

EVOLVING FROM COLLABORATING IN TEACHING
— REFLECTIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF
A TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY OF
PRACTICE WITHIN A CHINESE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Drawn from research of communities of practice (Wenger 1998), this paper holds that knowledge is an alive concept and realizes itself by social participatory learning . It presents a progressive , dynamic learning community developed to create a collaborative structure , which in turn provides channels for expressing dissent and negotiating differences . The 2 .5 year longitudinal participant observation of a learning community reveals that the dynamism and aliveness of “ a teacher professional learning community ” (Newmann 1996) are attributed to its evolving structure of collaboration , which contributes to competence increase , leadership dissemination and identity construction . This study highlights “ differences ” in community development that provoke dialogues and changes as well as serving as precursors for informed decision -making and teachers evolving identities . It is hoped that this paper can serve as a “ reference ” for teachers — particularly those who are of different nationalities and statuses — who are interested in building or supplementing their local professional communities of practice .

Key words

learning community ; reflective dialogue ; collaboration ; differences

Introduction

Based upon Wengers (2002 :7) definition of communities of practice and Newmanns (1996) characterization of teacher professional learning community , the term “ a teacher professional learning communities of practice ” used in this paper means “ a group of teachers who focus on students learning and deepen their knowledge and expertise in teaching by collaborating and interacting on an ongoing basis ” .

In Communities of Practice , Wenger (1998) depicts the social nature of learning by regarding it as an interactive process between belonging , doing , experiencing and becoming . Drawn from a 2 .5 year longitudinal participant observation of a teacher professional learning community at a language university in South China , this study reinforces Wengers idea of learning and further points out the role of structural changes in creating a dynamic community of practice . It argues that the dynamism and aliveness of a teacher professional learning community originates from its evolving structure of collaboration , which contributes to competence increase , leadership dissemination and identity construction . By analyzing the interactions between members and the transformations in the collaboration structure , the study reveals that differences and disparities become impetus to dialogues , diversification and development . Differentiating from the “ agreement ” nature implied in numerous studies of learning communities , the paper highlights “ disagreement ” and “ difference ” in that they provoke dialogues ,

adjustments ,and changes ,and serve as precursors to informed decision making and teachers evolving identities .

The author in this study takes a double role :an actual member of the community and an observer who studies the community . The community exhibits a creole nature ,as it constitutes a matrix of “ 3 +1 ” : three Chinese teachers collaborating with one experienced Canadian professor . The direct and actualized involvement facilitates the author's attempt to distill theory from practice , while at the same time interpreting theory in practice .

It is hoped that this paper can serve as a “ reference ” for teachers — particularly those who are of different nationalities and statuses — who are interested in building or supplementing their local professional communities of practice .

Context

The learning community in question was established in a language university in South China , nationally recognized as an elite university for English education and as a generator of various teaching reforms . As part of the process to develop it into a comprehensive university ,an English Language Education Department was established in September 2005 . In order to accelerate the growth of this faculty ,the young department invited foreign experts to contribute expertise and guidance . With the aim of cultivating qualified local teachers for the institute ,a veteran Canadian professor and three Chinese teachers were selected . These educators were already acquainted with each other and displayed an interest in cross-cultural collaboration ;they were consequently teamed up to design and conduct courses for education majors . Since it was the first time for the university to enroll education majors ,the entrance mark was relatively lower than the normal average so as to secure enrollment . Students who failed to meet the standards of their preferred majors could join the department if they ticked the item of “ Agreement with the Arrangement of Ministry of Education ” on their college application forms . This , however ,resulted in a problematic level of students English and ,of greater concern ,many students initial disinterest in this major .

