

Personal, Purposeful, Practical, Political Matters in the Teachmeet Phenomenon: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract: *TeachMeet is a recent phenomenon in which informal gatherings are arranged by teachers to share and discuss practice with peers in a convivial setting. Our overarching research aim was to explore the essence, nature and niche of TeachMeet events. Review of literature in the domains of professional development, leaderless organisations, and TeachMeet led to research questions seeking the perspectives of experienced participants. Our sensemaking methodological approach included an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews with individuals (n = 15) experienced the practice of TeachMeet, to shed light on what gives life to the TeachMeet phenomenon and reveal what matters most to participants. The IPA carried out on the interview transcripts generated personal and group experiential themes which reveal the TeachMeet phenomenon to be of personal, purposeful, practical, and political importance for participants, and that what matters most is to maintain the open, non-hierarchical, and social dynamic that is vital for TeachMeet events.*

Keywords: TeachMeet, open space, interpretative phenomenological analysis, group experiential themes, personal professional practice

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to report exploratory research into TeachMeet, a recent phenomenon of informal gatherings arranged by teachers for teachers, in order to share and discuss practice with peers in a convivial setting. TeachMeet first appeared in Scotland in 2006; its grassroots appeal has since seen it develop into a popular event format worldwide - as recorded in Amond (2022), although there is still no incorporated organisation, almost every day, somewhere in the world, a TeachMeet event is being organised. The simplicity of the infrastructure needed - nothing more than a date, time, location advertised for each event -

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combined with the agility and speed with which events can be organised and populated, affirms the choice of descriptor for the emerging TeachMeet as *Guerrilla CPD* (Bennett, 2012).

The overall purpose of the research was to seek answers to the ‘What?’, ‘How?’, and ‘Why?’ questions about this emergent participative professional learning format, TeachMeet; to explore the nature, niche and essence of it, with research questions seeking to reveal the characteristics, motivations, situation, perspectives, and ideation of the events and their participants. Already reported elsewhere are findings for one research question on characteristic elements of TeachMeet (Amond et al., 2024) and two research questions seeking both participants’ motivations and their perspectives on the situation of TeachMeet within their professional learning landscape (Amond et al., 2025). The rationale for the research was to look at TeachMeet in the light of a provocation from Evans (2019) in a paper entitled “Implicit and informal professional development: what it ‘looks like’, how it occurs, and why we need to research it”. In order to deal with our final and most complex research question on the relationship between evolution, impact, and sustainability in the context of TeachMeet, we needed to capture the insights of those whose experience of it was deepest and broadest. Our paper reports finding an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of interviews carried out with experienced organisers of TeachMeet (n. = 15), during which each outlined their past and present experience of, and their ideation on the future of, TeachMeet. The group experiential themes revealed by this IPA show the TeachMeet phenomenon to be of personal, purposeful, practical, and political concern to those who participate. This paper outlines the literature review, methodology, and findings which are discussed in terms of their implications, our conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE

Literature reviewed represents the three domains at play in the TeachMeet universe - the worlds of formal professional learning in education; of non-hierarchical open networks and communities; and of the TeachMeet phenomenon. Literature pertaining to both formal and informal professional development of educators was examined in order to glean a holistic view of processes pertaining to teacher learning that have been evolving from a provision and delivery model to a more enabling and transformative models (Guskey, 2002; Hargreaves, 2000; Granville, 2005; Murchan et al., 2009; Webster-Wright, 2010; Desimone, 2011; Kennedy, 2005; Evans, 2019; O’Sullivan et al., 2016; Korthagen, 2017; Guest, 2019). At the start of the research journey there was a far greater range of expert literature on formal professional development than there was on informal. In recent years however there has been a slow increase in studies which include the informal, and participants’ point of view of informal professional development, in their discussion of teacher learning. Central here in particular are several works prompted by the Evans (2019) provocation, which address change in the framing of professional development. King et al., (2023) call for a pragmatic approach to the complexity in teacher professional learning; Strom & Viesca (2022, p. 210) speak of “entangled ever-shifting nature of teacher ‘learning-practice’”. Sharimova (2025, p. 6) speaks of informal learning communities’ need for “connectedness, self-efficacy, knowledge sharing and receiving”; Shanks (2023, p. 598) speaks of an “informal turn” in professional learning; and Kathawalla & Mehta (2022, p. 610) discern

“a growing interest in the ‘human’ side of educational policy, with research beginning to recognise that actors throughout the education system need to be understood as human being possessing not only interests but also motivations, needs, and emotions.”

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Of additional interest was the body of thought extending from Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) through the Value-Creation Matrix (Wenger et al., 2011) to Communities of Practice Within Organisations (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023) in the evolution of Wenger's theorising on what he refers to as "the career of a concept" (Wenger, 2010), forming a bridge between the literature in the formal professional learning domain and that of the informal world of open networks and communities.

