

DEVELOPING ONLINE COMMUNITY: WHERE DOES TEACHER PRACTICES FIT IN?

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Developing communities is one of the main emphases tertiary institutions have due to the potentials of community. Its potentials in the academic domain or professional domain have been established by Brindley, et al. (2009), Gratton and Erickson (2007) and Palloff and Pratt (2005). Other researchers have also indicated that community can enhance quality of interaction (Salmon, 2004) because it enhances “the flow of information among all learners, the availability of support, commitment to group goals, cooperation among members, and satisfaction with group efforts” (Rovai, 2001:33). Picciano (2002) has also pointed out it affects academic performance and coursework completion. The professional domains also capitalise on community diversity in terms of knowledge and experience to realise workplace’ initiatives (Adler and Heckscher, 2006). With the provision of online learning environment (OLE) at tertiary institutions, developing a community is becoming more viable because teachers are able to plan and orchestrate instructional experience, assess and make changes *in situ* to support the development of online community so that interaction among students are promoted and students’

interdependence on each other are nurtured. With this in mind, this research set out to understand the development of online community in OLE and the teacher practices in relation to the respective online community.

It is believed that the panacea to realise the potentials of community is teacher practices; it is the teachers who “empower” the community (Coppa, 2004), who are “responsible for creating the container” for instructional experiences (Pallof and Pratt, 2004) and are accountable in creating, nurturing and sustaining community (Rovai and Wighting, 2005). Teachers cannot assume automatic community building just because students are working in groups (Pallof and Pratt, 2004). Teachers have also been cautioned that poor quality of community (incoherent, inactive and shallow discussions) can happen in the OLE (Deris and Tan, 2014; Hew, et al., 2010). In fact, studies have shown that teachers’ active and on-going involvement is indispensable in fostering desired community (Deris, et al., 2012a; Ke, 2010; Shea, et. al., 2006).

McKerlich, et al. (2011) suggested teachers’ involvements or teacher practices are both ‘direct and indirect’ and are related to “the design, direction and facilitation”. Supporting this, Deris, et al. added that these practices are both planned and spontaneous (2012b) and include actions that are seen by students as passionate, attending to and participating in the learning process (2011). In this study, these views define ‘teacher practices’. Meanwhile, ‘online community’ is defined as students “who interact and engage in shared activities, help each other, and share information with each other” (Wenger, 2006). In a recent study by Deris, et al. (2014), it was found that even in a teacher-less online environment, community can be developed. Thus, with the premise that teacher practices can build community, it is important to explore community in an online environment with a teacher. This will provide insights into teacher practices in relation to the online community that exists in the OLE.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

Focusing on exploring online community with focus on teacher practices, this study pursued the following questions:

1. To what extent did the online community interact with one another? Was the interaction sustained?
2. How did the community help each other in their learning?
3. How did the community perceive their learning environment?

Twenty two undergraduates enrolled in Teaching English as a Second Language bachelor degree programme were involved as participants. This selection was based on convenience sampling, of which the participants who fit the criterion required are readily available. Adopting Wenger's definition of 'community' mentioned earlier, the criterion for the selection of participants was 'shared activities'.

The OLE in this study, s.a.s.s.y., or "simply another social space for the young" was introduced to the undergraduates as "a virtual discussion room for bold and vibrant TESLIANS to share, discuss and learn from one another...". s.a.s.s.y. was implemented for seven weeks and based on teacher practices derived from previous studies (Deris, et al., 2012b & 2011).

Capitalising on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2012), this study employed mixed-methods approach to provide a more complete, holistic and contextual portrayal. Contributing equally, (1) surveys, (2) student interviews, and (3) students' online discussions were used as data sources after s.a.s.s.y. has ended.

