Improving teacher development through the effective use of social media groups

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Contents

About the author

Gary Motteram: Gary has been involved in a wide range of projects over many years that have addressed the topic of digitally-supported learning. In his early work, he focused on language learning and the role of digital technologies in the classroom and published in this area. He then began to specialise in distance teacher education as his work at Manchester moved in that direction, and worked on a range of projects in Indonesia, Poland, Mexico and China, where working with teachers at a distance was the main emphasis. He produced, with other colleagues at Manchester, a report for Cambridge University Press and Assessment which had a significant impact on their use of digital tools for teaching and learning. Furthermore, he also worked on two large European projects developing teacher education and language materials in virtual worlds. Following the publication of his well-received and well-cited British Council publication '*Innovations in Learning Technologies for ELT*' in 2013, he has

been focusing specifically on technology-supported teacher education in low-resource contexts. This particular focus started with his consultancy work on the PEELI project in Pakistan in 2013. From the findings of this project, he developed materials and practices that fed into more recent activities working with teachers online using tools like WhatsApp, Zoom and Padlet. This has included work with teachers who are refugees in Jordan, as well as teachers who work in language development of recent refugee arrivals in the UK, and teachers in a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa.
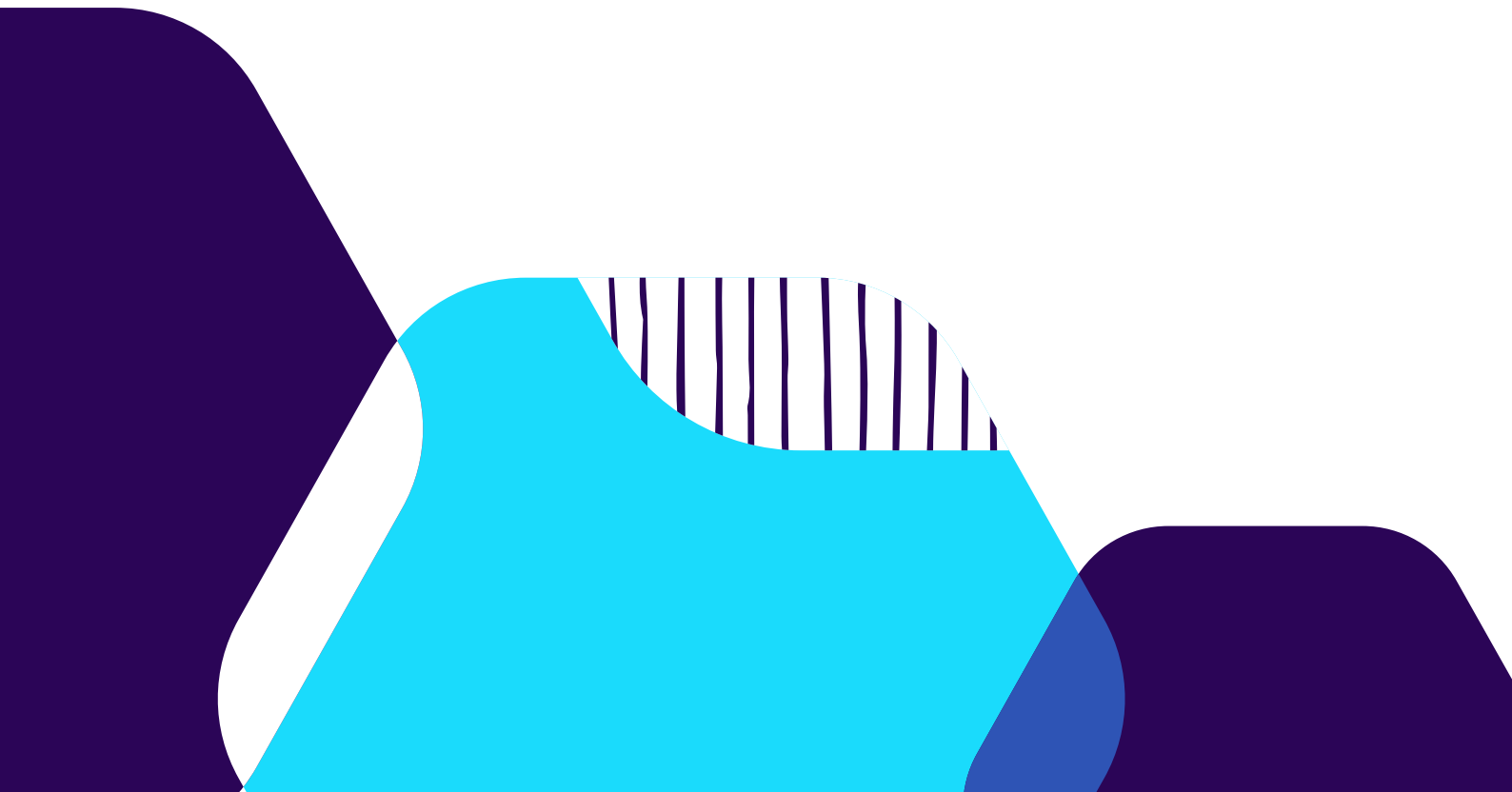
Abstract

This report explores the increasing use of social media for supporting various types of teacher education, particularly in a context where teachers work in difficult circumstances where there are also likely to be limited resources. This phenomenon started before the Covid-19 pandemic, and as with many other types of technology used in education, has now become more normalised.

The report begins by exploring the background of digital communication and examining why the use of social media has become a significant focus for this form of teacher development activity.

The report then explores various types of teacher education and their contributions to our understanding of good practice, alongside insights from conventional distance education. The research, carried out in 2021, includes case studies from different countries, highlighting key practices. The second part of the study, a questionnaire, provides valuable insights into the range of countries using social media for teacher education, the activities they engage in, and the perceived value of these tools. The study shows that the use of social media is part of a growing trend in adopting online tools for teacher education and demonstrates how these tools can contribute to a more socially just set of practices.

1 Introduction

Electronic communication has been part of our lives for a long time, with active forum groups dating back to the 1990s. However, social media as we know it today began to gain popularity in the 2000s, when a range of tools became more accessible on mobile phones. Since then, the use of these tools has grown exponentially.

Nowadays, people are using these tools in many ways. Initially, they were used for keeping in touch with friends and family, but because of security features like end-to-end encryption, they started being used for political purposes, for example, during the Arab Spring. They are now used in all aspects of life, including teacher professional development, which is the focus of this report.

Here we present the views of teacher communities collected in case studies (see Appendix 2 and Table 4), as well as the views of people who have had a central role in setting up professional development using social media. The report also presents the results from an online survey constructed from the findings of focus groups and interviews, which help to support the themes from the case study findings. This report acts as a survey of current practice and an evaluation of its effectiveness, so we can build on existing good practice. The aim of this report and the accompanying toolkit is to make social media for teacher development as effective as we can.

There are clearly challenges in the use of social media for teacher development, as well as successes, and these are both represented here. We are particularly interested in identifying the causes of these challenges and determining how we can improve. Should we consider alternatives if social media communication tools are not doing what we hoped they would do? Are the dynamics in these groups similar to those in online distance education, and can existing research in distance education guide us toward better solutions?

The accompanying toolkit is available online: '*Creating and running successful online groups for teacher development*'.
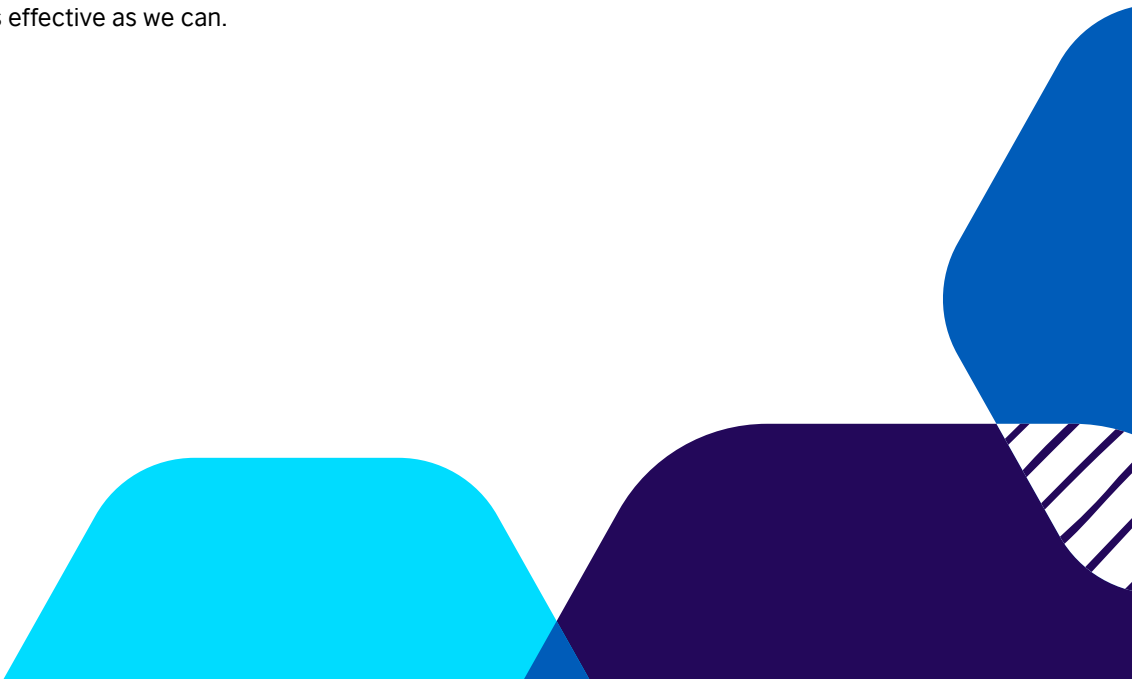
2 Reasons for using social media

One of the main reasons why social media is proposed as a channel for teacher development is that many teachers have access to and already use these tools. Social media also supports many functions that make it useful for teachers of languages, such as the ability to share text, pictures, audio and video. Social media can be used synchronously and asynchronously. Much of the data gathered in the first phase of this project has been collected on WhatsApp at meetings set up at specific times with a number of people contributing to the debate. These communication tools are usually accessed on a mobile phone (often an Android). The contexts where these teachers work are defined as 'difficult' (Kuchah and Shamin, 2018), or remote and are often the rural parts of countries in the Global South. Here we also find large classes, limited access to materials, and teachers who are not well paid (if at all).

