Educators Engaging in Online Educational Marketplaces: A Vision for Teacher Education to Prepare Critical Consumers, Careful Creators, and Discerning Professionals

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Online teacherpreneurship occurs via popular online educational marketplaces, such as Teacherspayteachers.com (TpT), whereby teachers purchase, sell, and exchange curricular materials created by fellow educators and designed for classroom use. Among the potential benefits of the practice is the ability to offer a teacher-centered and teacher-led approach to curriculum, facilitate collaboration, and provide an opportunity for teachers’ financial gain. However, several concerns exist, including resource quality, “power sellers” who may dominate the marketplace, and issues with platforms that extract teacher labor and funds as part of their for-profit model. Given these challenges and opportunities, we provide a vision for new approaches to teacher education that critically explore the growing practices around such platforms. Teacher education should address online teacherpreneurship and online educational marketplaces by preparing teacher candidates to be critical consumers, careful creators, and discerning professionals.

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E-commerce has proliferated in all facets of modern life, and the education sector is no exception. Teachers commonly purchase, with some also selling, curricular materials online. This practice, known as online teacherpreneurship (Shelton & Archambault, 2018), has grown in popularity in recent years as educational host sites have proliferated, including TeachersPayTeachers.com (TpT), Times Educational Supplement (TES), Teachers Notebook, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Marketplace, and Amazon Ignite. These online educational marketplaces have become well known among preschool to 12th grade (P-12) teachers as sources of academic resources created by teachers for other teachers’ classroom use (Opfer et al., 2016).

In 2022, TpT, one of the most popular host sites, claimed that “more than 2 out of 3 teachers in the U.S. have used a resource on TpT.” The popularity of online educational marketplaces such as TpT has continued to grow, especially during an era of remote teaching due to COVID-19 (Marcin, 2020). In the midst of its growth, online teacherpreneurship has been met with both optimism and skepticism. However, within the limited scholarship on the topic, it is clear that the field of teacher education has not sufficiently addressed the complex issues surrounding online teacherpreneurship, either from a consumer or creator perspective. A vision for moving forward is desperately needed to prepare future educators to use and/or contribute materials (or avoid such platforms altogether with an in-depth rationale for why this might be necessary).

To develop a vision, additional context about the practice of online teacherpreneurship is helpful, including the reasons for hope as well as concern. First, in terms of potentially positive outcomes, new avenues of sharing innovative and disseminating creative instructional ideas are possible without the gatekeeping or lack of authenticity of which textbook publishers are often accused. With the practice, the potential does exist to offer a teacher-centered and teacher-led approach to curriculum that may challenge the curricular control that external, for-profit textbook companies have traditionally held (Hodge et al., 2019). In addition, online educational marketplaces could facilitate teachers’ collaboration with colleagues across the globe (Torphy & Drake, 2019), enabling teachers to access just-in-time support from fellow teachers who are empowered as virtual leaders (Shelton & Archambault, 2019, 2020). Finally, for teachers participating in the practice, or online teacherpreneurs, there is the opportunity for financial gain as part of selling classroom materials (Koehler et al., 2020; Pittard, 2017).
Despite this potential, recent scholarship has highlighted issues with the online educational marketplace phenomenon (Shelton, Koehler et al., 2022; Silver, 2021). The quality of the materials exchanged on these sites can be questionable (Benko et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2018, 2019; Northrop & Andrei, 2021; Pittard, 2017; Polikoff & Dean, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2019; Stohlmann & Yang, 2021). The extent to which there is oversight to monitor quality is murky at best, given that anyone can upload, market, and sell materials on such sites. Additionally, substantial profits are attributable to a small group of typically White women deemed as “power-sellers” (Kohler et al., 2020; Sawyer, Dick, et al., 2020). As a result, such spaces may not be a democratizing force in the creation of curriculum, as platforms claim (Koehler et al., 2020). Although some teachers may experience financial gain by engaging in the practice, the system relies on their fellow teachers to support them, most often with their personal funds. Moreover, both buyers and sellers exert significant labor to create and market materials or to search for, vet, and curate materials—work that is unpaid and that drives marketplace host platforms’ profits (Shelton, Koehler et al., 2022). Given the challenges and opportunities of online teacherpreneurship and online educational marketplaces, we advocate for new approaches to teacher education that critically explore and engage this phenomenon, supporting teacher candidates to be critical consumers, careful creators, and discerning professionals.