The newly formed team faced a dual mission :teaching education courses while simultaneously utilizing these courses to nurture students interest in the major . The three Chinese teachers constituted two novice teachers and one department chair . None had any experience teaching courses on education in English . Therefore ,it was a priority for us to meet regularly to plan lessons with the foreign teacher , who had teaching experience extending four decades . A weekly meeting routine was subsequently developed . During the 2 .5 years of the study ,the community managed to spend at least two hours each week conducting “ reflective dialogues ” (Newmann & Wehlage 1995 ;Louis & Kruse 1995) despite changes in its members and collaborative structures . Since examinations play a crucial role in China's education system ,Chinese students are deeply concerned with the amount of concrete knowledge they can learn in classes . However ,western education emphasizes “ doing ” and a democratic relationship between teachers and students . Therefore ,these reflection meetings became crucial occasions for teachers to foster new concepts and to negotiate methods and practice that catered to students needs while at the same time complying with Chinese education expectations .

Existing Literature

With its initial articulation in 1990s ,the conception of teacher professional learning communities is relative recent and refers mainly to school based communities (Talbert 1993 ;Little 1990 ;Louis ,Kruse & Bryk 1995) . The variables of the conception encompassing “ school wide professional community ” (Louis , Kruse & Marks 1996) , “ professional learning community ” (Louis & Toole 2002) ,and “ teacher learning community ” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2003) are all underpinned by a belief in the value of participatory and collaborative learning . According to Newmann (1996) ,teacher professional learning communities are characterized by :

- 1) shared norms and values ;
- 2) a focus on student learning ;
- 3) reflective dialogue ;

- 4) deprivatization of practice ;
- 5) collaboration .

A more theoretical approach to communities of practice can be found in Wenger's *Communities of Practice*, in which he (1998 :3) argues, "learning becomes, fundamentally, a social phenomenon and is placed in the context of our lived experience and participation in the world". In furthering his ideas of social learning theory, Wenger (1998 :4) proposes four main premises :

- 1) We are social beings ;
- 2) Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises ;
- 3) Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises ;
- 4) Meaning is ultimately what learning is to produce .

He (1998 :5) also raises four components to characterize social participation as a process of learning .

- 1) Meaning (learning as experience) :a way of talking about our (changing) ability —individually and collectively —to experience our life and the world as meaningful .
- 2) Practice (learning as doing) :a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources , frameworks ,and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action .
- 3) Community (learning as belonging) :a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence .
- 4) Identity (learning as becoming) :a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates person histories of becoming in the context of our communities .

Figure 1 . Components of social theory of learning :an initial inventory(1998 :5)

A model (see Figure 1) developed by Wenger displays how knowledge is animated into four types of learning (belonging, becoming, experiencing and doing) which represent an individual's pursuit of meaning, growing and being. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder define communities of practice as "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" (2002 :7). This definition resonates with Newmann's characterization of teacher professional learning communities. Genuine teacher professional learning communities focus undeviatingly on students' success; they interact by conducting reflective dialogues and collaborative teaching which deprivatizes individual teachers' practice; the passion, devotion and concord in the collective learning process is based upon shared norms and values.

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) also put forward seven principles for cultivating communities of practice, and helping these communities gain "aliveness". The principles include :

- 1) To set a design for evolution ;
- 2) To open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives ;
- 3) To invite different levels of participation ;
- 4) To develop both public and private community spaces ;
- 5) To focus on value ;
- 6) To combine familiarity and excitement ;
- 7) To creating a rhythm for the community .

The first principle means communities of practice are dynamic in nature and the design should reflect adaptability . The key to this point is to combine design elements that help to catalyze community development . The sixth and seventh principle indicate that communities of practice should be cautious of overcooked collegiality and static regularity and work to consciously create changes ,newness and tempo that will stimulate and update their learning . These three principles emphasize the need for deliberate changes which can be employed as catalysis for evolution and enhancement .

