Virtual Professional Learning Communities for Teachers’ Enrichment

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Abstract
In this technological era, learning is not confined only within the boundaries of institutions. It has crossed all the boundaries and entered in virtual world with the help of digital media. The emergence of social networking developed a new mode of learning and interacting with others all over the world. Virtual professional learning communities (VPLC) provide an opportunity for individuals with a common purpose to come together across barriers in time and space. NCFTE-09 has advocated for Teacher Learning centers (TLCs) all over India, but it is not possible in one go; these learning communities can, instead, be established quite easily with the help of cyberspace. This article will reflect on the possibilities of the qualitative improvement of teachers with the help of establishing virtual professional learning communities (VPLC). The present article will also explore the role of tools that makes Virtual community possible, and whether these (tools) can be useful for betterment of teacher education.

Introduction
Our education system, today, is trying to break the nut shell to get the qualitative advancement, which, in itself, is a very significant progress towards creating intellectual, skilled and qualified individuals for the overall development of the country. Every nation needs people from different backgrounds to cater to the need of the country. Thus people from financial background is needed to cater to the financial, political background the political, technical background the technical, agricultural background the agricultural needs of the country and so on, but on the top of it, a
nation needs teachers and teacher educators to cater to the educational needs of the country. This being so, because it is the task of a teacher to create qualified and professional personnel to run the country successfully or to help in the national development. Hence, teacher education is the discipline which requires maximum attention to maximize the return from human capital.

Significantly, educationists round the globe tried many innovative practices to improve the quality of education. Use of Information communication technology (ICT) is one such innovation, in the era of advanced technology, global hood and rapid exchange of ideas and information which provides exposure to each and every individual to stay connected with people around the world and allows sharing their experiences and knowledge with others. This practice is very helpful to raise the standard of education all the same. Commencement of e-learning in India is rapidly replacing the service driven mindset to innovation driven mindset. The emphasis of education shifts to intelligence, requiring new competencies such as the capability of abstract thinking, systemic thinking, experimentation and collaborative work (Toffler-1990, Reich-1992).

**Teacher Education**

Teacher education occupies a very pivotal role in the education system of a country, in fact it is the backbone of the education system, and teachers has the responsibility to develop intellectual minds, skilled workers and technicians etc., it is the quality of teachers which affect the quality of work force that is needed for the development of the country so indirectly it is among the main pillar of the developing or developed countries. “It is well known that the quality and extent of learner achievement are determined primarily by teacher competence, sensitivity and teacher motivation” (NCFTE-2010). Pre service and in service are the two main phases of teacher education which has the responsibilities to make them competent, sensitive and keep them motivated throughout the career. At this particular point of time we are screaming about the quality of teachers and teacher education, however it is the collection of different factors which influence the whole system. According to NCFTE-2010 it includes:

- Status
- Remuneration
- condition of work
- Their academic and professional education.

Status, remuneration, and working conditions are three very important factors which influence the quality of a teacher but the quality of a teacher is affected most by the attainment of academic and professional education and qualifications. Professional education of a teacher is categorized into two main phases one is known as pre-service teacher education which a teacher acquires before entering into the profession of teaching, and second is known as in-service teacher education which is required for the continuous professional development of teachers. In the current scenario we need to implement some innovative ideas and practices to cater to the needs of teachers and
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teacher educators, National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE)-2009 has suggested the establishment of teacher learning centers (TLCs) to raise the quality of teacher education, but due to the economic constraints establishment of TLCs on a nationwide huge scale is not possible, till the establishment of TLCs all over India we require an alternative for TLCs and one of the alternative of TLCs may be Virtual professional learning Communities (VPLCs), which is an innovative idea that can fulfill the objectives of TLCs.

Virtual Professional Learning Community
Learning is a social activity that includes comprehension of languages and cultures, which ICT can greatly facilitate. ICT provide the possibilities for creativity and creation of interpersonal links (community) for the teachers, parents as well as students, in the wake of constructivist movement many educators and trainers are re-examining traditional approaches to learning and training, tutors and trainers are now seeing the benefits of involving students, stake holders trainees in the process of program design.

Virtual professional learning Community creates knowledge with the help of computer mediated communication and global resources. These communities also enable individuals to produce, access and interact with information and ideas produced by others in ways that are compatibles with their needs.

