
#schoollibrarians Tweet for Professional Development: A Netnographic Case Study of #txlchat

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Social media has become an important venue for building professional learning networks. More and more school librarians employ these flexible, free tools to make connections with colleagues and build a community of practice in the virtual learning environment. In this netnographic case study, the motivations and benefits to co-founders, core group members, and participants in creating and/or participating in a grassroots regionally based Twitter chat group are examined. Data include electronic interviews with key informants, an online survey open to all chat participants, an analysis of chat archives, and field notes. Study results illuminate the value participants place on this social-media delivered professional development experience.

Introduction

School librarianship is challenging work that requires continuous professional development (PD). Social media is an important and evolving venue for building professional learning networks (PLNs) for school librarians who must remain current with the latest instructional technology tools and devices (Dalton, 2013; Davis, 2010; Foote, 2013, 2014; Forrestal, 2011; Richardson, 2013). In instructional partnerships with classroom teachers, school librarians bring their understanding of how to design technology-facilitated learning experiences that motivate and engage youth and increase the relevance of students' research process and knowledge creation (Johnston, 2012).

#txlchat is a grassroots community of practice, or CoP (Wenger 1998). Through regular contact, #txlchat participants are acculturated into the evolving profession of school librarianship. The group has met continuously during the academic school year since April, 2013. This sustained social interaction among group members has resulted in a strong sense of "belonging" and "connection." Together, the co-founders, co-moderators, and the participants continually develop their expertise to update their libraries' physical and virtual collections, programs, and services.

Literature Review

As social networking tools proliferate, research studies seek to understand communication via these networks. In the library field, much of this research is focused on how academic and public libraries use social media to share information with stakeholders (Aharony, 2010; Palmer, 2014;

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Shiri & Rath, 2013; Shulman, Yep, & Tomé, 2015; Young, & Rossmann, 2015). PD carried out via social media is a growing area of research as a once exclusively face-to-face phenomenon has moved into virtual worlds.

Studies of educators appropriating social media cite the use of Twitter as a meaningful PD venue that enhances collegiality (Davis, 2013; Goodyear, Casey, & Kirk, 2014; Holmes, Preston, Shaw, & Buchanan, 2013; Wesley, 2013). Carpenter and Krutka (2014) surveyed 755 K-12 educators and found it less common for educators to use Twitter to interact with students or families than to use it for self-paced Twitter PD, which they describe as superior to traditional PD. Visser, Evering, and Barrett (2014) found that K-12 teachers who use Twitter for self-directed PD highly value the relationships they form and the information they share and receive via this tool.

The systematic study of how librarians are using Twitter for professional learning is an under-researched area. Dalton (2013) studied the attitudes of academic librarians using Twitter during a workshop whose participants had spent less than five years in professional practice. She noted that some exhibited anxiety about using Twitter effectively and recommended that LIS CoPs promote the use of Twitter at “mainstream and traditional library events (such as annual conferences) and to continue to use tweet chats as platforms for sharing ideas” (p. 108). Since Dalton’s study, many library professional organizations have integrated social media into conferences and workshops; more and more librarians are using Twitter for professional learning. I was unable to identify any research studies that investigated how K-12 school librarians particularly are using Twitter for PD.

Conceptual Framework

The CoP literature (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) and Vygotsky’s activity theory were used to frame this study. CoPs form around a domain (an interest or profession) where members build relationships, interact regularly, and learn together. In their shared practice, members do or create something that deepens the group’s knowledge base. What may begin as a search for information can transform into a source of community and understanding for members (Kozinets, 1999).

The culture in which this community interaction occurs plays an essential role in the meaning that people make of the experience. “[All] learners are engaged in both the contexts of their learning and in the broader social world within which these contexts are produced” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 24). The various levels of participation among the members of a CoP support individual and whole-community learning.

