A Series of Action Research Case Studies to Examine Strategies to Build and Maintain a Community of Practice for Pre-service Teacher Trainees on Practicum

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
This study was an action research exploration of the online virtual learning environment as a vehicle for developing the reflective practice of pre-service ESOL teacher trainees during practicum. The research occurred at the Institute of Education in Hong Kong, where this researcher worked as a Senior Teaching Fellow and practicum supervisor. Papers from the study have been published previously (2012, a, b, c). The particular focus of this presentation is on one of the study’s aspects, which is the strategies that were employed to initiate and develop the online communities of practice. This was found to be an essential pre-requisite to developing reflective capabilities online as each case study had a duration of only eight weeks (the length of practicum). It was thus an area where participants could verbalize their experiences openly, seek critical responses and share advice with each other. Findings suggest that online communities are able to develop effectively when a systematic core set of strategies exploiting the collaborative and asynchronous nature of the online environment are implemented. These strategies will be presented, analyzed and laid open for discussion.

Literature Review

VLEs and Online Learning
As knowledge is a socially-constructed phenomenon, the online virtual environment, with its inherent social and collaborative characteristics, can be seen to be a useful tool in developing focused content-based discussions. However, two caveats should be emphasized; the first is that if participants are communicating online in this way for the first time, as in this context, they may need instruction as to the nature of the tenor of the online discourse required (see Gee, 2004; Clarke, 2009); they may also lack the ability to project online social presence (Bibeau, 2001; Garrison, 1997; Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997). Without these skills, as Wang and Newlin’s (2002: 21) study suggests, intrinsic motivation and learner satisfaction online could dwindle as the forums age. The second caveat is that it is considered that a significant volume of postings should have been uploaded, shared and the content manipulated before an online community can mature (see Murillo, 2002, 2008). The communities for this research could be referred to as ‘task-based COPs’ as they joined for a very limited time. Thus, the need to develop reciprocity and produce constructed meanings quickly was essential. Given the two caveats raised, the role of the online moderator is of paramount importance, and a great deal of research on the role of the tutor in online moderation has been published (Jones & Peachey, 2005; Laurillard, 2007; Laurillard, 2007, Laurillard et al, 2009; Lewis & Allen, 2006; Salmon, 2000, 2004; Wenger, 1998). This research will present empirical data on two important aspects of managing an online environment: the first is how the COPs were set up; the second, how they were maintained.
The Study
A collective case study approach was adopted for the research methodology. All three case studies were self-study action research projects (for more on this see in particular Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Burns, 1999; Edge, 2001; Edge & Richards, 1993; Greenwood & Levin, 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998; Nunan, 2005). The research involved three 8-week case studies with 24 student teachers (8 participants per case study). Applying action research methodology, the research objective was to analyze what is needed (if anything) in terms of e-moderator practice in order to set up and maintain an effective online environment which promotes collaborative learning. The participants were unfamiliar with each other and unknown to this researcher at the beginning of the study. Each case study consisted of eight third-year participants of a four-year BEd (EL) degree from both Hong Kong and mainland China. There was a mix of male and female students aged between 20 and 25. Using personal journal and research observational notes, data and findings were recorded during and after each case study. These were compared and differences noted. By the third case study, the models and strategies discovered to be effective had been trialed and refined at least once. The forums were limited access. It was felt that this was preferable due to the desire to open a close-knit collective through which participants could grow mutual respect and trust in order to express themselves openly and honestly.

Results
These are divided into two elements. The first is ‘initiating an online learning community’; the second, ‘maintaining an online learning community’.

i. Part 1
As part of the first section, four activities along with participant postings and research notes will be presented. These activities have been constructed to form what has been termed the ‘developing online awareness model’ shown below as figure 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: Ranking activity</th>
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<td>Step 2: Discussion on ranking</td>
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<td>Step 3: Socialization activity</td>
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<td>Step 4: Find a similarity</td>
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Figure 1: ‘developing online awareness model’.

The activities will be presented with data from the three case studies. Briefly, the first activity required participants to rank four statements:

A. I am able to learn by writing about my thoughts and experiences on the discussion forum;

B. I can learn from others’ responses to my thoughts;

C. It is beneficial to upload and share lesson plans and teaching material;

D. I am able to learn by reading about the others’ thoughts and experiences.
These were then discussed asynchronously. The third activity was the sharing of personal information. This task was left completely open for trainees to choose the content of their postings. This was then followed up with an activity entitled ‘find a similarity’. This required learners to skim through the forums constructed by this stage and to study the threads to find as many commonalities with the other participants as possible and to acknowledge these. In addition to building of the community at these initial stages, this activity was designed to train participants to navigate through the forum to find threads effectively.

ii. Part 2
The results from the second section pertain to the stage when the initial part of the cycle has been surpassed and the COP is actively constructing new meanings through dialectical processes. Due to a busy schedule during practicum, it was observed that a lull in participant motivation may occur, and discussion relating to peers’ postings became less regular; some participants ceased logging on. To deal with this, strategies were developed which could inform participants about what the forums were doing. This way, it was guaranteed that even if they were too busy to log on during the week, they would not fall behind and would therefore be able to follow the threads when they found the time to do so. Two types of collage were created, each depicting snapshots of forum events. The first is a snapshot of each participant’s week providing the postings carrying the most content of their discussions during the week. The second is a snapshot of one of the week’s main topics of discussion. These will be presented along with participant postings. The models can be seen below in figures 2 and 3:

Figure 2: collage 1.

![Diagram showing the process of creating and publishing a collage in the COP context.](image-url)
Conclusion
The findings reflect other studies in this field (Clarke, 2009) that posit that online teacher education programmes need to engender a participant-awareness of online discourse and communication strategies. Thus, despite the number of e-enabled teacher education programmes, participants benefit from being explicitly informed about the positivity of working together in an online, asynchronous environment. In addition, actively building relationships at the outset through e-moderator strategies is essential, particularly if the site is a short-term community. This supports Skinner (2009), who argues the need for a ‘spark’ which ‘fires’ interaction, and Downing et al. (2007), Jones & Peachey (2005), whose findings suggest that more challenging tasks rather than mere socialization or ‘greet and meet’ type activities can increase the use of the discussion forums. In addition, maintaining an online learning community by summarizing the content of its postings, either by offering a snapshot of the discussion themes or of each participant’s weekly communications, and informing absent or less active participants about this content, can very much help sustain the use and even lead to the growth of the learning community.
References