Literature was examined which pertained to the open world of the networks and communities in leaderless organisations, how technology enables them, and how this is making them increasingly open and democratic. The world of the personal or professional learning network (Rogers, 1962; Tobin, 1998; Siemens, 2005; Downes, 2007; Richardson, 2014) and communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Hord, 1997; Price, 2015; Uí Choistealbha, 2018; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023) was visited; in particular the recent work looking at the influence of PLNs in teachers' professional learning (Carpenter et al., 2022; Oddone, 2022). The theory of connectivism - as an enabler of network individuals operating in an informal, opportunistic way, using the modern "Fifth Estate" communication system of social media - is examined (Siemens, 2005; Dutton, 2007; Cormier, 2008; Bell, 2016). The increasing injection of democracy into the conference system was explored, beginning with Open Space Technology (Owen, 1987), continuing with the flattening of hierarchies (Raymond, 2000; Poe, 2006; Ferguson, 2016) and ending the increasing openness in education (Cronin, 2017).

Literature examined with direct reference to TeachMeet itself was far less prevalent; what was available, although written informally and published on social media, shed light on intent in formation and development (McIntosh, 2006; Connell, 2009; Barrett, 2010; Hallahan, 2010; Anderson, 2014). Online conversations examined suggested connection between the older formal CPD and this newcomer - talk of "best CPD ever", "my pln", "our CoP" (Amond et al., 2018; TeachMeet[Aus], 2014; Amond et al., 2020). More discursive reports quote participants' appreciation of how TeachMeet and other unconference formats inspire development of skills, professionalism, culture, and community (Walsh, 2011; Bennett, 2012; Tumelty et al., 2012; Doust, 2013; Jones, 2014; Carpenter et al., 2016; Trust et al., 2016; Engeness et al., 2019; Charles, 2021; Holme, 2021). Overall however, in most of the literature mentioning TeachMeet there was more reporting than reflecting; apart from Bennett (2012), whose critical framing of a then nascent TeachMeet phenomenon as "guerilla CPD" provided a bridge between the three domains of literature reviewed, and a foundation for the framing of this research. In turn, this paper builds on that work to offer a strong new contribution to critical academic literature on TeachMeet based on the experiences of those who bring it into being.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach, and method used, was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022) of semi-structured interviews (n.=15). IPA founder Smith (1996, p. 262) defined it as a "qualitative approach developed within psychology for the examination of personal lived experience". Smith et al. (2022, p. 21) characterise the process as an inductive, data driven procedure combining strong data, a purposive sample, an interpretative commentary with convergence and divergence, leading to the "unfurling of perspectives and meanings".

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Oxley (2016, p. 56) states that in IPA the “pre-existing knowledge and preconceptions of the researcher are always brought to the encounter with the phenomenon”. This underlines the value of the “double hermeneutic cycle” which Smith et al. (2022, p. 21) explain as “the phenomenon is hidden within the participants’ accounts until interpreted by the researcher’s own experience”. In this research, the interviewers are experienced in the world of TeachMeet. According to Noon (2018, p. 75), the two complementary commitments of IPA are giving voice and making sense. Nizza et al. (2021, p. 2) present and four markers of high quality in IPA as: qualities of trustworthiness, focus and depth, strong data and interpretation, engaging and enlightening the reader. They seek convergence and divergence that entail “a hermeneutic cycling between the part and the whole in analysis” (p. 9), and advise “a close focus on the specific words spoken by participants, on their linguistic choices and tone, and the imagery they evoke”, citing Smith et al. (2022):

“Good IPA is almost always about things of importance to people and those circumstances where they are prompted ... to reflect on what has happened in order to make sense of its meaning”

Research Design and Procedure

In order to capture the essence of TeachMeet, it was of paramount importance to document and analyse the points of view of the humans deeply involved at every level. As it had come into being relatively recently – 2006 – it made sense to capitalise on the opportunity to seek out those involved in founding and shaping TeachMeet, those who were committed to bring it to others and seeing it thrive, in order to find out what matters most to them in their experience with TeachMeet. The most common approach used in IPA research is the semi-structured interview (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022); this was the case in this research. Our research plan was to record experiences of informed insiders of the TeachMeet community (Kvale, 1983; deMarrais, 2004; Moser & Kortstjens, 2018). A purposive and criterion-based selection (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2013) was identified, fifteen in total. Primary criterion was that each interviewee selected must be experienced an TeachMeet organiser; secondary criterion was that interviewees could also be founders, pioneers, early adopters and adapters. In agreeing to be interviewed, each informant gave consent for their identity to be shared. The interview schedule was designed to combine a flexible structure (Bryman, 2012) with narrative inquiry interview (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

