

Analysis of Timeline Posts to a Language Teacher Organization Public Facebook Group

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ABSTRACT

Affordances of Facebook for enhancing communities of practice are often overlooked in studies highlighting the role of social networking in the English as a foreign language context of Korea. Taking this into account, the purpose behind this study is to determine the function a Korea-based language teacher organization Facebook group in terms of how the 3,197 members use the service as a personal learning environment for professional development, while also seeking to determine how the group supports the endeavors of those actively engaging with it. Data harvesting was undertaken using NodeXL Pro, and confined to a one-year period, with thematic content analysis then employed to group the 278 captured timeline posts into themes for analysis. Although most posts were disproportionately organizational, it is clear that professional development emerges amongst members as the largest concern. Further analysis came to illustrate the role of the group in the professional lives of members, seeing it arise as an affinity space, presenting access to professional development opportunities, content, and contacts, and providing a means for members to validate teaching material, showcase success, and access just-in-time support. Ultimately though, before becoming integral to any educator's personal learning environment, the group could perform much better, and several means to this end are exposed.

Keywords: social networking, TESOL, personal learning environments

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social networking services (SNSs) like Facebook has changed what it means to be a teacher by providing 21st century educators, as part of a personal learning environment (PLE), “a space to reflect, share, and interact with other professionals” (Homan, 2014, p. 328). As new technologies emerge, and are appropriated by teachers, they reshape not only the learning landscape of students but also that of the teacher, particularly in terms of professional development opportunities (Goh, 2015; Homan, 2014). However, research on the use of Facebook groups for the professional development of practicing teachers, particularly in the Korean context, is almost non-existent (Kent, 2016), and for that matter, only very few studies have come to report on the potential for the use of SNSs to enhance professional development in education (Cevik, Celik, & Haslam, 2014). This study aims to partially fill this gap, particularly since Facebook groups are recognized in the literature as a means where teachers can contribute and interact with professional communities of practice in education (Rego, 2009; Steinbrecher & Hart, 2012). So too, the affordances of Facebook for informal professional development is also recognized (Sumeur, Esfer, & Yildirim, 2014) in terms of providing online communities that allow for the sharing of ideas, information, practice, and resources, and it is through analysis of these networks that the relationships and arising interactions evident in these communities can be mapped and potentially better understood (Hansen, 2011; Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011, Homan, 2014).

To help fill the identified gap in the literature, this paper begins by reviewing recent research surrounding the use of social networking services for teachers' professional development. This is undertaken to help situate the study, and to determine the affordances and potential that such technology might avail members of a Korea-based language teacher organization Facebook group (LTFG), while simultaneously highlighting the significance of forming a personal learning environment for professional development purposes. The importance and potential of a social media presence for such language teacher organizations is then discussed, followed by a qualitative analysis of the publicly available data extracted from the LTFG. This analysis is used to uncover the role of the group in the professional lives of members, and to determine if the group is operating as intended. Through such an undertaking, several key areas where improvements can be made to enhance the social networking services offered by the group can be brought to the fore, which in turn can allow for recommendations for enhancing the SNS role of the LTFG to emerge. These include: developing a means to exploit the potential which key actors (like administrators) afford the network; increasing the engagement and interaction profile of any non-engaged actors; ensuring relevancy of organizational posts; enhancing unsolicited posts; increasing group awareness to hot topics in the field; assisting members in becoming aware of those

whose interests align with theirs; establishing a mechanism to provide expert-level responses to posts as required; and the need to create cyber specific roles to achieve these outcomes if required.

This study captured a snapshot of posts and interactions from a professional teacher organization Facebook group during a particular time period. The purpose behind this is to review all captured content from the group timeline over a period of one calendar year in order to determine how group members are using the service, if the group is indeed functioning as a PLE and allowing for professional development, and to determine the function that the organization plays in terms of group administrator involvement in supporting the endeavors of the members who are actively engaging and interacting with the group. Consequent questions are:

