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Community of Practice: Supporting EFL Pre-Service Teachers in Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

This study was carried out to explore and describe the results of building a community of practice with a group of English pre-service teachers aiming to boost new educators' professional development by addressing conflicts among students, a frequent issue in public schools. On the other hand, technology was integrated into the process not only as an instrument to build the community, but also as an instrument to gather information throughout this study. In this regard, a blog was created, taking advantage of characteristics that online communities of practice have over traditional face-to-face communities. This study takes a descriptive-interpretative qualitative research method in order to analyze and describe data obtained from the members. The community members were seventeen pre-service English teachers from a public University in Bogota, Colombia, who were working on their pedagogical practicum in a public school in the same city. Findings suggest that building a community of practice with the pre-service teachers improved their abilities to identify issues in their classroom resulting in an improvement in their profession. Moreover, it was observed that building an online community created a comfortable environment that enhanced members' confidence when sharing anecdotes, experiences, and knowledge with others.

Key Words: Community of Practice; Online Communities of Practice; Conflicts among Students; EFL Pre-service Teachers; Professional Development.

Introduction

During our experience as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) educators, the lack of support for pre-service teachers (PSTs) was identified as a prevalent issue that is evidenced when they struggle with daily classroom scenarios. Conflicts among students showed to be the most common scenario, affecting not only students' learning process, but also pre-service teachers' development, which is why it was decided to address this issue. In consequence, it is

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necessary to find alternatives that provide the support and advice pre-service teachers require to handle these classroom conflicts. To achieve this, a community of practice was built using a blog with a group of new educators, who have evidenced conflicts within their classrooms. In this paper, the results obtained from this implementation are presented.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, points of view stated by different authors who have addressed the concepts relevant to our study are presented. Firstly, the concept of community of practice (CoP) and its characteristics are discussed; secondly, the concept of conflicts and different approaches for conflict resolution that have been previously proposed are explained.

Community of Practice

Communities of practice (CoP) have provided a variety of fields with opportunities to boost participants' professional development due to the fact that CoPs facilitate interaction among them in order to enhance their labor. Therefore, as educators, we can build a community of practice to address issues PSTs have to cope with within the EFL classroom.

Wenger (2002) defines a community of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). However, communities of practice are not always seen as such by its members, for instance, in universities, pre-service teachers meet weekly with a tutor where teaching issues are shared, ideas to solve them are discussed and advice is given, yet participation in this group is not always perceived by new educators as an opportunity to deepen their knowledge but as a course requirement.

Additionally, Cambridge, Kaplan, and Suter (2005) argue that building a community of practice is crucial when connecting people based on collaboration, knowledge sharing, knowledge generation and learning (p. 1). A CoP is, then, a way to build relationships among members of a group who seek improvement in their practice based on communication with their colleagues. In other words, Wenger (2002) highlights the main aspect of a community as having an issue, or a passion in common, whereas Cambridge, et al. (2005) consider more important what members can learn from the CoP. Nonetheless, we consider a CoP is relevant when it serves the purpose of providing mentorship and support to those who are having difficulties in their learning process and need guidance from experienced advisors who went through the same process.

Characteristics of a community of practice

Now, three critical characteristics that must be evidenced when building a CoP are presented: (a) Domain, which is the interest participants have in common, (b) Community, it refers to the communication among members and (c) Practice, the practice shared by the members (Diaz & Castañeda, 2013, p. 143). The domain is necessary to be attention calling for all of the members to ensure participation because it is based on interest; if the members are not related to the domain, participation will not occur. In the community, the building of relationships is needed so that ideas to solve issues are shared and interaction can take place. Finally, the practice evidences whether the CoP was built or not since it is the result of members' interaction and sharing. These three characteristics are necessary to develop a CoP, otherwise learning will not be meaningful for the members who might not find these characteristics in their practicum meetings and discussions.

Stages of cultivating a community of practice

Moreover, keeping in mind Domain, Community and Practice, a CoP goes through five stages in order to be developed: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation (El Masry & Mohd Saad, 2018, p.954).

El Masry and Mohd Saad (2018) state that in the first stage “The shared domain or interest pulls people into a network forming their potential community. The practice dimension enables members to identify their knowledge needs. For PSTs, their domain is language teaching” (p. 955). In other words, it consists of establishing language teaching as the domain of the community in order to enhance their performance. Similarly to El Masry and Mohd Saad's study, this study highlights the importance of knowing what to teach and how to teach it, besides, conflicts resolution is included as a way to face the challenge of discovering how the CoP can support them to evolve as teachers.

In the second stage, coalescing, members learn the importance of sharing knowledge with others. To achieve this goal, members must trust each other based on understanding their dilemmas, ways of thinking and problem-solving skills, so that members can see what

knowledge they miss and what knowledge is important to share (El Masry & Mohd Saad, 2018, p. 955).

