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Facebook as an arena for professional cooperation: English language teachers' work with educational resources

Abstract

Digitalization has led to an enormous increase in the teaching and learning materials that teachers have at their disposal. This article aims to shed light on the ways in which teachers make use of a professional online community to help them navigate in today's complex landscape of educational resources.

The article is based on an investigation of the entries and responses during two months in a participant-driven Facebook group for English teachers in Norway. Content analysis was used to identify patterns in the material. While entries covered many issues, the vast majority had to do with the selection and the use of teaching and learning materials. Most entries were requests for help and advice which, in most cases, received considerable response from fellow teachers by way of concrete tips as well as personal insights and experiences. In this way, the group conveys a sense of solidarity, collective responsibility and a low threshold for teachers to ask for help. However, the activity in the group reveals a propensity for "quick-fix" solutions for insecure and time-poor teachers. Thus, the results point to the need for more thorough education related to the choice and the use of educational resources and calls for teacher education and further education initiatives to provide this.

Keywords: Educational resources, Facebook, Professional online network, English teachers

Facebook som arena for faglig samarbeid: Engelsklæreres arbeid med læremidler

Sammendrag

Digitaliseringen har ført til at dagens lærere har tilgang på en stadig økende mengde utdanningsressurser. Selv om denne situasjonen åpner for verdifulle muligheter, stiller den også store krav til lærernes kompetanse når det gjelder valg og bruk av undervisnings- og læremidler. Denne artikkelen setter søkelyset på et nettbasert profesjonelt nettverk og hvordan det kan hjelpe lærere med å navigere i dagens komplekse landskap av læremidler.

Artikkelen er basert på en undersøkelse av innleggene og svarene i løpet av to måneder i en Facebook-gruppe for engelsklærere i Norge, *Engelsklærere*. Innholdsanalyse ble brukt for å identifisere mønstre i materialet. De mange oppføringene knyttet til læremidler indikerer at lærere er klar over det store tilfanget av

tilgjengelige ressurser og ønsker å benytte seg av dem. Mange trenger imidlertid hjelp når det gjelder å velge ut hvilke som er mest relevante og, ikke minst, hvordan de best skal kunne benyttes i klasserommet. Heldigvis består gruppa også av kompetente lærere som er villige til å dele sin innsikt og sine erfaringer. På denne måten framstår *Engelsklærere* som et lavterskel-tilbud for lærere som trenger hjelp, men også som et faglig forum preget av en solidarisk innstilling og en kollektiv ansvarsfølelse.

Aktiviteten i gruppa avdekker imidlertid en overvekt av «quick-fix»-løsninger for usikre og tidsfattede lærere. Resultatene indikerer derfor at lærere har behov for grundigere – og kontinuerlig – opplæring knyttet til valg og bruk av utdanningsressurser, og artikkelen peker på at dette bør dekkes både i lærerutdanningen og i ulike videre- og etterutdanningstiltak.

Nøkkelord: Læremidler, Facebook, digitale profesjonsnettverk, engelsklærere

Introduction

In recent years, the supply of teaching and learning materials that teachers have at their disposal has increased tremendously. Teachers and learners of English in Norwegian schools can choose between several textbook series specifically developed for use in this country. In addition, there is an abundance of resources – many of them developed for the world market – to be found online.

In order to meet the changing demands of their profession, teachers need to be life-long learners (OECD, 2018). The complex and changing situation related to teaching and learning materials might accentuate this need.

While authorities sometimes organize different further education initiatives and in-service courses, more and more teachers take personal responsibility for their own professional development (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). Social media have become a much-used arena for teachers to acquire new knowledge and skills by collaborating with other teachers online (Macía & García, 2016).

Studies have shown that most exchanges in professional online networks for teachers are related to resources (e.g. Cinkara & Arslan, 2017). However, few studies have investigated the content of the exchanges and what the teachers' needs and concerns related to teaching and learning materials are.

The present article reports of an investigation of entries and responses in an informal online network for teachers during two months at the beginning and at the end of the academic year 2020/21. It aims to answer the following questions:

How do teachers make use of a professional online community to help them navigate in today's complex landscape of educational resources?

What do the teachers' exchanges in the online community tell us about their needs and concerns related to educational resources?

