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Community of Practice Theory to Facilitate Teacher Education
Breen, P.**

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Letting Go and Letting the Angels Grow: Using Etienne Wenger's Community of Practice Theory to Facilitate Teacher Education

Paul Breen, INTO University of East Anglia, Norfolk, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a small-scale qualitative research study conducted within a community of English Language teachers, and explores how teacher development workshops can be used to foster or cultivate Communities of Practice. The study was situated in a Language Centre within the domain of UK Higher Education where there was an institutional drive to better integrate the use of new technologies with traditional approaches to pedagogy. Data was collected through focus group sessions with a team of English Language teachers before, during and after a series of teacher development workshops on the use of technology in the English for Academic Purposes classroom. These focus group sessions were then followed up with individual interviews, drawing on a framework of stimulated recall. The data was then analysed through an established discourse analysis framework in the early stages, followed by a more inductive approach of thematic analysis in the later stages; triangulated by classroom observations of all participants. The purpose of the paper is to understand the functioning of a Community of Practice in terms of its contribution to teacher development. The core argument within this paper is that Communities of Practice theory can contribute much to the fields of EAP (English for Academic Purposes), and teacher development in both theoretical and practical terms. It advocates a loosening of the reins on the part of organisations so that teachers are allowed to develop at their own pace and in a manner that is self-directed and tailored to their individual needs. It draws on Vygotskian-based theories of teacher cognition which suggest that in order for development to occur in a teacher education programme, participants need some form of prompting to move from within their "zone of proximal development" (Manning & Payne, 1993, p. 361). This prompting or scaffolding, as described in Vygotsky's own work (1934), generally takes place through a combination of support from more experienced practitioners in the first instance and then "situated engagement and negotiation" with peers and practitioners within a teaching community (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998, pp. 715-733).

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Educational Technology, Focus Group Research, Teacher Development, Teacher Experience With Technology, Teachers' Voices, Vygotsky

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INTRODUCTION

The title of the paper comes from a quote within an American film telling the story of a military veteran coming to terms with his life after involvement in the Vietnam war, after which he suffers a series of flashbacks affecting his perception of reality. This film, entitled *Jacob's Ladder*, takes as one of its central analogies a quote and an idea that the only way to be free of your fears is to let go and set them free to become a positive force in your life. The original quotation and idea, which featured a metaphor of 'demons' changing to 'angels' according to Greeley (1991), comes from the thirteenth century Christian theologian Meister Johannes Eckhart. In the film, Jacob, the central character, only makes sense of his life when he has finally released the demons from his system.

Similarly, in developing a Community of Practice, the trainer or educator must let go of the reins and allow the creation to evolve in its own way, in its own direction, and at its own pace so that it can achieve a life of its own. In order to do this we must harness all forms of energy that technology awakens, and accept, then deal with both the positive and negative affordances that it brings to traditional education. Teachers, as in most professions, cannot learn in isolation even if the classroom can seem an isolated place (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998, p. 716) where those in control of it feel they are "supposed to know it all" (ibid).

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Though Samaras & Gismondi (1998, p. 716) argue that many teachers find themselves in a "lone ranger" role, Etienne Wenger (1998, p.6) has stated that we all belong to communities of practice in both our personal and professional lives. Although the dichotomy of roles could be seen as contemporarily blurred, particularly in light of the demands of today's society and our 24/7 accessibility, communities of practice are an integral part of life both in the workplace and outside. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98)

describe communities of practice as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice." These overlapping communities of practice are described in more detail in Schlager & Fusco (2003, p. 208) as part of their broader Activity Theory Framework (pp, 208-211) which "focuses on the activities in which individuals and groups engage" (ibid, p. 208). This form of engagement, which becomes the glue holding together a community of practice, comes about because "activities take place in the context of, and are influenced by, a surrounding community" (ibid).

