# A Series of Case Studies Exploring How to Develop and Maintain A Community of Pre-Service Trainee ESL Teachers on Field Experience Practicum in Hong Kong

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**Abstract**

Three action research case studies of eight weeks were conducted with 24 third year undergraduate trainee teachers on their first intensive field experience practicum in secondary state schools in Hong Kong. Using a virtual learning environment, strategies were employed to develop communities of practice. These were done to enhance the support offered to students during practicum. Findings suggest that online communities can develop effectively if a systematic set of strategies exploiting the collaborative and asynchronous nature of the online environment are implemented. These strategies are presented and analyzed.

**Keywords:** Building and maintaining a community of practice; asynchronous communication; collaborative learning; e-tivities

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. VLEs and online learning community theory

In 2012, the virtual learning environment (VLE) Blackboard was being used by over 3700 educational institutions in more than 60 countries. One of the most effective characteristics of this environment is its social and collaborative nature. This premise is based on the interpretation of knowledge as a socially-constructed phenomenon (see Vygotsky, 1978; and neo-Vygotskian research, Forman, 1989; Knuth and Cunningham, 1993; Duffy, Lowyck and Jonassen, 1993). Participants test their individual knowledge through processes of online dialogue with like-minded others, who share an interest, and negotiate their meanings to achieve mutual understandings and mutually-constructed, or socially-constructed, shared knowledge. This provides a shared domain or 'sustained network' (Reil and Polin, 2004) for dialectical processes within a community of learners. As these processes occur, a   communal identity is born which represents certain 'new' ideals and notions about practice, which are shared (Clarke, 2006). As the group matures, there then begins a depersonalization of the self. This has been termed 'learning to become' (Mayes, 2002) or 'self-categorization theory' (Turner, 1991).  Its origins can be seen to date back to Dewey (1933) himself, who understood how community participation requires alignment in terms of thoughts, ideas, values, beliefs and language use, but it is also a focus of much more recent studies (Bonk and King, 1998; Carter, 1999; Le Cornu and White, 2000; Walker, 2003) of the same ilk. In addition, during these online processes, participants edge closer to their potential development levels through scaffolded social interaction (Bruner et al, 1976).as defined by the 'zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Jonassen (1999) has developed a model of Constructivist Learning Environments (CLE's) demonstrating how technology can facilitate collaboration and social construction of knowledge (see also Bonk, Wisher & Nigrelli, 2004). In addition to the shared network creating new meaning, one of the major premises is that asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) offers learners more time to compose the language required to express their thoughts effectively. They are thus more inclined to offer higher order cognition (see Bloom, 1956; and post-Bloom research, such as Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and more extended communications (Jonassen, 1996). One caveat is however, that language use is situated and is influenced by its social context (Mey, 2001).

If participants are communicating through English as a lingua franca, in this context, English as an Asian lingua franca (Kirkpatrick, 2010), their level of awareness of the language required for online discourse may be limited (see Gee, 2004; Clarke, 2009). In addition, they may lack the social presence (Bibeau, 2001; Garrison, 1997) and communication strategies (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997) required to interact online. Without these skills, as Wang and Newlin's (2002: 21) study suggests, intrinsic motivation and learner satisfaction online may dwindle.

One important distinction that has emerged is one of definition, namely 'community of practice' and 'community of learner' theory One of the essential differences between the 'community of practice' (CoP, see Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and the 'community of learners' (CoL, see Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Rogoff et al., 2001) is that the CoP commonly consists of members from the same profession whereas the CoL commonly consists of language learners. These communities can be further broken down to include 'task-based CoPs and CoLs, which are fairly small in size and join for a limited time. It is considered that a significant volume of postings should have been uploaded, shared and the content manipulated before an online community can mature (see Murillo, 2008). This particular study deals with communities that are at once both CoP and CoL because it consists of L1, Cantonese, English language teacher trainees. Thus, these participants are learning how to teach and developing their English language level simultaneously. For this reason, the term 'online learning community' or OLC has been adopted.