All 22 students participated in the discussions in s.a.s.s.y. Distributed to all students in a face-to-face (F2F) setting, survey data was analysed using SPSS. The semi-structured interviews

were also carried out in (F2F) setting with eight students. To gauge more data and validate the findings, students were also contacted via facebook message tool afterwards. **Content analysis** was carried out on both data from interview and discussion threads (DTs). However, themes from the online discussions were derived using **Lee's (2003) coding and Hew and Cheung's (2008: 1114) depth thread measure for online discussions.**

1.3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1.3.1 SUSTAINING COMMUNITY INTERACTION

Findings from this study indicated that students were interacting with one another in the pattern of inquiry and answer, but the interaction was not sustained. Based on depth thread measure, only one discussion thread (DT3) reached level 6 and this confirms “a discussion is taking place” and that it is “sustained or extended” (Hew and Cheung, 2008: 1114). The other DTs have lower levels (DT1, DT2, DT4, and DT7 = level 5; DT6 = level 4; DT5 = level 3). Analysis of DTs based on Lee's (2003) coding revealed that only 69 posts lead to continuous interaction i.e. the inquiry and answer pattern, with clarification, sharing of knowledge, agreeing and disagreeing embedded in subsequent replies. Table 1 illustrates two types of inquiry and answer pattern extracted from DT2.

Table 1(a) Inquiry and answer postings

Types	Posting
Explicit Interaction (EI)	<u>totally agree with S7.</u> most of the students (<i>S15</i>)
Implicit Interaction (II)	Learning should be made easy for students. If they are comfortable learning in Malay, we should not force them to learn in English. There are a lot of cases where students nowadays are too stressed out. If we force them to learn in language that they do not prefer, they might lost interest in learning the subject (<i>S22</i>)

*EI refers to expression of agreement using language expressions (e.g. 'I agree

with Jane’/ ‘As Jane has mentioned’). It refers to expression of agreement by providing detailed explanation only.

The findings seem to indicate that sustained, extended or continuous interaction were not fully achieved. Findings from surveys and interviews seem to suggest that online interaction depended more on teacher, and not so much on actual discussion requirements. This assumption is derived from the fact that 81% of the students responded positively (agree) to *Teacher communicated important due dates and time frames*, but negatively (disagree) to *I received timely feedback from my peers*.

During interview, it is suggested for teacher to “*participate as actively as everyone else... and provide personal views*” (S2) and because students “*liked being replied*” (S7), “*like to hear from teacher*” (S4) and “*feel ecstatic when teacher responds*” (S6). Perhaps, as suggested by other researchers (Xin, 2012; Jones and Young, 2006), teacher’s interaction is key to sustain interaction.

In addition, Conaway, et al. (2005) stated students do not automatically engage in interaction that foster community (e.g. giving supportive feedback, complimenting others, expressing appreciation). Therefore, it is not surprising that DTs analysis indicated only 4 posts belonging to social interaction i.e providing positive response (e.g. Yes, I get your point, Jane.), self-disclosure and greetings.

1.3.2 HELPING COMMUNITY LEARN

Eighty six percent of the total number of students agreed to the survey statement “*Students in this online course helped me learn*”. Analysis of DTs also revealed an overall of 139 posts to be substantial to their learning. Specifically, the students helped one another to reach consensus, initiate group activities, and provide detailed explanations on academic items.

Eighty two posts were related to consensus making i.e students discussed an issue presented and reached a common agreement, as illustrated in the following excerpts in Table 1(b) taken from DT6.

Table 1(b) Consensus making through discussion

Student	Posting
S4	Multicultural materials in curriculum should not only address the multicultural elements on surface but it should also function as a practise for students' to learn the real meaning of being a person who has multicultural value. Just by saying through words will not reach students. In fact they should experience it for themselves. How? By conducting short plays ...
S3	Yes, agree that multicultural curriculum can goes beyond the potrayal of multicultural elements within the curriculum and teaching materials. I found that the element of multicultural is not enough in English textbook and syllabus...So,
S21	Multicultural elements within the curriculum and teaching materials should be re-structure. More and more real life examples and activities can be included in the curriculum to provide an opportunity for students to expose to. Another way which can be done is ...

Thirteen of the posts in the online discussion reflected initiation of group activities via two ways: (1) offering detailed explanation, and (2) providing URL. Illustrated in the Table 1(c), in detailed explanation, the student directed the discussion towards two new topics, i.e. ‘teaching tolerance’ and ‘humour for talking about culturally sensitive issue’.