Wenger (1998, pp. 125-126) emphasises this theme of engagement by defining a community of practice as "a group that coheres through 'mutual engagement' on an 'indigenous' (or appropriated) enterprise and creating a common repertoire." Guldberg and Mackness (2009, p. 3) state that "at this time, the negotiation of individual identity in communities of practice was central to Wenger's thinking about communities of practice." This sense of the importance of individual identity within a community of practice is further echoed in the work of Darling-Hammond & Richardson (2009) in the context of teacher professional development. Yet, when ideas about communities of practice first emerged, the emphasis appeared to have been centred on the group rather than the individual.

In the earlier stages of his work, Wenger (2000) sought to define communities of practice in quite straightforward terms as being "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise". Essentially, in the words of Rogers (2000, p. 385), the core feature of a Community of Practice is that the actual "practice serves to bring coherence in a community." This sense of practice being at the heart of a community is nothing new as admitted in Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002, p. 40) in which the authors outline how communities of practice have existed since ancient times up to the present day, using the artisans of Ancient Greece and

the guilds of the Middle Ages as examples of communities which had both a business function and a social function. The main difference with such communities of practice and those of the present day according to the authors is that today's communities of practice often exist within large organisations (ibid).

Over a period of time, these communities of practice can “develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices and approaches” (Wenger, 2000, p. 5). Schlager & Fusco (2003, p. 204) also explain how, over time, “communities of practice are viewed as emergent, self-reproducing, and evolving entities that are distinct from, and frequently extend beyond, formal organizational structures, with their own organizing structures, norms of behaviour, communication channels, and history (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Barab & Duffy, 2000; Schlager et al, 2002).” All of these descriptions from the literature find expression in the work of EAP/English teachers. We are artisans in a particular field, and are not only part of a teaching community within our own workplace but part of what Edge (2005, p. 186) has described as being a “broader TESOL community”, indeed a “global community” that is “a far-flung one” in both geographic and cultural terms. This is a community of shared discourse and practices, shared histories, and sets of experiences particular to the profession.

CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY

This particular study seeks to trace the evolution of a community of English Language teachers, using their own voices, and an analysis of the discourse which emerged from a series of focus group sessions and then one to one interviews. It was born out of the need to provide continuous professional development to an EAP teaching team and the original goal was to explore how attitudes to practice were shaped as a consequence of attending a series of teacher training workshops on themes connected to the integration of new technologies

into traditional teaching approaches. This was part of an institutional drive, in the particular workplace herein, to make better use of new technologies in the classroom.

As stated by Munro (2010), in McDougall et al (2010, p. 46), there has been a twenty five year time span in which “IT has been touted as an invaluable, highly influential, pivotal resource capable of supporting, enhancing, and ultimately transforming any area of teaching and learning.” This change has happened at an astonishing rate and accounts for the increasing drive towards greater usage of blended learning approaches, where traditional classroom teaching is integrated with forms of online instruction. These are described by Prensky (2007, p. 40) as moving from those that are straightforward to the more complex and multi-dimensional, such as from old-style video to usage of new mobile technologies.

In line with the action research described by Burns (1999, p.24) this study was prompted by “concrete and practical” issues of “immediate concern” in my workplace. The actual study took place before, during, and after an in-house training programme on the usage of blended learning approaches in the EAP classroom. In this study, the specific context is the provision of Foundation courses within United Kingdom higher education. These Foundation courses are a combination of academic preparation and language studies in advance of progression to higher degree studies. One of the core subjects on these courses is English for Academic Purposes (*EAP*) which Jordan (1997, p. 1), citing the British Council's (1975) ETIC paper, defines at its most basic as “being concerned with those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems.”

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

The workshops in this research study aspired to having democratic and constructivist values at their core. Richards & Farrell (2005, p. 23)

describe workshops as “an intensive, short-term learning activity that is designed to provide an opportunity to acquire specific knowledge and skills” but good workshops are more than just about laying out “cookbooks for effective teaching” (Crandall, 2006, p. 37). Herein the workshops were intended as short term activities but the developmental impetus or impact is longer term when “participants examine their beliefs or perspectives on teaching and learning, and to use this process to reflect on their own teaching practices” as stated in Richards & Farrell (2005, p. 23).

