

Chapter 33

Use of Community of Practice Dimensions in Community–Based Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

The role of communities of practice (CoPs) in teacher professional development (TPD) is increasingly recognized. CoPs help teachers in a cohort to reflect on their practices, develop new skills and find motivation through mutual collaboration. With the affordances provided by Web technologies, the potentiality of online CoPs as a means of improving (TPD) has become a reality and is gaining popularity as the flexibility provided help teachers improve their instructional practices. 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 their use in the English cohort's TPD. The findings revealed that although key CoP dimensions were present, several factors inhibited teachers' participation in the community. It can be implied that it is crucial to consider these factors in developing online CoPs for teachers in Malaysia.

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, more and more research points to the role of collaboration in teacher learning (Blitz, 2013; Krista & Jacobsen, 2013; 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. It is no wonder then that collaboration is an increasingly common theme in many teacher professional development (TPD) approaches (Kelly et al., 2014). Unlike the approaches used in conventional TPD programmes, 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, Meirink et al., 2010). In other words, collaboration is a potent TPD tool as it leads to improved teaching practice, increased efficacy, higher readiness to experiment new approaches as well as deeper commitment to continuous improvement (Seo & Han, 2013; Moolenaar et al., 2012). It could ultimately lead to enhanced student learning and improved student achievement (Moolenaar et al., 2012; Vescio et al., 2008).

Realizing the immense power of teacher collaboration, calls for the development of teacher professional communities are widespread (Levine, 2010). Currently there is a profusion of community-oriented TPD approaches such as community of practice, community of inquiry, community of learners and professional learning communities. Although these communities vary conceptually, their underlying conviction remains the same; that is, they offer teachers an avenue to engage in professional discussions, connect with a wider peer group and seek support to enhance their teaching practice and improve student learning (Snow-Geron, 2005).

Communities that work on the basis of a shared set of values and principles and have shared goals and shared enterprise are defined by Wenger (1998) as ‘communities of practice’ or CoPs (Iyer & Reese, 2013). The crux of CoPs is social participation which is viewed as a process of learning (Wenger, 2008). This feature augurs well for a teacher-collaboration based TPD. 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. It includes the sharing of best practices and professional development opportunities. For teachers involved in online CoPs, they are engaged with the group, develop a sense of community, and improve their pedagogical content knowledge to assist in their instructional practices (Blitz, 2013)

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 with other teachers to share knowledge and practices as well as seek and provide 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.

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