Activity theory, which explores how people engage with others socially, focuses on how people use cultural tools to contribute to their own understanding and that of others (Vygotsky, 1978, 1997). Vygotsky noted that people learn by making things that they find useful — things that provide them with meaning. Studying the artifacts resulting from everyday practice is essential to uncovering the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences. Participants in #txlchat have appropriated the social media tool Twitter, and its conventions mediate their experience. The artifacts (“tweets”) they contribute to the chat are the way the participants make socially constructed meaning and are also the resources described in the CoP framework.

The social activity described in this study exists in a specific context using practices that are supported and constrained by the tool used. A netnographic methodology (ethnography conducted online) was applied to study #txlchat as an “activity” in which the members participate using a cultural tool, build relationships in a CoP, and create artifacts to which they ascribe meaning. Combining the CoP and activity theory as a framework, allows a deeper understanding of this Twitter group.

Study Context, Problem, and Purposes

Before launching #txlchat, co-founders @sharongullett and @_MichelleCooper had participated in #TLChat, a national-international chat group for teacher-librarians (school librarians). They wanted to create something similar for Texas school librarians and believe #txlchat may have been the first state-based school librarian chat. The cofounders selected Twitter as the best tool to achieve their goals. The 140-character tweet limit requires participants to be concise in their sharing and questions. Tweets can include referents to other people, organizations, and resources. Twitter conventions such as “retweets” and “faves” promote the social and community aspects of #txlchat.

This study is also guided from my position as a preservice school librarian educator who believes a Master’s degree in library science can help prepare former classroom teachers to step into the role of school librarian. However, it is not until candidates or graduates are in actual practice that they realize what they have yet to learn. Graduate students who exit their LIS program with a commitment to seek ongoing PD throughout their careers will be better equipped for their jobs.

The purpose of the study is to thoroughly describe the lived experiences of participants in this online learning community by understanding the relationship between the behaviors of the #txlchat co-moderators and participants and the virtual culture they have co-created. This study may help current #txlchat participants better understand the motivations and actions of their chat colleagues and themselves. It may also encourage other school librarians to join #txlchat or another Twitter group, provide additional strategies for existing chat groups, or inspire others to create groups of their own in their districts, regions, and beyond.

Research Questions

Data was collected via the #txlchat archives, interviews with key informants (co-founders and core group members), an online survey of participants, and my participant-observer field notes. These are the research questions that guided the data analysis.

1. What are the procedures and practices of #txlchat?
2. What are the motivations and characteristics of the co-founders, core group members, and participants in this CoP?
3. How do participants describe the value of this CoP?

The co-founder and core group member vignettes supported by member checks and other data collected offer insights into the meaning #txlchat participants ascribe to this CoP. Together, these data and my assertions provide a portrait of the #txlchat culture.

Methodology

Employing a netnographic case study research methodology (Kozinets, 2010), this study follows the goals and procedures of an ethnographic study conducted entirely online rather than face to face. Ethnography and netnography both seek to understand the relationship between behavior and culture; both communicate findings through holistic descriptions of everyday events.

Procedures for both methods are parallel, as the researcher takes the role of a participant observer. Study data is collected from “naturally occurring processes” including interviews with informants and examination of artifacts and documents. Both methods can include quantitative and qualitative data. To align with the holistic nature of the process, qualitative data is analyzed using

a constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Study findings for both ethnography and netnography include vignettes of informants or events. Findings also include the researcher's assertions based on the data collected.

Before initiating this research, I emailed the co-founders seeking permission to study #txlchat. They encouraged me to do so. I informally entered into the #txlchat CoP and participated in chats whenever possible while this study went through the Institutional Review Board process. Once the study was approved, I formally entered the community and announced the study to participants via a series of tweets with links to the study Web page.