The Norwegian Education Act defines teaching and learning materials as “all printed, non-printed and digital elements which are developed specifically for educational settings. The materials can consist of a single item or a whole package, and they cover the competence goals in the national curriculum” (The Ministry of Education, 2010, author’s translation). Tomlinson and Masuhara (2017, p. 2) provide a wider definition, specifically related to language learning. To them, teaching and learning materials are:

anything that can be used by language learners to facilitate their learning of the target language. So materials could be a coursebook, a CD ROM, a story, a song, a video, a cartoon, a dictionary, a mobile phone interaction, a lecture, or even a photograph used to stimulate a discussion. They could also be an exercise, an activity, a task, a presentation, or even a project.

Tomlinson and Masuhara’s definition can be said to correspond to the reality in Norwegian classrooms, where teachers have been found to bring an increasing variety of resources into their classrooms (Rasmussen & Lund, 2015; Aashamar et al., 2021). The investigation reported in this article also indicates the range of resources that teachers and learners can use to facilitate learning, from paper-based tasks to non-material elements such as a controversial issue or an interesting topic for discussion. Since the term *materials* may give associations primarily to physical materials, the term *resource* will be used along with *materials* in this article.

Theoretical framework and previous research

In recent years, informal online networks and communities have become common as arenas for teachers’ professional development and support (Macía & García, 2016). A growing number of studies have been done to learn more about these communities, how they are organized, the members’ profile, the domains and topics of discussion and, not least, the participants’ practices. A review of 52 studies from the last twenty years (Lantz-Anderson et al., 2018) found that informally-developed online teacher communities centered first and foremost around professional issues, just as formally organized ones do. Social interaction, as can be expected in an informal network, was less prominent. A review based on 23 studies of informal groups in the years 2009 to 2014 (Macía & García, 2016) reports about participants who support each other, develop new knowledge and share resources and experiences. All the studies concluded that participation in online communities and networks has positive effects on teachers’ professional development.

Other studies also focus largely on the positive aspects of informal online networks for teachers (e.g. Merceica & Kelly, 2018; Yildirim, 2019; Selvi, 2021).

The networks are often described in terms of Wenger's (1998) notion of a Community of Practice (CoP), defined as a learning partnership among people who find themselves in the same domain and who use each other's experiences as a learning resource (e.g. Kiss et al., 2018; Mai et al., 2020). In this way, online CoPs can be seen to meet teachers' need for continuous development as well as the teaching occupation's need for continuous improvement and innovation (Yildirim, 2019).

A Community of Practice is characterized by participants who are mutually engaged in a joint enterprise, who interact with and learn from each other, and who develop a shared repertoire of tools and resources as well as routines, styles and norms for participation in the group (Wenger, 2000). Since informal online groups often attract members who take on a passive observer role and do not participate actively, it can therefore be argued that they should be referred to as *networks* rather than CoPs (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2017). At the same time, it has been pointed out that many teachers need time to build courage in order to become active participants in an online network. They may start as "lurkers" or "authorized visitors" who simply observe and consume content, before they develop a more active role in making contributions of their own (Randahl et al., 2022).

Participant-driven informal networks make it possible for teachers to take individual responsibility for their own learning, and to ensure that the exchanges in the network are relevant for them (Liljekvist et al., 2020). Online networks are available 24/7, which means that teachers can receive immediate responses to their urgent needs. For teachers at small schools, it is valuable to have a wide outreach and the opportunity to get in contact with more competent colleagues (Yildirim, 2019; Selvi, 2021). The same thing can be said for teachers in developing countries, where formal opportunities for professional development are scarce (Bett & Makewa, 2020). For this reason, informal online networks have been referred to as "extended staffrooms" (Randahl et al., 2022).

Other researchers have emphasized the benefits of online communities when it comes to time effectiveness compared to other types of professional development (Merceica & Kelly, 2018). Since many teachers are active on social media, they are already familiar with the technology. This means that they do not have to operate within a previously unknown environment, and that it is easy for them to incorporate professional development into their everyday online activities (Kiss et al., 2018). Since online communities are easily available, they also have the potential to socialize students in teacher education into the profession (Tandberg & Aukland, 2020).

However, other researchers point to problematic aspects of online teacher communities. One concern is related to the fact that requests as well as offers for help are available around the clock. This may lead some teachers to feel that they need to be "on" at all times, thus reducing their personal time and space (Selwyn et al., 2017). Further, the easy access to help and support that online communities

offer may lead to the weakening of other, formal opportunities for professional development. While the pattern of postings and immediate response certainly can benefit individual teachers in the short term, it may not encourage more long-lasting insights and debates (Rensfeldt et al., 2018).

