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FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: THE CASE OF WEBHEADS IN ACTION

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ABSTRACT

An online community of practice (OCoP) is a group of people, who are brought together by a shared interest and with the aim of deepening their understanding of an area of knowledge through regular interactions facilitated by computer mediated communication (CMC) tools. An OCoP can potentially provides teachers with those elements of effective professional development (PD), cited in the literature, such as; collaboration, opportunities for mentoring, and sustainability over time. In this sense, OCoPs can be considered as a viable alternative for teacher PD. If OCoPs are to become an alternative approach to teacher PD then it is important to understand what factors affect teachers' participation in such communities. Therefore, through the case of Webheads in Action (WiA) OCoP, this study aimed to identify what factors contribute towards creating successful OCoPs. Members' interactions in WiA's public group page were collated over a period of nine months and interviews with 24 members of the community (4 core, 9 active, 11 peripheral) were used to gather the data. Two major themes emerged in relation to factors affecting members' participation in this OCoP. The first one was identified as the creation of a sense of belonging to the community which was achieved through various means such as having an initiation process and fostering trust and an inclusive community environment through community norms. The second was dynamism inherent in the community which manifested itself as new topics that kept members interested and participating, and a flow of continuous member recruitment to the community. In conclusion, this study highlighted the importance of the socio-affective dimension for designing and sustaining OCoPs.

Key Words: English as a foreign language (EFL), online community of practice (OCoP), teacher professional development.

1. Introduction

Text Teaching is a dynamic process which is centred on certain variables such as the teacher, students, and classroom conditions (i.e. number of students, tools available). This dynamic interplay necessitates that teachers continuously adapt their teaching to suit their context. For example, in Turkey a project called FATIH, which stands for "Movement of Enhancing Opportunities and Improving Technology", has been started by the government and in line with the aims of this project classrooms have started to be equipped with interactive whiteboards, learning content to be digitized, and students to be provided with tablet computers (MoNE, n.d.). The aims and expectations of the FATIH project resulted in a push for teachers to adapt their teaching in a way that they would maximize the use of these technologies provided to them. In order to adapt to such changes, teachers generally get involved in professional development activities.

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Professional development (PD) has been defined as "any activity that is intended partly or primarily to prepare paid staff members for improved performance in present or future roles in the school districts" (Little, 1987, p. 491). Engaging in PD is an important activity for teachers since this process can help teachers update their knowledge of a subject in the light of recent advances and/or exchange information and expertise with other teachers, experts, and/or academics (OECD, 1998). Results of the OECD Teaching And Learning International Survey (TALIS) suggest that teachers around the world are involved in various types of PD such as courses and workshops, education conferences and seminars, professional development networks, and informal dialogue (OECD, 2009). It is important that such PD opportunities are effective and meet teachers' needs. However, researchers involved in writing the TALIS report stated that "a significant proportion of teachers think professional development does not meet their needs" (OECD, 2009, p. 48).

In relation to the above point, online communities of practice (OCoPs) have recently been introduced and used as an alternative means of teacher PD. An OCoP can be defined as a group of people who share similar interests, aims, purposes or needs and share knowledge, collaborate or cooperate mainly via online communication networks and are guided by either formal or informal policies (based on definitions provided by Hunter, 2001; Jones & Preece, 2006; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). The reason for why OCoPs can be considered as an alternative means of PD is because OCoPs can potentially provide teachers with those elements of effective PD, cited in the literature, such as; collaboration, opportunities for mentoring, and sustainability over time (e.g. Cordingley, Bell, Thomason, & Firth, 2005; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Walter & Briggs, 2012). In fact, evidence from studies investigating teachers' PD and online communities highlight that teachers perceive such participation to be beneficial to their PD (e.g. Guzey & Roehrig, 2009; Kulavuz-Onal, 2013). If OCoPs are to become an alternative form of PD in the future then investigating factors that affect teachers' participation in such communities becomes a worthwhile topic of investigation for the scientific inquiry. To date, however, there has been only a handful number of research studies investigating this topic (e.g. Booth, 2012; Hew, 2009; Lai, Pratt, Anderson, & Stigter, 2006). Therefore, the aim of this study was to contribute to both the field of teacher PD and OCoPs by studying the factors affecting teachers' participation in an OCoP.