VISION

In the past, teacher educators have largely opted to ignore, discourage, or dismiss the use of online educational marketplaces due to the problems discussed above. But the reality is these platforms are increasingly popular among both preservice and current teachers, and the use of such sites shows no signs of slowing. Telling teachers to simply stay away from these platforms and their associated social media ecosystem is not an effective approach (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022). As Gallagher and colleagues (2019) explain:

Asking teachers to avoid curriculum sharing sites is not practical, given how easy and convenient they are. In addition, there are fantastic activities, resources, and ideas that get shared in online sharing formats. We simply want educators to use curriculum sharing sites responsibly (p. 217).
Given that future teachers are apt to continue to use online educational marketplaces, our vision is that by 2025, the field of teacher education will support them in doing so in a more informed and analytical manner as critical consumers, careful creators, and discerning professionals. We discuss our vision regarding each of these roles in greater detail below.

**Prepare Critical Consumers**

First, we envision a future where teacher education supports candidates in becoming critical consumers of curricula. Such efforts are essential given the low or inconsistent quality of online educational marketplace materials (Harris et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2018, 2019; Northrop & Andrei, 2021; Pittard, 2017; Polikoff & Dean, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2019; Stohlmann & Yang, 2021). Teacher candidates need to develop 21st-century critical curricular literacies (Sawyer, Dredger, et al., 2020; Schroeder & Curcio, 2022), which Schroeder and Curcio describe as practices that involve “interrogat[ing] the power relationships involved in the creation, selection, and promotion of resources in the for-profit teacher-to-teacher online marketplaces of ideas,” which “inevitably must take into account content knowledge and discipline specific skills that promote social justice” (p. 132).

To foster critical curricular literacies, teacher educators can guide candidates through a series of activities where they learn to be critical of the learning materials they locate on online educational marketplaces and then learn ways to adapt the material for their particular learners and contexts. Several recent studies nicely illustrate how experts in this field have developed different learning experiences to foster preservice teachers’ critical curricular literacies (see Gallagher, 2022; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Schroeder & Curcio, 2022). These learning experiences should involve developing critical understandings surrounding the platformization and marketization of curriculum (Koehler et al., 2020; Shelton, Koehler et al., 2022), as well as the use of content area-specific approaches to evaluate particular lessons or activities (for example, see social studies rubrics offered by Gallagher et al., 2019 and Shelton, Archambault et al., 2022). Moreover, such efforts should be present across various methods courses, given evidence that teachers need to draw on content-specific critical literacies when evaluating curriculum on a particular topic (Rodríguez et al., 2020; Schroeder & Curcio, 2022).
Prepare Careful Creators

Second, we envision a future where teacher education works to build capacity for a new generation of careful online educational marketplace curriculum creators. Research has shown that quality within the marketplace is inconsistent at best and harmful at worst (Harris et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2018, 2019; Northrop & Andrei, 2021; Pittard, 2017; Polikoff & Dean, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2019). However, the open and participatory nature of the marketplace means that its content can be changed (and we hope, changed for the better). Nonetheless, currently, much of the most popular content on TpT is created by a small group of elite sellers (Koehler et al., 2020), most of whom are white women (Shelton & Archambault, 2019; Sawyer, Dick, et al., 2020). Teacher education has an opportunity to build capacity within a new generation of content creators who can bring different identities and lived experiences, including teacherpreneurs of systematically excluded identities, to curricular design and change the makeup of content within the marketplace. However, it should be noted that these efforts will have little effect on the content that shows up in users’ searches unless host platforms also do their part in prioritizing this type of new material in search algorithms and the platform design (Scherder & Curcio, 2022; Shelton, Koehler et al., 2022).