## 1.2. The social dimension in teacher education

An essential element of teacher preparation programs is the development of a community of teacher-learners (Borko, 2004; Clarke, 2009). A number of studies have used technology as a way to support communities of teachers (Barab et al, 2001; Renninger & Shumar, 2002; Schlager, Fusco, & Schank, 2002). More specifically, research into communities of practice has explored how these online environments aid neophytes to build professional teacher identities through dialectical processes (Britzman, 1991; Coldron and Smith, 1995; Danielewicz, 2001; MacLure, 1993; Miller Marsh, 2003) .

Currently, therefore, the social dimension in teacher education is considered highly important. Collegiality is said to increase teacher efficacy (Gellert, 2008), which is defined as a conviction that one can influence how well students learn (Guskey & Passaro, 1994). This conviction is thus said to be related to better pupil achievement in schools (Lee & Smith, 1991). More specifically, it has been found that if teachers communicate their experiences with like-minded others, and develop socially-constructed meanings from their classroom experiences, their reflective practice capabilities increase (see Pollard & Triggs, 1997; Davis & Roblyer, 2005; Lock, 2006; Simpson, 2006; Murillo, 2008; Yang, 2009, Salazar, Zenaida Aguirre-Munoz, Fox and Nuanez-Lucas, 2010, Gleaves & Walker-Gleaves, 2010; Crawley, 2011; Brooke, 2012). This ultimately leads to better-trained teachers. It is therefore believed of paramount importance that trainees develop dispositions for collaboration during their teacher education programmes and this has encouraged recent researchers to explore the VLE's potential as a shared e-journaling tool for training pre-service teacher trainees, preferable to traditional book journaling (Simonsen, Luebeck & Bice, 2007; Galanouli & Collins, 2002; Murillo, 2008; Yang, 2009), which is very often an individual, isolated activity.

## 1.3. The nature of the online community for learning

Lewis and Allan (2005) explain that the life cycle of a community is made up of six phases: 'foundation'; 'induction'; 'incubation'; 'improving performance'; 'implementation'; 'closure' or 'change'. In the same way, Wenger (1998) offers five phases. These are 'potential', 'coalescing', 'active', 'dispersed' and 'memorable'. In her 5-step model, Salmon (2000) stresses that a community needs to pass through an 'access and motivation' stage in order to complete the 'potential' phase. Here she stresses that e-moderators need to be aware that there are still novices learning to use software who need explicit training in technical issues. Following this, to pass through the 'coalescing' phase, she suggests an 'online socialization' step using short e-tivities that cultivate trust between students through the sharing and comparing of personal information and ideas. Wenger (1998) refers to this as 'discovering commonalities'. Next, the 'incubation' phase is then developed through step 3, or 'information exchange'. During this step, moderators should facilitate online e-tivities that promote discovery learning through exploring and sharing knowledge and successfully processing information.

This is then followed by step 4 ('knowledge construction'), whereby students evolve from merely transmitting knowledge to authoring innovative ideas. Wenger (ibid) argues that during this phase participants are engaged in joint enterprises, and committing further to online relationships. With regard to Lewis and Allan's (2005) typology, this is when the community has reached the 'improving performance' phase, and is operating as a working community. The penultimate phase, the 'implementation' stage, is when the outcomes of the activities conducted during the phases above are reported. For Wenger (1998), this is when the community moves into the final phases of 'dispersed' and then 'memorable' as participation in dialectical processes diminishes over time and the community is increasingly inactive.

### 1.4. Setting up and maintaining an online learning community

Much research has been conducted on the role of the tutor in online moderation (Salmon, 2000; Laurillard, 2007; Laurillard et al, 2009; Jones & Peachey, 2005). As an online moderator, it is deemed important to be able to facilitate blog usage and online interactions. However, belief about the extent to which sharing and collaboration should be facilitated to help learners become acquainted with each other differs. Jones and Peachey (2005) argue that Salmon's (2000) stage 2 could be omitted if stage 1 is set up effectively before-hand. Indeed, these authors advise beginning the more challenging e-tivities tasks of stage 3 as soon as possible to ensure participant motivation.

## 2.  *The Study*

The ultimate goal of the working communities for this research, reported in a previous article (see Brooke, 2012), was to develop the reflective capabilities of the neophyte participants. This particular article presents another aspect of this study: it explores how the online task-based communities were nurtured effectively.