Despite the positive attributes of communities of practice ,it cannot be denied that the actual living community can be a harsh entity for both members and non-members alike (Bauman 2001) and should actively promote variety and “ a plurality of interests and perspectives ” (Nixon , Martin , McKeown & Ranson 1997 :14) . Nixon (1997) refers to “ accommodating values ” rather than “ mediating interests ” and Renshaw suggests this might be achieved by “ highlighting the power of learning premised upon dialogue ” (2002 :4) . The openness to dissent and disagreement and the willingness to negotiate ascertain the veracity of learning as described by Dewey (1916) : Learning should be undergirded by principles of justice and equity of access and reflective of the type of inclusive learning necessary for a truly democratic society . Deprived of this veracity ,learning corrupts ,communities of learning lose their essence and “ contrived collegiality ” arises leading to “ balkanization ” ,and “ comfortable collaboration ” (Fullan & Hargreaves 1998 :55) ,where members lose ability to see problems and so ignore issues of how to further improve their practice .

The aforementioned principles for cultivating communities of practice can be seen as preventive measures to avoid the occurrence of “ contrived collegiality ” . Principle 2 and 3 are effective in achieving openness ,objectivity and balanced views from both informants and peripheral members ;principle 4 implies that the private friendship should parallel ,rather than interfere with ,the impersonal business attitude in workplaces ,principle 5 guarantees that dissenting members can argue or debate ,but ultimately continue to work towards shared goals and values .

In summary , Wengers theory of communities of practice provides a systematic theoretical foundation for the analysis of dynamic learning ,for it explicates the interactive relationship between community ,practice , meaning and identity . It resonates with other researches on teacher learning communities ,which focus more closely on teachers ,but similarly emphasize shared values and practice . Nevertheless ,communities of practice are not immune to discord and disagreement . Principles set forth by Wenger to cultivate communities of practice imply that “ aliveness ” roots in changes and interactions with people at various distances from the core of the community . Based on the existing research ,the current study aims further explore how difference functions as an engine for structural evolution and the healthy growth of a learning community of practice .

Methodology

Drawn from the theory and literature of communities of practice ,the current study rests upon my 2.5 year participatory observation of a four-member teacher learning community of practice in the English Language Education Department ,where education major debuted in the university . Due to its historical significance ,I ,both as an observer and as a member teacher in the community began a journaling process at the inception of the new department . My journals ,students reflection essays ,and email exchanges between the foreign teacher and students are utilized as data to help interpret the distinctive nature of this community in action . These writings are all in English and corrections to students writings are made only for convenience in comprehension . Pseudonyms have been applied to community members . The narration and data are presented in a natural or qualitative way . Therefore ,

this study is qualitative and ethnography based. It argues that the community in question may be understood in terms of its three stage evolution as defined by the changing form of leadership and the consequently changed learning on the part of the apprentice teachers. The three stages are entitled :1) "central leading —learning from belonging" ;2) "peripheral leading —learning from experiencing" ;3) "equalized leading —learning from doing and becoming". Altogether the community has instructed three courses :1) Introduction to Teaching (ITT) ;2) Creative Learning and Critical Thinking (CTCL) ;3) Practical English Language Teaching (PELT). ITT and CTCL were taught twice. Implications of each stage, presented along with the data, demonstrate the role that differences play in recharging, restructuring and redefining communities of practice.

Evolving from Collaborating in Teaching — the Three Stages of A Teaching Learning Community of Practice

Stage one :Central leading —learning from belonging

The initial constitution of the four member learning community of practice in question predicted the central position of Robert. Robert had a PhD in Education and had been a teacher for forty five years. Mary, despite her department chair position and years of teaching English to non-English majors, had no experience in teaching education courses; Lucy and I were rookie teachers, passionate and committed but in great need of guidance and direction.