To support preparing careful creators, teacher education programs that focus on building capacity for instructional design may help. Candidates need to learn to design, develop, and implement classroom materials as teachers, but such skills may also be helpful for aspiring online educational marketplace content contributors. While many colleges of education have advanced degree programs in instructional design, it may be advantageous to include effective design approaches at the undergraduate level, incorporating blended learning competencies as these models continue to grow in use and relevance (Short et al., 2021). Moreover, as part of the design process, the field needs to foster a revise-to-improve mentality among teacher candidates regarding curriculum design. The next generation of content creators needs to listen to feedback and revise their resources accordingly. Teacher education should establish norms throughout programs that learning is slow, sustained, continual, and never done - as are the curricular products we create. One of the potential benefits of open curricular marketplaces is that buyers and sellers can engage with each other, providing feedback to improve materials. Given the digital nature of such curriculum, it can be easily updated (compared to textbooks). Engendering a value for the ongoing, iterative revision process in the design of learning materials needs is essential to preparing the next generation of careful content creators.
Prepare Discerning Professionals

Third, we envision a future where teacher education prepares candidates who object to the potential flaws and harms that curricular marketplaces can pose, not only to quality classroom instruction but also to educators’ professionalism. One of the difficulties that must be acknowledged with the educational marketplace phenomenon is the market forces it uses to continue to exist and profit (Koehler et al., 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2020).

It must also be noted that the practice of online teacherpreneurship does not exist without teacher labor (Shelton, Koehler et al., 2022). Searching for resources among the millions available and keeping up with the latest content via social media can feel like a job in and of itself. However, creating innovative and engaging materials takes a significant amount of time, and the few dollars an average teacherpreneur could make may not justify the work (Koehler et al., 2020). Likewise, when fellow teachers make purchases from these sites, it is most often with their personal funds.

Teachers’ attraction to the marketplace illuminates harsh realities facing the teaching profession— that teachers are underpaid, under-resourced, siloed, and overworked (Apple, 2013). An affordance of teacherpreneurship and online educational marketplaces is they offer a way to fund teacher curriculum creators while providing their fellow under-resourced and time-strapped teachers access to the classroom material and supports they need. However, this phenomenon may offer more of a band-aid than a viable solution. We believe that tomorrow’s teachers need to understand the complexities of these problems, with a focus on the flawed systems that are responsible. Then, teachers need the capacity to take up these issues, objecting to the inadequate work environments that make online educational marketplaces necessary in the first place. Teacher education can support teachers in learning how to advocate and call on school, district, state, and national leaders to fund classroom curricula, design teacher work schedules that allot more planning time, and foster positive, professional environments where they can collaborate with colleagues and share materials teacher-to-teacher.

IMPLEMENTATION

We conclude by offering a series of questions that pose benchmarks for implementation regarding actions that teacher educators can take. These questions seek to stimulate reflection among teacher educators to assist them with ideas for centering critical discussion about online educational marketplace practices within their courses and programs.
Prepare Critical Consumers

Given the inconsistent quality of curricular materials across online educational marketplaces, future and current teachers need to be prepared to become critical consumers of online curricular material. To reach this goal, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Teacher educators should add learning experiences in their coursework and related field experiences that foster critical curricular literacies, such as those offered by Gallagher (2022), Rodríguez et al. (2020), or Schroeder and Curcio (2022).
- As part of coursework, particularly in methods courses, teacher education students should conduct critical analyses and evaluations of online curricular materials using existing rubrics, such as those offered by Gallagher et al. (2019) or Harris et al. (2022).
- Teacher education students need to be provided with scaffolded opportunities to remix curriculum materials to adapt lessons to their particular students and contexts.

