



Teachers as sojourners: Transitory communities in short study-abroad programmes

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Sojourning teachers form a transitory community of practice.
- A common purpose is essential to a professional development community.
- A sojourning community has a finite life span.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines a sojourn in an English speaking country for a group of experienced teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). Sojourner learning was interpreted through a community of practice perspective. These participants formed a transitory community in the host country to support their academic and social learning. This enabled participants to engage in unfamiliar roles during their study abroad experience. On the participants' return to their home country, they no longer shared a common goal and disbanded the community. By recognising the life span of a community, educators can design programmes using participants' shared resources.

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1. Introduction

This study uses a community of practice lens to report on teacher professional development during a short study-abroad programme in a foreign country. This lens provided insight into how the participants, all experienced educators from Hong Kong, negotiated meaningful learning from their sojourn experience. The experiences of these participants illustrate how a transitory community of practice forms over time for a common purpose.

Three areas of research converge in situating this paper. These are studies of: teachers sojourning in foreign countries; teachers' professional learning through membership of a community of practice; and the Chinese teacher as a learner. There is a rich body of teacher education research on short programmes undertaken internationally. The duration of such programmes ranges from two

weeks to one year. Many studies have examined the positive effects of including sojourning programmes as a component of the education of pre-service teachers (Freed, 2008; Marx & Moss, 2011). Literature on sojourns indicates that short immersion programmes in other countries benefit these pre-service teachers' cultural sensitivity, language proficiency, and pedagogical practices. Studies seek to evaluate the impact of the experience on student teachers' cultural awareness as they prepare to teach linguistically or ethnically diverse learners. The expectation is that having lived the role of 'outsider', student teachers will gain an appreciation of the challenges faced by minority students (FERENCE, 2006; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). The implications drawn from pre-service teachers' experiences suggest that programme providers should be prepared to adapt the components of their programmes and respond flexibly to participants (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Lee, 2009; Sutherland, 2011).

Immersion may result in increased cultural awareness for student teachers. However, there are mixed results on the effects of short-term immersion on sojourners' foreign language

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development. In some situations, they are able to acquire significantly better understanding and control of the target language (Lee, 2009; Pellegrino, 1998), but in others, the benefits of foreign language development are less significant or lasting (Rees & Klapper, 2007).

A smaller number of investigations document the professional development experienced by practising teachers as a result of sojourns. Some studies indicate that experienced foreign language teachers display improved confidence in using culture as a medium to teach the foreign language as well as increased proficiency in their use and teaching of the target language (Harvey, Conway, Richards, & Roskvist, 2010). Other studies show that sojourns may result in both benefits and problems for practising teachers. For example, teachers may report more cultural awareness but find it challenging to apply teaching approaches in a different cultural context (Pray & Marx, 2010). Teachers in Cook's (2010) study felt similar constraints when applying pedagogies learnt in the host country on their return to Japan. Liyanage and Bartlett (2008) reported contradictory findings. After spending time in an English medium environment, the teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) felt that they would not be able to transfer culturally responsive practices into their home environment.

Trent (2011) approaches the evaluation of short courses abroad from a different stance. He problematised the impact of studying abroad on the student teachers' developing professional identities, revealing an antagonistic relationship between perceptions of host teacher and home teacher identities. He suggests that course providers need to assist student teachers to resolve and balance this identity conflict. This implication should also be considered by course providers when designing programmes for experienced EFL teachers.

The literature reinforcing the professional, linguistic and personal benefits of short immersion programmes reveals considerable insights into student teachers' responses to a sojourn. Nonetheless, there is little research on how a sojourn experience affects the learning of veteran teachers.

A significant and current trend is to use community of practice as a means of investigating how teachers make sense of their professional learning. This framework views learning as a competence that is socially and historically defined by a practising community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000). Community of practice has been used to evaluate how a university-sponsored cohort in the US supported beginning teachers working in different urban schools in their professional learning (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). Another form of community, a practitioner cohort of UK educators from different districts and school levels, investigated how its members situated their professional practice within the network, and then learned to build language bridges across the boundaries between their shared community (the educator network) and their home sites (Niesz, 2010). A longitudinal study of two US teachers is another transformative example of a socially situated approach to professional development. Their approach to teaching writing developed as a result of working collegially with each other and a research team (Flint, Zisook, & Fisher, 2011). These studies illustrate how concepts of community of practice allow researchers to examine teacher learning as a socially situated endeavour. Nonetheless, few studies explore short stay sojourns through a community of practice lens.

Sojourners bring resources from their national, cultural and linguistic background to their study abroad experiences. Cultural communities are defined as "a coordinated group of people with some traditions and understandings in common, extending over several generations, with varied roles and practices, and continual change among participants as well as transformation in the community's practices" (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 21). By being

immersed in a different culture and language, students may become more aware of their own cultural background (Gao, 2011). Hong Kong Chinese university students report a study abroad experience as an active learning process and describe three dimensions of development: intercultural, personal, and disciplinary/career related competencies (Yang, Webster, & Prosser, 2011). They may bring with them the qualities associated with Chinese learners in literature which, according to Volet (1999), include cue seeking to conform to task requirements, high achievement motivation, and informal peer support groups. These groups played a particularly important role in supporting Chinese students who are learning through English as a medium of instruction (Gleeson & Tait, 2010). Chinese learners strive to become good people as befits members of Confucian Heritage Cultures (Chan, 1999; Lee, 1996). Learning is regarded as having been brought about by continuous effort through a process of studying, enquiring, thinking and practising (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

This paper is positioned within the literature on teachers sojourning in foreign countries, teachers learning through membership of a community of practice, and the Chinese teacher as a learner. The case study is distinguished by the participants' specific cultural and linguistic background, and professional experiences. All study abroad groups are shaped by such characteristics. These underlying commonalities have international application beyond its particular context.

2. Theoretical framework

Wenger's (1998) communities of practice has been used as a theoretical framework to analyse how teachers engage in professional learning in different situations (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Flint et al., 2011; Takahashi, 2011). Niesz (2010) argues that this lens provides a way of seeing how teachers make meaning as they engage in a common task of learning. Learning is regarded as socially situated in that individuals form a community for a common purpose. This theory allows a nuanced interpretation of the data from the sojourner experience of a group of EFL teachers because these participants shared in a common experience of professional learning over a finite period of time. A community of practice framework enables their experience to be evaluated according to the three elements that are combined to define competence. The first of these is a "sense of joint enterprise," or the purpose as negotiated by its members. The second element is "establishing norms and relationships of mutuality" through interaction among the members as they adapted to an unfamiliar learning environment. In addition, the participants developed "a shared repertoire of communal resources" to meet their common goals (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). This framework captures key aspects of the process as the participants coalesced into a community and then dispersed on return to their home country.

Our study examines how the participating teachers formed an interim community during their sojourn in a foreign country. By examining the goals of the participants and how these changed over the period of the professional development sojourn and, for some, beyond, it is possible to see how the individual's learning experiences were renegotiated through the process of group membership.

3. Research methodology

The research question asked: How did a cohort of educators negotiate meaningful learning from their sojourn experience?

A qualitative case study methodology was adopted to explore this question. By defining the case unit as a community of sojourning teachers, it was possible to achieve an understanding of

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