

Nurturing communities of practice: The case of a TESOL virtual community of practice (VCoP) in Italy

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Communities of practice (CoPs) have become a major theme of teacher education and professional development, as they provide opportunities for collaborative professional growth. In reflecting on the value of virtual communities of practice (VCoPs), this paper describes the effort made by a teacher educator to create a TESOL VCoP in Italy. While the purpose was to connect a group of widely dispersed EFL teachers, allowing them to engage in collaborative learning processes leading to innovative teaching practices, the paper takes the stance of the teacher educator's self-inquiry. Reflection is directed towards gaining an understanding of the role(s) played by the teacher educator in helping community members nurture the VCoP through their participation and practice.

Introduction

To achieve ongoing professional learning, it is my view that teachers should be provided with concrete opportunities to form their own community in which they engage in collaborative learning processes leading to innovative teaching practices. Once back from training courses and workshops, teachers have little time in their daily routine to try out new ideas and adapt their practice to what they have just acquired. Concrete opportunities can be explored through participation in communities of practice (CoPs), or “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.4).

As a teacher educator in Italy, I work on teacher professional development (TPD) with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. From my experience, I realise that teachers wish to continue networking long beyond TPD schemes to exchange professional views and keep abreast of current trends in EFL pedagogy. The issue of how TESOL practitioners can form their own lively community outside institutional boundaries is of particular interest for me both as a teacher and teacher educator. One focus for this interest has been the TESOL virtual community of practice (VCoP) I built in Italy to encourage a group of EFL teachers to nurture their self-sustained community. Trewern and Lai (2001, p.45) define VCoPs as “groups of teachers who can get together and make use of communications technologies to access teaching resources, source new ideas, use communications technologies to share ideas or innovative teaching practices, and reflect on aspects of classroom practice.”

In this paper, I investigate the case of the TESOL VCoP to reflect on the value of building and nurturing similar communities for professional development. Based on the belief that “when a practitioner becomes a researcher into his own practice, he engages in a continuing process of self-education” (Schön, 1983, p.299), I use a teacher-research approach and carry out self-enquiry to gain an understanding of my role in assisting community members to nurture the VCoP through their participation and practice. I also source community members’ voices to draw professional reflections on the benefits and challenges of the experience.

Building and nurturing a VCoP

Currently, CoPs are a major theme of TPD (Schlager, Fusco & Schank, 2002), as they are considered powerful catalysts which stimulate teachers to undergo changes and improve their practice. Whatever the purpose for building a CoP may be, these communities have in common three structural elements: a domain of knowledge, a community of people and shared practice (Wenger, 1998). Although a domain of knowledge, or a shared interest, creates a common ground, “communities of practice are not just celebrations of common interests. They focus on practical aspects of a practice, everyday problems, new tools, developments in the field, things that work and don’t” (McDermott, 2000, p.2). A community of people is, therefore, made up of committed practitioners, who systematically engage in social interaction to develop a shared repertoire of resources.

Nowadays, collaborative technologies make it easy to build VCoPs, and represent the fourth structural element contributing to their creation. Collaborative technologies play a key role in shaping community environment and interaction, as they compensate for the lack of physical space. Since VCoPs differ from other CoPs, which are spontaneously emerging groups (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), their purpose, organisation and structure require careful thought. It is first worth thinking about whether VCoPs are the best way to organise learning. If the goal is to gather participants, otherwise geographically scattered, to engage in learning by doing, then VCoPs by nature facilitate a socio-constructivist approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1978), and connect people beyond time/space barriers. Moreover, the purpose of a VCoP is extremely important for its members. With a clear purpose, the community leader acts as a builder who chooses suitable technological tools, sets learning objectives, and designs activities

to create and define the VCoP structure. At the same time, understanding the purpose of the VCoP helps people decide whether to join a self-selected and voluntary community. A clear purpose also helps the leader act as a host who moderates interpersonal dynamics, and as a facilitator of learning processes, while community members modulate their involvement accordingly.

In nurturing VCoPs, Misanchuk *et al.* (2000) warn that if community members reject the invitation to elevate their engagement with each other, we will be left with something less—a cohort, not a community. Thus, participation is the key to a successful CoP, although it can occur in a number of different forms. One type of participation commonly associated with CoPs is Lave and Wenger's (1991) "Legitimate Peripheral Participation." Legitimation is generally concerned with CoP authority relations. However, VCoPs are usually self-sustained systems, where social relations are legitimated informally and not hierarchically. On the other hand, peripherality presupposes the existence of full participants, and refers to individual social relations as an empowering process which enables newcomers to move from the periphery of the community towards its centre. This process requires encouraging members to develop a sense of belonging to the community. However, what distinguishes CoPs from other communities are their reified products, concrete representations of their community practice, which help them gain understanding of their changing professional skills, and reap full benefits from the experience. As a consequence, different forms of participation and practice reflect processes which nurture individual VCoPs differently. Wenger (1998, p.96) comments that CoPs

come together, they develop, they evolve, they disperse, according to the timing, the logic, the rhythms, and the social energy of their learning. As a result, unlike more formal types of organizational structures, it is not so clear where they begin and end. They do not have launching and dismissal dates. In this sense, a community of practice is a different kind of entity than, say, a task force or a team.