However, despite these limitations, many people in these contexts now have access to the kinds of smart phones that are able to run a whole range of social media and we can see how these communities of practice, as they are regularly described, can actually have good success when certain conditions apply.

2.1 Types of social media and their uses

Mâță (2014, p 133) provides a table (Table 1) of social media types, which we have modified by adding two additional columns (Examples and General features) and updated to reflect the changing reality of the use of such tools.

Table 1 Types of Social Media Definitions (Mâţă, p. 133) – Adapted and updated

Type	Description	Examples	General features of the tools
Blog	A type of website that is ordinarily maintained by an individual with frequent updates (called 'entries') (Kim, 2011)	Blogger, Word Press, Medium	Mostly used for text and pictures, although they can include audio and video. Blogs are often managed by teachers, and students are asked to post. Other students are asked to comment, but often do not. Have mostly been used in English language teaching (ELT) for authentic writing practice.
Discussion forums	Interactive form of communication system based on individual postings and replies, which form so-called 'threads' (Safran, 2010)	Google Groups, JISCMail	Discussion forums were much more common in the early days of the internet, and these days, are more often associated with virtual learning environments (VLEs) where they are still used as an aspect of the courseware. These would not typically be characterised as social media.
Messaging services **(these have mostly replaced forums as a space for discussion)**	As Discussion forums, above	Line, Messenger, Signal, Telegram, Vyber, WhatsApp, WeChat	These are the core focus of this report and have replaced discussion forums as the main means of text communication between groups of people. Because they are 'social media' and people are used to using them in social ways, they can be problematic. However, they are very popular with teachers. They typically use text and pictures, but can also be used for audio and video messages. They can be used for group calling, but with limited numbers.
Microblogging	A small-scale form of blogging, generally made up of short, succinct messages, used by both consumers and businesses to share news, post status updates, and carry on conversation (Safran, 2010)	X (Twitter)	The most well-known micro-blogging programme and a useful way of joining up teacher communities and spreading work and ideas.
Podcasting/ Vodcasting	Internet-based radio shows or other audio programs available for download over the internet to be played through a computer and on MP3 players (Kim, 2011)	*Audio* Apple, Deezer, Podomatic, Stitcher *Video* YouTube, Vimeo, Bilibili	Videocasts are probably better known, particularly through tools like YouTube in the west and Bilibili in China. However, audiocasts probably have more value in more remote contexts, because they use less bandwidth.

Social networks/ Virtual Learning Environments	'Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 211)	Canvas, DingTalk, Facebook, Google Classroom	The most famous social network is Facebook, and it is used quite extensively in education both as a platform for the exchange of ideas and also for educational groups. People post materials of various types. It can also be used for live broadcasts of presentations. We have added Virtual Learning Environments to this group, because they have similar functionality to Facebook, and in some cases, work in similar ways. They have the advantages that they are closed systems and have a variety of tools specifically designed to support learning.
Web 2.0	'A wide array of web-based applications which allow users to collaboratively build content and communicate with others across the world' (Butler, 2012, p.139)	Pinterest, Padlet, Trello, VoiceThread, YouTube	These are all tools that are regularly mentioned in articles about the use of technology to support language learning. In combination with a communications tool like WhatsApp, they can be used to create a learning environment.
Wikis	Represent an example of one of the Web 2.0 online tools for developing collaborative activities (West and West, 2009)	pbworks	Wikis have been mostly used for collaborative writing and project work in ELT. They have a lot of potential, but have not been updated significantly from when they were first created. They are essentially a simple way of creating a website that anyone can interact with and edit. Tools like Google Docs and Tencent Docs offer similar characteristics today for collaboration on texts.
Video-conferencing services		Big Blue Button, Teams, Zoom	Videoconferencing services offer real time video-based communication and have shown their value for education throughout the pandemic. Their big problem for low tech environments is making them work for most people.
Virtual worlds	'An electronic environment that visually mimics complex physical spaces, where people can interact with each other and with virtual objects, and where people are represented by a virtual character' (Bainbridge, 2007)	Minecraft, Mozilla Hubs	These spaces offer similar capabilities to videoconferencing, but are still in their infancy and require high-end technology to make work effectively.

Table 2 below compares commonly used messenger tools. They include the most commonly used tool, WhatsApp, for comparison with key tools used in specific parts of the world (see the discussion below for more detail on countries).

Table 2 Comparison of commonly used messenger tools

Useful characteristics for Teacher Development	WhatsApp	Telegram	WeChat	Viber	Facebook Messenger
Can post text messages including emoticons and emojis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Can post audio messages	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Can post documents of various types	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Can post video	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Can export discussions	✓	✓	No	Difficult	No
Can provide audio and video calls	Max 32	✓ – Up to 1000 can participate in a video call, but with only 30 people who are able to use video	Max nine	No limit mentioned, although 20 has been suggested as a maximum	Max 50
Number of members in a group	1024	200,000	500	Not mentioned, but assumed to be unlimited	250
End to end encryption	Yes, as standard	Has to be set up	No	✓	No

Choice of tool to use is partly dependent on where people live in the world. It is also likely to vary with age, the sort of phone that people have available and their access to the internet.

According to the Statista website (www.statista.com/statistics/258749/most-popular-global-mobile-messenger-apps/), the most commonly used app for instant messaging is still WhatsApp, with 2 billion active monthly users. WhatsApp has been the most popular for a number of years. However, in 2022, the Chinese app WeChat replaced Facebook Messenger in second place. WeChat now has over 1.3 billion active monthly users, most being in China, while Facebook Messenger has one billion active monthly users in 2024, dropping from 1.3 billion users in 2021. Following these are QQ, Snapchat and Telegram, all with over 500 million active monthly users.

More general social media platforms are also still widely used: the most popular in the world remains Facebook with over three billion active monthly users. Instagram (two billion) and TikTok (1.5 billion) are also very popular (statistics reported from www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/).

The data collected in 2021 as a part of this project reflects the general popularity of WhatsApp in the world beyond China, although among people who have been using messenger tools for some time, there is increasing discussion about the value of Telegram. This is partly about the number of users who can be part of a group, but also about the different features that Telegram has to offer.

3 Teacher development models

3.1 What is teacher development and why is it needed?

The two main reasons for starting to make use of social media communication tools in teacher development have already been presented. Essentially, teacher educators saw the potential of these tools because they were available to the teachers they served, and people were already using them for other purposes. Teachers were used to these tools and knew the basics of how they worked. They could also be used in places where there were limited, or no opportunities for teachers to access any professional development.

Teacher development is a debated term, but it is used here to mean teacher sessions that occur after an initial period of training, sometimes referred to as in-service training. This, of course, assumes that there has been an initial training course for teachers before they get positions in schools. In some countries, central teacher training systems still exist, but it is a shifting picture which is being impacted by the number of teachers who have begun to work in the rapidly developing private school market, where being trained is not necessarily a requirement to being employed.

3.2 Different models

3.2.1 Communities of Practice (CoPs)

The groups that are formed are often referred to as *Communities of Practice* (CoPs).

CoPs are made of individuals who demonstrate interest or passion about a subject and whose knowledge and skill in that area are increased through regular interaction (Wenger et al., 2002). Members communicate through several means, which can be both digital and physical. By physical CoPs, we mean a CoP where members interact mainly face-to-face. CoPs also include virtual communities (VCoPs) supported by digital tools (Wenger and Snyder, 2000 cited in Haas et al., 2020).

Key points here are that knowledge and skills develop and this is because of regular interaction. Practices that are presented in a CoP need to be acted upon in the real world of the classroom.

CoPs have been used in ELT teacher development in various ways and these may be a mixture of face-to-face and online activity. It may be that small groups of teachers working in schools form a CoP to work together on their own professional development, perhaps driven by a particular project and with no virtual engagement. However, here we are also concerned with groups that may well never have met, particularly when an online group is international.