Thus we can define Virtual Professional learning communities as; a group of autonomous, independent individuals who are drawn together by shared values, goals, and interests and committed to knowledge construction through intensive dialogues, interaction, and collaboration with help of online medium

A virtual professional learning community employs technology to communicate; therefore it may happen and can be constructed anywhere. The idea of construction is central to the notion of virtual communities, as what is created by the community becomes the collective product of its members. Every one being able to share their work and experiences with other colleagues and has made value for their work, and at the same time enriching and improving it. Technology provides a means for enabling the development of learning communities across states and countries (Ford, Branch, & Moore, -2008) and online environments can increase the amount of professional development of teachers as well as increase the number of teachers participating in upgrading their credentials. Educators responsible for preparing tomorrow’s citizens should begin to embrace these opportunities and capitalize on the wealth of knowledge accessible through virtual professional learning communities (Ford, Branch, & Moore, -2008). PLCs share a common professional language, communal stories of success, extensive opportunities for quality professional development, and ceremonies that celebrate the improvement, the collaboration, and the learning (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Characteristics of successful VPLC
Virtual Professional learning community is a group of people who take an active,
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reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems and perplexities of teaching and learning. While various characteristics of professional learning communities have been identified, but they can broadly be categorised under five headings. These five categories are:

1. **Shared values and vision.**
   Having a shared vision and sense of purpose is centrally important. The quality of participation depends on individual and shared commitment or relevance of the substance of the community. Commitment of an individual or member of a community depends on shared values and common vision. The valence of the commitment need only be strong enough to maintain participation in the group, but stronger commitment generally leads to the development of stronger communities (Kowch and Schwier-1997)

2. **Collective responsibility.**
   Virtual professional learning communities gives due attention to teaching and learning. The learning community maintain and share membership and leadership that leads towards the commitment to improvement of professional practices. Members of such communities consistently take collective responsibility for student learning. This helps to sustain commitment, putting peer pressure and accountability on those who does not contributing fairly, and easing isolation. The quality of a community depends upon the competence and attitudes of each individual member of community, to raise the quality of the community they need to share the responsibility collectively.

3. **Reflective professional inquiry.**
   Reflection is regarded as a core activity for the individual and collective construction of meaning. This can also be viewed as an ‘inquiry minded approach to improve members learning. Such inquiry is characterised by: ‘reflective dialogue’, conversations about serious educational issues or problems involving the application of new knowledge in a sustained manner, frequent examination of teachings’ practice, through mutual observation and case analysis, joint planning and curriculum development; and problem solving and generation of new ideas addressing members’ needs.

4. **Collaboration.**
   Collaborative learning in general is defined as any kind of group learning in which there are some meaningful learning interactions between learners. We speak of virtual collaborative e-learning if these interactions take place in virtual environments (Goren-Bar, D., Koubek, A. 2001), collaboration is very vital aspect to achieve the goals of VPLCs. However, inter dependence is the central idea in VPLCs, the goal of better learning would not be achievable without the collaborative effort of the members of the community. Lieberman and Grolnick suggest that learning to collaborate is about sharing power, knowledge and influence.
Group and collective learning, as well as individual learning. Collective learning is also evident, through collective knowledge creation, whereby the school or networked learning community interacts, engages in serious dialogue and deliberates about information and data, interpreting it communally and distributing it among them.

Tools needed to Virtual Professional Learning Communities

Zhu and Baylen (2005) identified eight technology tool types: (a) communications, (b) organization and presentation, (c) information search and resource management, (d) audio and video technology, (e) web-based course management systems, (f) creation and manipulation, and (g) disciplinary software programs and tutorials, and (h) distance learning systems. Several of these different technologies were used to deliver instruction and to allow students to work together on group assignments. VPLCs integrate the following tools:

- Bulletin Board
- Discussion or mailing list
- Polling
- Instant Messaging
- Internet telephony
- E-mail tutor and students.
- Video/Audio Conferencing.
- Synchronous Collaboration Tools.
- Multimedia Resources Repository.
- File uploads area.
- Calendar.
- Search Tools.
- Bookmarking.

The aforementioned tools for VPLCs keep the community updated and aware the happenings around the world of teacher education. This could be better understood by looking at the description of some of the tools:

**Bulletin Board**

Bulletin board provides an asynchronous message forum and message sent to discussion group are permanently visible to everyone who has access to it. Many professional organizations provide bulletin board service within their website so that their staff can discuss and share their ideas. A typical bulletin board includes following features:

- Indexes
- Basic search facilities
- Tools enable you to view bulletin in hierarchical format this is often called threaded or unthreaded where they are stored by date and time.
- Facility to enable message to be select
Many virtual learning communities have access to closed bulletin board and these enable individual member to have confidential access to the community.