The first education course we taught together was Introduction to Teaching, a course necessary not only for the freshmen education majors but also for we three Chinese teachers. The challenges and pressures of the curriculum propelled us to prepare the course early in the summer holiday. Robert proposed a lecture plus seminar formula out of an intention to interweave pedagogical theories with practice, thus enhancing students understanding of and interest in their major. The total of 162 students, divided into six classes would attend a lecture conducted by Robert, with the three Chinese teachers observing and assisting in his class. The seminar lesson which followed the next day would be conducted by one of the three Chinese teachers in each class and would function as an arena for students to apply new theory into education related activities designed together by the four teachers. During seminar lessons, Robert would be, in his words, "a moving supervisor and mentor" visiting and observing our classes. Besides assisting us through his mentorship, Robert would develop teaching content /an ongoing self-made textbook on a weekly basis and email it to us on the weekend. We would communally prepare for and reflect on our lessons Monday afternoon, during the interval between Monday morning lecture and Tuesday seminar.

The collaboration pattern was a relief for us Chinese teachers. As a conscientious and considerate professor, Robert sensed our nervousness and voluntarily assumed a large portion of the workload. A lecture for 162 students required not so much an exact transmission of knowledge as the physical strength, passion and experience to retain students attention through inspiring teaching and skillful classroom management. The devotion and charisma Robert exhibited as a teacher and mentor naturally built our trust in, admiration of and reliance on him.

A significant part of our reflection meetings were earmarked to explore the reasons behind Robert's teaching decisions. When illustrating Blooms Taxonomy, Robert used a popular western children story — The Three Little Pigs —to demonstrate how to ask questions at different levels of high order thinking. The journal entry below records Robert's justification for choosing the story :

Why did Robert choose such a simple story? The story was popular with kindergarten children but might be deemed "too easy" for college students to practice their skills of asking questions at different levels of HOT (high order thinking). Why not choose some insightful and formal writing which may match more closely to HIGH order thinking? Lucy and I talked about it during students discussion and brought the question up to Robert in the meeting. Robert seemed pleasantly surprised when being asked the question. He said it was his habit to package "difficult" in "simple". In his eyes, levels of thinking resided everywhere and they had much to do with the ideas but not the language itself.

Teacher's journal, October 17th, 2005

To facilitate students learning by explaining complex ideas in simple settings may be a tiny gesture, unconsciously adopted by senior teachers, but it reflected a teacher's focus on student-centered learning. A teacher needs not secure his/her authority by presenting students a myriad of concepts and further confusing them by talking "big and deep". Following this logic, Lucy suggested that we select some well-known Chinese fables for students to practice their questioning skills, so as to marry Chinese settings with a western thinking model. The implementation of Lucy's idea yielded satisfactory results:

I gave them the English translation of three Chinese fables and there were small talks about the Chinese idiom associated with each fable. When I asked them to design questions, they seemed busy looking up dictionaries to find out English equivalents for some Chinese concepts. ... They designed interesting questions. One group's question was "How would you compare the moral of the three Chinese fables with that of the Three Little Pigs?" Students made connections not only between two classes but also between the eastern and the western wisdom.

Teacher's journal, October 18th, 2005

The course ultimately met our goals of enhancing students' understanding and interest in the education major. Most of the students reported, in their final reflective essays, their delight in taking the course, and some even mentioned they would like to consider teaching as their possible career.

The students' success mirrored our own achievement. Wenger reifies community as a social setting where individuals achieve a sense of belonging and learn from being together with others. It is in this learning community that we build up our confidence and competence by learning together under the guidance of a veteran educator. Bandura (1977:22) believes that "most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action". Knowledge becomes a competence and a knowing process which requires our participation to react with others. In this stage, the central role of Robert was positive as it endowed the community with self-assurance, solidarity and stability. In the preliminary stage of apprenticeship, the master demonstrates his expertise through his convincing ability to model and guide his apprentices. Therefore, it is beneficial for young communities of practice to have a committed and capable figure who can model, lead and inspire and thus provides a supportive and reliable environment for novices.