1. Is the Facebook group meeting organizational goals and operating as intended, or could it be performing better?
2. What role does the Facebook group play in the professional lives of active group members, in the way that it currently operates as a social networking service, and could this role be enhanced for all members?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite Facebook being one of the most frequently used SNSs among teachers (Soomro, Kale, & Zai, 2014), extremely little is known about how and why practicing K-12 teachers use Facebook, but they do turn to it to support their professional development (Sumeur, Esfer, & Yildirim, 2014; Carpenter, 2015). Early career educators, as Steinbrecher and Hart (2012) show, seek out teaching tips, lesson ideas and advice on various classroom or workplace predicaments, and use Facebook to “vent frustrations mainly centred around [the teaching] issues they face” (p. 80). For pre-service teachers, Cevik, Celik, and Haslamani (2014), recognize the promise of Facebook for providing teacher training as it is used in daily life. Yet, time as a constraint must be considered, as participants from Carpenter’s (2015) study show: “I was so busy ... too busy lesson planning or stressed out about teaching ...” to use the SNS “... even though it could have potentially helped me out” (p. 222). However, they recognize SNSs as being able to provide access to a “wide variety of ideas, people, and resources” and, perhaps more importantly, that it can provide support for the grassroots “personalization of professional development” (Carpenter, 2015, p. 223). A number of scholars have also identified the potential of Facebook for professional development (Phillips, Baird, & Fogg 2011; Zhang, 2009), particularly of an informal nature (Ranieri, Manca, & Fini, 2012; Rutherford, 2010; Staudt, St. Clair, & Martinez, 2013), as the various features available, such as posting questions, teaching tips, comments on lesson ideas, sending messages, sharing educational resources and links, and staying in touch with peers, can allow for effective online professional development to occur (Rutherford, 2010; Staudt, St. Clair, & Martinez, 2013).

However, effective teacher professional development, as Holmes, Preston, Shaw, and Buchanan (2013) see it, must be sustained over time, practical in nature, related to student learning, collaborative, involve knowledge sharing, and allow for a degree of ownership and control. This is followed by an argument that shows SNS support for these notions, along with the potential to provide a link between in- and pre-service teachers. A link that would enrich the learning process by providing access to a number of online learning communities, and a number of meaningful interactions beyond which the traditional academic and practicum contexts provide. Using networks in this manner can assist educators in generating social capital that could lead to increasing career success (Forte, Humphreys, & Park, 2012). In this regard, social capital is one benefit that emerges from participation in a network of peers where the position of an educator within a network of social relationships, like that of a Facebook group, sees a teacher gain access to not only new and varied resources, but subject matter expertise as well (Cross, Parker, Prusak, & Borgatti, 2001; Forte, Humphreys, & Park, 2012), along with the ability to discuss classroom practices and share resources in a diverse learning community that is itself a part of a PLE or personal learning environment (Homan, 2014).

There is “... a growing body of evidence that points to the effectiveness of professional development which is initiated and controlled personally” (Holmes, Preston, Shaw, & Buchanan, 2013, p. 56), in the form of PLEs. A PLE is “an individual’s online learning space ... conceptualized, built, and controlled by learners in their quest to become self-reliant, connected, and lifelong learners” (Shaikh & Khoja, 2014, p. 202). Heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2007) is central to this definition, along with the notion that learning, particularly informal learning (Attwell, 2007), will not be delivered by a single provider but form from an aggregate of services that learners engage with independently to attain their current needs. In terms of using Facebook as one service, Rego (2009) provides a number of tips for educators looking to develop their PLE, seeing educators who maintain such a presence gaining, through online connections, easier or even exclusive access to content and resources unavailable to those who are not online (Homan, 2014).

Native speakers arriving in Korea to teach English, with or without formal teacher training, are often employed as aides in the school system or as instructors at institutes where they may be isolated geographically, socially, linguistically, or professionally. As they are largely considered a transitory workforce, human resource departments are either not available or tend to be unwilling to assist in mapping the professional development of these employees (Beach, 2011; Seth, 2002). These aides and instructors would then find the development of private learning environments and access to resources like professional teacher organization Facebook groups invaluable. To this end, Goh (2015) recognizes the value of PLEs, particularly those emerging from within a community of practice for English language educators, and reliance on technologies such as Facebook groups to provide these networks, but cautions that there needs to be an emphasis on coherence, relevance, sustainability and quality. Coherence means being responsive to teacher needs and interests at different career stages, while incorporating perspectives from various stakeholders and academic research (Feiman-Nemser, 1983); relevance refers to teacher choice regarding learning opportunities based on beliefs, skill levels, and institutional roles; and sustainability and quality come from the establishment of immersive learning environments where teacher change can positively impact student learning, and is contextualized through work-based communities of practice. This, Goh (2015) determines, can see teachers emerge not only as leaders of their own learning, but be able to take on the role of professional development mentors from personalized learning spaces which are built on learning goals that involve peers, so that they can also become co-designers of their own professional development. Likewise, as Lu and Churchill (2014) state, from such dense social networks as can be found in PLEs, especially those with a foundation of continuous social interaction, knowledge construction and information sharing potential can end up benefiting educators as they afford access to high-yield learning. However, in the PLE context, as Campana's (2014) notes, the type of learning that occurs is most often informal, situated, and self-directed, and emerges from the results of engagement with not only communities of practice, but also various other networks including online networks, learning networks, and social networks.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection and analysis