As for analysis, Kvale (1983, p. 180) reminds us that the final stage of an interview is when “this is interpreted by interviewer alone” ... “enriching and enlightening by drawing on an insider knowledge of the topic” and “getting to the spirit of what was said”. This was the case as the fifteen transcripts were subject to an IPA during which the researcher is the instrument of analysis. IPA a systematic method - our process followed the IPA stages outlined by Smith et al. (2022): a cycle of reading, making exploratory notes, developing themes and making connections between them, detecting cross-case patterns, and generating the most potent themes. This research maintained the Braun and Clark (2021, p. 41) profile of IPA as a detailed focus on the analysis of each case for developing themes across cases, “going analytically much deeper with each data item before taking an overall schematic orientation to develop themes across the set; each transcript is analysed in full, sequentially, and analytic notes are ideally recorded on the transcripts themselves”.

The IPA process resulted in the generation of experiential themes interpreted as being of deepest concern within and across the interview transcripts. A lot of Personal Experiential Themes

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(PETs) are generated during line-by-line analysis of each transcript; each PET is the analyst's interpretation of the interviewee's words. Group Experiential Themes (GETs) refer to the most potent concerns detected in the PETS during cross-case analysis. Presentation of the interpretative analysis becomes a balance between the descriptive and interpretative voices of the researcher who narrates both the individual and the collective lived experiences of the TeachMeet phenomenon.

FINDINGS

The IPA process identified four GETs across the experiences recounted by the fifteen interviewees, each with several component PETs. The most potent matters of concern pertained to **personal**, **purposeful**, **the practical**, and **political** experiences that show the power of TeachMeet. A master table of these four GETs and their respective PETs is presented as Table 1.

Group Experiential Themes (GET)	Personal Experiential Themes (PET)
<p>A. TeachMeet is PERSONAL</p> <p>On personal, interpersonal, and social matters in TeachMeet</p> <p><i>The essence is they're your peers, people just like you</i></p>	<p>i. Evolving social, community, and personal networks <i>Learning is a communal process</i></p> <p>ii. Convivial group interaction at events, skilfully mediated, is appreciated <i>An MC who can join the dots, put people at ease, give time out</i></p> <p>iii. Encouragement from others is formative <i>Come along, this is how it works ... come along ready to give a talk</i></p> <p>iv. Effect of individual encounters <i>The energy, passion in her voice still resonates with me now</i></p>
<p>B. TeachMeet is PURPOSEFUL</p> <p>On being driven to engage with TeachMeet with intent, for a purpose</p> <p><i>Give something a proper name, it becomes a thing</i></p>	<p>i. Doing the Thing Right - countering discontent with CPD <i>A lot of CPD you go in, sit down, listen to somebody, you leave</i></p> <p>ii. Do the Right Thing - a moral responsibility to act <i>It's more an 'I'm doing something right' kind of thing</i></p> <p>iii. Make the Path by Walking - form and follow desire lines <i>A lot of people went away, organised their own elsewhere afterwards</i></p> <p>iv. Pioneers, innovators, early adopters - don't wait for permission <i>To make people think about stuff that they don't think about</i></p>
<p>C. TeachMeet is PRACTICAL</p> <p>On the sharing of practice at TeachMeet</p> <p><i>I came out buzzing - it changed how I thought about teaching</i></p>	<p>i. Spreagadh: a spark that ignites transformation <i>See it, like it, bring it back to the classroom</i></p> <p>ii. The Bazaar - what's there and not there in the mix <i>No keynote, everybody equal, everybody's voice recognized</i></p> <p>iii. The Black Box - a glimpse into another classroom <i>To be able to say to others, look, I'm trying this, what do you reckon?</i></p>
<p>D. TeachMeet is POLITICAL</p> <p>On the future for TeachMeet</p> <p><i>Nobody owns TeachMeet, it's the community</i></p>	<p>i. Yes Please – to keeping it simple and non-hierarchical <i>a face to face, open process</i></p> <p>ii. No Thanks - avoid commercialisation and appropriation <i>If it's not 'for teachers by teachers', it's not TeachMeet, it's something else</i></p> <p>iii. Maybe - evolving a niche in a professional learning landscape <i>We need to make sure that it remains as democratic as it needs to be</i></p>

Table 1. *Group Experiential Themes & Personal Experiential Themes from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of interviews (n. = 15) with Teachmeet organisers. Text in italics denotes verbatim extracts from transcript.*

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Verbatim extracts from interviewees are presented in italics within the text; the analysis we present here is a representation of the collective lived experiences of TeachMeet participants.