Stage two: Peripheral leading — learning from experiencing

The topics covered in Introduction to Teaching, such as modern English teaching methods, global language and education, the KSA (knowledge, skills and attitudes) model, and Bloom's taxonomy fostered the depth and breadth of students' thinking. The successful outcome encouraged us to adopt the same model of collaboration in teaching Creative Learning and Critical Thinking during the second semester (2006.2 — 2006.7). Interestingly, students began to employ their "high order thinking skills" to analyze problems they perceived in the classroom structure:

I like Robert, respect him very much and appreciate his attitude towards the students. He wants to change the education system in China. But you know it is very difficult for us to do so. In the last several years, the government issued a policy about reducing the students' burden. But evidently it ended up as a failure. The students are still under a lot of pressure. We still have to face examinations, suffering a lot from them. ... Maybe he does not understand the situation in China thoroughly. And there are also a lot of activities to do, which sometimes make us feel tired. ... But I can still learn many things as a student and learner in his class, such as how to treat and encourage the students to make them passionate in their study and as a student, what attitude we should take toward our study.

Student's reflective essay, April 8th, 2006

The comment was a response to various activities and projects designed in the course to enhance students' creativity and their ability of using English. Many students, however, considered the workload to be excessive, as they would soon take TEM 4 — a national English proficiency test for English majors — in the next semester. Students regarded the test as a yardstick for assessing their English competence; however, Robert held the opposite view:

It (TEM 4) fails to determine students true ability to communicate in English for it exams the ability to “remember” English and a few lexical and skill based samples of the language. It will gradually be phased out in China, and either replaced by more valid measures of communicative ability or eliminated entirely.

Robert student email, March 24th, 2006

Robert believed in constructive learning and designed a variety of activities to practice his “learning by doing” philosophy. “Students always exceed our expectations” was his catchphrase. However, Chinese students felt activities wasted their time and that they learned little. We discussed the conflicts between doing creative activities and preparing for the TEM 4 in our meeting:

Recently, students complained to me that they had no time to prepare for TEM 4 because they had to prepare for musical presentation (how to use music to teach and learn). When I talked about this problem, Robert said he also got emails of the similar complaints. But he believed that activities combined the practice of spoken English, information searching and organizing and, in fact, worked as another way for students to prepare for their exam. The difference was that “instead of practicing English by talking to a wall or a tree they learn together”. We reminded Robert that TEM 4 paid special attention to vocabulary and writing quality which were the weakest areas of our students. Robert thought for a while and said he would think about it and try to find some solution.

Teacher's journal, April 25th, 2006

Robert's solution was to combine creativity teaching with vocabulary learning, as well as carefully correcting students writings on a weekly base. In addition, he observed our lessons, trying to identify the differences between our teaching of the content he had developed. Since Chinese students expected their teacher to give substantial and solid lessons from which they could learn knowledge quickly and efficiently, I often complemented my lessons with supplementary materials. After observing my class, Robert wrote down his comment in my notebook:

You covered an amazing amount of material in a relatively short time! These may have been some concerns about comprehensibility but this does not deter from the effectiveness and efficiency of your teaching. This “relaxed style” is a reflection of your teaching maturity.

Robert's comment, May 17th, 2006

Despite the disparity between our styles of teaching, Robert affirmed my teaching as effective and efficient. In the reflection meeting, he invited all the teachers to describe exactly how we taught after observing his lecture and preparing lessons together. The discussion manifested that Chinese teachers consciously and unconsciously made adjustments to the “western flavored” teaching styles and content. Robert praised us, saying we were putting his teaching content to its best possible use by synchronizing it with the Chinese educational context.

At the end of the semester, Robert announced he had trust and confidence in us and asked us to teach the 2006 freshmen Introduction to Teaching without him. A young Canadian teacher, Jack, would be added to the group. Robert would continue to act as a consultant providing advice and assistance when requested.