The research involving three 8-week case studies with 24 student teachers (8 participants per case study) explored methods and strategies which actively engaged participants through a systematic process of technology training and socialization to develop a task-based online learning community in a specific educational setting: the training of English language teachers in a tertiary institution.

A total of 397 postings were uploaded by this researcher and participants over the three case studies. On average, this researcher would upload around 40% of these. Participants would upload the other 60%. On average, a participant would upload 2 to 4 postings per forum. Each posting would generally consist of 50 to 100 words. However, for the first forum, which consisted of the 'developing online awareness' e-tivities, there was on average of threads (one for the researcher and each participant) and an average of four postings for each thread. During the third case study, one thread consisted of eleven postings as communications on a certain theme became intense.

### 2.1. Research objective

The research objective was to analyze what is needed in terms of e-moderator practice in order to set up and maintain an effective online environment which promotes collaborative learning.

### 2.2. Research context

This research was conducted in Hong Kong at the Department of English of the Institute of Education (HKIED). 84% of Hong Kong's primary school teachers and 30% of its secondary school teachers are graduates of HKIEd. The Institute is thus the largest teacher education provider in Hong Kong. An important component of these courses is the practicum and in particular the field experience during year 3. Students spend a semester working in a local state school followed closely by an experienced teacher supervisor. Trainees are observed informally and formally over the course of the semester. Teaching in large classes is new for these students. The system this researcher was establishing was designed to support them online during this difficult period.

### 2.3. Research participants

The participants were unknown to this researcher at the beginning of the study. Students were not familiar with each other either. In addition, participants had no previous experience of working with an e-moderator to develop an online community for learning.

Each case study consisted of eight third-year participants of a four-year BEd (EL) degree from both Hong Kong and mainland China. There was a mix of male and female students aged between 20 and 25. Names of participants are not used in the results section.

## 2.4. Research design

A collective case study approach was adopted for the research methodology. All three case studies were self study action research projects (for more on this see in particular Allwright, 1991; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Burns, 1999; Edge, 1993, 2001; Elliot, 1976, 1991; Freire, 1970; Greenwood & Levin, 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998; Kuhlmann, 1992; Matsumoto, 2003; Nunan, 1991, 1993; Wolf, 2003). Adelman et al define the case study as an 'instance in action' or 'bounded system' (cited in Nunan, 2005: 75-76). In other words, it is the selection and study of a bounded phenomenon, in this case, an online forum set up to support trainee teachers. It thus has a beginning and an ending and cases are studied in their own right as an instance or construct, and this may concern, as in this case, an innovative teaching or training programme (Nunan, 2005: 76).

Using personal journal notes and research observational notes, data were recorded and findings described during and after each case study. These findings were compared and differences noted between cases. At the end of the three case studies, the models and strategies representing the results of this research had been tested and refined at least on one occasion by this author. The forums were not open access meaning that access was only given to research participants alone and only for the duration of each case study. Thus, a completely new site was started for each of the three cohorts. It was felt that this would be a better system than an open forum such as that found at blogger.com, which can be accessed freely online due to a need for a close-knit collective through which participants could grow mutual respect and trust in order to express themselves openly and honestly.

## 2.5. Research paradigm

As Polkinghorne (1988:6) notes, essentially, 'narrative meaning is created by noting that something is a 'part' of a whole and that something is a 'cause of something else'. This definition is particularly salient to this research as the findings will show. This study is a kind of constructed narrative. It has a time frame of events which can be seen as following a narrative structure of cause and effect, of events of reflective practice which lead to further reflective practice events. The results section is thus mainly constructed with descriptions of the evolution of this researcher's practices through his perceptions of his experiences. A hallmark of conducting qualitative research of this genre is that data are analyzed continually, throughout the study, from conceptualization through the entire data collection phase, into the interpretation and writing phases. Consequently, the data collection tools such as salient textual materials and interview responses are analysed using tools common to those used in narrative approaches to education research: observations written down through research notes; and personal writings.

## 2.6. Research process

The action research learning process that this researcher conducted can be described as moving from 'unconscious incompetence' (unaware of what we do not know) to 'conscious incompetence' (aware of our development needs) to 'conscious competence' (using new skills but monitoring these carefully) to relatively 'unconscious competence' (skills become naturalized or second nature without deliberate monitoring). It might also be described as how a researcher moves from observer/ reflector to critical analyst. To work through this evolution, the process was deliberate, purposeful and structured and it continuously provided links between theory and practice.