The sequence of workshops which were planned for the teachers in this study featured the following topics; *Introductory usage of Moodle; Pedagogic Approaches to Interactive Whiteboard Usage; Adapting traditional approaches to feedback in the electronic age; Advanced usage of Moodle; Blogs & Wikis on Moodle; & Use of Camtasia as a means of capturing lectures and recording feedback.*

The design was based on a synthesis of ideas from the literature and involved a combination of theory and practice. As argued by Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward (1999, p. 62), a successful workshop should ensure that “different elements fit together to form a complete learning experience.” The initial workshop was based around the usage of a Moodle Virtual Learning Environment. The reason for this was that Moodle was already in use in the organisation, it was something that participants were already familiar with, and there was a demand from participants for greater knowledge in how to use the Moodle site. This approach is supported in the literature by Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward (1999, pp 12-15) who argue that the needs and voices of participants must be listened to at the outset of the design process. Therefore it was felt appropriate that the first workshop should be an introduction to Moodle and it was delivered in the form of a hands-on session where participants had a chance to engage with the learning environment, before experimenting for themselves.

METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANTS

At the outset of this study, there were nine participants, all of whom were qualified and experienced teachers in the fields of English Language teaching and English for Academic Purposes. These nine teachers were part of focus group sessions, in which they participated in a semi-structured discussion, arranged into groups of three. These sessions took place before, during, and after the training workshops, and were transcribed immediately afterwards.

Though the participants shared a common profession, there were differences in nationality, background, and cognitions regarding educational technology in the EAP classroom. Two of the participants were American, one Scottish, one Singaporean, and five English; with a gender breakdown of five males and four females, ranging in age from middle twenties to early fifties. Some had formal training in the use of technology in an educational context while others did not. For a fuller description of the participants in this research please consult Figure One. In line with ethical procedures followed throughout this research process, all participants have been given pseudonyms for the purposes of reporting the findings.

TEACHERS' VOICES AT THE OUTSET

In line with ethical procedures in the university research context, consent was gained from all participants before their dialogue was recorded in the focus group sessions. When the recording and transcription was complete, the dialogue was then analysed electronically by means of a Corpus Linguistics programme known as Wordsmith. The larger corpus of dialogue was divided into sub-corpuses A and B, with sub-corpus A comprised of early dialogue and sub-corpus B comprised of later dialogue. The research questions were:

Table 1. Details of participants in the research study

NAME	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION	RELEVANT TRAINING
Derek.	English male, middle fifties, teacher of EAP.	Masters in TESOL & Cambridge DELTA qualified.
Frank.	American male, early thirties, Programme coordinator.	Masters qualified in ESOL teaching.
James.	Scottish male, middle thirties, teacher of EAP.	Masters of English plus currently undertaking a Masters in Linguistics.
Matthew.	English male, middle thirties, teacher of General English; also an actor and musician.	BA qualified and doing Cambridge DELTA at the start of this research.
Victor.	English male, early thirties, teacher of EAP.	BA and DELTA qualified.
Emily.	Singaporean female, late thirties, Programme coordinator.	Holds two Masters degrees; one on teaching and one in Linguistics.
Kelly.	English female, late twenties, teacher of EAP & Social Studies.	Masters qualified in the field of Sociology.
Patricia.	American female, early thirties, teacher of EAP & Research Skills.	Masters qualified in ESOL teaching and started doing Cambridge DELTA during this research.
Rosemary.	English female, early thirties, teacher of EAP.	BA qualified and started doing Cambridge DELTA during this research.

1. How do EAP teachers articulate change in their practice before, during and after a teacher education programme on the use of technology in an EAP teaching context?
2. What developments are there in the practice of EAP teachers as a consequence of a teacher education programme on the use of technology in an EAP teaching context?