Table 1(c) Initiating group activities by offering detailed explanation

Student	Posting
S5	everyone has his/her accent. Now, we have got to deal with the fact that "no man's speech is inferior, only different". "Our problem is how to teach tolerance of difference and acceptance of a man for what he is, not for how he talks". Thus as future language teacher, we have to educate our future students to appreciate not only our own language but also other languages. No language is superior to the other because language is a system and every system has its own strengths

and uniqueness.... language of humour is very effective to be used to talk about culturally sensitive issue because it seems to be a bit polite in a way that people would not be easily intimidated.

Forty four postings also contain detailed explanation on academic items, with an example shown in Table 1(d).

Table 1(d) Detailed explanation on academic items

Student	Posting
S19	I think in macrosociolinguistics context, social inequality can be explained by how level of formality and social class affects the verbal and nonverbal communication of the participant. Labov's research in the Lower East Side of New York City showed that individual speech patterns were part of a highly systematic structure of social and stylistic stratification. He studied how often the final or preconsonantal (r) was sounded in words like guard, bare and beer. Use of this variable has considerable prestige in New York City. It can be measured very precisely, and its high frequency in speech makes it possible to collect data quickly. Thus, social inequality affects the choice of particular linguistic form in language. I think social inequality also can be best explained through multilingualism.

In line with the focus of this paper, students were also interviewed about teacher practices that encourage students to help each other in their learning. For this, students pointed out teacher's emphasis on working together in different group sizes helped them "*learn many things*" (S2) and understand concepts/topics/questions from the explanations given by their peers (S1, S4 and S6), "*get some ideas from what they have written, their responses help in my thinking and help in making connection to what we have learnt*" (S4), "*prepare for the final examinations*" (S8), "*correcting my views*" (S7), and "*focus on topics that are important and relevant.*" (S6).

Survey data resulted the following findings: '*Teacher has*

provided a platform for discussion’ (86%), *‘Teacher provided useful information from a variety of sources.’* (90%). Although students liked the *“thinking outside the box”* approach (S6), *“independent learning and collaborative learning concepts”* (S4), **interviews also suggested** increased *“feedbacks and facilitation in the online discussion* (S5) to help students in *“understanding concepts”* and *“being corrected”* (S4, S7). Students’ expectations for greater attention on teacher’s intellectual and scholarly guidance as subject matter expert are also reflected in the **survey**: *‘Teacher was directly involved in guiding students towards understanding topics’* (57%), *‘Teacher helped me revise my thinking’* (62%), *‘Teacher provided explanatory feedback’* (67%).

Absalom and Léger (2011: 206) established that although peer scaffolding among students are encouraged, students still view teacher as **“privileged channel providing feedback, monitoring progress and assessing input”** and that teacher’s comments are **“indicator of satisfactory completion of task”**. Researchers suggest comprehensive formative feedback to students, as a whole group and as individuals (Nagel and Kotzé, 2010) and comprehensive corrective postings (Bedi, 2008).

1.3.3 PREPARING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Findings indicated that students’ perceptions of online learning environment are generally encouraging. Majority of the students responded positively to the following **survey statements** *‘Teacher has helped set climate for learning’* (81%). In the **interview**, S8 pointed out that *“the design of the course made it looked casual and friendlier not so formal...s.a.s.s.y sounds cool!”*. Three other students also mentioned the **logo and s.a.s.s.y** and stated that *“It’s suitable for young students”* (S1), *“it’s unique!”* (S4), *“represents us”* and *“it is refreshing!”* (S6). Three students (S4, S5, S6) also pointed out having a modicum of anticipation of the **comic strips** uploaded online. S5 responded, it *“created some*

sort of less formal environment... every time I log in I wish there's a new one."

In addition, the students (S2, S7, S8) also mentioned the lecturer's picture on the main page. A student revealed getting "some form of adrenalin rush" (S8). Having lecturer's photo online seems to create a sense of feeling that lecturer is monitoring (S7, S8) "what is going on" (S2). S6 pointed out that lecturer's photo was a constant reminder to "participate and participate". Meanwhile, S2 remarked it "is telling 'you better do well in the discussion'" and added that "I try to post something good". Similarly, S8 stated extra effort to search for online information was given "to refine" postings.