The slightly expanded community exhibited new attributes. Being a native speaker automatically endowed Jack with certain advantages; however, being young and inexperienced in teaching this course in some way put him at equal disadvantages. The new community featured increased equality in terms of pedagogical decision making, which in turn led to more freedom and independence in carrying out our ideas. A textbook was selected as the Chinese teachers felt that “the way foreign teachers use materials of their own choice could lead to a sense of insecurity and confusion among students” (Ouyang 2003: 131). Robert's PPTs were adopted as a salient reference and enlightening complement to the new course. Jack welcomed the practice for as he could more quickly close the knowledge gap between himself and the Chinese teachers. We maintained the habit of communal lesson planning and took turns in developing the actual teaching content for specific units. We turned to Robert for consultancy when there were puzzles or difficulties we could not solve in our meetings.

Looking back at this stage ,we can find that with the divergent thinking paths and approaches taught in the course ,students began to think more critically and provided us with increasingly insightful feedback ,as they demonstrated their enhanced knowledge of both teaching and thinking . The better informed students propelled us to better accommodate our teaching methods and content to students perceived “ meaningfulness ” :

We have learned KSA pyramid . Skills and Attitudes are at higher levels and Knowledge is the foundation of them . Without Knowledge ,how can we build Skills and Attitudes ? What is more meaningful for us is that we not only enjoy our learning by doing activities but also get more information and knowledge .

Student s reflective essay ,June 24th ,2006

Accordingly ,we adjusted our teaching content to build a better balance between knowledge ,skills and attitudes . When Robert saw our ability to reformatively transplant his ideas into our teaching ,he pushed us toward the center as he himself retreated from it . Leadership was transferred in this center to -periphery movement . The change seemed to come with little surprise as the community carefully nurtured the seed of growth . Boyer s research (1995) concluded that the most essential factor in a successful school was that of connection ;the most successful learning occurred when teachers taught effectively in their own classrooms but also found solutions together . Chasms did not occur when different voices were uttered . Contrarily ,community members negotiated differences ,shared experiences and actively worked out solutions to accommodate various interests . The appreciating and supporting culture expedited individual members maturity . It was the strategic transplanting of the kinesthetic liberal western teaching style into Chinese soil that enabled the master to identify the readiness of his apprentices to experience a more independent teaching life . The increase of competence premised the redistribution of leadership in a community of practice and prompt adjustment in the way of leading ascertained its further growth .

Stage three :Equalized leading —learning from doing and becoming

During the second round of teaching CTCL to 2006 students during their second semester (2007 .3 -2007 .7) ,Robert rejoined us and suggested that we three Chinese teachers should each develop a feature section related to creativity and critical thinking ,and conduct this lecture to the entire 2006 student body . He expressed his eagerness to see us “ be in charge of the big classroom and be able to do the same thing he has done ” . We agreed but felt quite nervous and requested that our lectures be done later in the semester , so that we could have more time for preparation . However ,the idea was not fully carried out due to a change in that year s academic schedule . After Robert finished his lectures ,each of us only had the time to lecture once .

Nevertheless ,the course plan offered us a prototype for a new format of collaboration ;each teacher took charge of one part of the course which matched their interests and strengths and teachers would rotate their teaching among all classes . Teachers could polish their teaching methodology and deepen their understanding of their area of expertise during each round of instruction . This collaboration model could be refined and realized by equalizing teaching hours and balancing the intensity and difficulty of each part . We decided to readopt this model to teach Practical English Language Teaching . This time , Robert recommended a text book which was written by western scholars and provided a global introduction to teaching the four basic skills in learning English ;speaking ,listening ,reading and writing . We Chinese teachers expressed our pleasure in having a textbook but pointed out that the western textbook might not be really “ practical ” for teaching English in Chinese schools . How could we combine the advanced western English teaching methodologies with the real conditions of China s primary and middle schools ? None of us had any experience teaching English in China s middle schools ,and teaching English to college students could be very different from teaching English to middle school students . This was even more true for Robert . Concerns about these differences led us to a decision :we needed to enroll another teacher who had working experience in middle school teaching . After searching teachers resumes ,we found Juliet ,a 30 year old teacher who not only had two years of English teaching experience in a key middle school ,but also studied in Britain for her master s degree .