One of the discussion topics at the outset of the focus group sessions concerned hopes and expectations for the technology workshops; whether teachers expected change to occur in their practice and in what form this change might occur. Using the corpus, analysis was carried out on two levels. This involved a quantitative analysis of key words, and then a qualitative analysis of longer stretches of discourse extracted by means of the corpus linguistics software. The reason for this approach was that, by doing a qualitative analysis, I was better able to track the more subtle references to change in practice, and zone in on areas which appeared

to have particular merit in terms of addressing the research questions.

Primary analysis suggested that there was a degree of excitement in terms of the affordances of technology and what it could bring to the classroom, not just for the teachers themselves but also for students. The following extract is taken from dialogue articulated by Matthew:

I think we're at the very beginning of a really exciting period of change in terms of integrating those technologies into the classroom because they're being used by the students anyway in their everyday lives through social networking and all of those things. It's sort of a new thing that's happening in society and in a way education's trying to catch up a little bit with that so it'll be really exciting to learn about new ways of integrating those techniques and methods into the classroom. -Matthew

James similarly articulated hopes of learning something new, which he might then be

able to put into action in the classroom, for the benefit of making lessons more engaging.

I would hope to gain some sort of good practical stuff that I can use in class to make the classes more interesting and dynamic for the young whippersnappers these days. So that's basically it. I'm looking for something good, perhaps to extend my own knowledge of these features and learn some good practical pedagogic applications that I can then bring into the classroom. -James

However, there was also a sense of apprehension in some areas; indeed suggestions of concerns that needed to be overcome before teachers either embraced the technologies at the heart of the workshops or used them in ways that realised their potential. Some examples of these 'concerns' are shown in the extracts of dialogue provided below, with reference being made to 'fear', 'technophobia', 'worry', and the loss of natural interactivity between teachers and students which occurs in classrooms, especially in an English Language teaching context. This was a substantial component of the teachers' articulation at the outset, suggesting concerns about the changes which technology could enforce on their practice.

Within this, I also detected the emergence of a sub-theme regarding the expectation of using technology as if it has become something that is a required feature of classroom practice. Thus the dialogue suggested that teachers' articulation of change is based on the assumption that significant changes have already happened, bringing technology into the EAP teaching mainstream. Hence, they articulated a sense of needing to keep up with all these changes and at the same time possibly not being convinced, as yet, of the benefits of doing so.

If all the systems are massively integrated and one thing goes wrong then you are left literally with nothing, not even any standard whiteboards in the classroom to use because they've been superseded; then that's a problem but that's

just a personal sort of fear, a technophobia anyway. -Matthew

I guess I'd be worried that I'll just slip into a way where I've just got a million kind of PowerPoint projections and it might become very static in the classroom, and you lose that interactive element that's essential to good teaching. -Kelly

Well I think technology is very useful if used correctly. I think some teachers will make PowerPoints, throw PowerPoints, do PowerPoints, and read from the PowerPoints and students will just sit there and they're not listening. -Frank
I think one of the reasons why teachers might not be particularly interested in embracing a new kind of technology is that for me I have found that if I am using something new for the first time there is a real risk that is going to become very one directional and one dimensional and not be as interactive as the other things that I do that don't include technology, at least for the first time.....

There's nothing that'll make you feel old faster than discovering that you're two or three versions behind what everybody else is using. -Patricia

PowerPoint is very presenty and that's like, that's fine if you're doing a lecture but if you're doing anything language related, if you're just going through a whole bunch of slides it's kind of putting a barrier between you and the students. It's kind of about using the technology in a more interactive way and not just because you can. -Victor

Taking these extracts as lexical instances of teachers elaborating on issues relating to the research questions, there were several recurring themes in perceptions of technology and its impact, both positive and negative, on the traditional classroom. There was a clear sense that teachers want to feel as if they were properly trained and not fumbling around in the dark with new applications so to speak. They also wanted to understand the pedagogic rationale for using technology in the classroom, rather than 'using technology for technology's sake' which was

a line articulated by Victor in the course of the first focus group session.

