The Patterns and Practices of Rural Middle School Students in a
Voluntary Online Summer Reading Course


Dissertation


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ABSTRACT

This study explored rural middle-school students' participation in an online summer reading course. The research question explored the patterns and practices of the student's participation in an online reading course and the instructional moves made by the teacher. Data were gathered from a small group (n = 4) of rural middle school students living in northern Appalachia who volunteered to participate in the online summer reading course. Data indicated that the course as it was originally planned was, in many ways, failing. Fewer children enrolled than was anticipated and participation was extremely limited. However, participation increased as the course was restructured from a traditional classroom structure into the theoretical framework of a CoP. With greater emphasis on defining of the domain, supportive techniques to instill the development of strong, trusting relationships within the community, and the encouragement of students to become practitioners within the domain of the community, a more functional CoP began to emerge. These findings indicate that attending to major CoP principles, such as clarifying aspects of the domain, creating an inviting space with greater opportunities for participation and the evolution of the community, and focusing on the value of being practitioners in the activities of the community, can be the difference between a successful or unsuccessful online, voluntary learning community.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Linda Sue, my wife and best friend of more than 25 years, and mother of our two wonderful children, Joshua and Lindsey. She has stood by me, with me, behind me, and, yes, occasionally in front of me, when I was traveling too fast or in the wrong direction. These few words can never describe the feelings I have for you in my heart. You are a part of me that completes me. I could never repay the sacrifices you have made or the support you have given me over the years. Your successes and my successes will always be our successes. I thank you for the all the years we have spent together and am looking forward to spending our future years together.

I love you, Linda Sue!

I also want to thank my two children, Joshua and Lindsey, for all their efforts in becoming two of the best children a parent could ever ask for. I am so proud of the way you treat others, the way you utilize your instilled values and morals in your daily interactions with others, and the way you constantly think about your future in such positive and different ways. Both of you, even though you have chosen wonderfully different paths, think so much alike. This is also dedicated to Mary, my other daughter. I am honored that you are a part of our family.

I am so proud of all of you!

Words can never truly articulate how I feel about my wife and family.

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two minute conversation with you in the hallway during a class break truly saved me.

Thank you for being the first to teach me what theory was all about. Finally, I would like

to thank the students who volunteered to participate in this research during their summer

vacation. I will cherish the time I spent with them chatting and getting to know them on a

personal level. I learned a lot from them in a short period of time. Keep reading!

Vita

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When children are out of school for summer vacation, some of them experience reading ability setback. Unfortunately, during the summer months, some students do not read or have access to suitable reading materials (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996, Entwisle & Alexander, 1992, and Heyns, 1987). Without access, students are unable to practice their reading. Allington (2006) has argued that if we could just get children to read, the simple act of reading would nurture proficiency in reading. But some children experience nine months of school and reading and then it all stops with the beginning of summer. Entwisle, et al. (2001) call this the "faucet theory", describing the phenomenon of how during the summer months the faucet of reading resources is turned off for children from disadvantaged families and neighborhoods.

## Addressing Summer Reading Setback

Cooper (2004) wrote that summer school has been around for a long time. Children in rural areas attended summer school during the 1800's while living on the farm. Summer school was also used to help new immigrants learn English and to keep urban children busy, keeping them off the street and out of trouble. More recently, summer school has been used as an enrichment tool, a time for students to take extra classes, for remediation, or to repeat a failed course (Gold, 2002).

Several studies have examined how summer school could be used to address summer reading setback, where some children lose ground in their reading ability during

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the summer break. Cooper, et al. (1996) found that most students lost at least one month of reading ability or had no academic growth at all during the summer. They found that intelligence level had no effect on growth or decline in reading abilities, although the data did not include their highest and lowest performing students. Researchers also found that gender and race did not have an influence on summer reading setback (Cooper, et al., 1996 and Entwisle & Alexander, 1992). The students' grade in school did not matter, although early grades showed less loss than the later grades (Cooper, et al., 1996). What did matter was the socioeconomic status of the family and the community (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2001, Cooper, et al., 1996, & Heyns, 1987). Alexander, Entwisle & Olson (2001), Cooper, et al. (1996), and Heyns (1987) all reported that children who were most likely to experience summer reading setback were those from disadvantaged neighborhoods (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003) and those who had special needs (Cooper, et al., 1996). Even though students from economically disadvantaged families and neighborhoods were progressing at similar rates as their better-off counterparts during the school year, they lost ground by the end of the summer (Heyns, 1987).

**Access to Reading Materials**

Communities that are economically disadvantaged lack access to suitable reading materials (McGill & Allington, 2001, Newman & Celano, 2001). Newman and Celano (2001) also note that without access to the proper materials, economically disadvantaged families are unable to provide their children with the necessary materials to help them continue their academic advancement during the summer. They also found a significant

lack of stores where books could be purchased in these neighborhoods, finding far fewer stores than in wealthier neighborhoods.

Borman, Overman, Fairchild, Boulay, and Kaplan (2004) found that children from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods did not have similar access to library resources to that of children from wealthier neighborhoods. Libraries located in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods were poorly staffed with untrained librarians (Alexander, et al., 2001, Allington, 2003, & Kozol, 1991). School libraries in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods had a poorer selection of reading materials in both quality and quantity, along with strict lending policies, which kept books out of the hands of the children who needed them the most, or were simply closed during the summer months (Alexander, et al., 2001).

**Problems of Being Rural**

Several in-school and out of school interventions have been offered for students from urban areas (Cooper, et al., 1996, Entwisle & Alexander, 1992, and Heyns, 1987, for example); however no research has been located by this writer that studied economically disadvantaged or special needs children in rural, middle schools and their summer reading loss or gain. Additionally, summer reading programs have been mostly designed for emergent readers and younger students (Simpson, 1992). Few interventions have been designed to attract middle or high school students (Honnold, 2003).

Because of their unique rural setting, access to suitable reading materials can be difficult for rural students. The physical distance from places offering suitable reading materials can severely limit the access of rural students to necessary resources (Allington,

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2003). The cost of transportation makes access to suitable reading materials for rural students more expensive than for their urban counterparts (Friedman, 2004, Phillips, Harper, & Gamble, 2007). In rural areas, libraries are far away, where stores that sell books are far and few in-between, and school libraries are closed for the summer, children have substantially less access to suitable reading materials during the summer break.

## Research Questions

This study explored rural middle-school student's participation in an online summer reading course. The original purposes of the study were two-fold.  One was to explore the patterns of reading growth, maintenance, or setback of these rural middle school students and the second was to examine the patterns of participation in the provided online learning environment. However, only four students fully participated in the course and insufficient data were collected to make any meaningful interpretation of the data collected on their reading abilities.

As a result, the research focused more exclusively on the students' and teachers' patterns and practices of participation in the online summer reading course. In particular, it asked the following questions:

1.  What are the patterns and practices of students' participation in an online Community of Practice?

2.  What instructional moves are made by the teacher in this online Community of Practice?

## Theoretical Foundations for the Study

This research takes up a social constructivist and sociocultural commitment in which learning and the mind are embedded within social activity and influenced by the tools and signs available within a particular cultural and historical context (Vygotsky, 1987). Almost everything we do and everything we know has been constructed through our interactions with others. As Hartley (2007) puts it, "Most learning is done with and from other people, and learning is a social activity as well as a cognitive one" (p. 50). We, along with others, co-construct reality. The question is therefore not the existence or non existence of reality but rather what a person makes of it. As Lincoln and Guba, (1985) maintain, reality "*doesn't exist until either* (1) it is *constructed* by the actor or (2) it is created by the participant" [Emphasis in the original] (p. 87). Similarly, Phillips (1995) wrote that "by and large human knowledge, and the criteria and methods we use in our inquiries, are all constructed" [Emphasis in the original] (p. 5). Social activity is at the center of knowledge construction. In activity we construct both ourselves and our world. This act of construction is constrained by the world or culture even as it creates the world and culture that constrains it. In order to construct knowledge, one must be involved in an activity. These activities can be either individual or social processes. Knowledge is built over time and through interaction with others (Patton, 2002).

Scholars who take up a sociocultural perspective use the notion of a CoP to describe the way in which learning is embedded within social practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learners are involved in communities of practice where participation deepens commitments, learning, and understanding (Wenger, 1998). People actively make

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themselves within communities of practice and learning, and identities are forged and shaped within the goals, norms, and aspirations of the particular community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, as Zieger and Pulichino (2004) maintain a community, "when first establishing itself …, must reconcile, negotiate, and transform that particular triangulation of the community, the individual identities belonging to it, and the knowledgeable skills they are practicing and learning" (p. 3). Members at first find themselves on the outer fringes of the community and gradually, over time, learn the practices of the community and become deeply involved with them.

In the digital Community of Practice (CoP) that developed in this rural middle school reading class, a sociocultural/historical approach as well as the idea of a CoP provided both a direction for the course as well as an analytical lens for the study. Students, together with the teacher, became a community of practitioners and the dimensions of the course sought to create and facilitate that community. Within this community, special attention was paid to the way language and other tools, in particular online tools and technologically-influenced discourses were used by the students and the teacher to participate in the course, construct new knowledge, create community identities, and work in a shared practice.

The idea of technological tools is of particular importance to the study. Kanuka and Anderson (1999) assert that, "Communication technologies have the capacity to provide an interactive environment that can support instructional methods required to facilitate constructivist principles" (p. 2). Through the use of technology and conversational language, students were able to construct new knowledge in their CoP.

Anderson argued "if learning is … a process whereby we actively construct knowledge using language based on our past experiences, then context-rich, long-term learning environments with tools that enhance communication and access instructional methods, provide real-world examples" (p. 11).

Resnick (2002) argues that, "being digitally fluent, involves not only knowing how to use digital tools, but also knowing how to construct things of significance with those tools" (p. 33). This study explored the ways in which these students constructed patterns and practices of participation within a digital community and the ways in which they constructed, adapted, and shared new tools to benefit learning, all towards the goal of improving their reading abilities during the summer vacation.

This study was interested in exploring the ways in which these students would create a CoP. It would explore how these students would create a CoP by working and interacting together, along with using the language and digital tools. The discourse amongst participating students was important to learning in this community. How students interacted with each other and their teacher may offer insights into how they were able to develop into this CoP.

Because the theoretical commitments of the course are sociocultural in nature, the research design and commitments follow from that epistemology. Towards those ends, it is positioned within a sociocultural epistemology and will take an action research approach within a qualitative design.

New strategies and research based pedagogical practices need to be developed to assist economically disadvantaged rural students in gaining or even retaining their

reading abilities over the summer. Many of these students work hard during the school year building these abilities, yet after the summer break, they return to school with a lower level of reading skills than when they left before the summer break (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2001, Cooper, et al., 1996, & Heyns, 1987). This study was designed to demonstrate and evaluate one such new practice for rural middle school students. It is designed to evaluate the patterns and practices of rural middle school students who participated in a summer reading class, within a digital habitat, who, through their participation together, may have developed into a CoP.

**Significance of the Study**

Researchers do not study rural areas as often as they study urban areas. Large research institutions and universities are generally located in or close to urban areas, encouraging studies to take place there. Rural research costs more in transportation because of low population density. Additionally, researchers have a tendency to study younger children during their developmental years rather than middle and high school students.

This research took place in a digital habitat with just a few rural middle school students. It took place on the Internet and in a digital classroom platform. Digital classroom platforms are mostly used by colleges and universities, in business and industry, professional development courses, and high schools. Some of these courses are unavailable in rural or economically disadvantaged school systems due to cost restrictions, technological deficiencies, or a lack of qualified personnel to teach the course. The rural middle school focus, use of a digital habitat, during the summer break,

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together with the goals of reducing reading loss and the development of a CoP by twelve and thirteen year olds, all contribute to putting this study on the cutting edge of digital instruction for younger students who find themselves living in rural areas. To my knowledge, no studies exist that encompass the identifiers listed above. In actuality, finding anything rural involving the Internet and middle school students is a rarity. This is unfortunate. However, now that this research has been completed, perhaps more research in these areas can occur.

Researchers interested in communities of practice have focused their attention on adult learners and practitioners. This research sought to discover whether younger students are also capable of developing as practitioners in communities of practice. Social interactions may allow them to create a CoP where they could practice their craft of reading and learn how to navigate through a new technology as well. As Allington (2006) argued, and I mentioned earlier, if we could just get children to read, the simple act of reading would nurture proficiency in reading. Nurturing proficiency in reading is accomplished by practice. These students practiced when no other structured space was available for them during the summer. If we believe that practice is a tool for preventing summer reading setback, then we can argue that these four children did not experience a slide in their reading abilities over the summer. Not only that, but in the process of keeping their reading abilities in check, they may have been able to come together and act as practitioners in a digital community made up of rural twelve and thirteen year old students.

**Definitions of Terms**

Some of the terms used in this study are used in ways that differ from their everyday usage or may have different definitions in other fields. In order to ensure a clear understanding of how these terms are being used, the section below provides brief definitions for some of the study's key terms.

*Asynchronous.* Messages are not posted in a sequential manner. There may be time between the posting of messages and responses.

*Digital habitat*. An Internet based meeting space, sometimes referred to as an online environment.

*Disadvantaged*. A person or group of individuals who face physical, economic, or mental challenges, lack economic resources, and do not have the power to influence change.

*Economically disadvantaged students*. Students whose family's income falls below the poverty level.

*I/M or Instant Messaging.* A text based tool used over the Internet to have conversations with others using short messages in a near synchronous timing.

*Middle School*. A school with students in the seventh and eighth grades.

*Participants*. Someone who engages on a normal basis in the activity of a group.

*Reading materials.* Any media which has printed words displayed to be read by others, including, books, magazines, signs, computer screens, televisions etc …

*Rural.* An area of sparse population, containing small towns, villages, farming areas, and areas that are inhabitable because of their physical condition.

*Socioeconomic class*. A family's socioeconomic status is based on family income, parental education level, parental occupation, and social status in the community, such as contacts within the community, group associations, and the community's perception of the family (Demarest, Reisner, Anderson, Humphrey, Farquhar, & Stein, 1993).

*Special needs students*. Students who have an Individual Education Plan due to a disability, physical or cognitive.

*Summer reading setback*. A condition that affects many students who do not read during the summer and see their reading abilities slide negatively.

*Summer school*. Classes that are held in a school classroom during the summer.

*Synchronous*. Messages and responses are posted with others at the same time. There is no delay between messages.

*Urban*. A sprawling area, containing large metropolitan areas and connecting suburbs.

## Summary

This research explores the patterns and practices of four rural middle school students who participated in an online summer reading course. The research examined how these four students came together during their summer vacation and worked together to become practitioners in a CoP. It also examined how the students interacted with one another and their teacher. The research examined how the students shared their stories and tools, and how they adapted them as needed. It also examined the artifacts that the students created and how, over time, they got to know one another better, and developed trusting relationships with each other. Particularly, this research examined how the

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students participated in joint activities and lengthy discussions in which they helped one another learn.

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one is an introduction while chapter two is an in depth review of the literature on summer reading setback, online teaching and learning, and the development of a CoP. Chapter 3 describes the methods I used during the study. Chapter 4 presents detailed evidence that emerged from this study, which is utilized in chapter 5, where I discuss, in-depth, the findings and implications of this study for rural middle school students as well as for and teaching and learning in a digital CoP.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This research explores the CoP of rural middle school students participating in an online summer reading course. In particular, it asks the following questions

1. What are the patterns and practices of students' participation in an online Community of Practice?

2. What instructional moves are made by the teacher in this online Community of Practice?

In order to situate this exploration, the following pertinent literature was reviewed. After a brief introduction, literature on summer reading setback is reviewed. Then strategies for addressing summer reading setback are then presented. The third section explores online teaching and learning and the final section provides a review of the literature on communities of practice.

**Summer Reading Setback: Introduction**

Roy Dungan (1958) wrote about the development of a junior high school summer reading program, in which a list of books was developed by English teachers, the librarians from a school, and the local public library. The list was divided into three levels, young adult, average, and developmental, ranging between third and eleventh grade. A book report form was devised by the reading program collaborators. On the last day of school, the list and report parameters were handed out to students in the sixth,

seventh and eighth grades. If students completed the assignment, they could get advanced credit for the following year.

Involving students in the act of reading during the summer has long been a matter of interest to administrators, teachers, librarians, and parents. Finding motivators to get children to read during the summer has been the difficult task. This study will evaluate a strategy where rural middle school students participate in an online reading and learning community during the summer months. The purpose of this strategy is to reduce the summer reading setback.

Lack of exercise makes one grow weak. When school is not in session, some children lose ground in their reading ability (Cooper, et al., 1996, Entwisle & Alexander, 1992, and Heyns, 1987). Traditionally, during the summer months, children who are economically poor "have never fared as well as the more economically advantaged children in American schools" (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003, p. 68), nor have children with special needs (Cooper, et al., 1996). Some authors have suggested reasons for this setback and how it can best be reduced (Cooper, et al., 1996, Entwisle & Alexander, 1992, and Heyns, 1987). These authors have noted that there has been a wide variety of school-based programs attempting to reduce summer reading setback. However, the fact that some children are not reading during the summer has been, for the most part, largely ignored as a cause for the gap that develops shortly after first grade between poor and middle-class students. The "faucet theory" that Entwisle, et al. (2001) have suggested, states that

when school was in session, the resource faucet was turned on for all children,

and all gained equally; when school was not in session, the school resource faucet

was turned off. In summers, poor families could not make up for the resources the

school had been providing, and so their children's achievement reached a plateau

or even fell back. Middle class families could make up for the school's resources

to a considerable extent so their children's growth continued, though at a slower

pace (p. 11).

New strategies need to be discovered and implemented in order to turn the faucet back

on, especially for families who have limited resources or live in rural areas.

Summer reading setback has also been referred to as summer loss (Cooper, 2003),

summer slide (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007b), or summer effect (Malach &

Rutter, 2003); however, since many children do return to pre-summer levels after several

weeks of instruction in the fall (Cooper, et al., 1996), summer reading setback is being

used to describe the same phenomenon.

This first section is divided into several parts. The first part presents a brief

history of summer school. This is followed by a discussion of the effects of summer

breaks on reading and learning. Then, a separate section examines the effects of family

attributes on summer reading setback. This is followed by a discussion of how school

attributes and the availability and use of the printed word by school children affect

summer reading loss. The chapter ends with three strategies for addressing summer

reading setback.

**A Brief History of Summer School**

In this first section, a brief history of summer school will be presented to illustrate how summer school has changed and developed since the 1800s. There are many student, family, community, and school traits that affect how well a child progresses in school. Many of these traits also affect how students lose ground in reading ability during the summer months, often due to the low volume of reading by students and the accessibility of reading materials in their neighborhood. I will explore many of the reasons for summer reading setback which can be traced to a system of economic differences between the poor and the wealthy.

**Why have summer school?**

According to Cooper (2004), summer school began as a response to changing economic conditions. At the turn of the century, "the economy of the country shifted from an agricultural base to an industrial one" (p. 6). Many people moved from rural areas and foreign countries to the cities, drawn by the availability of employment in factories. This move, however, left many adolescents with nothing to do when school was out (Cooper, 2004). Rural students had chores to do on the farm to keep them busy, but urban students had fewer opportunities to work. Even though some had summer jobs, many children were idle and had nothing to do. This became a great concern for people living in the cities. The problem became exacerbated by the passage of the child labor laws in 1916. Community leaders wanted action and schools began offering summer school to keep children occupied.

**How long is long enough?**

In the 1800s, "school calendars were designed to fit the needs of each particular community" (Cooper, et al., 1996, p. 227). Some communities had long summer breaks that released children from school in spring to help with planting and in the fall to help with the harvest, while many urban schools operated on an 11- or 12-month schedule. By 1900, migration from rural areas to the cities and an increase in family mobility created a need to standardize the time children spent in school. The present 9-month calendar emerged when 85% of Americans were involved in agriculture and when climate control in school buildings was limited. This tie to agriculture no longer holds today since only "about 3% of Americans' livelihoods are tied to the agricultural cycle" (p. 228).

Historically, summer school programs were introduced in order to teach new adolescent immigrants in this country (Cooper. 2004). While some adolescents had jobs, many did not, and according to Cooper, this idleness was "a cause of concern for city dwellers" (p. 6). Cooper states that wealthy children were able to hire tutors that kept them from suffering academic loss, but poor children could not afford such luxuries and fell behind until summer school programs began to serve the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Contrary to popular belief, holding school sessions during the summer was a common practice in rural communities (Gold, 2002). "Rural communities closed schools when farm life was most intense, but those closures occurred during spring plantings and fall harvests. As a result, country schools typically opened just during the summer and winter months" (p. 8). They were closed in the fall and the spring. Not all children

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attended school in the summer. Children over ten did not go to school in the summer because of the increased demand for labor in the farms. Likewise, "many younger children stayed home during the winter when impassable roads made travel to school nearly impossible" (p. 8). This left school attendance not only dependent upon farming practices but also on the weather. A school year was "comprised of brief winter and summer sessions was a mainstay of rural America in the nineteenth century" (p. 8). In 1840, the best determining factor for the length of the school year and when it occurred was the community's level of agriculture or "how much acreage a community devoted to farming" (Gold, 2002, p. 9).

In the 1800s there was no consistency in the number of days a school year would be comprised of or on which day's schools would be in session. In 1836, some school districts in New York's Westchester County had different lengths of school years, ranging from zero months to twelve months (Gold, 2002). These became more consistent by 1876 when the range spanned from 33 weeks to 42.5 weeks. Table 1 illustrates how inconsistent the school years were amongst states.

| New York | 1835 | 5.6 months |
| | 1890 | 6.2 months |
| Michigan | 1842 | 4.6 months |
| | 1890 | 7.8 months |
| Virginia | 1871 | 4.7 months |
| | 1890 | 5.9 months |

Table 1

Length of school year (Gold, 2002)

In the nineteenth century, many states imposed a variety of laws on their school systems in order to bring rural and urban school calendars into a consistent format (Gold, 2002). They "used term length mandates, state taxation systems, and a new organizational structure to lengthen and simultaneously reshape the public school year" (p. 19). Gold believed that, "Innovations like consolidated districts, free schools, graded classes, and an official school year were all designed in part to increase the length of the school year and to decrease the use of summer for schooling" (p. 27). Changing the school calendar "was a final method used by New York school administrators to increase school term lengths and eliminate summer sessions" (p. 24).

Summer school programs were short lived as they did not stay on the calendars for very long. School teachers also wanted the same schedules as university professors, who had the summer off. They thought it was unfair for them to have to work during the hot summer months while professors took vacations. Some urban teachers even believed that too much school would be bad for children and for teachers (Gold, 2002). Teachers "feared that keeping people confined to a stuffy, dark school room engaged in mind-

numbing activity would lead to physical and mental debility. They worried that too much education would stunt growth, produce dumbness, foster fatigue, and even precipitate melancholy" (p. 108). Fear of the unknown was used to keep summer school off district school calendars with the exception of intervention programs.

**Modern use of summer school**

Summer school programs did not stay off the calendar long and soon found their way back onto the school calendar. These programs were first reinstated to help struggling students and to prevent some students from falling behind, as well as to keep idle students from getting into trouble (Cooper, 2004 & Gold, 2002). Cooper stated (2004) that some programs were designed to "help students meet minimum competency requirements for graduation or grade promotion" (p. 7). A second type of summer school program was for students who failed a course that was needed for graduation; the student could retake the course in the summer and receive credit for it. The third type of summer school program was to make sure that students with disabilities received a free and appropriate education as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This extra schooling was intended to ensure that children with disabilities had a chance to keep up with their nondisabled peers. Other summer school programs were used to assist children who lived in high poverty areas. It was believed that by having this group of students attend summer school, the cycle of poverty could be broken. This was required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which "suggested that children have full access to effective, high-quality, regular school programs and receive supplemental help through extended activities" (p. 7).

Cooper (2004) has stated that since the thirties, summer school programs have grown to serve various purposes, providing a time in which students could pick up extra classes, allowing students to have a more flexible course schedule, and creating additional opportunities for those who wanted an enriched educational experience. In this manner, if students wanted to graduate early, have flexible schedules in order to participate in extracurricular activities, or take advantage of specialized course offerings or programs, they could do so. The summer break was also a time for teachers to make extra money or receive additional training.

However, for students who were not involved in some kind of summer enrichment or remediation, summer setback was amplified because of personal and situational traits. As the next section shows, these traits have a more powerful negative impact on students in the lower socioeconomic classes and students with special needs than they do on their middle and upper socioeconomic class peers.

**The Effects of Individual Characteristics on Summer Reading Setback**

This section addresses individual factors that may have an effect on summer reading setback. While no single characteristic may alone be the cause of this reading setback, socioeconomic conditions may play an important role.

**Summer reading setback and student attributes**

Cooper, et al. (1996) completed a meta-analysis of thirteen summer reading studies that were conducted after 1975. In their meta-analysis, they found that students would either have no academic growth or lose one month of grade level skills during their time away from school. They believed that this was a conservative estimate because

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the findings were based on a testing interval of 131 summer days, which included all of June, July, August, September and ten days into October. Because of the way school start dates varied in the studies used, many of these students would have experienced approximately five weeks of schooling before taking the fall test. The study "found that as the length of the summer interval increased, the amount of loss in test scores decreased" (p. 259). The researchers therefore concluded that, "greater amounts of instructional time in summer intervals probably serve to mitigate the estimated negative impact of the summer break" (p. 259). The authors felt that perhaps the loss would increase even further if measurements were taken on the last day of school and on the first day the student returned from the summer break.

### The effect of students' intelligence level

Cooper, et al. found that there was little evidence to suggest that the intelligence level of an average student had "an impact on the effect of summer break" (Cooper, et al., 1996, p. 261). About the same number of students showed positive, negative or no relationships with the variable of intelligence. The authors point out that since the data did not include students of substantially high or low IQ scores or students with disabilities, this finding should not be generalized to these subgroups.

### The effect of race and gender

In their study, Cooper, et al. (1996) found no "consistent moderating influence" (p. 262) of student gender or race on the effect of being out of school during the summer. However, Entwisle and Alexander (1992) found that as African American children progress through school, they tend to lose ground through the first few years of school

even while having started at a similar level with white children in Kindergarten.

Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson, (2007a) argued that "achievement differences between

the well-to-do children and poor children, ethnic minorities and white majority students,

are large when children first begin school and they increase over time" (p. 5). The reason

for this regression is not race, but may instead be linked to other socioeconomic family

characteristics, which will be discussed shortly. However, Entwisle and Alexander stated

that their data do "not explain differences in performance as related to ethnicity" (p. 78).

Heyns (1987) also found that socioeconomic inequities account for the differences in loss

of achievement between low-income groups and middle-income groups.

### The effect of the grade a student is in at school

Cooper, et al. (1996) did, however, find that a student's grade in school matters.

First and second graders showed insignificant gains while students in fourth grade and

above showed significant losses. The authors attributed this to a floor effect, where

"students in the lower grades show less variance from national norms simply because

there is a restriction in their possible lower range of values" (p. 263). As I will later show,

as the years in school accumulate, summer learning setback can also begin to accumulate

for some students.

## The Effects of Family Attributes on Summer Reading Setback

The socioeconomic attributes of struggling readers may have an effect on summer

reading setback. Parental attributes and family history may also influence reading growth

or the lack thereof during the summer break.

**The effect of socioeconomic status**

Cooper, et al. (1996), Heyns (1987), and Entwisle and Alexander (1992), all agree that family attributes could make a significant difference in a student's achievement or lack thereof; "Families and communities indeed shape children's academic development" (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2001, p. 183). Many children who come from privileged families are "privileged in all spheres of life: wealthy families usually live in good neighborhoods and send their children to good schools" (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007b, p. 13). On the other hand, "the poor and nearly poor tend to live in distressed communities and attend resource-poor schools" (p. 13). Entwisle and Alexander (1992) also found that students in a one-parent family gained less than students in two-parent families; however, "these differences faded away when the family's subsidy status was taken into account" (p. 81).

Cooper, et al. (1996) believed that family income made no difference in the loss students suffered in mathematics skills. What they did find was that, regardless of income, *all students* lost ground in mathematic skills. The same was not true of reading and language skills, which showed significant differences:

> Middle class students showed significantly greater absolute summer gains in reading and language achievement than lower-income students. Middle class students showed a nonsignificant gain in grade level equivalent reading scores, while lower-class students showed a significant loss. On average, summer vacations created a gap of about 3 months between middle- and lower-class

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students. For specific reading areas, comprehension scores for both income

groups declined over summer, but declined more for lower-class students.

Reading recognition scores showed a significant gain for middle-class students

and a significant loss for lower-class students (Cooper, et al., 1996, p. 261).

In Table 2, Heyns (1987) illustrates the relationship between family income and

the number of hours children spent reading during the summer, the number of books read,

and the number of times the library was visited on a regular basis. It is interesting to note

that Heyns found that poor black children read more than poor white children. However,

more affluent children, both black and white, read more than their poor counterparts.

**The effect of parents and family history**

Entwisle and Alexander (1992) found that parental education had an influence on

student achievement during the summer.

White children whose parents were high school drop-outs, for example, gained 50

points in the first winter, while those whose parents have some post-secondary

education gained 34 points (Table 2). In summer however, the children of

dropouts lost almost 8 points while those whose parents had some post-secondary

education gained over 14 points (p. 80).

Significant differences in parents' education made a significant differences in how their

children did in school.

Alexander, et al. (2007b) collected fall and spring tests results from almost 800

students from Baltimore, Maryland, in order to measure students' gains during the school

year. Of the 800 participants, the authors found that about twenty-five percent of the participants were in the upper economic group and about fifty percent of the participants were in the socioeconomically disadvantaged group. The middle income group was comprised of about twenty-five percent of the participants. They defined the groups by the mothers' education levels of an average of 10 years, 12 years, and 14.6 years. The gains were reported cumulatively in the study.

The results shown in Table 2 indicated that the students in the socioeconomically disadvantaged group were progressing at a rate similar to their better-off counterparts during the school year but that they had lost ground by the end of the summer. Figure 1 below displays these results. Alexander, et al. (2007b) offered two explanations for this. First, these students may have "they start(ed) school already behind, a deficit that their good school years did not erase, and second, that during the summer, when they were cut off from the school's resources, they lost ground relative to higher-SES children" (p. 19). During the summer, students in the socioeconomically disadvantaged group "gain a few points some summers and lose a few in others" (p. 19). However, in the well-off group, there was "*a large enough difference to account for almost all of the increase in the achievement gap across social lines registered during the elementary school years*" [Emphasis in original] (p. 19).

Distribution of Summer Reading and Use of Library by Family Income and Race, Sixth Grade

| Race and family income | Hours spent reading | Mean books read | Used library regularly (in percentages) | Read no books during summer (in percentages) | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| White[a] | .89 | 5.6 | 58 | 20.7 | 470 |
| Less than $4,000 | .73 | 3.1 | 27 | 29.2 | 26 |
| $4,000–8,999 | .94 | 4.5 | 37 | 28.8 | 83 |
| $9,000–14,999 | .95 | 5.8 | 64 | 20.4 | 115 |
| $15,000+ | .85 | 6.5 | 73 | 11.6 | 124 |
| $\eta$ | .086 | .232** | .316** | .092 | |
| Black[a] | 1.12 | 5.2 | 59 | 14.7 | 1023 |
| Less than $4,000 | .95 | 4.6 | 57 | 19.8 | 187 |
| $4,000–8,999 | 1.14 | 4.9 | 55 | 15.9 | 325 |
| $9,000–14,999 | 1.10 | 5.1 | 64 | 15.1 | 169 |
| $15,000+ | 1.40 | 6.8 | 79 | 5.4 | 101 |
| $\eta$ | .128* | .167* | .160* | .137* | |

[a] Total includes 122 white nonrespondents and 241 black nonrespondents on income
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Distribution of summer reading and use of library by family income and race, sixth grade (Heyns, 1987, p. 166).

Alexander, et al.'s (2007b) study concluded that the achievement gap between the socioeconomically disadvantaged and the well-off students widened over time, but that the reason for this widening was not their socioeconomic status, per se, but the lack of access to appropriate resources when they are out of school. Figure 1 indicates that children learn more when they are in school than when they are out for summer break. Socioeconomically "disadvantaged children come closer to keeping up during the school year than they do during the summer months" (p. 20). Alexander, et al. also concluded

that "the first two summers may be critical times for the retention of basic skills because

that is when we see the largest gain differences" (p. 19).
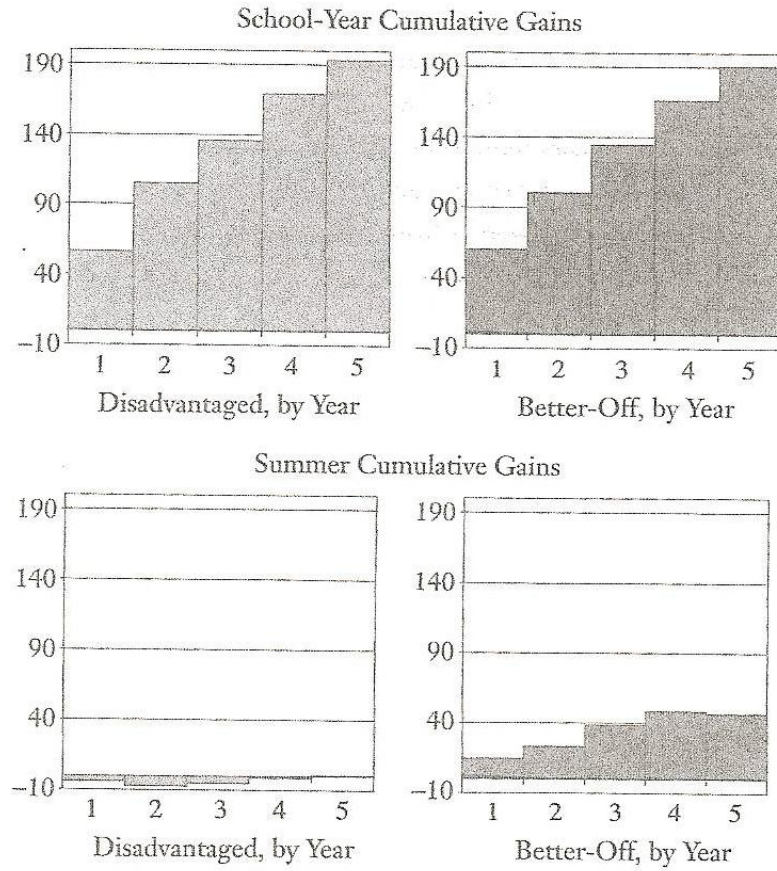


Figure 1

Summer and winter learning patterns of (socioeconomically) disadvantage versus better-off Baltimore children. (Alexander, et al., 2007b, p. 18).

Similarly, Borman, et al, (2004) found, as depicted in Figure 2, that socioeconomically disadvantaged children kept up with their more advantaged peers while they were in school. However, once school was out, socioeconomically disadvantaged students experienced cumulative setbacks.

A child's family's social history also matters. Children learn constantly from their interactions within their environment. Children are "apprentices in thinking, active in their efforts to learn from observing and participating with peers and more skilled members of their society" (Rogoff, 1990, p. 7). A family's culture is "formed by the efforts of people working together, using and adapting tools provided by predecessors and in the process of creating new ones" (p. 16). Parents who come from upper income families "generally did well in school themselves, and they have the tools to help their children do the same" (Alexander, et al., 2007b, p. 13). Unfortunately, parents from poorer families, "often struggled in school, and many suffer low literacy levels" (p. 13). These parents want their children to have the same kind of experiences that children of well-off parents have. Unfortunately, they cannot afford to pay for them.
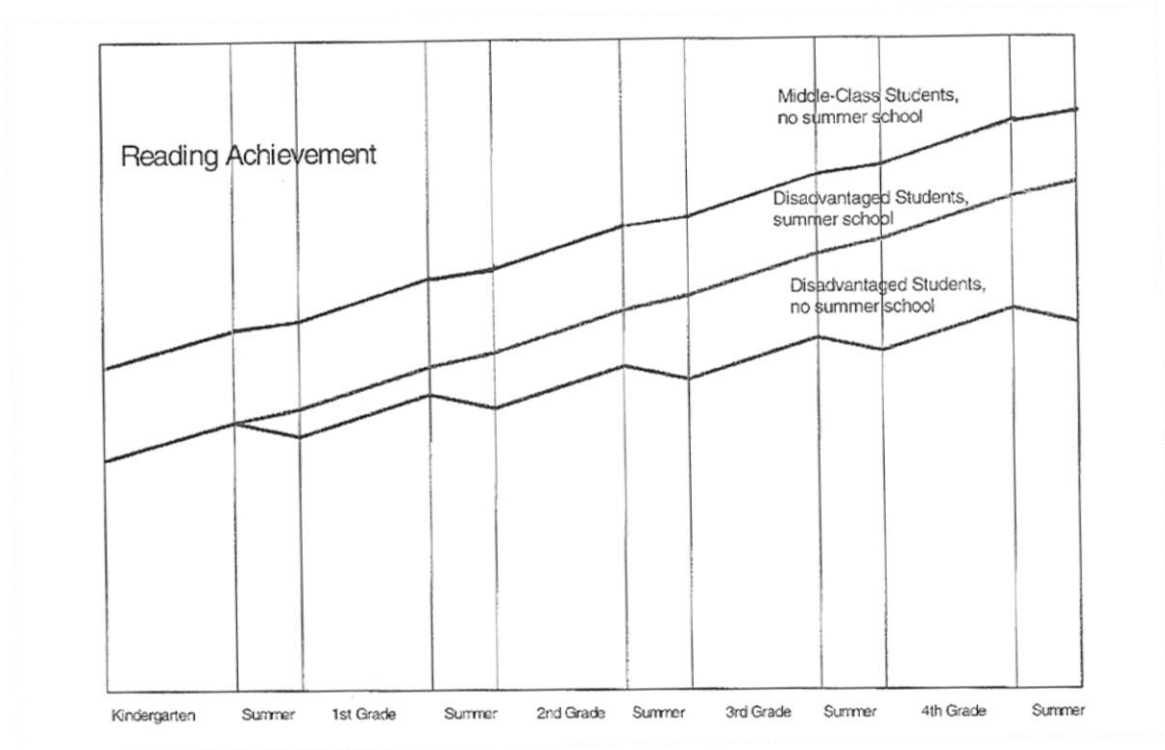
Figure 2

Differences in reading achievement between middle-class students and
socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Borman, et al, 2004, p. 251).

