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Under co-construction: An online community of practice for bilingual pre-service teachers



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ABSTRACT

With the advent of information and communication technologies, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a new medium for discursive interaction among learners in the classroom. In particular, an important extension of situated learning theory and community of practice for web-based communities has been a rapidly growing interest among researchers who are interested in how people socialize themselves into a discourse community in the online environment and how they use language to construct group affiliations and social identities. Using membership categorization analysis, this study aims to present the fine-grained details of participants' situated categorization practices in an online community of practice for bilingual pre-service teachers. Findings show how bilingual pre-service teachers utilized community-building features of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire proposed by Wenger's (1998) community of practice framework. Ultimately, this study argues for creating an online community of practice for culturally and linguistically diverse pre-service teachers that allows the use of multiple varieties of language, including their heritage language.

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1. Introduction

With the advent of information and communication technologies, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a new medium for discursive interaction among learners in and out of the classroom. In particular, an important extension of situated learning theory and community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) for online learning communities has been a rapidly growing interest among researchers who are interested in how people position themselves in an online community and how they use language to construct group affiliations and social identities (Clarke, 2009; Doering & Beach, 2002; Goos & Bennison, 2002; Gray, 2004; Lapadat, 2003; Poole, 2000; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Sengupta, 2001). CMC technologies, including the Internet, may afford an alternative medium for learning and student participation. By avoiding or mitigating some of face-to-face class discussion constraints, such as “linearity and ephemerality of spoken language in real-time; teacher domination of the discourse; competition of the floor” (Lapadat, 2003, p.22), CMC environments may “enhance social and intellectual connectivities” (Harashim, 1990, p.39) within a community of practice. For example, English (2007) suggested that online discussion would help the “silent student” feel “less threatened” (p. 59) to speak up in an online environment. Further, research on CMC has shown that CMC exhibits certain characteristics of both written and spoken communication and other features unique to the computer medium (Collot & Belmore, 1996; Herring, 2013; Yates, 1996). CMC, for example, contains its own forms of

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salutation and greetings and its special uses of abbreviations and symbols (Drayton & Falk, 2003; Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000; Werry, 1996). Furthermore, differences exist even within CMC. Participant structure in an asynchronous discussion bulletin board has different characteristics from a synchronous multi-party conversation (e.g., real-time live chat). Turn-taking and related behaviors (Sacks, 1992) are not relevant in this case as the technical make-up of the discussion forum shows that overlap is impossible in the asynchronous CMC structure. In the section to follow, I discuss a community of practice as a conceptual framework for the study (Section 2). Then, more specifically, I present how online communities for pre-service teachers have been discussed in the literature (Section 2.1). Section 3 contains research questions that guided the study. Section 4 describes the research site and participants. Section 5 discusses the data collection and analysis. Section 6 presents the findings of the study and Section 7 concludes the paper with implications of the study in teacher education, both pedagogically and methodologically.

2. Community of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) construct of a community of practice (CoP) is highly relevant in examining what kind of community pre-service teachers build via CMC. A community of practice refers to “a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavor and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them” (Wenger, 2001, p.1). The assumption is that communal activity is vital for pre-service teacher training to increase teacher professionalism. Based on social theory of learning, CoP defines community not in terms of pre-determined social categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, but in terms of mutual social interaction and shared goals. As such, CoP members experience “a constant becoming” thereby constructing identities through “the interaction of multiple convergent and divergent trajectories” (Wenger, 1998, p. 154). Wenger (1998) further describes three dimensions of community building: *mutual engagement*, *a joint enterprise*, and *shared repertoire*. Mutual engagement refers to negotiated objects of attention and action in a community of people; a joint enterprise entails common goals through interaction within a community; and shared repertoire includes a set of routines, words, instruments, genre, or concepts that the community has produced in the course of its existence. Communities of practice have multiple levels and types of participation in that at any one time members may be central participants in one community, but peripheral participants in another. Even within one community of practice, members can move back and forth between the core and the periphery depending on the social context in which they are situated (Morita, 2004). Following the CoP framework, I view people's identities as continuously in the process of being constructed because the members of academic communities learn to engage in different sets of practices and envision themselves on different possible trajectories. Thus, my conceptualization of categories and identities of participants in this study is inevitably multifaceted, complex, situational, and dynamic (Cho, 2014).

2.1. Online communities of practice for pre-service teachers

Among many types and functions of online communities, I briefly review ones designed for pre-service teachers' professional development in this section as this study focuses on membership categories manifested in a community of practice constructed by bilingual preservice teachers. A growing number of CMC studies have investigated personal behaviors and group interactions among preservice teachers (e.g., Barab, Makinster, & Scheckler, 2004; Groenke, 2008; Groenke & Paulus, 2008; Justice et al., 2013; Tømte, Enochsson, Buskqvist, & Kårstein, 2015). Doering and Beach (2002) analyzed the uses of various technologies, including WebCT,¹ to enhance literacy practices in a multi-genre writing project involving pre-service English teachers and middle school students in Minnesota. Their thematic analysis of the topics addressed in WebCT discussion bulletin board indicated that pre-service teachers employed various literacy practices of inviting others' participation, adopting an exploratory stance, and reflecting on the process of their practicum and online communication. They stated that pre-service teachers considered the site as co-constructed through their own participation without the need for instructor direction, while enhancing their sense of interdependency in a community of practice (Doering & Beach, 2002; Hung & Chen, 2001).

Another example of a community of practice can be found in the *Community of Teachers*, a professional development program for pre-service teachers at Indiana University, reported by Barab and his colleagues (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Barab, Makinster, Moore, Cunningham, & The ILF Design Team, 2001; Barab et al., 2004). In this program, pre-service teachers negotiated goals and meanings of the online community as well as the profession while working with 'old timers' (seniors/students with teaching experience) and doing their fieldwork in one school. Further, they shared their personal narratives that came to embody the canonical practices of the community and develop a shared language to describe particular group practices. Overall, the researchers argued that technology could support storytelling as a powerful method for creating knowledge in a manner that was not bound by time or place.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that not all online communities are inherently interactive and collaborative. Goos and Bennisson (2002), for example, found that pre-service teachers did not see a need to interact online when the option of face-to-face communication was also available. Moreover, they noticed some resistance to bulletin board discussions in general

¹ WebCT (**Web Course Tools**) is a web-based course management system, as with Blackboard, which consists of an integrated set of educational tools for constructing an online course environment, such as live chat, threaded discussions, e-mail, a calendar, and other online materials.

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