

Article Reviewed:

Trust, T., Krutka, D. G., & Carpenter, J. P. (2016). "Together we are better": Professional learning networks for teachers. *Computers & education*, 102, 15-34.

The article, "'Together we are better': Professional learning networks for teachers", by Torrey Trust, Daniel Krutka, and Jeffrey Carpenter sought to define teacher learning in the digital age, particularly in regards to social media and professional learning networks (PLN). It is clear from the abstract that this study had a strong emphasis on addressing the effects of PLN in improving the shortcomings of teacher professional development (PD). The report followed well the Six Steps in the Process of Research as outlined by Creswell (2015).

The article made a solid argument for filling a void in existing literature. Per the article, formal PD often fails to meet the standards of researched best practices; therefore many teachers seek online forms of PD independently. The authors established a need to address the effectiveness of online PLNs that many teachers are connecting with to supplement their own PD.

The authors first addressed their theoretical lens of a whole teacher approach to instruction. The article states, "The anytime, anywhere availability of expansive PLNs, and their capacity to respond to educators' diverse interests and needs, appear to offer possibilities for supporting the professional growth of whole teachers" (p. 16). As the researchers noted, this is important because this holistic approach offers flexibility that adapts to the shifting options in PD.

This approach is also important, as the authors pointed out in the literature review, because there is no agreed upon definition of a PLN. While Trust (2012) and others have attempted to define the online PLN, there lacks research on the value of these online PLNs. As the article points out, the majority of research tends to focus on a single community. The article does a good job of synthesizing the literature critically by the themes of “Teacher professional development” and “Personal/professional learning networks”. Because of these limits in research, the authors concluded that part of their study must address how teachers define their own PLNs.

It should be noted that the researchers did not intend to develop generalizable laws, but instead chose to focus on how teachers conceived of an engaged in their PLN. In addition, no one specific tool was explored as the authors attempted to understand the relationships of many tools available to online PLNs. This is a strong advantage of this study.

The sample size was quite large at 1417 respondents to an online survey. However, only about half (732) of the respondents fell into the target sample of PK-12 teachers, which is still a large number. The authors specifically chose not to do a random sampling because they wanted to target educators already familiar with the concept of a PLN. Some snowballing did occur in the study, but the authors noted they posted the survey in a variety of social media to mitigate any biases created by snowballing. One limitation that researchers expressed was that the sample included only a very small percentage (3%) from non-English speaking countries. In addition, many of the respondents did not mention any non-English speaking teachers in their

own PLN. The article appropriately stated, “there were parts of the world (e.g., many countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia) that went unmentioned, and there was limited evidence that participants gained the type of deep cross-cultural knowledge necessary for global citizenship” (p. 23).

As the researchers analyzed and interpreted the data, “repeated iterations” of the themes were performed both individually and collaboratively to ensure the themes were a valid representation of the data (p. 19). The researchers also used member checking with thirteen participants to further validate the data. That data was represented extensively using six tables throughout the “data analysis” section.

The findings of the study served to build on previous findings regarding virtual communities and networks. In addition, they also raised several questions for further research: “how can schools and researchers evaluate and support uses of PLNs for the growth of teachers and students?” and “how does such self-directed learning activity relate to the culture and goals of the schools and districts within which educators work?” (p. 31). These findings and future research are extremely valuable to practitioners looking to develop and better utilize teacher PD.

The authors did not include specific strategies based on the findings (which was not their intended purpose), but did offer insight to practitioners into the value of an online PLN. Future studies have a solid foundation to work from with this article and others reference in the piece. The authors did mention being surprised by the number of respondents that included face-to-face interactions as part of their PLN causing them to note, “This reminds us to be careful about creating false dichotomies between online

and face-to-face learning even when we conduct research focused on the digital realm” (p. 28). The authors could have expanded on this idea further and suggested future direction for research connecting face-to-face and online PLNs as the lines seemed to be blurred.

Overall, this article is well-written and relevant in the education field. Consistent with other works by the same authors, the findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue and offer a direction for further research. It does well to address all elements of the Six Steps in the Process of Research from Creswell (2015). The work is an excellent example for the intended audience to use when addressing teacher professional development needs.

Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative*. Boston: Pearson.

Trust, T. (2012). Professional learning networks designed for teacher learning. *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education*, 28(4), 133-138.