In line with the aim presented above, a case study design has been followed and Webheads in Action (WiA), which is a long standing OCoP of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers around the world who gathered online in order to develop their knowledge and skills of integrating technology into their teaching, has been chosen to be studied (see Johnson, 2005; Kulavuz-Onal, 2013). WiA has been chosen as the case because it is considered that it provides an *extreme* and *critical* case (Yin, 2014) since, unlike many other communities, it has existed for over 12 years (at the time of research). The remainder of the paper provides further insights to OCoPs (i.e. theories of learning associated with OCoPs; see Section 2), the research methodology followed (see Section 3), and a discussion (see Section 4) and conclusion (see Section 5) in relation to the results.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining OCoPs

Text The concept of OCoP is based on the communities of practice (CoP) framework developed by Lave and Wenger in 1990s. A CoP can be described as "a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger & Trayner, n.d., p. 1). This definition highlights the three fundamental characteristics of CoPs that Wenger et al. (2002; 2009) introduce, which are; a) *shared domain*, b) *community*, and c) *practice*. The *shared domain* can be seen as the area of interest that brings individuals together (Wenger et al., 2002; 2009). The *community* aspect, on the other hand, refers to interactions taking place among members of a CoP (Wenger et al., 2002; 2009). Having gathered around a *shared domain*, members of a CoP engage in joint activities and participate in the negotiation of meaning which defines membership in a CoP. This process has also been described as "mutual engagement" where members acknowledge not only their own but also other members' competence and knowledge, enabling each member to make meaningful connections with what other members share within the *community* (Wenger et al., 2002). In this sense, mutual engagement binds members into a social entity. Members' (*community*) interactions around their shared interests (*shared domain*) result in a shared enterprise that can be considered as the *practice* of the community (Wenger et al., 2002; 2009). The *practice* includes both the activities that members of a community undertake together (i.e. exploring ideas and sharing information) and the products and artefacts that members create together (i.e. documents, tools, websites, articles, and so on). In line with the definition of a CoP and its three fundamental characteristics, for the purposes of this study, an OCoP has been defined as group of people who share similar interests, aims, purposes or needs and share knowledge, collaborate or cooperate mainly via online communication networks and are guided by either formal or informal policies. It can be seen that the most notable difference between the definition of a CoP and an OCoP is the form of communication which is mainly computer mediated in the latter and face-to-face in the former.

2.2. Theoretical foundations of OCoPs

Learning within OCoPs and CoPs can be explained by social theories of learning such as the Sociocultural Learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These theories highlight the importance of social interactions in the development of cognition. To begin with Vygotsky (1931; as cited in Rieber, 1997) noted that "any function of the child's cultural development appears on the stage twice, or on two planes .... first between people as an intermental category, then within the child as an intramental category" (p.105-106). Vygotsky (1978) also noted that there are different levels in a child's development which include: the actual development level, that is what a child already knows or completed; and the potential development level, that is what a child can achieve with guidance. In order to refer to the distance between the actual development level and the potential development level which children can achieve by receiving help from more able peers, Vygotsky (1978) coined the term "zone of

proximal development (ZPD)". It should be noted that while Vygotsky has formed his theory of learning within the context of children's development, his ideas have also been implemented in adult education. In fact, some researchers even used terms such as "zone of proximal teacher development" (Warford, 2011).

As for Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning theory, it is rooted in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Learning theory. There are four main components of this social learning theory: 1) community that focuses on learning as belonging; 2) identity that considers learning as becoming; 3) meaning that refers to learning through our experiences of the social world; and 4) practice that can be seen learning while participating in an activity (see Figure 1). A key concept that is associated with Situated Learning theory and Communities of Practice (CoPs) is the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger describe LPP as a process where learners' initial participation in CoPs is peripheral and then in time, through their participation, those learners gain the knowledge and skills that enable them to move to full participation and become active and/or core members of the community (see Figure 2). To put it differently LPP allows new members to access the shared practices of a community and this process keeps the community alive by allowing those new members to be integrated to the community over time. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to this as the "process of community reproduction" in which "newcomers", in time through their observations of the community and gradually increased participation, become "old-timers" (p. 56). The application of the Sociocultural Learning and Situated Learning theories in the context of teacher professional development suggest that teachers who join an OCoP go through various stages of LPP and move from being peripheral members to becoming active and/ or core members. Furthermore, it is also considered that this process allows teachers to scaffold one another, thereby potentially allowing the less experienced members to move through ZPD, advance their knowledge and skills, and develop professionally.