These communities might also be referred to as *Communities of Inquiry* (CoI), or *Communities of Learning* (CoL). The Community of Inquiry model is used to describe teaching and learning online and is very useful for planning how to run an online teacher professional development group. We will discuss this in more detail below.

3.2.2 Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs)

Teacher activity groups (TAGs) is the term used to describe formally constituted Communities of Practice: 'TAGs were … recognised by the state education department and incorporated into a formal large-scale CPD project' Borg et al., (2020, p. 7). Teachers are considered more likely to engage in such groups if they are seen as being a part of a recognised system of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). TAGs are not, however, conventional classroom based CPD, they maintain their link to the essential features of a CoP in that they are group based and are social. Key features are:

- 'sustained activity over time (face-to-face and/or online)
- opportunities for teachers to learn together (collaborative CPD)
- opportunities for teachers to learn from one another (teachers as a source of expertise)
- dynamic content that is defined by teachers' classroom contexts (localisation and immediate relevance)
- sharing and interaction as key teacher learning processes
- positive group dynamics – trust, openness and a non-judgemental environment
- classroom inquiry and reflection (cyclical links between TAGs and teaching).' (Borg et al., 2020, p. 24)

3.2.3 The role of teacher associations/ relationships to CoPs/CoLs/CoI

Teacher Associations, while often not seen as a part of the officially recognised CPD offering in a country, are sometimes, nonetheless, the only providers of CPD opportunities in many contexts (see Lamb, 2012 and Elsheikh et al., 2018). They usually work independently of government, but sometimes are approached to run specific training activities by local governments or international organisations. The use of instant messaging communication tools has more recently become a feature of teacher association activity, particularly in contexts that are hard to reach, or where there is no funding to bring teachers together for face-to-face sessions. An early example of this is the English language teacher association in Côte d'Ivoire, but many other teacher associations have followed suit (see Motteram and Dawson, 2019). If not a part of a formally constituted training process, these communities sit outside of the notion of a TAG, but do have similarities.

3.2.4 Personalised/Personal Learning Networks (PLNs)

PLNs are a feature of the digital world, although the idea pre-dated the social media-based world we now inhabit. 'A PLN is a network of people, information, and resources that an individual strategically develops using social technologies to access informal learning' (Oddone, et al., 2019, p. 104). The difference to CoP is that they are driven by the individual and their needs. People seek out others to find information that they can make use of. Teachers are often looking for specific ideas and information for their learners and make efforts to look for solutions. They may also take that resulting knowledge back to their local CoP.

3.2.5 Reflective practice

Central to many of the types of activity described above is the notion of reflective practice. Reflective practice in English language teaching, along with its use in other disciplines, has its origins in the work of Dewey and Schön (see Farrell, 2018, or Mann and Walsh, 2017). It is a commonly used model and essentially a way for (mostly) experienced teachers to think more deeply about their practice through asking questions about their teaching, interrogating those questions, looking for solutions by providing evidence about how a practice does or does not work. It has the advantage over other methods of teacher development in that it starts with the realities of the teachers' lives, rather than trying to bring in ready-made solutions from elsewhere. It is represented in the last bullet point of the TAG model above.

4 What we can learn from online distance learning

One area that has not been effectively included in recent considerations of informal and formal online communities based on social media is the role that our understanding of distance/online learning can offer to these groups as they continue to develop. In the more successful groups that continue to be active and continue to evolve, we see many of the same characteristics that are prevalent in successful online education.

One common model that is regularly presented in distance learning is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison et al., 2000).

This model has three core elements: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence, and it is argued that learning occurs when all three elements are seen to work together and support each other. There is engagement with ideas via specifically designed content, or because knowledge is constructed through the exchange and critique of ideas (cognitive presence). People take an active part in the community as 'real people'. They contribute, turn up for meetings, they feel connected to what is happening on a psycho-social level (social presence). There is direction to the learning, referred to in this model as 'teaching presence'. People offer guidance on topics and ideas and guide the community towards a shared understanding of ideas. This model builds on the work of Moore (1983, 1993) who coined the term 'transactional distance' when talking about the needs of distance learners (see below).

A key concern about any kind of learning community is the seeming lack of engagement by the participants. People who do not engage in a community are often referred to as 'lurkers'. Bozkurt et al. (2020) provide insights in their online article about how people defined as 'lurkers' might engage with the online world, highlighting the following points:

- Lurkers are invisible, silent learners on the peripherals of the networks.

- Transactional distance can be in multiple forms.

- Lurkers prefer vicarious interaction.

- A combination of internal and external factors can lead learners to lurk.

These are important considerations for people setting up and running online communities. There will be lurkers, but that does not mean that they are not an important part of the community. They may be engaging with the materials and activities that are a part of the community, but they are not willing to overtly participate. There may be a host of reasons for this, which might be personal reasons or features of their circumstances.

Transactional distance is the theory that explains how structure and dialogue in a distance course impedes or enhances learning. It is directly related to learner autonomy. The more structured a course and the less dialogue there is, the less able the learner is to develop their own pathway through a

course. When we are dealing with adult learners, they bring a lot of learning skills and ideas about what and how they want to learn. This is, then, an important consideration in any kind of online space where we find teachers engaging.

A further consideration is the processes that people engage in to enable learners to become acculturated into an online, distance mode of learning. The Covid-19 pandemic prompted a vast move to online learning and teaching over a very short period of time, regardless of whether learners (or their teachers) felt confident or enthusiastic about engaging with technology. As a result,

knowledge about online/distance learning has grown, and learner attitudes towards it have become more positive (Robert, 2022).

A useful way of looking at the process of acculturation is via Salmon's (2011) five-stage-model of e-moderating. This model is concerned with the process of enabling people to engage in online learning and has clear relationships with Bloom's taxonomy (see Krathwohl, 2002) in that the skills developed become more sophisticated over time. It has two elements to it: technical support and e-moderating; and five stages of the learning process.

Table 3 Gilly Salmon's five-stage-model of e-moderating (adapted)

Stage	Technical support	E-moderating
1. Access and motivation	Getting people access to the system and setting up	Welcoming and getting to know people; giving people support
2. Online socialisation	Learning how the different parts of the system works by posting and replying to other messages	Using strategies to form the group and encourage social engagement. Beginning to establish presence
3. Information exchange	Finding your way about the material and engaging with and sharing your ideas	Supporting the learning process, giving additional explanations of the materials, setting appropriate tasks
4. Knowledge construction	Exploring more advanced features of the different tools. Adding your own materials and engaging with others	Providing support and feedback
5. Development	Looking at ways of extending the system, or finding ways of developing the growing knowledge base. Providing links to the outside	Providing support, but moving out of the way to let the learners do their own work

As time passes, the learning process should begin to transform and we anticipate that the elements here, if applied effectively to online communication communities, may have a similar effect.

5 The study

The study used focus groups and interviews to develop case studies of known groups of teachers who have been using social media for some time as a part of teacher development. The initial focus groups were held with teachers in sub-Saharan Africa, but the theory developed from the analysis of these case studies was later tested out in other contexts where similar groups have also been running for some time. This was undertaken through a questionnaire that built on the analysis of the focus groups and interviews. Data was collected from January to March, 2021.

5.1 Research questions

- How are social media being used for teacher development in low resource contexts?
- What types of activities are being used?
- How is activity being organised?
- How can groups be maintained?
- What changes to activities have occurred over time?
- How effective are these groups in improving learner outcomes?

5.2 Methodology

The aim was to use a modified grounded theory approach to build a theory of teacher development using social media. An initial theory was constructed using focus groups and individual interviews, which were coded based on the research questions to see what themes emerged. The theory was then tested using a questionnaire and further validated through additional interviews or focus groups in other countries to ensure its robustness.

5.2.1 Instruments

The main instruments were focus groups, three of which were conducted on WhatsApp, and a fourth on Zoom. WhatsApp and Zoom were also used for the interviews. The findings from the initial discussions were fed into an online questionnaire. Three other subsequent Zoom interviews were conducted to broaden the range of case studies.

5.3 Analysis

5.3.1 Focus groups and interviews

A first set of four focus groups with linked interviews provides an initial theory on which the questionnaire was based. The focus groups and interviews give direct insight into activity in five countries: Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Niger, although in all of these cases there are links between these countries and others including: Angola, Australia, Djibouti, India, Cameroon, Senegal and the UK (see Table 4). Three additional interviews were also conducted to give insights into other countries, or projects running in other countries: Egypt, India and Palestine. These were conducted after the questionnaire had been distributed.

In Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, teacher development activity groups have been running for over six years; in Guinea-Bissau, for four. The case of Niger is different in a number of ways and was only set up in September 2020. Its principal distinction is that this is a group built on audio contributions only. Other groups have some audio (and video), but this is not used for communicating with each other; most groups rely on text. There was a move in Benin to have a regular spoken language session and a Telegram group has been set up in Côte d'Ivoire where there were ongoing discussions about how audio might be used.