As the CoP brings more people into the group to participate, it is important to support it so that it can survive. In maturing, the third stage, participation is appreciated because the CoP is more dynamic and has created its own identity. However, El Masry and Mohd Saad (2018) argue that there is a challenge to bear in mind: “The challenge, which arouses while their CoP is expanding, is to keep its main goals and practice focused on its initial intent” (p. 955). In other words, it is necessary to ensure that the community growth doesn’t change the main community purpose and all members develop their labor following the same principles.

Taking care of the CoP in the fourth stage involves a number of challenges for the PSTs because they must be engaged with their learning and practice sharing. El Masry and Mohd Saad (2018) argue that in stewardship “PSTs, through their CoP, could be empowered and given the voice in what they learn and how to learn it. Provoking more discussions, exchanges, and negotiations of knowledge among the members can inject life in the CoP” (p. 956). Nevertheless, it is important teachers assist pre-service teachers with the new perspectives provided by the others so that the CoP is kept alive at this point.

In transformation, the final stage, members stop participating when they see the issue, which is the reason why they joined the community, getting resolved; and once members leave the community and its practices, the CoP ends. As El Masry & Mohd Saad argue, “the point here is that being aware that the CoP will eventually come to its end should urge its members to get the maximum benefits from it” (p. 956). The challenge here is knowing when to let the CoP die or not to ensure the purpose of the community is accomplished.

An example of CoP implementation are the results reported by Kong (2018) who created and explored an ESL teacher community of practice in a vocational college in China. The community was established by the voluntary registration of 16 teachers who joined the group. Once the group was conformed, its members carried out activities focused on solving practical classroom problems that were previously exchanged, analyzed and discussed to be solved in meetings held every two weeks. Kong defined this mechanism as “a problem-solving oriented community mechanism” (p. 160). At the end of this study it was also evidenced that, through CoP, teachers enhanced their teaching, research abilities and created “a culture of teacher group” (p. 162).

For instance, one of the participants shared an episode with an activity in which students prepared a presentation but they were talking alone because their classmates were not paying attention. Other CoP participants suggested different ideas to achieve expectations with the activity providing the teacher with different perspectives, such as advising students to be prepared to supervise the others, suggesting illustrations to stimulate interest or preparing performances.

Online Community of Practice

Technology has played an important role in CoP. Online communities of practice (OCoP) have been useful for educators who are not able to participate in face-to-face CoP, and also want to learn content from experienced ones. Mahrous (2015) argues that “They learn this content from various backgrounds that are not within their teaching context just by the intake of information” (p. 45). Therefore, experienced educators are necessary when building an OCoP as new educators relate with their experiences enhancing interaction and learning. Furthermore, Mahrous (2015) claims that “OCoP tend to establish a virtual world where educators who might never meet in normal circumstances can interact by sharing experiences and solving issues that characterize teaching and other domains” (p. 43). In this way, pre-service EFL teachers have the opportunity to learn content not only from their tutor and colleagues, but also from newcomers once the community has expanded; an advantage that might not be evidenced in a face-to-face community.

In teacher professional development, Duncan-Howell (2007) describes time as one of the most important advantages of participating on an OCoP because it offers freedom, it is convenient, flexible, and members access the community when they want and can. Different from face-to-face CoPs in which participation is based on spending time together, OCoPs members have no time pressure, and educators have time to think, reflect and answer. Another advantage that was described is efficiency because OCoPs provide fast responses and solutions as well as discussions about topics of interest (Duncan-Howell, 2007, p. 157). Traditionally, discussions are the result of teachers’ journals where problematic situations are identified, written down and brought to the group to find solutions.

On the other hand, OCoPs allow participants to share and discuss topics fast; responses are also provided promptly and, if ideas to solve issues are proposed, members can access the information whenever they need, wherever they are. As a conclusion, CoP goes further with technology since OCoPs fulfill gaps traditional CoPs cannot. For instance, time convenience,

easily expansion of the community on the web, easy access to the information, and efficiency on the responses.

To summarize, CoPs have been cultivated among members of different fields to boost their professional development. A CoP has to go throughout five stages (potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation) to be effective for the members, and three characteristics (Domain, Community and Practice) must be present for the CoP to be ensured. Participating in a CoP allows a group of people to share their knowledge while they learn from other experiences, skills and new information.

Bearing in mind the importance, characteristics, usage, and benefits of OCoP, the tool that was chosen to build the community was a webpage. The name of the webpage is “Conflicts among Students in the EFL Classroom”. In this webpage that works as a blog, members can create their account to be part of the community and participate on the different posts published.