2.3. Teacher professional development and OCoPs

There are a number of research studies that have investigated teacher professional development in online communities. However, rather than including a long literature review on teacher professional development through online communities, it has been decided to provide a couple examples showing OCoPs potential for teacher professional development. This is because present study's focus is factors affecting teachers' participation in OCoPs.

The first study that is presented is Guzey and Roehrig's (2009) case study in which they investigated science teachers' technology professional development in the "Technology Enhanced Community (TEC)" that they designed for participating teachers. Guzey and Roehrig (2009) explained that TEC allowed participating teachers to learn how to create technology-supported, inquiry-based lesson plans in collaboration with other teachers and researchers, who provided

advice and support to improve lesson plans when necessary, thus enabling the development of their skills in using and integrating technology. For example, the authors observed that Matt, one

Figure 1. Components of a social theory of learning, adapted from Wenger (1998, p. 5)

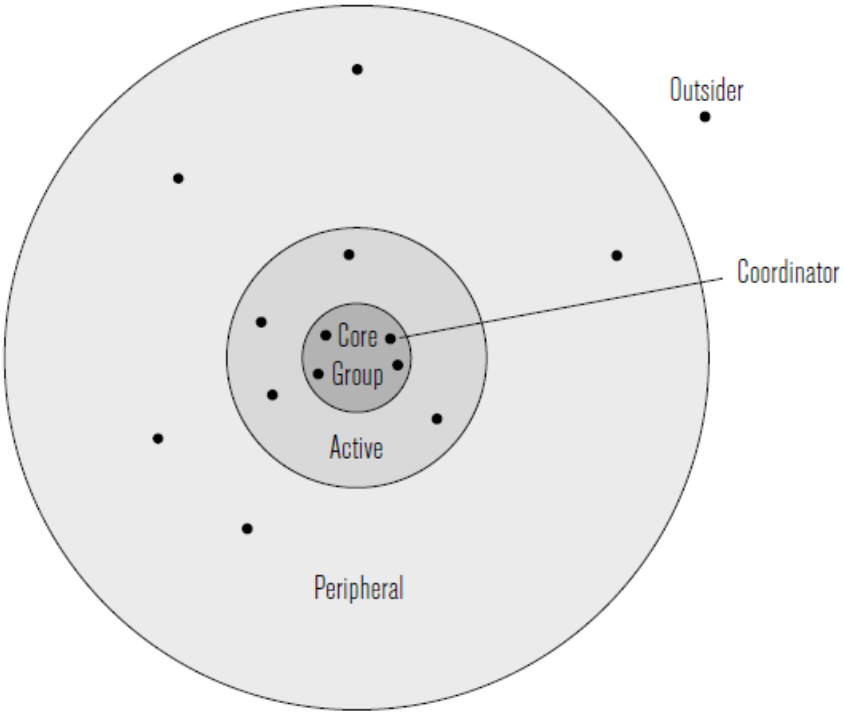

Figure 2. Degrees of community participation (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 57)

of the participants, made frequent use of Cmaptools[2] in his teaching and uploaded them to his class website, where he also directed questions to students and involved them in learning outside of school through their participation in online discussions. This can be considered to be an innovative pedagogy utilising technology in the sense that Matt used technology not only as a presentation tool but also took into consideration the context, his students and their abilities and engaged them actively in the learning process, which extended beyond the school thanks to technology.

The second study that is presented is Kulavuz-Onal's (2013) netnography (online ethnography) which investigated the Webheads in Action (WiA) community that is also the community chosen as the case to be investigated in the present study. In addition to becoming a member of the WiA community, Kulavuz-Onal (2013) also interviewed members of the community and analysed the messages members shared with one another. Kulavuz-Onal (2013) concluded that EFL teachers who participated in her study had developed skills and knowledge of pedagogically sound technology integration for the language learning/teaching process. For example, as a result of her participation and interactions in the WiA community, Beren (one of the interviewees) "not only developed her repertoire [of technology tools] but also gained a better understanding of how contextual factors affected her choices and ways of applying various Web 2.0 tools in her teaching" (Kulavuz-Onal, 2013, p. 264). Technologies, the use of which has been reported to be learned by members, included: blogs, wikis, and digital storytelling tools. The findings of studies presented above support the idea that OCoPs can, in fact, be able to provide opportunities for teachers' professional development which, in return, highlight the importance of investigating factors that negatively and/or positively affect teachers' participation in OCoPs.