Thus, every VCoP has its own specific lifecycle, which, according to Wenger (1998), consists of five stages of development: 1. Potential; 2. Coalescing; 3. Active; 4. Dispersed; 5. Memorable. In the potential stage, a community pre-exists when people cope with similar issues, although they do not benefit from shared practice. Typical activities of this stage involve tuning between potential members, and creating a common ground. In the second stage, when members acknowledge their potential and coalesce, they define a shared interest in or joint enterprise for the CoP, and mutual engagement binds them together in a social identity. The CoP is active when its

members are committed to developing a practice, which may range from sharing a repertoire of ideas to engaging in complex activities and projects, or creating artifacts, tools and documents as reified products. When all community objectives are satisfied, members are no longer actively committed, but remain in contact. Although the CoP is still alive, it enters the stage of dispersion. Eventually, the CoP becomes a memorable experience when it no longer occupies a central role in people's lives, although they recall it as a significant part of their identity through story-telling, and by preserving reified products.

The TESOL VCoP in Italy

Participants

Participants were all members of one of the three local TESOL-Italy groups based in Benevento, Cosenza, and Venice. As committed practitioners who had had no other occasion to connect at an intra-group level, the participants welcomed the opportunity to further their professional development beyond spatial and temporal constraints. Despite the fact that none of the participants had any experience of acting as co-instructional developers in a Learning Content Management System, they volunteered to join the VCoP with high expectations and motivation. In total, there were 24 in-service EFL teachers, from a cross-grade teaching background, who applied through their local TESOL groups, all intending to undertake changes in their teaching practice. The VCoP hosted 26 widely dispersed members, including an e-learning expert and myself as the community facilitator, who took part in 'anytime, any place' learning, informally bound to one another in social interaction and community practice.

Methodology

Wenger's (1998) five-stage lifecycle is here used to clarify how the VCoP arose and developed.

Stage 1: Potential (4 weeks)

Discussing issues of teacher education in the field of new technologies with my colleague, who coordinates the TESOL group in Benevento, gave rise to the VCoP potential. Not having a common professional practice we could share and discuss made us aware of the value of having our own community. A VCoP could connect professionals outside institutional boundaries, and allow distributed committed practitioners, who rarely have a chance to engage in face-to-face communication, to

learn by doing, and share their thoughts and practice. The need to find each other and discover commonalities was extended to our colleague in Venice to virtually connect colleagues from north to south, and to the e-learning expert to technically support the endeavour. In this stage, the TPD project was planned and approved by TESOL-Italy. Kairòs, the Learning Content Management System used for this VCoP, was set up.

Stage 2: Coalescing (3 weeks)

All members, self-selected through the local TESOL groups, registered on Kairòs, and started nurturing the VCoP through their social participation. At this stage, they explored connectedness, familiarising themselves with the system's user-friendly collaborative tools (community and group chat rooms, coffee and testing areas, general and group forums), which supported synchronous and asynchronous communication among the distributed members. Participants defined a joint enterprise in pursuing the innovative collaborative practice of designing EFL Learning Objects, or digital resources that can be reused to support learning (Wiley, 2002). In this stage, they recognised their potential as instructional co-developers to create, store, reuse and manage digital learning content from a central object repository. Indeed, members negotiated community, willing to be instructed in the theoretical domain of EFL e-resources by the e-learning expert. Eventually, members had become familiar with each other and with the environment, and had started building a sense of belonging to the community.

Stage 3: Active (12 weeks)

A socio-constructivist approach was adopted to engage in developing the shared collaborative practice of designing EFL Learning Objects. Members agreed to engage in joint activities in which they undertook to describe an online EFL module. They created their own Learning Objects as part of the module, and as artifacts of the community. The activities involved in generating their own Learning Objects allowed members to renew interest in teaching materials, and adapt to the change of online content and to the need to choose parameters in order to standardise their Learning Objects. Participants were also committed to learning how to use metadata to describe and catalogue their Learning Objects. They practised tagging their products with metadata to store and further reference them in digital repositories. While participating in this process of co-constructing meaning, a number of utilities (user folders, group work areas, shared web space, archives) helped the teachers keep track of and store their concrete

representations of community practice, supporting socio-constructivist learning (Plastina, 2007). Eventually, five tagged Learning Objects were produced as the outcome of group work with different foci in terms of EFL target learners (young learners – young adults), learning levels (CEF A1 – B2), language skills (reading, writing, listening and oral interaction), and content (getting around town, discovering lands of paradise, learning through songs, ordering meals, fit and healthy).