During the 'unconscious incompetence' or pre-action research stage, it was clear that action was required to set up the online community of practice but it was unclear what was required. By applying self-directed reading, important literature in the field (Wenger, 1998; Salmon, 2000; Lewis & Allen, 2006) was discovered and reflected on. From this point, the action research cycles led to the 'conscious competence' state. This 'conscious competence' stage began in action with the commencement of the first case study. There was in fact the building of a repertoire of skills and strategies through action research cycles: an idea emerges in answer to a puzzle; a solution is tested, monitored and reflected on. This intervention is then discarded, refined or kept unaltered. I would argue that through iterative practice during this 'conscious competence' stage, the shift from observer/ reflector to critical analyst occurs.

By the time the third case study was over, I knew that I had developed my own intimate understanding of the online environment and how it might contribute to the development of students' reflective teaching capability. I realized that this understanding was my own living theory and it felt like an intense knowing, much more so than it might have been from merely reading other accounts of research in this field. This is because I had constructed this knowledge through experiential learning over time through deliberative and dialectical reflection and the model developed for setting up and developing an online community of learners unique. At the same time, however, I was aware that this intense knowing was limited to the model that emerged and the iterative process of research. I had not necessarily become an expert in the academic field, rather an expert in my own context.

**2.7. Selection of data for the results section**

The data selected for the 'ranking activity' in the results section presents two participants' views on the benefits of online learning. These comments are representative of the views of the majority of the users over the three case studies. As noted in the results, most participants chose the same order of importance for the notions of this task. Similarly, the comments cited for the 'snapshots' are representative of the interactions conducted during a weekly forum. It can be noted for collage type 1, it is noted that only six participants were active for that forum. In addition, for collage type 2, only four participants are cited. It was rare that all eight participants contributed to a weekly forum.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Initiating an online learning community

The strategies used over the three case studies make up the elements of the 'developing online awareness model' shown below as figure 1.

**Figure 1**

| Step 1: Ranking activity |
| --- |
| Step 2: Discussion on ranking |
| Step 3: Socialization activity |
| Step 4: Find a similarity |
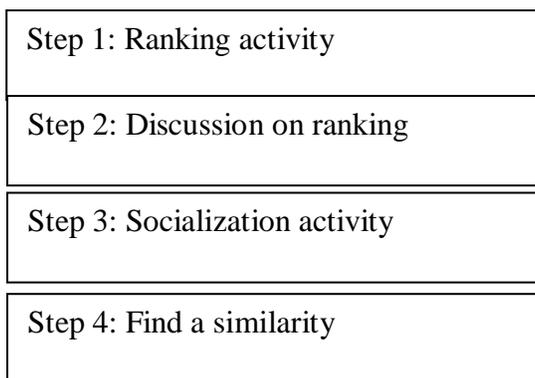
#### 3.1.1. Ranking activity

The first activity was a ranking activity containing a short list of statements which could aid participants in understanding the advantages in working together to develop a COP. This activity would also provide participants with example language to set the tone of the formality to be used. As this would be a platform of teacher education, this researcher considered that the register required should be relatively academic, for example, consisting of relevant field-specific lexis as well as using lexis from the Academic Word List. The statements for the ranking activity were predominantly focused on two of Wenger's COP constructs 'community' and 'identity'. Participants were asked to rank these statements concerning online learning in order of importance:

A.  I am able to learn by writing about my thoughts and experiences on the discussion forum;
B.  I can learn from others' responses to my thoughts;
C.  It is beneficial to upload and share lesson plans and teaching material;
D.  I am able to learn by reading about the others' thoughts and experiences.