2.4. Factors affecting teachers' participation in OCoPs

Whilst there is evidence supporting potential benefits of participating in OCoPs for teachers' professional development, to date, there have only been a handful of studies that investigated factors affecting such participation (e.g. Booth, 2012; Hew, 2009; Lai, et al., 2006). The studies conducted in this area have generally been qualitative studies which make it difficult to generalize their findings. As such, Blitz (2013), in her review on online learning communities, noted that "the field has not yet produced a critical mass of work in any particular area of investigation, *including factors affecting teachers' participation in online communities,* that can be used to compare findings and derive informed conclusions" (p. 13). This highlights the need for more studies to be conducted in the field of OCoPs and teacher professional development, in this case factors affecting teachers' participation in OCoPs. In addition, most of the communities that have previously been studied existed for less than a year; and been created by scientists for research purposes following a top-down approach (Blitz, 2013). Such top-down communities, however, contradict the assumptions of Sociocultural Learning theory that "teachers will be in charge of creating, leading, and sustaining online collaborations for learning and professional development" (Blitz, 2013, p.12). Webheads in Action (WiA), on the other hand, is an OCoP which is organic and created by a group of online

[2] Concept map tools (Cmaptools) are graphical tools used for organizing and representing knowledge.

teachers who participated in an online training and decided to continue their online interactions (Kulavuz-Onal, 2013). In this sense, finding from a case study on the WiA community can provide valuable insights to the field. Therefore, in line with the niches established above, the present study set out to answer the following research question: What are the reported factors that affect member participation in the WiA OCoP?

3. Method

As detailed in the previous section, this study has been undertaken to investigate factors affecting EFL teachers' participation in OCoPs through the case of Webheads in Action (WiA) OCoP. In line with this intention, this section discusses the methodology followed to achieve the aims of this study.

A qualitative case study design, which utilized interviews and document analysis, has been followed (see Figure 3). Following the invitation shared on the WiA community's public Yahoo group page in the summer of 2014, 24 members of the community with various levels of participation (peripheral, active, and core members; Wenger, et al., 2002) volunteered to participate in the study. Furthermore, within group communications which were publicly available on the Yahoo group page were collated for a period of nine months (between October 2013 and June 2014) in order to support and/or challenge findings from the interview data.

The interview schedule was semi-structured since such interviews allow some basic structure to the questions, which can make it easier to compare individuals' responses, whilst also allowing the flexibility of prompting and probing in order to follow up any specific issues of interests that emerge during the interviews (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Due to geographical distance between the researcher and the participants, interviews were held online through the use of Skype videoconferencing software. All interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards.

Thematic Analysis, which is claimed to be "a foundational method for qualitative data analysis" (p. 78) was applied to analyse the interview data for reasons such as its flexibility and ability to condense large sets of data, and offering a "thick description" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In search for themes, the transcribed interview data was transferred to the WiA Case Study database created using the NVivo software and analysed utilizing different coding techniques such as initial (open) coding and in vivo (inductive) coding (Saldaña, 2013). Then the generated codes were examined, potential groupings of codes were considered, and initial themes were created. Following this, the themes generated were cross-checked with the data set and amended as necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