CULTIVATING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

Though the early literature such as that of Wenger (1998) suggests that communities of practice must be organic in order to be authentic, there has been a gradual shift away from this notion as explorations of such groups have developed further. Wenger & Snyder (2000, p. 144) talk about “growing communities of practice from seed” whilst Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002) state that “cultivating communities of practice in strategic areas is a practical way to manage knowledge “(p. 6); particularly at a time of rapid technological change when “the half-life of knowledge is getting shorter” (ibid). Though the organisation did not explicitly set out to ‘cultivate’ a community within the English Language unit, events in the aftermath of the first workshops suggested that one was developing.

After the Moodle workshop, I observed that the EAP teachers began collaborating together in the development of the VLE, without any extra formal guidance. This was also evident in the extent to which they were using it in the classroom and simultaneous reference to its usage in the focus group sessions. The teachers were beginning to rely on one another more than they relied on formal training or development from management, to the extent that they started to explore affordances which had not been highlighted in the training session, such as the design of quizzes. Effectively, the teachers were taking control of the VLE, so that in keeping with the modular nature of the product, they were managing their own learning, and tailoring the design of the learning environment. This was evidenced in the dialogue from sub-corpus B in which there was an increase in references to working together, of peer collaboration, and of developing as a team. One concrete example of this came in the increased number of references to seeking assistance from more experienced

colleagues with qualifications in teacher training and experience of using technology in the EAP classroom.

Statistical analysis showed that in Sub-Corpus A, ‘technology’ and ‘training’ occurred as key words in over fifty instances, whilst in Sub-Corpus B there was a more consistent reference to practical applications of technology. This was evidenced by the fact that there was a greater incidence of referring to actual programmes, such as the ‘Moodle’ Virtual Learning Environment which was mentioned fifty eight times, and other applications such as ‘Camtasia’ which was mentioned over a dozen times. However, in order to answer the research questions more fully, there was a need to match this quantitative analysis with a more qualitative, contextualised analysis of the dialogue. This was carried out through a combination of a discourse analysis framework and more inductive approaches which linked together the references to applications with the context in which they occurred. By doing this I was able to see that over a third of all references to ‘Moodle’ were made in the context of development and collaboration, with almost all references to ‘Camtasia’ being made in relation to peer collaboration, working with and learning from more experienced colleagues.

The part played by Moodle as a cornerstone of the community is particularly significant because as stated in Wenger (2005, p. 1), “the web has enabled people to interact in new ways across time and space and form new breeds of distributed yet interactive communities of practice.” One new breed of practice that he cites is the utilisation of VLEs as a platform for new styles of interactive learning which has also facilitated “the shift to increasingly virtual communities of practice” (Guldborg & Mackness, 2009, p. 3). In the context of this research study, the VLE served to facilitate a situation whereby teachers and students could be part of the same community where they could use a range of media resources. This supported the claim of Brett (2000), in Brett & Motteram (2000), that “autonomous language learning is a theme that fits in well with multimedia” (p. 44)

but there were other elements that had to come into play to make this a Community of Practice.

These were the essential elements of mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise which allowed this loose, informal arrangement to fit the characteristics of Wenger's (1998) description of what constitutes a Community of Practice. These elements were exhibited in a greater number of references to the sharing of ideas and resources; interlinked with the idea of being part of a team. Of course it is not a collegial environment alone which creates a Community of Practice, but rather the actions that the community undertakes, and instances of such actions were articulated by the teachers in this study. Though they did not use the terms mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise, there were clear examples of each articulated through the participants' EAP discourse.

One instance of support for these claims can be found in an extract of conversation during a focus group session with Frank, Derek, and Rosemary. The latter two teachers had been engaging in a discussion about the drawbacks of technology, particularly issues with resources such as electronic whiteboards, when Frank interjected with a more positive slant.