**The School's Involvement**

 The schools that children attend and the libraries that are available to them could

also be influential on their reading growth. The location of the school, the number of

resources available, both in terms of physical resources such as books and computers and

the availability of qualified teachers to assist students in the summer months, could

influence summer reading setback during the summer break. In this section, the traits of a

child's school and access to libraries is traced to show how early summer reading setback might account for socioeconomically disadvantaged students doing poorly in high school.

**The effect of socioeconomic status and a child's school**

According to Entwisle and Alexander (1992), the children's socioeconomic status and the school that they attended had an effect on how children performed. They found that white children in segregated schools showed the greatest gains during the summer months while black students in segregated schools showed the greatest loss.

> Whites not on subsidy gained almost 11 points over the summer if they were in integrated settings, while those in segregated settings lost over six points. Whites on subsidy lost 18 points over the summer if they were in integrated settings, whereas those in segregated settings, stayed about the same (1 point gain). …. For African Americans, gains for those in segregated or integrated schools were about the same for every season, but in summer those on subsidy tended to gain less. In the first summer, for example, those on subsidy lost 6 points, those not on subsidy gained almost 9 points. Since a high percentage of African-American students was on subsidy, when subsidy and nonsubsidy students were combined, we observed only losses in summer (p. 78).

Alexander, et al.'s (2007b) study, entitled the Beginning School Study (BSS), commenced in the early 1980s in Baltimore, Maryland, and tracked school children from first grade through high school and until they were twenty-two years old. During the early years of their study, they were able to gather data "beginning in the first grade through the end of elementary schools (encompassing four summers)" (p. 15). This

project allowed them "to examine how achievement disparities from the early grades impact later school success, including high school dropout" (p. 15).

### The effect of access to libraries

School libraries in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas differ from their well off counterparts in terms of the quality of books offered, the availability of trained librarians, and the libraries' lending policies. Alexander, et al. (2001) argued that, "certainly many (socioeconomically) disadvantaged children are held back by inequities in the distribution of school resources and associated 'opportunities to learn'" (p. 183). One opportunity that is different for some children is the breadth of books they have access to in the school library. The number of books per child in the lower income school libraries was between 10.6 and 12.9 and the books were in the poor to good range of quality. In the middle class schools, the books were in the good to excellent range and averaged between 18.6 and 25.7 books per child (Newman & Celano, 2001). There were no trained librarians in the low income libraries while the middle income librarians had master's degrees and an average of twelve years of experience. The number of days that libraries were open also favored children from the middle class neighborhoods. In addition, many school libraries in poor neighborhoods have strict lending policies of the few books they do have whereas in richer neighborhoods, multiple copies of books are available to be read by children (Allington, 2003). Allington suggested that one way to increase access to books for students would be to have the school library open, possibly for just a few days a week, during the summer months. Allington argued that "another strategy would be to distribute classroom paperback collections to students for summer

reading" (p. 165). These collections remain stored in boxes for the summer when they could be read by students. Alexander, et al. added that, "schools *do matter*, and they matter the most when support for academic learning outside of school is weak" [Emphasis in original] (p. 183). Schools need to create more support for students during the summer in order to support their academic learning and progress.

Kozol (1991) found that a school in a poor suburb of New York City, which had about 700 students, only had about 1,300 books in its school library. Yet in another, more affluent suburb, there were 8,000 books available in the school library for about 825 students. That is slightly less than two books available for each child in the poor school library while the wealthier school library had about ten books available for each student.

**The effects of early summer reading setback on high school success**

Alexander, et al. (2007b) found that when students who were in the socioeconomically disadvantaged group entered high school, they were

seventy-three points behind the high-SES (Socioeconomic Status) group. Research at the high school level usually takes such a difference as 'given,' but because the BSS (Beginning School Study) includes a detailed testing history back to the first grade, we can see how the ninth-grade difference builds up over the years" (p. 20).

The authors stated that a third of the difference was already present when the children started first grade. The remaining two thirds of the achievement gap can find its origins during the elementary and middle school years, most of which (48.5 points) are registered in the first five years of elementary school. However, "it is during the summer months

specifically that the higher-SES group forges ahead. Indeed, summers account for most of the higher-SES group's achievement advantage at the start of high school" (p. 22).

The implications of this achievement advantage are serious. Sixty-two percent of the better-off group eventually became enrolled in college while only thirteen percent of the socioeconomically disadvantaged group became enrolled. Sixty-four percent of the low-SES group graduated compared to ninety-seven percent of the higher-SES graduating. The high-SES group also had higher scores on the California Achievement Subtest in reading (CAT-R). Many more high-SES students were enrolled in college preparatory classes than in the low-SES group. A significant number of the lower-SES group did not graduate from high school or obtain a GED by the age of twenty-one, while many of their counterparts had pursued a bachelor's degree at a four-year college.

**Availability and Use of the Printed Word**

In order to be able to read, a child must have access to proper reading materials. If there is no access, children have difficulties in finding the kinds of resources they can read and want to read. In rural areas, access to appropriate reading resources can be problematic.

### The effect of access to print

Children who are raised in middle and upper socioeconomic class homes with well-educated parents generally do well in school, while those who come from lower socioeconomic class homes generally underachieve (Newman & Celano, 2001). According to Newman and Celano, "parents in lower and middle class communities differed widely in the skills and resources they had at their disposal for upgrading

children's school performance" (p. 8). Even though "many families in poverty may value literacy, they have only minimal connections with school" (p. 25). Without the financial resources available to enrich learning, some families have little access to the social capital needed to provide their children with the necessary resources needed outside of the classroom. When poor families have little discretionary income, children rarely have book collections at home and schoolhouse libraries rarely have generous lending policies (McGill & Allington, 2001).

Newman and Celano (2001) studied four different neighborhoods to find out where books could be purchased. Two were lower income neighborhoods and two were middle income neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. What they found in the two neighborhoods contrasted dramatically. The middle class neighborhoods had 24 locations where books could be purchased. They had ten bookstores, most of which contained a special section for children (Newman & Celano, 2001). The lower class neighborhoods only had eight locations where books could be purchased, none of which were bookstores. Public places for reading in middle class neighborhoods "supported reading activity to a far greater extent than in lower income neighborhoods" (p. 19).

Public libraries fared no differently. Allington (2003) argued that "with schools and their libraries closed for the summer, public libraries might seem like a logical solution, however, those located in poor neighborhoods are often the first to close or restrict hours in a budget crunch" (p. 17). Newman and Celano (2001) added that, "low-income communities had smaller overall collections, fewer books per child, and more limited nighttime hours than those in the middle-income communities" (p. 36). In some

areas, children from low income families find it difficult to walk to the library because the streets are unsafe. In rural areas, libraries are too far away, increasing the costs involved in getting to the library and restricting access to books (Allington, 2003).

Kim (2004) suggested that "extending hours at local public libraries and opening school libraries might be a first step toward improving access to books during summer recess" (p. 184). Kim also suggested that grants be obtained to help build home libraries for poor children in severely socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Kim's "analyses provide some tentative evidence that increasing access to books may have larger effects on the number of books" (p. 185) children read:

> If access to print is highly differentiated in our culture, it may result in differential opportunities for certain types of learning and thinking that are related to literacy development. Differences in access could influence the degree of familiarity with book language and the cognitive behaviors associated with reading, helping to explain the substantial educational difference among low- and middle-income children in beginning formal instruction (Newman & Celano, 2001, p. 10).

Pervasive poverty creates an environment in which reading materials and other resources are available in lesser amounts and lower quality than those available to middle class children. This limited access does not promote reading in lower class neighborhoods while school is in session or during the summertime break.

**The effect of the volume of reading by children**

According to the National Reading Panel (2000), there are many studies that suggest that "the more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and

comprehension" (p. 12). Allington (2006) argues that "Reading is like other human proficiencies – practice matters. Voluntary, engaged reading, in school and out, seems most powerfully linked to high levels of proficiency" (p. 56). Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) report that their findings indicated that "reading books was the out-of-school activity that proved to have the strongest association with reading proficiency (p. 297). Lewis and Samuels (2003) stated, in a meta-analysis they conducted, that "students who have more time and opportunity to read perform better on measures of reading achievement" (p. 11), and that, "students who read more do better on a variety of measures of reading achievement (p. 12). Students, especially those learning English as a second language and those who have a learning disability, benefit most from reading practice. However, there are several factors that might influence why poor readers are reading less than better readers.

First, not having access to a quantity of quality books, especially during the summer months, may be a major factor (Heyns, 1987). Secondly, some students, especially underachieving students, may be asked to read books that are too difficult for them (Allington, 2002). This requires them to use more cognitive energy to decode unknown words and read word by word, so they are often unable to understand the ideas contained in passages. Being an underachieving reader makes students feel unsuccessful, keeping them from being voluntary readers. As Allington (2003) shows, "Children whose reading skills are not strong – that have a history of less-than-successful reading experiences – simply aren't interested in voluntary reading as are those children with a history of successful reading experiences" (p. 18). Underachieving readers are reading

less in school and out of school than their higher-achieving peers (Heyns, 1987 & Allington, 2002). The fact that poorer children have less access to reading materials they can read and want to read, causes them to fall further behind their middle and upper class peers.

According to Kim (2004), "research also suggests that summer learning is most consistently and strongly related to reading as measured by the number of books read and the frequency of leisure reading" (Kim, 2004, p. 169). Heyns (1987) agrees: "the number of hours spent on any single activity or a combination of activities is only marginally related to background; only reading is related to achievement" (p. 153).

Kim's (2004) study looked at "whether reading books in the summer improves fall reading proficiency, and whether access to books increases the volume of summer reading" (p. 170). Kim found that the volume of summer reading was related to fall reading achievement and "the benefits of reading books during summer vacation were also consistent for all ethnic groups. In particular, reading four to five books had significantly larger effects than reading three or fewer books" (p. 184). Children who read more improved their reading abilities more. According to Kim, "summer reading programs that motivate children to read independently at home represent a potentially cost-effective strategy for preventing reading loss" (p. 184).

**Suggested Strategies for Addressing Summer Reading Setback**

This section examines three main approaches for addressing summer reading setback. The first involves local library programs to encourage children and families to visit their library and programs that are designed around reading and fun activities.

Second, summer remediation and enrichment classes offered by schools to prevent summer reading setback or to catch students up to with their peers will be discussed. Lastly, I will discuss the possibility of modifying the school calendar, which has been suggested as a means to reduce or even eliminate summer reading setback.

### Public library programs

Public libraries are important resources in the community, "more than any other public institution, including the schools, the public library contributed to the intellectual growth of children during the summer" (Heyns, 1987, p. 177). Heyns argued that students who utilized library resources were more likely to grow more intellectually than children who did not. Fisher, Lapp, and Flood (2001) suggested that "libraries have traditionally been the common factor which has provided everyone with the opportunity to enhance their civic, language, and literacy skills." (p. 176). One way in which libraries contribute to this effort is by offering some form of summer literacy program.

Often, summer reading programs are designed to attract emergent readers through programs like the "kids club" (Simpson, 1992, p. 1). These kinds of programs attract mostly pre-K to third grade students while programs for older readers" (p. 2) usually attract children in grades 3 through 6 to read fictional materials. Some libraries do have young adult programs. The Hometown Public Library's summer reading program, for instance, is designed to attract middle school and high school students (Honnold, 2003). Most of the programs aimed at teenagers tend to incorporate online programs and involve review and rating forms, polls, quizzes, trivia games, or Internet scavenger hunts to keep older students involved.

Unfortunately, however, many library summer reading programs are not designed for older students. "The majority of these programs are geared toward elementary, rather than middle school students, with the fewest programs designed for high school-age youth" (Honnold, 2003, p. 1). In addition, to further complicate the problem, "in many small towns, other than school and a few clubs, the public library is the only place that can provide programs" (p. 3) to help children develop better literacy practices and skills.

Some of these programs involve activities at the library for children to do independently. Independent programs involve activities that "are left up for a period of time so teens may come in and participate at their leisure" (Honnold, 2003, p. 41). Such activities might include creating a game, making a poster, or decorating a bulletin board. Honnold suggested that libraries also have programmed days where students come to the library at a specific time to do a specific activity, such as trivia games, crafts, word games, and book-related games.

Other librarians have suggested other programs for students. Simpson suggested developing summer reading clubs "to help children experience a feeling of accomplishment" (Simpson, 1992, p. 1). She cautions, however, that "many librarians noted that slow readers often dropped out of the summer reading program because they could not manage the indicated number of books" (p. 1). Simpson allows students to read books at their own pace, reducing the pressure to win a prize because performance is based upon the group's performance rather than the performance of the individual student. Other authors suggest storytelling, story, and book talks (Steele, 2001), as well as

using the Internet and other technologies during summer reading programs (Doyle, 2007).

While providing library programs may be a good strategy to engage middle and upper class students, it may not be as promising for the economically poor. In poor neighborhoods, resources are scarce, libraries stay open for fewer hours, and some parents are afraid to allow their children to use the library because of the risk of incurring heavy fines for late or lost materials. An extensive summer school reading program operated by the school system may be more culturally acceptable for socioeconomically disadvantaged students in poor neighborhoods.

### Summer school reading programs

Summer reading programs are an effective and relatively inexpensive way to prevent summer reading setback (Entwisle, et al., 2001, Heyns, 1987, & Cooper, 2003). Cooper (2003) concluded from his meta analysis study that "results revealed that summer programs focusing on remedial, accelerated, or enriched learning had a positive impact on the knowledge and skills of participants" (p. 4). Summer school programs are most successful when they contain activities that are related to the reading of books (Entwisle, et al.). In addition, games that require little equipment but have complicated rules tend also to fare well with socioeconomically disadvantaged children. These authors stated that children from wealthier families are involved in swimming lessons, going on trips, playing in organized summer sports, and visiting local parks and zoos. Entwisle, et al. argued that, "engagement is the key to learning, and engagement can be difficult to achieve if summer programs are perceived as punitive" (p. 14). Entwisle, et al.(2001)

suggested that these "programs should not be scheduled as 'make-up' or billed as being for children who have failed" (p. 14).

Summer school programs have increased substantially in the United States over the last twenty-five years, the number of programs offered almost as much as doubling. However, "the vast majority of these programs … are reactionary and intermittent efforts, which provide students extra help only after they have fallen behind" (Borman et al., 2004, p. 234).

Kim (2004) makes suggestions regarding the kind of extra help that could be made available to students. One of Kim's suggestions is that schools do more to encourage participation by students. For instance, schools could reward teachers who take the time to develop fun, shortened reading programs for students to complete during the summer – a sort of summer curriculum to help encourage reading by socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Some portions of these programs could be required, such as a short writing activity based upon the books that students are reading. Schools could also offer parents training in how to supervise and assist their children's summer reading, creating a manual of "how to's" to help parents through the summer. Books could be mailed to students at their homes and children could respond to teachers by using postcards. Encouraging notes from teachers, according to Kim, could be sent to their students to motivate them to continue to keep reading.

Malach and Rutter (2003) conducted a study where elementary school teachers "took the school to the students" during the summer. The summer program utilized existing or readily available materials, was accessible to all children and used incentives

and rewards for success. A brightly painted recreational vehicle was transformed into a mobile classroom. The teachers visited communities in the school district, visiting first graders for 48 days of instruction. One-on-one instruction was offered to each child in the program. Students were encouraged to write book reviews, some of which were printed in the local newspaper. Parents were "encouraged to participate by listening to their children read, watching the teacher conduct a lesson and viewing the administration of a running record" (p. 52). Books were taken home by children in "ZIP!" book baggies. Of the students who participated in the program, 76% improved upon or maintained their end of the year reading levels compared to only 59% of the children not involved in the program.

Some summer remedial programs focus heavily on the remediation of reading difficulties and the development of reading comprehension skills through the use of a standardized packaged curriculum that combines text and the teaching of skills (Kim, 2004). While these are helpful, Kim argues that the gains made during such summer programs usually do not last over long periods of time and mostly benefit the middle class.

Carver and Leibert (1995) conducted a study that observed 43 students' reading habits over the summer using fast food coupons as an incentive. These incentives were awarded in accordance with the number of books read. The students read easy fiction books for two hours. At the conclusion of the study, the researchers found that there was no evidence of any significant gains. What they did suggest, however, was that by using

the incentive, students would read the books very fast with little comprehension, just to receive the prize.

However, not all school systems may be able to afford extensive summer reading programs, find qualified teachers to lead such programs, or even have classrooms available in which to host them (classrooms are often unavailable during the summer because of remodeling and cleaning). Another possible way of keeping the cost of education under control is by modifying the school calendar, redistributing the summer break throughout the year. The following section offers a few suggestions for alternatives to special programs.

**Modified school calendars**

For more than a century, "North American schools have used a school-year calendar which includes an interruption of formal education for three months at a time" (Ballinger, 2004, p. 279). The reasons originally behind this summer break have all but disappeared and are no longer relevant to the students of today. In fact, new reasons have appeared that suggest that changes might be made to the school calendar so that it would not include a long summer break. First, in many families, the parents work outside of the home. Children are consequently left in the care of other nonworking family members, hired babysitters, or dropped off at child care establishments, all of which create an additional financial burden. Worse still, some children are left alone to take care of themselves (Ballinger).

Schools are often compared on an international basis. Cooper (2004) found that students in the United States typically go to school for about 180 days a year while

students in Japan attend school for 240 days. Behind the argument around the required number of school days students should attend in a year, "is the notion that as time on task increases, so should knowledge acquisition" (p. 14). Arguments against the extended school year in the United States include the possibility of fatigue for students. Another argument is that if only a few days were added to the school calendar, the amount of content added would make little difference (Cooper, 2004). Cooper, for instance, argues that an additional 35 days would have to be added to the current calendar in order to make a significant difference. This raises the question of whether the additional cost of adding 35 days to the school year would be better spent on reducing class size or improving the quality of instruction.

Creative ways for changing school calendars have also been suggested. One researcher (Ballinger, 2004) has suggested changing the school year by incorporating scheduled breaks. This would allow students who are struggling to receive intervention during these breaks. For example, Ballinger suggests a winter school, fall school, and spring school, where struggling children could receive the extra help they need. While this system would create extra costs for the school districts, these "intersessions (meaning 'between sessions') may be one of the strongest, if not 'the' strongest, reasons for modifying the school year into a balanced year-round, or nearly continuous, instructional program" (p. 282). Cooper (2004) agrees; "Instead of the traditional calendar, children might go to school for nine weeks and then have three weeks off, or go twelve weeks and then have four weeks of vacation" (p. 15). This kind of modified schedule would not cost districts any more money because the school year length would not change. What would

change is the timing of when students are in school. This kind of school calendar reform would eliminate the extensive summer breaks in which summer setback has been found to occur.

There are also arguments against a modified schedule. According to Cooper (2004), teachers argue against such changes because "without the long summer break, they will be more susceptible to burnout" (p. 17). However, teachers working on a modified calendar actually report that it prevents burn-out. Another argument against the modified schedule is that some parents enjoy the extended break as a time to spend with their children without the influence of schools. Parents are also concerned about the effect that such changes might have on extra-curricular activities both during the school year and during breaks, especially the summer. Students worry about the loss of summer employment and being able to earn money without work interfering with their studies. Middle and upper class parents are also skeptical about such reform, since they have the resources to provide their children with worthwhile educational activities during the summer months.

Cooper (2004) has reported that finding credible evidence on the effectiveness of a modified school calendar has been difficult. Implementing statistical controls in an empirical study is the greatest hurdle to overcome. Controlling the population, random assignment, preexisting differences amongst students, and controlling for bias make it extremely difficult for this kind of study to show results with sufficient reliability. Cooper (2004) stated in summation that "my working conclusion is that, although some forms of evidence stand in contradiction, the effect of modified calendars on achievement is

generally positive, but small, compared to many other educational interventions – and may be negligible in some instances" (p. 19).

**Online Teaching and Learning**

Online teaching and learning is a new method being utilized around the world to help us interact with others, share information and learn from each other. Wenger, et al. (2009) wrote that "what is most interesting about the interplay of community and technology is our ability to learn together. In particular, when we talk about how technology enables community" (p. 3). Learning together, interacting together, and sharing together are all important factors in teaching and learning, and in developing a CoP. In this section, literature on designing and teaching in an online environment is reviewed and the role of the teacher in a digital habitat is explored.

  **Social presence in an online course**

Online learning is a cost effective and convenient way to take classes in comparison to the traditional educational setting (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Online learning is becoming so critical in the preparation of students that the State of Michigan now requires that "each student have a virtual learning experience prior to graduation" (DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, & Preston, 2008, p. 10). Teaching online however, requires a new set of skills for teachers, and "currently, no standard for preparing in-service or pre-service teachers for the unique demands of teaching in an online environment" (p. 11) is available. Because of this, new teachers in online environments find it difficult to meet the challenges that online teaching produces. One of these challenges is providing an

environment where the student feels involved as an important part of a community and not isolated from other peers and the teacher.

Having a social presence in a digital habitat is critical to learning in an online environment. Today, online learning has progressed to the point where it is no longer necessary to meet face to face. It is so convenient today that everything can be done online, anytime and anywhere. With asynchronous discourse, students have time to reflect upon the course materials and their responses before actually crafting or posting a response. These discussions are used by participants to share knowledge, reflect on ideas and improve critical thinking (Raleigh, 2000). Additionally, personal identities are not revealed, keeping all students on equal ground without regard for gender, age, disability or appearance (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

However, for some students interacting with peers and teachers in an online environment can be a frustrating event (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). One of the problems with online classes is that they have "been found to be socially isolating, resulting in higher dropout rates and lower student satisfaction" (Kuyath & Winter, 2006, p. 2). Students can feel isolated because of the missing paralinguistic features of speech and other typical features found in traditional classrooms (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Richardson and Swan stated that two of the reasons for the higher dropout rates and lower student satisfaction may be this sense of social isolation and having insufficient interactions with the professor. Conversely, having greater quality access and interactions with the professor "has been found to be the most significant contributor to the student's success in online distance education classes" (p. 2). Students expect that the teacher will

interact with them in the same manner that they would in a face to face classroom but "asynchronous communication may not give the immediacy that is required for successful social interaction" (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004, p. 73). Students may also expect to have this access available all the time and when it does not occur they can become frustrated. There is a great sense of immediacy in responding to questions and emails when accessing social interaction in the online environment.

Social presence theory "postulates that a critical factor of a communication medium is its social presence, which is defined as the degree of salience of the other person in the mediated interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (Richardson & Swan, 2003, p. 70). In other words, to what extent does the person being interacted with feel real? A trusting and honest relationship built in the online environment assists the participants in engaging and transacting with a real person. This begins in a forming stage, which according to McInnerney and Roberts (2004) "is a warm up period, designed to assist the formation of a sense of community" (p. 78). Chat rooms provide an excellent place for students to meet one another at the beginning of a course and begin to build these trusting relationships that will keep them from feeling isolated. Practitioners also need to feel appreciated when participating in online discussions; "When the level of social presence is low, interaction is also low" (Savery, 2005, p. 143). Social presence therefore has a strong impact on online interactions.

One of the methods used to build social presence is synchronous discussions or instant messaging. This method of communication has been shown to nurture community building and encourages deep thought about the issues being discussed by its members

(Wang, 2005). Asynchronous discussions "build a sense of social presence and a heightened sense of involvement in the ongoing communication events through quick feedback on ideas, support consensus and decision making" (p. 304). Synchronous discussions allow for the debate of topics through multiple lenses, allowing more people to speak than in the traditional classroom. It is also an important strategy to use in developing a student's reading abilities and teaching students to become reflective. It is "effective for creating a friendly social atmosphere" (p. 304).

### Using technologies as access for learning

The integration of different educational strategies and practices is constantly being assessed in order to assist children learning. Using technology in an integrated platform is one such method that has been developing for some time. McCombs (2000) wrote "as we enter this new millennium, there is an increased tendency to look at learning from a more integrative and holistic perspective" (3rd paragraph). Technology continues to change the way people learn. It is changing everyday with new programs, faster machines, and tools and toys that stretch our imagination. Nevertheless, strategies for teaching and learning, such as reducing the distance between students, teachers, and content, need to continue to grow out of research-based practices.

### Transaction distance theory

Moore's (1991) transactional distance theory suggests the components for best practices in an online environment.

When we talk about distance education, we are referring to a distance that is more than simply a geographic separation of learners and teachers. It is a distance of

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understandings and perceptions, caused in part by the geographic distance that has

to be overcome by teachers, learners and educational organizations if effective,

deliberate, planned learning is to occur (Moore, 1991, p. 1).

One of the principles of transactional theory is that with greater structure and less

dialogue amongst the participants, the transactional distance is increased. This places

most of the responsibility for success on the student. Distance that needs to be reduced is

the "psychological and communications gap that is a function of the interplay among

structure, dialogue, and autonomy" (Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtoom, & Wheaton,

2005, p. 106). The level of autonomy required of the learner increases as transactional

distance increases.
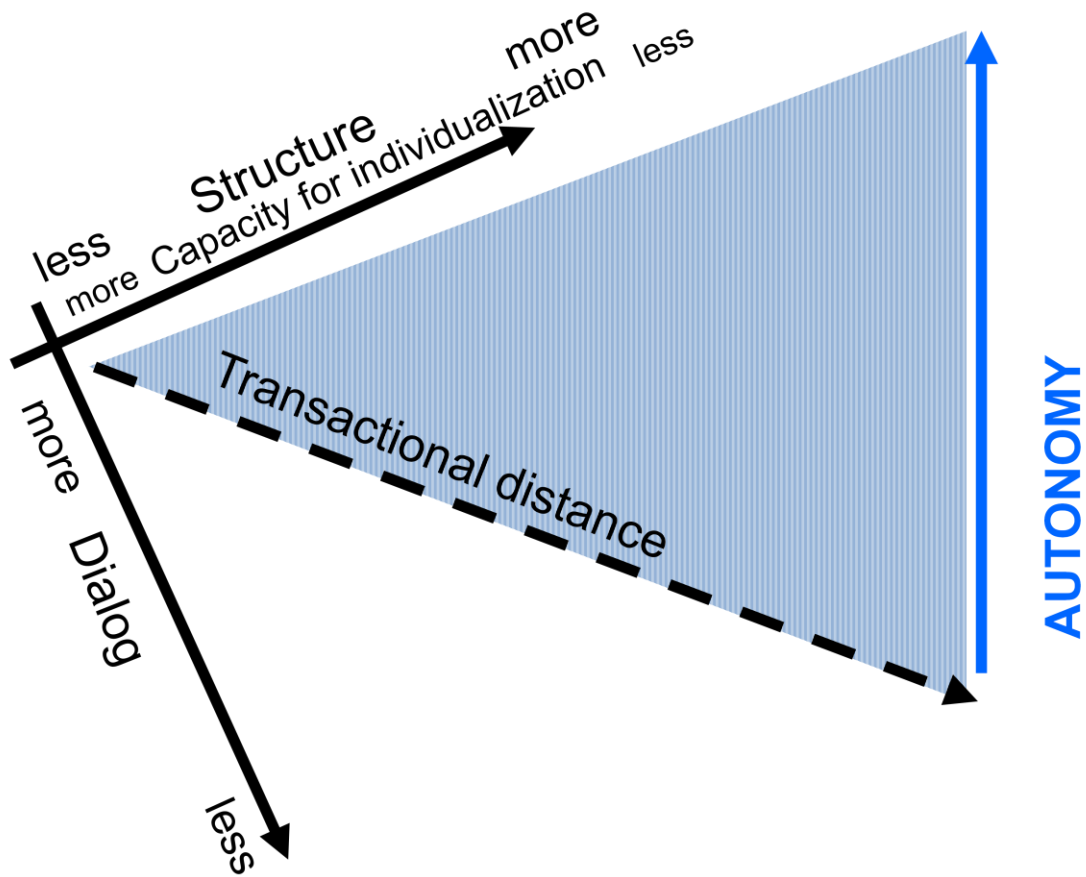
Figure 3

Autonomy and transactional distance theory (Moore, 2006)

As illustrated in Figure 3, when there are higher levels of dialogue between teacher and students, with little structure, students "receive ongoing guidance from instructors and are able to modify instructional materials to meet their needs (Stein, et al. 2005, p. 106). Success in an online course environment depends on the extent to which

the teacher is able to provide the right amount of structure for the course, as well as a sufficient quantity and quality of dialogic communication, in a variety of formats amongst peers, while allowing students to take on the level of autonomy that is *suitable* for them as learners (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The balance between dialog and structure ultimately depends on what the student needs in order to be successful in their learning (Moore, 1993). There are a few areas in which students will need more structure than others. The purpose is to create a framework that will have the necessary structure, while allowing for an atmosphere to emerge where deep and rich dialogue occurs among students and between students and their teacher (Moore, 1993).

### Educational interactions

In the view of how learning occurs, interaction is a key component. According to Moore (1989), there are three different types of interactions that occur in an online learning environment. Moore wrote that shifts can occur in the amounts of each interaction, based upon what the student needs at the time. The learner controls the interactions, fulfilling his or her needs at the time and making learning meaningful.

Interactions at the core of learning as described by Moore (1989) are student-teacher, student-content, and student-student interactions. For student to teacher communication, having personal contact information available, asking questions or making comments via emails, or contacting the instructor via the telephone, would all be useful tools in communicating with the teacher. Chat rooms and online office hours as well as face-to-face office time or personal telephone calls, can also reduce transactional distance (Stein, et al. 2005).

Student-content interactions are usually the largest type of interaction that occurs. Student to content interaction occurs when students have access to texts, other forms of visual or audio content, and creative assignments for them to connect with the content on their own. It also includes utilizing posted materials, reading assignments, library, and web resources. Additionally, it may include such cutting edge resources as "including immersion in microenvironments, exercises in virtual labs, online computer assisted tutorials, and the development of interactive content that responds to student behavior and attributes" (Anderson, 2004, p. 47).

The third type of interaction, student-student, is probably the most valued, as it allows for the development of multiple perspectives in knowledge development. It occurs mostly on discussion boards, chat rooms, and peer accessible postings. Peer to peer interaction is critical to the development of a CoP, where learners become practitioners. These three types of interactions should be used to reduce the distance between teacher and student, student and other students, and student and the content. By doing so, a positive environment is created in which learning can occur (Stein, et al. 2005).

In Figure 4, Anderson and Garrison (1998) illustrate further interactions of the teachers and content. Teachers also interact with other teachers in order to experience professional development and participate in communities which assist them in the growth of knowledge of their own expertise. Teachers interact with the content, continuously updating not only the content, but the resources and pedagogies used by students for learning. Anderson and Garrison explained how content to content is a relatively new idea that demonstrates how "content is programmed to interact with other automated

information sources, so as to refresh itself constantly, and to acquire new capabilities" (p.

48). Automation, in this interaction, uses other content from one source to automatically

update itself.
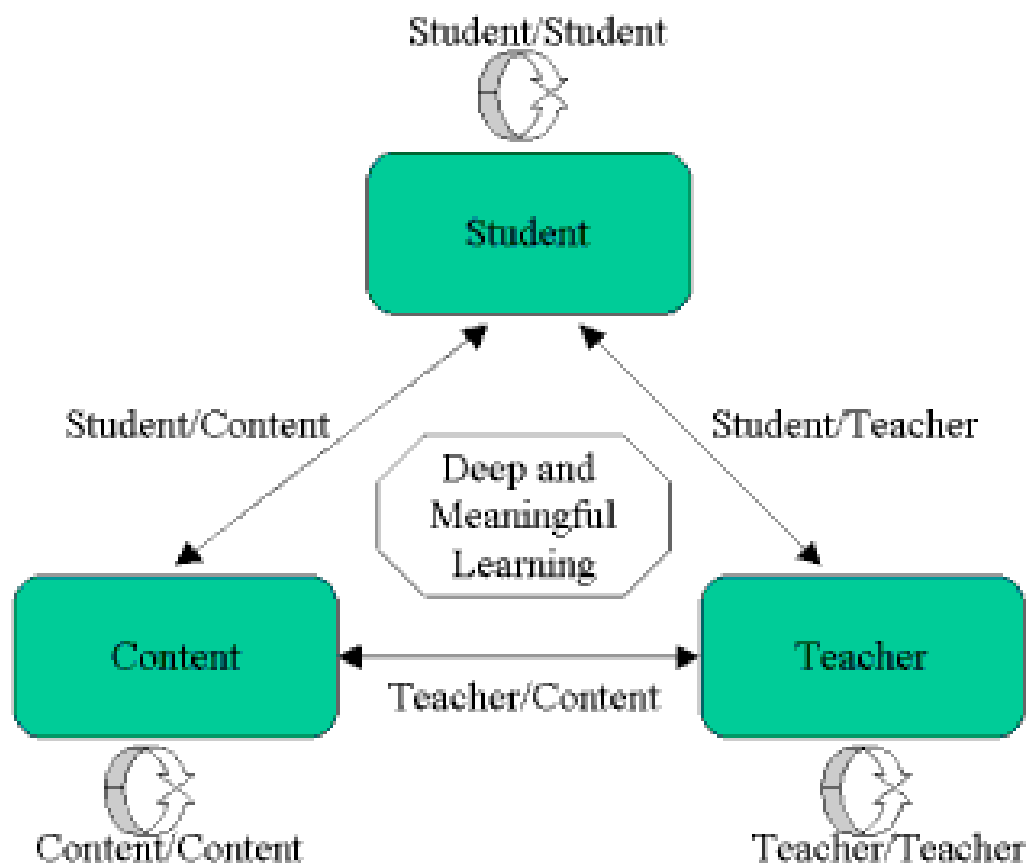


Figure 4

Educational interactions (Anderson & Garrison, 1998)

**The role of teachers in a digital habitat**

The role of teachers in the classroom may change as the use of technology increases, and as instructional tool access and use progresses. Teachers and "schools are concerned with creating the kinds of experiences that will produce productive, healthy people" (McCombs, 2000, p. 1). They are required to develop instructional techniques that integrate technology with sound pedagogical practices. Teachers need to open "new pathways to learning not previously available, but also require teachers to find ways to build meaning, purpose, connections, and relationships to the larger world and community outside the school building" (McCombs, 2000, p. 5). They need to build an online community with synchronous and asynchronous interactions. When they have accomplished this, "the educator can generate a feeling of trust amongst the students involved in online education" (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004, p. 80).

Teachers need to have effective communication skills. They need to be able "to communicate and socially interact with the students" (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004, p. 77). Online teachers need to establish guidelines for student communications that prohibit inflammatory messages, improper language, emoticon use, and "keep the subject matter relevant to the class" (p. 79). Having these guidelines, or netiquette rules, clearly posted at the beginning of the course, will assist in making the course a safe environment for all students to freely participate and learn (Raleigh, 2000). In addition to being masters of online social practices they must also be able to demonstrate mastery of the content.

Teachers need to establish how discussions will be held. For instance, they must decide whether they will be student or teacher led or controlled. Teachers also need to act

as facilitators in the online environment (Savery, 2005). Savery summarizes the teachers'

various goals through the acronym VOCAL. This refers to a teacher who is: "Visible,

Organized, Compassionate, Analytical, and a Leader by example" (p. 142). The teacher

needs to decide his or her level of participation. Will the teacher position him or herself

as a peer or play the devil's advocate? Will the teacher respond to the entire class at once

or to each student individually? Raleigh (2000) suggests that it is important to keep the

teacher role manageable. Teachers will also need to assign grades. The teacher will have

to decide how the grade is earned, be it through assignments or participation level. In any

event, the criterion for earning a grade needs to be presented upfront (Raleigh, 2000).

**A Community of Practice**

In order to best facilitate an online class, Wenger, et al. (2009) recommend the

establishment of a digital habitat where a CoP may emerge and prosper. In this third

major section, I will explore the major components of a CoP. Wenger, et al.'s research

deals with adult communities of practice. In fact, there is currently no research on

communities of practice involving thirteen to fourteen year old rural middle school

students in an online environment dealing with improving or maintaining their reading

skills during the summer break. However, the individual components of a CoP are

applicable to all groups, no matter their size or the ages of its participants. As long as the

domain of interest is created, the community is established, and practices are shared by

the members, socially constructed communities of practice can emerge and evolve.

A CoP is a group of people "who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion

about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing

basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). Every learner belongs to a CoP and, most often, to several. At work, in school, in clubs and organizations - communities of practice are everywhere. These communities are "where we engage in the pursuit of various enterprises" (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005, p. 58). In this section, I will provide a brief history of the evolution of the concept of the CoP as a learning theory, including a short comparison of situated learning theory, apprenticeship, and learning communities. I will then introduce the three most important components of a CoP: the domain, the community, and the practice.

### Situated learning in a Community of Practice

Situated learning holds that learning and understanding must include interactions between people and some kind of physical activity. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that new members in the community "inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (p. 29). When people are fully engaged in the process of a sociocultural practice, they learn new skills. The amount of time spent or the location are not what matters in the establishment of a sense of community. What matters, according to Wegner et al. (2009) is that the amount of time participants spend in a community is not essential. What is essential is that when the students interact with each other, they learn from each other. Similarly, Rogoff (1990) wrote that cognitive development "occurs through guided participation and social activities with companions who support and stretch children's understanding of and skill in using the tools of the culture" (p. vii).

Situated learning and apprenticeship theories therefore have several similar components. First, people learn in a community of people, where they learn by belonging. Second, they learn through practicing or by doing. Third, members of the community develop meaning individually and collectively through the experiences they have with one another. Lastly, people in the community identify themselves as members when they are able to create personal histories as a result of their interactions with other members (Wenger, 2006a). The elements of learning, as shown in Figure 5, constitute a CoP as learning integrates all of the components together. Learning occurs in the following four components: experiencing and practicing within social interactions, engaging in culture and history, developing an identity as a member of the community and becoming a member of the community (Wenger, 2006a).