**Discussion or mailing list**

There are thousands of discussion lists available on the Internet and each is devoted to a particular topic and is aimed at a specific audience. Individual members may post an e-mail to discussion list and this is immediately sent out to all list subscribers.

Any member of a list may take part in a conversation or begin a new topic. List servers can also distribute electronic journals (e-journals) and newsletters, which are simply online magazines that are edited and distributed as a list. If you are accessing EdWeb by way of Netscape or a similarly advanced Web browser, you can click onto the name of the list group and automatically connect to an email program:

- AASNET-L. African American Student Network. listserv@listserv.uh.edu.
- ACIMEG. Computer hardware/software for music teaching and learning. listserv@deakin.oz.au.
- ACSOFT-L. Educational software discussion. listserv@wuvmd.wustl.edu.
- AEMA-L. Arizona Educational Media Assoc. list. listserv@asuvm.inre.asu.edu.
- AERA. The American Educational Research Association runs the following sub lists at listserv@asu.edu:

**Instant Messaging**

Instant messaging enables the members to send and display a massage on someone’s screen in matter of second. It is a form of real-time direct text-based chatting communication in push mode between two or more people using personal computers or other devices, along with shared clients. The user's text is conveyed over a network, such as the Internet. More advanced instant messaging software clients also allow enhanced modes of communication, such as live voice or video calling and inclusion of links to media. Yahoo messenger, Google Talk, etc are few examples of instant messenger. Instant messaging software can be downloaded from www.icq.com and AQL instant messenger available from www.newaol.com.aim.

**Video Conferencing**

It is synchronous tools that enable the members to exchange information, provide instruction, discussion. Video Conferencing service allows multiple participants to converse with each other regardless of their location through the video end-points or Personal computers. The use of desktop or laptop video conferencing is becoming more common and it offers a way in which members of virtual learning community can come together relatively easily. The video conferencing service can be availed by any user through IP or ISDN interface. In India every major player in the communication (BSNL, MTNL, Reliance, TATA, Airtel etc.) are providing the video conferencing facilities through their network.

**Polling Software**

Polling software enables the community to collect information from the whole group.
It is useful in data gathering from the members on particular topic or event. This type of software can be availed free or on payment basis.

**VPLCs in Teacher Education**

There has been a paradigm shift from models of education and training where knowledge and skills are transmitted through formal attendance at training sessions to an approach that encourages group of practitioners to work together to examine, evaluate and construct knowledge and skills relevant to their current professional practices and the context of their particular work place. (Lewis and Allen, 2005), the school contexts and its demands are changing according to the time, explosion of knowledge, learners need and the learning process, and we require teachers and teacher educators who can satisfy needs of the education system, today teacher education has to prepare teachers for the dual role of encouraging, supportive and humane facilitators who enable learners to discover their talent, to apprehend their physical and intellectual aptitude, to develop character and needed human and social values to act as a responsible citizen of the country and second role a teacher has to play in the renewal of school curriculum to maintain its relevance to the changing societal needs and personal needs of the learner. (Position paper national focus group on teacher education for curriculum renewal – 2005). With the burden of dual responsibilities teachers need to evaluate their own practices and need to share their experiences with their colleagues and experts to get the right feedback and also some valuable suggestions, but there is no opportunity for teachers to examine their own biases and beliefs and reflect on their own experiences as a part of classroom discourse and enquiry. (NCFTE-2009), NCFTE – 2009 also suggested to established some kind of complementary support mechanism (Teachers Learning Centers – TLCs) to replace the system where teachers trainees, teacher practitioners and teacher educators works individually on assignments, tests, field work, they don’t have space to address their assumptions about realities related to learner, process of learning and the society to the system where students encourages to work in teams, interact with each other, perform project presentations and should have space to examine and evaluate their assumptions, their own position and able to reflect on various issues. According to NCFTE 2009 a teacher learning centre is a:

- Structural space for hands on experience,
- Resource center for teacher trainees, teacher practitioners and teacher educators,
- Forum for interaction and sharing,
- Platform for classroom based research,
- Structural space for self directed activities,
- Platform for developing a repertoire of skills,
- Structural space for personal and psychological development of teacher trainees, teacher practitioners and teacher educators,
- Structural space for forging links between pre-service and in-service teacher education.
Thus TLCs will provide a space to teacher trainees, teacher practitioners and teacher educators where they can get hands on experiences, could have space to say something to interact, to reflect, to enhance their skills and competencies etc.