#### 3.1.2. Discussion on ranking

The ranking activity, which was an individual task, was followed up with a discussion about and justification of choices made by participants. During each case study, A, B, D and C were most frequently chosen in order of importance. Two examples of participant postings from case study 1 are given below:

*'For me, A, B, D, C: I am not used to sharing my thoughts like this but I can understand and see a point to it. We can learn from each other.'*

*'I think A, B, D, and C. We need to give some time to adjust to a new approach of learning. Just think we are used to learning in classrooms and lecture halls and we have been taught in the same way for many years, and there is no way you can change that easily.'*

### 3.1.3. Socialization

For the third activity, participants shared personal information about themselves. This time, the task was left completely open for trainees to choose the content of their postings. Participants shared personal life story details and opinions on their educational context. It was found that participants were openly discussing critical issues; for example, one trainee brought up the contentious mainland Chinese one-child policy. During the interactions from this activity, it was evident that trainees were striving to be positive and encouraging. In this researcher's notes, is written: *'The undercurrent of their postings is very positive. They're implying: 'we can work together and find this online interaction interesting'; and 'we should not be afraid to discuss matters, including sensitive topics, nor to be critical'.'*

### 3.1.4. Find a similarity

The next activity meant that learners had to skim through the forums constructed by this stage and to study the threads to find as many commonalities with the other participants as possible and to acknowledge these. In addition to building of the community at these initial stages, this activity was designed to train participants to navigate through the forum to find threads effectively.

Many commonalities were perceived during this task. For example, from case study 1, one other participant was from mainland China and also lamented not having a brother or sister; three participants played the piano; two participants played table tennis, and all members enjoyed reading English and American literature. In fact, during case study 1, a brief discussion evolved on using literature in the classroom for language learning.

### 3.2. Maintaining an online learning community

The following findings pertain to the stage when the initial part of the cycle has been surpassed and the OLC is actively constructing new meanings through dialectical processes. In this researcher's context, that meant that trainees were normally well into their second or third week of teaching practicum. At this stage, trainees are subjected to long days of planning, teaching and often substitution of other classes. On top of this, they are writing assignments based on mini action research projects and preparing for informal and the formal observations that they must do. Due to this busy schedule, it was observed that a lull in participant motivation may occur: participants may stop discussing their peers' postings, even stop logging on. To deal with this, strategies were developed which could keep all participants informed about what the forums were doing. This way, it was guaranteed that even if they were too busy to log on during the week, they would not fall behind and would therefore be able to follow the threads when they found the time to do so.

Two types of collage were created each depicting snapshots of forum events. The first is a snapshot of each participant's week providing the postings carrying the most content of their discussions during the week. The second is a snapshot of one of the week's main topics of discussion.

### 3.2.1. Collage type 1

Figure 2 below is a snapshot of participant-trainer interaction over one week.

