

“Facebook Me”: The Potential of Student Teachers’ Online Communities of Practice in Learning to Teach

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the ways in which early childhood pre-service student teachers (PSTs) used an online community for discussions related to teaching. Using the lenses of communities of practice, our goal was to understand what happens when the PSTs begin to share new learnings about teaching through ongoing practice in online communities. We investigated characteristics of the conversations of PSTs and their professors when using Facebook. This study was based on the postings of seven early childhood PSTs and five university faculty members. PSTs were interviewed at the conclusion of the semester to share their experiences from posting on Facebook. Two categories from the data include PSTs’ views of the viability of Facebook and the kinds of talk that surfaced within the Facebook group conversations. Findings suggested that Facebook has the potential to sustain informal dialogues. However, PSTs require strong faculty support to solve issues related to complexities of practice.

Key words: Communities of Practice, Methods Course Instruction, Online Teaching, Professional Learning Network

INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, social media play strong roles in our daily experiences of community (Delwiche, 2006; Thomas, 2005). Social media provide new communicative spaces for individuals or groups to enter into discourses with others who share an interest in similar events, ideologies, and phenomena. Such communities provide the opportunity for participants to inquire into the utility of the social media themselves to effectively enact transformational frameworks for learning (Merchant, 2009). Increasingly, Facebook, the most used social media platform, is being used to forge professional and specialized communities (Gunawardena, Hermans, Sanchez, Richmond, Bohley, & Tuttle, 2009). The goal of this study was to investigate the ways in which pre-service student teachers (PSTs) used a Facebook community for discussions related to the teaching of writing. Using the lenses of communities of practice and New Literacy Study, the aim was to better understand what happens when literacy practices that are typically part of “vernacular” literacy become part of the PSTs’ formal “institutional literacy” (Street, 1995) through ongoing practice in novel professional communities.

Lave and Wenger (1991) contend that learning is always situated. That is, learning is authentically embedded within activity, context, and cultural processes. Sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise provides a social context for situated

learning. According to Wenger (1998), situated learning entails four “deeply interconnected and mutually defining components” (p. 5): learning as belonging, becoming, doing, and experiencing. In other words, individuals learn, grow, and change through sustained practice and situated activity within communities (Lave, 1996; Niesz, 2007; Wenger, 1998).

With the onset of social networking platforms such as Facebook, a greater emphasis has been placed on creating what are known as professional learning networks (PLNs) in virtual spaces. These PLNs can become a vital part of developing as a critically reflective practitioner (Brookfield, 1995; Schon, 1983). Many examples exist of PLNs that have existed in face-to-face environments (Applegate & Applegate, 2004) as well as virtual environments (Groenke, 2008; Niesz, 2010; Zuidema, 2012).

The authors of this study sought to understand how PSTs participated in a virtual PLN that was constructed specifically to exist within Facebook. Designed to foster a community of practice, the Facebook community studied here extended previous face-to-face coursework for a selected group of early childhood PSTs. The newly formed Facebook community aimed to engage the PSTs in dialogue with each other and the faculty that might support a deeper, more complex understanding of their practice. The research question was:

- What are the characteristics of the conversations of a PLN composed of PSTs and their professors when using Facebook as a platform?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical literature for this study draws from several distinct but complementary arenas. Theories of communities of practice (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) provide a foundation upon which the shared work of the student teachers can be understood and examined. By drawing from theories of communities of practice, we were able to explore the ways in which student teachers learned in the online community. The New Literacies Studies literature oriented our attention to the ways in which the work of the student teachers was influenced by their communal use of Facebook. Focusing on the online community as a community of practice allowed us to explore the ways student teachers engaged with and learned in this new environment, one that is more often used outside of classroom-based settings.

Communities of Practice and Situated Learning

Lave and Wenger (1991) remind us that learning within a community of practice is authentically embedded within the shared activities, contexts, and cultural processes of a given group. As Wenger (1998) notes, "Engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are" (p. 1). As has been noted by a variety of researchers, individuals learn, grow, and change through sustained practice and situated activity within communities (Lave, 1996; Niesz, 2010; Nikbakht & Booshrabadi, 2015; Wenger, 1998) When people come together to purposefully form a community of practice, they develop shared understandings about the actions and activities in which they engage. Individuals participate in meaning making as a communal process with other members of the community and through doing so construct new understandings. At the core, belonging to the group and learning via practice ultimately create new ways of thinking, feeling, and questioning as a professional (Niesz, 2007).

