

NS LIVE CASE SERIES 2017:

TeachOntario

For Ontario's Educators, by Ontario's Educators

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NEW SYNTHESIS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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NS Live Case Series 2017:

TVO's TeachOntario: For Ontario's Educators, by Ontario's Educators

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The opinions expressed in this case study are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of other organizations mentioned and/or identified herein.

The context

The information age has affected governments and public action in various ways. Governments strive to keep up with changes like the emergence of Big Data and Artificial Intelligence. Public organisations, capable of mobilizing innovative and organisational capacity, are similarly working to meet the challenges and opportunities from complex digital environments head on, often doing so with the support of societal partners.

The case of TeachOntario, an innovative online community developed “for Ontario’s Educators, by Ontario’s Educators”¹ presents us with a powerful example of policy arrangement built from the ground up to address the challenges posed by technological innovation. The platform addresses the need for professional development and dissemination of information across the education system of Ontario using social media. TeachOntario centers the production and sharing of information and knowledge on the key implementers of education policy, the educators. The platform represents a bold approach in knowledge sharing and development, as well as leadership development, through the use of social media.

Ontario is the largest Canadian province in terms of population, and fourth largest province in terms of territory, with 1,076,395 square km. The 72 publicly-funded school boards (public, Catholic, English and French language), along with a small number of special authority boards, together manage an education system that accounts for more than 150,000 teachers and almost 2 million students across its territory.² The province has a deep-rooted culture of teachers undertaking voluntary, self-directed professional development, often funded by the Ministry of Education and delivered by teacher Federations and other stakeholders. Leveraging new technologies to help provide professional development and best practice diffusion across this geographically large system has been a natural direction for the Ministry of Education and its educational learning partners.

Recent research of the education systems across Canada suggests that a positive environment for knowledge exchange, co-learning and building capacity leads to personal and professional growth that directly impacts improving student outcomes.³ Ontario’s vision for improving student achievement and well-being recognizes the importance of creating a culture of “collaborative professionalism”, which the Ministry has defined as “professionals - at all levels of the education system - working together, sharing knowledge, skills and experience”.⁴

Accordingly, several initiatives by the Ministry of Education and its partners help to foster an innovative culture and encourage the sharing of practices and experiences. A case in point, the Teacher Learning and Leadership

1 “About Us - TeachOntario,” TeachOntario.ca (blog), July 26, 2017, <https://www.teachontario.ca/docs/DOC-1343>.

2 Ontario Ministry of Education, “Education Facts 2015-2016,” Ontario.ca, August 4, 2017, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/educationFacts.html>.

3 Campbell, C., Osmond-Johnson, P., Faubert, B., Zeichner, K. and Hobbs-Johnson, A. “The State of Educators’ Professional Learning in Canada. Executive Summary. Learning Forward”. 2016.

4 Ontario Ministry of Education (2016). Collaborative Professionalism (Policy/Program Memorandum No. 159). Toronto, ON.

Program (TLLP) helps educators to develop projects and expand their knowledge by sharing best practices. This program has supported some 1,000 projects led by thousands of teachers since it was launched in 2007.⁵ The TLLP selects small teams of teachers for each round, who are then involved in intensive professional learning experiences, generating important results in terms of personal and group growth.

The above notwithstanding, creating a face-to-face environment for experience exchange, conferences, workshops and seminars can sometimes be costly and challenging, particularly for boards that cover a large geographical area and have relatively few students. Additionally, the school year has a compressed schedule that may make it challenging for educators to travel, particularly in wintertime conditions.⁶

The importance of promoting peer contact to improve teaching collaboration and knowledge exchange are amplified by an increasingly dynamic educational context, which calls for continuous adaptation and improvement of teaching practices. In such a scenario, information-sharing technologies, such as social media, emerge as an additional tool to catalyse interaction within the education community and increase the information shared and accessed.

Positioning to keep up with societal challenges

The Ontario Educational Communications Authority knows as TVO represents the technological extension of Ontario's public education system. Historically that meant using television broadcast technology to improve learning experiences through services that ranged from entertainment and education for children to journalism and documentaries.