1. Trainer/ selects most salient material to offer gist of participant discussions over the week.

2. Trainer sends out draft summary to participants to seek approval of material selected.

- **Example of collage type 1**

3. Trainer/ moderator makes changes based on feedback and uploads and/ or emails the snapshot to all participants.
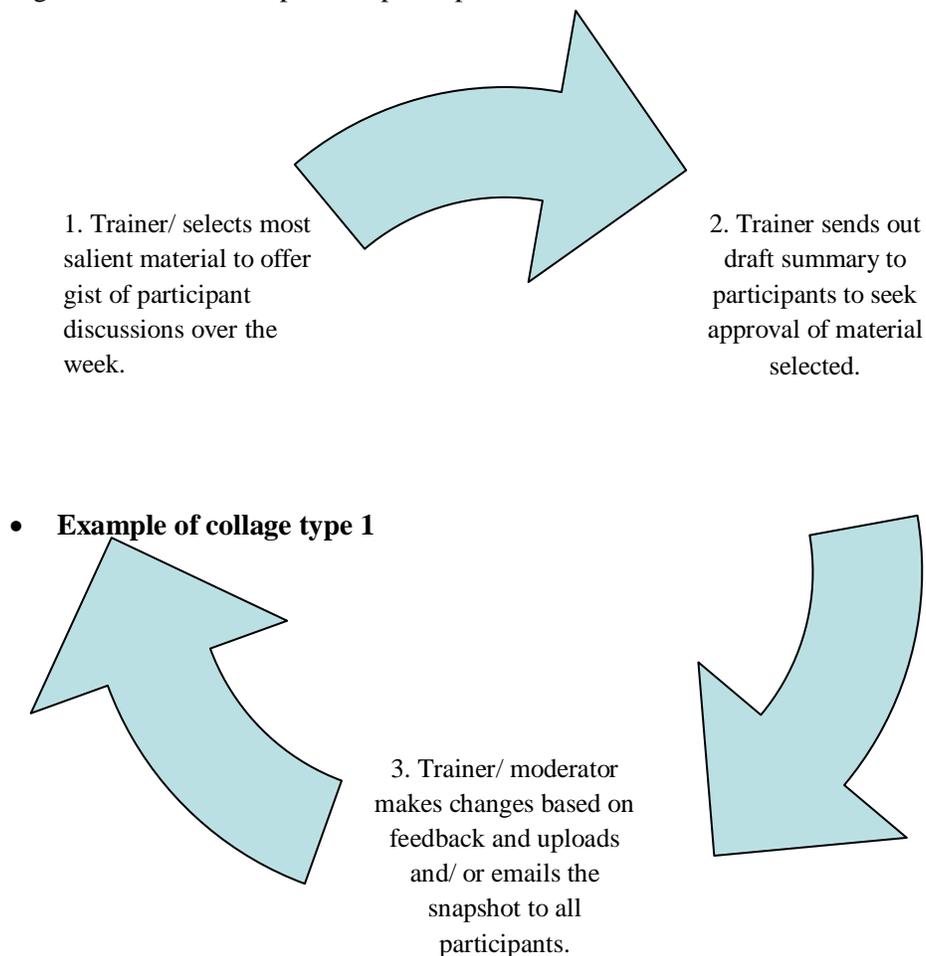
Below is a reduced version of a type 1 collage revealing only two out of six participant's postings from a forum during week four of case study three. The trainee communications with these two participants over that week are given along with any discussion that may have ensued.

Participant A's news this week: '*Students were finally arranged to sit in groups. However, I found they had little pair work experience, not to mention group work experience.*'

Trainer response to participant A: *did you speak to their class teacher (your supporting teacher)? Their original teacher usually adopted individual work, pushing students to pay attention to the teacher.*

Participant B's news this week: '*I was bothered by how to introduce grammatical terms to my students in a more interesting and effective way. My students are only grade2 students and part of the required grammatical knowledge is too difficult for them to understand or differentiate. More important, I have many worksheets and exercises books to be finished in class, which is required by school and have to be done in a very tight schedule.*'
Trainer response to participant B *many participants have found the same. Do you manage to follow the schedule?*
Participant B's answer to trainer: *I planned to teach the related grammar items right before they started to do worksheets. I supposed it would be easier for them to understand the exercises, however, some students' work still made me very frustrated.*

### 3.2.2. Collage type 2

Figure 3 is a snapshot of the principle discussion topics of a forum over one week.
Figure 3

1. Trainer/ selects most salient material to offer gist of main topic of discussion over the week.

2. Trainer sends out draft summary to participants to seek approval of material selected.

3. Trainer/ moderator makes changes based on feedback and uploads and/ or emails the snapshot to all participants.
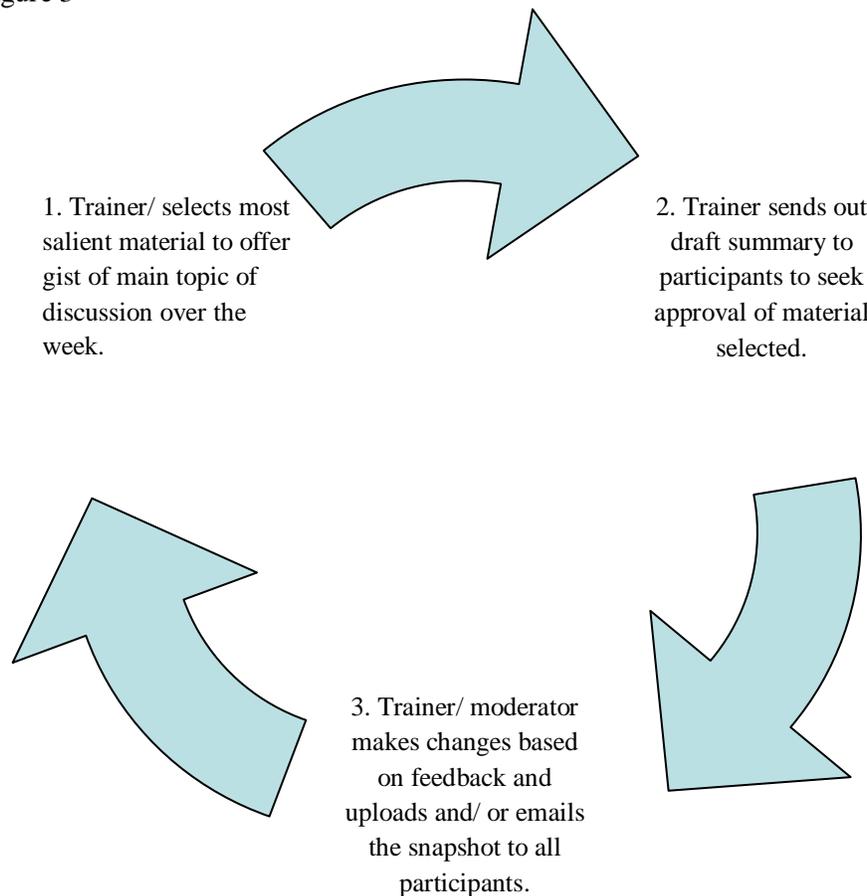
- **Example of collage type 2**