Most groups have a range of activities, usually with a mixture of 'synchronous' sessions offered at specific times during the week, often running at one slot in an evening, or over a number of days. Some groups run more than one of these, particularly the group in Benin. Some groups, like CINELTA, are mostly a space to exchange ideas and currently offer few training sessions. However, there are a lot of smaller groups in Côte d'Ivoire run for a specific school, or group of schools, or in a region and these run very targeted activities sometimes over several weeks. An example here is of a group of teachers from a number of schools getting together to explore how to better teach listening skills. The discussion carried on over a number of weeks as teachers began to work together on their practice.

In most of the groups, the regular activities can be about ELT, or more social discussions. People design lesson plans together, show a short video of their teaching and discuss it with their colleagues, attend a presentation/discussion of a specific issue in ELT. These activities can be more or less interactive with different people engaging with the topic. This partly depends on the skills of the presenter and what they are trying to achieve. Groups are moving more to a model of storing materials for future use, although the Benin group has always created PDFs based on the more formal sessions it offers.

The social aspect has been a common feature of these groups. Most of them started as an add-on to a teacher association and even if they began independently, face-to-face sessions have been a part of the mix for some of the members. Benin runs a Friday night game; they also announce people's birthdays. Teachers are supported when they are ill, or when someone dies. The death of a key member of Côte d'Ivoire's ELT community saw many messages of condolences and these were passed around many of the smaller linked groups. Discussion of important local issues has led to specific local activity and, in the case of Guinea-Bissau, the setting up of a charity to support teachers, schools and community projects.

One of the barriers for building further activity or spreading in the existing community is the low teacher salaries and the high cost of phones and particularly the internet.

An outlier from all of this text-based activity is the Niger group. This was set up specifically to practise spoken language and contributors must record and post their ideas. These are moderated and commented on by the group's initiator and other colleagues. Like other groups, there are discussions about specific topics and these run for three or four days. Recent topics have been on motivation and the teaching of spoken language itself. Other groups are beginning to explore the greater use of spoken tools, as indicated above.

One of the questions raised towards the end of the focus groups was how participants saw the groups developing and linked to this, whether the groups were sustainable.

Table 4 Initial case studies summary

Country and organisation(s): Benin, English Workshop

Background data	• Official language is French, but other local languages are important
	• Access to the internet is expensive for teachers
	• Few women English teachers
	• English Workshop set up July 2017
	• 257 members on WhatsApp
	• Other groups to organise activity – 11 administrators
	• 30 regular contributors
	• Facebook group
	• Website (new)
	• Some teachers also members of international groups
Types of activities	• Word, poem, song of the day running throughout the week
	• Exchange of materials (issues of copyright)
	• Regular presentations on issues in ELT either by known ELT practitioners, or mediated by inspectors, ELT specialists, advisors. These materials are archived as PDFs
	• Discussions on topical issues
	• Social side to the activity: Friday night game, birthday greetings and physical meetings
Ongoing/future developments	• Less teacher-focused activity during the pandemic
	• Development of a website – a search is being made for a community manager for this
	• Follow-up of how ideas are used in the classroom
	• More use of audio

Country and organisation(s): Côte d'Ivoire, CINELTA, various local groups

Background data	• Official language is French, but other local languages are important
	• Access to the internet is expensive for teachers
	• Few women English teachers
	• CINELTA set up as CI-ATEFL group in April 2017
	• 155 current members
	• Some teachers also members of international groups
Types of activities	• In CINELTA there has been less emphasis on ongoing activity. This is more than just an ideas exchange, but also building community; being social; caring about wellbeing/resilience
	• Specific teacher development (TD) activity is focused on regional groups
Ongoing/future developments	• Diversification into local groupings in school districts, or for targeted activity
	• New Telegram group set up to be more specific TD focused and to include other media

Countries: Egypt (Middle East and North Africa — MENA)

Background data	• The focus here is on countries in the Middle East where the first language is Arabic
	• Access to technology can vary quite considerably
	• Some of the countries are currently involved in ongoing conflict and this can lead to situations where there is no regular electricity supply
Types of activities	• Three recent linked initiatives: the first consisted of a series of monthly webinars based on British Council materials
	• The second was to set up a capacity building course for regional trainers, who subsequently went on to set up local communities of practice
	• The third was to run large online events (conferences, symposiums, forums) for all the regional teachers
	• Most of the core training used Microsoft Teams for webinars and Edmodo for synchronous activity
	• The CoPs used tools to suit their local needs and included WhatsApp, Facebook and Google Classroom. WhatsApp here is used as an instant messaging tool
Ongoing/future developments	• To find ways of reaching out to teachers with very limited or no access to technology

Country and organisation(s): Guinea-Bissau, The World in Your Classroom

Background data	• Official language is Portuguese, but Creole is the lingua franca
	• Access to the internet is very expensive for teachers
	• Of 300 English teachers in total only 80 are women. There are activities to increase the numbers
	• The World in Your Classroom set up in May 2018
	• 86 current members
	• Some teachers also members of international groups
	• Materials now being archived on a website
Types of activities	• Group was initially set up to support the visit of Linda Ruas
	• Discussions, quizzes and presentations about teaching. Teachers have worked together to share ideas for lesson material or have created lesson plans together
	• Activities are organised on a community basis and originally were set up to run from Saturday to Tuesday. More recently, there has been a drop-off in activity, which is suggested to be due to limited access to internet data
Ongoing/future developments	• Focus at the time was on the British Council Prelim course, an online course run in WhatsApp to improve teachers' language level

Country and organisation(s): India, Tejas, Maharashtra

Background data	• In this region of India, the official language is Marathi
	• The Tejas project, which was the focus of the discussion for this case study is running across 36 districts, reaching 51,500. Other similar projects operate in other regions of India
	• Access to the internet is not considered too expensive for most teachers, but buying a device is considered expensive
Types of activities	• The project was built on Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs) which started as local CoPs where 2,025 teachers would come together for regular meetings with a CoP leader and each CoP would have a WhatsApp group. There are 2,130 of these groups
	• The overarching group for the 51,500 teachers used Teams for the provision of content alongside a Facebook group for discussion and the storage of materials
	• During the pandemic, TAGs were maintained using videoconferencing to replace face-to-face activity. In some cases, this had begun before the pandemic

Country and organisation(s): Mali, MATE

Background data	• Official language is French, but Banbara is the national language and the lingua franca
	• Access to the internet is expensive for teachers, a monthly package costing 45,000 CFA
	• MATE's official WhatsApp and Telegram groups are only open to MATE members
	• Mate official WhatsApp group is approximately 200 members
	• Other parallel groups exist with more international contributions: MATE World Teachers Day (256 on WhatsApp) and The United Nations of Teachers (Telegram)
	• Activity in Bamoko with older students
Types of activities	• Specific targeted meetings as well as ad hoc postings
	• People share materials, or photos of lessons. They also do storytelling, have a writing corner, do interviews and play games
	• Live session every Saturday from 9.00 to 10.30, where a teacher presents a lesson
	• Cascade training from other training or events
	• Saturday events were mentioned with 20 being the lowest and 50 at the top end. There are also specific groups set up for the English clubs that are a common feature of schools in West Africa
	• They also make use of Padlet in their group, not something mentioned by others
	• Community stressed as important. Group problem solving helping to 'scaffold' activity, making the teachers more confident in what they do
	• Students benefit directly from the activity with one saying that the students get better marks as a result of the activity that occurs in the group

Country: Palestinian Occupied Territories

Background data	• Official language is Arabic, although Hebrew and English are widely spoken
	• Teachers' salaries make purchasing data packages a significant expense, but most teachers can manage to get internet access in the community from relatives, or in public spaces
	• Some have internet at home, but it is likely to be slow
	• The discussion focused on a group of 700 teachers who are part of the British Council's English for Success Project
Types of activities	• Teachers already used WhatsApp a lot for personal reasons and did not need any training for the project
	• Different groups were set up for the teachers and for teacher educators involved in the project
	• Groups are used mainly for sending out information, links, copies of emails. They also use Facebook for communications, too, for the overall group
	• Other apps have been tried, including Edmodo, and they use an LMS for providing online training courses
	• In another project, they are developing materials in a mobile LMS called EdApp
Ongoing/future developments	• This is an ongoing project

6 Questionnaire analysis

6.1 Background data

The questionnaire was created using themes that emerged from the focus groups and interviews. It was reviewed by colleagues at the Manchester Institute of Education with experience of questionnaire design and additional questions were suggested by British Council managers familiar with projects that make regular use of social media in teacher development. The questionnaire was distributed to members of a range of WhatsApp teacher development groups, via X (Twitter) and Facebook, and also by the British Council's management team. At the time of writing there had been 223 responses[1]. The analysis is based on descriptive statistics using the charts and tables produced by Google forms and checked using spreadsheet software. Text-based answers were analysed using the concordancing tool AntConc. Responses were copied from the survey and a word list was created to look for regularly occurring words. Further analysis through collocations and concordance lines was also conducted to provide a more detailed analysis of what the teachers had said. All of the different responses were searched manually to see if any further patterns emerged.