Along the lines of a study undertaken by Isharyanti (2015), an investigation relying on data harvesting utilizing NodeXL Pro was conducted on a Korea-based language teacher organization Facebook group (LTFG). Publicly available data extracted from the group revealed a directed non-egocentric network with 680 active actors (nodes) with 29,284 interactions (edges) across 278 timeline posts. Once all timeline posts and responses were curated, thematic content analysis was then applied to this data. The advantages of using NodeXL Pro (Hansen, Shneiderman & Smith, 2011) for obtaining social networking data for analysis, as Choi, Meza, & Park (2014) recognize, is that it provides support for mapping a variety of social media landscapes, provides an advanced means of reliably collecting and sorting social networking data, and provides a variety of built-in metrics to conduct analyses. The LTFG, consisting of 3,197 members with 7 administrators (or admins), is the primary focus of this study, with this particular group selected as it is run by a long-standing teacher professional development organization. The group is representative of a diverse range of English language teacher interests in Korea across all levels of curriculum from pre-kindergarten, through university, to life-long learning. To ensure recency and to restrict data overload, data collection and analysis was confined to timeline posts and responses made over a date range spanning one calendar year. Content analysis was then used to examine the themes emerging from all of the 278 captured timeline posts and from the associated actor responses. This approach was selected as thematic content analysis (Grbich, 2007) which, as a meaning-making process, allows for the identification of themes and patterns to emerge from the data and their organization into coherent categories, and for the identification of other themes to serve as sub-categories for analysis (Taylor-Powell, 2003 in Rambe, 2013). For this study, the major benefit of this is that it provides a means of expanding the range of content being studied past that of the individual actor's experience with the group (Guest, 2012). This analysis is undertaken in order to determine the nature and direction of all postings in regard to the relevance of posts to not only individual members but to all group members, the field/profession, and to the goals of the organization itself. In order to ensure consistency of coding the data into themes, the process was conducted twice by the researcher with a break of several weeks in between (Mackey & Gass, 2005), with all posts coded into the same major themes on both occasions.

Ethical considerations

In regard to the reporting of findings from publicly available data, anonymity is not perceived as being essential. There is, however, recognition that it is not relinquished simply because subjects of a study are passive participants (Zimmerman, 2010), and in line with the recommendations of the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE, 2016), the Facebook group itself, the organization behind it, and the members who engage with it are entitled to remain anonymous in this and any other study. This is especially important in environments like Facebook where participants are more likely to engage in confessional activity, dissociative anonymity, or online disinhibition (Joinson, 1998; Suler, 2004). The results of any research may influence the

group positively or negatively (Krotoski, 2010), and following Coughlan and Perryman (2015), in “conducting observation-only research on passive participants in the public sphere” (p. 156), data is anonymously presented and, as per American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011) ethical guidelines, without the need for negotiating a group consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Timeline Posts

Thematic content analysis conducted on all captured timeline posts (N = 278) came to see eight major themes along with several subthemes emerge (see Table 1). From the kinds of posts made under each theme by various stakeholders, the organization, and individual actors, a window into the workings of the group and the role it may play in the professional lives of members can be opened.