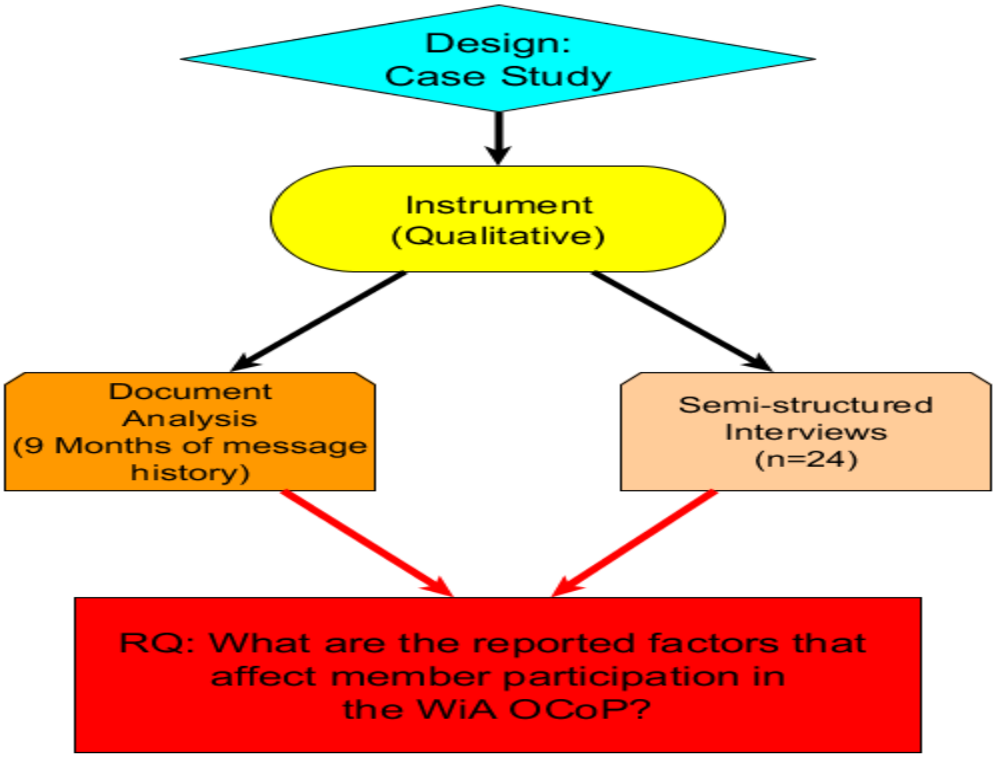

Figure 3. Overview of methodology

As for the document analysis approach, a total of 190 message threads consisting of 566 messages which had been shared on WiA's public Yahoo group were collated between October 2013 and June 2014. The message threads were categorized (i.e. sharing resources, requesting help) and were used as a supplementary method for checking the themes generated from the interview data (Bryman, 1989).

Additionally, a number of steps were taken to establish the trustworthiness of the study. For example, in order to increase the credibility of the study a member checking procedure (Mertens, 2010) was followed in which the initial results were shared with the interviewees through a Webinar. Also in order to increase the transferability of the results, as much details as possible has been provided to offer a "thick description" (Mertens, 2010). Last but not least, it should be highlighted that the ethical guidelines suggested by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2012) have been followed and ethical approval to conduct the present study has been granted by the Department of Education Ethics Committee at University of York, UK.

4. Findings and Discussion

Following thematic analysis and reconsideration of the themes after the member checking process, the factors that have been found to affect members' participation in the Webheads in Action (WiA)

community have been discussed under two overarching themes in this section. The first is the creations of a sense of community and belonging and the second is dynamism inherent in the WiA community.

4.1. A sense of community and belonging

A sense of community has been defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging … that members matter to one another … and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; as cited in Sharratt & Usoro, 2003). WiA members referred to one another as "Webheads" which implies that members of this community have developed a sense of belonging in the WiA community and over time have built a shared community identity:

> "… Thanks again Webheads!" (Thread 10, Message 3)
>
> "… when I became a Webhead…" (Sarah, Active member)

Factors that have contributed to the creation of a sense of community and belonging have been identified as: having an initiation process for developing a shared community identity; voluntary participation; and having norms that guide member interactions.