There are communities of practice everywhere. They are "at home, at work, at school, in our hobbies – we belong to several communities of practice at any given time" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 6). Communities of practice come in all sizes and meet in many different places to discuss their interests and explore the ideas and issues that their members have in common. Some have names while others go nameless. Some are highly visible while others are rarely, if ever, noticed. They sometimes create tools, languages, and other artifacts that are utilized by the group to accumulate knowledge. Over time, they allow their members to develop personal relationships that allow them to understand the knowledge they have, the practices they are engaged in, and the approaches they take to generate new knowledge or solve problems. Members value this learning and formulate identities as practitioners of the community. As Seaman puts it, "A community

Learning by becoming

Practcie

Learning as doing

Identity

Learning

Community

Learning as experience

Meaning

Learning by belonging
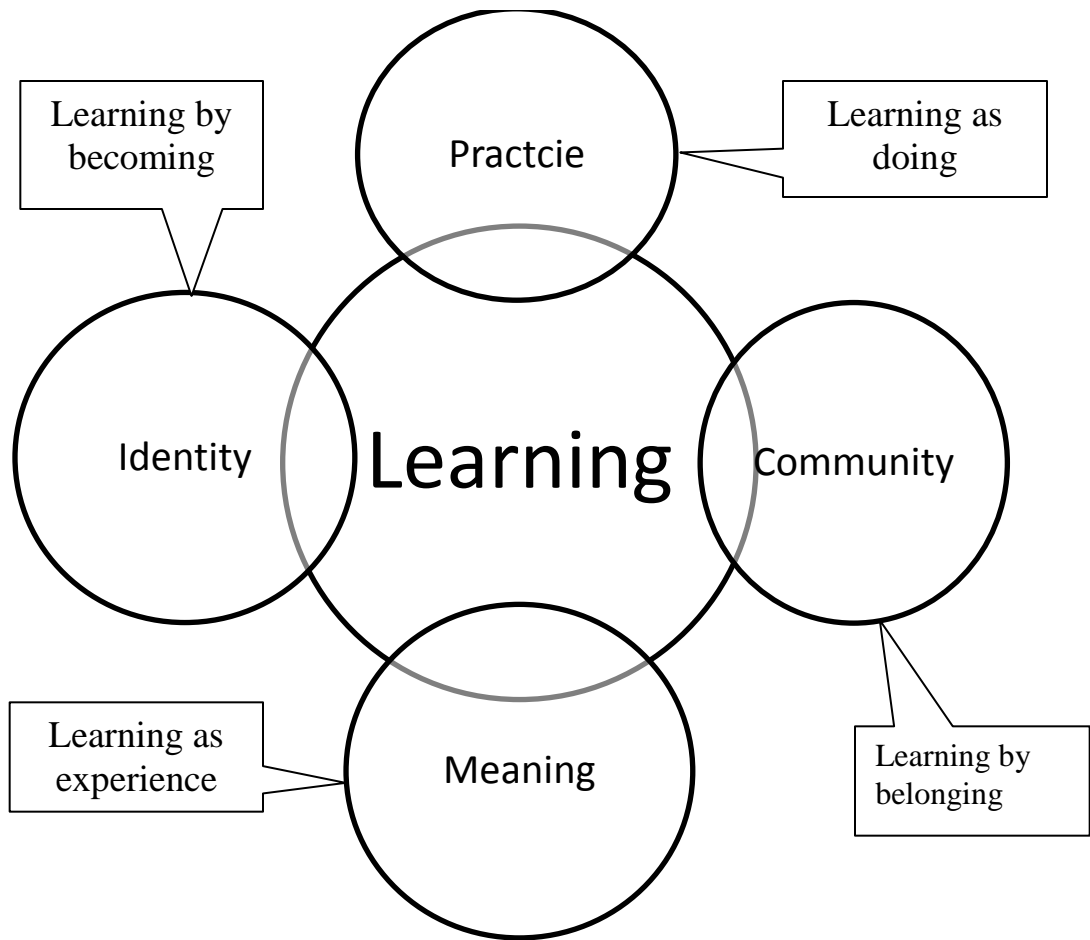
Figure 5

Components of a social theory of learning: an initial inventory (Wenger, 2006a).

of practice consists of members that share more than simply an interest; a CoP shares

expertise, competence, learning, activities, discussions, information, tools, stories,

experience, and a knowledge base" (Seaman, 2008, p. 270).

**Communities of practice: A conceptual history**

Communities of practice have been with us for many years. However, the term itself was first used by Lave and Wenger (1991) when they were exploring the concept of situated learning. In situated learning, learning is viewed as a situated activity that "has as its central defining characteristic a process we call legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). This legitimate peripheral participation provides a way for people with experience to share knowledge with those who are seeking knowledge. It also provides a way for sharing "activities, identifiers, artifacts and communities of knowledge and practice" (p. 29). Knowledge is thus shared and passed down from experts to novices until the novices become full participants in this sociocultural practice.

Lave and Wenger (1991) began their exploration of situated learning by considering the notion of apprenticeship, a concept that Rogoff (1990) was also working on. The apprenticeship model provides "beginners with access to both the overt aspects of the skill and the more hidden inner processes of thought" (p. 39). Through close collaboration with the mentor, the apprentice begins to understand not only the new knowledge, but also how that knowledge is created. Rogoff considers the process of apprenticeship when she wrote that children are

> apprentices in thinking, active in the efforts to learn from observing and
> participating with peers and more skilled members of their society, developing
> skills to handle culturally defined problems with available tools, and building
> from these givens to construct new solutions within the context of sociocultural
> activity (p. 7).

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Central to this concept of apprenticeship and legitimate peripheral participation is the way in which knowledge is learned. Novices or newcomers collaborate and learn from experts or old timers. The use of the word "legitimate" in the term is used to illustrate the hierarchical and authority relationships within the community. "Peripheral" refers to the member's social standing in the community rather than the actual physical location of the member. Participation, the final key element, depends upon to the previous two concepts and refers to the current level of participation in the community as well as future expectations about participation. Initially the new member learns the basics of the community and gradually works on more difficult tasks. Over time, the novice becomes an expert and is eventually recognized by other members of the community as a practicing authoritative figure (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This form of apprenticeship is the framework used in a community of learners, where the novice learns from the expert. Lave and Wenger, however, wanted to change the approach of learning, "from viewing learning as acquisition and towards understanding learning as participation" implying "a shift in orientation away from learning from and towards learning to" (Hughes, 2007, p. 38). This paradigm shift from learning *from* to learning *to* provides greater opportunities for learners to apply knowledge in different contexts.

**Situated learning, apprenticeship, and community of learners:**

**A comparison**

Situated learning holds that learning and understanding must include interactions between people and some kind of physical activity. When people are fully engaged in the process of a sociocultural practice, they learn new skills. Similarly, Rogoff (1990) wrote

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that cognitive development "occurs through guided participation and social activities with companions who support and stretch children's understanding of and skill in using the tools of the culture" (p. vii).

In the process of apprenticeship, on the other hand, learning takes place through the interactions of a novice with an expert. Apprenticeship "focuses on problem solving and developing skill(s), emphasizing processes rather than products of development and problem solving" (Rogoff, 1990, p. 9). This problem solving process can be a shared process, where learners participate in organized, cultural activities with someone who is more skilled. An apprentice, or novice, participates in "routine activities, tacit as well as explicit communication, supportive structuring of novices' efforts, and transfer of responsibility for handling skills to novices" (p. 39).

In contrast, situated learning takes place in practice, where a novice works through new practices and learns new skills. Situated learning focuses on "the relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 14). It considers the acquisition of knowledge and looks at the "kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures" (p. 14) that are involved. In situated learning, learners are considered simply to acquire abstract knowledge to apply later in different contexts.

According to MacNeil (1997), a community of learners is a specific place where people learn with others through activity to identify problems that affect them, decide on a solution together, and then take action in order to solve the problem. As the community progresses, new knowledge and skills are created and built upon (MacNeil). Another

researcher, Carney (1999), defined a community of learners as "a place where student learners are made to feel that their prior knowledge, the knowledge that they are acquiring, and the skills they are learning in order to acquire future knowledge are all tied together" (p. 53). Similarly, Garrison and Anderson (2003) define a community of learners as follows:

> A community of learners, from an educational perspective, is composed of teachers and students transacting with the specific purposes of facilitating, constructing, and validating understanding, and of developing capabilities that will lead to further learning. Such a community encourages cognitive independence and social interdependence simultaneously (p. 23).

Communities of learners have an intended purpose or outcome. Collaboration amongst the students is emphasized but there is also an expert-novice relationship between the teacher and the students. Communities of learners are also characterized by the active teaching of a specific subject or content as well as the practical application of what participants learn.

**Learning from experience**

Learning from experience is not a new concept. It probably occurred when people lived in caves when they spoke of the hunt on the next day or when they considered how to get food for their families. They might discuss strategies to hunt and capture the next day's meal and decide which tools to use to best accomplish their task. The Romans, for instance, had guilds and other specialized craftsman groups in which apprentices would be trained (Wenger, et al., 2002).

Active social participation in learning is a learning process that is recorded as early as 1897 when John Dewey wrote:

> I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated *to act as a member of a unity*, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs [Emphasis added] (p. 84).

Dewey explains how education occurs within the community, where social interactions place demands on the child "to act as a member of a unity". This situated learning within the community allows for the child to experience firsthand the practices of the community and become competent in these practices. Dewey understood the value of experience over cognitive knowledge. But experience itself is not knowledge. There are particular mental elements which may intervene in such experiences. These elements are primarily constituted by complexes of other qualities that are, as he puts it "objects of esteem or aversion, of decision, of use, of suffering, or endeavor and revolt, not of knowledge" (Hickman, 1990 p. 19).

Experience must align itself with competence. Wenger, (1996) wrote that "it takes sustained engagement in practice with old-timers in order for the depth and subtleties of practice to be shared with newcomers and for new generations to develop their own contributions" (p. 4). Experience needs to be integrated with the practices of the community before one can become competent in the practices of the community. This

would apply to newcomers, latecomers, and others not constantly involved in the practice. Practitioners must experience meaning in order to become competent practitioners. Lave and Wenger (1991) called this process legitimate peripheral participation. It is legitimate because practitioners are accepted by the members of the community but peripheral because the new members participate only in the activities on the fringe. As members participate, they become more competent in the practices of the community.

On the other hand, experience is the driving force behind competence. Some practitioners may have had experiences outside of the community and consequently invite others to participate in their experience. In this case, new relationships form in order to allow these new experiences to be assimilated into the community. Redefinition of the community may make it possible for these new experiences to be accepted and worthwhile for members. Wenger (2006a) suggested that, "they may need to add new elements to the repertoire of their practice. If they have enough legitimacy as members to be successful, they will have changed the regime of competence - and created new knowledge in the process (p. 139). This interaction between experience and competence is important to the growth of a practice. When these kinds of interactions occur, experience and competence turn into learning, both by the individual and by the community (Wenger, 2006a).

For experiences to become knowledge, both must be reflected upon by the person who has had the experiences. There must be focus and context. Dewey wrote, "Movement about an axis persists, but what is in focus constantly changes" (Dewey,

1922, p. 323). Knowledge is made when we take our experiences and reflect upon them with specific focus and within an existing context. Without these parameters, experience "is only something 'experienced'. There is something 'undergone' but there is no active knowing, because there is no significance" (Hickman, 1990 p. 20). Communities of practice experience learning in groups of people, learning through practice about a subject they are passionate about or have a concern for, and they learn how to do it better through regular interaction (Wenger, 2006a).

The next section will define the domain and illustrate how it becomes one of the integrated components of a CoP. According to Wenger (2006b), there are three ingredients that make up a CoP that differentiate it from other groups, of which the domain is the first, the community the second and the practice the third. He provides the following definitions:

> *The domain*. A CoP is something more than a club of friends or a network of connections between people. 'It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

> *The community*. In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.

> *The practice*. Members of a CoP are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring

problems - in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction (p.

1).

As these three components develop so does a CoP.

**The Domain**

The first of the three major components of a CoP is the domain. The domain describes a specific area of expertise or of interest that members share. "The domain creates a common ground and a sense of common identity. A well-defined domain legitimizes the community by affirming its purpose and value to members and other stakeholders" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 27). The domain is a space that defines an area of expertise or a set of issues. Because of its specificity, members are inspired to participate and contribute to the evolving knowledge. The domain helps define what is considered worthwhile, how the ideas can best be presented, and guides what directions to take in the future.

**Identity through a shared interest**

Communities of practice allow for the development of an identity of both individuals and a group. They are spaces in which "practitioners can connect across organizational and geographic boundaries and focus on professional development rather than the application of expertise to meet a specific goal" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 20). A CoP also "implies an experience of togetherness that extends through time and space" (Wenger, White, Smith, & Rowe, 2005, p. 2). When students meet online not to reach a specific goal, but to practice and grow in their expertise, in the case of this study, of reading, they formulate an identity as reading practitioners.

Wenger (2006a) wrote that a CoP "is focused on a domain of shared interest, it is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between friends" (p. 2). He also stated that "For a community to form, the topic must be of more than just a passing interest" (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009, p. 4). Members must have a minimum level of expertise or interest in or knowledge of the domain. They must have a shared competence that has grown from experience, which makes members of this community different from those in other groups. A CoP may not be recognizable to people outside the community. A group of children in an online reading course may look like they are merely participating in a socializing event. Yet, when these students share the same level of competence and have made a commitment to the interest of the domain, the event becomes more than a classroom or a group of friends meeting in a digital habitat; it becomes a CoP. Members formulate an identity for the CoP – "a set of issues, challenges, and passions through which members recognize each other as learning partners" (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 5).

### Commitment to the domain: A joint enterprise

Members must make a commitment to the domain; otherwise the community is merely a group of friends interacting (Wenger, et al., 2002). Membership implies an interest in the subject of the domain and therefore a commitment to participate in it.

> A Community of Practice represents an intention – however tacit and distributed – to steward a domain of knowledge and to sustain learning about it. A strong community is a group where that intention is well understood as a joint enterprise, no matter at what scale or with what level of interaction. This implies a high level

of identification with the domain as something that connects the members and their orientation to practice. A network by contrast entails connectivity, with nodes and links, but not necessarily an intention to hold a domain or identification with a joint enterprise (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 192).

Commitments to a domain vary greatly. Commitment of any kind indicates an intention to work within the community in order to evolve knowledge within the group. It is understood that the process of the community is a joint enterprise with others who share the same interests. The size, scope, or frequency of participation is not important as long as the individual's identification as a group member is clear and in agreement with the domain (Brown & Gray, 1995). This is what makes the community a community: the connectivity within the orientation of the group's practice.

Any group can become a joint enterprise, but what makes a CoP different is the level of commitment and the function of the group for its own specific purposes (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005). Communities of practice are not kept together by an external manager who controls the activities of the community. Instead, "learners negotiate their own economies of meaning and communal responses to the designs placed before them" (p. 60). In other words, communities of practice are not constrained by outside barriers; they negotiate their own meanings and responses; they devise and build from this joint enterprise a shared repertoire or competence.

**A shared repertoire**

The shared repertoire is the shared language and discourse of the community (Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007). It also includes routines, words, tools, and ways of doing things, symbols, discourse, and genres. "Over time, the joint enterprise creates resources for negotiating meaning" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 82).These resources are used by the members of the community. Some elements of the repertoire are already in use elsewhere and are adopted by the community, while others are created or produced specifically for the CoP. The items in the repertoire may be very dissimilar, "they gain their coherence not in and of themselves as specific activities, symbols, or artifacts, but from the fact that they belong to the practice of a community pursuing an enterprise" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 82).

A shared repertoire of tools is used to negotiate meaning as it "reflects a history of mutual engagement and remains inherently ambiguous" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 83). Artifacts of a CoP can be used in their current state or redesigned for use with current issues. They can continue to be utilized in common established ways or can take on new meaning and be used in new ways. Keeping these resources ambiguous allows them to be used to generate new ideas. In this context "ambiguity is not simply an obstacle to overcome; it is an inherent condition to be put to work" (p. 84).

However, putting things to work may not be as easy as one might imagine. It involves a process in which many perspectives on a problem and its solutions have to be negotiated. A CoP can also be a messy place where new ideas and knowledge are formed

or where the social energy can keep us responding to new ideas or problems. Wenger (2006a) emphasizes this point:

1)    I have insisted that shared practice does not itself imply harmony or collaboration.

2)    Moreover, asserting as I have that these kinds of communities produce their own practices is not asserting that communities of practice are in an essential way an emancipator force (p. 85).

Communities of practice in themselves are therefore not good or bad, positive or negative, beneficial or harmful. They are communities in which meaning and knowledge are formulated thorough a negotiated practice. The following section explores communities themselves and how members build and nurture them.

**The Community**

The second major component of a CoP is the community. This section presents the literature concerning members' participation in joint activities and discussions, relationships amongst members, as well as member collaboration and sharing.

**Participating in joint activities and discussions**

In a CoP, the mutual engagement of its members in activities and discussions is paramount. People must be engaged with each other in order to negotiate meaning and nurture new understandings and knowledge. Without joint activities, there would be no community. These activities may include the following:

1. Membership is not just a matter of social category, declaring allegiance, belonging to an organization, having a title, or having personal relations with some people.

2. A Community of Practice is not defined merely by who knows whom or who talks to whom in a network of interpersonal relations through which information flows.

3. Geographical proximity is likewise not sufficient to develop a practice. (Wenger, 2006a, p. 74).

A CoP is not just a group of friends who exchange information and the physical location of the community is unimportant. What is important is the ability of group members to engage each other in joint activities and discussions. This could be as simple as talking on the telephone or using technology to instant message each other. As Wenger puts it, "people can participate in different ways and to different degrees" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). They could meet on a daily or monthly basis at a specific location or in a digital habitat.

An asset to digital communities is that they can cross several boundaries. In a digital world, it is easy to develop communities that span the globe, where the time of day is unimportant because participation can take place continuously. Wenger, et al. (2009) wrote, "When membership is defined by participation in a technology space, it may take new skills to give it an identity that is not defined by technology" (p. 189). When participation in a technological space occurs, groups can move to different technologies that allow for their continued growth and enhancement of learning. The community is not

limited by one specific technology and may utilize several kinds of technologies to serve their purpose.

Another asset of digital communities is that since they have the potential to become very large, there are greater chances for the formation of more specialized groups. As Wenger (2006a) puts it, "what makes engagement in practice possible and productive is as much a matter of diversity as it is a matter of homogeneity" (p. 75). Larger groups with a diverse membership have participants who begin to specialize and develop reputations as experts. Contributions by experts have a complementary effect when there is mutual engagement. Experts are able to stay focused on the practice and encourage productive learning while diversity allows communities to prosper and progress.

A CoP in a digital habitat is a relatively new concept and has its own challenges. For instance, a digital community can cross boundaries so that "people can come together who would not meet otherwise – or even know of each other's existence" (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 188). Having access to all kinds of communities can be problematic with regard to the size of the community. Technology can also present certain limitations as far as participation is concerned. It is difficult to cross time zones and the involvement of multiple languages may also be problematic. There are also limitations on the number of people who can be in a chat room discussing an issue at one time. Some large groups break down into smaller subgroups and may specialize even further. Some communities also have "a very large periphery of members who benefit deeply from their participation even if they rarely or ever say anything at all (Wenger, et al., 2009).

**Building relationships**

Once a community has been established, members need to get to know one another. It is therefore very important "to have activities that allow members to build relationships, trust, and an awareness of their common interest" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 82). Members must inherit some kind of value for their participation. It takes time for these relationships to reach a level where trust exists. When this occurs, people are willing to share information with each other. Wenger, White and Smith (2009) emphasize the importance of this and argue that "Learning together depends on the quality of relationships of trust and mutual engagement that members develop with each other" (p. 8). Further, Lave and Wenger (1991) wrote that a "Community of Practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with the tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). A single community is not the only community that is strengthened through these developing relationships. Overlapping communities also benefit and grow.

It takes time to build these trusting relationships. People new to the community often look in from the outside and gradually move into, and are accepted by the established members of the community. Prospective members take time to become familiar with how the group operates and with different members' perspectives before making a decision to become involved or move on. Wenger, et al. (2009) suggested that, "People who remain peripheral may also carry the community's learning to other communities" (p. 9). This is also how specialized subgroups continue to grow; "This permeable periphery creates many opportunities for learning, as outsiders and newcomers

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learn the practice in concrete terms, and core members gain new insights from contacts with less-engaged participants" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). As members get to know each other, the community can begin to prosper as fresh ideas and perspectives inspire long time members into thinking anew.

**Stages of Development**

Figure 6

Stages of development for a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998).

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**Stages of Development**

**Active**
Members engage in developing a practice

**Coalescing**
Members come together and recognize their potential

**Dispersed**
Members no longer engage very intensely, but the community is still alive as a force and a center of knowledge

**Potential**
People face similar situations without the benefit of a shared practice

**Memorable**
The community is no longer central, but people still remember it as a significant part of their identities

**Typical Activities**

Finding each other, discovering commonalities

Exploring connectedness, defining joint enterprise, negotiating community

Engaging in joint activities, creating artifacts, adapting to changing circumstances, renewing interest, commitment, and relationships

Staying in touch, communicating, holding reunions, calling for advice

Telling stories, preserving artifacts, collecting memorabilia

time

Figure 6

Stages of development for a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998).

It takes time for a CoP to evolve. They "develop around things that matter to people. As a result, their practices reflect the members' own understanding of what is important" (Wenger, 1998, p. 3). As shown in Figure 6, members progress through different stages of participation and involvement. Some communities last a long time while others may only be short term communities.

**Helping, sharing, and learning from each other**

Wenger and Snyder (2004) suggested that, "People in communities of practice share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems" (p. 125). Social interaction and learning together are the keys to the development of a CoP. When people interact together, working on a problem or learning a new skill, they share perspectives and ideas. When misunderstanding occurs, they scaffold the underachiever until the learner has become proficient with the knowledge of the group (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). When members help each other and share information, they learn from each other. Having a shared understanding allows for community members to merge together and thrive in their abilities and their thinking.

Communities of practice are places for the exchange and interpretation of information. Because members have a shared understanding, they know what is important to communicate and how to share information that is useful to the community. The learning is not just situated in practice. It is an integral part of practice, where members learn through helping and sharing knowledge and ideas in a practice. It is participation in the practice, "where participants have a common understanding about what it is and what it means for their lives and community. The community and the

degree of participation in it are inseparable from the practice" (Kimble, Hildreth & Wright, 2001, p. 218). In this next section, the practice aspect of a CoP will be explored to illustrate how practitioners function within a community.

**The Practice**

The third major component of a CoP is the practice, which is ultimately what "differentiates Community of Practice from other communities" (Seaman, 2008, p. 270). Practitioners develop and use resources in community activities. They have a "way of talking about shared historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 5). Over time, the practitioners develop a shared practice.

Communities develop in stages. As community members get to know each other better, they build trust and acceptance through their involvement in a variety of activities. They arrive at the CoP at different stages of development. Cousin and Deepwell (2005) suggest that "e-facilitators have to be mindful that learners may arrive at a pedagogical setting with congealed practices form another kind of setting" (p. 61). It is the participation of learners in the specific CoP that promotes specific learning. Cousin and Deepwell concluded that "the central point here is that participation enables learning, and learning changes who we are" (p. 61). Learning throughout life is taken in stages of socially constructed steps and therefore "cannot be designed; it can only be designed for" (p. 63) the optimization of learning.

Participants must be willing to be engaged in their CoP of their own volition. Cox (2005) addressed this idea of volunteerism. He wrote that "a 'community' of practice is

defined by its membership being voluntary and its behavior 'self organizing'" (p. 534).

By voluntarily participating in the CoP, learning is enhanced as participants follow the direction they have chosen. This section will review the literature on how practitioners utilize the tools of the community in their practice.

**Practitioners**

Practitioners come together in a CoP to be involved in activities of a well-defined community. In fact, one of the main goals of a CoP "is to establish a baseline of common knowledge that can be assumed on the part of each full member" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 38). The practitioners do not have to agree on everything in the knowledge base. They can take different perspectives or develop individual expertise, but they all share a basic foundation of knowledge that will allow the group to work together. A CoP may come in a variety of shapes and sizes. They are identifiable in what they do, by their purpose, and their need to interact together in order to learn from each other.

What is important in a CoP is the social interaction that occurs over time. Learning is about the work of the community, community work is about learning in the community. Lave and Wenger (1991) wrote that "learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in word" (p. 34). Both learning and working together occur in social settings but need not take place in a face to face meeting. In an age of emails, instant messages, and applications like SKYPE, people have been able to come together and become practitioners in technology-based communities of practice (Wenger, et al., 2009). Technology-based

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communities therefore have the same value and components as face to face communities of practice. It is the practice that is important.

> Over time this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense therefore, to call these kinds of communities, communities of practice (Wenger, 2006a, p. 45).

**Shared resources**

Members of a CoP bring a set of tools to the community. During their practice, they also develop new tools that allow the practice to work more efficiently. Understanding and knowing the purpose of tools and how tools are used in the community is important. Tools assist members in developing understanding and meaning as they negotiate the community practice. Wenger (2006a) wrote that, "this form then becomes a focus for the negotiation of meaning, as people use the law to argue a point, use the procedure to know what to do, or use the tool to perform an action" (p. 59). These resources are thus shared by participants in the community

Such resources can include many things. A shared repertoire of resources refers to a community's "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has adapted in the class of its existence" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 83). In a digital habitat, these shared resources may look a little different from those found in a face to face habitat. As Wenger, White and Smith (2009) argue, "As communities appropriate technologies, they make 'themselves at home' in

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new ways and new places. They shape their digital habitats and the technologies they
contain through novel use, asking more of technology creators and suggesting new
directions for development" (p. 19). As new technologies are created, they can be adapted
for use in a community by the practitioners. Members themselves can then develop
expertise and share how a new tool functions with other members. As they become more
proficient with the use of the tool, more members will begin to use it. This allows for a
new kind of interaction between practitioners and technology, which can further learning
about work and working to learn. It can also promote the development of new tools or
different ways of using old tools. As new technologies emerge, new ways of learning and
sharing knowledge and information also emerge.

> New approaches to work require new kinds of computing. The age of desktop
> computing is giving way to the era of social computing. Reengineering would not
> have been possible without new information technologies. … New digital
> technologies will enable companies to engage their employees and energize the
> emergent. (Brown & Gray, 1995, p. 4).

Not all tools are used for the purposes for which they were originally designed.
Many technological tools are shared in a CoP in ways that exhibit adaptability. As
Wenger, et al. (2009) put it, "communities of practice are skillful at putting all kinds of
tools to good use, regardless of their designer's intention" (p. 62). Because digital
communities mostly communicate with words, the most popular tools use some form of
discourse. However, according to Cousin and Deepwell (2005), some theorists "point to
the emotional substructures to online discussion groups" (p. 60). For instance, it can be

difficult to understand the truthfulness of online postings sometimes. It takes time to build relationships where trustworthiness can exist. This can be "a delicate process that includes knowing enough about each other and building trust, technology introduces new twists to this challenge" (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 191).

### A shared practice

When practitioners share a repertoire of resources in the activities of the community, they have a shared practice. Wenger, et al. (2002) wrote that, "An effective practice evolves with the community as a collective product. It is integrated into people's work" (p. 39). People living and working in a community do not want to work alone. They learn from and build upon their own as well as others' knowledge through interactions and conversations. Each community has a different way of accomplishing this and its own unique way of developing and sharing knowledge. Wenger, et al. argued that, "Successful practice development depends on a balance between joint activities, in which members explore ideas together, and the production of 'things' like documents or tools" (p. 39). When practitioners work in cooperation with other practitioners, they are able to produce usable tools and other artifacts that the community can utilize to expand their particular knowledge base. Thus "communities of practice do not reduce knowledge to an object. They make it an integral part of their activities and interactions, and they serve as a living repository for that knowledge" (p. 9).

New members are accepted into the community by performing simple tasks that are in line with the goals of the community. Through this induction process, newcomers become familiar with the tools and practices of the community. Older members share the

historical development, the practices, and the tools of the community. Gradually, as newcomers experience more practices, they become more competent and more deeply involved with the center of the practice and eventually become full participants. Learning then becomes more of a social practice through participation rather than a simple acquisition of knowledge. As Lave and Wenger (1991) put it:

> Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and… the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (p. 29).

Wenger, et al. (2002) suggested that, "Successful practice building goes hand-in-hand with community building" (p. 40). As more new members join the community, the practice expands and broadens. But it is only through the sharing of the practice that a true CoP develops and is nurtured.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have explored summer reading loss, ideas on how that loss can be minimized, and the possible use of a digital space to develop a reading CoP with rural middle school students to reduce summer reading setback. Using technology and a digital

habitat to interrupt the loss of reading skills during the summer break is a novel idea whose time has come. Building a CoP in a digital habitat may be a means of using tools that students already use to engage them in the sociocultural practice of discussing their reading. The next chapter will provide a discussion of the methods used in the online CoP that was designed to help students from losing ground in their reading abilities during the summer.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH APPROACH

This study took an action research approach within a qualitative design to explore rural middle school students' participation in a summer online reading class. Several premises that undergird qualitative work were important in the design of this research. First, a qualitative approach is based upon the belief that knowledge, culture, and learning are socially constructed in a community through the process of interaction and language use. The main goal of this research was to study the effect of developing a CoP (CoP) that provided multiple opportunities for students to interact with peers, their teacher, and the content, through the use of written discourse in a digital habitat.

Second, a qualitative approach aims to capture human interaction and patterns of meaning making within a naturalistic setting. This research therefore sought to study "real-world situations as they unfold naturally" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). It studied and analyzed the kinds of relationships or patterns that emerged in the online discourse amongst peers and between students and the teacher. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested "that inquiry must be carried out in a 'natural' setting because the phenomenon of study … *takes their meaning as much from the contexts as they do from themselves*" [Italics in the original] (p. 189). Students' constructed realities cannot be separated from the world in which they are experiencing it and the observer must therefore make observations that are "time- and context-dependent" (p. 189). With today's teens, the setting for discourse to occur is often constructed with the use of technological tools. Rather than a face to

face classroom setting, this study took place in a digital habitat. In such a setting, data were contextual and a part of real time learning and interaction. Data were collected from student responses and postings, created work specimens, and interactions amongst their peers, their teacher, and the content, in order to capture student participatory practices.

Third, the inquiry took an in-depth look at the interactions of the students in an online class environment which generated rich and thick descriptions. The goal of naturalistic inquiry "is to understand social reality on its own terms, as it really is, to describes what comes naturally" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1999, p. 122). This study gathered thick descriptions of what came naturally by studying student interactions in a natural setting of an online community. This study sought "rich descriptions of people and interaction as they exist and unfold in their natural habitats" (p. 122).

Participating in human discourse is one way of gathering thick descriptions. It is a way of clarifying and confirming meaning. In qualitative research, the interactions between the researcher and the researched can be viewed as an opportunity to gather information about the realities of the situation. They are desired as the "researcher attempts to become part of the setting, with a goal of providing in-depth descriptions and analytical understandings of the meanings participants in a setting attach to their interactions and routines" (Bailey, 2007, p. 3). By including thick descriptions of these discourses, credibility and transferability are also enhanced. These descriptions, however, "must specify everything that a reader may need to know in order to understand the findings" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 125). By locating these rich and thick descriptions, a

more complex and complete picture of the context within this online environment emerged.

**Action Research**

Action research is practical (Denscombe, 2007) and "is aimed at dealing with real-world problems and issues" (p. 123). Children losing ground in their reading abilities during the summer months when they are not in school is the kind of real world problem referred to by Denscombe (2007). Action research is about change, "both as a way of dealing with practical problems and as a means of discovering more about the problem" (p. 123). Using an Internet-based course management system to foster the development of a CoP is a novel way to enhance summer literacy development. With the isolation that many rural middle school students experience during the summer months because of where they live, summer literacy development and practices literally become an isolated practice. By using the Internet, this research attempted to bring the schoolroom into the living room.

Lewin (1946) proposed a three step model for action research. The first step is to determine the problems and issues involved, the second is to take action to solve the problems or address the issues, and the third is to determine the outcome of the actions taken. By using this model, "action research is also orientated towards outcomes" (Tesch, 1990, p. 66). Further, Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) wrote that action research is "taking action based on research and researching the action taken" (p. 538). Action research focuses on emerged improvements to an intervention being executed. This research proposed an alternative intervention to the classic problem of summer

reading setback. Action research has been previously applied in many areas, including curriculum development and teaching strategies (Ary, et al, 2006). Glesne stated (2006) that in education, action research has been a way for practitioners "to improve practice" (p. 17).

Substantial research has already been presented in identifying summer reading setback, what it is, and developing programs for urban areas to address it (Cooper, et al., 1996, Entwisle & Alexander, 1992, and Heyns, 1987); however, it still remains largely unaddressed for many rural students today. Additionally, with the more recent inclusion of technology-based strategies as an intervention, mostly unavailable in the 1990s, research is now beginning to emerge in addressing possible uses of technology in teaching and learning. Further, in rural areas, there are often few reading resources or opportunities available for students to take advantage of during the summer months. Little has been done to address summer reading setback with rural middle school students. This research developed a literacy practice for rural middle school students when they are away from the schoolhouse during the summer months.

### Ensuring Trustworthiness through Credibility and Transferability

Positivists claim that inquiry can be made value-free through the use of methodologies that "isolate and remove all 'subjective' elements from the inquiry situation" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 162). Quantitative research however, is not value free. It contains values that positivists are not always willing to recognize and that "values are determinative of decisions about what to study, how to study it, and what interpretations to make" (p. 162). A major concern, then, for positivist researchers is

whether or not qualitative research findings are trustworthy. These issues are defined differently for qualitative researchers and research situated within a qualitative paradigm.

First, qualitative researchers are concerned with credibility. Whereas in quantitative research, the implementation of the method is what determines reliability and validity, in qualitative research the research works toward credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability. The goal of credibility is to show that the research was conducted in such a way as to ensure that the findings and descriptions of the research were accurately described and identified. The research must then be "credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Credibility is a force in interpreting your data and can establish a level of trustworthiness and define the limitations of your study (Glesne, 2006). The trust that a researcher has established the truth and the believability of what is written is crucial in naturalistic inquiry. Besides offering rich and thick descriptions of the data, one also has to provide a layer of objectivity. One way of doing so is to deal with opposing views of your conclusions (Northey, Tepperman, & Russell, 2005). Not giving the opportunity for opponents to express their opposing views, "will seriously weaken the credibility of even your best findings" (p. 129). Good research considers alternative explanations to the findings. It is a matter of not presenting a narrowly defined accounting, but a holistically defined broad picture.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer several techniques to insure that the findings and interpretations of qualitative research have credibility. They include:

1.	Triangulation

2.        Peer debriefing

3.        Negative case analysis

4.        Referential adequacy (p. 301).

**Triangulation**

Triangulation is the inclusion of data from different sources through multiple perspectives. It "strengthens a study by combining methods" (Patton, 2002, p. 247). Marshall and Rossman (1995) define triangulation as "the act of bringing in more than one source of data to bear on a single point. … data from different sources can be used to corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research in question" (p. 144). Data sources used in this study for triangulation were:

- a grounded survey, at the end of the course, used to gather student opinions,

- emails from parents and students

- my reflectory journaling during the course, and

- student's work, including responses on

  - synchronous discussions

  - asynchronous discussions

  - blogs and other work products

**Peer Debriefing**

Peer debriefing "is a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner of paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). According to Bailey (2007), peer debriefing with a friend,

colleague, or committee member, should occur early and frequently during the study. Using an expert reviewer is another way of checking for biases and inconsistencies in the methodology and conclusions. Peer debriefing also "provides an initial and searching opportunity to test a working hypothesis that may be emerging in the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 308). In this study, peer debriefings took place with my advisor as this research progressed to identify what steps needed to be taken next in the study based upon what was emerging from the data. Peer debriefing was very important as it gave support to the decisions being made and the directions being formed as the study advanced.

**Negative Case Analysis**

As data were analyzed it was important to look for negative case examples. A negative case example offers credibility to the study as it "represents an extreme point on a dimensional range of a concept" (Corbin & Holt, 2002, p. 5). These kinds of cases are not necessarily against the emerging theory, but they do show the "breadth by expanding its possibilities" (p. 5). This was a systematic process throughout the continuous analysis of the data as I sought to confirm or disconfirm, broaden, or deepen existing data categories.

**Referential Adequacy**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "recorded materials provide a kind of benchmark against which later data analysis and interpretation (the critiques) could be tested for adequacy" (p. 313). All of the data in this study is in written form and was collected from emails, transcripts in a/synchronous discussions and other postings. These

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are examples of the data that are frozen in time, allowing for the opportunity to go back in time and reexamine and retest raw data. This data "provides a rare opportunity for demonstrating the credibility of naturalistic data" (p. 314). Student-created typed responses and written dialogues contributed to referential adequacy throughout the study, as will be illustrated in Chapter Four.

<center>**Transferability**</center>

Qualitative research does not attempt to generate data and conclusions that can be generalized across large numbers of people in a population. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) state, this presents some limitations; "The problem with generalizing in qualitative research is that "they don't apply to all particulars (p. 110). This is because "there can be no one set of generalizations, consistent with one another, that can effectively account for all known phenomenon" (p. 118). There were no assumptions that every student in this research was the same, nor that they received the intervention or participated in the same way. Instead, this research explored a particular intervention with a small group of rural middle school students, uncovering patterns of participation within this particular context. This allowed me to take "adequate account of local conditions, local mutual shaping's, and local values (for possible transferability)" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40).

However, I hoped that the results of this research would have implications and applicability in other rural settings, involving other rural middle school students. If transferability is to occur, then it rests upon the "applicability of findings beyond the setting, situations, and participants included in the research" (Bailey, 2007, p. 182).

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Applicability, however, "rests more with the investigator who would make that transfer, than with the original investigator" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 145).

## Setting

There are two layers in the setting of this study. The first layer is in the context of a rural middle school. The second is in the online environment. The active participants in this study were four students from a rural school district, located in Appalachia, Ohio, herein in referred to as Scenic View Middle School. The Scenic View School District included four elementary schools, housing grades kindergarten through sixth grade, a middle school that housed grades seven and eight, and a high school that included the upper grades of nine through twelve. Scenic View Middle School was located on the same property as the high school. The property also housed the school farm, with the Future Farmers of America (FFA) hog barn directly across the highway from the middle school. The physical setting of the school included acres of corn and potato crops planted by the FFA, surrounding the outside of the campus, along with softball, soccer, and football fields.

There were approximately 380 students enrolled for the 2008-2009 school year. Ninety-nine percent of the school population was Caucasian, 0.8% was African American, and only 0.2% was of other ethnic descent. Forty-eight percent were male and 52% were female. Forty-six percent of the total student population received free or reduced lunches.

Of the 26 teachers at the Scenic View Middle School, one was a female African American teacher who taught language arts. The rest of the teaching staff was Caucasian.