The #txlchat founders maintain a website with chat archives which I accessed to collect data on the number of participants in the weekly chats, the number of retweets, and the number of faves for each chat. I launched an online survey which was open to all #txlchat participants for a period of two months—January and February 2015. Twenty-five people participated in the survey administered by Psychdata. Participants had the option of being anonymous in the study or being identified by their role in education and/or Twitter handle. I used a semi-structured approach for purposive informant interviews with three co-founding members and five core group members. The electronic interviews were conducted in writing via email, via phone, and/or via an online learning management system that allowed interviews to be recorded. To gather additional information from a participant-observer stance, I participated in most of the weekly chats from November 2014 through February 2015 and recorded field notes during this time of “official” participation. (I lurked on this chat before the study launch and continue to participate in the chats whenever possible.)

My goal was to achieve a thick description that portrays and interprets the lived experiences of the members of this CoP. Some survey responses are presented in percentages. All qualitative data sets were coded holistically with a constant comparative approach based on categories that emerged inductively from repeated close readings of the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). I have interpreted the data and conducted member checks with study participants by posting data and quotes on a wiki open to all #txlchat members. The interview profiles and vignettes were shared directly with the informants via email; they provided corrections and clarifications.

Findings

Archive data

Co-founders @sharongullett and @_MichelleCooper began archiving data from the very first Twitter chat on April 7, 2013. They use Storify (<http://www.storify.com>), a social media curation tool, to harvest the weekly chat tweets and curated them on a wiki (<http://txlchat.wikispaces.com>) until November 8, 2015 when they moved the archive to a Weebly Web site (<http://txlchat.weebly.com>). During study dates, April 7, 2013, through February 24, 2015, there were forty-five chats. (Of those, three archives were incomplete due to curation technical difficulties; these were not included in the numerical data set.) During the study period, one hundred eleven Texas librarians and one hundred twenty-one librarians, authors, and others from out of state participated in the chats. (There were fourteen Twitter handles that could not be identified.)

#txlchat topics fell into seven broad categories with three outliers. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of chats held that were focused on a particular topic.

Table 1: #txlchat Topic Categories

Broad Topic	# of Chats	% of Chats
Technology	13	29%
School Library Management	8	18%
Literature, Authors/Illustrators	8	18%
Marketing and Advocacy	6	14%
Notable Librarians	3	7%
Collaboration	2	4%
Lesson Plans	2	4%
Other Professional Development	1	2%
Leadership	1	2%
Uncategorized	1	2%

Participation in the weekly chats varied from thirteen during a chat held in the second month (5/21/13) and up to sixty-five who participated in a chat featuring two notable librarian guest speakers (2/25/14). Table 2 shows the topic, date, length of the chat (time), number of participants, and the number of tweets for the top ten chats held during the study period.

Table 2: Chats with the Greatest Number of Participants and Tweets

Topic (Date)	Time*	Participants	Tweets
Special Guests Colby Sharp and Jon Schu (2/25/14)	60	65	374
Connecting on Skype (12/10/13)	60	41	460
Are Dewey's Days Numbered? (1/26/15)	30 (45)	39	224
Social Media Marketing (1/20/15)	30	38	237
Being a Connected Librarian (10/14/14)	30 (35)	37	217
March Madness and Battle of the Books (2/24/15)	30 (35)	37	217
Best Apps and Books for 2014 (11/26/13)	60	23	261
Library Websites (1/14/14)	60	26	231
Super Powered Librarians (10/7/14)	30 (40)	34	256
Hour of Code (12/9/14)	30 (45)	29	239

* The time is the scheduled chat time in minutes. The times in parentheses are the actual times content exchanged occurred for that chat.

The topics of the top ten participation chats were aligned with the most frequent chat categories. Half of the top ten chats were focused on technology topics, one had a literature focus, and one was focused on both technology and literature. Two fell into the "notable librarians" category, and one focused on school library management. Six of top ten chats were held in the 2014-2015 academic year.

Retweets and “faves” are Twitter features used by #txlchat members. Table 3 shows the top ten participation chats ordered by the number of retweets posted during a chat session.