The aim was to get responses from countries that represent places where teachers have limited access to teacher development opportunities and where steps are actively being taken to use social media tools to make a difference. As a result, the countries that replied mostly reflect this context. This was so we could build a picture of good practice to create a toolkit (https://doi.org/10.57884/44ZX-3715) for others to use. India had the highest response rate, followed by Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Ukraine and Benin (see Figure 1). However, there was a breadth of responses (33 countries replied in total) which suggests that social media communication tools are widely used for teacher development purposes.

The data shows an almost 50:50 split on gender (51.8 per cent female; 47.7 per cent male; some preferring not to say), a range of ages from 18–60+, the largest group being the 40–49-year-olds (35.6 per cent). Of the respondents, 61.3 per cent live in a city, 27 per cent in a town and 11.7 per cent in rural areas. Ideally, we would have liked more respondents from rural areas, but when you consider teachers'
salaries and the costs of access to internet data, this lower-level response rate is not surprising. In Figure 2, we can see that over 60 per cent find mobile internet data very expensive or expensive and in most of the countries responding to the survey, teachers' salaries are low, and at times, teachers may well not get paid at all (this became particularly problematic during the Covid-19 pandemic). However, despite this, 59.2 per cent of teachers say they have a monthly contract for their phone.

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[1]This is the total number of responses, numbers on individual questions may vary as the respondents were only required to answer the question about consent. The questionnaire was closed to facilitate the writing of this report, but could be reopened to collect new data at a later stage.
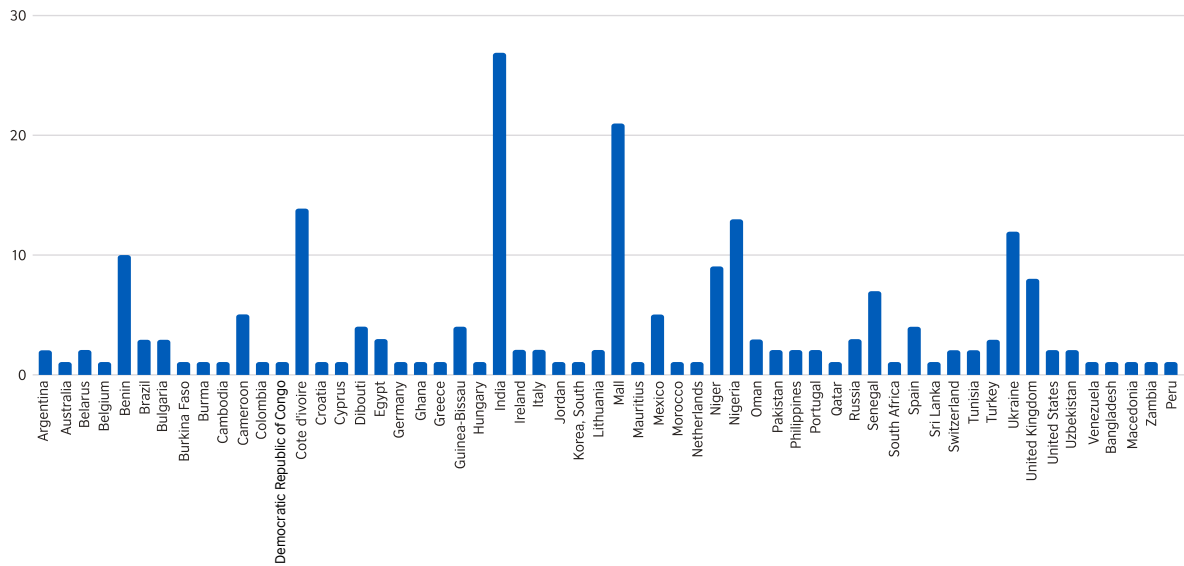
Which country are you from?

Figure 1 Response rates from countries

Is mobile data expensive for a teacher to buy in your country?

219 responses

- Very expensive
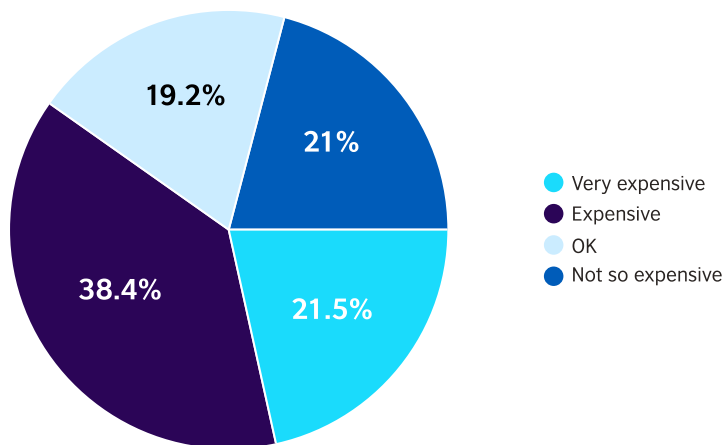- Expensive
- OK
- Not so expensive

Figure 2 Cost of mobile data

Tools and their use

We were interested in what the most commonly used tools are. WhatsApp, as we expected and would be predicted by its world dominance, is being used by 165 of the respondents. However, the question for messaging tools was 'tick any that apply', so Telegram was the next most popular (77 people ticked this), the next largest being Viber (31) with Line, Signal and WeChat at ten or below. Viber is a tool predominantly used in Eastern Europe, and this matches the data collected here. Tools are also used by most people at least a few times a week with 38 per cent using them 'many times a day'.

How often do you make use of messaging tools for teacher professional development?
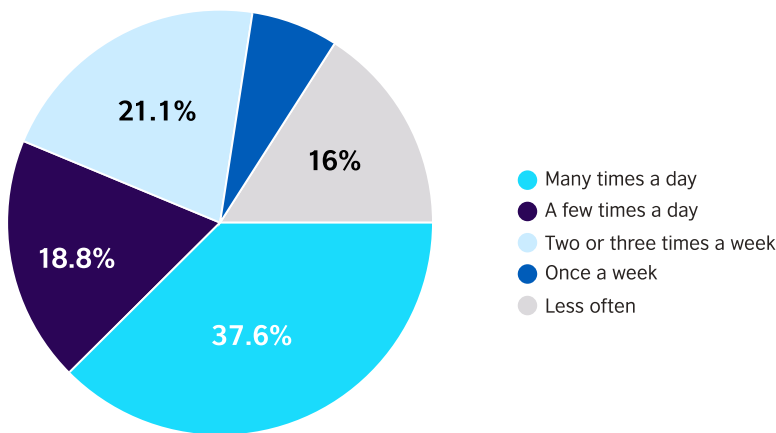
213 responses

Figure 3 How often people use messaging tools

We did also ask about other social media tools and the most commonly referred to are YouTube (165), Facebook (159), Audio and podcasts (95) and Instagram (55). This matches more global usage as presented above. When asked what they use social media for, the respondents talked about various ideas related to teaching and learning. Sharing resources (particularly videos), ideas and experiences were mentioned most, followed by professional development, but there were also lots of mentions of meetings, discussions, improving teaching, creating materials. People also mentioned learning English and using these tools directly with their students.

One response that we had not expected was the high-level use of videoconferencing tools that was reported. Out of the 219 who answered this question, 91.3 per cent answered positively. This may reflect the demographic of the respondents, as they are mostly city- or town-based. Less surprising, is the dominance of Zoom in the choice of tools (189) with the second most popular being Google Meet (84), followed by Teams (60) and Skype (42). As with other tool questions, this was a 'pick any that apply', so respondents are inevitably using more than one tool. Usage of such tools is quite common, with one to three times a week being the most common responses. There were three responses for 'everyday' in the other category, but most other responses in that category fitted with the general trends.

How often do you make use of videoconferencing tools for teacher professional development?

208 responses

- Once a week
- Two or three times a week
- Once a month
- Less often
- Five days a week
- everyday
- Everyday for remote learning
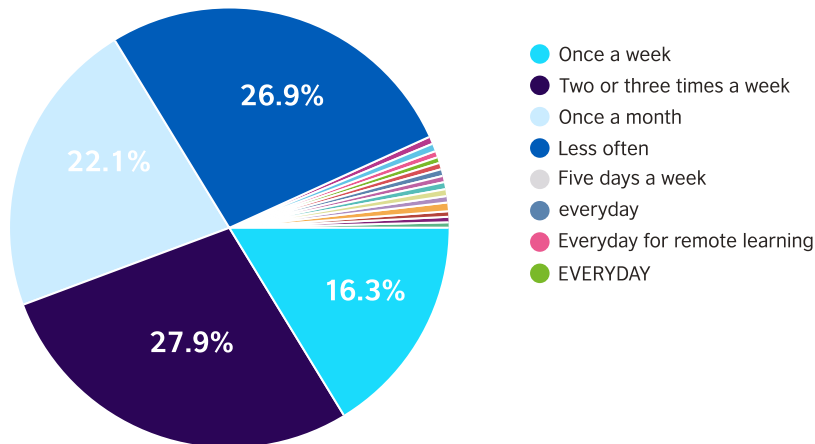- EVERYDAY

26.9%
22.1%
27.9%
16.3%

Figure 4 Use of videoconferencing for professional development

6.2 Professional development

We are interested in this report in how people make use of the different social media tools for professional development. Two hundred and thirteen people replied that they were members of professional development groups. Many are members of more than one. Sixty-two people were members of five groups with a few people stating they were members of many more. Several people reported that they were members of 20+ groups, one saying, 'Many, I cannot count them'. Of 219 people, 86.3 per cent are members of local groups which include teacher associations like ATES (Senegal), BRAZTESOL (Brazil), CINELTA (Côte d'Ivoire), ELTAI (India), MATE (Mali), and TATE (Tunisia).