**VPLCs as an alternative to TLCs**

VPLCs may act as an alternative to the TLCs, VPLCs has the potential to fulfill the goals of TLCs, VLCs can facilitate learning by providing opportunities for its members to interact, share, discuss, reflect on different educational and social issues, it has the merit of not having restricted boundaries of a school, city, state or nation, it is an approach to get views and held discussions from all over the world on particular educational and social issues. However the success of VPLCs depends on its members, if members perform their roles with nobility then success is granted. So in order to run a successful learning community every individual has to perform some roles and some of them are as follows

- Members (student - teachers, in service teachers & teacher educators) must have clear sense of vision, why he/she is joining a particular community? What role he/she can play in achieving the community goal? And how he/she can positively use this community to improve the overall learning process in classroom.
- Teachers of different schools, place and different background share their experiences, ideas, and work together in collaborative team to determine the best practice to achieve the mission and goal of community.
- Their Main focus should be the development of students as well as their own practices.
- They should be goal and outcome oriented
- They must always be committed to continuous enhancement of their knowledge, experiences and process of teaching.
- The teachers should see themselves as lifelong learners therefore they should always engage themselves in the process of learning.

**Benefits of Virtual Professional Learning Communities (VPLCS)**

Culture emerge from community, when people are come together and worked for common goals forms a community, thus the school/colleges are also a community, where the common goal is overall development of learner, school/colleges reflect the inherent characteristics of a community due to the presence of people from different backgrounds and from different sections of the society.

- VPLCs provide advantages of instant information exchange that is not possible in real life communication. These type communities provide a large pool of data to the members that can be beneficial to them. In brief some important benefits of VPLCs are given below;
- VPLCs decrease the teachers and learners isolation, because they can interact to each others from anywhere and anytime.
- VPLCs increase the teachers commitment to the mission
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- VPLCs develop the sense of belongingness among the learners and teachers. It also fosters the shared responsibility.
- VPLCs bring together various peoples with various ideas, experiences and information therefore new and innovative ideas emerge out from the community.
- VPLCs increase the social cohesiveness’ among members of the community and decreases the gap between its members (teachers, students).
- VPLCs develop collaborating and cooperation among the members, result of this benefitted to the all learners
- VPLCs also ignited the research attitude among the learners and members

Few suggestions for VPLCs
- Face book pages and groups are convenient options, teacher trainees; teacher practitioners and teacher educators could create a page, invite all their fellows and share the information away.
- Google is among the many competent options too. Google Plus has dazzled the world with “circles”.
- Checking plagiarism: - Every day, students use tones of paper for schoolwork. We carry heavy loads of books and notebooks to school. And teachers too, must accept a pile of notebooks to read their students single-page essays. VPLC allows teachers to announce their homework on the class webpage and students in turn, could type the homework and upload it to the site, email it to the teacher or share it on Google Docs! There is a perk to this tech; typed homework helps keep plagiarism in control.
- Teachers usually do not have time to conduct discussion about their difficulties with colleagues, experts, and other peoples, they can use Face book discussion, group chat or Google+ hangouts. Teachers also can initiate discussions and let other people participate in them. Various professors in Harvard, Wharton and few of the top universities around the world are now interacting with students, colleagues, experts etc. via Twitter and Facebook to answer queries and spread knowledge.

These are just a few ways in which VPLCs can serve as jewels of the “online classroom”. With the Google products now integrated under one umbrella toolbar, Google mail, docs, plus, sites and blogger are all at our service. Moreover, sites like Weebly are taking the concept of online classrooms to a whole new level. All we need is some awareness, interest and creativity to turn “harmful” social networking websites into effective “educational” tools.

Conclusion
In the era of globalization teaching learning process is not restricted to merely the four walls of classroom, it become a process of knowledge construction and put ample
pressure on the teachers and teacher educators, so far teacher and teacher educators do not leave the space and interact with colleague or expert. They do not learn opportunity to reflect on different issues or enhance their skills and teaching competencies. NCFTE-09 has advocated for TLCs but establishment of TLCs across whole country will take time. Hence VPLCs offer much as a place to fulfill the goals of TLCs. VPLCs provide ample opportunities to its members to stay connected with different members of community from anywhere and at any time and interact, share, understand, reflect and get knowledge on different social and educational issues. But the success of VPLCs depends upon the interactivity because they have shared values, vision, collective responsibility, collaboration and the members and their good management. VPLCs can be established very easily with the help of different tools available on internet free of cost such as facebook, google+, Orkut, skype, Research Gate or linkdin. Some of these tools has some harmful effect in form of social networking but it is up to its members how they utilize in fruitful way.

References