Well, one of the good resources that I think we have is the whole Moodle thing. There are more teachers coming in and there are more resources available, so the teachers can share. For example if a new Accounting teacher comes in then all the old Accounting PowerPoints and everything is already there so it's building up a community of teachers..... It's becoming used more and more. -Frank

This then prompted more positive responses from Rosemary and Derek who also spoke of witnessing the emergence of teachers working together and showing those elements of mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise that Wenger (1998) deemed necessary for something to meet the requirements of a Community of Practice. Derek also makes reference to mentoring, and implies that

this is something which is happening in some instances, in the organisation, and perhaps needs to be cultivated or stimulated further.

Yeah I think more teachers are using it as well and definitely asking questions about Moodle as well so it is being used further than it was last term which is definitely a good thing. Yeah it definitely is; you can see that. -Rosemary
I think it would be quite interesting to have another staff development on Moodle getting us all actually using it and people actually mentoring other people which would be quite good to see how we can actually use it and to see what other people have done, to take those of us who are less good at it through the various steps and everything would be really interesting. -Derek

To continue this line of conversation, I then probed the matter further with the group.

You mentioned about newcomers coming in, new people coming in. Rosemary, you started out like this. (Rosemary nods and hums to show agreement) How did others help you out when you first started? -Paul (to Frank)

Yeah I was lucky that I had some, some members of staff that actually helped me out, showed me what it could be used for, things like quizzes and things like that, and then because I was already interested in it and then because I was shown and then the more you use it, I dunno if that makes sense but once you start using it you use it more and more. Em, but it's the initial getting into it, seeing what it is. I didn't know at first what you could actually do on Moodle until someone told me what I could do so I think that's what's needed most. But I think yeah more of the new teachers are becoming involved because it's new and they're not afraid to ask questions and say oh what is Moodle about, whereas with some teachers who have been here for a while and they still haven't used it, they don't then ask the question what can you actually do with Moodle. I think that makes a difference as well. -Rosemary

COMMUNITY TAKING ON A LIFE OF ITS OWN

After the VLE workshop and as the focus group sessions moved towards the middle phase of the research study, conducted over nine months, teachers began to work more on their own, almost exclusively of institutional training. This meant that subsequent workshops did not command as much attention as the first and, unexpectedly, the teachers began to explore 'their own' technologies rather than those introduced in the more formal sessions. One example was the use of Wikis which I had imagined to be a logical progression from the development of a VLE. Despite having a workshop on this, it really did not take off in the same way as the Moodle session had, and there was very little uptake on its usage. Around the same time, some of the participants became interested in mobile technologies and this began to usurp the other workshops to the point that they tapered off in the end whilst the usage of mobile technologies developed into an institutional project in its own right.

The reason that this may have happened, drawing on evidence from analysis of the dialogue and from reading the COP literature, is that the initial workshops had given the teachers a sense of empowerment. That sense of empowerment, which was manifest in the later dialogue, is central to the philosophy at the heart of Wenger's (1998) COP theory because it is a manifestation of people using the knowledge they have acquired in their own practice. Wenger (2004, p. 2) states that "practitioners, the people who use knowledge in their activities, are in the best position to manage this knowledge." Once people become empowered they begin to act independently of management and become more autonomous, which in the particular context of EAP is a very good thing because autonomy is at the heart of the academic purpose we try to instil in our students. This perception of empowerment was further supported by classroom observations carried out during the research process.

Lessons were observed and evaluated through a framework adapted from the ISTE Classroom Observation Tool which is a free online tool that provides a set of questions to guide classroom observations of a number of key components of technology integration. Through using this approach I was able to see if developments arising in the dialogue were being put into practice in the classroom, and whether or not there were changes in the design and delivery of the teachers' lessons over the duration of the teacher education programme.