Group Experiential Theme A: TeachMeet is Personal

The first group theme generated showed the central object of concern to be the person, and how they have been affected on different levels by their experience of TeachMeet. For all of the interviewees, TeachMeet was as much about the people involved as it was about the events ... *it's more 'people meet' than 'content meet'; the power of the thing is in the people.* Four PETs within this show how a profound lasting effect of TeachMeet on social and group relationships, interpersonal and internal relationships between and within participants.

Evolving Social, Community, and Personal Networks

Often via social media, three elements intertwine at the social level of TeachMeet - appreciation of TeachMeet as community; connections formed in personal learning networks (PLN); and a close relationship of TeachMeet to Twitter.

When teachers hear each other's stories it fosters a sense of community, building mutual trust and competence ... *a community of people who laugh, cry, clap at that moment; ... fostering self-determined sourcing and provision of their own CPD.* Factors in how individuals develop a sense of worth are the mutual support found in a PLN, and connections within the network ... *I started to make networks and connections with people; ... introduced me many people and opportunities, helping me cultivate and curate and find my voice in teaching.* Twitter is identified as becoming a space for TeachMeet discourse. This close relationship between Twitter and Teachmeet was referenced as being *intertwined* and *symbiotic*, a *two-way street*. Some recall finding Twitter via TeachMeet, and vice-versa ... *at my first TeachMeet, I joined Twitter; ... TeachMeet was a chance to meet some face to face with Twitter people.*

Convivial Group Interaction at Events, and Skilful Mediation, is Appreciated

This theme reflects the social setting; the opportunity for sharing in groups; and the role of the MC in facilitating both.

Descriptions of TeachMeet as *convivial*, *round table*, *open*, *exciting forum*, and *organic...like mates in the pub* revealed the essence of the thing for many. Informal flexible seating arrangement is important, allowing *physical permission to be opposite or beside each other to chat*. This social setting sets TeachMeet apart from traditional CPD events ... *the cup of tea at the back of the room is key because it evolves into conversations.* The opportunity to share with a group may have a transformational effect on others present ... *people are keen to help each other; ... so much that it's contagious; ... and if you can bring that into your school, it's really good.* The role of MC is described as central:

... one who can join the dots ... the connector ... who needs more than a tolerance for chaos. The ability to read the room is important, because you have to trust your presenters, trust your audience; ... I think of it as a form of radical democracy in that I don't really know who is speaking; ... a good MC is one who is allowing freedom of participation.

Encouragement from Professional Mentors, Colleagues, Peers is Formative

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Professional relationships are acknowledged as instances which help individuals prosper - appreciation is expressed experiences of the formative effect of both mentor - mentee relationships, and interactions with professional peers. Encouragement from a mentor, and being an encouraging mentor to others, was for many a deciding factor in decisions to become involved in TeachMeet ... *it was a conversation with a mentor of mine ... have you thought about speaking?* This support and trust from more experienced colleagues was cited as impactful by all – the common thread is that of being encouraged to *get on with it*. Peer-to-peer interaction, depicted as *the hunger to be together and have the chats* is seen as *the essence ... if this is missing, the purpose is defeated*. Validation and appreciation from one's peers had impact ... *teachers love validation, love being told you're doing well; you don't always get that in the classroom*.

Close Encounters of a Personal Kind Matter

The lasting effect of profound personal experiences generated experiential statements telling of impactful moments and inspiring people that made a lasting impressions; and there was a personal focus on the affective experience of being a TeachMeet MC.

The lasting effect of individuals encountered at TeachMeet was cited as influential; individuals who had each made deep impressions were repeatedly mentioned by name ... *they had a positive, meaningful, powerful impact on my life, professional as well as personal*. There were dramatic descriptions of feelings at the end of 'first night' TeachMeets ... *relief, exhaustion, elation and excitement and a desire to do a lot more of this ... such an emotional high; I wanted to ensure we wouldn't lose the momentum we had tapped into that night*". Many describe the intensity of being the MC at a TeachMeet ... *I'd put all my concentration on the people in the room, their comfort, their inclusion; ... from a logistical standpoint, it was very nerve-wracking, really hard work ... I enjoy it, but it is exhausting*.

Group Experiential Theme B: TeachMeet is Purposeful

This group theme encompasses four PETs, the reasons that compel someone to become a TeachMeet organiser. Some seek to are counter discontent with CPD experiences; some feel a feeling of moral imperative to do whatever it is they can; some are following 'desire lines'; some are acting on a pioneering spirit of innovation.

Do the Thing Right - Acting to Counter Discontent with CPD Experiences

Obvious across all conversations was disappointment with past and present CPD encountered, and a wish to engage in TeachMeet as an alternative. The traditional mindset provides and controls 'official' CPD delivery both outside and within schools was seen as a barrier by many. Current CPD sessions are viewed as lagging behind ... *the problem is a mindset of PD stuck in the 80s and 90s ... if you go to PD, it's an all-day session ... we can't get out of that mindset*. Patience with many providers was wearing thin ... *I was fed up with the top-down stuff done*. Unsatisfactory CPD sessions were criticised as passive ... *nobody wants to be sitting looking at someone talking there for hours ... it's just very frustrating*.