Senge (1990) suggests that communities of practice are communities in which "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire... where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). Serrat (2009) found that by engaging in a professional community of practice, teachers contributed to student success by developing shared goals and values, engaging in increased opportunities for teacher leadership and by more open communication between colleagues with constructive problem-solving as a focus of dialogue. As part of research in public schools around the nation, Kruse and Louis (2009) contend when socially constructed and shared understandings of what comprises quality teaching and learning are absent, teachers are less likely to reach challenging learning goals for their students.

Furthermore, research suggests that access to high-quality professional learning is a key component for improving classroom practice (Jaquith, Mindich, Wei, & Darling-Hammond,

2010). High-quality professional learning, with the potential to positively affect student learning, is defined as having three significant levels (Jaquith et al., 2010). The first level is marked by sustained, content-focused opportunities for educators to engage with new ideas and practices. Second, high quality learning is apparent when it is evident that teaching practices are reflectively and reliably implemented. Finally, learning is evidenced by sustained attention to authentic collective learning on the part of all educators. Honing new ideas, constructs and strategies within communities of practice generate opportunities to enhance high quality professional learning for members of the community. Furthermore, as online communities of practice are built between university faculty and the student teachers, this means of socialization can ease the transition between educational and professional settings (Islam, 2008.) In turn, teaching practice can be refined in the context of new conceptual understandings and insights.

New Literacies and the New Literacy Studies

Literacy scholars have grappled with the immense implications of the arrival of the Internet and other digital forms of communication that we will refer to in this article as "new literacies." We use the term "new literacies" and "new media" interchangeably to mean multimodal (not only print-based) texts that are usually screen-based and include some interactivity. Since the mid-1990s, literacy scholars have written about the onset of computer-mediated communication and all of the "new" affordances these new ways of communicating provide for readers and writers (New London Group, 1996). Of course, there are some who have argued that these affordances are not all that new, that they simply combine "old" literacies, such as visual design and music, in new packages (Kist, 2005). Nevertheless, there can be no argument that people are moving toward more screen-based reading and writing (Kress, 2003), and that these screen-based reading and writing experiences must at least somewhat differ from reading and writing using paper.

Education scholars continue to research how these new literacies may be used in classroom settings—these studies have looked at educational uses of video books, known as "vooks," (Groenke, Bell, Allen, & Maples, 2011); games (Barab, Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010); wikis (Schillinger, 2011); and podcasts (Vasinda & Mcleod, 2011) to name just a few. Meanwhile, of course, there is acknowledgement that some of the most meaningful uses of new literacies occur outside school (Iddings, McCafferty, & Teixeira da Silva, 2011).

Indeed, those from the New Literacy Studies perspective have looked at the context of the uses of new literacies. Taking a sociocultural approach, these scholars posit that literacy, no matter what the media in which people are reading and writing, must be seen in the context of people's lives and discourses (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

A number of researchers have explored engagement with new literacies through a communities of practice lens. In particular, researchers have investigated blogging (Davies

& Merchant, 2007), Web 2.0 (Merchant, 2009), gaming (Delwiche, 2006), role-playing in fantasy online communities (Thomas, 2005), and the online production of fan fiction (Black, 2007). Although some of these authors address communities of practice only briefly in their examination of engagement in new literacies, Thomas (2005) and Delwiche (2006) use the theory more directly, analyzing learning in new literacy communities of practice. Delwiche (2006), for example, argues that when newcomers enter the “complex discursive communities” of massively multiplayer online games, “they are gradually introduced to a complex social framework through the tutelage of other community members. These social spaces encourage information sharing and collaboration both within and beyond game parameters” (p. 161). Thomas (2005) similarly examines learning in online communities of practice through research into children’s engagement in online role-playing inspired by the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. In this case, the children themselves created the online world in which they participate at the ages of 10 and 11 years old. Thomas (2005) argues that the participating children “learned through the process of becoming a community and engaging in its social and discursive practices. They learned through adopting identities mediated through text, image, sound, and both within and out of their fantasy storylines” (p. 28). These studies have taken place in a range of contexts, but outside the field of teacher education.