Stage 4: Dispersing (1 week)

After 15 weeks, all VCoP goals were achieved and members were still in contact. At this stage, they received feedback on their practice from the e-learning expert. They were also asked to voice their experience by posting short reports to the general forum before the VCoP entered its final phase.

Stage 5: Memorable (Present)

The VCoP has definitely entered its stage of being a memorable professional experience. To date, this stage is still in existence under three different forms: 1. *word-of-mouth*: participants continue to positively recall the VCoP with other colleagues during TPD workshops and conferences; 2. a *TESOL blog*: participants have created a professional blog as a follow-up to the VCoP, inviting colleagues from other local groups to join the *new* community; 3. *re-use of reified products*: most members have reported integrating their Learning Objects into their syllabi; one participant re-employed her reified product to set up an e-twinning project.

Reflection on VCoP participation and practice

The experience of helping the TESOL VCoP members nurture their self-sustained community challenged me to engage in self-inquiry into understanding how my role changed significantly during the different stages of the VCoP's lifecycle.

Coalescing

In the first three weeks (stage 2), I took the lead to assist participants in building a sense of belonging to the community. Initially, I acted as a community host in welcoming participants to the newly built community. I then facilitated this developmental stage by activating community-building processes which allowed tuning between members to take place. For this purpose, two plenary chat sessions were held together with the e-

learning expert to promote social interaction between members of the different TESOL groups, and to support them in the use of the system's technical functionalities. These sessions enabled me to inquire into members' modality of participation.

Patterns of participation

The chat threads stored in the general chat archive were analysed to identify patterns of participation. Qualitative findings showed three types of participation: 1. one-to-one interaction between single members and the community facilitator or the e-learning expert; 2. intra-group interaction between members belonging to the same TESOL group; and 3. scarce interaction (lurkers) without much personal involvement in the synchronous events. It was clear that members' participation was still not effective in nurturing the VCoP. In the first type of participation, interactions on a one-to-one basis were legitimating only the community experts as authorities. By placing trust only in their expertise, these participants were engaging in hierarchical social relations which would not contribute to nurturing the informal self-sustained community. In the second case, I realised that participants were still strongly anchored to their real-world social identity, which hindered the sense of feeling themselves to be VCoP members, and slowed down the process of reaching the active stage of the VCoP. As far as I could judge, participants who were acting as lurkers were encountering social and technical difficulties in the new virtual environment. At this point, I took the lead to assist the group by adjusting to their needs in order to facilitate the community in reaching its crucial stage of becoming active. I guided lurkers to use the testing area to try out the array of the system's utilities without inhibition. I especially encouraged dyad interlocutors to visit the coffee area, where they could relax over a virtual coffee and socialise with other community members. I also stimulated members to get beyond dyadic interaction concerning personal queries by asking them to post and share their ideas on the general forum. As a stronger feeling of connectedness stemmed from these processes in which I had acted as a community facilitator, social scaffolding, trust, reflection, and negotiated meaning were nurtured, creating the balanced conditions for the VCoP to move onto its core stage of becoming active.

Becoming active

Offering members new professional opportunities for collaborative learning practice first meant stimulating them to reflect on how they intended to design their EFL Learning Objects. Vibrant synchronous and asynchronous exchanges led the community

to negotiate an agreement that Learning Objects could be standardised to the parameters of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) (Council of Europe, 2001). This reflective participation triggered noticeable changes during the 12 weeks covering the VCoP's third stage. I was moving away from my role of community facilitator toward that of community collaborator, while VCoP members modified their *modus operandi* in significant ways. Five members took the lead as CEF content experts, and three mentored inexperienced members on software applications. Their expert participation strongly contributed to the community's professional growth. In addition, the community took the action of creating five e-groups to share practice, thus shaping new social dynamics. I considered this transformational participation an indicator of how the VCoP was highly valued by all members. The extent to which participants were taking responsibility for their learning through cooperative group participation became even clearer when they sorted themselves into five groups composed of distributed community members with mixed abilities. Moreover, each e-group decided to appoint a leader to monitor group practice and to act as spokesperson during two inter-group chat sessions that were held to exchange ideas and provide feedback on ongoing practice. This was tangible evidence of the professional bond among group members and of their full community participation. In learning to delegate their participation, it was clear that members changed the way they valued the VCoP. They understood that delegating meant sharing the workload, and also that it critically contributed to developing and maintaining strong community membership based on trust and on social scaffolding. Finally, I realised that I enacted the role of community adviser, supporting members in their doubts and uncertainties as they gradually led their own professional development processes.