In recent years, TVO has capitalized on an opportunity to expand its role in education through new technologies. The five-year Strategic Directions enacted in 2013, the focus on using new technologies and new media to assist educational efforts was highlighted as a central aspect of TVO's strategy.⁷ This approach reinforces the organization's role as the technological extension of the public education system. Content is now provided 24/7 across multiple devices and screens for all ages of learners.

Going beyond the reach of television allows TVO to remain relevant and modern. In addition, it helps the organisation to fulfil its public purpose, by developing innovative learning experiences, expanding interactions between students and community, and reaching out to citizens.

5 Ontario Ministry of Education, "2017-2018 Teacher Learning and Leadership Program - About the Program." Ontario, ca, September 30, 2016, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teacher/tllp.html>.

6 Mauren Asselin et al., "TeachOntario: A Professional Learning Community for Educators," February 24, 2015.

7 Ontario Educational Communications Authority, "TVO Annual Report 2013-2014," 2014.

The process of developing a learner-centred platform

Social media allows for the fast exchange of information and knowledge, and opens new spaces for discussion. TVO foresaw that social media could be used to foster participation and exchange within the education community.

TVO identified that educators could benefit from having a safe environment to exchange knowledge and best practices for the broader benefit of improving outcomes for all learners. The idea was to promote a teacher-initiated and facilitated digital space, in which educators could feel comfortable to share projects, ideas, questions and wonderings, with their colleagues across the province. The project envisioned teachers as contributors to every aspect of the platform, from its ideation to its design and development to its ongoing daily activity, instead of being regarded as clients of it.



The educator-led creation and operation of the digital space constituted the core value of the platform. TVO reached out to partners to engage the education community and build momentum for the initiative. In partnership with the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF), its affiliates, and the Ministry of Education (EDU), the initiative leveraged the mobilisation of different capacities from each partner to reach the most valuable assets for the process: educators. The EDU and OTF helped recruit the TLLP prototype and beta testers, who helped in the initial stages of the platform development. EDU, OTF and its affiliates also mobilized interest in the platform by sharing its features as an educator-led digital learning destination with school board leaders and mentors.

A pilot project was developed with the active involvement of 12 teachers who had participated in the TLLP program. The initial concept of the platform was inspired on the TLLP by emulating some of the aspects such as engagement of teachers in developing projects and exchanging knowledge.

At the initial stage, the project aimed at providing an environment for positive interactions by encouraging innovative projects and peer-to-peer professional knowledge exchange. Users could invite other educators to participate, and a professional email address was used to verify that users were part of Ontario's education community.

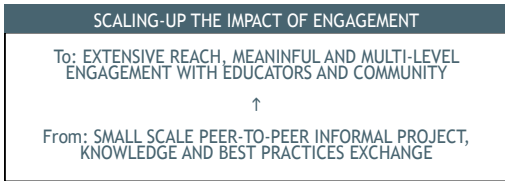
The beta version of TeachOntario was launched in June of 2014. By the end of June, the users grew from 12 to 20. By the end of the summer, there were 100 users. In October the number increased to 600 users. By the end of 2015 and 2016, TeachOntario surpassed 2,300 and 4,000 users respectively.

In 2017, the platform accounted for more than 10,000 users. From the initial stage, the education community welcomed the platform, recognizing it as a safe space for communication and exchange within the community.

The online community is in constant evolution as it is constantly iterating according to user utilisation and feedback. It introduces new features to support professional learning, and to facilitate the exchange of exemplary practices. It remains a collaborative platform and a powerful tool with the objective of supporting educators in helping students succeed.⁸ Students benefit from new methods brought by educators to the classroom, in addition to having access to particular content on the platform.