Yet another concern is linked to the observation that many teachers seem to be rather passive consumers of content, depending on a host of expert colleagues to provide answers and recommendations. One aspect of this is that the tone of the interaction is often deferential, and several studies have found little evidence of reciprocal exchange and genuine discussions (Rensfeldt et al., 2018; Liljekvist et al., 2020). The sharing of information has been described as superficial, with “a ‘smash-and-grab’ approach to being informed” (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018, p. 311). Moreover, little evidence has been provided that the teachers’ participation has an impact on their classroom practices (Macía & García, 2016). Another aspect is that many online communities are dependent on altruism, and “a voluntariat” (Schullenberger, 2014) that works for free.

Added to this is the concern that platforms like Facebook are commercial ones, and that activity there generates surplus value for their owners (Fuchs, 2014). Although this clearly is a dilemma, platforms have been seen as useful enough for suggestions to be made that teacher educators take a more active part in the activities in informal online communities, in order to create better connections between pre- and in-service education (Aukland & Tandberg, 2020). Some have also suggested that moderators should get financial support, or that authorized bodies should play a role in ensuring the quality of the teachers’ professional development (Yildirim, 2017). Issues related to the privacy of learners and colleagues mentioned in posts have been mentioned in this connection, too (Tønnessen, 2019). Voices have also been raised for authorities to join forces with informal networks. The idea would be to utilize the affordances of technology and build on already established processes of sharing and learning, in order to develop more holistic approaches to teacher development and learning (Jones & Dexter, 2014).

Research has shown that teachers turn to an online professional community for a variety of reasons (e.g. Macía & García, 2016; Rensfeldt et al., 2018; Liljekvist et al., 2020). They share experiences and reflect on practice, they pose and answer questions, and they ask for help and provide advice. They also share and recommend teaching materials and resources, engage in general discussions and provide emotional support.

Several studies of the content of teachers’ online networks point to resources as being on top of the teachers’ agenda (e.g. Kiss et al., 2018; Rensfeldt et al., 2018; Tandberg & Aukland, 2020). An investigation of a Turkish Facebook group for English language teachers, for example, found that resources attracted about fifty percent more entries than the second most common category, career development (Cinkara & Arslan, 2017). This can perhaps be seen as an indication

of teachers' willingness to keep updated in an era when increased digitalization has resulted in "a cascade of resources" available (Gissel & Illum Hansen, 2021).

Textbooks have had a particularly central role in the teaching of English as an additional language (Jordan & Gray, 2019). In Norway, a survey from 2016 found that 70% of the English teachers in years 5-10 primarily used paper-based coursebooks in their teaching (Gilje et al., 2016). However, textbooks seem to be losing their position as the main resource in many Norwegian classrooms. Based on an investigation of history and English teachers, Rasmussen and Lund (2015) claim that many teachers still use a textbook as a structuring element in their teaching, but that they add to it by selecting materials from a variety of sources. They do this in order to vary their teaching, as well as to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The authors emphasize how these "hybrid practices" place great demands on the teachers' ability to design their own teaching, and to select, evaluate, assemble and put learning resources to good use. With reference to teachers of Norwegian, Blikstad-Balas (2014) points to the same tendencies in her article "The hegemony of the textbook, – a closed chapter?"

An investigation from 2021 supports Rasmussen and Lund's (2015) conclusion. Aashamar, Bakken and Brevik (2021) observed teaching in Norwegian, English and social studies in years nine and ten and found that the learners spend relatively little time on work with the textbook. While teachers follow the themes that the textbook presents, they bring in considerable amounts of supplementary materials in the form of paper-based as well as digital resources, and they make materials themselves. The researchers conclude that while this situation is a result of the increased availability of educational materials, it also follows from the way that the Norwegian national curriculum describes competence aims for the learners – and leaves it up to the teachers to decide how they should go about reaching them.

Another study that includes interviews with teachers, describes how teachers find it more motivating both for the learners and for themselves when they are able to find materials that come across as more authentic and relevant than the textbook materials do. Several teachers say that they appreciate being in a learning process, trying to stay updated. At the same time, they stress the fact that it is quite time-consuming to do so (Gilje, 2021).

The new situation clearly places great demands on teachers' ability to select, evaluate and make use of educational resources. While calls have been made for measures to be taken by schools, authorities and teacher education in order to help teachers develop the competence they need (Aashamar et al., 2021), the increasing number of participant-driven online networks shows that many teachers take individual responsibility for the situation. Turning to fellow teachers for help certainly seems a natural thing to do. An investigation among 319 teachers in Sweden, for example, shows that many teachers rely on recommendations from

colleagues when they choose teaching and learning materials (Reichenberg, 2014).