Voices from the VCoP

In the VCoP's stage of dispersion (stage 4), the five e-groups posted their short reports to the general forum. Although they were all generally positive, I decided that an in-depth qualitative analysis of their 'voices' would allow me to deepen my professional understanding of the benefits and challenges of the experience. The main issues voiced are reflected through the most significant tokens.

Individual benefits

Community voices helped me understand that the VCoP offered its members a number of individual benefits. First, the VCoP raised greater individual professional awareness,

upgrading each member's domain knowledge and keeping them abreast of innovative teaching practices:

None of us was used to considering technology as a resourceful way to teach and learn; our understanding developed progressively through the acquisition of new knowledge and by cooperating in learning by doing. (e-group 3)

Individual benefits were also perceived through a learning-focused sense of identity of the VCoP:

The experts pushed us ahead and encouraged us in the difficult moments of our learning process, showing us trust and our possibilities of success. (e-group 4)

Members also gained individual benefit from finding a sense of sharing with colleagues:

Cooperation in the group has been smooth with no conflicts from the start. (e-group 1)

One community member even developed awareness of how she integrated her cooperative strategies with her colleague:

I am more holistic in my learning processes, whereas my colleague is more analytic in her approach, so our exchanges have drawn our attention to how we were developing materials in two different, but complementary, ways of looking at things. (e-group 2)

Individual benefits were also claimed to derive from a sense of belonging to the VCoP:

Cross-group cooperation was fundamental to give us psychological strength to focus on our tasks. (e-group 3)

We took advantage of all our e-mates' reflections in the general forum to become aware of instructional design. (e-group 4)

Strengthening professional growth

It also became clear that even identifying problems related to group cooperation contributed to strengthening members' professional growth:

Despite the absence of communication, which provoked delay in the work production, I rejected the idea of giving up and invited the group to try involvement once more. (e-group 5)

In the first stage, two group members adopted a rather personal way of working as they used to meet physically. Their asynchronous cooperation, however, gave us the chance to start the module and agree on the topic. (e-group 2)

Collective Benefits

Community voices also gave me insight into a number of collective benefits. First, it was clear that members valued building a new common method and model around specific competencies:

We were all trying to identify the possible Learning Object to develop following an instructional design (ID) model, although our colleagues at school didn't have a clue of what we were talking about. (e-group 4)

In addition, they seemed to appreciate the benefits they collectively reaped from the increasing access to expertise:

We learned how we could exploit a Learning Content Management System with our students. (e-group 2)

Finally, it was evident that the VCoP helped participants retain knowledge which they could adapt to their own teaching contexts:

We appreciated Keller's ID model as it can help us refine interaction and cooperation among students. (e-group 1)

Problematic Group Dynamics

It appeared that the main challenges which community members had faced concerned time pressure, group involvement and group conflict. Deadline pressure was seen as strongly related to group involvement:

After five weeks, a group member gave up for personal problems, so we needed to better plan our little time available by deciding who would do what to meet assignment deadlines. (e-group 1)

E-group 5 went through particular challenges related to group involvement and conflict:

Unluckily the group had been missing the regular presence of its leader, so stronger efforts had to be made to meet deadlines.

Some great misunderstandings came from the leader who criticised our work and sent a rather rude message to the forum. The community facilitator's role was fundamental in managing group conflict, by running a special group chat session in which professional cooperation, trust and respect for others, netiquette and virtual social behaviour were discussed at length.

This *therapeutic* session was helpful in re-establishing a cohesive group, which was “no longer frustrated by observing the greater cooperation of the other groups and their superior method of proceeding”, as mentioned during the synchronous event. My participatory role had led me to monitor the group and support its needs through strategic intervention. My awareness of problematic group dynamics allowed me to

facilitate the re-construction of group identity, based on cooperation and not on a sense of competition with other groups.

Conclusion

The TESOL VCoP offered its members a unique professional experience, allowing them to reap individual and collective benefits from making professional connections outside their usual institutional boundaries. It particularly enabled them to acquire a body of new domain knowledge, but above all, to develop a new mode of professional action through cooperative participation and practice, overcoming disjunctions of time and space. However, nurturing truly committed cooperative VCoPs is far from easy. It requires understanding that “learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (Lave and Wenger, 2002, p.57) and that it is crucial to support the empowering process of different levels of participation which nurture a VCoP’s lifecycle. Community leaders should engage in a participatory role, encouraging members to reflect on and transform their modus operandi through processes of cooperative practice and professional self-mobilisation.

Beyond this short but fruitful experience, it is worth pursuing further understanding of the value of VCoPs as alternative TPD models, which can provide teachers with greater opportunities to take charge of their learning and change their often routinised teaching practices.

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