There was an even split between male teachers and female teachers. Fourteen percent of the teachers had a bachelor's degree, 32% had 150 semester hours, 14% had a master's degree, 4% had a master's degree plus 15 semester hours, and 29% had a master's degree plus 30 semester hours. The average age of the teachers was approximately 42.5 years, ranging from 24 to 60 years old. The mean teaching experience was 15 years with a range from 1 to 38 years.

An additional layer of the setting was the online environment, specifically the course management system of a large Midwestern university. A special course was added so these rural middle school students could participate. Each student was registered and given a guest account which was valid for the length of the course. Access to the online course was restricted to the students, the researcher and his dissertation committee members.

## Participants

The participant pool for this study were students preparing to enter the eighth grade in the fall of 2009 and who enrolled in the online summer reading course. The actual participants included two girls and two boys, with one of the boys having an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Three other students, a boy and two girls, signed up to take the class and participate in the study, but did not participate in the course once it began. The actual participants in the study were 12 and 13 years of age. The students in the study were 12 and 13 years of age. All students are Caucasian and are not economically disadvantaged. The following is a brief description of the actual participants in the study, using pseudonyms.

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Jordan is a good student and takes his learning very seriously. While he is autistic, he functions very well in an inclusive classroom setting during the regular school year, interacting well with his peers and teachers. He sometimes regards comments that are of a joking nature as a serious comment and becomes upset, leaving the situation quickly in order to calm himself. He is on the golf team with Zack. Jordan is of average size for his age. He wears glasses and keeps his hair neat and is well dressed.

Zack does well in school and is active in several student organizations. He loves to display his ability to debate issues with other students and teachers. He was an Ohio Model United Nations delegate for two years and is also on the golf team. Zack likes to keep his wavy hair a little longer and usually has an exciting look in his eyes when you meet him. He is also on the golf team.

Sara is a popular young lady who is focused on her learning and practicing her Christian beliefs. She is an excellent singer who, like her mother, plays the piano. While being popular, she maintains a low profile and is respected by her peers and teachers. She does well in school and participates in different choir ensembles. She often volunteers her free time with church and community organizations.

Kathy is also a popular young lady in the middle school with many friends. She enjoys singing and performing in band, choir, and show choir. Kathy is an good student who enjoys reading as a pastime. She is active in school organizations and is active in church and community organizations as well. She and Sara are friends.

The course was designed for 30 students to allow for maximum participation and support. However, students enrolled in the course did not have to participate in the study,

though all were invited to participate and did so. The course was designed to attract general education and special education students, girls and boys, average readers as well as struggling readers, and students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The subject pool represented a diverse group of students. The superintendent of the district and the building principal gave written permission for the course to take place and for the study to occur in the district and with students from the middle school.

## Theoretical Course Design

An online setting for this reading class, which was framed around the principles of a CoP, is a unique approach to addressing summer reading support for students who are at risk for summer reading setback. In this section, I further explore the ways in which this course was constructed around a CoP within an online learning environment.

Technology has changed the way that people learn, work, communicate, and play. It is changing everyday with new programs, faster machines, and more innovative tools and toys that stretch our imagination. Nevertheless, strategies for teaching and learning need to grow out of research developed in educational settings.

As we enter the new millennium, teachers need to integrate new content and tools in order to teach with a greater holistic perspective (McCombs, 2000). Particularly, as it relates to courses taken in an online environment, the design of this research was drawn from this perspective. It integrated technology *into* pedagogy instead of technology being used as a separate component added in.

This research was designed to take advantage of a technological integrated platform that was based upon research presented in the last 15 to 20 years. Moore's (1991) transactional distance theory was utilized in designing this course.

When we talk about distance education, we are referring to a distance that is more than simply a geographic separation of learners and teachers. It is a distance of understandings and perceptions, caused in part by the geographic distance that has to be overcome by teachers, learners and educational organizations if effective, deliberate, planned learning is to occur (p. 1).

The distance that needs to be reduced is a "psychological and communications gap that is a function of the interplay among structure, dialogue, and autonomy" (Stein, et al., 2005, p. 106). This was important, because greater structure and less dialogue tend to increase transactional distance so that the learner needs to take on more responsibility in order to be successful. By utilizing student to peer, student to teacher, and student to content structures throughout the research, responsibility for learning was less isolated and success enhanced.

In this online CoP, special attention was paid to both the constraints and affordances of an online learning environment. In the research design, there were multiple opportunities for students to interact with their peers through the use of discussion threads, blogs, emails, and instant messaging. Opportunities to communicate with the teacher were also available through multiple scheduled chat times, the use of asynchronous discussion threads, and the use of emails. Interaction with the course content occurred when students were reading or interacting with their peers. Digital

conferencing in chat rooms, for example, allowed students to share with their peers and the teacher the ways they interacted with the text.

The research offered both structure, for deep and rich dialogue to occur between students and their teacher and a certain degree of autonomy for student learning (Moore, 1993). There were a few areas where students needed more structure than others. For example, none of the students had ever used a course management system before. Extra structure and dialogue was therefore necessary to scaffold them to a point where they could function in the program autonomously. Another area that requires structure was in providing the strategies that good readers use. They also needed extra structure and support in how to participate in discussion threads.

### The Middle School Online Summer Reading Course Design

This research took place over a period of eight weeks during the months of June, July, and August, 2009. Each week, data from activities were collected around three main themes:

1. Reading

2. Responding

3. Creating

For reading, the course was structured with opportunities for discussions about strategies on how to become a more proficient reader. These strategies included students learning how to create short summaries and retellings, making predictions that were based upon the reading, and writing questions that challenged the author's purpose for writing a specific part of the story. The course included discussions that developed around the

students' personal connections with the characters, the plot, and the story in the course book. The data illustrated how other open discussions emerged as a result of the reading and thinking process during the course. It was also structured with an announcement of the assignments and schedules every week on the front page of the online class site. This was also where course and reading assignments were disseminated and discussion boards were made available to the students.

There were multiple opportunities for students to interact with peers, the content, and the teacher:

1. Dialogue with peers and the teacher

2. Multiple interactions with the text and the words printed on the computer screen.

3. Teacher facilitation and support in the content of the course and technology

4. Availability of a recording of the book

5. The use of a course management program

6. A strong teacher, peer, and content presence

No face to face classroom meetings took place during the summer except for preliminary and post course meetings with individual students. During the preliminary meeting, students reading abilities were evaluated and they learned how to navigate through the online course management system. In the post course meeting, students again had their reading ability evaluated and they completed a written survey.

## Using Technological Tools

This research used several different technology tools. First, in the way of creating discourse between students and the teacher, students used:

- Discussion threads

- Chat rooms

- E-mails, which were utilized to ensure that all students had private access with their peers and the teacher

- Personal communication tools, which were used proactively at the beginning of the course in order to make the tone of the course welcoming and friendly

- Short educational movies

- Teacher created recorded video lessons

These technology tools were not only the tools of the teacher but are also the tools of students. They were also the tools that students were accustomed to using in communicating with their friends, searching the Internet, discussing issues in their lives, and just socializing in the online community.

## Methods for Data Collection

Data were collected in a variety of ways and there were several stages of data collection.

Stage One: Course Data Collection

The research began approximately two weeks after school ended and lasted for eight weeks. During this prolonged engagement time with persistent observation (Glesne,

2006), data collection occurred. Data were collected from the course management system in the form of:

1. Asynchronous discussion threads

2. Synchronous discussion

3. Student postings

4. Emails from parents and students

5. Teacher reflective journal

6. Student surveys

Students were also asked to develop a blog.

Stage Two

After the online reading course ended and before school began in the fall, each student was asked to complete a class survey of emergent design. It asked about the students' opinions on the class, how it helped or did not help them, and what they liked or disliked about it.

## Timeline for the Study

Informing students of Scenic View Middle School took place during the month of May along with registering students and gathering permissions to participate in the course and the study. The collection of data began on June 22, 2009 and concluded on August 22, 2009. Following the collection of data, I began further analysis of the data I had collected. I began to write about the data in February, 2010.

**Coding, Processing, and Organizing the Data**

Data analysis used an emergent design approach to explore qualitative data. Emergent literally means "arising unexpectedly" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 64). In emergent design studies, "the design continues to emerge as the study unfolds" (Ary, et al., 2006, p. 454). As the researcher is engaged in the process of continuous data analysis, themes begin to appear that then drive further analysis. Ultimately, my goal was to uncover "patterns, themes and categories that can use creative and critical faculties about what is really significant and meaningful in the data" (Patton, p. 467

I analyzed the data in the following way. First, I coded the data. The goal of coding was to organize data into more manageable categories (Bailey, 2007 & Patton, 2002). I did some initial coding of data as it was being collected (Glesne, 2006). As I did this, I began to see patterns emerge, which helped me develop a list of coding patterns. As I continued my analysis, I began to collapse the categories because "data reduction lies at the heart of coding" (Bailey, p. 127). Initial coding (Bailey, 2007) and open coding (Berg, 1998) are the formation of broad areas of dividing data into manageable groups.

Once initial or open coding was completed, I began a second stage of coding called focused coding (Bailey, 2007) or axial coding. This was completed through "intensive coding around one category" (Berg, 1998, p. 238). This allowed me to "further reduce the data by identifying and combining the initial coded data into larger categories that subsume multiple codes" (Bailey, p. 129). During this process, the data organization moved from a literal code to a more conceptual code. I began dealing with convergence, trying to "figure out what things fit together" (Patton, 2002, p. 465). When specific

categories were established, I then began to scrutinize divergence. In scrutinizing

divergence, I attempted to "flesh out" the patterns or categories from the research. This

was done by processes of "extension (building on items of information already known),

bridging (making connects among different items), and surfacing (proposing new

information that ought to fit and the verifying of its existence)" (p. 466). While

examining divergence, the data were scrutinized for existing patterns and for deviant

cases where the data did not seem to fit.

### Ethical Considerations

As a teacher/researcher there are a number of ethical considerations I

implemented in this study. First, I was the teacher in this course and my obligation was

to support the growth of my students. Additionally, I was also the researcher. Though I

did not foresee any problems with this position, it did place me in a closer relationship

with them than many researchers experience with participants in research.

As the researcher, I took certain steps to ensure the rights and protection of my

students/subjects. During the study, I asked all participants and a parent of each of them

to give consent for the student to participate in the course and the study and sign

releases for use of any information, work products, and communications generated

during the course. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any

time without penalty and without compromising their participation in the course.

I also undertook specific steps to ensure confidentiality.  Pseudonyms are used

for all participants and the location and name of the school was changed. No person or

place is identified. Data were kept in my home office safe and on my personal laptop. It

was also stored in the Midwestern University's course management system, which was password protected.

Confidentiality was held to the highest standards with only my advisor and members of my dissertation committee having access to the course management system and the students' work. Only I know the actual identities of the students participating in the course. At the conclusion of the study, I removed the actual identifiers from the data.

## Writing of the Research Report

I began writing the findings of the study by collapsing some of the categories and organizing themes that emerged as I examined the organized data over a period of several months. This was a difficult process because of the amount of data I collected and my desire to search for alternative explanations and categories that I might have missed. I wanted to make sure that I analyzed the data from different perspectives. In order to include different perspectives, I consulted with my advisor on several occasions to make sure that I was keeping an open mind to other possibilities which might emerge which were either in agreement or incompatible with what I had discovered. I wanted to make sure that my writing was truly representative of the data I had so carefully and extensively analyzed over time. I also wanted to make sure that my personal views were recognized and dealt with so they would not fog the truth that was emerging from the data.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the patterns and practices of rural middle school students in developing a CoP in order to support summer reading literacy and

evaluate the patterns and practices of the teacher in the online course. I utilized my personal epistemological beliefs along with my social constructivist theoretical orientation, which guided my research design and implementation of this online course; the ways I interacted with my students and encouraged their interaction with each other, and the methodologies I practiced in order to generate the level of participation and data needed to complete this study. To enhance the trustworthiness of my study and my conclusions, I have triangulated the data by collecting and storing the data to ensure referential adequacy, searching for data indicating the negative case, and exercising peer debriefing during the prolonged engagement of students in the study (Patton, 2002).

CHAPTER 4: COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

This study examined the patterns and practices of rural middle school children who participated in a summer online reading course. My research questions were:

1. What are the patterns and practices of the student's participation in an online Community of Practice?

2. What instructional moves are made by the teacher in this online Community of Practice?

Within this chapter, I explore these questions from a deductive analytical approach to examine the patterns and practices of the students in an online reading CoP as defined by Lave & Wenger (1991), Wenger (2006a), and further characterized by Wenger, et al. (2009) as a digital habitat. I use the three defining principles of communities of practice which are 1) having an identity that is defined by the domain's interest, a commitment to that domain, and sharing competence to interact with others in the domain; 2) pursuing the interest of the community in joint activities, sharing information through discussions, and building relationships which help other members to learn from the community; and 3) members act as practitioners, using similar resources, such as tools, stories, and experiences in a shared practice (Wenger, 2006a).

In functioning communities of practice, participants are committed to the domain. Wenger (2006b) defined communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact

regularly" (p. 1) or "communities where the learning component is central" (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009, p. 3). Learners are involved in communities of practice when participation deepens commitments, learning, and understanding (Wenger, 1998). The goal of this study was to illustrate how middle school students in a summer digital reading course would deepen their commitments to learning, understanding, and development as readers, while acting as practitioners in a digital reading CoP. The central question of this study therefore was, "what are the patterns and practices of participation by the students as members of a Community of Practice?"

This chapter is divided into three major sections which describe the three defining characteristics of a CoP: the domain, the community, and the practice. In each of these three major sections I explore both research questions: the children's patterns of practices and the instructional move made by the teacher. At times the children's practices and the teacher's moves are in obvious relationship to one another, especially in the live chats as can be seen in the way in which the teacher responds to the children and vice versa. At other times, the teachers moves are more 'behind the scenes' and captured by data that is not always part of the more visible chat. These kinds of teacher moves are shared at the end of each section.

<div align="center">**The Domain**</div>

In the first section I explore how the students developed shared identities and made commitments to the domain as well as how the teacher fostered and, perhaps, at times, inhibited these identities and commitments. The domain "has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore, implies a commitment to the

domain and a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people"

(Wenger, 2006b, p. 1). The data illustrates how the students and the teacher developed

several shared identities within the domain and illustrates the patterns and practices of

their participation in this CoP through transcripts of synchronous interactions. These

identities include a more formal student identity, a relational identity, and a "teacher as

my pal" identity.

In a CoP, a commitment is made by the students to share their competencies with

each other. While the level of commitment in this case did not reach the expected level of

the teacher, a level of commitment was made by the students to participate and share with

each other. This is best illustrated in the sections I have entitled "Apologies for not

participating: Sorry I couldn't be there!", "Getting others to participate: Meet me

online!", and "Promises made by students: I will get my work done".

These transcripts are the actual writings the students posted and include

misspelled words, emoticon use, and other instant message writing techniques used by

the students. They are the artifacts of this study and are included as they appear in their

digital habitat. Pseudonyms have been substituted for everyone except for me.

**Identity**

Being students of similar ages and attending the same middle school did not

necessarily make these students members of a CoP. What made them members of a CoP

was their commitment to participate in an online summer reading course. They were a

group of students who came together for a purpose; in this case, they came together to

read a book, *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), practicing and honing their reading skills,

improving their reading abilities, and learning in a digital habitat. In making this commitment to participate, students began to develop a shared identity of belonging to this digital habitat.

Data from this study indicates that the students drew upon three important identity positions as they navigated through the course. The first identity is what I call the "student identity" and it is aligned with a more formal classroom identity; this identity is characterized by the use of formal language, a relatively serious demeanor, and answering and asking questions. This identity was most prominent during synchronous conversations between one child and the teacher. It also appeared during conversations between the teacher and two students where one of the students appeared to be more dominant in the conversation.

The second identity formed by students is what I have termed the "relational identity". This was prominent during conversations between multiple students and the teacher and in conversations between students. In using this identity, students discussed matters involving their daily lives and were not guided by the specific purpose of the community. This identity was employed in conversations about their social lives and other socially-motivated conversations. In short, they used this identity when they socialized.

The final identity that emerged from this study is what I call the "teacher as my pal identity". This identity is best characterized by informal discourse within a formal setting and emerged in the relationships that developed between the teacher and the students. Students use different levels of formality in their speech depending on the

person they are speaking to and the setting in which the conversation takes place. For example, in schools, students may use a kind of language on the playground that may not be suitable for speaking to a teacher in the classroom. In the classroom, a more formal level of speech normally takes place. In this chapter, I will illustrate how these three different identities developed by using the students' own words.

**The Student Identity**

One of the identities students drew upon was their identity as students. This was most prevalent during the times when one student was interacting with the teacher. When this kind of conversations took place, there were typically well-defined roles for the student and the teacher. A sense of formality was present. The student identity is represented here in transcripts portraying students acting "as a student," students being redirected and students redirecting others.

**Acting as a student.**

This passage below is an example of the type of discourse that occurred between a student and the teacher when discussing topics related to the reading of the book. Students refrained from interjecting comments of a personal nature. There was little use of slang, instant messaging language or emoticons. It was formal speech. While personal conversations did take place, they were normally limited to the initial and closing conversations between the student and the teacher. In this exchange between Zack and Bob Wilson, hereafter referred to as the teacher, the conversation stays on the subject of how families are constituted and the issue of sameness in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) community.

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**Bob Wilson:** What do you think about how families are made up?

**!?Zack?!:** its really different than how we live how the newborn is sent to a family which is strange

**Bob Wilson:** How many kids are in each family?

**!?Zack?!:** i pretty sure its 4 cause the dad says they cant have the little newborn cause they already have 4 people in the family

**Bob Wilson:** OK so then why might Father's interest in Gabe cause problems?

**!?Zack?!:** sorry i was thinking total ppl 2 kids are aloud in each family

**Bob Wilson:** I gathered that.

**!?Zack?!:** because hes kind of getting attached and the elders might think of his interest to be going to far

**Bob Wilson:** That's true. Have you noticed how everything is the same?

**Bob Wilson:** How could he be going too far?

**!?Zack?!:** yes i have figured that out

**!?Zack?!:** theres like no difference in the lives they live

**Bob Wilson:** YES I agree. it is almost as iff everything is standardized. How would you feel if you were living in this community?

**!?Zack?!:** i would feel.......well i guess i would feel bored of doing the same thing over and over

The student and the teacher stay on topic as they discuss the themes in the assigned book. Zack's formal school-based student identity is presented in the way he responds to the teacher's questions, gives his opinions, and inquires further.

Conversations are straight to the point, formal in their structure, and do not deviate into personal or relaxed conversations or language. These kinds of conversations also took place between female students and the teacher. This next conversation between Sara and the teacher takes on a tedious tone and is highly focused on the content of the book.

> **Bob Wilson:** So, can you tell me what you think so far about the book I have selected for us to read?
>
> **Sara:** I like the first three chapters. It gets a little confusing but other than that it is really good
>
> **Bob Wilson:** Where is it confusing at?
>
> **Sara:** Like sometimes in chapter one and at the end of chapter three or maybe i was just reading too fast
>
> **Bob Wilson:** What is confusing you?
>
> **Sara:** I don't know. Just like at the beggining of ch 1 like the whole air plane parts and stuff
>
> **Bob Wilson:** As you read this book, you will see that some things that we take for granted in our culture are not found in theirs. Have you read about cars or busses?
>
> **Sara:** what chapter is that in?
>
> **Sara:** the cars and busses?
>
> **Bob Wilson:** It isn't
>
> **Bob Wilson:** In this culture, planes are strange things.
>
> **Bob Wilson:** As are cars and busses
>
> **Sara:** oh

These two passages illustrate how students interacted with their teacher in synchronous conversations using their student identity. These exchanges are also representative of conversations that might take place in the face to face classroom setting. However, this level of formality did not characterize all conversations, especially when other students were present in the digital habitat. Sometimes, off topic discussions developed that would eventually be controlled by other students, bringing the group back to the interest of the domain. The following section illustrates this kind of interaction and shows how a student was able to redirect his colleagues back to the subject.

**Redirecting and getting redirected.**

Redirecting students was often accomplished by other students using their student identity as members of the community. This would typically arise when, during discussions of content, one or more students would drift away from the content discussion into a social discussion or a subject not related to the topic being discussed. This can be seen in the two discussions that follow. In the first, Sara is seen redirecting Jordan back to the subject, and in the second, Kathy redirects two students to return to the discussion of the book.

**Bob Wilson:** Jordan, what di you think would be the best type of question to ask and answer

**Sara :** yeah she was talking to me on the phone yesterday and we started talking about CHALKBOARD and the book that you gave us and she said that she finished it because she couldn't put it down

**Jordan :** Sara, when she began and stopped reading the book?

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**Sara :** anyways...back on topic

***Kathy\*:):** are we going to discuss the book?:)

**Sara:):** ok well back to the topic....

**Jordan:** Whoops!

These students redirected their peers to continue working in the interest of the domain, which had been previously defined by the teacher. They were there to discuss their reading. In the next section, I will show how identities shifted when students changed from their student identity to their relational identity.

**The Relational Identity**

A second identity formed in this digital habitat was the relational identity, where student participation contained more social traits. When this type of identity was present, the classroom became more informal and there more less focused conversations accompanied by a degree of playfulness and teasing amongst the students. The domain of interest was crowded out by students who had gathered for the purpose of socializing rather than to discuss the content or their reading.

**Social and teasing conversations.**

In this example, Kathy and Sara are engaging in a conversation that lacks a real subject. It is as if they were talking without meaning anything, a purely socializing moment on a summer day between two middle school girls.

**Kathy:** hello Sara!

**Sara:** hi

**Kathy :** wat are you doing?

**Sara:** talking to u 2 ways!

Kathy has changed their alias to *♥ Kathy ♥*:)

**\*? Kathy?\*:):** that is interesting how do you do that?

**\*? Kathy?\*:)** has changed their alias to *♥ Kathy ♥*:)

**\*? Kathy?\*:)** has changed their alias to * Kathy *:)

**Sara:):** there

**\* Kathy \*:):** Hellllllloooooooooooo?

**Sara :)(:** hello

**\*Kathy\*:):** Look at my smilie;) it's winking!!lol!!

**Sara :)(:** thats awesome! lol

**\*Kathy\*:):** I know Right!!

**Sara :)(:** lol so what do u want to talk about?

**\*Kathy\*:):** Idk wat do u want to talk bout?;)

**Sara :):** idk...there is nothing to talk about lol

**\*Kathy\*:):** Well let's find something to talk about!!LOL!

**Sara :):** how about nothing?

**\*Kathy\*:):** Hey have you changed your profile yet?

**Sara :):** what??? a profile???

**\*Kathy\*:):** Yeah just go to my hamepage and on the top right corner it says my profile!

**\*Kathy\*:):** I ment homepage sorry!

**Sara :):** oh cool

**Sara :):**ok brb

***Kathy\*:):** ok, you can upload pics tooo!

**Sara :):** yupp lol!!

***Kathy\*:):** You rox my sox!:)

Boys had similar conversations; however, they tended to be much shorter and to the point. In general, boys' interactions did not last as long as the girls'; they were significantly shorter and less emotive. Some exchanges, however, took on a playful tone:

**Sara :):** Peace out my home slice

**Mr. W.:** ???

**Sara :): :)** i was saying hi to zack

**!?Zack?!:** back at u sara

**Jordan:** That is weird.

The subjects of these two conversations were not related to the content and focus of the community. They were purely social in nature. Another indicator of relational identity was playfulness and teasing in discussions amongst peers, which gave a sense of informality to the digital habitat. The exchanges illustrate how teasing and playfulness were present in student conversations. There was a sense of name-calling with the expectation of it not being taken seriously.

**Sara:):** idk i was making a joke lol

**Kathy\*:):** I was making a joke but you apparently didnt get the memo

**\*Kathy\*:):** But I was JK sorry I was too complicated for your brain compasity Jk

L♥ you sara

**Sara:):** I would personaly move Kathy! Man is she a Pain!!!!! lol jk... i would

move the people i don't like very much...see how they like it!!! :)

**\*Kathy\*:):** I was JK but he really gets annoying but I ♥ him:)

In this digital habitat socializing occurred in a manner similar to that which might

be found in the face to face classroom setting. Relationships were created and developed

amongst students as well as between the students and their teacher. However, there is

some evidence that illustrates how the relationships between the students and their

teacher in this digital habitat became at times, less formal.

**The Teacher as My Pal Identity**

During the course of this class, relationships of a more informal nature developed

between the students and the teacher. Students became more informal in their speech and

writing when interacting with the teacher. This identity will be demonstrated through a

series of examples of informality of language used with the teacher by the students. I

have named this relational language. This relational language also includes a reduced use

of formal names, relaxed speech with the teacher, and the building of a relationship of

greater familiarity and informality between the students and the teacher. This "teacher as

a pal" identity is important as it demonstrates how the students and the teacher developed

close personal relationships that allowed them to work together, rather than being

separated by hierarchy.

**Teacher as a pal: Relational language.**

For example, Zack's comment, "dang well that sucks" in the passage below, would probably not be acceptable in a normal face to face classroom setting full of other students.

**!?Zack?!:** but hey mr. w not that mSaras gone can we talk about the endin

**Mr. W.:** not yet

**Mr. W.:** That will be the icing on the cake!!!!

**!?Zack?!:** dang well that sucks

In the exchange that follows, where the teacher and Sara are discussing how families are constructed in the book, Zack and Kathy make some comments that would probably not be heard in a face to face classroom, where the teacher and students are formally identified.

**Mr. W.:** Lets not worry about that. After all families are not created normally here are they. There is a "baby factory"!

Sara:): yeah

**Zack:** whatever MR.W

*Kathy*:): Oh that is .........................interesting:)♫

**Zack:** veryyy.....interesting

*Kathy*:): Yes

These kinds of relaxed conversations indicate that the students have developed a relaxed relationship with their teacher in the course environment. There is a lack of formality in the conversation in the choice of words and phrases used by the students.

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**Teacher as a pal: What's in a name?**

Here, the teacher asks if he can shorten their names while typing to save time and key strokes. Kathy echoes the same request back to the teacher to call him Mr. W., proposing a more informal manner of addressing their teacher.

**Bob Wilson:** Sara, you just said "they are "better than us" apperentally" Tell me... how are they better than you?

**Bob Wilson:** Can I call you Kat and Sar?

*Kathy*:): I don't know wat she is talkin bout you are pretty, nice, and all that stuff

*Kathy*:): Mr.W yes im cool with that can I call u Mr.W?:)

Informality continued to present itself in the written language the students used during these synchronous conversations.

*Kathy*:): i was jk !!!:)

**Mr. W.:** ok

**Mr. W.:** I just think if everything was standardized it would be better!

**$Zack$:** i have to go be on whenever bye

**Mr. W.:** thry saturday

Sara:): see ya

Sara:): i will try to be on saturday...i might be asleep though...lol

**Mr. W.:** sat 8:30 pm

**Mr. W.:** or 10 am

**Mr. W.:** Ok girls. What do you think are

the best parts of the society described in this book.

Sara:): in the pmmmmmm....for mua at least

*Kathy*:): ok gtg i will be on tomorow and sat!!!:) Bye!!! I am so sorry i have

plans for tonight

**Mr. W.:** I will not be on line on Friday

*Kathy*:): ok thanks Bye!!!:)

In this passage, Kathy begins to joke with the teacher. Sara types "in the

pmmmmmm....for mua at least", while Zack writes "i have to go be on whenever bye".

These conversations indicate how the students began to treat the teacher as a pal. Their

abruptly leaving the digital habitat can also be equated to the student getting up and

walking out of class without permission. This further illustrates how the hierarchy

between the students and the teacher was becoming more leveled.

### Informality: Relaxed speech with the teacher present.

As time progressed, the students became more relaxed in speaking with their

teacher about personal matters. In this lively exchange, the two girls discuss personal

topics and give actual names of other peers in their school that they do not care for and

explain why. These kinds of conversations normally would not take place with a teacher

present; they would most likely take place in the cafeteria, on the bus, or during recess.

Pseudonyms have been substituted where actual names of other students have been

identified.

**Bob Wilson:** Alright lets get personal! If you could move 3 people into this community, where the structure would be great, decisions would be made for you, your life would be planned out. What three people in YOUR LIFE would you want to move?

**Bob Wilson:** and WHY

*Kathy*:): to us or away from us?:)

Sara:): i don't get it

**Bob Wilson:** from you into the givers community

*Kathy*:): My Brother!

*Kathy*:): JOHN

**Bob Wilson:** What 3 people, if you could, would you remove from your life and put them into the giver's community? Why?

**Bob Wilson:** Why your brother?

Sara:): I would personaly move MARY SMITH! Man is she a Pain!!!!! lol jk... i would move the people i don't like very much...see how they like it!!! :)

*Kathy*:): I was JK but he really gets annoying but I ♥ him:)

**Bob Wilson:** like who?

*Kathy*:): Thanks Sara you said it perfectly!:)

**Bob Wilson:** Who are the people you don't like very much, Sara? Why would you move them?

Sara:): like the people at school who think that they are better than everybody else because in the givers world everybody is equal and nobody is better than anybody

*Kathy*:): ELIZABETH JONES, AMY JACKSON, and JANE DOE Because I don't like them:(

**Bob Wilson:** why?

**Bob Wilson:** What do they do that you don't like? Remember that only the 3 of us can see this.

*Kathy*:): Because ELIZABETH is a snob, AMY is abusive and she is mean to my sibs, and JANE is mean

Sara:): sometimes they get snobby and start to think that they are better than the lower class people at school

Sara:): they look down apon people

**Bob Wilson:** Lower Class? Who decides what class you or others are in?

*Kathy*:): and JANE hates me but i would get to deside her future!

**Bob Wilson:** What future would you give her?

*Kathy*:): We dont deside they just treat us like that

Sara:): they judge people by their looks....it's just not how humans were meant to be

*Kathy*:): a future far away from all civilization

A similar exchange occurred with Jordan, who points out some students he considers to be bullies.

**Mr. W.:** I see. You made the statement "I hate it when people and games are messed with, like how you see me get picked on at school." Tell me more about how you are picked on, if you don't mind??

Jordan: I'm called loser by MARCUS WELBY during 1st semester in gym.

**Mr. W.:** You know, I think you are a VERY intelligent young man.

**Mr. W.:** Sometimes

**Mr. W.:** people who are not as intelligent as you don't understand that

Jordan: Yeah...

**Mr. W.:** So there first reaction, in order to become more EQUAL to you is to bring you down to there level. Would you agree or disagree with that?

**Mr. W.:** I guess the real question is HOW YOU REACT to their mocking or picking on

**Mr. W.:** Let's connect this with the book

**Mr. W.:** If Jonas was a sunny view, how would he be treated having been selected to be the new receiver?

**Mr. W.:** Remember... he can lie!!

Jordan: He would be picked on, and his spirit could be broken.

These two conversations illustrate how these students felt comfortable enough to talk about their peers in a negative light without regard of the teacher or other students being present. Conversations like these are normally held among closely trusted friends to eliminate the possibility of repercussions from the people being talked about. Establishing trusting relationships between peers and their teacher was important in developing a CoP, which allowed for this kind of relaxed speech to develop between the peers and their teacher.

**Informality and familiarity.**

This sense of informality and familiarity continued to grow as the course progressed. Students began to write about family traditions, such as in the following discussion, where Sara talks about how she is looking forward to receiving a promise ring when she turns thirteen.

**Bob Wilson:** How old are you now

Sara: 12

**Bob Wilson:** Soon, you will be "a 13". Have you read yet about the ceremony of thirteens? This may be in next weeks readings ???

Sara: no i have not read about the thirteens.

**Bob Wilson:** What priviledges have you acquired now that you are almost a teenager?

Sara: um i can um i can watch some pg13 movies now. Still not very much but some.

**Bob Wilson:** OK I am not sure if that is something you were looking forward to doing but let's for a momment go back to the 8 years olds watching all the 9 year olds riding their bikes. That would be a WOW factor for the 8year olds right?

Sara: yes

**Bob Wilson:** So what would a 13 year old look forward to doing?

**Bob Wilson:** What would be a WOW for you?

Sara: um well i have been wanting a promise ring for my 13th birthday

**Bob Wilson:** What is a promise ring?

Sara: a purity ring

**Bob Wilson:** I see. so what happens when you get this ring?

Sara: i don't know

**Bob Wilson:** Is there a party? a special dinner? Is it like a barmistfa (sp)

in the Jewish Religion?

**Bob Wilson:** Is this a religious or family custom?

Sara: nope you just get it and go home in my family

Sara: but i get it on my birthday which i special to me

**Bob Wilson:** Is this a religious custom?

Sara: I think. well my mom had one and so did my dad and my sister got one last

year

**Bob Wilson:** OK let's parallel this to the book a little. Your family culture has

certain customs as does Jonas' culture, Right?

**Bob Wilson:** So this awarding of gifts, of priviledges, is done so on birthdays,

just like yours.

The sense of familiarity continues when Sara asks the teacher if she can take a

break from the chat in order to go make lunch.

**Bob Wilson:** Sometimes it won't allow you to "paste" However, if you push down

the "CTRL" button and then push the V button at the same time, it will paste

Sara: ok

**Bob Wilson:** When you get done with that, can you tell me what you think so far

about the book I have selected for us to read?

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Sara: ok

Sara: hey. can i go get some lunch real Quick?

**Bob Wilson:** Yes

Sara: ok i will be back in about 10-15 mins. is that ok?

**Bob Wilson:** yes

Sara: ok be bacl

Sara: back

**Bob Wilson:** That was quick

Sara: ok this is going to take longer than i tought. the water for the mac-n-cheese still is not boiled.

The informality of the setting allowed these students to become more familiar with the teacher to the point where the teacher was becoming a "pal". The type of language used with the teacher often veered closer to the language heard on the playground or in the cafeteria among peers than the language typically heard in the face to face classroom setting. Students began to open up to the teacher and write about personal matters. They began communicating with the teacher as if he were one of their peers or their friend. The students decided the level and extent of their participation in the course and conversations. It was not teacher directed but directed based upon the choice of the students. All the while, the teacher would allow and often encourage this behavior by his speech, content and lesson design, and other relational building acts that he would produce. By allowing students to make choices, they began to create participant identities and take ownership of the course.

Once the identities that students used in the community had taken shape, students began to show a sense of responsibility and commitment towards the digital habitat or the domain. In this next section, I will explore how these attributes of responsibility and commitment were presented by the students in their postings.

**Commitment to the Domain and Sharing of Competence**

The students in this digital habitat were aware of the expected norms of participation in this CoP. These were delineated several times in the online environment before and during the course. They were also posted online in several areas. However, having an understanding of the expected norms of practice and participation does not necessarily translate into actual levels of participation. These students had numerous activities that kept them occupied during the summer vacation. Students and parents reported in emails, phone calls, and surveys that they had extensive involvement in sports, vacations, other forms of recreation, family, church, and community activities. However, students also understood their commitment to the community and took their commitment seriously. Even though their participation did not rise to the level of the teacher's expectations, they had a shared sense of responsibility to the community and offered excuses and apologies when they were unable to meet the teacher's expectations. In this section, I explore the characteristics of participation by looking at how students would apologize for not being able to be more involved. I also provide data on how students would try to encourage other students to participate and how they would make promises to get their work done and participate more in the future.

**Apologies for not participating: Sorry I couldn't be there!**

Students often offered excuses for not being able to meet the teacher's expected levels of participation in the synchronous conversations. As a result, they would often offer apologies along with their excuses.

**!?Zack?!:** sorry my schedules been real tight

**Sara:):** yes and i am soo sorry i haven't been able to get on lately!  But the book is sooo good!!! why does it leave you wondering....ugh....it makes me want to find out more!!!

**Jordan :** I won't be on tomorrow due to a 4-H meeting.

**\*Kathy\*:):** good and sorry I havn't done much this week I was busy

**Sara:):** i am so sorry i forgot alll about the chat this morning and goodmorning to you to

The excuses and apologies for not participating illustrate that students understood what the expected levels of participation were, but for various reasons, were sometimes unable to fulfill their commitments. Previous commitments, busy family schedules, and

unexpected or planned trips took priority over their level of participation in the domain. They utilized norms of politeness in offering explanations for their absences.

Having displayed an understanding of the expected levels of participation, the students would often reaffirm their commitment to participate more fully in the future. In these instances, students would commit to return to participate in the domain the following day or later in the week. This commitment to participate on specific days at specific times or to follow up on requested tasks is depicted in the following exchanges.

**Bob Wilson:** I will be on the chat for about an hour or so if you ahev any questions

**Sara**: ok i found them. thanks! see you on Friday

*****Kathy*****:): Hey I got to go I need to take care of the animals Give me 5 mins. and I will be back

**Mr. W.:** ok

**Sara:)**: ok well i gotta go so i will see u guys tomorrow morning


**Mr. W.:** Have you seen my video on the memory store?

**!? Zack?!:** no i will be back got to do something

**Mr. W.:** go look. it is in the discusion for this week

**!? Zack?!:** cant right now but hey i will talk tommarow gotogo

**!? Zack!:** see ya Mr. W and i am reading another of Lois Lowry's book called gathering blue

**Kathy** *:): oh ok well I will see you in the mourning!:)♫

Not only would these students make explicit excuses for not being able to participate during a specific activity, they were also able to make specific commitments as to future plans to participate. This indicates that they were developing a sense of commitment to the domain and how they were building their commitment in the future.

**Getting others to participate: Meet me online!**

Student interactions reveal that they not only care about their own participation, but often also attempted to make an improvement in their peers' participation by calling them on the phone or making other arrangements with them to participate during chat room sessions. The examples that follow show how some students would attempt to increase participation in some of their peers.

**Sara:)**: i will go call Kathy

**Sara:)**: she is getting on right now

**Sara:)**: or should be


**Mr. W.:**  Yes we can chat tomorrow morning at 10. Will you tell Kathy?

**Sara:)**: yes i will tell her. what do you mean by that?


**Mr. W.:** Kathy, are you able to call Sara to see if she is available to join us?

*\*Kathy\*:)*: yeah give me a sec


**Mr. W.:** Would you and Sara discuss if there is another time this weekend when we could discuss the project?

***Kathy***:): yes I will call her and get back to

***Kathy***:): ok well i got to go bye!

In this next example, Zack expresses his displeasure at the fact that Jordan is not involved in the conversation with him during a lengthy chat with the teacher. This demonstrates the students' desire to participate and interact with others in the online environment.