Despite her relatively young age ,Juliet provided valuable suggestions such as how to integrate theory

with real textbook analysis . Examples include providing students with the lesson plan format in use by Chinese middle school teachers ;spending one third of teaching hours on students micro teaching ;and requesting peer feedback to build understanding of teaching in practice . I went to observe different teachers classes and found that Juliet made full use of the textbook and excelled at guiding students to interpret pedagogical guidance in Chinese context ,while Robert made the least use of the textbook and was strong at eliciting answers from students by probing and organizing group discussions . Since each of us was responsible for teaching one skill ,during our reflection meetings ,we talked less about content and more about the methods we employed in class and our students response to them . Once ,we put forward the issue of using Chinese in an English class :

Juliet considered the occasional use of Chinese was necessary and helpful and pointed out her argument was supported by a research which proved that sporadic use of Chinese could arouse students attention and serve as a highlight for important points . Robert protested her idea ,arguing that the practice may switch off students thinking in English and hazard the sustaining effect of an English learning environment . I agreed with Juliet and also used some Chinese in my English class . We then asked Robert the question ,“ How do you learn Chinese ? Does your teacher only speak Chinese to you ?” Roberts explanation was very vague and obscure . He ended his defense by promising to email us some scientific research papers and invited Juliet to visit his classes .

Teacher s journal November 5th ,2007

Following the “ Chinese issue ” was our reading of the relevant papers provided by Robert and Juliet visit to Roberts classes . Juliet found Roberts teaching very “ constructive ” and “ highly student - centered ” . In the following reflection meeting ,she mentioned her adjustment to her original lesson plan and inserted a short discussion among students before delivering the rules of teaching listening . We then furthered our discussion on the “ Chinese issue ” :

Juliet and I suggested that in fact whether we should or should not use Chinese in our class is a question concerning the difference between teaching English to EFL (learning English as a foreign language) learners and to ESL (learning English as a second language) learners . Mary supported our idea ,saying :“ Sometimes foreigners cannot understand the difficulties EFL learners have . Besides the opposition of using Chinese in teaching English ,many oppose to teach English skills separately , just as what we are doing now . But we lack the environment and have to split the difficulty so that we can have more focused and intensified training .” Robert nodded and related to his correction of students writing . He said he used to think there was a parallel connection between oral English and written English ;but now students could express themselves freely but their writing was full of mistakes and they did need particular grammar and writing lessons .

Teacher s journal November 12 ,2005

The “ Chinese issue ” was a stimulus to a further study based on both research papers and on spot investigation ,and an on going exploration of the ontology underneath . The reflection meetings thus became a place for exchanging new approaches and ideas . Robert offered us a checklist he worked out for evaluating students microteaching ;but Juliet and I noted that the items focused heavily on classroom management but less on the teaching effect ,i. e. ,how much and how well students could learn from the class and from the experience itself . We proposed a “ portfolio ” approach ,which required the student teachers to write a reflection report ,a modified teaching plan and to put together all their teaching materials and other groups comments . Robert and Mary acclaimed our creative method ,stating that they would try it out in their next round of teaching .

The new collaboration model prescribed a fair distribution of responsibility and entitled each member to an expert status in his/her own domain . With the freedom in his/her own kingdom ,each teacher had opportunities to experiment ,implement and modify his/her teaching ideas . The increased depth from each round of teaching endowed each teacher with more expertise and authority with which to share the podium . The concern about difference between Western English teaching theories and the actual English teaching situation in Chinese schools generated the need for the recruitment of a new member . The addition of the new member brought about more plurality and an atmosphere of debating and sharing . The flattened leadership structure arose from both the restructured collaboration model and the growth in

each member's competence. The reflection meetings became multi-voiced and emphasized more on why instead on how. Different concepts and approaches were brought to the table for discussion, applied in practice, and compared as to their real efficacy. It was the open discussion of differences and actual implementation of various practices that manifested the equality of leadership and transformed community members into independent doers blessed with collaboration, creativity, and critical minds.