Do the Right Thing: Acting from a Moral Imperative

This theme is about actions taken, recognition of individual moral responses, taking risks and reaping benefits, and of everything being voluntary. ... *it's more an 'I'm doing something right' kind of thing*.

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There is a belief that teachers giving up their time to take part in TeachMeet deserve to be served with the best experience possible ... *I left the TeachMeet full of my buzz and energy and excitement, and I felt there was a nugget there of something I could do to really get this going, because I wanted to do it right.*

Taking a calculated risk, after discussion with like-minded others, in response to a perceived need or for the greater good, was a feature of introducing TeachMeet to territories where it was a new concept, as witnessed ... *we probably were trying to avoid doing something that was safe; we were trying to be risky ... push boundaries ... take a leap in the dark. We had no idea if this was going to work or not.*

The transformative benefits within a school that has taken the step of adopting TeachMeet as the in-house CPD model for technology training was described ... *people are discovering things themselves ... and feel a bit more empowered and confident and relevant ... so I think the experience of having TeachMeet has led to our staff being open to that kind of learning ... from all the TeachMeet experiences... it totally transformed my idea of what CPD can be and should be.*

The volunteer disposition is seen as a vital feature ... *it is voluntary, always is, you have to want to be there... those who are there choose to be there.*

Making the Path by Walking: Forming and Following Desire Lines

This theme was of experiencing a TeachMeet and leaving with a fervent desire not only to have this experience again soon but to replicate it in other places, and to introduce it to others.

In practical terms, people recounted how they decided to carve out their own opportunities to showcase new voices in new places, to facilitate sharing among colleagues ... *it was really a great experience and I wished somehow that I could replicate that to instil the agency and the capacity to share ... that night, sitting there getting more excited by the energy and positivity in the room - that was the spark.*

Many who described a *vividly, exciting, amazing, blast of positive energy*, spoke of taking the next possible opportunity to replicate it, modelling it on what they had experienced ... *I felt that I wanted to do this, and I knew I could do this; ... it's time to give this a go.* Not just to repeat the experience for oneself, but out of a sense of responsibility that having found something 'good' they were morally bound to find a way to get it to others.

Don't Wait for Permission: being Pioneers, Innovators, and Early Adopters

A thread that ran through some of the interviews spoke particularly of purpose as it drove the early days of TeachMeet.

A shared vision of individuals trying to advance their practice by seeking the company of other innovators ... *people helping each other out with bits of technology ... the ones that are reading teaching books in their holidays, reading research, writing articles, blogs, podcasts, making videos, really investing their personal and professional time in teaching. So having a TeachMeet just felt like 'there's more of me out there'. And to get us all in one room and to share a meal afterwards was a really, really good thing.*

These were people who were not going to wait for anyone's permission to proceed with their plans and purpose ... *I had zero permission.*

Group Experiential Theme C: TeachMeet is Practical

This group theme centres on the practical matters of TeachMeet, which generated three Personal Experiential Themes – descriptions of the catalytic and transformational effect of encounters in the marketplace-like events attended and organised; the sharing of ideas, resources, ways of teaching; and the appreciation of a chance to glimpse into the black box of another classroom.

Spreagadh: The Spark That Ignites Transformation

There was a stress on the fact it is not just ‘show and tell’ that matters at a TeachMeet, it is a brief demonstration of something by one teacher for colleagues, followed by a discussion of possibilities and merits ... *this is beyond tips and tricks ... this is something that's transformed my classroom ... take a look.*

It is very much about how these brief encounters can act as a spark to ignite or inspire a passion ... *when the audience has an ‘aha moment’ ... you see the whole room leaning forward on their seats; ... They don't want to be sitting down for three hours learning something, they want the basic introduction, a spreagadh ... it inspires them ... gives them an avenue in; they've seen it, they like it, they'll bring it into their classroom.* The word spreagadh used here (pronounced spra-guh) translates from the Irish language as ‘urging, incitement; incentive, encouragement; excitation, stimulus’ (Teaglann.ie nd).

There was a vein rich with appreciation for how these practical experiences could have a long-lasting transformative effect and change in demeanour of those incorporating TeachMeet into their professional development ... *My first TeachMeets? I came out buzzing with 100 different ideas ... they changed how I thought about teaching; ... the amount of ideas and resources that I was able to bring into my own teaching, which was the whole point of the exercise in the first place; ... professionally, it probably changed me; ... really changed my practice.*

The Bazaar: the Atmosphere, What's There (and What's Not There)

This experiential theme was about the unique feel of a TeachMeet event - the atmosphere, the mix, and the variety of what is there, and (conversely) the naming of what is not there.