As the months progressed, I witnessed a more consistent usage of technology in the classroom and 'training' autonomy outside of the classroom became even more apparent. It was almost as if the formal workshops were moving in one direction and the informal developments in the workplace were moving in a different, possibly more relevant, direction. At this stage my role, as manager and educator, was to step back and let this grow. Like the character in Jacob's Ladder, I had to let go of the 'demon' of too much control. At the same time I had to make sure that teachers had access to support if that was required. There emerged a predominant pattern of teachers wanting to experiment with this for themselves, but still feeling the need for some form of guidance in facing challenges along the way.

FACING THE CHALLENGES WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

During the original focus group sessions there were a number of instances where teachers expressed some form of fear, inhibition, or apprehension. These included examples such as Matthew, Frank, Victor, and Kelly all articulating the suggestion that they wanted to avoid an over-usage or over-reliance on tools such as PowerPoint. Matthew, at one stage, voiced this as technology causing regression rather than progression when he spoke about the dangers of "*the teacher standing at the front using PPT which is basically just going back to transmission style teaching*" and of being sent into a

“spiral of despair” when placed in a situation where the technology doesn’t work properly. Patricia voiced concern about being left behind in terms of the speed of change, expressing the idea that “you learn how to use something once and you think you know it. Then the next version comes out and you don’t have time to relearn all of the technology every time Microsoft wants to make some money.”

James though suggested that one of the ways of overcoming these issues and addressing them was to enlist the help of other people, which supports the claim at the heart of this paper; that these training workshops facilitated the emergence of a Community of Practice.

‘Um, I mean yeah, it’s just a case of you play around with something, you find out how something works, em if you see somebody else who’s struggling with it, and they have some questions you may be able to help them with, at some point they’ll obviously reciprocate, so I tend to, with technology I tend to play around with things for a certain period of time and then if I can’t do it I tend to go and ask someone who I know has a better sort of technical knowledge, to see if we can all work together somehow. I mean that’s generally how I tend to approach technology. I don’t spend too long faffing and fooling around if I’m not getting anywhere.’ -James

From the pedagogic perspective, Emily also voiced concerns about placing too much emphasis on the technology and not enough on the teaching. She suggested that *“as teachers we’ve been trained in what good classroom practice is so then if we want to use technology in the classroom we need to be creative enough to figure out how to use the technical tools that we have to make our good teaching practices ... what’s the word ... happen?”* She also suggested that in terms of theory, what is happening with the use of technology is not so much a revolution in teaching practice but a continuation of a tradition.

When I’ve read articles that discuss the use of technology in the classroom in EAP situations, when they refer to theories they don’t refer to, you know, they refer back to the pedagogical theories about scaffolding and things like that so I haven’t come across any special techie theory. It’s all down to pedagogy. -Emily

Victor echoed this by suggesting that *“with regards to technology you can’t just experiment with technology, you need to have the way of teaching to go with it so I’ve tried to experiment with different ways of teaching and sort of how those fit in particularly with mobile learning and such things as using student mobile phones.”* This feeling was also voiced by Patricia when speaking about the use of Virtual Learning Environments; saying *“there is no leeway with a virtual environment for saying well I have time today; I’ll worry about it in the twenty minutes before class. You can’t. You have to have it at the beginning of term; the whole thing ready to go.”* James also voiced the opinion that it is not simply about having the resources, the time, or the desire to use technology. It is also about possessing knowledge and teachers having the confidence that they do possess the required knowledge.

MOTIVATION TO FACE THE CHALLENGES

This then raises the question of what exactly motivates teachers to overcome this adversity and, like the character in Jacob’s Ladder, to let go of their fears and turn them into something that is positive and energising, rather than negative and draining. That film employs the technique of flashbacks and recollections of the past but in the case of teachers, thankfully, there appears to be far more emphasis on the potential offered by a technology-rich future.

In the focus group sessions, one of the issues of interest was finding out what motivated teachers to increase their understanding of technological applications in the EAP classroom. I wanted to discover the driving forces behind

what I was witnessing the workplace. Despite constraints with time and other commitments, teachers began to devote more and more effort to developing their understanding of technology's affordances. This may not necessarily have been due to the impetus of the workshops alone. Indeed, when asked if it was, some of the respondents suggested that it was as much to do with ideas being shared amongst colleagues.