Despite considerable research that documents the extent to which this happens, only limited studies have been done on the ways in which teachers deal with the new resource situation (Reichenberg, 2014) as well as on the content of the teachers' exchanges in an online network (Aukland & Tandberg, 2020). The present study contributes to filling this research gap, specifically directed towards English teachers' work with educational resources.

Methods

The investigation covers entries in a Facebook group for teachers of English in Norwegian compulsory and upper secondary school during two months in 2020/2021. The group counts close to 19,500 members and aims to be "a resource for everyone who teaches English, where teachers can ask questions, share resources, links, lesson plans etc."

Teachers who want to join the group need to apply for membership and be accepted by one of the two administrators, one teacher and one teaching materials developer. Their role is primarily to make sure that the participants adhere to the rules of the group regarding issues of privacy and copyright regulations. As an English teacher myself, I was accepted as a member and was thus able to observe the activities in the group. I did not post entries nor respond to any, so my role as a researcher was that of a nonparticipant observer (Williams, 2008) or "authorized visitor" (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2017).

I considered the Facebook group to be a public space, as the participants post their entries to a population of close to 20.000 people. One of the rules of the group is that entries should not make it possible to identify learners, parents or colleagues. Since the participants use their full name when posting, I took cautious steps to secure the confidentiality of the entries and the participants. One measure was to translate the entries from Norwegian to English, another to modify the ways of expression. Following these criteria, as pointed out by Willis (2019), I refrained from acquiring informed consent from the group members.

I investigated all the entries at the start (September) and at the end (May) of the school year. These months were chosen because I hypothesized that teachers might express different needs and concerns at the beginning and at the end of a school year. There was a total of 230 entries, 118 in September and 112 in May. In addition, there were approximately 1500 responses, as well as thousands of "likes" and smileys.

I followed the steps commonly used for content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) and started out by familiarizing myself with the material. This I did by copying the entries, verbatim, into a table. Next to each entry I suggested a preliminary categorization of the content. I also checked the speech acts used, as this would

give me an impression of what the teachers wanted to accomplish by posting in the group. First, I followed Liljequist et al. (2020) in distinguishing between the four primary speech functions *statements*, *questions*, *offers* and *commands* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). However, as I found that the vast majority of entries were questions, I noticed that they differed in the type of response they called for. Based on this insight, I distinguished between questions that required – and most often got – one simple answer, and questions that opened for many and varied responses. In the coding process, I referred to the latter as *requests*. Requests tended to elicit a considerable number of comments, most often in the form of suggestions for useful resources.

There were some offers, most of them recommendations of an educational resource. There were some statements which could be classified as offers as well, since they provided information about an educational opportunity, a conference, or new guidelines from the authorities. There were no commands, but some statements and questions in the form of a joke or an inspirational text. As words of encouragement, such entries could perhaps also best be classified as an offer.

Most of the requests expressed the need for an educational resource, for example: *Does anyone know of a good song for year 4?* Some called for teachers to share experiences with different textbooks: *Which textbook series should we choose?* Yet others asked for advice on how to meet a competence aim or teach a specific topic or language skill: *How can I make learners in year 4 write?* It turned out that almost all the requests for advice elicited responses that pointed to concrete educational resources as well. I therefore coded all these requests in one category: Educational resource, Classroom approach. The other entries were grouped in five other categories, based on the speech function and the content of the entries, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Content categories and speech functions

	<i>Content category</i>	<i>Speech function</i>	<i>Example (translated/modified)</i>
1	Educational resource, Classroom approach	Request	Does anyone know of a good song for year 4?
2	Language issue	Question	What is “dannelse” in English?
3	Technical issue, formalities	Question	How can I get access to “Epic”?
4	Educational resource	Offer	Here is a link to a film about different accents.
5	Formalities/educational opportunities/conferences	Offer/statement	Here is some information about a conference that you may find interesting.
6	Jokes, “bonding”	Offer	Do you know why this month is called May? Because it may rain...

It turned out that the requests and offers related to educational resources (Content categories 1 and 4) constituted the bulk of the material, and I therefore chose to analyze these entries in more detail. I went through the requests first, aiming to check which content areas that they dealt with and the needs that the teachers

expressed. During this process, eight categories emerged (see Table 3). I then classified the offers in terms of the kinds of resources mentioned as well as what seemed to be the teachers' main reasons for bringing them to the group members' attention.