Table 3: Topics with the Greatest Number of Retweets (plus Number of Faves)

Topic (Date)	Time*	Retweets	Faves
Special Guests Colby Sharp and Jon Schu (2/25/14)	60	354	537
Hour of Code (12/9/14)	30 (45)	159	592
Super Powered Librarians (10/7/14)	30 (40)	136	502
Being a Connected Librarian (10/14/14)	30 (35)	101	472
Connecting on Skype (12/10/13)	60	95	243
Are Dewey's Days Numbered? (1/26/15)	30 (45)	75	561
Social Media Marketing (1/20/15)	30	63	614
Best Apps and Books for 2014 (11/26/13)	60	49	177
Library Websites (1/14/14)	60	40	73
March Madness and Battle of the Books (2/24/15)	30 (35)	39	621

* The time is the scheduled chat time in minutes. The times in parentheses are the actual times content exchanged occurred for that chat.

In Table 3, retweets were privileged over faves. On Twitter, when someone retweets they are attaching that person's post to the retweeter's own Twitter feed. This is a more meaningful act than a fave, which remains only on the original tweeter's feed and is akin to a “like” on Facebook, meaning that I read/saw what you posted (“I like it” or “I like you”), that the user identifies with the tweet or shares the opinion expressed, or even that the person does not feel strongly enough about the tweet to retweet it. (A fave requires one click and a retweet takes two clicks.) To my way of thinking, a retweet is a stronger statement of agreement and support.

Online Survey

A total of twenty-five people participated in the online survey (Appendix A); all were from Texas. Among them were eight elementary librarians, four middle school, and four high school librarians (one of whom also serves as a district librarian), One K-12 librarian, one 7-12 librarian, and two district-level librarian supervisors. Five other participants did not provide a specific role in education category. Twenty reported that they are the only librarian on their campus.

Ten of the respondents reported participating in the Tuesday night chats once a month; seven twice a month; four three times a month; and four of the respondents reported participating four times each month. Three had been participating for less than six months; seven have participated between six months and one year; thirteen had been participating for more than one year. (Two were unsure of the length of their participation.) Among these respondents sixteen noted that if they miss a chat, they search the hashtag as soon as possible. Twenty-one participants, 84%, reported they have reviewed the #txlchat archives.

Seven survey participants used the words “network,” “connect,” or “connection” in describing their reasons for participating in #txlchat chats. Seventeen used the term “professional development” in describing the benefit they receive. One reported no benefit to participating. Thirteen reported they attend the chats regardless of the topic. Five noted that the expertise of the

week's facilitator/s was a motivating factor. A high school librarian/district-level supervisor wrote she participates "just to be connected to others" (@Booklady13). A state-level school program coordinator wrote: "I am inspired weekly to work even harder for our librarians."

When asked their main reason for participating, the respondents offered many reasons: "I love participating in this Twitter group because it creates an instant family of acceptance and support for librarianship" (elementary librarian/district-level supervisor @janhodgelibrary). "It is real-time communication with like-minded librarians on topics of interest to me" (middle school librarian @sandracarwell). Another middle school librarian noted that the chat gives her the opportunity "to learn more from experienced professionals" (@dkist11). A former high school librarian wrote, "Keeps my brain working on issues & projects for students of all ages" (@BooksYALove). A high school librarian wrote, "I don't really actively participate. I just read what others are saying."

Survey participants noted that the classroom teachers, students, and administrators with whom they work receive a wide variety of benefits from their participation in #txlchat. An elementary school librarian wrote: "I am able to stay on top of current trends that include technology and library lessons" (@chaodom). "It helps me develop programming for my school community. It also helps me with tech[nology] ideas to share with teachers and administrators" said middle school librarian @IreneKistler. A district-level supervisor wrote it has helped me "bring in staff developers for librarians in my district."

#txlchat participants engage in reciprocal mentorship during the chats and beyond. Twenty-three out of the twenty-five, 92%, who participated shared specific knowledge that they gained by participating in the #txlchat. Twenty shared specific information that they had shared with the group; one noted sharing too much to name. Four reported they had not shared. Sixteen out of twenty-five reported communicating electronically with other #txlchat members outside of the Tuesday night chat times. Eighteen reported meeting other chat members face to face.