Table 1: The themes and subthemes of timeline posts collected by NodeXL Pro

Themes	Sub-themes	<i>n</i>	%
1. Organizationally oriented	Administrative matters, events, local chapter focus	160	58
2. Professional development	Teaching, further education	40	14
3. Teaching related	Classroom content, teaching tips, materials requests	23	8.3
4. Calls-for-participation or attendance	Articles, awards, conferences	19	6.8
5. Research related	Requests, findings, queries	16	5.8
6. Socially oriented	Events, Korea related, newspapers and books	9	3.2
7. Career oriented	Employment, finances	8	2.9
8. Miscellaneous	Admin moderated, attachment unavailable, selfies	3	1.1
Total		278	100

Organizationally oriented posts

Posts representative of the organization (particularly those relating to administrative matters), events (including calls for attendance and participation at the national and international in-country conferences), matters concerning local chapters, and organization job board postings covered the majority of posts for the year (58%, *n* = 160). However, since admins of the group insist in a pinned post that the group is for ‘discussion only’ and not for news events or job postings, then the organization is essentially spamming itself out of discussion promotion because the posts made by various admins and organizational stakeholders are not always actively commented upon. They include:

- reminders to pay dues, although it is likely to be unclear to those posters and the wider members of the group how many of the 3,197 LTFG members are actually annual or lifelong members of the organization, or for that matter, residing in-country;
- information regarding the free monthly newsletter becoming available to subscribers, or the quarterly magazine becoming available for financial members of the organization, which might come to make those members on the periphery of the Facebook group feel more isolated by not being or not financially able to become an organization member, and places a barrier between them and any potential knowledge provision that such content might provide;
- that it is time to register for a conference or workshop, with only minimal calls for participation in comparison, with such over-promotion perhaps leading to a negative impact in terms of ambivalence, where members might ignore similar posts in future (Brooks, & Highhouse, 2006); and,
- posts indicating that new positions are available to view on the organization’s job board.

Since the group admins themselves indicate the timeline is to be used to promote discussion only, and state that the LTFG does not endorse recruitment, advertising jobs, or private companies, then perhaps posts concerning offline organizational recruitment and fee postings, along with links to new job postings on the organization’s job board, should be left aside, particularly in light of findings discussed later in terms of career-oriented posts. Ideally, such content could be better served from the official news site, or other official organizational pages. So too, locked-out content for group members such as official publications, like the quarterly magazine, or even the free newsletter website that is accessible to email subscribers, are odd postings due to this stance, as they are potentially posts that only a handful of group members could at present engage with for discussion, and are also posts that serve to essentially alienate a large percentage of group members. This is especially prevalent when seeing cross posts between the other official organization Facebook groups and the LTFG. It is likely that admins are unaware of how best to harness the potential that SNSs can lend to such groups and the benefits these can provide both to group members and the organization as a whole. As SNS platforms today bring with them, not only a means to support and maintain existing social ties, but the creation of, and the promotion of linkages to, new ones, there has fundamentally been a major change in how computer-mediated communication occurs (Boyd, & Ellison, 2007; Soomro, Kale, & Zai, 2014). For groups like the LTFG, this means that the role of SNS

admins has changed, requiring them to be more than just moderators, and to become active posters of timely, relevant, and engaging content; become involved with discussions; and welcome new members who join the group. The welcoming is especially important in alleviating clique formation, and it can serve as an ice-breaker when tight-knit groups have already formed in a network. This is also particularly relevant for groups that are run by organizations, as they may serve as an initial point of contact.

A means to help develop discussion, and focus the LTFG more towards employing the affordances of an SNS, allowing non-organizational members a means to recognize the value of Facebook group membership, and help to foster the development of the LTFG as a PLE service among all members is to ensure that the editor of the newsletter provides highlights of the content along with the timeline post, instead of simply announcing: 'December News out now'. So too, the quarterly magazine editor could also provide highlights from each article, or an overview of the topics discussed, rather than postings such as: 'the newsletter is out'. In this way, group members can become more engaged with organizationally produced content, start to comment on or ponder over the concepts in light of their own teaching contexts, and relevance to their students. These highlights could push group members towards commenting on and replying to such posts. This would establish, for those members of the group who are not members of the organization, a peek into the value that organizational membership and participation can provide while establishing a means of affording cohesion between those group members who have access to the content and those who do not. Lowering the level of gatekeeping regarding such 'knowledge' might also serve to breakdown the perceived power differential that current practices establish (Hilferty, 2008), particularly those that might arise between organizational members and non-members. This may also start to promote an increasing familiarity among a wider range of actors throughout the network, especially those who are currently on the periphery, and establish for them a means to interact more cohesively with their peers and those more central members of the group. This is particularly poignant as the value of not only Facebook group membership, and perhaps organizational membership as well, is not clear to members of the LTFG, as a general timeline search reveals posts asking for a reason to become financial.