4.1.1. Initiation process and development of a community identity

To begin with, it was found that prior to joining the WiA community almost all interviewees had participated in an online training that was titled "Becoming a Webhead (BaW)". The aim of BaW sessions was to "provide knowledge and hands-on experience of basic web communication tools" (Telma, Core member) and also to "introduce members to the Webheads in Action" (Delma, Active member). The BaW sessions were conducted for a successive 10 years between 2004 and 2013 and brought in "new people, new blood, [and] new ideas" (Mike, Core member) to the community. At the end of each BaW session, participants were informed that they had become "Webheads" and they were invited to join the WiA community. Cecilia (Core member) explained that participation in BaW sessions provided her "a smooth transition to the [WiA] community". Now, comparing the definition of a "petrolhead" who has been described as "a person who is excessively interested in or is devoted to travelling by car" (petrolhead, n.d.) and a "cokehead" who has been described as "a cocaine addict or habitual user" (cokehead, n.d.) to the term "Webhead", it can be argued that the use of "Webhead" for referring to each other suggests WiA members' addiction or, more suitable to the case of present study, their commitment to the use of technology. In fact, learning about educational uses of technology had been reported by members as their motivation in joining the WiA community. In this sense, referring to each other as Webheads can be seen as a manifestation of members' shared identity and commitment to the WiA community, whose established focus is learning about the use of educational technology. This is in line with the findings of Booth (2012) and Hew (2009), who reported the formation of a collective identity around the shared domain within successful online communities of teachers.

4.1.2. Voluntary participation

As explained above, following the BaW sessions participants were invited to join the WiA community. However, participating in a BaW session "does not oblige you to become part of the Webheads, you join if you wish" (Betty, Active member). This suggested that it was those who were committed to the community that joined WiA in the end. Interviewees' community interactions, in which they helped each other, were also on a voluntary basis. When considered in relation to the term "Webhead" which implies interviewees' commitment to the community and its shared domain, this finding supports Wenger et al.'s claim (2009, p. 4) that "for a community to form, the topic must be of more than just a passing interest" (see also Booth, 2012; Hew, 2009). This finding also sheds light on why some of the online communities created for teachers might have failed (see for example Thang, Hall, Murugaiah, & Azman, 2011).

4.1.3. Community norms

Preece (2004) proposed that online communities need rules and/or norms which would guide members' interactions. Interviewees' responses showed that WiA interactions were, in fact, guided by a number of norms which, similar to findings of previous studies, seemed to facilitate community interactions (Booth, 2012; Hew, 2009). Those WiA norms were identified as: 1) providing support to other members; 2) being polite and respectful; 3) avoiding political and/or religious discussions; and 4) avoiding spamming.

Supporting other Webheads was the most frequently mentioned norm of the WiA community. "Support is there all the time", Raine (Active member) remarked. It was observed that the support within the WiA community was in two different forms; technological and social support. As for technology support, Webheads explained that they support each other by responding to help requests about technology and sharing their knowledge and expertise of particular technologies. Interviewees reported that "there are no stupid questions" (Rebecca, Peripheral member) and "no one is left unanswered" (Hailey, Active member). Similarly, Emma (Active member) expressed that "a request for help is never ignored […] always there is at least one person who replies". In fact, the analysis of the nine-month message history supported the above points. When Webheads contacted the community to ask for information and/or help with certain types of technologies, at least one response was received on the same day that a query was posted. In addition, Telma (Core member) maintained that Webheads "discuss tools" and "tell people about a new tool that has come about and so on and tell them: "Do try it! Because it's very useful, interesting, and so on". As for the social support, the sharing of feelings such as sadness and success seemed to be welcomed within the community and was expressed as one of the norms. Vance and Mike (Core members) reported that members shared information about their personal lives from time to time and that was allowed in the community. Mike added that Webheads were interested in knowing each other and that as Webheads they would share information about "the milestone moments in our lives" with the community. Vance explained that Webheads "respond a lot to people's just talking how

they feel". As such, the analysis of the message exchanges among Webheads showed that 21 out of 190 (11 %) message threads had social support related content.

When it comes to respecting others and being polite, Delma (Active member) expressed that "respect is something we value". Considering that members of the WiA are dispersed around the world and have different cultural backgrounds, it is not surprising that they consider "respect" as one of the main norms. Rebecca (Peripheral member) added that Webheads "will respectfully respond" to any query and Delma explained that when members share their ideas in the community it is possible that "you may like them or not and you may discuss why you don't like this or the other, always respectfully". In addition, Mary (Active member) expressed that "politeness is at the top" within the WiA community. Similarly, in Sally's (Peripheral member) eyes, the Webheads "are all very nice and polite [and] nobody is ever discouraging or making you feel stupid". In line with these observations, the analysis of public group messages showed that the use of terms such as "please", "dear", "hugs from [….]", "thanks", "best wishes", "cheers from […]", "sorry for…" were common.