When it comes to the comments, I distinguished between main comments and sub-comments. I considered main comments to be those that responded directly to a request, while sub-comments were comments to the main comments. I made a note of the content of the main comments, focusing on whether they provided information about a resource or recommended an activity, whether they provided advice, or whether they simply answered a question. I also marked the ones that provided some reflection or that initiated a discussion on the issue at hand. I disregarded the many sub-comments, since they were most often merely expressions of agreement or approval.

As I analyzed the requests related to educational resources, it became apparent that the teachers had different motivations for requesting information and advice. Although many entries were difficult to place, four categories related to this emerged from the material.

Results

Among the 230 entries, 179 (78%) had to do with educational resources. There were 144 requests and 35 offers related to this, as shown in Table 2 (Content categories 1 and 4). There were 32 questions, 25 related to language issues (Content category 2) and seven related to technical issues and formalities (Content category 3). Most of the questions about language issues addressed Norwegian words that were difficult to translate, such as *KRLE*, *kjerneelementer* and *dannelse*. A few teachers asked questions about grammar, and one asked about the use of colloquial forms in written texts. Most of the questions in Content category 3 were related to access to different online resources, while two asked about formalities in connection with tests and exams.

Six entries offered information about formalities, educational opportunities and conferences (Content category 5), while 13 entries were jokes and words of encouragement (Content category 6).

Table 2: Number of entries in each content category

	<i>Content category</i>	<i>Speech function</i>	<i>Number of entries</i>
1	Educational resource, classroom approach	Request	144
2	Language issue	Question	25
3	Technical issue, formalities	Question	7
4	Educational resource	Offer	35
5	Formalities/educational opportunities/conferences	Offer/statement	6
6	Jokes, "bonding"	Offer	13
	Total		230

The content of the teachers' requests

The 144 requests related to educational resources (Content category 1) were further classified as having to do with eight different content areas. As Table 3 shows, most of the entries were calls for resources that could be used to teach a specific topic (24%, Category 1a).

Table 3: Content of teachers' requests related to educational resources (Content category 1), in order of frequency

	<i>The content of the requests related to educational resources</i>	<i>Number of entries</i>	<i>%</i>
1a	Resources to teach a specific topic/competence aim	34	24
1b	Resources for general activities, general advice	32	22
1c	Information about a specific textbook series	18	13
1d	Books of fiction	16	11
1e	Resources/approaches for language-specific work	15	10
1f	Films/activities related to films	13	9
1g	Tests, diagnostic tests, evaluation	12	8
1h	Advice on planning a period/semester/year	4	3
	Total	144	100

In September, there were numerous calls for suitable materials on the US presidential election, the Black Lives Matter movement and “fake news” (Category 1a). In May, the topics ranged from questions of identity and cultural differences to the pandemic, but resources related to more traditional topics such as London and the weather were also in demand. All in all, the requests bear witness to many teachers' efforts to make the teaching of English relevant and up-to-date by linking it to topical issues and current affairs.

Some requests in Category 1a had to do with ideas and resources that could be used in work with specific competence aims in the national curriculum. This excerpt is a typical example: *I want to work with the competence aim “explore and describe ways of living, ways of thinking, communication patterns and diversity in the English-speaking world”, but I get a bit put off by these lofty formulations. Can anyone help?*

Almost as many (22%) were requests for information about resources that could help activate the learners, often without any specific skill, topic or language point in mind (Category 1b). Typical questions were: *Does anyone know of fun activities for year 3? / Does anyone know of good digital resources for years 5-7?*

Some wanted resources that could be used for drama activities, others wanted ideas that could be used to teach English outdoors or in physical education classes. There were also some requests for general advice in Category 1b, such as: *How can I make learners in year 2 practice oral English?*

The eighteen entries related to specific textbooks (Category 1c) reflect the fact that Norwegian teachers can choose between different textbook series, especially produced for the Norwegian market. There were twice as many entries related to

this in the spring as in the fall, indicating that many schools considered buying new textbooks for the coming school year. The most common questions were: *Which textbook series should we choose for years? / Does anyone have any experience with ...?* However, the relatively low number of entries related to these series supports the claims that have been made that today's teachers make considerable use of materials other than the traditional textbook.

Sixteen teachers wanted ideas for fictional books, either for the class to read or for learners with special talents, challenges or interests (Category 1d). These questions elicited a great number of responses. One teacher wrote: *Hooray! The school library is going to buy 50 books. Which ones do you recommend?* This entry received 48 main comments, most of them with references to relevant titles of children's and young adult literature.

Most of the fifteen teachers who requested help with language-focused work (Category 1e), wanted tips about workbooks and websites for work with grammar. However, some wanted input on how to work with specific language points. The responses to these requests varied from references to specific resources to general advice.