Further, for those presentations that the organization accepts for workshops and conferences, the organization could ask presenters to post their abstracts to the LTFG timeline, and provide some biographical data about themselves along with these posts, particularly since such data is normally collected for conference programs anyway. This would serve to promote familiarity among group members, increase awareness to hot topics in the field, as well as making members more aware of peers whose interests might align with theirs, and this is something which Meyer (2012, in Holmes, Preston, Shaw, & Buchanan, 2013) describes as invaluable. Moreover, it also allows direct access to those providing expertise at professional development events. Such posts also organizationally promote back channeling (McCarthy & Boyd 2005), leading to increased content engagement for participants through the provision of interim, pre-, during-, and post-conference or workshop discussion building, which many teachers desire (Gosha, Billionniere, & Gilbert, 2010). This would afford an otherwise nonexistent level of participation and engagement to group members who may not be able to attend such events, while simultaneously offering a level of professional involvement that might also allow them to "forge and maintain professional ties outside of their local teaching context [and] become conduits for the flow of new practices and ideas in and out of their workplace" (Forte, Humphreys, & Park, 2012, p. 7).

Professional development posts

Posts centred on professional development (14%, $n = 40$), covering topics such as teaching and further education, include links to journal articles, plenary session videos, educator blogs, and links to grants and scholarships. Other posts in this category see links to free and paid courses concerning research and teaching skill improvement, methods for ensuring successful conference experiences, and teachers wanting to donate used course textbooks to others. Also, members here are successfully using the LTFG for establishing queries, including those related to undertaking teaching certificate courses, or to find those able to lecture on specialist topics. As Sumeur, Esfer, and Yildirim (2014) remind us, it is not the affordances that makes a tool valuable but it is the manner in which people use it to meet their immediate needs. So too, as Carpenter (2015) affirms, social networking services can present activities and opportunities from a discussion space where participants can construct their own knowledge concerning what it is they want to know by interacting with others.

In terms of organizational support, the LTFG could be used more proactively to encourage member professional development. For example, uploading videos to the timeline of select conference presentations and workshops, of which abstracts and introductions would already have been posted previously (as mentioned under the *Organizationally Oriented Posts* category above), with a poll posted on the timeline to garner what content might be of most interest to members. These could, if gatekeeping was required, be provided only to organizational members as long as the value of what is being provided to them could be easily established by all group members, perhaps by providing adequate information as to what the content covers, as the interaction and

discussion surrounding the content itself would be free to engage with by all members. Alternatively the virtual presentation conference format could be added, and these presentations could then be made available on the LTFG, which would provide an additional means for all members local and otherwise to participate and engage in professional development. It would also provide, for organizational members, increased currency from the conference event itself, as they may then be able to see presentations that were scheduled while they themselves presented or attended another. Seeking to focus on providing aspects of professional development through such content provision is one means of ensuring the relevancy and essentialness of the LTFG as a service in the PLE of many English language teachers in Korea and elsewhere.

Teaching related posts

Teaching related posts (8.3%, $n = 23$) focus on classroom content, teaching tips, and requests for materials. They are all indicative of the kind of posts expected (Steinbrecher & Hart, 2012), and they largely consist of instructors looking for just-in-time support, a means of validating their teaching materials or classroom tools, and an outlet for showcasing classroom successes. Even though the dream of sharing user-generated content has failed in terms of repositories consisting of reusable learning objects (Conole & Culver, 2009), such content can all be passed quickly and successfully between members of SNS communities like the LTFG, with such interactions leading to the development of an environment where teachers can be seen helping teachers, and one that is highly relevant to the immediate needs of those involved.