The atmosphere was described in terms of the welcome, the dynamic supportive space, and was stressed as important for organisers to work towards ... *key to any good TeachMeet is the energy of the room ...for people who are not used to standing up and talking about what they're passionate about, you want to create a safe zone.* Although the importance of the role of the MC has been highlighted already, it is noted again as being vital to creating and nurturing this atmosphere... *someone who thanks you for coming along, that human touch ... welcoming people into the space and making them feel that they're welcome.*

The ‘mix’ in the room - the wide career experience of those participating; the range of schools represented in the room; the variety of content and method in the presentations - was appreciated as a signature elements of a TeachMeet event ... *the thing that impacted on me was the variety; you hear from people from different backgrounds, different schools, different settings, even different industries sometimes.*

What is NOT to be seen in a TeachMeet setting is also deemed important. It came down to the absence of three things ... *no keynotes ... no vested interest ... no set agenda or sequence.*

The Black Box: Glimpses into Another's Classroom

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Repeatedly described are the concrete active elements that give TeachMeet life for participants: the exchange of ideas, the modelling for each other of ways of teaching, the black box effect of the glimpse into another teacher's classroom.

The exchange of ideas was stressed as a two-way *non-judgemental* barter, each contributing and benefitting, and was repeatedly described as a very dynamic characteristic element ... *and it's not just about who's in front of you ... I'm sitting beside you, so I can turn to you and ... it's those kinds of conversation starter ideas that I think are really the guts of a good TeachMeet.* Seeing someone else describe or demonstrate what they do, and learning from that, is appreciated as a *generous gift to others* at the TeachMeet, and is valued on several levels, from the effect it has had on seasoned teachers to the potential it has for future teachers.

Getting serial random glimpses into another teacher's classrooms is a universal deeply satisfying element of being there ... *giving a platform for teachers to share work-in-progress, not finished or polished, that's actually going on in the classroom, that they've come up with; ... sharing hard-won knowledge of what works in the classroom, in a non-official setting with peers; for me that's the essence of TeachMeet.*

Group Experiential Theme D: TeachMeet is Political

This theme focus on matters political encompasses both opinions on what TeachMeet is and isn't, and ideation about how the future might play out. This interpretation uses the most primitive equivalence of the word political - conveying the concerns of community, of citizenry. Three strong PETs were here - the 'Yes Please!, these things belong in TeachMeet'; the 'No Thanks!, these things have no place in TeachMeet'; and the 'Perhaps?', these are things that may evolve in the future of TeachMeet'.

Keep It Simple and Non-Hierarchical

This theme includes characteristics the interviewees considered fundamental, those they consider must be maintained in a *simple, non-hierarchical* TeachMeet - the *unconference values* of being *open, inviting, and inclusive*. The main thrust here was for keeping the organisational structures flat ... *democratic teacher voice, distributed leadership, equality of voices ... nobody owns TeachMeet, it's the community.* The open invitation is key ... *it should be an open call ... anyone putting themselves forward to speak deserves a hearing.* Above all, interviewees' preference was for keeping TeachMeet simple ... *the smaller they are, I think, the better they are.*

Avoid Commercialisation and Appropriation

This is a theme of determination to protect the integrity of TeachMeet by resisting commercialisation and appropriation.

There is vehement collective resistance to any *counter to concept* commercialisation; one exception being altruistic *values based* corporate support which may be intrinsic in making a TeachMeet viable ... *a sponsor shouldn't be allowed to pitch; ... keep it uncontaminated by sponsorship.* However, positive effects of successful sponsorship that are pointed out by those with experience of it working well; companies that want to sponsor should understand what they are sponsoring is and the essence of why it's valuable ... *the best sponsors are those who back off and having their names associated with the event is good enough.*

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This theme also voiced annoyance at any appropriation of the name and concept of TeachMeet - in particular those using the name while changing the format ... *the problem with anything open-source, with no ownership, is that someone may come along and take it; ... companies have tried to take it over as something that they're doing themselves ... saying 'we're having a TeachMeet and this keynote is speaking'.*

There is unease about events when intentions do not align with values ... *Why call it a TeachMeet when it is not? Why not be more inventive, call it something someone else?; ... TeachMeets organised by those who haven't done many TeachMeets tend to be stage shows rather than curated conversations; ... Once it becomes too slick, too organised, you're diluting it, and I don't know if it deserves the title TeachMeet, it's just another conference; ... the line was always 'for teachers, by teachers'. Once it moves away from those four words, it's not for teachers or by teachers, then what is it? It's not TeachMeet, it's something else.*

An evolving niche in a professional learning landscape

The themes here concerned the present and future direction of TeachMeet; a possible niche of TeachMeet within CPD; and the reaction to the move to online events during the Covid-19 pandemic (W.H.O., 2020).