Twenty-one of the twenty-five, 84%, who participated in the survey are "connected" educators who reported using other forms of social media. When comparing #txlchat with other forms, four respondents appreciated Twitter and #txlchat for being interactive, and four others noted the real-time, fast-paced scheduled chats as advantages. Four highlighted the topic focus of the chat, and six others were specific in mentioning #txlchat's school library programming topic focus.

Survey participants described the characteristics of Twitter or the #txlchat in different ways. An elementary school librarian wrote: "#txlchat is different from Facebook and Instagram in that it is more give and take." Another elementary school librarian wrote: "Twitter is interactive; the others are not" (@linseymtaylor). A district-level supervisor reflected that "#txlchat is a conversation," while a K-12 librarian wrote: "I am not a particular fan of Twitter but the topics draw me to #txlchat."

Interview Participant Vignettes

To learn about the history of this CoP, I included #txlchat background questions in semi-structured interviews with the co-founders (See Appendix B). Their responses helped to describe the group's procedures and their promotion venues while helping to situate the experiences of the co-founders, core group members, and participants in a context. The co-founders and the core group members all responded to the questions on the second half of the co-founders interview protocol. I encouraged interviewees to take the interview in any direction they thought would help me better

represent and understand their experience of #txlchat. I constructed the vignettes, and the informants provided member checks. Two sample vignettes are provided here.

First-person Vignette: *Birds of a Feather Reach Out to Lonesome Librarians.* I thought using Twitter would allow lurkers and participants to drop in and out as they had time or were interested. Scheduled chats could also be archived for librarians to review at their convenience. I wanted “lonesome librarians” (the only librarian in a district) to have a quick, dynamic way to be a part of a larger community of professionals.

Whether synchronous or asynchronous, sharing knowledge with a broad audience is facilitated through Twitter. There’s something about the immediacy of a chat that Facebook cannot match. For the co-founders and core group, our major concern was and continues to be the participation levels. We are delighted to see a couple first timers each week. We do know there are quite a few lurkers and those who read the archives, but there is no way to determine how many.

The Internet and electronic media have been game changers for our profession. #txlchat is a perfect example. I use Twitter to expand my professional skillset and to have conversations with some of the most creative, forward-thinking librarians in the field. No matter when I look at my Twitter feed I learn something; it might be a link to a website or a blog or a quote worth really thinking about. I think I also serve as a role model for other librarians. If I can do it, so can they.

Participating in the #txlchat gives school librarians a sense of birds of a feather. I had hoped that we would reach out to the lonesome librarians and give them an outlet for asking questions, being able to comment, and share with others. #txlchat participant @debramarshall said it so well. “You can’t imagine what a gold mine of information and professional learning I get from all of you by following you on Twitter.”

First-person Vignette: *A Challenge to Remain Viable in My Ever-evolving School Environment.* For many years, I have pushed to provide professional development in east Texas to ensure that I was able to stay fresh with current trends in education and librarianship. #txlchat gives me the opportunity to share what I discover. It also reminds me what it feels like to not know—the challenge of learning that meets with success or with the sense of failure associated with not “getting” it.

I want #txlchat to continue to stimulate librarians to communicate and share what they have learned—both failures and successes. I believe our chat still has room to grow. #txlchat provides a great environment to test the waters of technology and online professional development.

For me, #txlchat is a journey of self-discovery, learning, and sharing. It continues to challenge me and keep me involved with some of the progressive people leading the way in educational practices and teaching and learning philosophies. Together we are changing school environments to better facilitate learning and are continually striving to provide what our students will need for their future.

Researcher’s Field Notes

Impressions of the interactions among participants during the weekly chats were recorded in field notes. One note described how #txlchat has remained true to its original goal of providing a democratic forum in which all participants have an equal voice. At the beginning of each chat, participants greet one another personally, and new participants are welcomed. While some co-moderating teams seem to “assign” the greeter role, almost everyone participating tweets the arrival of at least one other chatter.