Less the workshops and more the staffroom based interaction which has been really good for sharing ideas, like having the i-pads there and to have others to just bounce ideas off has been really useful. And then also I suppose it's about generating ideas through literally just talking to other teachers and saying 'hey maybe I could do this' or just suggesting things to each other. That's been really useful. -Matthew

With regards to training sessions, yeah they are good in influencing you because you get kind of excited. There's a group atmosphere; for example in some sessions the room was quite packed out and lots of people went, maybe some of the people who went were curious, but some who went were resistant but wanted to go and see, you know, kind of, maybe reaffirm the boundaries or change their position on it. So I think that training sessions in that way are very good for pushing people's boundaries and also creating this kind of group excitement. -Kelly

Through the two extracts detailed above there's a real sense that working together as a group is important for fostering the right environment where people feel comfortable with using technology. There was though also a sense amongst some members of the group that even though this community was working, it still needed some external impetus to keep it going.

I think we're definitely moving in the right direction so I suppose with that, yeah that's technology, we've been using more of that. I think that's becoming more integrated and heading in the right direction. Some teachers I think aren't as confident in using the technology and

I think that's where they might be interested but they might be frightened to ask so I think if we kind of point them in the right direction, have more workshops for that, I think it's definitely going to get better. -Rosemary

CONCLUSION

Returning to the research questions, it could be argued that these teacher training workshops served to spur on the development of a Community of Practice, rather than simply being a community of teachers working together and sharing resources in the workplace. This sense of change was strongly articulated by the teachers themselves, both in theory and in practice. Though it was not the only development that occurred, over the course of the research study, technology came to play a more central role in the professional lives of the teachers, and this came about through a scaffolding process where they overcame their initial concerns to move out of their comfort zone and into a place where development could occur. This process of development has been traced and evidenced by a combination of small-scale qualitative and quantitative research approaches, through the analysis of discourse from focus groups and individual interviews with the teachers who participated in the study, and classroom observations which served as a form of triangulation.

As the group cohered, they demonstrated and articulated examples of Wenger's (1998) criteria of mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise being the central components in the definition of communities of practice. Though not the sole focus of their work, the VLE came to be emblematic of what they were doing, particularly in terms of asserting a professional identity for colleagues and students. It served as a repository of materials, a place for discussion, and a forum for student-teacher interaction, as well as acting as an expression of teachers' personal identities. Added to this, the VLE particularly served as a rich source of history for the organisation and for individuals; namely the EAP teachers

who formed this Community of Practice. Furthermore, that development occurred through a process of scaffolding, support, and engagement which has echoes of a Vygotskian approach espoused by Samaras & Gismondi (1998, pp. 715-733).

By their very nature though such communities are not fixed, and that inherent fluidity means they require constant work or, like a plant, can wither or die. As suggested by several of the participants in this study, teachers need to come to a deeper understanding not of individual technologies but of pedagogic approaches to their usage and integration. It is those approaches and not the technologies themselves that have benefits for EAP teaching. On the whole, the role of Communities of Practice within English for Academic Purposes, as yet, may be limited to small-scale instances such as this one. However, as the subject becomes more recognised as an independent and specialised academic discipline there is fertile scope for small communities of practice within the broader community of professional organisations such as BALEAP. The formation of such communities and the establishment of empowerment is not always a straightforward process as Etienne Wenger himself would admit but when they work, they appear to work well in many instances.

I believe that this was one such instance, a story of evolution from a collection of individuals, with a distinct identity, to a team that worked together, collaborated together, and ultimately developed together as teaching professionals. Pennington (1990) states that it is important for English Language teaching to be seen as a profession, and I would argue that EAP must be viewed not just as a profession that is reactive, but one that is creative and self-defining in its own right. To do that, perhaps we must take charge of our own destiny in defining and locating the subject within the digital landscape in which we operate at the present time.

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