Prepare Careful Creators

Given some of the problems with online teacherpreneurship, namely the inconsistent quality of materials, the fact that a few power sellers dominate the marketplace, and the fact that teacherpreneurs overwhelmingly embody historically dominant identity dimensions, there is an opportunity for teacher education to build capacity in marketplace content creators. To reach this goal, teacher education should consider including the following:

- Learning opportunities aimed at building teacher education students’ capacity for instructional design should be offered at the undergraduate level, rather than solely in advanced degree programs.
- Within teacher education programs, faculty should foster a revise-to-improve mentality within teacher education students when engaging with curriculum writing, emphasizing that learning is slow, sustained, continual, and never done - as are our curricular products.
- Culturally responsive learning experiences should be offered to support pre- and in-service teachers of historically marginalized identities to foster, celebrate, and encourage their capacity as curriculum authors.
Prepare Discerning Professionals

The for-profit online marketplace model poses new problems to curriculum and the teaching profession that we believe 21st-century teachers must grapple with and object to. Platforms like TpT extract teacher labor and funds (Shelton, Koehler et al., 2022) while controlling the terms upon which “quality” curriculum is understood (Gallagher et al., 2022). Although the marketplace may represent a quick fix for time-strapped teachers, pre- and in-service teachers must understand that larger, systemic issues are to blame. They must be able to take action to object to these harmful policies, practices, and systems. To reach this goal, teacher education should consider the following:

• Programs should facilitate critical readings and discussion around the opportunities and challenges of online teacherpreneurship and the online educational marketplace model of curriculum (e.g., reading popular press articles on both sides of the issue such as Collins, 2019; Shelton et al., 2020; WECT Staff, 2019).

• Pre-service teachers should be able to make an informed argument for why they use (or choose not to use) online educational marketplaces. Such arguments should be able to address teachers’ use of personal funds, the labor teachers exert, and the profits marketplace platforms extract from teachers.

• Pre- and in-service teachers should observe examples of and be provided with opportunities to practice dissent when unethical or questionable actions are taken by platforms and/or users (e.g., by observing and participating in critical TpT resource reviews or in Twitter engagement that critiques TpT).

• The capacity of current and future educators should be developed to understand and work to change harmful policies, such as schools’ disinvestment in curriculum or the role that elected officials (and, in turn, one’s own voting practices) play in education funding and teacher professionalism.

CONCLUSION

Online educational marketplaces and the practice of online teacherpreneurship have become an undeniable force in education today. They offer a practical, easy way for teachers to supplement curriculum on-demand. But given the issues with quality documented on these sites (see Harris et al.,
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2022; Hu et al., 2018, 2019; Northrop & Andrei, 2021; Pittard, 2017; Polikoff & Dean, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2019; Stohlmann & Yang, 2021), teachers need to be aware of how they are participating in a system with potential, but ultimately, one that is flawed. It is important to recognize that the main incentive of platforms such as TpT is as a for-profit business, with a primary focus on increasing the number of transactions and sales. As a result, these platforms do not have a vested interest in monitoring quality (Shelton et al., 2020). Other issues with the for-profit nature of curricular exchange include marketing resources as being “engaging” that may distract from the actual pedagogical quality and opaque marketplace algorithms that dictate what teachers see in a given search. The algorithm may also produce results that include materials that, while visually attractive, are superficial and banal (Gallagher, 2022; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Schroeder & Curcio, 2022). These are important realizations for teachers to have prior to engaging with online educational marketplaces.

This article presents suggestions for how teacher education can engage teacher candidates with the complex issues surrounding online teacher entrepreneurship. However, we acknowledge that teacher education cannot fix it all. An affordance of the participatory curriculum marketplace model is that individual teachers are responsible for the content that is populated, and they have agency in what they purchase and the feedback they offer— but that affordance may be overstated given the platforms’ control of the content. Nonetheless, as a collective, teachers may be able to work against the powerful platform forces at play so that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks when it comes to online educational marketplaces. We believe in the power of teacher agency but recognize the immense challenge such change would require.

References