TeachOntario is organised around three main key spaces. The Explore space is globally accessible, encompassing webinars, book clubs, multimedia blogs focused on exemplary teaching and learning practices, as well as curated resources from TVO, the Ministry of Education, and other sources. The Share space is dedicated to educators sharing knowledge in learning practices and in professional learning and innovations. Finally, the Create space is dedicated to educator-initiated collective projects.⁹ The platform has a vast array of functions that increase and iterate according to educators' demands. Educators commonly read the latest research, follow the work of other educators, write their own blogs, upload and share videos and teaching

material, access material from other educators, build communities around particular subjects or issues, and exchange professional knowledge broadly.¹⁰



Grassroots engagement solutions to public challenges

Since the beginning, TeachOntario has been a grassroots initiative. TVO provides the technological support, but its growth and diversification depends essentially on the engagement of the education community. The innovative online community started with teachers and expanded to reach all educators, administrative staff, management, and evolved so that the Explore section is public - so accessible to all. Education boards and educational partners use tailored solutions within the platform to perform professional development. The Ministry of Education leverages the platform to provide meaningful learning opportunities for a wide variety of educators including teacher candidates, new teachers, mentors, teacher leaders and school board staff.

⁸ Asselin et al., "TeachOntario: A Professional Learning Community for Educators."

⁹ Asselin et al.; "About Us - TeachOntario."

¹⁰ Asselin et al., "TeachOntario: A Professional Learning Community for Educators."

Various layers of access, as well as different tools for various applications, emerged as the project expanded. The online space initially worked as a “gated community”. Some of its features were, and still remain, restricted to educators, allowing greater freedom to express opinions and explore wonderings. Other features evolved into open forums and tools, providing material available to anyone looking into developing and sharing constructive learning experiences.

TVO expected the education community would need approximately five years to grow the necessary confidence to open the platform to share their learning and best practices beyond the province of Ontario. But merely after one year, educators already felt confident enough to initiate the opening of particular spaces, and the Explore section of the platform was made available to a global audience. New applications are constantly added to the platform, according to the needs of the education community. The access to each new function is evaluated according to their goals.

Peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and professional learning is no novelty for the education community. As noted earlier, a substantive and deliberate effort has been exerted in Ontario to promote professional activities and events to encourage such exchanges. In addition, informal knowledge transfer and discussions are frequent within schools.

TeachOntario has helped expand these interactions. It has fostered engagement with the potential for broader impact and opened a channel for decentralised professional development initiatives. Educators’ engagement and agency is at the core of the mechanism. They are creators, producers, and consumers of content, while the custom key spaces of the platform enhance meaningful interaction.

The platform is not a substitute for professional development initiatives; rather, it empowers and expands the reach of decentralised initiatives from educators on new levels. The results are far-reaching and impactful engagement experiences that translate into further engagement and growth for the platform.

Learning to date

TeachOntario was created by TVO, with the participation of the Ministry of Education and Ontario Teachers’ Federation. Yet, its development and success are the result of the enthusiasm and engagement from the educators and education community.

The platform embodied a policy developed at the grassroots. The participation of teachers was fundamental for the development of a custom digital space that evolves with educators’ needs. The platform was started as a prototype in 2014 and officially launched in 2016, but it is in continuous development, much as education itself.

TeachOntario has achieved its maturity, figuring as both an official Professional Development Initiative from the provincial Ministry of Education

and one of the prominent Digital Learning products in development by TVO. TeachOntario was awarded the platinum prize in the 2015 IPAC/Deloitte Public Sector Leadership Awards,¹¹ demonstrating the importance of the project.

Positioning TVO as a digital learning organization was crucial to lay the bases for a collaborative website to emerge. The new organizational approach opened the way for the creation of TeachOntario as a grassroots public engagement initiative. Acting with the teachers' federation and the education community propelled the project forward and increased the reach of the initiative. The experience represents a distinct example of innovation led by public organisations, using cutting-edge technology concepts and public engagement to achieve public results.

Underneath any successful structure or initiative, there are relationships. The collaboration between TVO, the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Ontario Teachers' Federation and its affiliates and educators across the province created a space for authentic teacher-directed learning.

¹¹ "About Us - TeachOntario."

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