Our focus in this project concerned how student teachers participated in an online community of practice, Facebook, and how this interaction took shape, growing as it did, out of a more formal, traditional classroom setting. There have been other studies that have looked at uses of new literacies with pre-service teachers such as discussion boards and email, sometimes with mixed results (Groenke, 2008; Hiebert & Morris, 2012; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008; Zuidema, 2012). Our study sought to examine the use of a popular social network with pre-service teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Following their experiences in a writing method class designed using a community of practice lens, seven students indicated they wanted to sustain their participation in a community of practice during student teaching. A Facebook page was established for the PTSs for this purpose. The participants were all female, white, and aged 20-22. They were all from the early childhood (Pre K-3) program and reported that they were from a middle socio-economic class. This qualitative study examined the semester that followed the reading/writing methods courses. The courses sought to teach PSTs in learning designed to facilitate cognitive shifts concerning their perceptions about teaching reading and writing using a balanced literacy approach. Subsequent to this course, the PSTs went into their student teaching experience. We hoped that as members of the online community, the student teachers would share their stories of success and challenge, maintain their sense of connection, ask questions of each other and instructors, and find support for their

development as teachers of writing. In addition to the student teachers, the online community also included five university faculty members, several of whom have expertise in creating educational contexts in which high quality instruction of writing is present.

To encourage substantive electronic conversation, the faculty members posted reflective questions on the page with the intent of supporting student teachers’ thinking about their practice. An example of an instructor’s prompt was: How has teaching writing during student teaching been similar and/or different than what you envisioned [as part of your methods course]? An example response by Chrissie was:

In my student teaching experience, teaching writing has been much different from what I learned. Sadly, I have not had much opportunity to implement my own ideas... However, this only makes me more excited and driven to teach writing as I envision it should be taught once I have my own classroom. My mentor teacher has allowed me to integrate writing with other subjects... she has specific topics or prompts that the children must follow... I wish the writing was more open-ended, because what I took away most from our class last semester was that writing is most meaningful when we write about things we care about. It’s very obvious that the children write just to get it over with...

Responses such as the one above, along with in-depth interviews of all participants, were the sources of data for our qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) focused on student teachers’ participation in a Facebook community. We sought to understand both participation in the Facebook community and its role in their development as teachers.

Data Collection

In this qualitative study, each student teacher was encouraged to post weekly on the class Facebook page for a sixteen-week semester. Student teacher-generated substantive, content focused responses (N=65) thus comprised a primary data source. Postings that served to support colleagues but did not offer substantive advice, dialogue, or feedback (e.g., good job, sounds like you had a hard day, or were “liked”) were compiled separately (N=47). Faculty positions were not included within the data set for analysis. However, when student teachers replied to the content of faculty postings those responses were included within the data set (N=19). The total set of Facebook postings (N=131) included all the postings of the student teachers including supportive comments, teaching tips, feedback, and discussion of the challenges and successes they experienced while student teaching.

The seven student teachers were interviewed at the conclusion of the semester. Interviews focused on the kinds of experiences student teachers shared when they posted and read responses on the Facebook site. Example questions included, “When did you decide to post on the Facebook page?” and “What kinds of concerns did you think were worthwhile to post?” We also probed for explanations of how the discussions informed classroom teaching. We asked questions such as, “Describe specific things/ideas that you learned or used from your methods courses or from your participation

in the online community of practice.” Interview questions were also informed by our readings of the Facebook postings. We probed for how situational and contextual circumstances informed postings and choice of posting. Interviews were recorded using Livescribe technology and notes were taken throughout the interview process. Livescribe was used to create a digitized file that linked audio to written material and allowed for re-play and transcription of interview data in tandem with shareable cloud-stored automatic playback. Using this technology allowed members of the research team to easily access both the transcriptions of interviews as well as the recorded spoken words in the context of the interview setting. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. They were categorized based on direct quotations from PTSs about their experiences of using Facebook.

Data Analysis

The study was designed to document student teachers’ contributions to and experiences in the online community (i.e., participation) and how their participation contributed to their development as student teachers. We sought to understand how participation in the community supported student teachers through their student teaching semester and revealed their struggles and successes as early-career teachers of writing. With these goals in mind, we analyzed the activity on the Facebook site (e.g. student teachers’ contributions, their stories of experience, responses to one another, and questions) and the interviews through a multi-phase process. During the first phase, Facebook postings were analyzed inductively following the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since this analysis occurred concurrently to our participation in the online community, our responses to student teachers in the Facebook environment were informed by this early analysis. For example, as we observed exchanges concerning district adopted writing programs, we made note of how student teachers worked to incorporate methods course content into those prescribed curricula. We then responded within the Facebook discussion thread noting similarities and differences between those curricula and methods course content, attempting to prompt more in-depth discussion and reflection on practice.