Respondents also reported belonging to a wide range of international groups. Out of 216 respondents, 77.8 per cent were also members of international groups. Some interpreted this as belonging to groups outside of their own country, or regional groups like Africa ELTA. Common among the responses were teacher organisations like IATEFL, TESOL International, as well as the British Council, various international publishers, and teacher training organisations. English Connects, as a currently running British Council project, clearly featured in the data.

The overwhelming majority of respondents thought that both international and local groups are useful. The most commonly favoured response involved the word 'sharing', with the word itself being used 31 times. The most common collocation was with 'experience', this occurred seven times, followed by 'documents', 'information' and 'resources'. It was also collocated a number of times with 'ideas', and 'ideas' itself was mentioned 18 times. 'Teaching', 'new', 'learning', 'resources' and 'information' can also be found in the responses, 'New' being collocated with 'experience(s)', 'ideas', 'information/knowledge', 'methods', 'strategies', 'material(s)/documents'.

What sorts of activities do groups offer? Tick all that apply

216 responses

Sharing of resources	195	(90.3%)
Information exchange	185	(85.6%)
Debates/ discussions about teacher development topics	144	(66.7%)
Teacher development sessions run occasionally	144	(66.7%)
Teacher development sessions run on a specific day each week	107	(49.5%)
Social events	90	(41.7%)
Debates/ discussions about issues in the world	74	(34.3%)
Joint lesson planning	70	(32.4%)
Quizzes	62	(28.7%)
Song of the day	42	(19.4%)
Storytelling	42	(19.4%)
Word of the day	31	(14.4%)
Some other topics received only single digit answers		

Figure 5 Activities offered by the groups

These responses were mirrored in the sorts of activities that were mentioned with 'sharing resources' being the biggest response (195 out of 216) and 'information exchange' (185 out of 216) coming next. There are two questions that mention teacher development sessions and if we combine these two responses, we end up with a larger response (251), the second question was a more specific response about occasional teacher development sessions.

The activities included in this question come from the focus groups and interviews and there are few other additional suggestions. Social events are also quite prominent, with 90 people responding to this.

Over 90 per cent of the respondents make use of what they learn in the groups with 86 per cent saying that they 'always', or 'sometimes' use the ideas in their classes.

Words that collocate with 'activities' included: 'warmer', 'listening', 'speaking/oral', 'group' and 'writing', amongst others. 'Useful' was used 15 times, and was matched with 'very' five times. 'Lesson plans/planning' came up ten times.

Do you think the balance of activities in groups you belong to is about right?
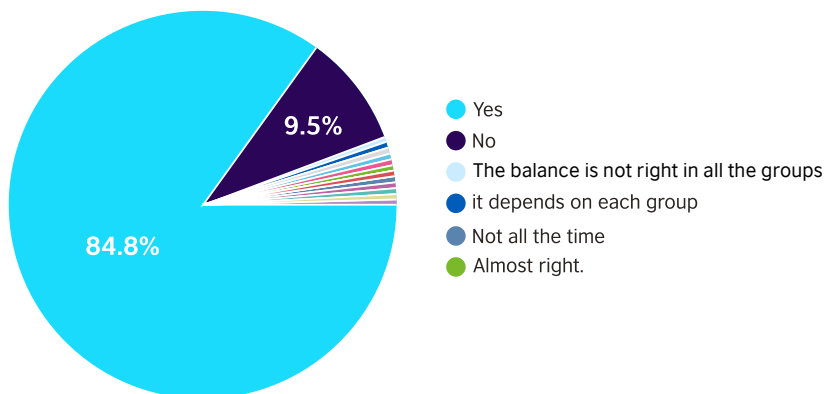
211 responses

- Yes
- No
- The balance is not right in all the groups
- it depends on each group
- Not all the time
- Almost right.

9.5%
84.8%

Figure 6 Balance of activities

How often do you send messages to teacher professional development groups?

213 responses

- A few times a day
- Many times a day
- Two or three times a week
- Once a week
- Less than once a week
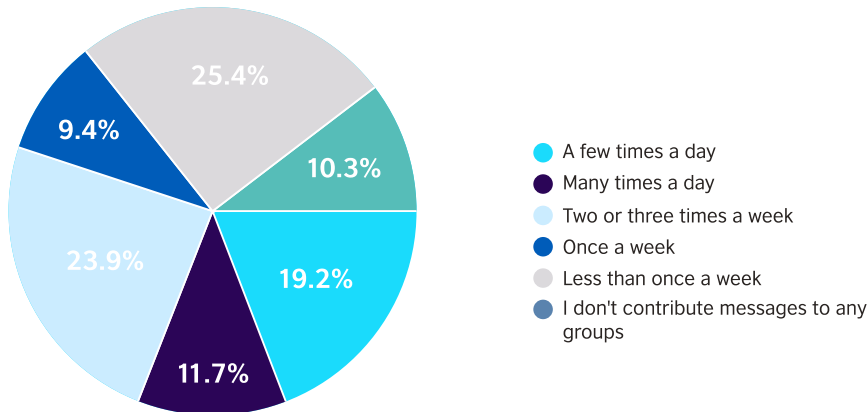- I don't contribute messages to any groups

Figure 7 Frequency of messages to TD groups

You can see from Figure 6 that most people think the frequency of activity is about right (84.8 per cent). We also asked whether there were other kinds of activities that they thought might be added to the suggestions in Figure 5 (this list came from the focus groups and interviews). There were 42 suggestions, however, they were mostly similar to proposals in the sections above. The three most common suggestions were debates and discussions, lesson planning, and practical sessions. When asked what they would like to see less of, most of the answers were about the typical annoying posts that are adverts, or those that are not relevant to teaching. Many replies simply said 'none'.

Contributions to the group

We were also interested in how often people posted, what prevented them from doing so, as well as the kinds of materials they post.

Of the respondents, 30.9 per cent (213) said they posted many, or a few times a day. At the other end of the scale, 35.7 per cent posted less than once a week or not at all (see Figure 7). When asked why they did not post, the most common response was connected with 'time' (21 mentions), lack of time being an obvious collocation. No 'data' or 'internet', or 'lack of money to buy data', or limited connectivity was not as common as we might have expected, but these responses did feature in the corpus. Some interesting additional reasons people did not post included: posting but receiving no response, someone having posted the same idea earlier, and the admin regulating the postings.

We also wanted to know what people do post. Twenty-one concordance lines include the word 'question', mostly collocated with 'ask/asking' or 'answer/answering', or similar words with the same meaning as 'reply'. Other common responses included 'sharing', or 'giving information', engaging in activities sharing 'knowledge', 'materials/educational resources', or ideas about teaching. Materials could be texts, audio and video.

Administrators

We were also interested in how the groups' administrators saw their roles and how they managed activity. Intriguingly, eight people declared that they were not administrators, but offered ideas about what they do to keep the group active, or what they would do if they were administrators. One said, '*I'm not an administrator but I animate the group by suggesting discussion topics*.' A person who was not an administrator said, '*I am not an administrator in a group, but if I were … my role would be sharing everything with the group, sending and forwarding everything to the group*.'[2]

Respondents who are administrators talked about various aspects of the management and maintenance of the groups. 'Respecting the rules' got mentioned a number of times and this was often linked with adding and removing people from the groups. However, related to this was making sure the group worked by animating the participants, 'watch[ing] over the group cohesion', 'help[ing] and guid[ing] newcomers', motivating the participants, posting, and setting up various sessions of the types

[2]The language of the quotations has been corrected where necessary.

described above. Administrators also mentioned getting feedback and taking into account the concerns of members, also negotiating about the topics that form a part of the group's practice.

6.3 Impact on students

Our expectation as we started working on this project was that the point of groups like these is to make a difference to the lives of learners and hopefully to improve learner outcomes. Although a study like this one can only provide teachers' perceptions of any kind of impact, we thought it a useful question to ask.

One hundred and seventy-one people responded to the question about improvement to students' learning. However, although 59 of those responses began with a 'yes', what followed the 'yes' was mostly about the impact on them as teachers, the fact that it helps the teachers improve their practice, learn new methods, get updates to ideas, change their ways of teaching. The same is true for most of the other responses clustered around 'teaching' and 'students'. The teachers suggest that the impact is indirect and is rooted in what they have learned from the engagement with the groups.

When asked directly about evidence of improvement, the teachers mentioned students' improved performance over time and their lack of complaints about the teacher's methodology. There was little direct evidence of improved student performance, with few mentions of better grades. Those that did mention grades suggested they had gone up and linked this to improved fluency, or '*positive change in terms of motivation and outputs*'. Additionally, improvements in speaking and writing were mentioned. When referring to the students directly, the teachers talked about improved engagement or activity, increased student interest, and motivation in class. The students were said to participate more and communicate better.