**Bob Wilson:** Shall be end a great discussion here?

**Zack:** whatever u want mr. wilson

**Zack:** it would be better to have Jordanhere to

These examples provide evidence that the students not only cared about their own level of participation but were also concerned about the participation of their peers. Participation as a group effort was of greater value to them than to merely interact with the teacher. They valued interacting with their peers and were willing to take the necessary steps to make sure they would be involved in those experiences.

**Promises made by students: I will get my work done.**

In communities of practice there is often a gap between the level of participation and reification. Wenger, White and Smith (2009) wrote that "creating reified 'stuff' can be a byproduct of participation in community activities … or engagement in practice. It can be a goal of participation in itself" (p. 81). Members of the CoP participated by engaging in conversations and activities with each other. In the process they also produced artifacts, such as tools and stories "that reflect their shared experience and around which they organize their participation" (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009, p. 57). In

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this CoP, students were asked to create artifacts by creating a blog and by responding to prompts in an asynchronous manner. This was the community's reification of their participation or their making of an object that illustrated their learning from one another.

> **Bob Wilson:** If you open week 1 you will find more detail about the. The first is to do the collage and the second is to create the 5 apologies. Then, there are two questions posted that deal with the book.
>
> Jordan: OK
>
> Jordan: I'm going off to do them. Have a nice day, Mr. Wilson!
>
> .
>
> **Bob Wilson:** Where are you in your reading of the book?
>
> **!? Zack?!:** soory computer wierd about 6 but i am reading alot more now and i will catch up tommarow like i said busy
>
> **!? Zack?!:** ya and i have alot of free time tommarow until we go to good will so i will read and work on some things on ChalkBoard
>
> **Bob Wilson:** Let's start with the 2 activities for this week. Why don't you complete the survey and then try to do the memory store project. I will assume you will catch up on your reading. How does that sound?
>
> **!? Zack?!:** sounds great and i will catch up on my reading tommarow and do both the assignments if i have time

Commitment to the CoP, as I have illustrated, can be achieved in several different ways. Offering excuses for not having the time to participate, promising to participate on specific days or at specific times, and trying to encourage peers to participate, all indicate a willingness on the part of the students to commit themselves and their time to the CoP. Students also demonstrated their commitment by completing assignments and creating artifacts, as indicated by the interactions between the students and the teacher above. The teacher, however, also made commitments to strengthen the domain after the course began. In this next section, I describe what the teacher did to accomplish this.

**Teacher Practices: Building a Community**

As the teacher in this community, I found early on that encouraging students to participate in this online community was going to be a difficult task. The first task I had to complete was to get students to increase their participation levels. Participation levels were low and I utilized a series of strategies to increase the level of participation and the number of active participants. Even though my efforts were extensive, and even with an encouraging sign up period, my success in increasing the number of active participants did not fare well.

**Increasing registered students: A great beginning.**

Although participation eventually became one of the problems, I initially received great response and interest in the course when I first made a presentation to the entire seventh grade introducing my project. After giving my presentation, I asked the students to write their names on a signup sheet and gave each of them another paper asking for parental consent. On May 19, 2009, I wrote in my teachers' journal:

Wow, I had 44 students sign up that they were interested! I previously had 46 students in a survey say that they had a computer and high speed Internet. Twenty-four of the students responded positively in both the survey and in signing up today. I asked them to return the sign-up sheet on Friday.

With this kind of response, I even began to ponder splitting the group into two courses of twenty students. Unfortunately, by May 29th I had received parental consent from only six respondents. One parent emailed me the following week to let me know that her daughter would not be able to participate:

I apologize for not responding to your email last night as I had agreed to do so. Unfortunately Jane wont be able to participate. She really wanted too. She is upset at not being able to do so. Under the circumstances we were dealt with last night and early this morning the next coming months are going to be extremely hectic and will be causing hardship on Jane as well as for the rest of us, mostly her. I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused you. I would explain the issues that are occurring and upcoming, however that would end you with another book to read. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in a wonderful program. I hope all goes well. Again I apologize.

Sincerely,

Jane's Mom.

What luck for rulers that men do not think

Adolf Hitler (1889-1945)

**"You cannot legislate the poor into freedom by legislating the wealthy out of freedom. What one person receives without working for, another person must work for without receiving. The government cannot give to anybody anything that the government does not first take from somebody else. When half of the people get the idea that they do not have to work because the other half is going to take care of them, and when the other half gets the idea that it does no good to work because somebody else is going to get what they work for, that my dear friend, is about the end of any nation. You cannot multiply wealth by dividing it. [Bold in the original]**

**~~~~~ Dr. Adrian Rogers, 1931 – 2005**

(Parent email dated 6/10/2009)

When I received this email, I was a little taken back by the inclusion of the additional quotations that dealt with people not thinking about what government does, accompanied by the Rogers quote, I had serious concerns for this student who I had contact with during the year. I attempted to contact the mother to see if there was some way I could assist in helping her and her daughter overcome the hardship they encountered, but was never able to reach either of them. I tried several times but my inquiries received no replies.

In order to increase registration, I made phone calls and was able to sign up three additional students for the course. Then, in the following two weeks, three of the nine dropped out. I was back down to six students, and I decided to forge ahead and have the course with just those students.

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**Increasing participation: encouraging student participation.**

As participation levels dropped and as a means of improving participation, I wrote a letter to each student with a comment about the lack of participation and about their failure to complete assignments. I felt that I had to strike a delicate balance. I was worried that if I demanded too much, the students would simply resign from the course. During week four, I had them complete an online survey, read twenty-four pages from the book, and create an advertisement for a memory store where customers could purchase new memories and turn in bad or old ones. I expanded my online offerings to nine different sessions, hoping that I could catch some of my students at times more convenient to them. I made myself available for chats during morning and late evening times, which I believed would not conflict with camps, time spent at swimming pools, and sports. A copy of my lesson plan for week four can be found below in the letter that I mailed and emailed to each student.

July 11, 2009

Hello students,

I hope you are all enjoying your summer and summertime activities. I know many of you have been on vacations, camps, and participating in other activities, which I hope includes a little reading too! I am sure that is why several of you have been noticeably "absent" from "class". In order to better meet your needs, especially in the chat room, I have expanded the chat room schedule to allow you to participate more fully. Let me know if there are other times and days that would be better. I

hope to see you often in class this week. I will try to see you and your parents this week to have some paperwork completed. Thank you for your participation.

## Week 4 Activities

## Starts on July 13, 2009

**Read** chapters 10, 11 & 12, pages 72-96, in *The Giver*.

**Complete the "Mid-Term Survey Course Evaluation**". When you have answered all of the questions, click on the "Submit" button in the bottom right hand corner of the screen. Please be honest and sincere in evaluating the course you are taking. I will respond to individual concerns quickly and if the need arises, change some of the course structure and/or assignments. If your parents would like to fill out one, that would be great! Just let me know which one is yours and which one is your parent's in question number 1.

**Imagine a Memory Department Store.** You can go into this store and purchase memories, exchange bad ones, etc. Create advertising that would entice customers to go into this store. You can use print, videos, or voice if you are so inclined. In other words, your advertisement may be a television commercial (video), a radio commercial (voice), or a magazine/newspaper commercial (print). Post this in the discussion room called "Memory Store".

**Check out** all of the advertisements. **Respond** to no more than three of them.

**Participate in at least 2 chat room discussions**. Here is a schedule for week 4:

1   Monday                            10:00 – 11:30 am

2   Monday                            8:00 – 9:00 pm

| 3 | Tuesday | 8:00 – 9:00 pm |
| 4 | Wednesday | 10:00 – 11:30 am |
| 5 | Wednesday | 8:00 – 9:00 pm |
| 6 | Thursday | 8:00 – 9:00 pm |
| 7 | Friday | 10:00 – 11:30 am |
| 8 | Friday | 8:00 – 9:00 pm |
| 9 | Saturday | 10:00 – 11:30 am |

In my journal, I wrote:

> For next week, I am going to have them read, complete the survey, make to store
> ad, and come to at least 2 chat sessions. I am going to have several sessions both
> in the morning and the evening. Then, maybe I will see a pattern of which days
> and times work better. I am not sure of anything yet when it comes to getting
> these folks to participate. I am very concerned (July 10, 2009).

In my continued efforts to improve my student's participation, I decided to make
a phone call to each of them. My teacher journal of July 13, 2009, reflects my thoughts
on the outcome of my conversations with the students.

> I just spoke with Martha on the telephone about getting online. She had some
> technology questions about how to post things and upload assignments into the
> system. I told her to get on one of the chat sessions and I'll explain how to do
> that. I also spoke with Sara and she said that she has been very busy with 4-H and
> Camp Sunny Hills. She also explains that she was on vacation. She told me that
> she was getting ready to get back into taking the class this week and had already

made plans to get online. The third person I spoke with was Kathy. She was also busy with 4-H, softball, and other activities. She also said that she had planned to become more active in the class this week. I still need to contact Zack and Mark. There was no answer at their home when I tried to call them. Hopefully with Jordan, Martha, Sara, and Kathy participating in the online class I will be able to now gather more data. At least that is my hope!

On July 15, 2009, Zack and Jordan participated in the morning chat session and became very engaged. We had very good discussions about several questions in the book and made several connections with our own lives. For the first time, I felt myself becoming too involved in the conversation, so I waited for them to continue their chatting until it appeared that they had exhausted the subject. When their conversation was beginning to die down, I would then interject with another question to keep the discussion going. In the discussions, I tried to take a side with which I expected they would disagree. Zack, in particular, seemed to enjoy making arguments, so this strategy was meant to engage him. They both agreed to be back that night, but unfortunately neither of them appeared for the evening chat session.

On July 16, 2009, I received a call from Mark's mother. She explained that Mark had not been able to participate very much in the course for several reasons, among them that he had been very busy with golf and going to camp. She also explained that she and her husband had been laid off from their regular jobs and had to take several part time jobs. Scheduling time for Mark to get online had been difficult since she had had to take him to different places while she and her husband were working. She sounded rather

depressed. I reassured her and told her that several other students had similar problems during the summer. Mark, at this juncture, had already read the entire book. I thought she was going to tell me that he no longer wanted to participate in the course, so I told her that Mark was welcome to rejoin the course that week and that I would help him to catch up. In spite of my encouragement, Mark never returned to the course.

Mark was not the only participant to leave the course. On Wednesday, July 15, 2009, Martha's mother emailed me stating that her daughter would be leaving the course as well.

> hello its Martha's mom! im sorry but this isnt going to work out for her. shes just to busy in the summer to keep up with this. i thought she could work it in but shes not. thank you Martha's mom

After I received the email, I tried to call several times and sent a reply email but I never got a response.

**Increasing participation: using post cards and letters.**

Early on, data indicated that some students had not understood how to navigate through certain technology issues. For instance, Martha, one of the students, would join the chat sessions at times when nobody was online. She would write "watz up?" looking for somebody to chat with. I made several telephone calls to her home to explain how the chat worked but was unable to reach her. Then, as the course began, I was immediately faced with low participation. I decided to send a colorful postcard to each of the students as a reminder of how to log on to the course management system in order to participate. The first card I sent was on June 23, 2009.

Hello and Happy Summer from Mr. Wilson:

The Sunny View Summer Online Reading Program has begun. In case you have

forgotten how to log onto CHALKBOARD, here are some instructions:

1.  Go to www.ABCDEFedu .

2.  Select students in the navigation bar.

3.  Then, in the drop down box, select CHALKBOARD.

4.  Select the blue log in button.

5.  This will take you to the sign-in screen.

6.  Enter your user name (lastname.t1) and the password you selected.

7.  You are in!

    If you have any questions or problems, please email me at wilson.@ABCDEF.edu

    or call my cell phone at 123-456-7890. I am here to help you succeed!

    I have scheduled two more chats for this week. One is on Thursday from 1-2 pm

    and one on Friday from 10-11:30am. Try to make one or the other or both. Next

    week we will have three chats, one each on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

    Also, take a look at the revised week one schedule. I have shortened it somewhat

    but we will still be reading chapters 1, 2, & 3. Try to post your assignments by

    Thursday so you fellow students will have time to respond.

    **HAVE FUN!**

After the first week of the course with little participation, I wondered if the

students had forgotten or were confused about how to enter ChalkBoard. The low level of

participation and the unscheduled inquiries in ChalkBoard, such as Martha's appearance

made me conclude that I needed to reinstruct the students on how and when to participate. Unfortunately, this reminder did not increase participation.

**Increasing participation: The stimulus plan.**

On July 27th, I sent out a special stimulus package card, offering a $20.00 gift card to any student who completed a series of assignments. Unfortunately, it never became necessary for me to purchase any of the cards as nobody completed the assignments.

<div align="center">

**Special Announcement**

**Online Summer Reading Class - Stimulus Package**

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During the last three weeks of the Online Summer Reading Class, **President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act** is allowing me to offer an incentive to students in this class. Yes, that's right! You have read it correctly. As part of the stimulus package passed by the United States Congress, you are able to earn a **$20.00 Wal-Mart Gift Card** if you do the following activities during this week and the next two weeks of the online class. Here is what is required in order for you to earn the stimulus money:

**Take part in at least two (2) chat sessions per week.**

1. **Compose one original posting per week and reply to every other person's original posting in the "Discussion" area that is posted by Friday of each week.**

2. **Complete two (2) online surveys; one during the week of August 2<sup>nd</sup> and one during the last week of the class.**

3. **Participate fully in the requirements of our online project, to be determined during the week of July 27<sup>th</sup>.**

4. **Complete at least one (1) optional activities posted in the next 3 weeks.**

5. **Complete "end of the class testing", just like the tests that you took before the class began.**

   **You will receive your stimulus package the week after the final week of the class.**

On August 9<sup>th</sup>, I sent a personalized message on a post card to the students whose participation had been lagging, in order to encourage them to participate more in the course. I did not send one to Jordan because he was participating in almost all of the chat sessions. These were printed in different colors, hot pink, lime green, purple, and blue in order to attract their attention. Below is an example of one of the messages I sent; I have not changed the style or size of the text.

**Hi Kathy,**

**I know you have been a very busy young lady this summer and I congratulate you on your accomplishments. I have not found out how you did at the State Fair. I am sure you did well. You seem to have a natural talent for being prepared. You should feel very proud! Try to make it on line a couple of times this week as it is our last week. Maybe you can arrange a time**

**when both you and Sara can be online at the same time. That would be great.**

**I have enjoyed our conversations and your insights into the book. You will**

**have a great 8$^{th}$ grade year and a phenomenal life. I can tell these things!**

**Thank you,**

**Mr. Wilson**

At the end of the course, on August 17th, I sent a post card to have them complete

a few closing assignments. It read:

**Hi Everyone,**

**First of all, I want to thank you for participating in this class. I hope you**

**enjoyed it. I know I enjoyed interacting with such bright students! There are**

**just a couple of things I would like for you to do as we end the class.**

1. **Post to your blog**

2. **Make a reply to everyone else's blog**

3. **Complete the survey**

**If you would like to chat before school starts, send me an email and we will**

**arrange a time to do so! I will also be calling you soon to take a few post tests,**

**just like we did at the start of the class.**

**Thank you again for all your hard work! Hope to see you on Friday evening**

**at the open house and especially on Tuesday, our first day back.**

**Mr. Wilson**

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In a CoP, members make a commitment to participate in the domain of interest of which they have chosen to become involved. When membership is assumed, so too are the identities that reflect the interest of that particular CoP. I have provided data to establish that these middle school students and their teacher, made a commitment to participate in this online CoP and formed identities which were useable in the practice of their shared interest. While the levels of participation were not at the level I expected, this may be due in part to the fact that my initial expectations were too high and required too extensive a degree of involvement. Members of the community seemed to determine their own levels of participation on the basis of their availability, which was influenced by other summer commitments and their degree of interest. In the next section, I will explore how these members participated in joint activities and discussions and how they formed relationships amongst themselves and with their teacher in order to learn from one another.

**The Community**

In this section I explore how the students and the teacher in the study helped each other learn by sharing different perspectives, beliefs, and information about the reading. This community did not just appear; it was organized, nurtured and needed lots of attention by the teacher (Wenger, et al., 2002). The members of the community found "specific ways to operate, to build relationships, and to grow" (p. 46). The students and the teacher built personal relationships with each other, sharing life stories and perspectives, and arguing positions and changing minds. The fact that members of the community were learning from each other became quite evident in their conversations.

Activities were jointly attempted and completed. In sum, over time, they developed a community.

I have first divided this section into three parts that reflect the three main aspects of a knowledge-sharing in the community: participating in joint activities and discussions, helping each other and sharing information, and building relationships to learn from each other. I have then added a final section entitled teacher practices: establishing lines of communications, in order to illustrate how the teacher developed and encouraged different forms of communication in order to foster greater participation by the students.

**Participating in Joint Activities and Discussions**

Wenger (2006b) wrote that when people come together in a shared domain of interest, they "engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information" (p. 1). Relationships are created that allow them to learn from each other. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. Learning occurs with and from others, through formal and informal activities and from sources outside as well as within the community (Wenger, et al., 2009). This section will illustrate the patterns and practices of the students in this summer digital reading course and how they participated in activities together and discussed their readings as well as other social topics that emerged. I will also explore how they helped each other understand key concepts, how they learned from each other to work with technology, and how they shared information while building relationships with their peers and their teacher in order to learn from each other.

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**Helping Each Other and Sharing Information.**

During our course meetings, a variety of situations often arose where students would need assistance. These involved issues with technology such as a website or program, that the students were unfamiliar with or were having difficulty in navigating. I share examples of this in the first subsection and show how these difficulties were overcome. In the next subsection, I describe how I redesigned the course with the help of the students when I realized early on that the course was not going the way I had planned. Their input, as will be shown, was a valuable resource to me as I made changes in the curriculum and structure of the course. I then provide a brief discussion of how course assignments were adjusted.

**Helping each other: Issues with technology.**

There were several occasions in which students helped each other complete a task, shared their understanding of an issue presented in the book, or worked together to resolve technology issues. In this first example, the teacher wanted them to create a recording or a video advertisement for a retail store that was somehow connected with a topic or theme in the book the students were reading. After posting and explaining instructions in both synchronous and asynchronous manners, the teacher offered the students an example. The following interaction illustrates how the teacher shared this example as a model for what he wanted his students to accomplish.

*Kathy*☺: Mr. Wilson how do u want us to do the m.d store project?

**Bob Wilson:** Did you see mine?

Sara☺: no

*Kathy*☺: how do you get to it?

*Kathy*☺: you guys still there?:)

**Bob Wilson:** Go to the discussions and look under the memeory store assignment. I have a post with a link to youtube. I made a tv commercial with my computer. You could also do it with a camera. You can do a voice ad or a newspaper/magazine ad

*Kathy*☺: Ok BRB!:)

*Kathy*☺: I that's see it that's went to discussions?:(

Sara☺: that's saw it!!!

*Kathy*☺: now I see it let me watck it brb!

**Bob Wilson:** Lauging too much are you????

**Bob Wilson:** laughing!!!

Sara☺: yess!! It's hilarious!

*Kathy*☺: yep you know it!

Sara☺: nicely done ☺

Unfortunately, nobody was able to complete this assignment. When inquires were made as to why, the students replied that they did not understand how to use the technology to make a movie with a digital camera or did not have the equipment to do so. Despite this setback, there were other instances in which the students did help each other with technology. In this next example, Sara and Kathy were creating a blog. Sara was experiencing some difficulties creating the blog because her grandparents' computer had

filtering software and would not allow her to access the blog site. Kathy agreed to create the blog for her and they worked together to do so.

Sara☺: yes. Well that's am at my grandparents house and they may have blacked the website

**Mr. W.:** ok can thery unblock it for you?

Sara☺: I don't know

**Mr. W.:** are they there

Sara☺: yes

[…]

Sara☺: she said that they have protective things on their compuer. I could always do it on Monday when I get home

**Mr. W.:** that's fine

*Kathy*☺: yeah tell me what to put and we could share

Sara☺: ok I am so sorry

**Mr. W.:** no worries

*Kathy*☺: no prob!

Sara☺: ok good

*Kathy*☺: wat do u want to call it

*Kathy*☺: Sara and Kathy's Giver Project?

**Mr. W.:** only choose one of your names

**Mr. W.:** Sara could be Saras giver project

*Kathy*☺: I could open another page and create her own!

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**Mr. W.:** yes you could do that for her. Why don't you two communicate back and forth and do that?

Sara☺: Ok!!

*Kathy*☺: ok with u Sara?

[…]

*Kathy*☺: wat do that's do for blog address

*Kathy*☺: Sara your e-mail is XXX.t1@ABCDEF.edu right?

Sara☺: yes

[...]

Sara☺: is it suppoed to be plain?

**Mr. W.:** that's need for info

**Mr. W.:** like plain white

Sara☺: yeah with dark blue at the top?

**Mr. W.:** OK oh my gosh I wil change it

*Kathy*☺: am IO suppost to do this or my blog and Saras?

**Mr. W.:** do what?

*Kathy*☺: wat u r doin of our blogs?

**Mr. W.:** that's see keep on doing your and Saras blogs

*Kathy*☺: k

**Mr. W.:** Sara refresh you blog page

**Mr. W.:** Is that better?

*Kathy*☺: http://XXXgiverXXX.blogspot.com is the URL

*Kathy*☺: so you can access her blog

**Mr. W.:** good job Kathy!!!

Sara☺: oooooo that's perty

*Kathy*☺: thanks

This example provides evidence of how these two students were able to work together to produce a useful artifact as a result of their participation in the community. Even though they were in separate locations, digitally, they could work together as Kathy works with Sara in creating her blog. Page by page, color by color, the two girls worked together, overcoming technical difficulties, until the assignment was completed.

### Helping each other: Redesigning the course.

Students also worked together with the teacher in redesigning the course requirements and structure. The next two dialogues show the interactions of two students and the teacher as they attempt to redesign the course early in the summer. The students offered suggestions and asked questions that helped the teacher in restructuring the course.

**Bob Wilson:** Let's start a new topic. I am curious! What kinds of things would make this class interesting for you? After all, there is no grade. It's not a requirement. You are in this class becasue of something you must see as valuable of fun. How can I as the teacher, increase that value. Make it more fun instead of like a real class?

Sara: umm don't make us take tests or answer like 20 questions in a row.

Jordan: The chat room so we can talk privatly

Jordan:  about California, **fainting**

**Bob Wilson:**  OK i don's have any plans fro 20 questions and those tests are optional. Should I do away with the optional tests? How else could we use the chat rooms?

Sara: i am not quite sure

Jordan:  We can use them to talk to any friends in the group.

Jordan:  Like now.

**Bob Wilson:** How often would you like me to be in a chat room? What days and times work best for you two?

**Bob Wilson:** Look in the discussion thread called "Questions about technology and CHALKBOARD " and click on undercover picture. Then open the word document attached.

Jordan: I was asking that question to Sara. Sorry you misunderstood. No I can't find it.

Jordan: I laughed out loud.

Sara: umm probably monday's and wednesday's and friday's from 10 to 11 all three times that would work the best for me

**Helping each other: Sharing information about course assignments.**

Collaboration also occurred when students would ask their peers about upcoming assignments or when they were due. These exchanges not only illustrate students working together but also reinforce my earlier claim that students assumed a level of responsibility

for meeting the requirements of the CoP. The following exchange between Sara and Jordan, for instance, solves a student's question about an assignment due date.

Sara: what are the assighnments??????

Jordan: Read Ch. 1-3 and do your collage is what he said, Sara.

Sara: oh ok bye

This question could have been answered very easily by Sara by looking in the course lesson plans for the week or on the weekly opening announcements pages. However, instead of finding the answers herself, she decided to ask the question of a peer and continue the online socialization. Jordan's reply is also personalized when he adds Sara's name to the end of his response. This kind of communication illustrates how these students were working together and helping each other in the course.

**Helping each other: Sharing and understanding others' perspectives.**

In some instances, discussions led students to change their minds of come to different conclusions about a topic or issue in the book as they shared their perspectives. In this short discussion about the role of memories in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), Zack and Jordan offer different opinions on a question posed by the teacher.

**Bob Wilson:** So what happens when nobody has memories?

**Bob Wilson:** Remember that the Gicer has all of the momories

**Bob Wilson:** poort typing there

**Zack:** yes

Jordan: They might not remember what they are doing and could not work right.

**Zack:** that and we wouldnt really now what to make of  mistakes

and feelings

Jordan: Hey, that is the same as mine.

Jordan: Without memories, you wouldn't have joy or happiness

from what your doing at the time.

**Zack:** thats correct

The students and teacher worked together sharing their opinions and helping each other with assignments and concepts. In doing so, they began to build the kinds of relationships that would allow them to learn from each other. In the next section, I will provide more examples of how this occurred

**Building Relationships to Learn from Each Other.**

There is a significant difference between acquaintances and people who have genuine relationships with each other. In a CoP, members must move beyond superficial acquaintance to interact with other members and learn together (Wenger, 2006a). As Wenger, White and Smith argue, "Communities with this orientation place a high value on knowing each other personally" (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 86). The students' use of the relational identity discussed earlier is one of the ways in which students got to know each other better. Although the students were already familiar with each other as fellow students from the same school, in the same grade, and often even in the same classes, in this community, they were able to develop a more personal relationship with their peers and the teacher. The amount of time spent or the location are not what matters in the establishment of a sense of community. What matters is that when the students interact

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with each other, they learn from each other (Wenger, et al., 2009). In this course, students built genuine relationships with each other as depicted in the following personal exchanges. They wrote about things that they could share together and engaged in discussions, often changing their own minds and the minds of their peers in the process.

**Building relationships: About that dog …**

In this section I will present examples of how students learned from each other by interacting with their peers and with their teacher. Sometimes, the learning has to do with the content of the course while at other times the learning deals with life events, or as I have previously discussed, with the relational identity. For instance, in this example, Sara and Kathy learn about where they can adopt a dog. While this has nothing to do with the purpose of the domain, they have developed the kind of relationship in which they can discuss personal issues in their lives. They are learning from each other through an informal activity and utilizing sources from outside the community.

**\*Kathy\*:):** And guess what I get to adopt a dog from the animal shelter!

**Mr. W.:** What would you say is the best time to have chats? In the morning like now or in the evening like 8:30?

\*Kathy\*:): in the mourning

**Mr. W.:** Woops got ahead of myslef there. That's great! What kind of dog? Name?

Sara:) joined the Chat

Sara:): hello!!!

**Mr. W.:** HEllo Sara

*Kathy*:): Her name is Keesh and she is a black lab. She is only 10 weeks old!

*Kathy*:): Sorry it is Keesha

**Mr. W.:** going to be a big dog!!

Sara:): I want to be the first friend to see her!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

*Kathy*:): ok!

**Mr. W.:** Will you love her as much as you do as a puppy as you will as a big

dog?

Sara:): what animal shelter?

*Kathy*:): in Cityville

*Kathy*:): friends of the animal shelter!

Sara:): There is a F.O.T.A.S in Cityville?

*Kathy*:): Yes I will Mr.W I love big dogs they will actually play with you

**Mr. W.:** good

**Building relationships: Discussions with friends and changing minds.**

Alternatively, most of the time, students were able to learn from each other by

discussing their perspectives on an aspect of their reading. They discussed different

points of view and would agree or disagree with each other. In this discussion, Zack and

Jordan are prompted to discuss the ending of the book, and more specifically, the

question of whether Jonas dies or lives. Zack starts out believing that Jonas dies in the

book but is convinced by Jordan that he survives.

**Mr. W.:** Alright, then answer this question, both of you...To you, is the ending of

this book a happy one or a sad one?

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**!?Zack?!:** sorry it was supposed to be i can debate u on it all day

**!?Zack?!:** both

Jordan: A inbetween ending to me.

**Mr. W.:** choose1

**Mr. W.:** or argue both

Jordan: A sad ending. Jonas passed away.

**!?Zack?!:** because he feels happy to be free and to see something hes never seen

but also because since he thought he heard noise coming from his community and

Jordanwe dont no that

Jordan: That too.

**Mr. W.:** But perhaps, it was only an echo. page 180

Jordan: Can I talk about what I did today?

**Mr. W.:** not yet

Jordan: OK.

**Mr. W.:** Was Jonas just using up his memories of life???

**Mr. W.:** as he died???

Jordan: No.

!?Zack?!: sorry guys g2g talk tommarow and i dont think it was cause they

probably got the memory of christmas and started to celebrate it but g2g again and

no cause the baby wouldnt be there

Mr. W.: we need to finish this ... tomorrow Zack!

!?Zack?!: and a bunch of others

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**Mr. W.:** Make sure you exit chat

**!?Zack?!:** tomorrow sounds good bye

**Mr. W.:** So what do you think about Zacks perspective on the ending Jordan?

Jordan: It was probably true, except the Gabe part, and Zack is still on.

An interesting point in their exchange occurs when Jordan attempts to change the subject as he is pressured to consider a concept that is difficult for him to understand. It is worth noting that this was not the first time that the ending had been discussed by these two students.

In the next exchange, students are discussing issues of "sameness". This is another example where the students start out presenting different perspectives on an issue and then end by agreeing with each other. In these exchanges, the students are playful, inquisitive, and in their own way, teasing each other in their postings. However, they remain focused on discussing a single issue from multiple perspectives and conclude by agreeing that one perspective may be better than the other.

**Bob Wilson:** Let me repeat the question: I don't remember the clothing kids wore in our book. Are they all the same?

**Bob Wilson:** Do you remember Zack?

*Kathy*:): Yes I think?:(

Sara:): i don't know.....i forget

*Kathy*:): yes because everyone looked the same

Sara:): i would not be a good reciever of memory because i forget a lot!!!!

**Bob Wilson:** do you think that the twelves and thirteens would be having this

discussion?

Sara:): nope

**Bob Wilson:** Why or Why NOT?

Sara:): because they are all the same

*Kathy*:): no because they would have to say sorry a lot!!

**Zack:** no to your first question about the clothing cause it said that different age

groups got different jackets so they didnt wear the same thing and the second i

agree with both the girls

**Bob Wilson:** But they are all raised the same, under the same rules, by surrogate

parents who cant say I live you? Wouldnt they turn out the same/? Aren't they like

"cookie cutter kids"?

*Kathy*:): Zacku there

Sara:): yes the whole community has the same rules

**Zack:** yes i am here i just like listening to the others opinions i have been

speaking mine for almost 2 days

*Kathy*:): yeah I agree with Sara

**Bob Wilson:** OK so do we all agree that everyone is pretty similar?

Sara:): yes

*Kathy*:): yes I do

**Zack:** no

**Bob Wilson:** Why not zack'

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Sara:): yes u do zack

*Kathy*:): what do you mean Sara?:)

Sara:): idk i was making a joke lol

*Kathy*:): Oh

**Zack:** no i dont and because remember how asher got picked because he was more fun than the others and jonas got picked because of his ability to see beyond and the other aspects

*Kathy*:): now I see you brought me into the light

Sara:): yeah

Zack, Kathy, Sara, and the teacher are having a discussion about how children are raised the same way in this community, and further, about the issues of sameness. Sara, making a personal connection in the conversation, admits that she would not make a good receiver because she forgets a lot. They ask each other questions and argue different issues with one another.

In this third example, Zack and Jordan are discussing different memories that the Giver is passing on to Jonas. At the end of the discussion, Zack is trying to make a point with Jordan but fails to convince him of the credibility of his argument.

**Bob Wilson:** OK, lets talk about the sled run memory, the snow and the cold. Why was this so suprising for Jonas?

**Zack:** because he never expierenced the thrill and the weather before cause they have the same wheather everyday

Jordan: It was suprising of how The Giver makes people feel something different every time he touches them.

**Zack:** ya thats cool and surprising but Jordanits not always a good thing

Jordan: Why?

**Zack:** youll learn that later

Jordan: What chapter are you on right now?

**Bob Wilson:** Why wouldn't it be a good thing?

**Zack:** 15

**Zack:** well with the pain in all it gets alot worst

**Zack:** i would not want the pain of some things he goes through like the hunger

**Bob Wilson:** But doesn't pain allow us to appreciate good feelings more?

Jordan: The Giver was showing him what a bad sunburn feels like.

Jordan: Yes.

**Bob Wilson:** Youre right Jordan

**Zack:** right

**Bob Wilson:** But doesn't the sun also warm us up and make the weather nice?

**Zack:** yes it does

Jordan: It does.

Jordan: Sometimes we need the cold too. We could be sweating in too much heat.

**Zack:** but would u like to see your own species kill another if u never saw blood before. Or break a bone before

**Zack:** and yes we do need the cold for other things too

Jordan: I think it isn't right.

Finally, in the exchange that follows Zack and Jordan discuss how *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) presents what is supposed to be a "perfect society," where everything is black and white and abnormality is excluded, and where choices have been made for individuals by someone else. While they argue the point, they show a great deal of respect for each other's viewpoints. Whether they agree or disagree, they have built a relationship that allows them to discuss issues civilly while learning from each other's point of view.

> **Bob Wilson:** Choices were made long time ago to do away with things like snow and hills. Sameness was chosen. Why could this be a good thing?
>
> Jordan: Everything would be equal.
>
> **Zack:** well........the reason they did it  i dont like but this could be a good thing cause we would all be equal
>
> Jordan: But how are we going to know what is what?
>
> **Bob Wilson:** but I thought being different was a good thing?????
>
> Jordan: Sometimes it is.
>
> **Zack:** thats very true i like us all being different and unique but also theres fights cause off the difference
>
> Jordan: Being differnt makes the world more interesting.
>
> **Zack:** thats true

This last example illustrates how the relationships that were gradually built by the CoP allowed for honest discussions to take place even when there where disagreements.

These examples depict how, with the building of relationships between students and the teacher, they were able to discuss not only the text but also how the text connects with their own lives. Theses discussion sometimes changed minds and sometimes did not. However, they all felt comfortable enough in the CoP to discuss freely their opinions and beliefs with others. In this next section, I describe what the teacher did in order to develop a better community by establishing and developing lines of communication with community members.

**Teacher Practices - Establishing Lines of Communication**

In the early stages of the study, the data indicated that as the course was progressing but participation was becoming sporadic, falling far below my expectations as the teacher. I therefore decided that serious adjustments had to be made in order to increase participation levels and allow the course to be successful. As the data shows, I tried several strategies to solve reoccurring problems and increase student participation in the course. I first addressed and adjusted the course communication practices. These practices were utilized to notify students and their parents about what was going on in the course. In addition to the weekly assignment postings and emails to the students, I also started to copy those emails to the parents. These communicative practices included my postings on the website, communicating with parents and students through the use of emails, and my communicative practices at the beginning and ending of the chat sessions of important information.

**Communicative practices: Postings on the website.**

As the data also shows, another useful practice that emerged was my postings on the home page of the course management system providing important information about the week's topics, readings, assignments, and chat session times. I would also email these postings to their home email accounts, many of which belonged to the students' parents. Below is an example of such postings:

**Welcome to week #2** Jun 26, 2009- ✏️🗑️

I have opened up week number 2 because next weekend is July 4th. Some of you may be going on vacation. Some may be staying at home for a picnic in the backyard. Some may go to the fireworks in Hometown like my family and I will be doing. Try to get your assignments done a little earlier next week so people will have a chance to respond. If you have not completed week 1 assignments, please do so quickly so everyone can respond. This class is only as good as your participation.

I have added two questions in the discussion section that deal with a "possible" class project and the use of incentives or rewards. Please let me know your opinion on both of these.

**I will be online on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday**

**from 11am to 12:30 pm, or by appointment.**

**Communicative practices: Emails from parents.**

Parents would occasionally reply to my correspondence explaining why their child would be unable to participate during the week. For example, in the email below, the parent indicated that the child would be away at 4-H camp for the week.

Monday, July 06, 2009 2:32 PM

*Mr. Wilson -*

*Just wanted to let you know Kathy is at 4H camp until the 10th.*

*Thanks!*

*~ Lori*

Some parental emails were sent to let me know that their child would be unable to participate during a future time period, such as this one from Sara's father.

Tuesday, August 04, 2009 10:30 PM

Hi Bob - Sara is out at Sunny Hills for a youth group camp all week. I'll see if I can get her online at least for Saturday. My apologies.

Sara's Dad

Sent from my Verizon Wireless BlackBerry

Below is a response from a father indicating why his son was having difficulties participating in the course:

Saturday, June 27, 2009 8:22 AM

Mr. Wilson,   Zack's Dad here .  I have been giving him your e-mails, he got your postcards, etc.  he is having trouble organizing time to do assignments.  He loves to read. but gets distracted by

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others.  I have discussed the need to keep promises and

responsibility.  will try and get corrected today.

 John.

Some responses, however, were encouraging and helpful, such as this one from Sara's

father:

Monday, July 06, 2009 11:11 AM

Thanks! Sara is enjoying the program. Let me know if she's getting off track since

she's involved in some other summer responsibilities that take her focus. I want

her to benefit from this time and effort invested. Have a great day!

Sara's Dad

Sent from my Verizon Wireless BlackBerry

In addition to keeping in touch with the students, I also wanted to encourage

communication with parents. By sending simple emails to parents, they would remain

informed about the course activities and hopefully supervise their children's participation

in the course. This strategy also opened opportunities for parents to easily contact me

using their BlackBerries to ask questions or share information about their child and the

course.

**Communicative practices: Emails from students.**

Sometimes, but not very often, the students themselves would reply to an email

from the teacher. In the example below, Martha wrote the teacher to find out if he had

received her assignment and to offer an excuse for not participating.

martha.t1@ABC.edu

Thursday, July 09, 2009 7:30 AM

did u get my collage? sorry i have not been on i have beed at my cusins hous and i just met her so i could not get on!

Emails offering excuses for lack of participation were in fact the most frequent. Below is another example of such emails, this time from Zack:

Friday, June 26, 2009 7:49 PM

Sorry i didnt join chat today i misread the time i cant join anyday next week until thursday cause i am going to moms so i will be on friday though.

**Communicative practices: Inquiries at the beginning of chats.**

At the beginning of synchronous conversations, I made it a point to inform students that even though they had not participated for awhile, they were still welcome to join us in the future. During these discussions, I would also try to find a way to make it easier for them to participate. For example, in this exchange with Zack, I tell him that I am glad to see him online and query how I can make it easier for him to increase his participation.

**Bob Wilson:** So, I am glad to see you back involved in the class.

**Zack:** ya ive been kinda busy and kinda lost track of the chats

**Bob Wilson:** What can I do to make it easier for you to participate more fully?

In this next transcript, Sara and I converse about when the next chat will be, since she had missed one earlier in the day.