Avoiding political and/or religious discussions was another norm reported by members. This is because Webheads perceived such discussions can result in conflicts, which could negatively affect community dynamics and divert community's focus from its aims:

> "…politics have been left aside and uhm we are all members of a community. We get together because we have these aims in mind which have to do with education and changing the paradigm of education" (Raine, Active member)
>
> "We don't care what religion or which political party a person belongs to you know, we care about the individual, the individual who wants to learn, the individual who wants to share the knowledge etc." (Delma, Active member)

Avoiding spamming was another norm followed in the WiA community. Mike (Core member) explained that self-promotion or advertisements are not acceptable in the community unless they are aimed at initiating interactions. Vance (Moderator, Core member) elaborated on this issue further by stating that people can and are encouraged to promote their work if what they are promoting relates to the community and/or has "academic value" but "not commercial". In fact, there had been an incident in the past in which one of the members started to harass the community by sending spams. In response to this, Vance (the moderator) banned the spammer and removed him from the group in order to protect the community.

Having these norms in the community seemed to create a positive atmosphere in the community which helped members to feel "safe" (Amal and Havva, Peripheral members), "confident" (Sarah, Active member), and "comfortable" (Patrick, Peripheral member). Furthermore, this also seemed to create a virtuous circle in which members were motivated to share when they saw others sharing, which led other members to join and participate and subsequently continue the sharing within the community:

> "I love it! Because it's a way of having colleagues around the world but probably are doing the same as you are doing uhm and you learn from them. You share with them and they share with you their experiences" (Mary, Active member)

Notably, the previous studies, which investigated successful teacher OCoPs, found that the norms of the community were enforced by the moderators, who were referred to as "watchdogs" (Hew, 2009), "sheriffs" or "shepherds" (Booth, 2012). These metaphors convey the idea that a moderator is responsible for maintaining the community as a safe place in which the members would feel secure enough to participate in online discussions. Different to those metaphors, in the present study, Vance's (Moderator) role was likened to that of a "cat herder" by a number of interviewees, which Vance, himself, explained to reflect "his hands-off management" of the community. Vance explained that he would let members, who have problems, "work it out". This implied that he did not want to be seen as an authority figure. Additionally, since no problems among members were observed in the public space of the community during the nine months of data collection, it seemed that the WiA community was self-organized and members were self-imposing the reported norms, another characteristic of successful online communities (Preece, 2004). In spite of this, however, when the community was harassed by one of its members in the past, it was Vance who took the initiative and blocked that member to restore order in the community. This suggests that Vance had a similar responsibility to the moderators who were referred to as "watchdogs" or "sheriffs". Therefore, it can be interpreted that having a moderator who oversees the community is important for motivating members to participate by making them feel safe within the community.

As explained above, the Webheads did not only exchange messages in relation to educational technology (their shared domain) but they were also able to share messages that reflect their personal lives and experiences. It is considered that such messages help community building process, because sharing such messages provides a feeling of togetherness, camaraderie, and being with like-minded people. When present, such aspects have been found to positively affect member participation in teacher communities (Booth, 2012) and when not present, have been found to negatively affect participation (Carr & Chambers, 2006). Notably, the proportion of topics within the WiA community, which included a social element, was 11 % (21 out of 190 threads). This is almost 6 times higher than the proportion of 2 % reported for the community which Carr and Chambers (2006) had created. They reported the 2 % ratio of social interactions to be insufficient and potentially discouraging member participation. Whilst it would not be correct to specify an "ideal" proportion of social topics within an OCoP's overall message history, given the positive perceptions of the social content within the WiA community's interactions, it can be concluded that a community should provide opportunities for members to talk about, not only their profession, but also more social and affective aspects of their lives.

4.2. Dynamism

Two main factors were identified to contribute to the dynamism inherent in the WiA community which were: 1) the dynamic nature of their shared domain; and 2) ongoing recruitment of new members to the community.