6.4 The benefits of being a member of a group/ groups

There were 172 responses to this question and 34 responses start with a 'yes'. Lots of reasons are given. This quotation sums up many of them: '*Gaining subject knowledge, gaining confidence, seeing the same subject from multiple perspectives, learning from the shared experience and resources of other teachers.*' 'Being in touch with other people' comes across strongly, as does 'discovering new ideas and practices', and 'becoming more confident in what they do'.

7 Discussion

There are many interesting and some unexpected findings in these two data sets. The methodology of developing a theory of use by exploring the perceptions of a smaller, but active community, and then verifying the findings from the questionnaire has worked well. We have a lot of confirmation of the findings in the focus groups and interviews, and there are also additional findings.

We see a mixed pattern of activity within the groups, as you would expect, and there are essentially four types of group: 1) a group set up as a part of a project and training that is mostly used for information exchange; 2) a community, often linked to a teacher association, where information and ideas are exchanged, but where there is also a strong social element; 3) a group that is designed more specifically for teacher development of various kinds and alongside the information exchange there are specific training sessions, often at regular times during the week; 4) a smaller group that comes together to work on specific issues that relate to very local contexts.

Being social is a strong driver, but there is pressure for the groups to not stray too far away from their core mission of teacher development. Administrators may remove people from groups if they do not think their posts are appropriate. There is perhaps a recognition here, as with other forms of distance learning, that building a community is an important feature of making successful online learning work. When asked about impact on students, a lot of the responses were about what the teachers got from the overall experience, perhaps suggesting the importance of the psycho-social aspects of the communities, including building resilience (Motteram and Dawson, 2019).

Sustainability of the groups is an important consideration and, at the moment, while there is a turnover of membership in groups, they continue to

be popular. There was a lot of enthusiasm both in the focus groups and interviews and in the questionnaire responses. There is also a move towards the archiving of materials, so these can be re-used by existing members and can be accessed by people who join later. Again, here we can see a link to studies in online learning where having a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous materials is seen as good practice. This idea is reinforced in the emphasis in many responses on the sharing of information and ideas, and that teacher development sessions are also valued highly. Teachers say that they go on to use ideas in their classes and the sense that they are developing as teachers is much more prominent than the evidence they have of the impact of the activity on their students. The focus groups, interviews and questionnaires have allowed a range of reflection on what has been happening for quite some time now, with activity in some countries starting more than six years ago.

The response rate for the questionnaire was almost a 50:50 split male to female. Certain countries in Africa have a high number of male language teachers, but this is recognised and attempts are being made to rectify this. The good practice in Guinea-Bissau needs promoting and replicating elsewhere[3].

Access to the internet is an issue, but is not reported as widely as we had expected. This may be the result of more respondents coming from cities and towns, with only 11.7 per cent coming from rural areas. More people contributed regularly to the groups than was expected, with over a third doing so regularly. The main barrier to contributing is time. Teachers are busy, often having more than one job and finding the time both to read and then respond to postings can be difficult.

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[3] The teachers' association is trying to encourage young female teachers to enter the profession by going out to high schools to promote the profession.

8 Conclusions

What is very positive in this report is that social media-based professional development activity is being reported from places in the world where there is an identified need for teacher development, and in the past, it has proven difficult to provide. These groups show that this form of teacher development is working and welcomed. It also appears to be meeting the psycho-social needs of the community. The use of these groups is a practice that needs to be replicated and promoted, while recognising its limitations. Changes can be made to support the groups' success, while the recognition that groups have different functions is an important one. There are new groups being set up that have specific aims, and which will perhaps only run for a short period of time.

A lot of people are prioritising time that is not necessarily easily available in order to engage with material posted by others and to make use of it in their teaching. They are also contributing to the ongoing debates that are going on globally. Social media offers a limited bandwidth, but at the same time, this limited bandwidth is a positive contributor to teachers' lives, allowing them to be together as a community and to share. While there are clearly issues that need addressing, we can see much good coming out of the activity that is occurring all over the world.

Photo © Mat Wright

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Appendices

Appendix 1

'Focus group' questions

The nature of the tools and the uses you make of them

What social media tools do you use? In personal life? Professionally?

How long have you been using social media tools personally?

How long have you been using social media tools professionally?

How were you introduced to them for professional use?

What do you use them for?

Do you use different social media tools for different reasons? Why?

What do you like/don't you like about the tools you use?

If you could change the social media tools you use professionally, what would you change? Are there some features of one tool that you would like to see included in the one you use most?

Nature of the groups

Are you in more than one group? Yes/No. Tell us about the different groups.

How did you first start using the groups professionally?

Have you started a group you use for professional purposes?

Is/Are the group(s) active?

Are you active in the group? Do you post yourself? Or do you only respond to posts that are made?

Are there too many/not enough posts? What would be a good balance of numbers of posts?

Is there a group leader? Do they do a lot of posting? Are they the person who set up the group?

If there isn't a group leader, how does the group work?

Do a lot of people in the group post, or is it often the same people who post? What percentage of people post (approx. – how did you work this out)?

Types of activities

Can you list the different kinds of activities that the group runs?

Which types of activities do you prefer? Why?

Are there other activities you would like to see happening on the group? Can you make suggestions?

Is it important for there to be regular postings? Or is it better to have fewer postings, but the activities are more significant?

Personal professional development

Besides being part of a social media group, what other forms of professional development are you involved in?

Do you search the internet for resources? What sorts of resources do you use?

Using social media/other internet resources with the learners you work with

Do any of you use social media groups with the learners you work with? Is it possible with younger children? Or only with older children/adults?

Do you look for ideas from the internet and use them in your classes?

Access

Do you have access to wifi at all? At home/At school? Somewhere else?

Do you have enough data in your data plan to consult the professional social media group regularly?

Appendix 2: Case studies

Benin

Benin is a small country in west Africa, lying between Togo in the west and Nigeria in the east and the Gulf of Guinea to the south. It has a population of approximately 12 million. The official language is French (spoken by 35 per cent of the population), but regional indigenous languages are also spoken, e.g., Fon, Bariba and Yoruba.

The English Workshop group was set up in July 2017 by Elie Santingo Migan and is a large community of teachers (257), mostly from Benin, but with regional and international members. The group has been bigger and at one point there were two parallel communities running in WhatsApp. WhatsApp is the preferred tool, although there have been discussions about using alternatives like Telegram, where numbers in the community would be less restrictive. However, members of the core team believe WhatsApp is easier to use. Although set up by Elie Migan, there is a team of 11 administrators who work with Elie to keep the group running. Activities run throughout the week and a typical day might produce many hundreds of messages, particularly when there is a topical debate. There is Word, Poem, Song of the Day, for example, and these run alongside other organised activities. People also exchange materials on the curriculum, PDFs of class materials and teacher guides. It was suggested that people do not use the group regularly because of the high cost of access to the internet. It was suggested that there were 30 regular contributors.

Regular weekly activities may be a discussion, or a presentation of ideas about teaching. These activities are mediated by senior ELT professionals like advisors, inspectors, or university academics.

New international members of the community are interviewed. A member of the administration team will act as the interviewee and these sessions usually last an hour. All sessions are advertised well in advance and people know that there will be regular activity. The group has set up a system of templates so that the work of the administrators is less onerous, but this is still a lot of work. Social aspects of a community are not ignored, e.g., birthday greetings are posted and if someone is reported as ill, wishes for recovery are offered. A game is also organised on a Friday night to help teachers relax. Before the pandemic, the community in Benin would occasionally also meet up physically and, for example, celebrated the second anniversary of the group being set up.

When there is a discussion or a presentation of a topic, a version of this is archived and presented as a PDF back to the group. There is also a Facebook group. A website has been set up on the same model as the group in Guinea-Bissau and materials are starting to be stored there. The group is currently working on finding a community manager for the website. There are plans to follow up on activities that are discussed in the group by observing the implementation in classes, they are also going to begin to run a weekly spoken language session. This has not been done before because people have been too shy to speak.

'*The group has been successful because it meets the crew members' expectations and needs: improving their teaching skills, preparing lessons, networking and learning more about ELT in the world*' (Elie Santingo Migan).

Facebook group: **https://www.facebook.com/EnglishWorkshop229/**

Website: **https://michelleruas.wixsite.com/englishworkshop**

Egypt (MENA)

The interviewee for this case study is based in Egypt, but was talking about activity throughout the MENA region looking at countries like Egypt, Lebanon, the Gulf States, as well as Iraq and Yemen. The first language in all these countries is Arabic, but English and French play a role in education and society in general. By population, Egypt is the biggest country with a population of approximately 111 million, with Bahrain the smallest, with a population of 1.4 million.

Three recent projects were presented which make use of a number of different tools and materials to provide access to training for people who, in some cases, have very limited access to any forms of training and locally lack basic facilities like electricity.

The first initiative was a series of online webinars built on existing British Council materials. The pre-existing materials were adapted to suit local needs. This fed into a second initiative to train regional Community of Practice (CoP) leaders to run their own localised training. This was a capacity building course for these trainers. They then went ahead to run local CoPs. A third initiative was to run large online events targeting all of the teachers in these groups, offering conferences, symposiums, forums and included updates on local activities. These were set up to help motivate the teachers and to keep momentum going. Out of all of this activity has come an online course.