Conflicts among Students

English classes are interrupted by conflicts among students, which affects the classes' development. Whenever teachers have to stop in order to intervene and put an end to the situation, teachers take time away from the class objective, students get distracted and even sometimes involved in the conflicts. A conflict refers to the disagreement among two or more individuals resulting from beliefs, actions, values, positions, or interests that might be unacceptable for other individuals or members of a group (Barsky, 2007). Moreover, conflicts in school are evidenced as anger, violence, and bullying such as name-calling, rumors, gossip, stolen and damaged property, etc. (Gibbons, 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Bad language and violent behavior create an uncomfortable environment inside the classroom for everyone including the teacher. Hence, it is important that we, as teachers, know how to deal with conflicts. This knowledge about conflict resolution is supported by Trofymenko (2000) when she states:

“Success in the EFL classroom depends less on techniques and materials and more on what goes inside and between the class members. The most important task of the teacher is to foster a sense of community between students in the language classroom [...]” (p. 2).

Keeping in mind the importance of students' relationships in the creation of a motivating and positive classroom atmosphere and the role of the teacher in it, it is crucial English teachers and PSTs be provided with the necessary tools or knowledge to help students build new and

better ways of behaving with their classmates “particularly the necessity of frequent, authentic interaction with peers, good feedback, and participation in a low-risk, friendly classroom, as well as the benefits of cultivating a strong sense of community in English as a Second Language course” (Block, 2010, p.2).

Throughout the revision of the literature, it is clear that mediation and conflict resolution stand out as the main approaches implemented in different contexts, but mostly at schools. Nevertheless, there are other perspectives to cope with conflicts in a rather interesting and novel way.

García-Raga, Grau, and López-Martín (2017) carried out an investigation of the impact of mediation programs at several schools. They collected information from 310 students using a survey about the impact and success of school mediation practices in Valencia, Castellon and, Alicante. They described mediation “in terms of three educational purposes: conflict resolution, prevention and personal strengthening” (p.466). At the end of the research, it was concluded that, on the one hand, students have a generally positive view on it, and on the other hand, they found name-calling and rumors as two of the more common conflicts in all three schools.

Moreover, a group of four third-grade teachers decided to create a classroom behavior system titled *Making Amends* being understood as a restorative system in contrast to the common punitive system. In this system, students would learn not only to resolve the conflicts by taking responsibility for their own mistakes but also to be more independent when solving them. This innovative idea has coped with one of the undesired effects of conflicts inside the classroom, “the restorative system has diminished the teacher’s involvement in resolving classroom conflicts, increased instructional time, and freed the teacher to work independently with students who are less able to self-monitor their own behavior” (Smeltzer & Erb, 2018, p.101).

Gibbons (2010) decided to use an arts approach to address a sixth grade, from a public school located in New York, with difficulties working as a group which led the teacher to spend “too much time trying to regain order and attempting to resolve disputes” (p.85). Gibbons based on the book called *Touching Spirit Bear* to implement the concept of *Circle of Justice* which consisted in role playing fictional characters with similar conflicts to the students’ background. As a conclusion of this intervention, Gibbons pointed out that “in the process students gained an understanding of different points of view while strengthening their own unique responses” (p.88). Additionally, she highlighted that due to her previous findings it is

important to consider the inclusion of a creative arts approach in the school curriculum for conflict resolution.

Method

Descriptive-Interpretative Qualitative Research

In order that PSTs' professional development was enhanced through the building of a CoP, it was decided to carry out this study under the descriptive-interpretative qualitative research method as a way to gather, analyze and interpret the participants' information. According to Creswell (2014), one of the characteristics of qualitative research is being interpretative, therefore, inquirers are one of the most important instruments when collecting data. After the data is organized and described, inquirers make a personal interpretation which may be guided by their experiences, history or culture.

In this case, it was decided to build a CoP with the PSTs to gather information about the conflicts they encounter, the strategies or approaches they implement to cope with those conflicts, and at the same time analyze those strategies and approaches to provide feedback if necessary. Bearing in mind the advantages of OCoPs, a web page which functioned as a blog was designed and four open-ended questions were proposed for PSTs to participate. Finally, we played the role of interpreters by reflecting on the results and findings not only as EFL teachers, but also as members of the community in interaction with the PSTs. Moreover, we reflected on how the building of a CoP affected the members in their professional development.

Settings and Participants

This practice community was grown with a group of pre-service EFL teachers from a public university located in Bogotá, Colombia. The group consisted of seventeen new educators of sixth and seventh semester who are fully immersed in the teaching of English, giving six hours of class per week to students of a public school located in Bogotá. The members of the community whose ages are between eighteen and twenty-five years old volunteered to be part of the community participating in the proposed blog and attending meetings with their tutor.

Instruments

In this section, the instruments for data collection are described.