Importantly though, what the brief mention of these types of posts do not show is the somewhat lost nature embedded within, especially by those who appear to be early career teachers. ‘To be totally upfront, I’m a bit of a softy, maybe a pushover, which isn’t great when in front of students. I don’t know how to respond to problems with behaviour, student refusal to follow instructions, and other aspects of classroom management’. Posts like this one are likely due in part to a lack of initial training provided to new arrivals, especially those working at language institutes, where training might consist of, ‘Here is the textbook, there is your classroom, students are waiting’ (see Sperling, 2015). As a cry for help this conceivably illustrates a lack of continued workplace training, and most certainly a lack of support. This situation is created due to the need for teachers, which has seen the rise of language teacher visa categories created for non-teacher trained individuals (Ministry of Justice, 2015). This may explain why the core of professional development posts to the LTFG are ones that do not expand upon an existing educational knowledge base, but rather revolve around discussions that are attempts to create one. This perhaps is also reflective of a number of teachers at this level just starting to look at further education in order to move to better positions, such as college/university language instructor employment, and toward more long-term prospects or accreditation.

Regardless, what is evident here, and also from the *Professional Development* category of posts, is that a kind of ‘affinity space’ (Gee, 2004) has emerged where members of the group, who come from varied backgrounds with varied degrees of knowledge and experience, are coming to interact collaboratively around topics of shared interest. This also allows for in-service educators, regardless of certification, to interact and engage in LTFG posts that could lead to learning that might not otherwise be possible, seeing the affinity space “utilized according to individual interests, needs, skills, and expertise” where it is envisioned that some participants (like admins) could become responsible for “taking on active moderator and curator roles and others primarily benefiting from the resource and idea sharing common in such spaces” (Gee, 2004, p. 211). For this to actively occur, however, admins need to have gained the education and/or experiences of a seasoned specialist educator, or educational experts from among the organizational member base need to be approached and recruited to assist in developing the space. As such, additional cyber ‘mentor’ roles may need to be created for the group, so that the expert-level responses that such a space demands can be provided to members in a timely manner.

Calls-for-participation or attendance posts

Other organizational type posts, predominantly posted by associated stakeholders, included calls for participation/attendance at non-organizational conferences, with these types of posts coming in at 6.8% ($n = 19$). Admins, as part of the commitment of establishing the LTFG as a PLE, could contact such associations asking them to provide a short overview or review of the conference so that group members can gain insight into the type of presentations that are or were available, and how attendance or participation might come to assist professional development or career networking. Admins could also encourage group members who may attend or present at such conferences to post a short report on the value obtained from their attendance. This would then be much like what the organization currently does for outreach purposes, at conferences held by affiliated organizations, in the Far East. Doing so would provide engagement to a wider range of group members, including those educators currently located outside of Korea and who were perhaps either former members of the organization and/or now members of affiliate organizations. This would lead to broadening the range of ties to the LTFG network, and perhaps also lead to professional development and collaborative teaching and learning

opportunities amongst members, particularly since, as Anyanwu (2015) notes, “a top priority for teachers today is to remain current and successful in an ever-changing global educational landscape mediated by innovative technology” (p. 1).

Research related posts

Research related posts follow at 5.8% ($n = 16$), and centre for the most part around requests for study participants or survey completion, and inquiries into how to conduct research or data analysis, with only the sharing of findings from one of the previously conducted surveys made available. This means that some members are using the group to help them undertake aspects of professional development by seeking out data to assist them in fulfilling further education commitments, while a number of other educational stakeholders are using the group as a research window into the English language teaching context of the local, international, and expatriate communities. Unfortunately, with only the distributors of one survey providing research feedback, this trend, if continued, may see members become disenchanted by such requests. A means around this would be to have admins follow up those who ask members to participate in the collection of research data. In this way, feedback on studies in progress can be obtained by members, which may allow for engaging points of discussion to arise, or perhaps even prompt some members to consider implementing aspects of such research in their own classrooms, which could then in turn be reported back to the group, spurring reflective practice. Such provision would also see the values and beliefs that arise in the teachers who engage in these practices coming to mold the kind of pedagogy that they employ (Walkington, 2005), with reflective practice also allowing for teachers to review their own teaching methods in light of what is working best for students (Ho, 2009).