Strengthening the professionalism in this CoP is the behind-the-scenes work of the co-founders who archive the chats and the co-moderators who determine topics and facilitate the

chats. The group effectively promotes the chats via Twitter and a state-wide listserv, inviting continuing participants and enlisting new members. Co-moderators post the topics and guiding questions a day or two in advance of the chat; this helps some people decide whether or not to participate. Advance notice of the topic and questions also gives all participants time to prepare the information and resources they wish to share.

Throughout the chat, participants engage in side conversations, retweet tweets they feel are of particular worth, while “fading” others. Participants not only retweeted and faved tweets of regular group members, but that new or infrequent participants’ tweets were also highlighted. Every tweet had an equal opportunity to be promoted based on its perceived value.

Specific tweets that stood out were also recorded.. This tweet posted by a member not in the core group invited others to participate: “#txlchat is held every Tuesday from 8:00-8:30 and it's great! All are welcome to join in, just have to be ready to keep up! ☺” A first-time #txlchat directed this tweet to the person who had invited him: “Thank you for the invite tonight! I have enjoyed learning with you! Twitter is truly a key to unlimited knowledge! #txlchat.”

Assertions

The sense of belonging is strong in this CoP. As one online survey participant noted it has a “more communal feel.” Many of the study participants communicate with other #txlchat participants outside the chats. Some have collaborated at conferences to co-present the knowledge from the chat; some have done so without ever meeting face to face. More than half of the study participants see other participants in person as well as online. It is unknown whether or not the geographic nature of the chat or opportunities to meet face to face make a difference in the value that members place on this CoP.

The vignettes suggest the strong commitment of co-founders and core group members to an egalitarian framework for the chat as they encourage participants with all levels of experience and expertise to share and ask questions. The vignettes also underscore the desire for all participants to have a voice in #txlchat and to have ownership of their own PD. Twitter itself supports their goals for the chat because anyone using the #txlchat hashtag can post to the group at any time.

Like all communities, #txlchat is an evolving CoP. In addition to listening online for emerging trends and potential topics, the co-moderators reach out at the “Tweet Up” held at the annual Texas Library Association to seek face-to-face and online input from current and potential participants. In the online survey, an elementary librarian wrote: “I would like for there to be more of an outreach to diverse librarians. It would add a level of depth to the voices of advocacy for the multiracial patrons we serve” (@awakenlibrarian). Perhaps there are ways to market the benefits of this online PD opportunity to currently underrepresented school librarians.

Conclusion

Applying their tech-savvy to their own PD for connection with others who understand their jobs, school librarians participating in #txlchat use a cultural tool to increase their knowledge and improve their skills. Having built an “affinity space” where participants with a shared interest and with different levels of knowledge and expertise interact (Gee, 2004), members of this CoP have created and sustain a culture in which participants can ask questions, share their expertise, and engage in free real-time PD. Through their collaboration, the artifacts they co-create — tweets of information and support — enrich the quality of the community and bolster the professional

expertise of individuals and the group. This CoP supports practitioners navigating the complexity of school librarianship today and provides them with connections to one another and to the information they need to be successful in their work.

As they appropriate Twitter purposefully to achieve desired outcomes —school librarian PD— participants demonstrate and develop 21st-century literacy practices. #txlchat study participants articulated why Twitter, more than other tools in their technology toolboxes, best meets their needs for connection, community, and accessible real-time PD with colleagues. Along with the chat archives, the weekly #txlchat provides a useful, usable venue for continuous PD and growth. As one librarian wrote: “I have enjoyed watching it grow and evolve and I can't wait to see what direction it takes in the future.”

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank #txlchat co-founders @sharongullett, @_MichelleCooper, and @EdneyLib whose support for this study was crucial to its success. Thank you also to my research assistant Miranda Valdez.

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