4.2.1. Dynamic nature of the shared domain

Wenger et al. (2002, p.31) stated "[a] domain is not a set of problems it evolves with the world and the community". This highlights the dynamic nature of the shared domain of a community suggesting it can change over time. Surprisingly enough, over the past 12 years that the WiA community had existed, the shared interest which brought them together did not seem to have changed. Similar to Johnson (2005) and Kulavuz-Onal's (2013) findings, Webheads' shared interest was identified as learning about the integration of technology into the language teaching/learning process. It is possible that the WiA group has sustained their interest in the educational uses of technology due to the fact that technology itself is a dynamic concept that has a fast pace of change. For example, Johnson (2005) reported that the WiA community, in its initial stages, used and held discussions about the use of synchronous text-chat technologies such as Yahoo! Messenger. More recently, however, they have started exploring the use of mobile devices and video conferencing tools such as Google+ Hangouts. In this sense, in line with Wenger et al.'s (2002) argument, it can be considered that community's shared domain did, in fact, evolve over time. Therefore, it can be argued that the changes that take place within the shared domain provide the community with new topics around which to interact and lead discussions, which can be seen as a positive factor for members' ongoing interactions and participation in the community.

4.2.2. Ongoing recruitment of members

Interview results showed that participants in this study joined the WiA community at different times, with some having become a member at the start of the community in 2002 (i.e. Vance) and some having joined just recently at the time of research (in 2014; i.e. Mona). This suggests that new members have been recruited to the community on an ongoing basis, which is in line with Lai et al.'s (2006, p.31) claims that members join and leave communities of practice (CoPs) and that this "inherent community turnover means there is a need for ongoing recruitment" of members in order to sustain the critical mass (see also Wenger et al., 2002). Although in theory anyone who wants to join the WiA community can do so by simply registering themselves to WiA's Yahoo! group[3], it was found that most of the interviewees participated in Becoming a Webhead (BaW) online sessions prior to joining the community. In relation to this, while the need to recruit new members has been articulated in the literature, the process of how to recruit members to OCoPs does not seem to have received much attention, with the exception of Lai et al.'s (2006, p.39) statement that "community leaders usually recruit members privately". In fact, the findings of the

[3] The WiA Yahoo! Group page URL is https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/evonline2002_webheads/info

present study also lend support to Lai et al.'s (2006) claim, in the sense that the BaW sessions- which brought new members to the community- were organized by core members of the WiA community who can also be considered as leaders/ coordinators. It can be argued that the BaW EVO sessions have provided a framework of apprenticeship or mentorship, which Wenger et al. (2002, p. 147) highlighted as a means "to connect newcomers with old-timers". The analysis of data suggested that during the 10 years in which it ran, the BaW EVO session served the WiA OCoP as being an orientation and mentoring opportunity for new members, in which those new members became familiar with, not only the shared domain of the WiA community, but also met Webheads who mentored them prior to joining the WiA. Therefore, it is possible to argue that an induction program through which new members of the community are given orientation can be useful to motivate and integrate those members within the community (see also Wenger et al., 2009).

5. Conclusion

Through studying the Webheads in Action OCoP, it is considered that a better understanding of OCoPs as social learning environments has been reached and the study contributed to the limited but growing body of research investigating teacher OCoPs. Based on the discussion of findings in the previous section, the following suggestions are offered as points of consideration for teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers. Since qualitative case studies are not generalizable and since each OCoP (including the case studied in this research) is unique and has its own characteristics, the findings of this study should not be treated as a prescription, in isolation from the contextual factors that might be present, for creating and/or sustaining OCoPs.

To begin with, it is important that teachers voluntarily participate in OCoPs rather than being mandated to participate. In order to increase teachers' voluntary participation, we may work on creating opportunities to better inform teachers about the potential benefits of their participation in OCoPs (i.e. authentic, relevant, and flexible learning opportunities which are not constrained by time or location). In addition, this form of learning can be acknowledged and the time teachers are engaged with the community can be formally recognized by policy makers.

Additionally, since members join and leave online communities, it is important to develop mechanisms that would bring in new members. Such mechanisms can usefully provide induction and orientation to the community and its shared domain. This would help the development of a community identity allowing a better integration of new members.

Last but not least, a community needs a number of norms, either implicit or explicit, to guide member interactions. Those norms should not be too restrictive, rather should allow members to feel free and should be strong enough to allow members to feel safe and secure and increase their trust in the community. Such norms can allow the creation of an inclusive community atmosphere where members can share, not only their knowledge, but also develop social relationships that can contribute to building a sense of community and togetherness.

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