Socially oriented posts

Socially oriented topics were kept to a minimum overall, at 3.2% ($n = 9$), and largely centred around Korea related newspaper articles on education, culture and language; books on Korean history or language; and, even a local theatre production. Although these posts do see content arising from contexts that are anchored in and driven by individual interest, they also highlight the fact that members are turning to the LTFG not only for support regarding their local teaching context and studies, but for support regarding their local environment. Importantly, this indicates that on some level, the group is assisting in providing aspects of acculturation for those members new to Korea, and is also providing for long-termers and Korean nationals alike access to information that might impact upon them both socially as well as professionally. Further, by putting those relatively new expatriates in contact with long-term residents as well as geographically local members, access to content and contacts, that might not otherwise be as readily accessible, are provided. This is something that needs to be recognized, since being employed as an educator abroad can involve having to adjust to some radically different societal and workplace cultures (Brown, 2014; Hofstede, 1986; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Kent, 2004).

Career oriented posts

Interestingly, the least representative topic on the timeline was career oriented at 2.9% ($n = 8$), which came to cover a range of inquiries regarding aspects of employment. Posts included concerns over visa related matters, and finances such as pension and savings, as well as transitional career advice. Overall, this may mean that most members of the group are very happy with their work and chosen careers, and due to the large number of timeline posts actually centring on professional development and teaching related content, they actually want to improve upon it. However, there are a number of other Facebook groups where discussions can be held more privately, and it is likely that group members would choose to exercise that option. This is especially poignant as what is discussed on Facebook in a publicly accessible group is visible to all, and it is increasingly important to be vigilant about posting content that might risk professional status (Sumeur, Esfer, & Yildirim, 2014).

Miscellaneous posts

Finally, a small percentage of miscellaneous posts were recorded (1.1%, $n = 3$). These posts include member selfies, unavailable attachments, and admin moderated posts. Overall these were rare, with the majority of participants actually using the LTFG for specific purposes and posting with specific intent, as can be seen by the scope of posts available under other categories. This also shows that members generally recognize the group as being representative of organizational values, and they are inclined to post content and queries that revolve around the mission statement. This is evidenced by individual member posts predominantly focusing on the immediate needs of educators who are seen as networked individuals attempting to “draw upon spaces both within and outside of their schools to improve their curricula and inform their practice” (Homan, 2014, p. 312). Posts to the group pertain to a wide variety of educational aspects from professional development through teaching, with social and career oriented posts, when they do occur, largely being reflective of the Korean educational context or the local environment in general.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this article finds that the LTFG has come to establish a niche where it provides a space for people of like interest, offering them the ability to engage and interact in order to develop professionally. However, there is room for improvement, and a number of areas where the group could be performing better in terms of meeting organizational goals have been uncovered. To enhance the role of the group as an SNS service, it is also clear that more can be done to provide a sense of professional belonging to all group members. Perhaps if this is promoted and focused upon more aggressively, then an increase in the quality and type of posts from all members, not just core members affiliated with the organization at some level, might then be seen. This may also be the case if the group becomes increasingly supportive of teachers in a range of contexts, and increasingly begins to establish itself as a focal PLE service for group members overall, including those on the periphery of the network. By doing so, it is likely that the LTFG may then be able to reward the organization with an ever increasing financially current member base.

This aside, several limitations may have impinged upon this study. First, the owner of the group is an official organization which in a sense can be viewed as sponsoring the group, and there may have been some colouring of posts, especially those made by admins. Second, membership of the group is not controlled as it is open to all, organization affiliates or not, and although group membership is high, the emerging sample size is comparatively small. Third, significant actor credibility may need to be taken into account in terms of their links to the organization and what this might mean for how they conduct themselves in regards to an online presence. Aside from these limitations, it is also surprising to see limited research on the role of SNSs in English language teacher professional development on the Korean peninsula, particularly since Korea has long been one of the most wired countries on Earth (Hachigian, 2002). As such, there is much potential for future research. Of particular interest is the design of a study to determine the significance of SNSs in the private learning environments of native English speaking teachers at various levels of employment, from K-12 co-teachers, to private institute instructors, and those employed at college/university language institutes. This would seek to identify the importance of professional development to stakeholders, establish the current levels of engagement of in-service teachers with professional development opportunities, and trace emerging and key needs of professional development. One thing is sure: as Feiman-Nemser (2001) nigh on two decades ago warned,

if we want schools to produce more powerful learning on the part of students, then we have to offer more powerful learning opportunities to teachers [...] Unless teachers have access to serious and sustained learning opportunities at every stage of their career, they are unlikely to teach in ways that meet demanding new standards for student learning or to participate in the solution of educational problems (pp. 1013-4).

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