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What makes an online community of practice work? A situated study of Chinese student teachers' perceptions of online professional learning

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Student teachers value the significant presence of others in supporting learning.
- Online learning fosters an embracement of the multidimensional roles they took on.
- Voluntary participation and empowerment emerge as factors of professional learning.
- There is a reciprocal interplay between online CoPs and Chinese views of learning.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper brings to the fore a cohort of student teachers' perceptions of an online learning experience during school placement in a Chinese tertiary institution; it critically explores factors contributing positively to online professional learning and the development of the community. An ethnographic case study approach was adopted. Findings indicate that online communication allows participants to recognize the significant presence of others in supporting and transforming their learning. It also fosters an appreciation and embracement of the multidimensional roles that they take on. Voluntary participation and empowerment emerge as key factors making this a vibrant professional community for professional growth.

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1. Introduction

For the last decade, educators and researchers (e.g. Baran & Cagiltay, 2010; Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Clarke L, 2009; Kirschner & Lai, 2007) have been enthusiastic in promoting online communities of practice (CoPs) for collaborative professional learning. There is a general consensus that online CoPs are a powerful catalyst and desirable model to support and enhance student teachers' professional learning. Different from the traditional views of learning to teach (i.e., the craft, applied science, or reflective models), this *learning communities* orientation (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) engages directly with Wenger's (1998) socio-cultural learning theory that meaningful learning occurs in a socially situated learning process in a community of practice (CoP).

Perry, Walton, and Calder (1999) note that in a CoP, driven by the same purposes, a group of intellectual people engage collectively in 'planning, enacting, reflecting' (p. 218) on their joint enterprise and try to improve what they do and care about. The emphasis on engaging in a communal pursuit enables student teachers to gain access to their peers' teacher thinking and doing; it offers structured opportunities to move from reflection as a private endeavour undertaken in isolation to reflection as a social practice that will ultimately benefit student teachers' professional growth (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Clarke L, 2009; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Zeichner, 1996).

Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) contend that it is highly important for student teachers to learn how to participate in such communities. Such participation requires them to understand the developmental process of an online learning experience. Their perceptions of learning to teach must change from a personal, private view to one of professional practice which can be improved if it is made public, discussed openly, and reflected upon

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collectively. Equally important and apparently overlooked is an analytical understanding of what makes an online CoP work in context (Hoadley, 2012). This paper studies the experience of a cohort of student teachers in China. As such, it intends to bring their perceptions of an online learning experience critically to the fore and, hence, to explore cultural factors that contribute positively to their online professional learning and community of practice.

2. Nature of teacher education in China's normal universities

Over the last decade, Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been given support to set up preservice teacher education programmes (MOE, 2006; State Council, 2001) in order to 'ameliorate the problems of quantity and quality with the teaching force' (Hu, 2005, p. 667). Shouldering the main responsibility for educating teachers of all disciplines for secondary schools in China, Normal Universities (i.e., teacher-training universities) offer a four-year undergraduate programme. The traditional programme consists of three key strands: (1) disciplinary studies, (2) educational studies and (3) a one-off six-week school placement (Sha & Li, 2005). In the final year of their study, student teachers are allocated to a local secondary school in partnership with the Normal University to participate fully in observing different classes, teaching and managing class activities. Meanwhile, they are assigned to be supervised by a university-based supervisor in groups of four to six. The supervisor's roles involve visiting student teachers in the placement school, observing their lessons once a week, and giving informative feedback on their teaching performance.

Nevertheless, since the late 1990s, the rapid expansion of student enrolment identifies some disquieting issues regarding school placement in the Normal Universities of China (Shi & Englert, 2008). Normal Universities have since found themselves in an awkward predicament to obtain and secure placement schools due to the growing number of student teachers (Gao, Zhang, & Qi, 2012; Li, 1999; Yang & Zhou, 2011). Many are encouraged or even compelled to contact placement schools by themselves, and this tendency is reinforced because some of them hope to get a job in their placement school after graduation. No supervision is provided to those individuals who arrange their own placement due to the constraints of geographical distance and limited availability of university-based supervisors. Even for those who take up a school placement set up by the university, supervision tends to be rushed clinical visits because supervisors must combine their many placement visits with lecturing commitments. Given these practical problems, the role of supervisors has not been optimally fulfilled during student teaching placement (Zhen, 2006).