Conclusion

This study depicts the growth of teachers in their evolving learning community of practice. It manifests that:

First, knowledge is an alive concept in a learning community of practice. "Knowledge is much more a living process than a static body of information" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002 :9). As social beings, we learn things faster by watching and interacting with others as opposed to reading words from a text. In communities of practice, knowledge is pared down to its core. Knowledge is no longer flat, but three-dimensional, with one explicit dimension of words and data, one tacit dimension of others' experiences, and one creative dimension left for each individual to fill in. The data and information recorded by others are just the cover of the knowledge book. One must open it and test it with his/her own eyes and hands so as to explore its meaning for him/her, and apply it to his/her situations, and extend it from his/her experience.

Second, the evolution in the collaboration structure facilitates the redistribution of leadership, contributes to and proves the competence growth of community members. It also creates rhythm and tempo for the community development. Lave and Wenger (1991) raises the concept of "legitimate peripheral participation". In these situations, people who initially join communities learn from the periphery. As they become more competent they move closer toward the centre of each particular community. Therefore, learning is more a process of social participation rather than acquisition of knowledge. However, as displayed in this study, the community members very often are not aware of their own progress, doubts about their competence and expect for more growth before taking bigger risks. When progress and hesitance are both observed in the community, active adjustment in a collaborative structure can propel individual members to take on a more independent apprenticeship. Meanwhile, intentional structural transformations implemented on a regular basis help rhythmize the community development and impart excitement and aliveness to the community.

Third, open channels of communication should be provided to let differences be heard, and the positive effects of differences depend on an accommodating and negotiating culture nurtured in the community. The familiarity and friendship established in the community should work as the foundation for mutual trust and respect and facilitate rather than hinder the free expression of differences. Meetings, emails, and reflective reports are means to invite diversified opinions from both insiders and outsiders. In fact, it is not differences themselves are crucial; what matters is that differences provoke debate, exploration and motivations for members to better understand each other by reexamining and deprivatizing their practice. The dissent and disparities between teachers and students' interests also indicate the deviation from "teaching for the best end of the students", a basic norm for teachers, and stimulate teachers to make active adjustments to their teaching. The different voices in a teacher community generate discussions, dialogues and negotiations whereby understanding, appreciating and learning is enhanced among members.

Fourth, learning is a continuous identity constructing and shifting process. The reconceptualisation of identity as something continually undergoing revision requires that the learner is someone continually engaged in the process of learning (Nixon, Martin, McKeown & Ranson 1997 :15). In a learning community of practice, learning is actualized in various forms of belonging, experiencing, doing and becoming. It gradually qualifies, empowers and transforms individual members from observers and followers, to adjusters, to reformers and originators. This happens when the community deprivatizes individual practice by allowing access to each other's work spot, exchanging views and sharing experience on a regular basis and as they move toward the center.

For future study

This study holds that a teacher professional learning community of practice contributes to the competence growth of individual members. It nurtures the spirit of teamwork, professionalism and shared ethics, and thus guarantees that our teaching serves our students. It is the very place that teachers continue their learning and become life long learners in their work place. It distills harmony from discord by providing open channels for negotiating differences and encouraging complementary learning. Meanwhile, the communal problem solving experiences inherent to the community inspire teachers to do further explorations and academic research, a dominant focus in many universities, and thus ensuring the balance between research and teaching. Therefore, teacher professional learning communities of practice developed at various levels by Chinese institutions can mirror and contribute to today's China, who spares no effort to build an increasingly harmonious and learning society. It is hoped that this study can provide a jumping off point for teachers interested in building their local communities of practice. Further experiments and analysis of the outcomes will be necessary in future studies.

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