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A study of non-native discourse in an online community of practice (CoP) for teacher education

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study attempted to investigate the online discourse functions of non-native speakers of English in a community of practice (CoP) which comprises student-teachers, front-line practitioners, and faculty staff members. Discourse functions were identified through an analysis of the naturally occurring interlocutory moves among the participant groups in discussing the postings on teaching during a period of 5-week teaching practicum. Six posts with the highest number of interlocutory moves were selected for in-depth analysis. They included 107 comments and 57 responses. A total of 15 discourse functions were identified from the interlocutory moves. A frequency count of the discourse functions has revealed significant discourse features of online communication in a CoP context among non-native speakers of English. Discourse features which involve memberships, roles, cultural phenomenon and use of a second language were exemplified and discussed. The study may provide direct evidence of communication characteristics in an online CoP and indirect evidence of discourse management of non-native speakers in an online CoP for knowledge construction and professional development.

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1. Introduction

How teachers' professional development can be fostered has always been a major concern within educational research. As Schlager and Fusco (2004) explained, teacher professional development is not merely a series of training workshops, meetings, and in-service days. Rather, it is a learning process concerning how to develop, implement, and share knowledge that improves teaching through "engagement in practice within a community of practitioners" (p. 124). In the last two decades, more and more researchers have seen the value of community of practice (henceforth CoP) in facilitating teacher professional development, arguing that it can help cultivate reflective practitioners (e.g. Murphy & Laferrière, 2003; Hough, Smithey, & Evertson, 2004), and shape the professional identity of teachers (e.g. Irwin & Hramiak, 2010), in particular. Study of communities of practice has showed no sign of abating, but research efforts have gradually shifted from examining the nature of traditional CoPs to online CoPs, and from scrutinizing the benefits of such communities to exploring the factors leading to their success, with the technical support and the dynamics of interaction between different members being two major aspects of concern. However, in-depth analysis of the language which facilitates and promotes interaction to realize the value of online communication in a CoP context is lacking, particularly when members in the CoP are using their second language in the interaction process. The present study focuses on analysing discourse management of non-native speakers in conversing, exchanging, and discussing with one another in a contextualized online community for knowledge construction and professional development. This paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, a concise review of the most relevant literature on online CoPs, pertinent to teacher education, will be

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provided. Then, the analytical framework will be presented in [Section 3](#), and the methodology on which the present study is based will be described in [Section 4](#). The results of the analysis are discussed in [Section 5](#), followed by [Section 6](#), which summarizes the main findings and comments on the limitations and possible contributions of the present study.

2. Literature review

2.1. *The notion of CoP*

Coined by [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#), the term CoP is used to refer to “a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment” ([Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002](#), p. 34). CoPs can be distinguished from other groups (e.g. a community of interest) in three major ways. First, a CoP is characterized by a shared domain of interest. Members of a CoP are bound by what they mutually engage in. It is their membership that implies commitment and competence and differentiates them from other people ([Wenger, 2006](#)). Second, CoPs are distinguished from other groupings in the heterogeneity and diversity of their membership ([Schlager & Fusco, 2004](#)). Members of a CoP range from mentors to novices. While individuals should possess a certain level of expertise in the knowledge domain, there will be a range of levels and types of expertise to support discussion and information exchange ([Lai, Pratt, Anderson, & Stigter, 2006](#)). It is through sustained interaction and negotiation that the different members become connected to each another, thereby establishing a community. Third, the concept of practice connotes doing. A CoP comprises practitioners who develop a shared repertoire of resources such as experiences, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems ([Wenger, 2006](#)). CoPs do not simply serve as interest groups but are learning communities. Based on a shared practice, members in a CoP co-construct knowledge and learn in the process of social participation ([Lai et al., 2006](#)).

As a result of globalization and the Internet's rapid development ([Kirschner & Lai, 2007](#)), CoPs are often deemed to be something virtual despite its original concept put forward by [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#) being premised on situated learning in a co-located setting ([Kirschner & Lai, 2007](#)). However, noticeable differences can be identified between face-to-face communication and online interaction. First, online conversations do not contain non-verbal cues and sound inflexions used in face-to-face interactions, which are key components of communication for many people ([Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003](#)). Second, texts on a page or a screen are less ephemeral than spoken words ([Carr & Chambers, 2006](#)). Third, members of online communities might find it difficult to retract or refine a position since threads of discussion can be revisited over a longer period of time than in verbal exchanges ([Hammond, 1998](#)). In spite of the differences, the trend of eLearning, the contemporary theory of learning, and the advantages of overcoming time and geographical constraints in communication affirm the virtual environment in CoPs. Online CoPs become a potential for more sustainable and long-term interaction among members for knowledge growth.

2.2. *Online CoPs in teacher professional development*

Given that the conventional event-based of professional training does not seem to have received positive feedback as it fails to improve learning substantially ([Hawley & Valli, 1999](#)), the building of CoPs is of considerable importance. As [Murphy and Laferrière \(2003\)](#) put it, professional development experiences for teachers should be based on teachers' own artistry and competence, which they can share with other teachers and create opportunities to view multiple perspectives. The emergence of CoPs shifts the focus of teachers' professional growth from formal training such as teacher seminars and workshops to learning in practice. Through active participation in CoPs, teacher professional development no longer only involves the passive acceptance of knowledge but becomes something in which the teachers participate as part of their daily activities ([Moore & Barab, 2002](#)).

A range of studies have pointed out that online communities provided teachers with opportunities to become reflective practitioners (see [Hough et al., 2004](#); [Murphy & Laferrière, 2003](#); [Tang, 2009a](#)) and shape their professional identity ([Hung, 2008](#)), for they served as a site of engagement for learning to teach which allowed individual members to view problems in multiple contexts and alternate perspectives, thereby confirming or reframing their teacher beliefs. It is generally acknowledged that online CoPs function as a catalyst to improving teachers' professional practice. However, promoting teacher professional development through online CoPs is not straightforward, as it has been shown that the success and sustainability of a community depends on many different factors. [Riding \(2001\)](#), by investigating how the use of email discussion groups created online communities as a way to support teachers of Media Studies and Psychology by facilitating effective and informal professional training, found that the emergence of clear discussion focuses, the presence of a facilitator responsible for monitoring the messages and sustaining the conversations, and wide-ranging membership are significant factors contributing to the success of a CoP. [Carr and Chambers \(2006\)](#) further explored the relationship between the use of online communities and teacher development. In their study, 13 teachers and school leaders from primary and secondary schools in Australia took part in a series of semi-structured telephone interviews which focused on the factors and attitudes affecting the participants' use of online community environments. In common with [Hough et al. \(2004\)](#), it was reported that the sense of community and the purpose of discussions are two determining elements which affect online participation. Other factors identified include the role of participants, level of facilitation and time, to name but a few. In another study, [Starkey and Savvides \(2009\)](#) found that social presence in terms of the affective, interactive, and cohesive dimensions plays a prominent role in affecting participation in online discussions. [Tang and Lam \(2014\)](#) also interviewed a representative sample of members of an online learning community for pre-service teachers

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