During phase two, we examined our data within and across the group of postings as well as the interviews. We examined the ways student teachers used the online community, communicated support for each other within the community, shared knowledge about teaching writing, developed expertise and confidence for teaching, synthesized new ideas and concepts, and used practices learned in methods courses during student teaching. We coded data in all of these categories and then examined the coded data to develop themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). At the conclusion of phase two we engaged in critical conversations about the emerging themes; the goal of these conversations was to spark collegial challenge or consensus regarding the research findings. Finally, in phase three we entertained alternative interpretations (Chase, 1995) of what these data might offer us in understanding how the online community functioned to support student teachers’ practice. By exploring a variety of

possibilities and options concerning how the data might be understood, we were able to further develop and confirm our findings. In other words, analysis of audio-recorded interviews helped us provide further evidence in support of using Facebook in classrooms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We report our findings as they relate to three major themes that emerged from the data (Table 1). The first theme addresses the use of Facebook as a medium for enhancing student teacher’s practices. The second theme concerns two ways student teachers used Facebook to talk with each other about student teaching experiences. The third theme relates to the experiences of student teachers as they used the Facebook platform as a practical tool.

We conclude with a discussion of an unintended teaching opportunity this project afforded us.

Using New Literacies to Enhance Student Teachers’ Practices

In looking at our data in light of Facebook as one of the new literacies, we found that participants had definite opinions about this new medium and its affordances. On a basic level, the format of Facebook made a difference to these participants, and they seemed to want to talk about the format of Facebook (and, thus, its affordances) often. Andrea made a comment about the visibility of her colleagues’ postings: “Really, what I did was check and see what people were posting first because it kind of helped me to see where their conversations were going.” The layout of Facebook meant that the participants could easily see the topics that had been discussed as well as the opinions that had been shared before venturing an opinion oneself. In this way, the student teachers could tailor their learning by seeking just in time postings related to felt difficulties within their daily experiences.

Beyond the formatting issues, participants also made revealing comments about their perceptions of the literacy practices that they saw as typically related to Facebook—they found themselves rather amazed that this new medium could be used for teaching and learning purposes. Crystal said, “I never thought that communicating on Facebook would be—I mean, other than a social group. I never realized

Table 1. Emerging themes

Themes	Examples
1. Facebook as a medium for enhancing practices of PSTs.	Learning from other PTSs through seeing their posts online.
2. Facebook as a medium for communications about PSTs’ student teaching experiences.	Exchanging ideas and having valuable discussions about their questions and concerns. Expanding social interactions between PSTs.
3. Facebook as a pedagogical tool for PSTs.	Having more instructional opportunities with interactive literacy practices.

that I can learn from other students or other teachers, you know, off Facebook.” This kind of amazement corresponds to research with middle school students who referred to working with new literacies as “easy” while they also reported working seven to eight hours a night on new literacies assignments (Kist, 2005). These new forms of reading and writing are sometimes seen as having entertainment value, but little else, and this seemed to be similar to comments made about Facebook by some of our participants.

Other participants did voice the opinion that Facebook could be used as a practical learning tool; these participants saw its benefits as a venue for communicating with colleagues. Andrea said, “I’m a big fan of technology in general, and I always am interested in how to incorporate it into the early childhood field. But not only that, I think it would be nice to have something like this for my colleagues... What an easy way [to communicate] instead of emailing.” Chrissie, who did her student teaching in Mexico, especially enjoyed being involved in an online community in that it allowed her to still interact with her cohort, even though she couldn’t be with them in person. Being involved in the Facebook project inspired student teachers’ thinking about other classroom applications of new media, such as blogs and wikis.

Some participants seemed to greatly prefer the affordances of Facebook to the official online learning system adopted by the university, mainly because it was “easy” due to the fact that they were familiar with Facebook. “You might be on every day, anyway,” Bree said. Participants also had much to say about the benefits and drawbacks of requiring students to post a certain number of times. “You probably would’ve gotten more out of me if you made me post twice a week..., or you had made a requirement because then I would have,” Karla said.