Most of the training events were provided using Teams as the synchronous tool, backed up with Edmodo for asynchronous activity and discussion. The local CoP leaders could make use of whatever tools were most appropriate and were encouraged to adapt the original course materials to suit the local conditions. The CoPs use Facebook, WhatsApp and Google Classroom. WhatsApp is not only used here for instant messaging, but also as a platform for teaching and learning. The interviewee had found that WhatsApp was a good tool for the teachers to use for reflection following a Teacher Activity Group (TAG) session.

Internet access varies according to where teachers are based with no issues in the Gulf, good access in Egypt and (at the time of this interview in 2021) Occupied Palestinian Territories, although accessing large video files, for example, would be problematic. In low-income countries, or those affected by conflict, where salaries are low and teachers do not get paid regularly, access can be much more difficult and reaching out further to teachers with no access to technology at all can be a real problem.

Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau is a small west African country with a population of 1.8 million. Portuguese is the official language but is not spoken by many. The lingua franca is Creole and there are also a number of languages spoken by different ethnic groups.

As in many countries in the world, teachers do more than one job, as teaching is not well paid. A typical state school teacher may only earn £150 a month. At the same time, internet connectivity for mobile phones is very expensive and often low quality.

The GB WhatsApp group – The World in Your Classroom – has been running since May 2018 and currently has 86 members (there are only approximately 300 English teachers in Guinea-Bissau, of whom 80 are women). It was set up around the English language teacher association and was started following an initial face-to-face meeting at TESOL Africa between Linda Ruas and Ali Djau in Senegal in 2018. The group was set up by Ali Djau to facilitate a visit by Linda Ruas to run workshops with the local teachers. It was used at this time for needs analysis. Some teachers did not have access to phones at the beginning and some were bought for them via crowdfunding so they could access the WhatsApp group.

Some teachers are now also members of other groups, like the Benin group – English Workshop – where they meet and exchange ideas with teachers from other countries. The British Council Prelim course is also being run on WhatsApp with teachers being supported with funding to take part. They are remunerated for attendance. Some are using other forms of social media, e.g., Instagram and Telegram. During the Covid-19 pandemic when the schools were closed, some use was made of WhatsApp to communicate with students, but students mostly did not have access to phones or data.

The group has run a variety of activities since 2018, e.g., discussions, quizzes and presentations about teaching. Discussions have included topics like fake news, coronavirus, inequality, racism, sexism, using stories in class, teaching vocabulary, teaching students with disabilities, error correction, idioms, etc. Discussions around gender have featured quite significantly. The teachers have worked together to share ideas for lesson material or have created lesson plans together. It was suggested that the teachers prefer the topical discussions rather than ones that focus on teaching methodology. These discussions, however, often lead into debate about how these ideas could be developed into lessons.

Activities are organised on a community basis and were originally set up to run from Saturday to Tuesday. More recently, there has been a drop-off in activity and this is suggested to be due to limited access to internet data.

The group has now set up a website: **https://eltagb1.wixsite.com/elta-gb** where materials are being stored and can be accessed.

India (Maharashtra – Tejas)

This case study focuses on a large teacher development project in one part of India, although there are other projects using similar methodologies in other parts of India. It is the second most populous state in India with approximately 112 million people (2011 census). The official language is Maharati, spoken by approximately 70 per cent of the population. A number of other regional languages are spoken along with Hindi (10 per cent).

Teachers can earn in the range of £600 to £1,000 a month, depending on the type of school they work for. Access to the internet is not considered unaffordable for most teachers, but buying a device is considered expensive.

The Tejas project is spread across 36 districts and there are 51,500 teachers involved. These large numbers mean that WhatsApp groups are only used for the TAGs, not for the overall project where a combination of Teams for presentations and a Facebook group for discussion and for storing project documents are used. The Facebook discussion space has good activity. They also make use of MOOCs as part of the training with a separate Facebook group for discussion of topics. There are 2,130 TAGs with typically 20–25 teachers, managed by a local co-ordinator, and in this case, WhatsApp is used. Specific online course groups may also use WhatsApp where links to videos or documents are sent out in advance of synchronous meetings. Because of familiarity, WhatsApp was used by some teachers during the pandemic to maintain contact with students, mostly via family phones, essentially to provide family support. In most cases, not all of the class had the phone access to maintain the contact. Activity here was asynchronous.

The TAG groups themselves were maintained during the pandemic and ongoing activity continued with meetups via video conference. Videoconference meetings had already been established before the pandemic in some groups, because it meant groups could more easily get together, and there was no need to travel for meetings, saving time and resources. The mixture of WhatsApp and videoconference meetings was shown to be a resilient model.

(https://www.britishcouncil.in/programmes/english/primary/tejas)

Mali

Mali is a large, landlocked west African country with a population of approximately 19 million. Fifteen million people speak the lingua franca and the national language Bambara, but French is the official language and is used in schools. However, it is estimated that only 9,000 people speak it as an L1.

Many teachers in Mali work in the private sector and are not well paid. Like many teachers in Africa, these teachers have not been paid at all during the pandemic. Even state teachers struggle to live on their salary, and this makes buying a mobile phone and internet data a challenge for many. The relative costs of internet access are high with the sum of 45,000 CFA (approx. £60) mentioned by one member as their monthly subscription.

Use of technology in teaching has been influenced by two key factors, with some teachers attending courses overseas and with the Malian Association of Teachers of English (MATE), introducing training in the use of WhatsApp and Padlet in 2018. These were initiated and led by Moussa Tamboura, the then president of MATE.

WhatsApp is currently the most popular tool, and this is the one that teachers are most familiar with. In some parts of the country, for example, in Bamako, the capital, the teachers are using WhatsApp with children, as well as for professional development. Groups of children in the higher levels of school (Terminal; the final year of schooling) were the most commonly mentioned. This is activity that occurs out of class as the mobiles are not allowed in schools. Contact with parents via WhatsApp was also mentioned. Other tools that were mentioned in discussion include Facebook, Messenger, X (Twitter), LinkedIn and Instagram. Facebook was more closely associated with professional activity. The teachers mine groups and the internet in general for materials and ideas and these are then spread around the communities they belong to.

MATE runs its own professional WhatsApp development group with 200+ members and there is also a more internationally-focused community: MATE World Teachers Day with a population of 256. There are parallel Telegram groups. MATE does not allow external members on its core groups. An alternative community has emerged that is called MATE World Teachers' Day group which was set up to run a series of teacher training activities in October, 2020, but has remained active. Its parallel Telegram group is called The United Nation of Teachers. One of the positive features of Telegram that was mentioned was that, unlike WhatsApp, when you join a group, it will add in discussions and materials that have already been presented.

MATE activities on WhatsApp are organised in very similar ways to groups in other countries, with both specific targeted meetings as well as ad hoc postings. People share materials, or photos of lessons. They also do storytelling, have a writing corner, do interviews and play games. They have a live session every Saturday from 9.00 to 10.30 where a teacher presents a lesson. They might also use the group to cascade training from other training or events they have been a part of. Different levels of participation in the Saturday events were mentioned with 20 being the lowest and 50 at the top end. There are also specific groups set up for the English clubs that are a common feature of schools in West Africa.

They also make use of Padlet in their group; not something mentioned by others.

The teachers stressed that one important feature of the groups was community, with group problem solving helping to 'scaffold' activity, making the teachers more confident in what they do. It was suggested that students benefit directly from the activity with one saying that the students get better marks as a result of the activity that occurs in the group.

Occupied Palestinian Territories

The Occupied Palestinian Territories has a total population of approximately 5.4 million people with Arabic as the official language and with Hebrew and English also being widely spoken.

The discussion for this case study focused on specific projects, mostly the British Council's Teaching for Success professional development course, where the focus is on state school teachers. A group of 700 teachers and teacher educators are involved in this project. They 'use WhatsApp a lot' and have separate groups for different teacher groups and for different teacher educator groups. The groups are used for sending links, reminders about events or meetings and for copies of emails that are also sent. They also have a Facebook group for communication, too.

The teachers are used to using WhatsApp, they are already using it for personal reasons, and there was no need to do any specific teaching about its functionality. The teachers can find a way to access the internet, but this may need to be through community access in cafés, or through relatives and friends. Some teachers will have wifi at home, but the signal strength may not be that good. They may have a monthly package deal, but this is likely to run out towards the end of the month. A typical monthly package is not that expensive, but from a limited teacher's salary, it can be quite a significant expense. Teachers' overall salaries can be reduced because they are not paid the full amount each month, or one- or two-months' salaries are not paid at all. The majority of teachers are female, and male teachers will have a second full-time job outside of the home, which gives them limited time to access online activity.

WhatsApp is dominant, but other apps have been tried like Edmodo. When they used a Learning Management System (LMS), it has been difficult to get teachers to use the discussion forums. There has been some use of WhatsApp by teachers during the pandemic to work with children. They are also developing materials for a project with digital freelancers using EdApp, a mobile LMS.

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