

# English teachers' moderating and participating in OCPs

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## Abstract

Online Communities of Practice (OCPs) are among the most accessible tools for EFL/ESL teachers' co-construction of knowledge and self-directed learning. Despite the welcomed proliferation of EFL/ESL teachers' OCPs, concomitant research on collaboration is noticeably lagging behind. The present paper is just a preliminary look at moderation and participation, two of the most salient roles of members in OCPs. The authors co-moderate a local Yahoo group of EFL teachers from Venezuela, and participate in an international Yahoo Group of EFL teachers from different countries and nationalities. By analyzing (a) the posts the authors wrote in each OCP and (b) the authors' introspective accounts completed for the purpose of this research, it appears that contrary to expectations there is not much difference in executing the roles of moderation and participation. Results indicate that, rather than changing their online behavior and style while embarking in the two tasks, each author appears to display similar behavioral tracts in both OCPs. Because English is the language of collaboration in both OCPs, results suggest that participation and moderation in OCPs may serve as a deterrent of language loss. The paper concludes with a call for more research on the role of EFL/ESL teacher–teacher interactions in OCPs.

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## 1. Introduction

Teachers of English as a Second or Foreign language (ESL/EFL) have tapped into the Internet in many different ways to facilitate students' learning almost since the nascent days of this ubiquitous resource (Egbert et al., 1999; Warschauer, 2001). But the potential of the web for ESL/EFL education is not limited to students exclusively. It also offers alternatives for teachers to further their education and maintain language skills through both formal and informal professional development formats (Hubbard and Levy, 2006). While in the former setting, ESL/EFL teachers may be participants in school-based programs leading to a degree; in the latter they cultivate professional and linguistic development independently.

Among the available alternatives, one that has grown in numbers in recent years is the Online Community of Practice (OCP) which stands as an informal resource for professional development by bringing together peers/

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colleagues of different social and educational backgrounds to share their knowledge, experiences and views on their practice (Hanson-Smith, 2006). In essence, OCPs (or groups) provide a virtual arena for discussion and exchanges among peers or colleagues, thus offering opportunities for continuous learning from one another. OCPs composed of ESL/EFL teachers have not been investigated in any depth though they are, in fact, “alternative professional development structures that allow for self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning that is directly relevant to teachers’ classroom lives” (Johnson, 2006: 243). In particular, there seems to be a void in the research concerning the roles of moderators and/or participants on said OCPs. What exactly are the roles of moderators, on the one hand, and participants, on the other? What strategies do they use in their roles as participants or moderators? What motivates teachers to join and participate periodically in these communities? Out of these questions, the present paper focuses on the authors’ roles in two OCPs integrated by EFL/ESL teachers.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Online communities of practice

Formal online professional development has been available to ESL/EFL teachers for some time now in the form of Internet-based seminars, workshops and courses (Almeida d’Eça, 2004; Almeida d’Eça and Gonzalez, 2006; García and Susuki, 2008; González, 2004; Hubbard and Levy, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Lites, 2004). These options share some or all of the following features: (a) they are delivered by one or more experts in the field; (b) they are sponsored or supported by a renowned institution or set of institutions (i.e. a university, an international teachers’ or researchers’ association); (c) participants might be required to pay a registration fee; (d) participants are supervised and/or assessed throughout the program; (e) some product is required by the end of the online activity in the form of a project or an e-portfolio; and (f) there is usually a certificate of “attendance” or participation.

On the other hand, newer alternatives consisting of largely informal, online professional development have surfaced (Johnson, 2006). These begin with the initiative of an individual, institution or group of teachers who decide to set up an OCP, using their own means, time; and academic weight. Others willing to collaborate sign up to become members. From what we have observed, open Groupware (such as Yahoo Groups) are among the most frequently used platforms from the many available for that purpose since they are fairly easy to use, do not require complex technical knowledge or skills, and are accessible to many people in almost any part of the world. Both OCPs in the present study are Yahoo Groups.<sup>2</sup>

An assumption underlying teacher-related OCPs is that the exchange of views and experiences and the sharing of ideas and resources might result in the enhancement of individual teaching practices. Communication among colleagues through OCPs offers (a) enhanced chances of professional development through situated learning and reflective practice (Almeida d’Eça and Gonzalez, 2006; García and Susuki, 2008; Hanson-Smith, 2006; Johnson, 2006); (b) a forum for trying out teacher’s research intuitions during and after the process of preparing a workshop presentation, a paper or an article (Adams, 2006), and, in our observation, (c) a relaxed atmosphere to share experiences and resources by co-constructing knowledge relevant to their classroom practices or even build a reputation as an innovating teacher.

Nonetheless, all of these benefits rely largely on group members’ participation. It is through communication and exchange that participants can reach the goals of creating a sense of mutual identification, training/helping each other, solving similar problems and assessing their research intuitions about problems observed in their teaching contexts. Without members’ participation, the most sophisticated groupware might not, by itself, grow into a mature *community of practice*.

### 2.2. Participation (or collaboration) in OCPs

A major concern in educational research and in EFL/ESL instruction has been member participation, or lack thereof, in different kinds of online environments. Most of these studies – carried out with students, not teachers as subjects – compare learners’ performance in computer mediated communication (CMC) settings versus face to face

<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the recent advent of Web 2.0 and 3.0, one of the groups studied here is in the process of moving to Diigo and Ning and uses in addition Twitter and Facebook for complementary management purposes.

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