There was agreement that evolution is inevitable, and that it was well under way ... *There's now more than one type of TeachMeet ... different ways of doing, thinking, and being.* Divergent views emerged as to whether TeachMeet qualifies as CPD, despite its growing appearance within learning spaces ... *TeachMeet is a funny type of CPD. It's throwing the candy shop at you, and you decide which candy to have; it's up to your professionalism to follow up afterwards ... it's not a deep level of CPD, but to me CPD is a spectrum ... I definitely feel TeachMeet fits - it ignites and keeps going a hunger for learning.*

But the caveat alongside any idea of adapting TeachMeet within the realm of CPD was that stress would be laid on *keeping TeachMeet as we know it ... I'm worried a move into more formal planning spaces might exclude people; ... we tried to be as flexible as we could whilst also being true to what TeachMeet is, to make it work; there's so much merit to the informality; ... we need to ensure that it remains democratic.*

The final matter here concerned the sudden move of TeachMeet events to online platforms during the pandemic of 2020. One matter of note was the balance between *missing the social contact* and *the wider reach*, the same factors being seen as both positive and negative ... *the vibe of a good TeachMeet is in conversations afterwards; you can't do that as effectively online. But online pulls in people from all over the world! ... if online become the only way to congregate and share - then so be it; but for me it will always be a holding action against a return to something more human, hands across the table.*

Whether it be face to face or online or, the pragmatic wish for TeachMeet future was ... *it's up to the wisdom of the crowd to decide.*

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the nature, niche, and essence of TeachMeet by listening to the stories and perspectives of participants. We discuss the findings in light of how they resolve and substantiate this research aim, how they reflect the literature reviewed, and how they deepen knowledge and understanding of the TeachMeet phenomenon.

Significant in the findings is how they show TeachMeet to be ‘exactly what it says on the tin’, living up to the name chosen for it. Teachers meet, and they teach each other, in a meeting that is social, open, and humble. Humble in that there is no hierarchy, no agenda other than that set by the participants. The name is new; the concept isn’t. TeachMeet is novel and has been framed as radical, in that “the intent is to provide teachers with a forum for sharing their practices outside of the classroom without the structures of normal staff development” (Bennett, 2012), but it is not new. Co-founder Ewan McIntosh reminds us that *teachers have always done this ... snuck away from professional development for a quick pint... talk about amazing stuff kids achieved that week, think 'I'm going to try that next week' ... they've always shared ideas. It's nothing new in some ways, but it was legitimising it ... if you give something a proper name, it becomes a thing.*

The findings of the IPA reveal a potency in TeachMeet which resides in the personal, purposeful, practical, and political impact that the experience to date has had on participants as individuals and as a collective. At a personal level, teachers are encouraged by peers and mentors, bringing ideas back to their classrooms because of inspiring stories told by other teachers. Collectively, participants appreciate becoming part of a dynamic network or community; Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023, p. 16) refer to this as “commitment to collective progress in practice”. In terms of purpose, direct actions taken with intent – deliberately seeking to improve as teachers, improve professional learning, provide opportunities to peers to gather at a collaborative, informative, and fun event where ideas on practice are exchanged. At a practical level, open exchange and discussion of knowledge, ideas, and resources among teachers can only be of benefit, and in some cases the resulting *spreagadh* or spark can be transformation. And in political terms, those who realise the potential of TeachMeet have a determination to both preserve the intended integrity of TeachMeet, encouraging others to adopt and adapt it into the future, ensuring it remains simple, social, and independent.

The findings confirm that TeachMeet is no ‘flash in the pan’ - it has its evolutionary roots in the Open Space Technology unconference world (Owen, 1987). The experiential statements in all the interviews are imbued with the two fundamentals of OST – “passion and responsibility” (Owen, 1997, p. 27). There is significance in the trust expressed for openness, informality, and freedom in TeachMeets. The open and random nature of TeachMeet events evokes a playfulness in social learning as suggested by Price (2015), the balance between chaos and order (Owen, 2004) for which Hock coined the term chaordic (1999), and the “living, self-governed structures that thrive on the passion and care the members bring to their engagement” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 65). It is significant also that many attend TeachMeet for the company as much as for the content. The appreciation for the ‘freedom to roam’ during events implies that relaxation of a ‘one size fits all’ approach might increase motivation and engagement in formal CPD - as suggested in Korthagen (2017), O’Sullivan et al., (2016), Murchan et al., (2009), and others.