Participants also debated the benefits of setting up a page in Facebook versus setting up some other kind of group for facilitating discussion. This trend in the data suggested that the participants began to think on a deeper level about the pedagogical implications of using new literacies as a learning tool in their own classrooms. Experimenting with one form of new literacies made them begin to think about new literacies in general and how they might or might not adapt these learning experiences in their own classrooms. Whether or not they will go on to use Facebook themselves, the experience of its use in new ways prompted them to think of the potential of utilizing these new media in their own classrooms.

Head Lice and Office Max: The Online Community as Forum for Sharing Practical Tips and Ideas

The student teachers used Facebook to talk with one another in two distinct ways. First, participants in our online community tended to use the online forum to share examples of teaching projects and to request and share feedback on those lessons and units. As the group discussed their role in the Facebook community, they indicated that the role of the group was to “share ‘how-to’s.’” Although occasionally a student teacher would share a question or concern that emerged from her practice, more often the site served as a

forum for ‘show-and-tell.’ When we asked in interviews about the benefits of our online community, the most prominent response was that the student teachers found ideas, tips, and other practical suggestions in the online interaction. Bree said that in a recent post she shared “teacher appreciation day at Office Max!” She went on to note that the group did discuss literacy instruction in their classrooms, yet the conversation appeared to remain at the level of sharing ideas and tips. Rather than dismissing such interaction as low-level learning, we found that for these student teachers learning about the ways they can and did support each other held value for the development of supportive professional communities.

The participants also appeared to use the forum to help them deal with the everyday challenges of life in schools. In the group conversation, for example, Karla shared that “I think you learned real-life skills that they don’t teach you in your literacy, math, science, social studies courses, things that come up.” When asked to expand on this, she went on to say,

‘Cause we were like, ‘how to deal with head lice?’... Or a child had pushed one of our colleagues in school and how that was handled, and—or what do you do when a child in an urban setting walks out of their school and says the N-word to his friend? Is that your line to correct that? Is it not?

In summary, then, on one hand, the participants appeared to find value in the tips and suggestions of their colleagues. On another, the groups provided discussion of ways to handle everyday life in schools—issues that were outside the scope of methods coursework discussions. On the latter point, we found it interesting that the participants did not want to have these conversations with just anyone; they valued having these discussions with their existing colleagues from their teacher education experience. Perhaps due to familiarity, safety, and/or a desire to continue existing relationships, at the conclusion of the study the group decided to reconnect without the input of university faculty, forming their own Facebook community.

Online Communities as Forums for Remaining in Touch

Second, in interviews we learned that the new (participant-initiated) Facebook community provided participants a way to stay in touch with their pre-service colleagues. They viewed their experience in teacher education as fomenting a close-knit community—one that most identified as a community of practice. Chrissie explained, “We were able to help each other grow through questioning, supporting, and challenging each other.” Once the group graduated, Opal wanted these connections to continue. She explained,

When we all graduated I was trying to think, how can we all keep in touch, because I realized that this group of colleagues- we’ve been together for five semesters now, we know each other, we try to get where we’re coming from, and we’re really good at helping each other through problems and giving each other resources... After partaking in this, um, group for the study, it just seems so commonsense to me that I would start another group on Facebook. So, it’s a very similar thing but it doesn’t have a focus on writing. It’s just in general,

anything you want to contribute to the world of teaching. You know, so people post job availability in their district, posting about behavioral problems and looking for resources.

Although, again, the explicit focus of discussion remains on tips, the subtext appears to be an interest in connection. Opal made this more explicit:

It's important for teachers to communicate with one another and to support one another. And now that we're all spread apart, you know, we're new to the schools we're going into, it's important to have that established group of support.

We also learned that the shared language generated in their work together in teacher education was valued, at least by Opal, who noted that, with the Facebook page we created, I had an outlet to share what I was doing because I was so excited about my wonderful writing project that I was doing with my students and, you know, I wanted somebody who would understand what I was saying or give me feedback while it was going on. But for me it was an outlet and where I had peers that I knew that could reply, 'oh, I really like this,' or, 'hmm, what if you did this?' That was really beneficial to me, but I also liked reading everybody else's ideas and how their classroom worked. It also gave me some good ideas for what to do and what not to do.

