

Is Presence of Community of Practice Dimensions Sufficient for Community-Based Teacher Professional Development?

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ABSTRACT

Professional development programmes that include teacher collaboration can help teachers meet their professional needs and control their professional lives. They can voice their needs and expectations to peers who share similar experiences. Moreover, teachers can discover new teaching roles and opportunities, develop new skills and find motivation in being a member of a group (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Hawkes, 2000). With the affordances provided by Web technologies, the potentiality of online communities of practice (CoPs) as a means of improving teacher professional development has become a reality and is gaining popularity. The Online Continuing Professional Development for Teachers (e-CPDeIT) project aimed to develop three online CoPs; that is, English, Mathematics and Science communities among twenty Malaysian Smart school teachers. This paper examined the key CoP dimensions, as expounded in Wenger's (1998) framework, and investigated whether their presence is sufficient for successful CoP among teachers in the English cohort. The findings revealed that although the key CoP dimensions were present, there were several factors inhibiting their participation in the community-based cohort. It can be implied that it is crucial to consider these factors in developing teacher online CoPs in Malaysia.

Keywords: Communities of Practice (CoPs), Continuing Professional Development, Teachers, Web Technology, Wenger's (1998) CoP Dimensions

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, more and more research points to the role of collaboration in teacher learning (Cutrim-Schmid, 2011; Mackey & Evans, 2011; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Parker et al., 2010; Tsai et al., 2010) as it creates a learning culture that helps build a community where learning is supported and stimulated. Professional development programmes that include collaboration can help teachers meet their professional needs and control their professional lives. They can voice their needs and expectations to peers who share similar experiences (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). Moreover, teachers can discover new teaching roles and opportunities, develop new skills and find motivation in being a member of a group (Hawkes, 2000). Such communities offer teachers an avenue to engage in professional discussions, connect with a wider peer group and seek support.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) have undergone massive transformations with the advent of web technologies. Information and communication technologies (ICT), with features such as interactive and reflective practices have boosted the development of rich online environments that promote the sharing of professional strategies. This includes the sharing of best practices and professional development opportunities. However, in Malaysia the notion of online CoPs as a tool to assist teachers in their professional growth is still at its infancy. Most teacher professional development (TPD) programmes provide face-to-face in-service training that offers little opportunity for teachers to engage in professional discussions, connect with a wider peer group and seek support (Lee, 2007; Malakolunthu, 2007). The online continuing professional development for teachers (e-CPDeIT) project aims to provide these opportunities for three cohorts of teachers (English, Mathematics and Science) from five Smart schools, through the development of online CoPs. A central conviction underlying the design of the project is that teacher collaboration in CoPs can help teachers grow professionally. This paper attempts to examine the presence of

key CoP characteristics or dimensions as expounded in Wenger's (1998) CoP framework in the English cohort. It also investigates whether the presence of these factors is sufficient for developing online community-based teacher professional development.

Background

The Smart school initiative was launched in 1999 to encourage the development of ICT in Malaysian education. Smart schools are technologically enriched schools where teaching and learning practices and school management have been systematically reinvented. The initiative aims to equip students with IT competence, science and technology as well as to transform the education system; that is, to move from an exam-dominated culture to a thinking and creative knowledge culture (Ministry of Education, 1997). To begin with, the Smart school approach was used in the teaching and learning of four subjects: English Language, Malay Language, Science and Mathematics (Ministry of Education, 1997).

Teachers play a significant role in ensuring the success of any educational reform, including the Smart school initiative. Thus, to constantly enhance knowledge, competence and efficiency of Smart school teachers, the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Ministry of Education has conducted several training programmes and courses for teachers. However, despite the training provided, teachers are facing numerous problems in implementing the project. The problems include lack of ICT skills (Hajar Mohd. Nor, 2005), lack of continual skill training (Razak & Embi, 2004; Samuel & Bakar, 2006) and also the ineffectiveness of the training programmes (Malakolunthu, 2007). Hence, it is clear that the training programmes have not brought about the desired effects for the successful implementation of the Smart school initiative.

Considering all these, the e-CPDeIT project was developed to provide Smart school teachers with the means to continually increase their technological knowledge and skills and

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