Thirteen teachers asked about relevant films to use or if anyone wanted to share tasks and activities that they had developed in connection to specific films (Category 1f). Many responses, too, indicated that films and film clips are used quite extensively in the teaching of English in Norway. Especially when suggesting resources for specific topics, teachers tended to refer to film clips and documentaries, often with links to websites, and full-length movies were also often recommended.

While there were only a few entries that asked about possible diagnostic tests in September, more entries in May asked about this (Category 1g). In the spring, there were also requests for resources that could help learners prepare for end-of-year tests. The four entries that asked for advice on long-term planning (Category 1h) received response in the form of concrete plans or templates to follow.

The content of the teachers' offers

A total of 35 entries offered information about an educational resource or a classroom approach (Content category 4, see Table 2). All entries signaled that the teachers wanted to share for the benefit of others, but different circumstances seemed to have triggered the teachers to post. The most common one was enthusiasm over having found a new, free, easily accessible and useful resource on the internet. These entries often started with the phrase: *I just came over this fantastic resource*, before they went on to recommend an app, a website, a novel or a film. Among the many resources mentioned were a documentary about aborigines and Michelle Obama's podcast. Apps and websites that allowed learners to practice different skills were prevalent.

Another circumstance was when teachers had just tried out an activity or a resource in class. These teachers wrote about specific songs, poems, images and

activities they had used with success in the classroom, and the entry often ended with the words: *The kids loved it!* Yet another circumstance was when teachers had spent time developing their own materials and wanted others to benefit from the work they had done: *I post my lesson plan for Formal letter writing, if anyone is interested. Suitable for upper secondary. / We just saw The Hate You Give, and the learners loved it. Here are the activities that I used.*

While some of these entries elicited follow-up responses with even more resources, most of the entries that offered information about teaching and learning materials received thanks and likes only.

Among the six entries in Content category 5 (see Table 2) were two pieces of information from the authorities. The others contained information about relevant conferences and available in-service education opportunities. Most of the jokes in Content category 6 (see Table 2) demonstrated a language point, often in the form of a pun (e.g. *A man walked into a restaurant yesterday dressed as a tennis ball. He was served immediately*). Other entries in this category were quotes, poems or cartoons that provided words of encouragement for teachers.

The content of the main comments

The main indication of the teachers' willingness to help and to offer information and advice can be seen in the approximately 1500 responses. Most of them referred to specific resources and/or activities. One teacher who asked about good video clips on YouTube for learners in year one, for example, received 51 tips about concrete resources, with links. Another teacher who asked for advice about the teaching of vocabulary in year 4 got 66 responses. Here, too, most comments pointed to specific resources. However, some also pointed to language learning theory and to the need to teach words in context.

While such an approach was not prevalent, several teachers did show a willingness to "educate" their colleagues. One question about how to teach verbs in year six, for example, elicited 15 quite extensive responses. Some referred to various resources, others explained how one can work with texts to investigate the different forms of words found there. One teacher recommended a book on English didactics that covers the teaching of grammar, another recommended cooperation with the Norwegian teacher, while yet another responded: *My students read "authentic" literature from year 5. Then they learn verbs "for free."*

Some teachers seemed to disagree with the premises for the question asked, but the responses were always constructive and respectful. One question about how to conduct the traditional vocabulary test at the end of the week, for example, was answered with numerous suggestions of alternative ways of working with vocabulary, without the use of such tests: *We never use such tests. Instead, we....*

Some entries elicited a bit of discussion, for example about the new setup for exams at upper secondary level. The most extensive discussion was prompted by a request for resources to teach the Civil Rights and the Black Lives Matter

Movements in year 10. While many of the 53 responses pointed to films as well as other resources, this entry also elicited an exchange about the need to teach these issues with caution and to avoid generalizations and stereotyping.

The teachers' motivation for requesting help

Although not all entries provided clear signals about this, it became apparent that the teachers had different motivations for posting their requests. Tentatively, I identified the motivations as shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Motivations for posting a request

	<i>Motivations for posting</i>
a	A need for resources/advice related to learners with special needs
b	A need to discuss something/expand one's repertoire
c	A need for resources/advice
d	A need for assistance, to save time

The entries that requested resources for learners with special needs (Category a) covered a variety of issues. Weak learners, strong learners, learners with English as a first language and newly arrived immigrants with only meagre English language skills were all mentioned. There were also some special cases such as this: *I have an 11-year-old learner whose oral English is very good, but who cannot read. Help, anyone?* This entry received 17 responses that provided advice as well as concrete ideas of resources.