3. Problematizing school placement

Various forms of disconnect and isolation prevail in the preservice teacher education setting worldwide — not just in China. Geographical distance results in inadequate support and guidance from university-based supervisors (Bowen, 2002; Fry & Bryant, 2007; Mayer, 2002). Consequently, student teachers may experience too little communication, support, sharing, and discussion of professional encounters with their peers and supervisors (Bonk, Hara, Dennen, Malikowski, & Supplee, 2000; Hramiak, 2010; Schlagal, Trathen, & Blanton, 1996). Moreover, they are impeded from integrating educational conceptions, which were developed prior to school placement, with experiences gained in practice teaching because of lack of supervision and collegial dialogue, as reported in a range of international contexts (Allen, 2009; Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, 2006; Le Cornu & White, 2000; Russell, McPherson, & Martin, 2001; Trent, 2010; Zeichner,

2010). In fact, the divorce between the front-loaded teaching theories and practical teaching during the placement remains a worldwide, perennial dilemma of teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Peercy, 2012; Scherff & Singer, 2012; Vick, 2006). Disconnection may also take the form of student teachers being effectively confined to isolated classrooms with limited exposure to the diversity of school activities (Lortie, 1975; Schlagal et al., 1996). Student teachers may have little involvement in professional conversations with other teachers (Farrell, 2003), and disengage themselves from exploring the pre-existing beliefs, past biography, and knowledge that shape their practice (Lortie, 1975; Melville, Campbell, Fazio, Stefanile, & NTkaczyk, 2014; Price, 1989; Richards, 1998). An overly narrow learning-to-teach experience (Tang, 2003) can consolidate their view of teaching as a solitary activity as their practice fails to provide a comprehensive experience of a whole school or a broader understanding of educational system (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Price, 1989). Making matters worse, it is very likely for student teachers to be marginalised in placement schools (Britzman, 1991) in that they lack status and situational knowledge or have limited authority to behave like real teachers (Alsop & Scott, 1990). This may further intensify a sense of professional and psychological isolation. Student teachers can 'feel disequilibrium' and 'vulnerable' when they have to balance the tension between proving their teaching competence and seeking help from their mentors (Scherff & Singer, 2012, p. 264).

From the human perspective, professional learning is embedded in a sense of belonging to the community in which knowledge and practice are fundamental common property (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2008). This sense appears particularly meaningful for student teachers. An online collaborative venue in which they can discuss practice, eliminate doubts, and seek support from each other may motivate and engage them better in their professional growth. Thus international evidence supports the need to consider how CoPs may mitigate such effects.

4. Online communities of practice, learning to teach and Chinese views of learning

As a model to support teachers' professional learning, CoPs have gained considerable currency in a range of international contexts (Baran & Cagiltay, 2010; Hanson-Smith, 2006; Kirschner &Lai, 2007; Lai, Pratt, Anderson, & Stiger, 2006; Reimann, 2008). According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), a CoP is 'a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment' (p. 34). The three key dimensions, (1) mutual engagement, (2) joint enterprise, and (3) shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998), constitute a cohesive community that encourages its members to pursue and define their activities jointly over time. As such, it may develop a shared learning experience with a rich array of resources including meaningful stories, tools, and possible ideas or solutions for dealing with problems.

A number of international studies have explored the benefits of building online CoPs to foster preservice and inservice teacher education. In the UK, recent research affirms the CoPs framework can reduce teacher isolation (Clarke L, 2009; Hramiak, 2007, 2010); develop and enhance student teachers' reflective practice (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Seddon & Postlethwaite, 2007); enable them to establish their professional identity (Kelly, Gale, Wheeler, & Tucker, 2007). In Australia, online CoPs are designed to nurture mutual support, peer mentoring and connection (Herrington, Herrington, Kervin, & Ferry, 2006; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010); to support student teachers to define their professional goals and construct communally a professional identity (Balatti, Knight, Haase, & Henderson, 2010; Goos & Bennison, 2008) and to re-appraise the application of educational concepts in their local context (Shin &