Below is a snapshot of one of this week's main topics of discussion: using IT in class

Participant A: '*I found that teachers here seldom use IT in teaching. I adopted power point to introduce myself with a lot of vivid pictures. I found young kids loved those visual images.*'

Participant B: '*Once I turned back to the worksheets attached to their textbook, they suddenly lost interest and nearly no one would give me any response I believe it was because they are accustomed to this teaching and learning style. Now I am facing a problem that how to make those exercises provided by textbook more interesting.*'

Participant C: '*I have asked students to work in groups and they will do presentations with PPT for the class.*'

Participant D: '*During the first week of school, I observed my supporting teacher. She was teaching International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to the class and she used PPT to upload sound bites too (like Stan) and play them to see if students had guessed the right sound.*'

These snapshots were collated from the threads of a weekly forum and then sent out to all absent participants at the end of each week as an email attachment. This helped to avoid any trainees from alienation. For example, during case study three, a trainee was too busy to log on and post during two weeks of her practicum, and after that she was ill for one week. During these three weeks, she was not involved in the COP in any way. However, when she returned to the site after these three weeks, she commented that she had been reading about the interesting experiences her peers had had during her absence through these snapshots and she was immediately able to offer her opinions about some of the issues raised online.

As already mentioned, these case studies were set up to support trainees during their eight-week practicum. Therefore, keeping participants in the loop at all times was essential.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Action research

The action research framework was an essential part of this research. The researcher had never previously moderated online virtual environments of this kind. Therefore, as Aristotle (384-322 B.C) states 'for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.' These findings grew over time from multiple observations. Had the action research cycles not been adopted, it would not have been possible to construct the 'developing online awareness and community model' or the 'collages for maintaining participation'.

These two models were created and refined over three case studies and were the products of much trial and error cycles of practice and relevant academic research in action while the case studies were being conducted. It was the need for action that provided the motivation to construct and apply these instruments.

### 4.2. Asynchronous nature of the online environment

In tandem with Jonassen's (1996) view, the researcher found that the asynchronous nature of the online environment offered the appropriate opportunities for participants to reflect on each task, and compose meaningful, considered postings, making extended turns which were more aligned to higher order thinking. Specifically, it enabled participants to carry out the forum searching activities for the 'find a similarity' task. This activity might be ineffective in a synchronous communicative situation, as it requires time to skim through the threads and postings that can make up a forum. It also provided this researcher with the capability to create the collages which were almost always made up of dialogues taking place over more than one day. Thus, with asynchronicity, there is a continuous interplay between observing the data of new proceedings in the research and collecting research data of interactions prior to that moment. This creates a dual time frame: a continuous present during the action research being conducted and a past which is made of several pasts: varying from 'yesterday' to 'last month' and so on. It is therefore possible to navigate the forums and research simultaneously in both present and past time, which facilitates the researcher's need to analyze and evaluate.