The teachers who signaled that they wanted to expand their own repertoire (Category b), typically started the entry by describing what they wanted to teach and the resources they had considered so far. Then, they would ask: *What do you think? Do you have other suggestions?* All in all, however, such open discussions were scarce. This reflects other studies that have found little evidence of a genuine exchange of views in online teacher communities (e.g. Rensfeldt et al., 2018; Liljekvist et al., 2020).

Far more entries fell into Category c (*A need for resources/advice*), and many of them seemed to be posted by inexperienced teachers. Quite a few said so themselves, as shown in the following examples: *How do I fill a whole day ("fagdag") with English in 9th grade? Greetings from an inexperienced teacher.* / *Does anyone know of good English songs for years 3 and 4? Greetings from a newly educated teacher who has to teach all subjects.*

Some revealed insecurity in the way that they formulated themselves: *Does anyone have examples of texts for reading that can be given as homework? If so, how do you work with the texts at school?*

Category d (*A need for assistance, to save time*) was the one with the most entries. Here are some typical examples: *Does anyone know of a documentary about racism? / Does anyone have resources related to the US election and how Trump was elected? / Does anyone have materials related to the documentary about Amy Winehouse?*

The term “opplegg” was used extensively. It can probably be translated into “a lesson plan, with ready-made activities”. A great number of entries asked for “opplegg” related to the teaching of different skills, but also in connection with specific films such as *Freedom riders* and books such as *Wonder*.

Discussion

The findings in this investigation correspond with other studies which also found that the majority of entries in an informal online network for teachers were related to educational resources (e.g. Kiss et al., 2018; Rensfeldt et al., 2018; Tandberg & Aukland, 2020). This could indicate that questions related to teaching and learning materials are the most pressing ones in today’s teachers’ work. However, it could also be seen as the result of the medium’s affordances. A relatively open forum like a professional network on Facebook is not the place to discuss everyday challenges related to specific students, colleagues or leaders. Questions about resources, however, can most often be asked and discussed openly, without having to consider issues of privacy.

That said, the many entries related to educational resources indicate that this is an aspect of their work that English teachers in Norway find interesting and relevant. The investigation supports Rasmussen and Lund’s (2015) claim that many teachers are engaged in “hybrid practices” in the way that they, at least to some degree, combine resources from different sources and design their own teaching. While they may still use a textbook, the exchanges indicate that many teachers are driven by competence aims and that they do not feel constrained by the structure, the logic and the materials of the textbook series.

The supply of resources is especially rich in a subject like English, as it is taught all around the world. The exchanges in the Facebook group indicate that English teachers in today’s Norwegian classrooms are well aware of the opportunities that this situation represents, but that they appreciate help and guidance when it comes to identifying and selecting the most relevant materials. As pointed out by other studies (e.g. Yildirim, 2019; Selvi, 2021), the size of the group is an asset. Someone who makes a request in a group of almost 20.000 teachers has good reason to expect some useful responses. As an “extended staffroom” (Randahl et al., 2022), an online network can be seen as a valuable site for “crowd sourcing” of educational resources.

One obvious advantage of the Facebook group is that the participants receive immediate support. A teacher who asks a question or posts a request usually gets help within the same day. Provided that the requests are specific enough, responses can be spot-on in terms of relevance. However, the downside of this might be that some teachers rely too much on last-minute assistance from the group. The present investigation corresponds to other studies which have identified a tendency for teachers to enter a “smash-and-grab” approach to finding and using teaching and learning materials (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018).

Another concern is the fact that many teachers ask for ready-made lesson plans and resources and activities in the “one-size-fits-all” format. Responses, too, often refer to “fun” activities that “the learners love”. Such information might well be put to good use. Still, there is a danger that activities are brought into the classroom as quick solutions, at the expense of activities that are based on more thorough pedagogical considerations of the learners’ desired learning outcome.

The format of the exchanges may promote such a “quick-fix” attitude to challenges in the classroom. The activities in the group can be said to resemble those in other social media, where participants engage in an individualized practice, aimed to meet their own, personal needs (Rensfeldt et al., 2018). If participants get used to the immediacy of the exchanges and the quick solutions provided, this might hinder the development of a culture among teachers where they build competence through more theoretical considerations and in-depth discussions.