Significantly, these findings show two main motivations that prompted organisers to take action by arranging more TeachMeets: to counter disappointment with their current CPD, and their desire to provide opportunity for others to have TeachMeet experience as they’d had. This attitude of ‘do something about it’ suggests an agency of enactment which Barad (2007) ascribes to those who take action in translating ideas into reality. It is important to note that alongside each response that recounted negative experiences of CPD, there was in addition an imperative to reverse this by providing opportunities for a better experiences in the future. This

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“giving back” was listed in an Australian Community Review (TeachMeet[AUS], 2014) as a long-term consequences of TeachMeet; this reflects the Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023, 19) consideration that personal experience of agency strengthens identification within a community and “transforms local innovations into widespread yet locally adapted practices”. A desire to bring innovative ideas to peers, to develop a self-directed model professional learning without waiting for permission from others, and to improve current provision of CPD reflects the responses to a previous Participant Impact Survey, reported in Amond et al., (2020), that showed a domino effect impact on the respondents’ teaching community - having experienced a TeachMeet, the reaction of many was to organise more TeachMeets.

Findings showed that signature elements that give life to the TeachMeet event - the catalytic facilitation by an agile MC, the convivial atmosphere which echo the Open Space Technology unconference format (Amond et al. 2024; Owen 1987; McIntosh 2007; Bennett 2012; Carpenter et al. 2018) – to be linked with those appreciated by participants for the effect they have had on their practice. In particular, the *spreagadh* or impetus of the nanopresentation - the brief glimpse into a peer’s classroom - is highlighted as an example of the effect of professional development and learning most highly valued by global experts (Guskey, 2002; Kennedy, 2005; Desimone, 2009; Webster-Wright, 2009; Wenger et al., 2011), that of being transformative.

Implications

In the findings it is clear that the need to commune with like-minded others can bring a community together at a TeachMeet; there is less clarity about what holds the network together after and in between events, in the absence of formal structures. Rogers (1962) calls it the weak ties that drive diffusion of innovations; Siemens (2005) calls it the weak ties between nodes in a network. Granovetter (1973) theorises on the strength of weak ties that form bridges in loose-knit networks. Inside Granovetter’s theory, there are two ideas that might shed light on the complexity of TeachMeet - an “emotional intensity” and a “sense of community”, each of which is strongly evident in the findings. Participant stories are infused with emotional intensity, “maybe even quasi-religious in fervour” (Parkin, in Anderson, 2013); people speak of *passion* ... “people lighting up when they talk about what they do” (Amond et al., 2020). Granovetter says of the sense of community being activated at meetings that “maintenance of weak ties may well be the most important consequence of such meetings” (1973, p. 1336). Staying connected to each other using social media was central to the findings ... an almost symbiotic relationship between Twitter and TeachMeet is a strong experiential themes interpreted in the interview analysis. As social media fractures, the certainty of the strength of weak ties may become uncertain and may call for remedial action within the community.

Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023, p.16) tell us that a community “evolves until it is no longer relevant”. The findings of this research clearly imply that experienced participants perceive TeachMeet to be still evolving, which leaves scope for realisation of the potential and relevance within it; it could remain exactly as it is now for those who appreciate that, but could be taken further by those who expressed desire to do so. Revealed alongside this is a dilemma borne of tensions between desires to optimise TeachMeet’s positive impact to date and anxieties about dilution or devolution of future practice in TeachMeets.

Both of these issues - the uncertainty creeping into social communications, and the dilemma about the profile of events - will have implications for the grassroots organisers and participants taking TeachMeet into its twentieth year and beyond.

Recommendations

We make two recommendations based on needs identified during the research. The first is a specific recommendation to extend this research into the TeachMeet phenomenon. This report is limited to fifteen interviewees from four countries, albeit each of them an experienced key informant; other insights from across the global TeachMeet community should be sought to substantiate these findings and share further knowledge based on experience. The second is a more general recommendation, borne of the visible imbalance in the literature which leans very much in favour of studies of formal provision over informal; more academic research, from participants' points of view, should include and consider the informal aspects of the participant-driven professional development in education that TeachMeet represents. Uptake of each of these recommendations would inform those responsible for policy, planning of professional learning with more insight to the perspective of the participants for whom they provide. We offer this paper as a first contribution towards both.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that according to those with experience of TeachMeet – a social phenomenon situated at informal intersections in teacher learning – it is evolving through participant agency enacting desires reflecting their political, practical, purposeful, and personal experience of TeachMeet. The deep impact of personal experiences has developed relationships that have built growing communities and networks. Purposeful actions have been driven by a moral imperative to do whatever is possible to do, and also to counter discontent with formally provided learning experiences. Practical aspects that are appreciated are the chance to see into the black box of another's classroom, the exchanging of knowledge, and the transformation that an inspiration *spreagadh* or spark may bring about. Political ideation centres on the twin resolutions that events must remain simple, non-hierarchical and any commercialisation or appropriation must be resisted whilst also acknowledging the risks and benefits of possible evolved future role in professional learning for TeachMeet.

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