### 4.3. The developing online awareness model and the collages

This researcher has found that asking participants to effectuate an online socialization activity, often known as a 'getting to know you' right at the beginning stage of an online learning community is not effective as it does not set the scene for academic learning and it does not raise participant awareness about the potential benefits of online community participation. What was needed first, in this context, was an activity such as the 'ranking activity' that presented the benefits of engaging in the research. In addition, the strategy of informing absent participants about the activities of the site in the form of collages was important in maintaining interaction. In the post-forum asynchronous interview feedback, trainees acknowledged how useful the collages were in keeping them in the loop of the community's weekly activities. Further, there is an advantage in constructing the collages for the researcher. At the end of each case study, the collection of these collages provides a good summary of the interaction and the principal content of the forums. After several case studies have been enacted over a longer time frame, this proves to be a useful reference section.

## 5. The limitations of the study

### 5.1. Dual role as teacher educator and researcher

Although this study was related to this researcher's work as a practicum trainee teacher supervisor, the research projects conducted were set up and conducted as a supplementary support for supervisees, and this was done completely independently by this researcher. However, there is of course an ethical dilemma in that the research did become a part of the supervision of this researcher's students, albeit independent and supplementary. Thus, questioning the voluntary nature of the participation: participants may have felt indirectly coerced to cooperate in the research study. It is essential to stress that, although it did not occur, if a student had decided not to participate, this decision would have been fully respected. This was made explicit at the outset.

**5.2. Reflexivity and confirmability**

An important issue connected to the research process as well as the selection and analysis of the data is this researcher's values or reflexivity, and the impact these may have had on the research. It is likely that extracting all researcher bias from this qualitative research is impossible. However, there is a need for qualitative researchers to strive to demonstrate that findings emerge from the data and not their own predispositions. This is also known as 'confirmability'. Attempting to ensure confirmability thus refers to the qualitative investigators conscious concern for objectivity. One common way to ensure this is to adopt triangulation of the data. The feedback from participants between case studies aided in giving a less biased report of the effectiveness of the strategies developed during the research. Answers from informants relating to the final open question 'anything else you would like to add?' were sometimes very frank, honest critiques of the system put in place. In addition, both research notes and personal writings were compiled throughout the research. In this way, this researcher strived to separate observations from emotions. The research notes contained descriptions and analyses of the observations of the interactions online and content of the postings whereas the personal writings contained researcher reactions to the projects, a place where feelings about how the research was developing could be recorded. Therefore, although objectivity might not have been ensured, it was hoped that observation versus sentiment was.

## *6. Conclusion*

As noted in the literature review, language use is situated and influenced by its social context (Mey, 2001). The research findings suggest that if participants are communicating through English as a lingua franca (Kirkpatrick, 2010), it is useful to model the register or formality of the language to be used online for dialectical interaction. This finding reflects other studies (see Gee, 2004; Clarke, 2009) which posit that online teacher education programmes should engender an awareness of online discourse and communication strategies.

The findings also suggest that even today, as e-enabled teacher education is increasing, participants benefit from being explicitly informed about the potential benefits of working together in an online, asynchronous environment. Participants overwhelmingly noted that learning by first writing about and then reading about one's thoughts and experiences was effective, which tends to suggest that asynchronous communication does enable higher order functioning.

The findings also suggest that actively working to build relationships at the outset of the community through e-moderator strategies is essential, particularly if the site is a short-term, task-based learning community. This helps to support research from Skinner (2009), who argues the need for an instigator of stimulus or 'spark' which 'fires' interaction and Downing et al.'s (2007) results that argue for the need for interesting tasks to encourage socialisation and increase the use of a discussion forum. It also affirms research (Jones & Peachey, 2005) that argues for more compelling socialization activities at the launch of the community such as the ranking task to establish online relations rather than mere 'getting to know you' type tasks.

In addition, maintaining an online learning community by summarizing the content of its postings, either by offering a snapshot of the  discussion themes or of each participant's weekly communications, and informing absent or less active participants about this content, can very much help sustain the use and even lead to the growth of the learning community. Without these strategies, it is suggested that online learning communities that are set up to support neophytes during complex periods such as school practicum placement, may not facilitate learning as effectively because use may be hindered through time constraints.

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