Sara:): are you doing one again tomorrow?

**Mr. W.:** That's ok though because I may have worn everybody out last night

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Sara:): haha

**Mr. W.:** Yes I will be online at 10 am

**Mr. W.:** ON YOUR BIRTHDAY!!

Sara:): ok so we can have a chat tomorrow? and my birthday is on sunday

**Mr. W.:** sorry, i thought i remembered two days

**Mr. W.:** Yes we can chat tomorrow morning at 10. Will you tell Kathy?

**Mr. W.:** I want to have you experience doing a discussion thread

Sara:): yes i will tell her. what do you mean by that?

**Communicative practices: Reminders at the end of chats.**

When our chat sessions were nearing closure, I would always remind the students about when I would be online next and encourage them to join me to discuss our book.

**Bob Wilson:** You are so right young lady! Ok you have a great weekend and I will see you in the chat next week. Monday, Wed and Fri from 11-12:30

Sara: yeah and that is why sometimes you can't put the book down, Because you are wondering what is going to happen

Sometimes, I would ask a student to contact their peers to get them to join us.

Mr. W.: Good... ok I will see you around 10:30. If you talk to Kathy, tell her to join us also. I will call the boys

Other times, the students would take the initiative to ask about the next meeting and then agree to meet at specific times.

Jordan: Are you going to be on tonight?

**Bob Wilson:** Yes at 8:00

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Jordan: See you then.

**Zack:** yes at like 8:30

I would also try to encourage them to join me at a time that was convenient for them and their peers.

**Mr. W.:** Would you and Sara discuss if there is another time this weekend when we could discuss the project?

**Mr. W.:** Let me know what time

**Mr. W.:** and thank you ... you did noce work today!

**Mr. W.:** NICE

*Kathy*:): yes I will call her and get back to

*Kathy*:): ok well i got to go bye!

If I had a student who had not been participating, I would give him or her, a friendly reminder about the expectations of our CoP.

**Zack:** sounds great and i will catch up on my reading tommarow and do both the assignments if i have time

**Bob Wilson:** That would be great! A couple of suggestions.... first, check you email a couple of times a week. OK?

**Bob Wilson:** I use emails to let you know of any changes.

**Zack:** sure and one thing to say the book is good so far i think it will even get better though

**Bob Wilson:** Second, log onto CHALKBOARD as often as you can, at least 3-4 times a week. Check the classlist to see if anyone else is online. If they are they will a little dot next to their name.

**Zack:** okay i will probably get on it at least every day just to check up and i got a question how to u check your mail on ChalkBoard

**Bob Wilson:** That would be GREAT! Lastly, participate in chats. This is where the real classroom is at! I did not want to have a class where we read a book and answer 10 questions.

**Zack:** yep when is everyone else on usually

By reminding students at the beginning and ending of chat sessions of upcoming meetings, I was able to encourage them, as the facilitator, to continue and build their participation in the CoP. In the next section, I will explore the data to show how this group of students was more than a community of interest, and how they moved into developing as a community of practitioners.

<div align="center">

**The Practice**

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What distinguishes members of a CoP from members of a community of interest is how they conduct themselves within the community. Members of a CoP are practitioners; "They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems- in short a shared practice" (Wenger, 2006b, p. 2). In a CoP there is a "sense that it is 'about' something. It is not just a set of relationships" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 43). The community is not just about a shared interest either, "It entails developing a shared practice, which directly affects the

behaviors and abilities of members. … you have to look at how the group functions and how it combines all three elements of the domain, community, and practice" (p. 43).

In this section, I continue to provide data that illustrates how these students were not only members of the community but were also practitioners and I examine, more specifically, how members became practitioners in the community. I also provide evidence exemplifying how these students and their teacher developed and used specialized language skills, including emoticon use and two new patterns that I describe as visual-emotional text and a tactic of "holding the floor". I then examine the evidence that emerged suggesting gender differences in the students' patterns of speech. These tools of specialized language, were used by both the students and the teacher to improve the group's productivity in communicating ideas, thoughts, and knowledge. After establishing these patterns of language, I will demonstrate how the students developed a shared repertoire of resources and a shared practice in their digital habitat

**Patterns of Language**

The online world, because of its global nature, has developed a language of its own. As Wenger (2006a) puts it "because styles and discourses can spread across an entire constellation, they can create forms of continuity that take on a global character" (p. 129). Instant messaging, the kind of communication often used during chat sessions and texting, has created discourse simplifications or abbreviations – shortcuts that allow the written language to mimic spoken language. When members produce their own histories, "communities of practice also produce and reproduce the interconnections, styles, and discourse through which they form broader constellations" (p. 130). These

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discourses are best typified though the use of emoticons and visual-emotional text. These visual devices allow participants to transmit the emotions that would typically appear in face to face conversations through facial expressions and body language as well as voice tone and expression. Hand gestures, posture, or voice volume are not transmittable in written conversations. Emphasis needs to be applied in order to create a true sense of conversation with emotions. Volumes have already been written on these subjects and this short offering is not meant to be an in-depth discussion of these types of language patterns. It is offered, however, to illustrate how these middle school students utilized these characteristics of expression in their postings during chat sessions held within the online environment. These were tools that the students and their teacher utilized while participating in their CoP.

**Emoticon use.**

The students and the teacher both employed specialized forms of language during the course. One of these is emoticon use. An emoticon is an abbreviation for a set of words or a statement presented as a picture. For example, a smiley face presented as a colon and a close parenthesis would indicate happiness. This forms of communication have arisen mostly as a result of the rapid growth of instant messaging, allowing senders to communicate their messages in type more efficiently.

In examining the first lines of samples of students' instant messages, it becomes evident that they frequently use abbreviations in their writing. They write Idk for "I don't know", lol for "laughing out loud", brb for "be right back", and jk for "joking". These messages also reveal the use of a wide range of symbols such as the heart, the music note,

and the smiling face made by a colon and an ending parenthesis. Kathy and Sara also changed their computerized generated black and white names of "Kathy" and "Sara" to the embellished versions seen below. There also changed the colors of their names on several occasions. Zack changed the appearance and color of his name, adding exclamation and question marks. Jordan, on the other hand, never changed the style or the color of his name. Jordan was a precise speller and never deviated from his formal written language.

♥ idk  lol  brb  k  jk...  ♫:)  nvm  u  :)♫♥  *Kathy*:):  Sara:)

Sara:): Look at my smilie;) it's winking!!lol!!
Sara:): yupp lol!!

*Kathy*:): You rox my sox!:)

Sara: that was totallllly not obvious good Job♥:)

Kathy  g2g  brb

**!?Zack?!:**  Jordan Johnson

**!? Zack?!:** u finish the book yet

**!? Zack?!:** wats up Jordan

**!? Zack?!:** u finish the book yet

**Visual-emotional text.**

A speaker can transmit thoughts and expressions by using paralinguistic language in face to face discourse. In the digital habitat, where the printed word becomes the voice

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of the speaker, expressions and emphasis are nearly impossible to transmit without the addition of more words or other digital types of expression. While emoticons have been identified as a means of adding these expressions and used to "create ambiguity and express sarcasm online" (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2008, p. 379), the use of additional letters and symbols provide another method for adding expression, emotion and emphasis. An example of this would be in "using ALL CAPITAL LETTERS, [which] is considered shouting and is hard on the eyes" (Neuage, 2004, section 1.4, para 2)**.** It is difficult sometimes to interpret what is written as text language is absent of specific prosodic and paralinguistic features. Freeze (1998) wrote that "...what is written is not always what is meant. A fair amount of meaning relies on inflection and body language. It is best to clarify a person's intentions before jumping to conclusions or getting defensive". (p. 135). By using repeated letters and symbols, a reader is able to hear the extra speech as they read it, causing to emotion to be heard. I use the term visual-emotional text to describe these additions. The next few sections indicate how visual-emotional text was used by the students in their participation in the digital habitat. The following illustrates how the students used this strategy.

Sara:): Man is she a Pain!!!!!

*Kathy*:): I want to be the first friend to see her!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

*Kathy*:): ok gtg i will be on tomorow and sat!!!:) Bye!!! I am so sorry i have plans for tonight

Sara:): in the pmmmmmm....for mua at least

Jordan:   Hahahahahahahahahahahaha!

Jordan: You tricked me!!!!!

$Zack$: i think the worst part is them not having any memories cause without memories life would be borrrrrinnnnnngggggggg o and bye jordan

!?Zack?!: wow thats sweet man i wish i could of went hahahaha

The use of visual-emotional text as a tool to transmit emotion and expression was not limited to students. Sometimes a writer may type a paralinguistic expressive utterance (Neuage, 2004), which includes the examples where repeated letters are presented. The teacher also used multiple letters, capitalization, and symbols to expression emotion.

Mr. W.: But WHOSE REASON????

Bob Wilson: And YOU ACCEPT THIS?????

Mr. W.: Ypou have been a little busssssssssssy

Mr. W.: Make up a different password. WRITE IT DOWN!

Mr. W.: I UNDERSTAND THAT!!! and I agree that it is not right!!!

Bob Wilson: That's crazzzzzzzzzzzzy!

**Holding the floor.**

As the teacher and students chatted, there were often times when the teacher would be interrupted by a student's comment in the process of typing up his own thoughts and responses. To counteract this and control the conversation, the teacher came up with a format to "hold the floor", an instant messaging tool for longer responses. This interruption of conversational turn taking by taking several turns at one time, was done in order for there to be a natural flow of discussion about a topic or subject (Neuage, 2004).

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This allowed me to get my entire comment or thought across without interruptions and without the students being able to post anything until I was done. I often posted partial responses which I hoped would leave the students hanging for the rest of the sentence to appear. I found, as the transcripts below show, that students were able to identify that the teacher was trying to make a point and would wait until he had finished making the statement before joining the conversation. I have highlighted these responses bold font in order to show the impact of this type of responding. The teacher used this strategy for several purposes:

a. to make a point

Jordan: That is just cruel and wrong.

Jordan: Yes.

Mr. W.: i undersatnd i just wanted to make sure

Mr. W.: that your understanding'

Mr. W.: of being released was what was said in the book

Jordan: I'll see you tonight at 8:30, I hope.

Mr. W.: ok

b. to use at a teaching moment

Mr. W.: The author writes words in a book from their perspective

Mr. W.: You read the words HOWEVER

Mr. W.: You interpret them differently based upon your history

Mr. W.: your religion, your schooling, your family

Mr. W.: You read the words from your persepctive.

Mr. W.: That is how when we all read the same book, we can ewalk aways

with a different impression of what was written

Mr. W.: a different feeling.... happy, sad, upset

Mr. W.: It's not the same understanding that the author has. It is YOUR

understanding

Jordan: The perspectives are different, but it creates different summaries.

Mr. W.: YES this is very true

c. to give instructions

Mr. W.: No go down the discussion page until you see

Mr. W.: OK

*Kathy*:): I just did

Mr. W.: go back to you posting and fill in the subject.

*Kathy*:): ok im done!

Mr. W.: Then post it

Mr. W.: Then highlight it and change the font size to 24

Mr. W.: Then copy and paste the blog address into the text area

Mr. W.: give the subject a name like you see mine and jordans

*Kathy*:): ok im there

d. to make connections with the book

Mr. W.: How would you feel about Mark if he was being trained for the same

position?

Jordan: I would feel bad since he could misuse this position.

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Mr. W.: Fiona is already training to perform releases with no feelings.

Jordan: I could ask him to be responsible with that power though.

Mr. W.: How could he "misuse this position"? After all, he would just be doing his job!

Mr. W.: AND with NO feelings??

Jordan: He might release people for no reason.

Mr. W.: soooo an accident or even worse a

Mr. W.: an act of murder could be committed

Mr. W.: and nobody would even know about it??

Mr. W.: After all Mark would just be doing his job!?!?!?!

Jordan: That is releasing with a special reason.

Mr. W.: But WHOSE REASON????

Jordan: I don't know I wonder..... again!!!

The teacher used "holding the floor" tactic as a means of controlling the conversation. Although hierarchical in nature, it does allow the teacher to assert himself when direction is needed.

**Gender Discourse.**

Many of the conversations involving girls featured frequent expressions of feelings and extensive use of visual and emotional expressions. Because this can be perceived as taking the conversation off track, teachers typically try to redirect students to a more acceptable kind of discourse. This next set of data is an example of this redirecting. The exchange below illuminates how the relational identity is sometimes

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difficult to overcome, and how shifting from this "relational discourse" into a more serious discussion about the book can be challenging.

**Bob Wilson:** I would like to use the discussion threads more next week with maybe one question. Whatcha think???

Sara:): cool...but i have great news!!!!!

**Bob Wilson:** I am not suggesting 2 in the morning. The point is that you can reply to anyone at any time. Just like I did with Kathy

*Kathy*:): what tell me!!!:)

*Kathy*:): oh that makes sense(Mr.Wilson)

Sara:): oh ok cool and guess what????? I am turning 13 in 2 days!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (not counting today) YAY!

**Bob Wilson:** Whereas, the chat is used to converse with people who ARE online at the same time.

Jordan:   I saw that option on the way here.

**Bob Wilson:** Happy TEENAGE YEARS!

Sara:): thanks!!!!!!!!!

Sara:): i am soooooo exited!!!!

Jordan: I'll be 14 about 4 months.

Jordan: Sorry, 3 months.

*Kathy*:): are we going to discuss the book?:)

Sara:): ok well back to the topic....

Jordan: Whoops!

**Bob Wilson:** Right NOW----Although not a rule, people generally do not touch others who are not their family. When Jonas touches Asher in Chapter 13, trying to give him a memory of the color red, Asher becomes uncomfortable that Jonas is not adhering to this code of conduct. What do you think of this rule?

Boys' discourse was usually typified by short and direct questions and answers, even when conversing with girls. The conversations that follow illustrate these characteristics in addition to the sparing use of emoticons or visual-emotional text.

Jordan: Hi.

Sara:): hello Jordan


Sara :): Peace out my home slice

Mr. W.: ???

Sara :): :) i was saying hi to zack

!?Zack?!: back at u sara

Jordan: That is weird.


!?Zack?!: hey mr. w

Jordan: Hi. I was taking a shower.

!?Zack?!: wats up Jordan

Differences emerged in the style of communication between boys and girls. Girls discourse seemed to be more emotive while the boys seemed to be less emotive. While

the girls discourse may seem a little distractive as it appears to go off subject, as teachers, we need to find a way of utilizing their communication practices in positive ways.

**A Shared Repertoire of Resources – A Shared Practice**

In their online CoP, these students worked together with their peers and their teacher. While the number of times they worked together fell below the level originally expected by the teacher, when the students were online with a peer or their teacher, they worked together in a shared practice. In this section, I present specific data to illustrate how these students shared knowledge of the book they were reading by sharing experiences and stories. I will also present data that illustrates how they used tools specific to the domain.

**Sharing of experiences and stories.**

In a CoP, the sharing of experiences and stories allows practitioners to make personal connections with the interest of the domain. This personal identification with the interest of the domain allows for knowledge to be shared in a personal manner. Connections are developed and relationships are formed through the sharing of personal experiences and stories. When readers are able to draw parallels between their personal lives and the words in a text, a deeper understanding of the text often results. Tools used in one domain can also be used in others. As the following conversations show, the students in this digital habitat shared personal stories with each other and their teacher.

**Making personal connections with the book.**

In this exchange, the teacher and the students discuss and make personal connections with some of the rules of the community depicted in the book, which have to do with touching people and not seeing others unclothed.

**Bob Wilson:** Right NOW----Although not a rule, people generally do not touch others who are not their family. When Jonas touches Asher in Chapter 13, trying to give him a memory of the color red, Asher becomes uncomfortable that Jonas is not adhering to this code of conduct. What do you think of this rule?

Jordan: I think it is not right. People touch for relationships.

Sara:): i am not that far...i read to chapter 12

*Kathy*:): I dont like it because I always give hugs to my friends and family:)

[…]

**Bob Wilson:** Sara, earlier today...???

Sara:): hey de-ja-vou!

*Kathy*:): Mr.Wilson what do you think about that rule?:)

Sara:): you told me about zack earliar today

**Bob Wilson:** Actually, I thought it to be a little weird

Kathy*:): why is that?:)

**Bob Wilson:** I'm not sure I would let an old man that I just met touch my back

**Bob Wilson:** BUT, in this society there is complete trust

Sara:): yeah that would be very strange

*Kathy*:): Yeah that is kinda weird but I ment only my family:)

*Kathy*:): to give hugs and stuff:)

**Bob Wilson:** They have these rules that sometimes make me wonder what they

were thinking

**Bob Wilson:** Do they give hugs and stuff??

*Kathy*:): Sara, what part are you at?:)

**Bob Wilson:** Comfort objects are given to every newchild, but according to the

rules, they are taken away when children become Eights.

Sara:):not that i have read...i don't think......BUT, when Jonas washes the old lady

*Kathy*:): I don't like that because i ♥ my stuffed animals!!!:)

Bob Wilson: Rules 22: Although not a rule, people generally do not touch others

who are not their family.

Kathy*:): That is a good part Sara♫:)

Sara:): then why did Jonas wash the old lady, if that is a rule?.

**Bob Wilson:** Another theme that goes through the book is the theme of sameness.

Everyone is the same color becasue there is no color. Everyone has the same size

family.

*Kathy*:): because they are to old to clean themselves♫:)

Bob Wilson: Good question Rules 13: The rules dictate that people in the

community must not look at one another's nakedness, but the elderly and the

newchildren are an exception from this rule.

*Kathy*:): Oh♫:)

Sara:): Yes

In this exchange, Jordan does not think it is right for people not to be allowed to hug others. He readily admits to giving hugs to friends and family. Sara and Kathy discuss how it would be "kinda weird" and "very strange" for strangers to touch them but not for their family members. Sara recalls a specific incident in the book that seems to violate this rule, "BUT, when Jonas washes the old lady" and questions why Jonas is allowed to touch and wash the old lady. According to Kathy it is alright "to give hugs and stuff" to members of your own family and implies that it is wrong to do so with strangers. In these exchanges, these students have made a connection with the printed text in regards to their own lives leading them to a better understanding of the text.

In this next exchange, Zack makes a personal connection between the book's description of lights seen through windows, music, families, and celebrations of love with his idea of Christmas, even though the Christmas holiday is never mentioned in the book.

**Mr. W.:** I am curious about the Christmas ending ...How did you come up with that?

Jordan: That was Zack's question.

**Mr. W.:** yep

**!?Zack?!:** well i remembered earlier in the story how he liked it and how it talked bout the lights throught the window and it said where families created and kept memories where they celebrated love and the giver and jonas talked about those things and the music

**Mr. W.:** Yes this is true

**Mr. W.:** but why Christmans?

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**!?Zack?!:** because its winter for one and the lights and thats when everybody usually celebrates family and love and u have a lot of lights on the cristmas tree during that time and people put on christmas music for that time it adds up in my mind o and that also was jonas's favorite thing and a part y he left and the fact that being realeased was to be killed but thats just my opinion and i can fight u on i

On a different day, in a different chat session, Sara draws the same conclusion about the scene being a representation of Christmas.

Sara:): in the book jonas's dad "realeses" people and he was going to "realese" gabe so jonas took gabe with him. and there was also the search planes and the snow and the memory of sunlight and the crictmas lights and the singing.

**Making personal connections to their lives.**

I repeat part of the previously presented data here to illustrate how the two girls involved in the conversation were able to take a question that developed in regards to work assignments in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) and construct their response referring to actual students with whom they go to school. What is even more interesting, however, is that because these two girls both knew these other students, they were able to share their feelings and thoughts on the basis of shared experiences and knowledge. Pseudonyms have been substituted where actual names of other students have been identified.

**Bob Wilson:** like who?

*Kathy*:): Thanks Sara you said it perfectly!:)

**Bob Wilson:** Who are the people you don't like very much, Sara? Why would you move them?

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Sara:): like the people at school who think that they are better than everybody else because in the givers world everybody is equal and nobody is better than anybody

*Kathy*:): ELIZABETH JONES, AMY JACKSON, and JANE DOE Because I don't like them:(

**Bob Wilson:** why?

**Bob Wilson:** What do they do that you don't like? Remember that only the 3 of us can see this.

*Kathy*:): Because ELIZABETH is a snob, AMY is abusive and she is mean to my sibs, and JANE is mean

Sara:): sometimes they get snobby and start to think that they are better than the lower class people at school

Sara:): they look down apon people

**Bob Wilson:** Lower Class? Who decides what class you or others are in?

*Kathy*:): and JANE hates me but i would get to deside her future!

**Bob Wilson:** What future would you give her?

*Kathy*:): We dont deside they just treat us like that

Sara:): they judge people by their looks....it's just not how humans were meant to be

*Kathy*:): a future far away from all civilization

The students also shared stories and experiences of a personal nature using their relational identity. These more personal conversations generally emerged at the beginning of the synchronous chat sessions or towards the end of the sessions. The

subjects involved personal occurrences in their lives and had no bearing on the book or the purpose of the community. In the short exchange below, for instance, a discussion about upcoming birthdays developed when the teacher was explaining the differences between chat sessions and discussion threads:

*Kathy*:): what tell me!!!:)

*Kathy*:): oh that makes sense(Mr.Wilson)

Sara:): oh ok cool and guess what????? I am turning 13 in 2 days!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (not counting today) YAY!

**Bob Wilson:** Whereas, the chat is used to converse with people who ARE online at the same time.

Jordan:   I saw that option on the way here.

**Bob Wilson:** Happy TEENAGE YEARS!

Sara:): thanks!!!!!!!!!

Sara:): i am soooooo exited!!!!

Jordan: I'll be 14 about 4 months.

In some instances the teacher would be just as involved in these conversations as the students. Not only did these discussions provide an opportunity to share experiences and stories, but as these transcripts illustrate, they also contributed to the development of personal relationships, which is important in a CoP. Here, Zack and the teacher discuss what they had recently done and were planning on doing in the near future.

Jordan: Where were you on Saturday night?

**Mr. W.:** I had to go to Cleveland

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**Mr. W.:** I posted a note on the home page. did you see it?

Jordan: I wasn't on last night because my mom had to help with Grandma.

Jordan: I won't be on tomorrow due to a 4-H meeting.

**Mr. W.:** I did not have a chat time scheduled for Sunday. That's alright if you miss Tuesday night.

**Mr. W.:** I understand how busy this time of the year is for everyone in 4-H

**Mr. W.:** Both of my children were in 4-H

Jordan: I saw the note on the night in question

Jordan: I sound like a lawyer.

**Mr. W.:** good, that is where i will post important information

**Mr. W.:** I was wondering who you were trying to be

Jordan: I've been playing a video game about a fictional lawyer lately.

**Mr. W.:** AHHH Now i see the connections

Jordan: Pheonix Wright: Ace Attorney

**Mr. W.:** :)

Jordan: How are you?

**Mr. W.:** I am good and yourself

Jordan: Good. I'm going golfing with Grandpa tomorrow.

**Mr. W.:** Have you finished the book?

These students were often able to make personal connections with the story they were reading and experiences from their lives. As a strategy for improving

comprehension, these students utilized this tool of the reading domain to illustrate how they could use it in their practice as readers.

**Using the tools of the domain.**

Students were able to share, acquire, develop and use several tools of the community. They all used computers, the Internet, and the course management system of a major mid-western university. They also all read the same book, *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993). Chat sessions and discussion threads were used as discussion tools for students to meet and converse both as students and as adolescents socializing. The students and their parents used email, and on a limited basis, the telephone, to communicate with the teacher. The girls also used the telephone and text messaging to communicate with each other. Wenger, et al. (2009) stated that the tools of the community include identifiable pieces of technology that support the community's activities or bridges different types of activities.

**Blogs.**

Sara, Kathy, Jordan, and Zack all created blogs at www.blogspot.com as part of their response to their reading and their work in "Project Bearth," the creation of a futuristic world on another planet similar to Earth. In this project, students were told that Earth is in the process of being destroyed. A scientist has found a planet in the solar system that is similar to Earth. Their task is to reinvent the Earth, now called Bearth, in several ways, taking into consideration, for instance, government and jobs. Their blogs are entitled:

http://sarasgiverproject.blogspot.com

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http://kathysgiverproject.blogspot.com

http://thegiveratrvjhs.blogspot.com/

http://zacksgiverblog.blogspot.com

http://giverproject.blogspot.com/

(I have changed to original names of these blogs when necessary and inserted the students' pseudonyms. The fifth blog above was created by the teacher as an example for the students.

**Teacher Practices: Re-evaluating My Expectations.**

Finally, in this section I provide evidence of the adjustments I made in terms of my expectations of participation, the weekly lessons throughout the course in order to meet the needs and schedules of the students and improve their level of participation. I also show how differentiation was employed during the course.

As the course progressed, I found myself deviating quickly from the original structured curriculum, which contained weekly assignments, mandatory readings, chats, and postings to discussion threads, and moving towards a more informal and less structured curriculum. These shifts were motivated by a desire to increase students' involvement and expand their participation in the course. The low level of participation by the students was the most significant recurring problem. Adjusting the quantity and complexity of the assignments to fit the students' availability and capabilities was by far the greatest challenge of this course. The course began to focus more on discussing and making connections with the book, and an attempt at a course project, and less emphasis was placed upon other planned activities and assignments.

**Making adjustments: Re-evaluating my expectations.**

An analysis of the first week's lessons indicates that there was a substantial amount of online reading in addition to the required reading from the book. There were optional tests that I fully expected students would take advantage of and two creativity assignments. There were also several response assignments, and while some were optional, I fully expected that the students would complete them. We would meet only twice during the first week and, again, I expected all students to participate in both sessions. Finally, there were two asynchronous discussion threads for all students to respond to and students were also asked to respond to two of their peer's postings. Everything was set for a great course but very little happened. On June 23, 2009, I wrote the following reflection in my teacher journal:

> I was kind of disappointed that only two students were on the chat room today. I wondered if some of the students were first, unable to get online because they had forgot the web address or possibly because it was such a beautiful day outside that they were off doing summer things. I decided to RE contact the four students who did not show up in the chat using two different formats. First, I designed a four by six postcard on the computer that gave them instructions and web addresses so they would be able to log on to the system. I mailed them on Wednesday afternoon, thinking that they probably would not get the postcard until late Thursday and would not be able to participate in Thursday's chat. So I decided to also e-mail each of those for students and simply cut and paste the message from the postcard onto the e-mail. I emailed Martha separately because

she had not activated her account yet. Her mother called me Wednesday evening stating that she had not received the e-mail from the University yet. It was late in the evening when she called so I told her that I would e-mail her at the University on Thursday morning, which I did.

The same kind of participation continued after the postcards and emails, however. On July 6, 2009, I wrote in my teacher journal:

Over the holiday weekend I got online just to check to see if anybody would join me. Nobody did. Having said that, I really didn't expect anybody to be online over the weekend. I knew that the kids would be busy with family outings and parties, just like myself, and also getting ready for 4-H camp this next week. I don't look forward to very many people being online this week either because it is the last week for softball and baseball and there are several camp opportunity's available for students in the class.

I am really concerned however, with the small amount of data that I'm collecting. When this week is over, I'm going to have to inspire the students to participate more in the class. The postcards did not do as good a job as I thought they would. However, I have to remember that this is a busy time of year for the students. This is very similar to what the research said about middle and upper class families. These families' had plenty of activities to keep their students busy during the summer break. I am beginning to consider a different perspective on this study. Instead of looking at what I'm collecting as data, maybe I should be looking at what I'm not able to collect and find out why. Is it possible that rural

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middle school students are kept busy enough by their families and other

community activities that reading setback may not be an issue for them?

This data is going to be very interesting to analyze!

**Making adjustments: Lesson plans revisited.**

Below is an example of the more extensive planning that I had originally arranged

for the first week of the course. My lesson plan was designed to mimic one found in a

traditional face to face classroom setting, with several assignments for the week which

centered on four themes: reading, responding, creating, and meeting, in the order of

importance. By the conclusion of the course these elements had taken on different levels

of priority so that meeting became the most important with reading as a close second.

Responding and creating came at a distant third on the list.

| Week 1 starts on June 22, 2009 |
|---|
| **Reading: This first week has a few extra assignments in it. It may take a little longer than normal.**<br>• Read the welcoming message<br>• Read in the CONTENT area:<br>2.  Course description and objectives<br>3.  Learner expectations<br>4.  Vocabulary exercise<br><br>• Read chapters 1, 2 & 3, pages 1-25, in *The Giver.*<br><br>• THIS IS OPTIONAL: If you would like to check your comprehension skills, go to the following website and take a short quiz for chapters 1 & 2 when you have finished reading. Download the "Quiz grades" form from the "FORMS" section in the content. Record your score for the first time you took the quiz and save the document to your computer. At the end of the course, if you want to, you may share your results with me.<br>• Go to this website: http://www.mce.k12tn.net/reading17/giver.htm for the optional quizzes. |

Table 3. Sample weekly lesson plan                                                    continued

Table 3. continued

| Creating: |
| --- |
| • *"It's all about me"*- I would like you to create a digital collage about who you are, what you enjoy doing, hobbies, etc… and who you are as a reader. You have probably done this before when you cut out pictures from magazines and posted them on a poster board. This time, however, you will create it on a word document, (8½" x 11") and then post it to the discussion thread called *"It's all about me"*.<br><br>• **Create a set of "standard apologies"** for 5 student misbehaviors found in our school. Post them in the discussion room called "Standard Apologies". |

| Responding: |
| --- |
| 1. Post any questions you have under "Questions about CHALKBOARD and TECHNOLOGY" and in "Questions for Mr. Wilson". I will check these threads often throughout the course so feel free to ask a question at any time. As questions are posted, I will post an answer. Anyone may add a follow-up comment or question. I will respond further if necessary.<br>2. Take a look at everyone's digital collage (see below). Post a comment in the discussion thread *"It's all about me"* to at least two other students.<br>3. Read all postings in the discussion thread called **"standard apologies"** and respond to at least two postings.<br>4. *JOURNAL:* Journal writing is optional. Write a few sentences about you concerns about this class |

| **MEET ME ONLINE IN THE CHAT ROOM:** |
| --- |
| **Tuesday, June 23rd, 10-11 am and Friday, June 26th, 10-11:30 am.** |

| **Discussion Threads** |
| --- |
| 1. **In the book, Jonas and Lilly don't seem to have experienced live animals? What happened to them? Why do you think this is? How would you be affected if there were no puppies? No kittens? No birds or bugs? Cattle or hogs? Squirrels or chickens? No Zoos? Would our life be changed any? How?**<br><br>   **Would this be a good or a bad thing?**<br><br>2. **In Jonas' community there is no mention of cars, busses, trains or planes in this community? Why do you think this is? How would your life be affected if our community had no cars, busses, trains or planes? How would you adjust? How would this make life in our community better? Worse? How would it impact the planet Earth?** |

At the end of the course, I discovered that several students had read the entire book by the end of the fourth week. I was surprised by this, since I had asked them to only read a limited number of chapters as I had outlined in the syllabus. I was, nevertheless, encouraged that these students had read the entire book so quickly. It was my intent to do a book study rather than just read a book. However, their interest was different from mine. During their summer, they wanted to read! Two of the students even suggested in their course survey that the next time this course was offered, that the students read and discuss several books rather than just one.

**Making adjustments: Tweaking the lessons.**

It eventually became clear that the course would only have four students, so I decided to proceed with that number and make the best of it. I continued to tweak the lesson plans and place more emphasis on the chat sessions, as the students seemed to be responding the most to that form of participation. In the following lesson plan, which was created for week five, I focused on the chat sessions, posted only one question on the discussion board, and asked for the completion of one small assignment. I followed this formula for the remainder of the course because I began to feel that the students were responding better. However, they were not using the discussion threads or responding to the short assignment unless they were online with me. By the end of the course, all of the students had created their own blog; however, this too had to be done online with my guidance and prompting. They found creating these blogs difficult, and it took a lot of chat session time to scaffold them in this endeavor.

Participation during the second half presented a vast improvement over the first half, as illustrated in Table 3. While the difference is not radical, Table 3 does indicate that the adjustments I made to the curriculum and the personal relationships I developed with the students coincide with an overall increase in the students' participation in our CoP. While Table 3 shows some swings, it also illustrates an upwards trend of increased participation. Table 3 illustrates how, during the first two weeks, participation levels remained constant but low. Week three included the week of the Fourth of July. After the holiday, however, participation appears to increase. This could have been caused by my communication strategies and/or the fact that many of the activities they students were participating in, had concluded.
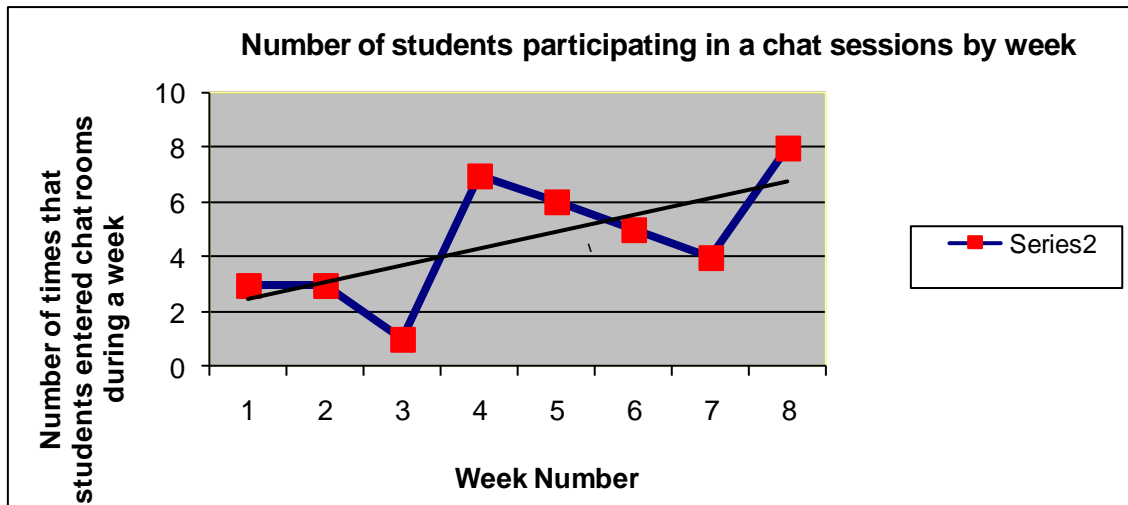


Table 4.

Number of students participating in chat sessions by week

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**Making Adjustments: Differentiation amongst students.**

Each student is different and, as the data shows, as I got to know my students better, I often found myself adapting the scope, format, and depth of questions I would ask to the particular strengths of each student. With Jordan, for instance, I found that if I pushed him too hard on a subject that he was uncomfortable with, he would leave the chat session. With other students, however, I found that taking a more antagonistic position encouraged them to argue, and thereby clarify their position on a subject. The following sections provide examples of how students reacted to the differentiated instruction I provided, and more specifically, those that emerged from conversations with Jordan and other students using open and closed question techniques.

*Going deeper with Jordan: His great escape.*

Sometimes, Jordan would be persuaded by his peers and I to discuss a topic that appeared to be uncomfortable for him. Jordan is autistic and new concepts and situations are often difficult for him to handle. When Jordan found himself in these uncomfortable discussions, he would often leave the discussion abruptly. In this first example, the teacher and Jordan are discussing standard apologies. However, when he is prompted to discuss if people really mean what they are saying, he quickly leaves the discussion.

**Mr. W.:** I can usually hear it often... at walmart, grocery stores, fast food places they all seem to give a standard thank you!

Jordan: Most of the time.

**Mr. W.:** so you have heard these?

Jordan: Yes.

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**Mr. W.:** Does they REALLY mean it?

**Mr. W.:** Are they genuine?

Jordan: Yes.

**Mr. W.:** I wonder if they do?????

**Mr. W.:** Or is it just something they they are use to saying???

Jordan: Yes.

**Mr. W.:** Like when you see some one and you say "Hi, how are you? Do we really want to know how they are? or is it our standard greeting?

Jordan: It is a standard greeting.

**Mr. W.:** And if it is just our standard greeting, then there can't be TRUE MEANING in what we are saying

**Mr. W.:** Like in the book, with standard apologies.

Jordan: Oh.

**Mr. W.:** Do they truly mean they are sorry or is it something they just say

**Mr. W.:** Do they say "standard apology""standard apology""standard apology"... while the little voice in their head says I wish you would go jump in a lake!

Jordan: Sometimes a little of both.

Jordan: I'm going out now. See you tommorow night!

Jordan was also uncomfortable discussing the concept of euthanasia which appeared in the book. Whenever the teacher would bring up the subject with him, pushing him to think about "Elsewhere", he would quickly leave the chat session. The following

illustrates the way in which he would flee the conversation when it became difficult for him to deal with:

**Mr. W**.: do you remember that Gabriel was "voted" to be released?

Jordan: I wonder if the rules were involved in the releasing..... AGAIN!!!!!

Jordan: Sometimes wrong tothe innocent.

Jordan: to the I meant.

**Mr. W.:** explain wrong?

Jordan: Sorry I forgot to press the space bar.

**Mr. W.:** ok

Jordan: If they only made a mistake that got them released.

**Mr. W.:** but what happens to you when you are released?

Jordan: You are removed from the community.

**Mr. W.:** to where?

Jordan: To Elsewhere.

Jordan: I going out now, but I will be here tonight.

This is another instance where Jordan leaves the chat room abruptly:

**Mr. W.:** Do you remember in chp 20 that t

hat's what happens when people are released; they are killed. Fiona is already

training to perform releases with no feelings

Mr. W.: do you remember?

Mr. W.: I f not reread chp 20 ok

Jordan: That is just cruel and wrong.

Jordan: Yes.

**Mr. W.:** i undersatnd i just wanted to make sure

**Mr. W.:** that your understanding'

**Mr. W.:** of being released was what was said in the book

Jordan: I'll see you tonight at 8:30, I hope.

Jordan is a very precise student and pays great attention to details. One of the traits of his Autism is his heightened awareness to specific issues and his inability to handle conflict well. Jordan noticeably, had difficulty is dealing with people who lie and with violent situations. He especially had difficulty with the books concept of "release", or euthanasia. Whenever these kinds of discussions would arise, Jordan would escape from being involved in these discussions by immediately exiting the chat room.

*Differentiating the types of questions.*

As a method of scaffolding different students, I would often adapt my way of asking a question to the student with whom I was chatting. For example, when asking Kathy, Sara, and Zack questions, I often used open-ended questions such as these:

Would you judge them upon how they act or what they would be best at in deciding their jobs? What jobs would you give them?