She made it clear that the established relationships of the pre-service program provided a meaningful context for interacting about their experiences as new teachers. "You know, you get these little accomplishments like, you won't believe the journal entry my student did today, and everybody else and like your family members, they just don't appreciate it as much as colleagues do."

Difficulties Transitioning from Student to Independent Professional

An interesting dichotomy within the data suggested that the student teachers both liked the informal relationship Facebook provided, yet found it too informal to support their professional practice and learning beyond the ways already discussed. They enjoyed posting and wanted their colleagues to "like" their posts but did not want to have to reflect on their practice in public ways. Furthermore, they returned repeatedly to the notion that they might have been more involved with the community if the university faculty had been more directive in their posts. They craved the structure of the methods course, where assignments were clear and feedback was supportive and immediate. As Bree noted,

When I think about you as professors, I can truly say that I read every single word you wrote back to me [on classroom assignments], and it meant a lot. And I could go back through it and understand what you liked and I [enjoyed] the nice notes and constructive criticism and then with the online thing, it was different because you weren't commenting as much. I guess we still were counting on your feedback like in your class and then when we were in the online community, we were still relying on it.

The student teachers presented as dependent on the guidance and direction of the faculty to support and reinforce their efforts. When we stepped back to encourage their own

reflectivity, rather than feeling empowered, the student teachers felt, as Karla said, "sort of ditched."

Our second research interest focused on applications of methods course content. As we reviewed our data, we identified that rather than seeing method courses as venues for content knowledge they were to learn, student teachers instead focused on whether the instructor(s) "liked" their written or oral presentation. Rather than recognizing methods course knowledge as constructs to be internalized, held up for critical review and then enacted in future classroom settings, they tended to remember creating finished products the instructors liked. It was as if their memories were centered on learning the "game of school" where you do well for praise and approval, rather than on learning content and skills that would be of professional use. The Facebook parallel of "liking" one another's postings, allowed them to recall their memories of the approval they received in methods courses where both process and products were "liked" by students and instructors correspondingly.

Echoing this point was Karla's statement that said, "We were grown up to follow the teacher's rules so that's how I am." In final interviews, the student teachers suggested that the instructors might have posed initial questions about the demographics of their student teaching placements, the diversity of their classrooms and other contextual identifiers. They felt this knowledge was important so that, "you [the instructor] could have judged, why [I'm] teaching this lesson or why [I] made those decisions." Student teachers continually sought the approval of the faculty, valuing positive feedback over their colleague's comments as well as over prompts designed to stimulate their own learning and thinking.

We did observe evidence of application of the methods course content through the discussion of implementation of specific strategies (e.g. book making, author studies, poetry writing and the like.) However, when we probed for instances of instructional problem solving, there was less evidence to explore. Perhaps the newness of the teaching experience or the expectation as shared by Moira that she joined the Facebook community to, "share ideas and thoughts and to be able to get feedback from classmates and [the instructors]... to be able to keep in contact with people in an easy way" proved more powerful than we anticipated (as impediments to "serious" reflection).

It was our intention that the Facebook community might provide the student teachers a venue where, through dialogue, discussion and mutual problem identification and solving, they might begin to find ways to make methods course content their own. Instead, when faced with situations where they could not simply apply instructional pedagogy to their current teaching, rather than work to resolve the difficulty they either "gave up" the idea or concluded that a lack of authoritative support hindered their attempts to succeed. Furthermore, participants found the student teaching experience so overwhelming that they defaulted to "survival" tactics in place of seeking more complex understandings of learning and for practice. For example, as Chrissie remembered, "I wanted extended time for a project, I was reminded

about the pacing guide.” In another case, Krista, was told by her teacher to help children write paragraphs by supplying, a sample topic and concluding sentence. [She] thought most children would take this sample and tweak it to work for their paragraphs. However, after editing and many mini-conferences I had with students, I noticed they were using their own sentence ideas instead. Many used questions, the way I had portrayed during a mini-lesson... I didn't think they needed the sample and they didn't. I just didn't know how to say no.

The difficulties of being a “guest” in a veteran teacher's classroom also proved too formidable for them to be advocates for what they knew to be good practice. Furthermore, one can surmise that they lacked the knowledge and skills needed to negotiate professional disagreement.