That said, it does seem that the group represents an important source of information as well as inspiration for many. A wealth of ideas and resources are shared, and questions are asked and answered, as also shown in other studies (e.g. Liljekvist et al., 2020). The fact that the exchange happens in a positive and supportive tone, probably contributes to the feeling that the group is a safe community where insecure as well as experienced teachers can receive valuable input and support. My investigation did not check who the participants were and the level of activity that different types of teachers displayed. However, there is reason to believe that some participants were merely “lurkers” or “authorized visitors”, who consume content, but do not contribute content themselves. Because of the informal tone and seemingly low threshold for active participation, these teachers may develop into more active participants as time goes on (Randahl et al., 2022).

When it comes to other types of participants, many entries signaled that they were posted by teachers who wanted to vary their teaching and to make learning more motivating and effective. Some wanted help to meet the special needs of specific students, or to link the subject to topical issues. Other entries bore witness of teachers who were deprived of time, yet others of teachers who were inexperienced and/or insecure. It comes as no surprise that such teachers exist, as a survey from 2019 found that approximately 50% of the English teachers in years 1-7 in Norwegian compulsory school lack formal qualifications to teach the subject (Perlic, 2019). The responses indicate that the group contains a considerable number of dedicated ones who are willing to share information, experiences and advice that has the potential to help increase the quality of teaching. They are also eager to share their enthusiasm both for the resources and for the teaching of English in general.

However, the fact that the usefulness and the relevance of the group activities is dependent on the voluntary participation of competent teachers, is yet another cause of concern. There is, for example, no guarantee that a critical mass of

experienced teachers stays with and remains active in the group. Future research is needed to investigate how much “unpaid digital labour” (Rensfeldt, 2018) teachers invest in the group, what their motivations are for doing so, and how sustainable the setup is. In a group that is entirely participant driven, there is also no way of ensuring the quality of the response that inexperienced teachers receive and share.

It therefore seems natural to consider, the way some researchers do (e.g. Jones & Dexter, 2014; Yildirim, 2017), how an informal network could be exploited better as an arena for teachers’ professional development. Potential for improvement lies especially in more in-depth discussions of classroom approaches related to theories of how languages are learned. More systematic presentations of various types of resources and, not least, more critical voices against the tendency to provide quick-fix solutions, could also be desirable.

Researchers have suggested that teacher trainers, authorized bodies or expert teachers with financial support could play a role in assuring the quality of the activity in the group (Aukland & Tandberg, 2020; Yildirim, 2017). Given the popularity of – and the apparent need for – a network like the Facebook group, these suggestions could be worth considering. At the same time, attention should be paid to the sense of solidarity and collective responsibility that the group conveys, as well as the low threshold for teachers to ask their questions. Such values might be difficult to maintain in a network that is *not* participant-driven.

Conclusion

The Facebook group under scrutiny in this article comes across as a much-valued meeting point for teachers. One main affordance of the group seems to lie in the large number of participants, making it a sort of “extended staffroom” (Randahl et al., 2022), where teachers can get assistance as well as inspiration. Another affordance lies in the immediacy of the exchanges, as teachers never have to wait long for response. However, while it certainly has its advantages, we have seen how the format of the group also can be said to promote a propensity for quick-fix solutions over more thorough pedagogical considerations and discussions.

The number of entries related to teaching and learning materials indicates that Norwegian English teachers are well aware of the opportunities that the available “cascade of resources” (Gissel & Illum Hansen, 2021) represents, and that they see the group as a useful source of information and assistance. The exchanges also show that teachers probably are engaged in “hybrid practices” (Rasmussen & Lund 2015), as they share materials from a variety of sources which can be used in their classrooms. While the activity in the group reveals that some teachers are insecure and many definitely pressured for time, it also shows a considerable number of teachers who are willing to share their insights and experiences, and who see the group as an arena to provide help and advice to those who need it.

The many “likes” and expressions of agreement indicate that many teachers probably follow the group simply in order to keep updated and to get inspiration. Further investigations of who the participants are, and the nature of their engagement, may cast light on how sustainable the network is and also on the potential for quality assurance and further development.

The activity in the group documents that the rich supply of materials available places great demands on the teachers’ insights and judgement related to the choice and the use of educational resources. The Facebook group must be seen as a laudable initiative from the teachers themselves to take responsibility for the situation. However, while a participant-driven network can represent valuable support, it seems obvious that further measures need to be taken in order to help teachers develop the competence they need. Securing formal qualifications for all who teach English is one obvious step, providing teachers with enough time to orient themselves in the multitude of materials another. It seems particularly important to provide teachers with lasting insights and judgement skills, and to counteract the tendency in online networks for quick-fix solutions. An increased focus on educational resources and how to cope with a field in constant development seems necessary, in teacher education as well as in further education initiatives.

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