Finally, the students also commented on the layout of the course. In s.a.s.s.y., the first page was used as the main page systematically housing the netiquette, learning tasks, learning materials and deadlines. Expressing satisfaction, S4 stated that the lecturer took into account the students' need and this consideration is "about 85%" of the lecturer's attention. When prompted about the specifics of the learning environment, the students responded "Everything is just there" (S6), "Everything can be seen in one page" (S7), "easy to see and search for things" (S2). Since all was housed in one page, students also remarked "won't miss anything" (S7), downloading handouts and submitting term papers easier (S2), deadlines were clearly seen (S5 and S6), and the online discussions were available on the main page (S7 and S8).

Three students (S2, S6, S7) described the first page as "well-organised". S7 also used the expression "interactive, eye catching"; S8 elaborated on similar qualities by pointing out that "important announcements are signalled with a blinking thumb" and important piece of information were "written with red coloured ink"

Collison, et al. (2000: 1) point out that “course design and presentation mechanisms” coupled with “excellence in online dialogue facilitation” as important aspects that need to be mastered by online teachers. In her review, Swan (2004) also lists interface design as one of the factors influencing students’ interaction. Northcote (2010) and Reupert, et al. (2009) also encourage teachers to express their personality in the online course as it can increase “warmth” and decrease the “dehumanisation” of learning. Teacher’s selection of images, captions, and colours coupled with placement of social activities, for example, can reflect teacher’s character, values and predisposition. The fluidic nature of the online environment allows teacher to design the OLE and to make changes *in situ*. Teacher is required to possess technical knowledge and to invest time to manipulate the environment that the students are going to be immersed in (Deris, et al., 2012a; Swan, 2004).

1.4 CONCLUSION

This study started off with an aim to investigate the development of online community with a focus on teacher practices. This study supported the findings on the potentials of community in helping students in their learning. However, this study has also demonstrated that having shared activities does not necessarily lead to sustained interaction. From the findings and discussion, it can also be concluded that OLE can be designed to support community development.

With the notion that ‘teacher practices’ refers to planned and spontaneous, direct and indirect teacher’s actions in the instructional design, direction and facilitation, this study has shown several practices that support the development of community. First of all, to ensure interaction is sustained, teacher practices must also actively posting messages in the interaction. Spending too much time posting messages that are not pertinent to learning, however, is ill-advised and counter-productive. This study recommends

teachers to become part of the community and to model the ways to sustain interaction by participating in the discussions. Since this research lacked data concerning the postings from teacher, an investigation of how teacher's postings can sustain interaction is recommended.

Secondly, providing comprehensive corrective postings and confirmation of learning are teacher practices that are integral in ensuring students confidence in the subject matter leadership of their teacher and their overall learning experience. Adopting the role of 'sage on the stage', teachers risk moulding students to become mere 'voyeurs' and not academic 'connoisseurs'. Nevertheless, becoming a 'guide on the side' completely could put teachers' expertise to waste. Recognising neither side provides ideal condition for learning in tertiary level, there must be a balance. As much as we want our students to grow on their own, some form of recognition or assurance of students' achievement is still much needed by our students. In net-based professional communities, at the receiving end, we often find managers or consumers who, in a sense, provide confirmation that their outcomes or innovations are of consequence. In the context of online learning where there are no actual managers or consumers, teachers must then provide subject-matter leadership by adopting both the roles of guide/facilitator as well as assessor.

Finally, teacher practices must include deliberate planning and designing of learning environment. The interface of an online course usually houses the most basic elements, not different to a physical classroom with the usual furniture. Online teachers, however, are empowered with technology to make changes to their classroom. Compounded with the resources on the internet, we can choose whatever 'furniture' with functions, colours and design of our choice and present them in whichever arrangements that we choose them to be. While there is no specific guide on how learning environment should look like, teachers are reminded that

the design will influence the climate of learning and can encourage the development of a community.

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