Unintended Instructional Opportunities and Outcomes of Innovative Practices

The Facebook online community was an example of an instructional and curricular innovation that should have achieved its stated goals, in our opinions. Faculty were willing to support the student teachers, the student teachers themselves had requested that the group be created, and the student teachers had all expressed a commitment to supporting each other as they headed out into this new teaching experience. What remains, we believe, is a broader discussion, largely absent from the literature on teaching that concerns what a teacher might do when something that should work well, does not.

Much has been made recently of data-based decision making at the classroom and instructional level. The theory suggests that teachers should on any given day, have at their fingertips all the data about student learning necessary to inform their next instructional decision, and that correcting one's instructional path is a relatively straightforward effort that involves reading exit tickets, reviewing student homework or test scores and identifying the missing concept, information, or process and then re-teaching what was missed. Of course, the power of formative instruction and assessment is well documented (Marzano, 2003; Stiggins, Arter, Chappius, & Chappius, 2006). What we submit is missing from this discussion is a more honest and broad conversation about innovative educational practices that, after being tried out, somewhat disappoint.

Findings point to the supportive nature of developing an online community of practice. The online dialogue provided an opportunity for members to share, question, and reflect upon their experiences as teachers of writing. However, since student teachers craved structure and on-going positive feedback and support for their posts, they were reluctant to take on a more developed role in the community. Although the Facebook page was designed to allow student teachers to begin to bridge their professional status from novice to early-practitioner, they were hesitant to ride “without training wheels.” It seemed that they missed a more autonomous literacy classroom structure as described by Street (1995). Yet, a student teacher, Opal, who was initially reluctant to join our Facebook study, later started her own Facebook

page to continue communication with her cohort. It is indeed tantalizing to know the contents of Opal's page, yet this material was not a part of this study.

Our contention is that one of the main lessons we learned from this study is that we educators should be more transparent when we are trying new strategies; not being more transparent about these trials and errors may mean we are missing many so-called “teachable moments.” Greater transparency and co-learning with our pre-service teachers would better model our own professional learning as we stand next to our students supporting their professional growth. Using a relatively new medium such as Facebook provided us the opportunity to model how scholars and teachers learn by conducting and posting interviews and including the student teachers in our professional online dialogue; the student teachers were provided a glimpse into the ways faculty make professional learning a lasting goal. We, the originators of this study, were, perhaps unwittingly, key members of this online community of practice.

CONCLUSION

Situated learning theories suggest that participation in a community of practice constitutes learning in the forms of belonging, doing, becoming, and experiencing (Wenger, 1998). The student teachers did reiterate their sense of belonging to the online community through their commitment to maintain connection and to capitalize on each other as resources for teaching support. During their student teaching, they used the online community as a source of encouragement and connection. At the same time, it is worth noting that the student teachers struggled with transitioning from being highly supported and praised novices to becoming early practitioners capable of making professional decisions to solve their emerging problems of practice, and this new medium made this more revealing. Their shared online experiences suggested that real world practice is not only a place for them to employ methods course approaches and strategies, but also one where complexities emerge.

The Facebook postings suggested that these student teachers applied writing methods class practices in ways that were contextually negotiated. However, in contexts where there was a disconnect between espoused university course methods, their own writing experiences, and observed classroom writing practices, the student teachers found themselves at a loss to reconcile multiple belief systems. Cognitive flexibility was not fully realized in moments where discord emerged, and the online community fell short in providing ways to address these circumstances. This is unsurprising in that student teachers are, by definition, just becoming practiced teachers. In this way, their inability to rely upon each other in the online forum to define, examine and solve problems of professional practice is not unexpected. However, it may be hoped that, if they maintain the connections forged in this online community, subsequent communal efforts may be informed by these early interactions. In this way, new literacies such as online social networking have the potential to facilitate ongoing substantive conversations focused on enduring problems of practice.

Needless to say, additional study is needed to better understand how new literacies could transform the way we “do” teaching and learning and further develop our understandings of the influences of social media communities beyond ways to keep in touch with trusted colleagues and share tips. In an era of increasing online education, this research will be needed more than ever before. Our experience with this study suggests that, in helping prospective teachers make the transition from student teacher to early practitioner we must seek viable ways to foster professional communication that benefits classroom teachers and students alike. The addition of new ways of communicating make these transitions and the challenges around facilitating these transitions even more complex, yet, ultimately, promising.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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