What do you think about how families are made up?

YES I agree. it is almost as if everything is standardized. How would you feel if you were living in this community?

Right NOW----Although not a rule, people generally do not touch others who are not their family. When Jonas touches Asher in Chapter 13, trying to give him a

memory of the color red, Asher becomes uncomfortable that Jonas is not adhering to this code of conduct. What do you think of this rule?

On the other hand, I would often use closed questions for Jordan, using the "holding the floor" tactic to keep his attention from drifting and to help make my question clear. As the following exchange attests, the questions I asked him, while not entirely closed, normally only required short and concise answers. This does not mean that I never used open-ended questions with Jordan or that I never used closed questions with the other students.

**Mr. W.:** How does Jonas' religion make it to this new community of Elsewhere?

Jordan: The religion of Jonas' community.

**Mr. W.:** Explain?

Jordan : Religion.

**Mr. W.:** other people?

**Mr. W.:** the government?

**Mr. W.:** Who treats them fairly?

Jordan : No.

Jordan : People are treated fairly though.

**Mr. W.:** cars and planes?

Jordan : Not a lot.

**Mr. W.:** Does it have houses?

Jordan : It is a community to start over.

**Mr. W.:** What is it?

Jordan : It is not a city.

Jordan : It is a place of Jonas' religion. Released pepole go there after taking a

long journey there.

**Mr. W.:** Describe it for me.

Jordan : Yes.

Jordan : I also seen a describtion of Elsewhere.

By differentiating the type of questions I asked, I was able to scaffold Jordan into

seeing another perspective in a way that would not be upsetting for him. I was also able

to, by asking more open end questions, to challenge the other students to think deeper

about the topics we were discussing.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have reported the findings in response to my research questions

They are

1. What are the patterns and practices of the students' participation in an online

    Community of Practice?

2. What instructional moves are made by the teacher in this online Community

    of Practice?

With only four students, all of whom were occupied by many other activities and

engagements during the summer months, the level of participation fell below my initial

expectations. However, upon closer analysis, the course proved valuable in shedding light

on different kinds of participation and activities, the kinds of relationships and practices

of the members, the way members took responsibility for their engagement, and

strategies for addressing recurring problems. All of these issues are valuable in explaining how small groups of middle school students can form a CoP within a digital habitat.

I found that the students took on multiple identities that were used in the domain not only in the interest of the domain, but also for socializing. These students completed joint activities and participated in discussions that were mostly synchronous, but also expressed themselves in asynchronous forums and created domain artifacts. During their time together, they built relationships with each other that allowed them to learn from each other and help each other learn. They were practitioners using similar resources, sharing their personal experiences, stories, and beliefs and being brought together by the book they were reading. Similar tools were used in the domain, and they were also involved in resolving the recurring problem of low participation levels. When they were together, whether it was with other peers and the teacher or just with the teacher, they were practitioners in a digital habitat.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the implications and limitations of this study as illustrated by the data and how it relates to the literature. I will also discuss how further research can be designed to build upon the strengths of this study while eliminating some of its weaknesses. Finally, I will discuss the implications of these results for future practices using digital habitats during the summer months to reduce summer reading setback and to build communities of practice.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In chapter 4, I explored the data I collected around the research questions and within findings relevant to these questions. I bring those findings together in this chapter in order to present an argument that in some classroom settings and designs where classes are held in a digital habitat and, in particular, where it is a voluntary digital habitat, a Community of Practice (CoP) theoretical orientation provides a powerful framework for understanding and analyzing online teaching, learning, and engagement.

I begin by briefly describing how challenges in the class as it was initially conceptualized and presented to participants, threatened to derail the course. I then describe the adjustments and changes that took place in redesigning the course and changing the theoretical orientation to that of a CoP. Finally, I make some comments on the implications for this research and the need for similar research in the future, followed by some non concluding remarks.

### The Shift from Being Schooled to Nurturing a Community of Practice

Summer heat, swimming, sunshine, baseball and softball, camps, vacations, and sleeping in; why would an incoming eighth grade student want to attend a summer school course? They didn't! The rural students involved in this online reading course wanted something different; something more social where they could direct their own learning and practice; where they could socialize yet specialize and hone their skills in reading. Unfortunately, that is not what they found in this online summer course. What they did

find was a structured, expert to novice relationship, good old fashioned classroom, full with rich assignments, projects, tests and other course-like activities that nobody wanted to do.

**My Initial Design of the Classroom**

My initial thought on the structure of this course was to design it similar to a face-to-face, traditional classroom while utilizing online tools for sharing, discussing, learning new ideas and being engaged in mini lessons on reading. In designing the course, I leaned heavily on traditional classroom structures and on an apprenticeship approach to teaching and learning (Rogoff, 1990), as well as the literature on developing online courses (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004, Stein, et al., 2005). However, the original design of the course and the literature I used did not adequately support a design for online courses where the participants are volunteer rural middle school students who are taking the course during their summer vacation. The course was too highly structured and did not allow for choices to be made by the students. The teacher decided what was important for students to learn, to know, and to do. The teacher created the environment where the teacher took on the responsibility for providing opportunities for students to become engaged in activities and opportunities to work with their peers. As the teacher, I was prepared to demonstrate what I wanted them to learn and to encourage the students to take risks and explore new ideas. I would provide instructions, mini lessons, and guided practice, reinforcing what I wanted them to learn. I designed opportunities for some limited choices to be made by the students; however I also required that they follow specific time tables for assignments. I had even designed rubrics and other evaluative

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guidelines that I would use to assess student work. I thought that most of these activities would be fun for the students, especially since I integrated in them the use of highly motivational technology tools.

As it became clear that the course was not working, I began to make changes in the curriculum and the theoretical construct of the course in order to increase participation and better support student learning. As can be seen from the data analysis and the student's patterns of participation, the decisions I was making and the outcomes of those decisions were moving us toward what Wenger (2006a) calls a CoP. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which a CoP framework provided support for the course and provided me, as a researcher, with a theoretical framework for understanding and interpreting the data. In particular, I lay out my efforts to deliberately nurture a CoP and the ways in which my efforts played out within the course. My interpretation will also point out the ways in which I fell short in my efforts and point towards how a CoP could be more intentionally created within such an environment in the future.

**From the Traditional Classroom to a Community of Practice**

When a teaching and learning practice fails in a classroom we need to change what we are doing, adjust the curriculum and pedagogy, and create a better environment where students can learn more and learn better. My initial design had failed us as a group of people interacting in an online course; a course that was highly structured, not only in the lesson plans but also in the hierarchical relationship that I had built into the design of the course. It was time for a major shift in this course or the course and the research would fail. In reflection, I realized that much needed to change, beginning with the

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theoretical foundation itself. As a result, I went from seeing this as a just another class to a exploring my teaching and our collective participation in a CoP.

## The Power of a CoP Approach for Understanding this Online Environment: Cultivating a Successful CoP

A CoP perspective arises from the literature on sociocultural foundations and knowledge management.  Learning in this framework is based upon social interaction between people. As with other kinds of learning communities, a CoP is a community where the membership is cooperatively engaged and trusting relationships are built; second, members negotiate within the community where ideas and conflicts are shared and socially negotiated to a mutually agreed conclusion; and finally, members utilize a collection of specific tools, stories, languages, and others instruments, which are developed over time and are used in abundance (Wenger, 1998).

CoP's  will develop on their own, however, "an appropriate amount of design can be a powerful engine for their evolution, helping members identify the knowledge, events, roles, and activities that will catalyze the community's growth" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 63).  Additionally, there are a number of characteristics that differentiate a CoP from the original design of this traditional classroom space and from other kinds of learning communities. It is the specificity of indicators which help define a CoP and differentiates it from other learning communities. This specificity was most valuable to me in my redesign of this education course.

Within this section, I demonstrate the ways in which this online learning space can best be understood as a CoP.  First I revisit the three major characteristics of a CoP –

the domain, the community, and the practitioners in order to explore the ways in which the students and I took on these characteristics as well as the places in which we fell short. Next, I use Wenger, et al. (2002) principles for nurturing a CoP to interpret both the strengths of our changes as well as, again, highlight the areas in which efforts might have been made more deliberate.

**Revisiting the Domain, the Community, and the Practitioners**

There are three major components in a CoP that I attempted to address in the redesign of the course. The first component is the domain, which Wenger (2006b) describes as a focus of interest that is shared by the members. A domain is more than a group of friends who get together to discuss things. Members of a CoP have a commitment to a practice, "and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people" (p. 1). The second component is that in a CoP there is a sense of community; where members search out and engage in activities that relate to the community's interest. They "engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other" (p. 1). Finally, the third component is that members are practitioners. As practitioners, members "develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction" (p. 1).

**Creating the Domain**

The domain describes a specific area of interest that members of the CoP share. "The domain creates a common ground and a sense of common identity. A well-defined

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domain legitimizes the community by affirming its purpose and value to members and other stakeholders" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 27). In order to create a worthwhile online domain, I had to make it an interesting space for these students to participate. Members needed to be inspired to participate and contribute to their evolving knowledge. I needed to define a digital space they considered to be worthwhile, a place where ideas can best be presented, and guide them in what direction to take in the future. They needed to become a group of practitioners.

**Developing a Shared Identity and Interest**

When students meet online not to reach a specific goal, but to practice and grow in their expertise, in the case of this research, of reading, they develop an identity as reading practitioners. Wenger (2006a) wrote that a CoP "is focused on a domain of shared interest, it is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between friends" (p. 2). Members must have a minimum interest in the domain. They must have a shared competence which has grown from experience, which makes members of this community different from those in other groups. A CoP may not be recognizable to people outside the community. A group of kids in an online reading course may look like they are merely participating in a socializing event. Yet, these students shared similar levels of competence and had made a commitment to the interest of the domain. This community became more than a classroom or a group of friends meeting in a digital habitat; it could become a CoP. But first, I had to get them back involved in the online community in order to make this a joint venture. CoP's gave me the framework to help these students develop an identity of both individuals and a group of practitioners.

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**Commitment to the Domain: A Joint Enterprise**

Members must make a commitment to the domain; otherwise it is merely a group of friends (Wenger, et al., 2002). The members of this online community had made a commitment to participate in the online course. They and their parents signed permission papers, undertook some training and began their involvement in the course. Commitments to a domain vary greatly. Commitment of any kind indicates an intention to work within the community in order to evolve knowledge within the group. It is understood that the process of the community is a joint enterprise with others who share the same interests. The size, scope, or frequency of participation is not important as long as the identification as a group member is clear and in agreement with the domain (Brown & Gray, 1995). This is what makes the community a community: the connectivity within the orientation of the group's practice. The major obstacle in this course was to get these students reconnected with the course and each other.

Any group can become a joint enterprise, but what made this group of students an online CoP were the different levels of commitment and the function of the group for its own specific purposes (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005). Communities of practice are not kept together by an external manager who controls the activities of the community. This is what I had first intentionally had tried. My error was in not allowing my "learners [to] negotiate their own economies of meaning and communal responses to the designs placed before them" (p. 60). In other words, this CoP was being constrained by me as their teacher. In retrospect, I should have allowed them to negotiate their own meanings and

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responses; I should have allowed them to devise and build from this joint enterprise a shared repertoire. Instead, I gave them assignments to complete.

**A Shared Repertoire**

The shared repertoire is the shared language and discourse of the community (Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007). It also includes routines, words, tools, and ways of doing things, symbols, discourse, and genres. "Over time, the joint enterprise creates resources for negotiating meaning" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 82).These resources are used by the members of the community. Some elements of the repertoire are already in use elsewhere and are adopted by the community, such as emoticon and instant messaging language, while others are created or produced specifically for the CoP. The items in the repertoire may be very dissimilar; "they gain their coherence not in and of themselves as specific activities, symbols, or artifacts, but from the fact that they belong to the practice of a community pursuing an enterprise" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 82).

However, putting things to work may not be as easy as one might imagine. It involves a process in which many perspectives on different issues need to be discussed and conclusions need to be negotiated. What one student would understand from a chapter in a book may differ significantly from what another student would understand from reading the same chapter. Communities of practice can be a messy place when new ideas and knowledge are formed or when the social energy can keep us responding to new ideas or problems. Wenger (2006a) emphasizes this point:

1. I have insisted that shared practice does not itself imply harmony or collaboration.

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2. Moreover, asserting as I have that these kinds of communities produce their own practices is not asserting that communities of practice are in an essential way an emancipator force (p. 85).

There are disagreements and different perspectives not only on the issue of problems being worked on by the CoP, but also in their outcomes. Communities of practice in themselves are therefore not good or bad, positive or negative, beneficial or harmful. They are communities in which meaning and knowledge are formulated thorough a negotiated practice. The following section reexamines communities themselves and how members build and nurture them.

### The Community

The second major component of a CoP is the community. In this section I present the literature concerning members' participation in joint activities and discussions, relationships amongst members, as well as member collaboration and sharing.

**Participating in Joint Activities and Discussions**

In a CoP, the mutual engagement of its members in activities and discussions is paramount. People must be engaged with each other in order to negotiate meaning and nurture new understandings and knowledge. This was the major concern with the original design. Students were resisting from participating due to the structure of the course. Without their involvement in joint activities, there would be no community; there would only be completed assignments completed autonomously.

This CoP was not just a group of friends who wanted to exchange information. What was important was the ability of group students who wanted to engage each other

in joint activities and discussions. As Wenger puts it, "people can participate in different ways and to different degrees" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). They could meet on a daily or monthly basis, at a specific location or in a digital habitat. What was important was their meeting and integration together, something that was not happening.

This CoP was located in a digital habitat, which is a relatively new concept and has its own challenges. For instance, a digital community can cross boundaries so that "people can come together who would not meet otherwise – or even know of each other's existence" (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 188). In rural areas, because of the distances between where these students live, had it not been for this digital habitat, these students probably would not have seen each other all summer long. Technology however, does have its limitations as far as participation is concerned. There are also limitations on the number of people that can be in a chat room discussing an issue at one time. Some rural communities have technology deficiencies that restrict participation as might socioeconomic conditions of some rural families.

**Building Relationships**

Once our community had been established, my students needed to get to know one another. It is very important "to have activities that allow members to build relationships, trust, and an awareness of their common interest" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 82). Many of these activities were absent in the original design. It takes time for these relationships to reach a level where trust exists. Fortunately, my students did know each other superficially, but not personally. Their relationships needed to be nurtured and allowed to grow. When relationships grow, people are willing to share information with

each other. "Learning together depends on the quality of relationships of trust and mutual engagement that members develop with each other" (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 8).

It takes time for a CoP to evolve. These students needed to "develop around things that matter to people. As a result, their practices reflect the members' own understanding of what is important" (Wenger, 1998, p. 3). These students had indicated what was and what was not important to them and they were willing to work together with the teacher in order to achieve the things that mattered to them.

**Helping, Sharing, and Learning from Each Other**

"People in communities of practice share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems" (Wenger & Snyder, 2004, p. 125). Social interaction and learning together are the keys to the development of a CoP. When people interact together, working on a problem or learning a new skill, they share perspectives and ideas. When misunderstanding occurs, they scaffold the underachiever until the learner has become proficient with the knowledge of the group (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). When members help each other and share information, they learn from each other. Having a shared understanding allows for community members to merge together and thrive in their abilities and their thinking.

Communities of practice are places for the exchange and interpretation of information. Because members have a shared understanding, they know what is important to communicate and how to share information that is useful to the community. The learning is not just situated in practice. It is an integral part of practice, where members learn through helping and sharing knowledge and ideas in a practice. It is

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participation in the practice, "where participants have a common understanding about what it is and what it means for their lives and community. The community and the degree of participation in it are inseparable from the practice" (Kimble, et al., 2001, p. 218). Communities of practice do not merely have members just as members. It is the participation in the activity of the community, which is well delineated and identifiable, where social interaction occurs, and where members are working together, that make a CoP. In this next section, the practice aspect of a CoP will be revisited to illustrate how practitioners function within a community.

**The Practice**

The third major component of a CoP is the practice, which is ultimately what "differentiates CoP from other communities" (Seaman, 2008, p. 270). Communities of practice are not just a club or a group of friends who get together to discuss something that is of interest to them. What distinguishes this CoP from other groups is that the students needed to become practitioners. In their community "they develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, a shared practice" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 1). Practitioners develop and use resources in community activities. They have a "way of talking about shared historical and social resources, frameworks and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 5). Over time, the practitioners' develop a shared practice.

Communities develop in stages. As community members get to know each other better, they build trust and acceptance through their involvement in a variety of activities. They arrive at the CoP at different stages of development. Cousin and Deepwell (2005)

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concurred as they suggested that "e-facilitators have to be mindful that learners may arrive at a pedagogical setting with congealed practices form another kind of setting" (p. 61). It is the participation of learners in the specific CoP that promotes specific learning. "The central point here is that participation enables learning, and learning changes who we are" (p. 61). Learning throughout life is taken in stages of socially constructed steps. "Learning cannot be designed; it can only be designed for" (p. 63) the optimization of learning.

Participants must be willing to be engaged in their CoP of their own volition. Cox (2005) addressed this idea of volunteerism. He wrote that "a 'community' of practice is defined by its membership being voluntary and its behavior 'self organizing' and it is a CoP merely because it is about work, not a leisure time activity" (p. 534). By voluntarily participating in the CoP, learning is enhanced as participants follow the direction they have chosen. This is what really sets this CoP apart from other learning communities. It is the fact that these students volunteered to participate in this course because they *wanted to!*

In this section, I begin by offering examples of how different patterns of language emerged in the students exchanges. I also share data of how this CoP, after a redeveloping the course began to share experiences, personal connections with the book and their lives, and how they shared the tools of the domain in order to display that they had a shared repertoire of resources. I conclude this section describing how the teacher made adjustments to not only his expectations of the students, but how he also made adjustments to the curriculum and the way he engaged the students.

**Practitioners**

Practitioners come together in a CoP to be involved in activities of a well-defined community. "One of the tasks of a shared practice is to establish a baseline of common knowledge that can be assumed on the part of each full member" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 38). The practitioners do not have to agree on everything in the knowledge base. Practitioners can take different perspectives or develop individual expertise, but they all share a basic foundation of knowledge that will allow the group to work together.

As Brown and Gray (1995) explain, the size of the community is not what is important,

> at the simplest level, they are a small group of people … who've worked together over a period of time. Not a team, not a task force, not necessarily an authorized or identified group. … They are peers in the execution of "real work." What holds them together is a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows (p. 3).

A CoP may come in a variety of shapes and sizes. CoPs are identifiable in what they do, by their purpose, and their need to interact together in order to learn from each other.

What is important in a CoP is the social interaction that occurs over time. Learning is about the work of the community, community work is about learning in the community. "Learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in word" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 34). Both learning and working together occur in social settings. Learning and working

together do not always have to take place in a face to face meeting. In an age of emails, instant messages, and applications like SKYPE, people have been able to come together and become practitioners in technology-based communities of practice (Wenger, et al., 2009). Technology-based communities therefore have the same value and components as face to face communities of practice. It is the practice that is important. A CoP develops social relationships that are important to the practice of the community. The personal relationships and practices of the community take time to develop. Once the activities and practices are expanded and strengthened, the members then become practitioners.

**Shared Resources**

Members of a CoP bring a set of tools to the community. During their practice, they also develop new tools that allow the practice to work more efficiently. Understanding and purpose of is given to how tools are used in the community. They assist members in developing understanding and meaning as they negotiate the community practice.   Such resources can include many things. A shared repertoire of resources refers to a community's "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has adapted in the class of its existence" (Wenger, 2006a, p. 83).

In a digital habitat, these shared resources may look a little different than in a face to face habitat. "As communities appropriate technologies, they make 'themselves at home' in new ways and new places. They shape their digital habitats and the technologies they contain through novel use, asking more of technology creators and suggesting new directions for development" (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 19). As new technologies are

created, they may be adapted for use in a community by the practitioners. Members themselves can then develop expertise and share how a new tool functions with other members. As they become more proficient with the use of the tool, more members will begin to use it. This allows for a new kind of interaction between practitioners and technology, which can further learning about work and working to learn. As new technologies emerge, new ways of learning and sharing knowledge and information emerge.

Not all tools are used for the purposes for which they were originally designed. Many technological tools are shared in a CoP in ways that exhibit adaptability. As Wenger, et al. (2009) put it, "communities of practice are skillful at putting all kinds of tools to good use, regardless of their designer's intention" (p. 62). Because communities mostly communicate with words, the most popular tools use some form of discourse. However, according to Cousin and Deepwell (2005), some theorists "point to the emotional substructures to online discussion groups" (p. 60). For instance, it can be difficult to understand the truthfulness of online postings sometimes. It takes time to build relationships where trustworthiness can exist. "Reaching enough mutual commitment to learn together is always a delicate process that includes knowing enough about each other and building trust, technology introduces new twists to this challenge" (Wenger, et al., 2009, p. 191).

**A Shared Practice**

When practitioners share a repertoire of resources in activities of the community, they have a shared practice. "An effective practice evolves with the community as a

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collective product. It is integrated into people's work" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 39). People living and working in a community do not want to work alone. They learn from and build upon their own as well as others' knowledge through interactions and conversations. Each community has a different way of accomplishing this and its own unique way of developing and sharing knowledge. "Successful practice development depends on a balance between joint activities, in which members explore ideas together, and the production of 'things' like documents or tools" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 39). When practitioners work in cooperation with other practitioners, they are able to produce usable tools and other artifacts that the community can utilize to expand their particular knowledge base. Thus "communities of practice do not reduce knowledge to an object. They make it an integral part of their activities and interactions, and they serve as a living repository for that knowledge" (p. 9).

New members are accepted into the community by performing simple tasks that are in line with the goals of the community. Through this induction process, newcomers become familiar with the tools and practices of the community. Older members, such as the teacher in this course, share the historical development, the practices, and the tools of his experience in communities. Gradually, as newcomers experience more practices, they become more competent and more deeply involved with the center of the practice and eventually become full participants. Learning then becomes more of a social practice through participation rather than a simple acquisition of knowledge.

**Sustained Nurturing in a CoP**

Interpreting the course through the three main characteristics of a CoP gave me important insight into the ways in which I might have approached the initial design of the course. Seeing the course through these characteristics also allowed me to quickly re-envision and redesign elements within the course. In this section, I explore the ways in which a CoP, once it has been initiated, is continually nurtured.

Wenger, et al. (2002) found that a CoP contained seven principles which nurture a CoP and make it alive. When these principles are used in the design of a CoP, participants are able to engage in group discussions or have private one-on-one conversations. They can read about new ideas or watch as peers argue from different perspectives. These "communities are voluntary and organic, [and] good community design can invite, even evoke, aliveness. These principles are

1. Design for evolution

2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives

3. Invite different levels of participation

4. Develop both public and private community spaces

5. Focus on value

6. Combine familiarity and excitement

7. Create a rhythm for the community" (p. 51)

In these next sections, I will demonstrate, with examples from my data and connections with the literature, how each of these seven principles were utilized, integrating them together within the design of this community, to allow this CoP to

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become "more flexible and improvisational" (p. 51). Within this design, participation increased and the students and I became practitioners in a CoP.

**Designing for Evolution**

Wenger, et al. (2002) wrote that communities of practice are organic and need to be designed to foster their growth and metamorphosis while building upon "preexisting personal networks" (p. 51). The online course utilized these preexisting personal networks when it enrolled students from the same rural middle school who knew each other.

Unfortunately, the original design of the course failed to develop an inviting space for these students to engage one another. It did contain many elements connected to the book they were going to read. However, there were too many requirements, assignments, and activities in this course. Wenger, et al. (2002) wrote that in designing a CoP, it is best to involve "fewer elements at the beginning than a traditional organizational design" (p. 53) might have. Once I made the shift from including many structured assignments to just a few elements, participation increased.

Several design factors were used to foster and encourage community development. I encouraged students to reenter and participate in the community I had redeveloped through emails to parents and students which were used to keep everyone up to date as to what was going on in the course during the week. Telephone calls, postcards, and letters were sent to students encouraging their participation. Once students began to participate more actively, they were able to experience the low structure of the course and experience more freedom. This assisted in the development of the CoP. As time

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progressed, new elements, such as the creation of a blog and an optional class project were introduced. I had included fewer elements in the community design than I did at the beginning of the course and participation began to improve.

Wenger, et al. (2002) developed five different stages of development in a CoP, as illustrated in Figure 6. In this particular community, members began in the coalescing stage when they began to join the course just to see what it was all about. At this point in time, the course was still designed as a traditional classroom space. They moved quickly through the active stage and approached the dispersal stage when the redesign occurred. Had the original course design remained, the community would have probably continued its direction and moved quickly into the memorable stage. However, due to the shift made in the framework of the course, the participation slide was reversed and the students moved into the active stage of development. It was at this point, that the community began to thrive as members found value in participating. But it often takes time for a community to develop to the point where "people genuinely trust each other, share knowledge that is truly useful, and believe the community provides enough value that it has a chance to survive" (p. 82).

**Stages of Development**

**Active**
Members engage
in developing a
practice

**Coalescing**
Members come
together and
recognize their
potential

**Dispersed**
Members no longer
engage very
intensely, but the
community is still
alive as a force and a
center of knowledge

**Potential**
People face
similar
situations
without the
benefit of a
shared practice

**Memorable**
The community is
no longer central,
but people still
remember it as a
significant part of
their identities

**Typical Activities**

Engaging in joint
activities, creating
artifacts, adapting
to changing
circumstances,
renewing interest,
commitment, and
relationships

Finding each
other,
discovering
commonalities

Exploring
connectedness,
defining joint
enterprise,
negotiating
community

Staying in touch,
communicating,
holding reunions,
calling for advice

Telling stories,
preserving
artifacts,
collecting
memorabilia

time

Figure 6

Stages of development for a CoP (Wenger, 1998).


Different tools and language were developed and deployed by the teacher and the
students in the CoP. This may not have occurred in the more formal, structured, teacher
directed classroom. From emoticon use, slang, visual-emotional text, holding the floot
techniques, and informality of discourse, the practitioners developed specific tools used
in the community to afford itself an improved means of communicating understanding
and knowledge. They responded to each other with this discourse through mutual
engagement in common activities. These tools would be used in the CoP as it continued
to evolve.

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I also asked the students what they wanted from this course. They told me they wanted a place where they could meet, collaborate, and discuss what they understood from their reading. They also wanted a place where they could socialize. The evolution of this course might be helped if I added the components that the students wanted. For example, in this exchange, they told me they did not want to take tests or answer comprehension questions.

> **Bob Wilson:** Let's start a new topic. I am curious! What kinds of things would make this class interesting for you? After all, there is no grade. It's not a requirement. You are in this class becasue of something you must see as valuable of fun. How can I as the teacher, increase that value. Make it more fun instead of like a real class?
>
> Sara: umm don't make us take tests or answer like 20 questions in a row.
>
> Jordan: The chat room so we can talk privatly
>
> Jordan: about California, **fainting**
>
> **Bob Wilson:** OK i don's have any plans fro 20 questions and those tests are optional. Should I do away with the optional tests? How else could we use the chat rooms?
>
> Sara: i am not quite sure
>
> Jordan: We can use them to talk to any friends in the group.

Even though the time remaining in the course was short, only six weeks left, since these members already knew one another other, the process of building trust and

relationships were quickly accomplished. This building of relationships allowed some of the students to quickly move through the early stages of development and into the active stage. With the redesign, they found their interests were being met. The CoP, because of this new design, was able to shift its focus in order to support the interest and goals of the students. Relationships developed further and an important sense of informality developed in this relaxed and inviting space.

This sense of informality displayed itself in several ways. There were relaxed, even playful conversations between peers, such as in this exchange:

**Sara :):** Peace out my home slice

**Mr. W.:** ???

**Sara :): :)** i was saying hi to zack

**!?Zack?!:** back at u sara

**Jordan:** That is weird.

They joked around with and teased each other like in these exchanges:

**Sara:):** idk i was making a joke lol

**Kathy*:):** I was making a joke but you apparently didnt get the memo

**\*Kathy\*:):** But I was JK sorry I was too complicated for your brain compasity Jk L♥ you sara

**Sara:):** I would personaly move Kathy! Man is she a Pain!!!!! lol jk... i would move the people i don't like very much...see how they like it!!! :)

The less structured, informal meetings assisted this CoP to evolve. The students

developed personal relationships which would, over time, assist them in the honesty of

their exchanges and levels of participation in the course.

Another area I worked on in order to develop this community was to encourage

students to work together. When students become comfortable working together they

expand their interacting and develop knowledge together. For instance, Sara, who was at

her grandparent's home, was having difficulties in creating a blog because of filters on

the grandparents' computer. She and Kathy decided to work together to create her blog.

Sara☺: she said that they have protective things on their compuer. I could always

do it on Monday when I get home

**Mr. W.:** that's fine

*Kathy*☺: yeah tell me what to put and we could share

Sara☺: ok I am so sorry

**Mr. W.:** no worries

*Kathy*☺: no prob!

Sara☺: ok good

*Kathy*☺: wat do u want to call it

*Kathy*☺: Sara and Kathy's Giver Project?

**Mr. W.:** only choose one of your names

**Mr. W.:** Sara could be Saras giver project

*Kathy*☺: I could open another page and create her own!

**Mr. W.:** yes you could do that for her. Why don't you two communicate back and forth and do that?

Sara☺: Ok!!

*Kathy*☺: ok with u Sara?

[…]

Sara☺: is it suppoed to be plain?

**Mr. W.:** that's need for info

**Mr. W.:** like plain white

Sara☺: yeah with dark blue at the top?

**Mr. W.:** OK oh my gosh I wil change it

*Kathy*☺: am IO suppost to do this or my blog and Saras?

**Mr. W.:** do what?

*Kathy*☺: wat u r doin of our blogs?

**Mr. W.:** that's see keep on doing your and Saras blogs

*Kathy*☺: k

**Mr. W.:** Sara refresh you blog page

**Mr. W.:** Is that better?

*Kathy*☺: http://XXXgiverXXX.blogspot.com is the URL

*Kathy*☺: so you can access her blog

**Mr. W.:** good job Kathy!!!

Sara☺: oooooo that's perty

*Kathy*☺: thanks

Working together, developing closer relationships, trusting each other, informality of exchanges and participating at greater levels all indicate that the students were becoming members of a community who were pursuing a shared interest. That interest is becoming practicing members of a community. This community began to grow and evolve after the space had been transformed from a traditional classroom and into an inviting, less structured CoP. My only wish was for more time. I wish this group of students could have continued together in the same language arts or reading class during the ensuing school year. It might have been possible to see the CoP evolve even further and deeper, both in numbers of students and levels of participation.

**Opening a Dialogue between Inside and Outside Perspectives**

As I eluded to earlier in this chapter, the students and I began an exchange of ideas and insights on how to better design this course. Wenger (2006a) wrote that "communities of practice are about content – about learning as a living experience of negotiating meaning – not about form" (p. 229). The course was formatted and structured and this was not how they had envisioned their participation in a course during their summer break. They did not want their course to be "legislated into existence or defined by decree" (p. 229). They wanted to participate in practicing their skills of reading and comprehension through discussions in an online environment. "Practice itself is not amenable to design" (p. 229). Practice needs to grow out of interactions and discourse. It grows from sharing ideas and learning from others. It is free flowing, not structured in a

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course full of designed elements. It bears repeating what these students told me when I asked them for input on how to redesign this course. They stated,

Sara: umm don't make us take tests or answer like 20 questions in a row.

Jordan: The chat room so we can talk privatly

Jordan: about California, **fainting**

**Bob Wilson:** OK i don's have any plans fro 20 questions and those tests are optional. Should I do away with the optional tests? How else could we use the chat rooms?

Sara: i am not quite sure

Jordan: We can use them to talk to any friends in the group.

Jordan: Like now.

**Bob Wilson:** How often would you like me to be in a chat room? What days and times work best for you two?

**[ …]**

Sara: umm probably monday's and wednesday's and friday's from 10 to 11 all three times that would work the best for me

Wenger further states that "learning cannot be designed: it can only be designed for – that is, facilitated or frustrated" (p. 229). In the design of this course, I had designed the teaching instead of creating the space where students could learn. Shifting this course with the ideas and interjections of the students in mind allowed for the kind of dialogue that supported the movement away from structure and towards a CoP, and a viable learning space. This shift agrees with what Wenger (1998) wrote, that

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communities of practice do not usually require heavy institutional infrastructures, but their members do need time and space to collaborate. They do not require much management, but they can use leadership. They self-organize, but they flourish when their learning fits with their organizational environment (para. 28).

The simple act of asking questions of the students stimulated the process of design change. But I had to gather more information. I recalled when I  first submitted the lesson plans for this online summer reading course in a class I participated in, entitled *Fundamentals of teaching adults online* (EDU PAES 701D), during the previous summer at The Ohio State University. I remembered one of the professors, gave me feedback on my planned course. She wrote, "I continue to think there may be too much content here. I suggest being open to adjusting your syllabus after you see how things go the first few weeks" (C. Wanstreet, personal communication, Aug 25, 2008 8:10 PM). I also consulted with my advisor, who suggested that a redesign might be a useful tactic to re-stimulate interest in the course. The students, my advisor, and a past professor, had encouraged me to redesign the course with less structure and make it an inviting space for students to meet and practice their reading skills. Including these different perspectives allowed adjusting the structure of the curriculum relatively easy and successful. I had been trying to dictate the structure of the community to rural middle school students who were only participating in the course for the fun and love of reading and socializing with some peers. I found that I did not "design for aliveness" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 50). Instead, I had designed a structure that quashed the energy that I had so wanted to engage. The original structure was not only uninviting, it was stifling.

I developed and invited outside communication with parents. Parents can be a definite influence on their children. By including them in the weekly course announcements, I was able to get unsolicited help in increasing participation, or at the very least, valuable information concerning the level of participation of their child. For example, in this email, Sara's father wrote,

Monday, July 06, 2009 11:11 AM

Thanks! Sara is enjoying the program. Let me know if she's getting off track since she's involved in some other summer responsibilities that take her focus. I want her to benefit from this time and effort invested. Have a great day!

Sara's Dad

Sent from my Verizon Wireless BlackBerry

Students themselves also emailed me with their concerns regarding the class, as exemplified in these two examples,

Friday, June 26, 2009 7:49 PM

Sorry i didnt join chat today i misread the time i cant join anyday next week until thursday cause i am going to moms so i will be on friday though.

martha.t1@ABC.edu

Thursday, July 09, 2009 7:30 AM

did u get my collage? sorry i have not been on i have beed at my cusins hous and i just met her so i could not get on!

Not only did they email me, we also discussed levels of participation in our online chat sessions, such as these two examples below:

> *Kathy*:): ok gtg i will be on tomorow and sat!!!:) Bye!!! I am so sorry i have plans for tonight

> **Zack:** sorry i was at football practice

This constant and persistent exchange of information assisted in redevelopment of the course in two ways. First, it gave me a better understanding of how busy my students were in the summer, defining some of the reasons for low participation. However, it also, and most importantly, allowed me to change the lens of how I viewed the course and their levels of participation, and how I could shift the structure of the course to make it more inviting, exciting, and alive. I had competition and I needed to compete!

**Inviting Different Levels of Participation**

Throughout the course, members participated at different levels. I consider the aspect of participation on two levels. The first level is how often they participated. Were they online once a week, every day, or once a month? The second level is how they participated. Were they participating as students or as practitioners? Were they there to discuss issue which arose out of their reading or just to regurgitate what they read?

Participation levels were low during the first few weeks of the course. While strong levels of participation were encouraged by the teacher, students also encouraged their peers to participate. Students often made apologies for not participating and promised to participate more often. Some students tried to get students to participate by calling them on the phone or by texting. Nevertheless, different levels of participation

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existed during the course. Similar to the model in Figure 7 that Wenger, et al. (2002) developed and I adapted to show these students in the model, this course contained a core group, an active group, and a few students in the peripheral group. I am sure that there may have been members in the outsider group, students who wanted to participate but for various reasons could not. These reasons may have included students who did not have access to the technology needed to fully participate, whose parents had other plans for them in the summer, or simply forgot to bring in the signed permission papers after being reminded several times.

Trusting each other was important. I trusted students to participate when and as often as they could. In the traditional classroom design, specific attendance was required or overall assessment of their work could have been affected. Now, there were no longer specific participation requirements, only guidelines and requests. However, when *they* felt that *their* levels of participation had fallen below the expectations of the community, they offered apologies such as, "I wasn't on last night because my mom had to help with Grandma", or "i am so sorry i forgot alll about the chat this morning and goodmorning to you to". They would also offer promises to be more frequent visitors to the community when they would write, "ok well i gotta go so i will see u guys tomorrow morning", "cant right now but hey i will talk tommarow gotogo" or "oh ok well I will see you in the mourning!:)♫". As the practice continued to develop, the students themselves would make phone calls, talk to their peers, and text each other, making plans to meet online. The responsibility for participation in the community began to shift from that of the teacher to the responsibility of the *all* the participants.

However, I wish I had done more to encourage participation in the course while school was still in session. There are several things I would have changed before this course began. First, I would have begun the course in the theoretical construct of a CoP. This would have been more inviting and most likely would have contributed to more students participating in the course. Second, I would have begun earlier in soliciting participants and training them in the use of ChalkBoard, so they would be more familiar with the Internet program. Third, I would have made a computer lab in the school available throughout the day for their use. While getting to the school may have been problematic for some students, at least they would have had the option to participate if they did not have access to the technology requirements needed to participate.

As shown in Figure 7, the core group contains those students and the facilitator who participated profoundly in the activities of the group. When we think of a facilitator, my role in this community was to send out notices to members as to when the next meeting will be, redirect the members when they wandered off target for the current discussion, and make decisions for the members based upon the knowledge, history, and practices of the community.
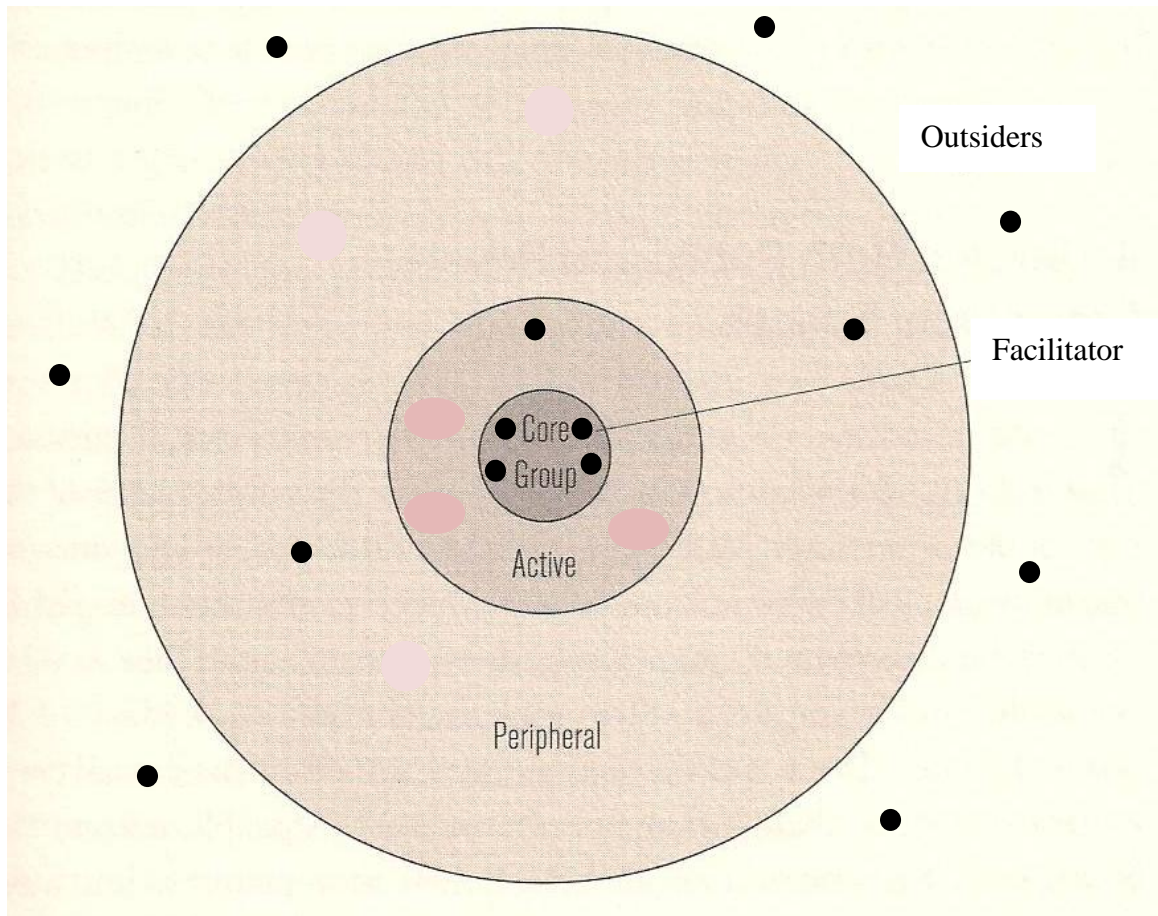
Figure 7

Degrees of community participation (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 57)

These three students, identified in Table 4, along with myself as the facilitator, took on leadership roles that changed the direction of the course. The active student participated on a lesser scale but did not join in a leadership position. Those on the periphery were passive participants. They participated on a very limited basis. Wenger (2006a) noted that this group is usually the largest in the community; however, with this

group being small and because of technology difficulties, that scenario did not occur. Wenger believed that these participants often moved in and out as the discussion or topic interested them. With these two students, it was the availability of the necessary technology that kept them on the peripheral.

There is a critical point to make here. In rural Appalachia, access to the Internet is expensive and difficult to obtain. Not all households can afford the cost of current technology, nor could they access if they could afford it. This was an obstacle for many students, who wanted to participate but could not because of technological limitations of where they live and what resources they had available (Results from an informal survey of students taken in May, 2009).

| Community Participants | |
|---|---|
| Core | Jordan, Zack, Sara, and Mr. Wilson |
| Active | Kathy |
| Peripheral | Martha and Mark |
| Outsider | Students who may have wanted to participate in the course but did not sign up |

Table 5

Community participants and their degree of participation

I also found out that the students in the course were involved in many activities during the summer. Parents would send me emails explaining the activities their child was involved in. For example in these next two emails, parents explained why their child had not been participating very often in the online course.

Tuesday, August 04, 2009 10:30 PM

Hi Bob - Sara is out at Sunny Hills for a youth group camp all week. I'll see if I can get her online at least for Saturday. My apologies.

Sara's Dad

Sent from my Verizon Wireless BlackBerry

Saturday, June 27, 2009 8:22 AM

Mr. Wilson,   Zack's Dad here .  I have been giving him your e-mails, he got your postcards, etc.  he is having trouble organizing time to do assignments.  He loves to read. but gets distracted by others.  I have discussed the need to keep promises and responsibility.  will try and get corrected today.

John.

This course, in its original design, had a leader, the teacher and students who were to follow the teacher's directions and do the work as assigned. Again, this did not work because in order to develop that hierarchical status, one must hold some kind of power or authority over the participants. This power could be grades, rewards or other external incentives in order to encourage and demand that the student make the choice of

following the given directives and doing those assignments rather than choosing to do something else. I did not have that power or authority in this course. These students had volunteered to participate with no promises of rewards or grades. They joined because they believed it would be a novel activity to participate in during their summer break.

They did see value in participating in the course. In their end of the course survey, I asked them "why did you participate in this course? They responded "I thought it might be fun and it would help me not to forget too much over the summer", and "because I love reading", and "to make friends and discuss ideas". Their reasons for participating in the course were not motivated by getting credit for a class. Their motivation was simply intrinsically driven: to maintain and improve their reading skills and have fun doing so.

Martha and Mark were continuously encouraged to join us in the course, even during the last week we were scheduled to be online. Unfortunately, their circumstances had changed during the summer and they were unable to participate because of technology difficulties. However, one of the changes that occurred when the course was adjusted to a CoP is that there no longer existed the requirement to participate. Participation was encouraged and the boundaries of the community were maintained fluid, to allow movement between the degrees of participation when the member decided that they had the time, had an idea, or in some other way, the interest of the community had drawn them back in (Wenger, et al., 2002).

Wenger, et al. (2002) wrote that "the key to good community participation and a healthy degree of movement between levels is to design community activities that allow participants at all levels to feel like full members" (p. 57). By supplying each member

with information through a multitude of methods of upcoming activities of the course,

member participation increased. I supplied not only the core and active members with

this weekly information, but also included sending notices to those members who were in

the peripheral level. "Rather than force participation" (p. 57), as might have been the

means in this traditional classroom space, in this CoP, opportunities for participation

were designed and created to make the practice *come alive.* It did not matter to me where

they were in their participation levels. I wanted them to know they could participate on a

level that was good for them. There was one conversation I had with a parent halfway

through the course, which deals with this specific issue. I made notes in my journal to

reflect the following:

> On July 16, 2009, I received a call from Mark's mother. She explained that Mark
>
> had not been able to participate very much in the course for several reasons,
>
> among them that he had been very busy with golf and going to camp. She also
>
> explained that she and her husband had been laid off from their regular jobs and
>
> had to take several part time jobs. Scheduling time for Mark to get online had
>
> been difficult since she had had to take him to different places while she and her
>
> husband were working. She sounded rather depressed. I reassured her and told her
>
> that several other students had similar problems during the summer. Mark, at this
>
> juncture, had already read the entire book. I thought she was going to tell me that
>
> he no longer wanted to participate in the course, so I told her that Mark was
>
> welcome to rejoin the course this week and I would help him get caught up. Mark
>
> was encouraged to get back into the course, however, he never did.

During the time that the course operated as a traditional classroom space, there was a definite teacher-student relationship in place. However, as I shifted the theoretical construct to a CoP, over a short period of time, relationships began to change. Not only were there different levels of participation, but the hierarchy between the students and the teacher began to flatten. While I still remained the facilitator for the group, one who made plans, contacted participants, and created interesting topics for discussion, the students began to treat me as one of their peers and I began to treat them more peer-like versus that of a student. We participated in an informal manner, shortening names, holding discussions that were un-class like, versus the stereotypical classroom conversations of asking and answering questions posed by the teacher, staying on subject, the lack of personal conversations, and speaking in a very formal way. In the CoP, students called me Mr. W., asked me if I would wait until lunch was fixed herself, told me "that sucks", and described personal relationship problems they had with peers at school, naming names and describing details. They began to joke around and playfully tease each other in my presence.

> **Mr. W.:** Lets not worry about that. After all families are not created normally here are they. There is a "baby factory"!
>
> Sara:): yeah
>
> **Zack:** whatever MR.W
>
> *Kathy*:): Oh that is ........................interesting:)♫
>
> **Zack:** veryyy.....interesting
>
> *Kathy*:): Yes

This was relationship building amongst them and they were including me in their activities. The hierarchy of the relationship of teacher-student was flattened to a relationship of semi-leader to peers.

**Developing Both Public and Private Community Spaces**

From the onset of this study, I had fully intended to use the chat sessions as the main forum for public conversations within the domain. In order for rich dialogue to take place, synchronous conversations were of the utmost importance. Because there were no planned face to face meetings planned, I had to develop and nurture a place where students would feel safe and comfortable in exchanging ideas, thoughts, and other open discussions. As originally planned, I wanted to develop an online space where the students would come to "class", where I would teach them something, where they would do some practice work, and where we would hold discussions. However, when this space became uninviting, this new space was created. In the CoP construct, I developed a space in the digital habitat where students could come and go as they pleased, share what they had learned or thought, exchange ideas, solve problems, define and refine tools and techniques of communication, and make plans for another get together.

When the CoP developed, I found that the students and I began to work together; they attempted to solve the problem of low participation levels, of technology roadblocks and difficulties. They utilized new tools in extending emoticon use and they held "informal discussions of current problems and issues" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 58) that were occurring in the novel, the course, and their lives. For example, the girls used these emoticons often, ♥ idk  lol  brb  k  jk...  ♫:)  nvm  u  :)♫♥  *Kathy*:):  Sara:) in

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their conversations with their peers and the myself. They developed this into this "web of relationships among community members, and much of the day-to-day occurs in the one-on-one exchanges" (p. 58). However, while most of the conversations in the community were held in these public areas, discourse was not limited to this method.

Areas for private conversations were also available. There was a student lounge where students could chat with each other; however, it was used only once. There were private journals that only the student and the teacher had access to. We all had each other's email addresses and telephone phone numbers, including my cell phone number. There were asynchronous areas to ask questions about technology, the course, and the book. These "back channel" communication tools when they are utilized, strengthens the relationships amongst the participants in the CoP (Wenger, et al., 2002). This kind of relationship building may not be necessary in a traditional classroom, as the important relationship is between the student and the teacher or leader, who ultimately creates the teaching structure and lessons, and gives out the grades.

Within these public and private places, communication was fostered, and when communication develops amongst its members, specialized forms of communication tools were developed and used. One of the tools developed is a means of "holding the floor". As the students and I were discussing issues, my posting of a response, thought, or question was often interrupted by the students responding or posting their own responses, ideas, and thoughts. I wanted to find a way to get my point across without being interrupted. I developed a way of doing this by posting incomplete sentences, usually 7-10 words in each posting and always breaking the sentence so the entire idea of the

sentence was never transmitted in one posting. I used this strategy in four ways. First, to make a point,

> Jordan: That is just cruel and wrong.
>
> Jordan: Yes.
>
> Mr. W.: i undersatnd i just wanted to make sure
>
> Mr. W.: that your understanding'
>
> Mr. W.: of being released was what was said in the book
>
> Jordan: I'll see you tonight at 8:30, I hope.
>
> Mr. W.: ok

Second, at a teaching moment,

> Mr. W.: The author writes words in a book from their perspective
>
> Mr. W.: You read the words HOWEVER
>
> Mr. W.: You interpret them differently based upon your history
>
> Mr. W.: your religion, your schooling, your family
>
> Mr. W.: You read the words from your persepctive.
>
> Mr. W.: That is how when we all read the same book, we can ewalk aways with a different impression of what was written
>
> Mr. W.: a different feeling.... happy, sad, upset
>
> Mr. W.: It's not the same understanding that the author has. It is YOUR understanding
>
> Jordan: The perspectives are different, but it creates different summaries.

Third, to give instructions,

> Mr. W.: No go down the discussion page until you see
>
> Mr. W.: OK
>
> *Kathy*:): I just did
>
> Mr. W.: go back to you posting and fill in the subject.
>
> *Kathy*:): ok im done!
>
> Mr. W.: Then post it
>
> Mr. W.: Then highlight it and change the font size to 24
>
> Mr. W.: Then copy and paste the blog address into the text area
>
> Mr. W.: give the subject a name like you see mine and jordans
>
> *Kathy*:): ok im there

Finally, to make connections with the book.

> Mr. W.: How would you feel about Mark if he was being trained    for the same position?
>
> Jordan: I would feel bad since he could misuse this  position.
>
> Mr. W.: Fiona is already training to perform releases with no feelings.
>
> Jordan: I could ask him to be responsible with that power though.
>
> Mr. W.: How could he "misuse this position"? After all, he would   just be doing his job!
>
> Mr. W.: AND with NO feelings??
>
> Jordan: He might release people for no reason.
>
> Mr. W.: soooo an accident or even worse a

Mr. W.: an act of murder could be committed

Mr. W.: and nobody would even know about it??

Mr. W.: After all Mark would just be doing his job!?!?!?!

Jordan: That is releasing with a special reason.

Mr. W.: But WHOSE REASON????

Jordan: I don't know I wonder..... again!!!

By holding the receivers attention, I was able to easily get what I wanted them to know without them interrupting me, and without being interrupted by themselves as they were responding to me or posting something new. When I used this technique, the students' next response would be an acknowledgement of the exchange and an understanding of the issue I was attempting to address.

I also began to notice that, in order for the students and I to add emphasis and expression in an expressionless domain, students would add exclamation points, capital letters, and multiple letters in words in order to add expression and emphasize feelings. Paralinguistic language is the unspoken part of human discourse. It includes the facial expressions and body movements of the speaker and listener. However, in a domain where the face and the body cannot be seen, these students and I utilized typed letters and symbols to show expression and emphasis. We were able to "see" paralinguistic language digitally through the typed words of our posting. Here are some examples of this visual-emotional text exchanges:

Man is she a Pain!!!!!

But WHOSE REASON????

And YOU ACCEPT THIS?????

I want to be the first friend to see her!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Sara:): in the pmmmmmm....for mua at least

**Focus on Value**

During the redesign, I made a number of changes to and deletions of a number of assignments and activities. I made changes to enhance the learning and teaching environment, to make it more inviting, and to increase participation. I kept one asynchronous assignment and their weekly reading. All other assignments and activities were optional, embedded with technological tools that focused on the creative nature of the student. I kept these just to add some excitement and deepen the interest in the course.

Grades and assessments were eliminated. Grades and assessments were unnecessary since this was not a course taken for credit. It would not appear on their middle school school transcript. It would not be included in the calculation of their grade point average. So why have grades and assessments? According to Wenger (2006a), communities of practice are about building trusting relationships. Trust in relationships in a CoP indicates that a person is doing the best they can because of their inherit interest in the domain of the community. These students were in the CoP because they wanted to be there, not to earn a grade or be tested on knowledge that had been shared. Rewards were intrinsically developed and extrinsic rewards were rejected. Jordan wrote during a discussion of possible incentives, that, "I don't want anything. I'm an honest person. I don't want you wasting your money for greedy reasons by me".

There were no extrinsic values afforded to these students as a result of their participation and efforts in taking this online course during their summer break. There were no grades now or swim parties at the end of the course, only the opportunity to participate in something different where they could hone their reading skills. The value they received could only be derived through intrinsic rewards. In actuality, when extrinsic or physical rewards or incentives were offered, some students replied that they did not want my money and that participating in the course was enough reward for them. I even tried to bribe them with $20.00 gift cards, which were left totally unclaimed. They were searching for something different than the value of a dollar.

The value they may have been searching for just may have been their inclusion in the social interactions. These are students who live in rural areas, were neighbors can be miles apart and close friends even further. To have access to peers and a teacher, when there is nothing else to do on a hot summer day, may have been the value of participation in itself. They may have seen that the "most valuable community activities are the small, everyday interactions – informal discussion to solve a problem or one-on-one exchanges of information" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 60). We need to recall what Entwisle, et al.(2001) suggestion of the "faucet theory", which stated that

> when school was in session, the resource faucet was turned on for all children, and all gained equally; when school was not in session, the school resource faucet was turned off. In summers, poor families could not make up for the resources the school had been providing, and so their children's achievement reached a plateau or even fell back. Middle class families could make up for the school's resources

to a considerable extent so their children's growth continued, though at a slower

pace (p. 11).

This need for these small, everyday interactions with others may be best represented in

these two requests, one from Martha and the other from Zack as they attempted to

interact with anybody in the online course.

Martha: watz up

Martha: watz up (She posted the same comment twice on the same day.)

Zack: SOMEONE NEEDS TO COME TO CHAT GEZZZZZZZZZZZZZ


These rural students, who had some access to school replacement activities, may

have begun to experience the faucet theory and the feeling of isolation of their rural areas,

something urban children may not experience. They may have seen the opportunity to

connect with other peers in a social setting as a means where they could turn the faucet

back on. In Moore's (2006) transactional distance theory, he concluded that learning in

an online environment is enhanced when there is less structure and more discourse

amongst peers and the teacher. These students may have begun to value and highly

appreciate the opportunity to communicate with others, stimulate their minds, and enjoy

socialization time. After all, no other reward or incentive was offered or available.

When I restructured this community, the one aspect I felt was very important was

that the students valued their synchronous discussions together. I created more

opportunities for the students to get together online with me and discuss their ideas and

thoughts. In retrospect, I was dealing with a double edge sword. On the one hand, I was

making it easier for any student to participate more and at hours where they might have

been more available. Together, we found that mid morning and mid evening would work best. So I scheduled many opportunities for them to participate during the week and on the weekends. Unfortunately, with so many opportunities to participate, coupled with a small community size, the number of sessions with multiple participants fell. We then adjusted the available times again, and I would ask the student meeting with me to contact someone else and set a time when we could meet together at the same time.

The students seemed to enjoy the chat sessions more when there were multiple students participating in the same session. But they did not want to be involved in a large class discussion. One student wrote that they liked the online class because it had, "less people, private, and the blogs are not in schools". Another student wrote that, "It was a lot more fun and you learn more about the book and reading". Yet a third student wrote that there was value in the course because "we go more in depth about what we read".

The students also found value in the online class benefited them as readers. Kathy wrote, "I had to read a lot on the Internet so it helped me practice", while Sara wrote that, "It helped me not to forget too many reading skill over the summer and now I am reading more difficult things". Jordan wrote that, the course "helped me discuss the book with others" and Zack wrote, that it "helped me communicate and find different opinions". Their responses indicate their recognition that practicing their reading and reading skills, made them better readers. They understood the value of practice and how practice could enhance their abilities as readers. They also saw insight that reading was just not about reading a book.

Technology and having the class meet in a digital habitat also produced value for these students. Sara reported that "It was sooo much more fun than sitting in a hot room with kids listening to boring words. I like having to type … you also can sit at home in a comfy chair with comfy clothes". Not only were students able to be in their own individual comfort zone but they also began to learn how to navigate and use technology to their benefit. The students in general wrote that by using new technology tools, such as blogs, discussion threads, and chat rooms, they experienced using new tools, improved their computer skills, and discovered new resources on the Internet. The skills they developed in the course management platform will prepare them for future experiences in digital habitats that can be found in some high schools and most colleges.

Another area that these students found valuable was that they had to read so much more on the Internet in addition to the book, just to participate. Not only did they have to read the book, but all discussions had to utilize their skills as readers and writers. They discovered that by participating in the course, located in a digital habitat, not only did they have to read the book and the assignments, but they also had to read the postings and messages in order to participate and navigate through the class. One student wrote on their final survey that, "I had to read a lot on the internet so it helped me practice". This "double practice", according to the students, enhanced their reading skills over the summer. Additionally, not only did they hone their reading skills but they also began to develop knowledge on how to use new tools of a digital habitat and developed closer relationships with their peers.

I do wish, however, that I would have been able to enroll more students in the course. With more interaction amongst peers, I believe that the students would have valued their participation more and participated more often. Their need for those small, everyday interactions with others would have been satisfied at a greater level if they would have been able to interact with more students.

**Combining Familiarity and Excitement**

In creating this space for a CoP to develop, I wanted to create a space where the students would be comfortable in; a place absent of the pressures of a classroom. I wanted it to become a "place where people have the freedom to ask for candid advice, share their opinions, and try their half-baked ideas without repercussions" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 61). In shifting away from the traditional classroom space, a place where the students may not have felt as free to act and participate in a formal and structured environment, I wanted the students to drop in and discuss social issue contained in their reading and their lives, make true connections with the book and what they were experiencing as they mature, and do so without the added weight of responsibility of completing required assignments. I wanted them to feel free to experience new technology, how to navigate in an online environment, and interact socially with their peers and an adult in a safe and commitment free environment. I wanted them to see and utilize this space "as a place to think, reflect, and consider ideas" (p. 61) of their peers, their reading, and their lives, interconnecting all three without the added responsibility of structured, graded assignments.

In order to help grow this space, I needed the students to develop an identity that they would feel comfortable with in their exchanges with their peers and the teacher. One identity I wanted them to relax was their student identity. I did not want this course to follow a routine of a question asked, question answered. For example, I wanted to shift away from these kinds of discussions:

**Bob Wilson:** What do you think about how families are made up?

**!?Zack?!:** its really different than how we live how the newborn is sent to a family which is strange

**Bob Wilson:** How many kids are in each family?

**!?Zack?!:** i pretty sure its 4 cause the dad says they cant have the little newborn cause they already have 4 people in the family

**Bob Wilson:** OK so then why might Father's interest in Gabe cause problems?

**!?Zack?!:** sorry i was thinking total ppl 2 kids are aloud in each family

**Bob Wilson:** I gathered that.

**!?Zack?!:** because hes kind of getting attached and the elders might think of his interest to be going to far

**Bob Wilson:** That's true. Have you noticed how everything is the same?

**Bob Wilson:** How could he be going too far?

**!?Zack?!:** yes i have figured that out

**!?Zack?!:** theres like no difference in the lives they live

This kind of interrogation only regurgitates information already known. I wanted them to act as practitioners and question what was known and the validity of it. I wanted this kind of discussion, where they would question me and their peers:

> **Bob Wilson:** Let me repeat the question: I don't remember the clothing kids wore in our book. Are they all the same?
>
> **Bob Wilson:** Do you remember?
>
> *Kathy*:): Yes I think?:(
>
> Sara:): i don't know.....i forget
>
> *Kathy*:): yes because everyone looked the same
>
> Sara:): i would not be a good reciever of memory because i forget a lot!!!!
>
> **Bob Wilson:** do you think that the twelves and thirteens would be having this discussion?
>
> Sara:): nope
>
> **Bob Wilson:** Why or Why NOT?
>
> Sara:): because they are all the same
>
> *Kathy*:): no because they would have to say sorry a lot!!
>
> **Zack:** no to your first question about the clothing cause it said that different age groups got different jackets so they didnt wear the same thing and the second i agree with both the girls
>
> **Bob Wilson:** But they are all raised the same, under the same rules, by surrogate parents who cant say I live you? Wouldnt they turn out the same/? Aren't they like "cookie cutter kids"?

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\*Kathy\*:): Zacku there

Sara:): yes the whole community has the same rules

**Zack:** yes i am here i just like listening to the others opinions i have been speaking mine for almost 2 days

\*Kathy\*:): yeah I agree with Sara

**Bob Wilson:** OK so do we all agree that everyone is pretty similar?

Sara:): yes

\*Kathy\*:): yes I do

**Zack:** no

By encouraging the growth of identity with the rural middle school students, I was able to get them to relax their classroom identity. Other shifts also occurred. They began to interact with the teacher as more of a "pal" than as an adult and the teacher became more familiar with the student as a pal. For example, they began to share what is going on in their personal lives. As familiarity with each other develops, the community was able to interact in a more welcoming atmosphere. This gave rise of opportunities for these teens to be social, rather than formal students. Here Kathy shares information about a new addition to their family.

**\*Kathy\*:):** And guess what I get to adopt a dog from the animal shelter!

**Mr. W.:** What would you say is the best time to have chats? In the morning like now or in the evening like 8:30?

\*Kathy\*:): in the mourning

**Mr. W.:** Woops got ahead of myslef there. That's great! What kind of dog?

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They were even able to carry on in chatty conversations that had nothing to do with the content of the course, as best exemplified in this conversation between Sara and Kathy.

**Kathy:** hello Sara!

**Sara:** hi

**Kathy :** wat are you doing?

**Sara:** talking to u 2 ways!

Kathy has changed their alias to *♥ Kathy ♥*:)

**\*? Kathy?\*:):** that is interesting how do you do that?

**\*? Kathy?\*:)** has changed their alias to *♥ Kathy ♥*:)

**\*? Kathy?\*:)** has changed their alias to * Kathy *:)

**Sara:):** there

**\* Kathy \*:):** Hellllllloooooooooooo?

**Sara :)(:** hello

**\*Kathy\*:):** Look at my smilie;) it's winking!!lol!!

**Sara :)(:** thats awesome! lol

**\*Kathy\*:):** I know Right!!

**Sara :)(:** lol so what do u want to talk about?

**\*Kathy\*:):** Idk wat do u want to talk bout?;)

**Sara :):** idk...there is nothing to talk about lol

**\*Kathy\*:):** Well let's find something to talk about!!LOL!

**Sara :):** how about nothing?

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Because of the interest shown by these students in participating in synchronous conversations, I greatly expanded the availability of these chats to several times a week. During these chats, there was no clear leader in the discussions. While it is true that I was present as a teacher, I found myself acting more as a facilitator rather than fulfilling the role of a teacher. My hierarchical role as the teacher flattened over time. Over time, the practice became shared with the teacher and the students. We all became pals, as reflected in these conversations.

**Bob Wilson:** Can I call you Kat and Sar?

*Kathy*:): Mr.W yes im cool with that can I call u Mr.W?:)

Another example is when I asked them,

"Alright lets get personal! If you could move 3 people into this community, where the structure would be great, decisions would be made for you, your life would be planned out. What three people in YOUR LIFE would you want to move?

They then told me their peer's names and why they did not like them!

Sara:): I would personaly move MARY SMITH! Man is she a Pain!!!!! lol jk... i would move the people i don't like very much...see how they like it!!! :)

*Kathy*:): I was JK but he really gets annoying but I ♥ him:)

**Bob Wilson:** like who?

*Kathy*:): Thanks Sara you said it perfectly!:)

**Bob Wilson:** Who are the people you don't like very much, Sara? Why would you move them?

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Sara:): like the people at school who think that they are better than everybody else because in the givers world everybody is equal and nobody is better than anybody

*Kathy*:): ELIZABETH JONES, AMY JACKSON, and JANE DOE Because I don't like them:(

**Bob Wilson:** why?

**Bob Wilson:** What do they do that you don't like? Remember that only the 3 of us can see this.

*Kathy*:): Because ELIZABETH is a snob, AMY is abusive and she is mean to my sibs, and JANE is mean

Another example is when Jordan wrote about himself being bullied at school, he wrote

Jordan: I'm called loser by MARCUS WELBY during 1st semester in gym.

**Mr. W.:** You know, I think you are a VERY intelligent young man.

**Mr. W.:** Sometimes

**Mr. W.:** people who are not as intelligent as you don't understand that

Jordan: Yeah...

**Mr. W.:** So there first reaction, in order to become more EQUAL to you is to bring you down to there level. Would you agree or disagree with that?

**Mr. W.:** I guess the real question is HOW YOU REACT to their mocking or picking on

**Mr. W.:** Let's connect this with the book

**Mr. W.:** If Jonas was a Scenic view, how would he be treated having been selected to be the new receiver?

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**Mr. W.:** Remember... he can lie!!

Jordan: He would be picked on, and his spirit could be broken.

The hierarchical relationship of teacher to student had been flattened onto an even playing field. It was no longer a relationship of the teacher teaching the students. It became a practice of the students and the teacher sharing knowledge that they had engaged in. The teacher and the students participated in activities together and explored new ideas and knowledge together. They engaged in a process of collective learning that they and their peers created together. This was often found in their arguments where minds were changed, like when Zack and Jordan were arguing the controversial ending of the book and Jordan posted, "It was probably true, except the Gabe part, and Zack is still on" or when Kathy wrote, "now I see you brought me into the light".

This community needed to be a place where they could wander through knowledge without fear of repercussion or judgment, and wonder about other possibilities. Yet, the community had to contain some planning in order to keep interest levels on the rise. Students needed to be challenged in their thinking, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge.

Activity planning is one of the responsibilities, as the facilitator, I needed to focus on (Wenger, et al., 2002). Activities which take the students out of their normal everyday routines can be exciting. One of the areas of excitement for them was looking at new digital tools and different applications. One of the activities I designed for them was to make a video about memory department store, where a customer would be attracted to go into this store and purchase memories or exchange bad ones. The exchange of memories

is a theme that runs throughout the book we were reading. I asked them to create an advertisement that would entice customers to come into their store. They were encouraged to use print, videos, or voice if they were so inclined. I shared with them my example, which they thought was rather humorous and exciting as depicted in this exchange:

*Kathy*☺: Mr. Wilson how do u want us to do the m.d store project?

**Bob Wilson:** Did you see mine?

Sara☺: no

*Kathy*☺: how do you get to it?

*Kathy*☺: you guys still there?:)

**Bob Wilson:** Go to the discussions and look under the memeory store assignment. I have a post with a link to youtube. I made a tv commercial with my computer. You could also do it with a camera. You can do a voice ad or a newspaper/magazine ad

*Kathy*☺: Ok BRB!:)

*Kathy*☺: I that's see it that's went to discussions?:(

Sara☺: that's saw it!!!

*Kathy*☺: now I see it let me watck it brb!

**Bob Wilson:** Lauging too much are you????

**Bob Wilson:** laughing!!!

Sara☺: yess!! It's hilarious!

*Kathy*☺: yep you know it!

Sara☺: nicely done ☺

In another assignment, I asked them to create a "colors video" where they would look at a wall that was a certain color and write down anything that came to mind. These were optional activities and were suggested within one week of each other. Wenger, et al. (2002) suggested, "lively communities combine both familiar and exciting events so community members can develop the relationships they need to be well connected as well as generate the excitement they need to be fully engaged" (p. 62). According to these students, optional activities did add some excitement and interest in the course but still may have been too much like classroom assignments. Technical restrictions, camera availability, and how to upload videos, hindered the students from engaging in any of these activities. In retrospect, I could have cured some of these technical difficulties if I could have made resources at the school available for the students.

One of the main premises of a CoP is its basic assumption that learning is best accomplished within a sociocultural foundation. Knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and discourse amongst students. These students echoed this assumption in their end of the class survey when they wrote, "It was great chatting with classmates about the book", "It was exciting", and "It was awesome".

In redesigning this community, these students were able to nurture relationships with each other that permitted the community to prosper. By including activities that were expected, such as reading and discussing their reading, along with unexpected, optional activities, this CoP began to develop working relationships where students could brainstorm ideas together, explore different perspectives on issues presented in the book

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and by the teacher, along with developing an online community where they could get together and socialize.

**Creating a Rhythm for the Community**

The rhythm of this course, in its original design, was highly structured, overflowing and overbearing with activities and requirements. The students were asked to complete a variety of written assignments, multiple response inquiries, and a time consuming creative project each week. There were too many assignments in order to get a rhythm going just two weeks after school had let out. The emphasis was not on meeting and reflection or thinking or socializing. The emphasis was on getting weekly assignments completed.

Wenger, et al. (2002) believed that communities of practice have a rhythm. Communities have different kinds of rhythms based upon the relationships amongst its members and the tempo of their interactions in community events, including web activities, and other discourse interactions. They wrote that,

> when that beat is strong and rhythmic, the community has a sense of movement and liveliness. If the beat is too fast, the community feels breathless; people stop participating because they are overwhelmed. When the beat is too slow, the community feels sluggish" (p. 62).

As a traditional class, this course was beating too fast and the community could not catch its breath; students began to lose interest because of the wealth of activities and they began to reduce and cease participation. It was becoming unlived. Then, there was a change; a change to a CoP, where it became alive.

When this change occurred, the community began to develop an easy rhythm. It took a few weeks for this rhythm to develop, but soon the community had "a sense of movement and liveliness". Students began to meet more regularly and instead of completing assignments, they were reflecting on their reading and having discussions with their peers. There was a sense of vibrancy and a sense of excitement that I felt as we met … for the last few times. We had solved problems together, shared our ideas, thoughts, and reflections. Relationships were developed where peers trusted each other and accepted their teacher as peer-like. We had created a domain, a community, and a practice in a very short period of time. Most importantly, we created a space where rural middle school students could practice their reading skills during the summer break in an online environment.

## Delimitations

This research did not seek to answer all questions about the differences between a traditional classroom space and a CoP. The following delimitations are presented as a mean to narrowly define the scope and breadth of this research. They define the parameters of the inquiry.

1. Statistical data of the students reading abilities pre and post study were not analyzed. This study therefore, does not present data on any affects of the course on the participants reading abilities.

2. This study does not consider any results from students participating in any face-to-face summer reading programs.

3. This study does not consider any studies involving urban or any other middle school students and their participation in a similar online summer reading programs.

4. This study does not compare all social learning constructs with a CoP. It only compares a traditional classroom with a CoP.

## Limitations

This research cannot investigate or discover all knowledge. There are specific areas that cannot be included. The following are the limitations of this research inquiry.

1. This research had a small number of rural middles school students who participated in an 8 week online summer reading course. Having a class with 10 – 15 students or more and more time for the community to develop may have produced different results that might be valuable.

2. Because of the small number of students involved, the socioeconomics, cultural, or ability factors of the participants were not included, nor does it include a variety of different personal factors. This research only involved Caucasian, middle class, rural, eighth grade students.

3. In order to have access to the course, students had to have access to high-speed Internet and newer high speed processing computer equipment. This study did not look at students living in rural areas who did not have Internet or access to required technology tools.

## Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

This research demonstrated first, how a course management platform can be used to engage students living in rural areas in the practice of reading during the summer break. The mere practice of reading skills has been suggested as a valuable method of reducing summer reading setback (Allington, 2006). This research demonstrates an inexpensive, easy to replicate, pedagogy for rural students to participate in a community in order to practice and hone their reading skills.

Secondly, it demonstrated what can be done when the structure of an online course fails to provide the kind of structure needed when rural middle school students are looking for a digital space to safely socialize while practicing their reading skills. This is most important because the highly structured traditional classroom space failed these students who did not want to participate in a structured online reading course. Many of the assignments did not work. There were far too many and took too much time to complete, competing with the students' busy summer schedule, especially for students who had volunteered to take the course. However, when the shift was made early on in the course into a CoP, participation levels of the students increased. This demonstrates how teacher moves can be so important when implemented to increase participation and build a stronger community and practice.

It also demonstrated how learning by students can be enhanced when a CoP theoretical framework is utilized in an online classroom. It further suggests, how this theoretical framework can also benefit students in a face-to-face classroom setting, especially when what is occurring in the classroom is not encouraging student learning.

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Further research needs to be conducted where the Internet and course management platforms are integrated and used to hold summer reading courses to allow students to practice their reading skills and abilities. In addition, research at different grade levels needs to be expanded, from primary through the middle grades, so all children can be reached during the summer months in order to prevent summer reading setback. Other courses, such as, math, science, current events, and community service could be explored. Inevitably, we need to find solutions so all children, both urban and rural, can have access to the technological skills, equipment, and access to the Internet, so that every child can be successful practitioners in communities of practice.

While the students commented that they enjoyed the class, especially the chat sessions, they also made comments that they could have read more than just one book. I made the decision to make this course more of a book study rather than a contest to see who can read the most books. However, I now think that having two or three books to read and discuss, especially maybe a series by the same author, may have added more interest and excitement to the course. This expansion could have stimulated more discussions which could have resulted in greater participation. The content may have been too narrow with just one book. A new vision of a digital habitat might include three to four books or a series by an author or two, with participation in one to two chat sessions each week, a posting in an asynchronous discussion thread, and development and growth of a connected blogging tool. The students could also have be exposed to more technology resources available on the Internet. Additionally, even though these

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students did not need incentives to participate, some type of reward system would have been a nice gesture for all their hard work!

More research needs to be conducted to determine the usefulness of a CoP in online learning environments involving rural school students. This includes using this theoretical framework in a variety of subjects and grades when school is not in session and when it is in session. When school is in session, using a course management platform could nurture further development of a CoP *in the classroom* through the use of students' experiences in the online environment. Using the CoP framework may also be extremely beneficial to learning in a blended course. One possibility is to use the online environment in ways that would enrich and extend learning of the schoolhouse day in order to check for deep understanding of daily curriculum and to challenge and extend learning of students beyond presented content.

### Non Concluding Remarks

As the title implies, this chapter does not conclude anything. That is not its purpose. Its purpose is to illustrate how an online environment can be used to stimulate the minds of children during the summer months so they do not fall behind. It is also meant to illustrate new ways of developing structures that are effective with children to keep them engaged in their learning when the heat of summer arrives. Through the use of socially mediated platforms, children can stay connected with their peers and a teacher to keep mental stimulation thriving during the summer months. But this kind of participation in a community cannot be forced as no power exists to enforce such participation. It has to be encouraged, fun, and exciting for children to become engaged.

It has to have at its roots of foundation, in social interaction where children can be children in a safe environment that challenges them to share, think, and create knowledge that has value to them. If the next generation is going to be competitive in a worldwide environment, then we must eliminate cognitive and reading setback during the summer months. We must also teach children to learn how to interact and work together in spaces that transcend geographic boundaries. This would better prepare them to work in a global economy as adults.

Yet, summer time is for kids to go swimming, play sports, and just take a break. But extended breaks during the summer can cause children to slide backwards. There is no conclusion to this chapter as it does not suggest an end. It only reports on a guidepost along the road of finding ways to eliminate or reduce summer setback. It also demonstrates how children of different ages can be involved and engaged in online environments to learn new knowledge and interact with peers, and if the environment is structured properly, how these children can develop and act as practitioners in a CoP.

A CoP, as Wenger (2006b) has told us, is not just for adults and businesses. They are for everyone. They come in different sizes. They are located in different spaces. They transcend many boundaries. They are about many different things. Communities of practice are about learning from and with each other. There are no conclusions, only the next step in the next Community of Practice.

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