Blog

Although blogs are believed to be online diaries for people to publish only their personal experiences and stories, nowadays, blogs usage has expanded allowing us to use them as a tool to gather research data. As Hiler (2002) argued, blogs developed gradually into an app with the power to promote collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate (as cited in Alony & Jones, 2008). Jacobs and Williams (2004) stated the same idea when making a comparison between blogs and wikis, “Blogs, on the other hand, boast a level of participation not previously experienced by the earlier wiki initiative, and a greater sense of community and debate is encouraged as a consequence” (p.2). Therefore and bearing in mind this study purpose, it was decided to use blogs to get the community of practice to work actively and to share their knowledge. PSTs followed this link to access to the blog: <https://andrewmer3.wixsite.com/website/inicio/>

Questionnaires

Since it was important to get to know all the community members’ experiences, questionnaires were chosen as the most suitable instrument to be applied. Birmingham and Wilkinson (2003) described questionnaires as “less resource-intensive than many other research instruments, and they can help gather views and opinions from many individuals” (p.7). In addition, the questionnaire was composed of four open-ended questions, which means there were no predetermined answers.

Building a CoP

In order to build the community of practice, we followed the five stages presented before. Firstly, conflicts were evidenced to be a common issue PSTs face in their classrooms, and as a result, conflicts and their resolution were chosen as the domain. Once we had established which the domain of the CoP would be, we started to plant the interest during the meetings carried out every week between the tutor and the PSTs; these meetings revolved around the idea of participating in a blog to create a CoP in which they were going to have the opportunity to share the knowledge they considered important and to let others see gaps they had in their own practice. To let PSTs know what the topic of the CoP was, we posted this question: *Have you identified conflicts in your EFL classroom? If so, let us know about it in the comments.* Furthermore, we provided a definition of conflicts as a way to guide and narrow the discussion.

Secondly, to accomplish the second stage purpose, we posted the following question: *How have you addressed the students' conflicts you have witnessed in your EFL classroom?* As a way to encourage members to share their knowledge of the CoP domain and show them their knowledge is valuable. On the post, we asked members to share strategies or techniques they had implemented and we invited them to tell us whether they worked or not. At this point, expanding the community and having more participation was a challenge since in comparison with the first post only two more members participated. Thirdly, to ensure that members remembered why the community started, the following question was posted: *Did you feel either prepared or like knowing how to handle conflicts in the EFL classroom?* In this way, PSTs would bear in mind what the purpose of the community was.

In the fourth stage, PSTs participated in a post in which they were given the voice of the blog. Neither definitions nor instructions to answer were provided, but members were expected to follow the principles they had been following in order to learn about the domain, to achieve this we posted on the blog: *What are the most common conflicts in your EFL classroom?* Along with the following categories: teasing/ name-calling/ taunting, inappropriate sexual comments, threatening to cause harm, hitting/ kicking/ pinching/ spitting/ tripping/ pushing, embarrassing someone in public. These categories were drawn from the previous definition of conflicts provided above. Finally, we sent them an email in which they were invited to continue participating as a strategy to prevent PSTs from leaving the community. On the other hand, before letting the community die, PSTs received feedback on their strategies to handle conflicts based on the collected data to remind them why they joined the community in the first place.

Results and Analysis

Common Conflicts

Bearing in mind conflicts among EFL students as the community's domain, it was noticed that throughout the members' participation in the CoP it was possible to learn about conflicts and to identify the most common ones in the PSTs' classroom. This is evidenced by comparing the PSTs' comments when discussing cases they had had in their classrooms, as seen in the example (1) below:

(1) *"I am working with kindergarten, actually, they are very calm but in every classroom, there are some problems of coexistence, discipline, and attention. A common*

problem in my English classes is name-calling; children use nicknames that make others feel uncomfortable” (PST 1).

The comment above was provided by one of the PSTs introducing name-calling as a form of conflict in a group. Wenger (2010) argues that when members recognize each other as potential learning partners in a community, learning takes place. Similar to Wenger, we observed in the comments this mutual recognition of learning partners when other PSTs kept in mind the concept of name-calling and provided more evidence of this conflict learning about it at the same time. For instance:

(2) “Regarding my experience in the classroom, I consider that there are several problems in the school. A kind of conflict in my classroom is the use of nicknames. This is a very ambiguous thing because some students like to have nicknames, but some others don’t, to the point that they feel uncomfortable or insecure” (PST 2).

(3) “There are some conflicts that are evident with my fourth-grade group. For instance, in my class, there is a student who calls his classmates names, makes jokes, and tries to annoy others in different ways” (PST 3).

El Masry and Mohd Saad (2018) found in their study that PSTs “underestimated the value of communication and mingling with the broader social context within the school” (p. 972), different from them, we observed in this study that PSTs took advantage communication among them in the CoP when identifying the most common conflicts such as name-calling, teasing and taunting.

Shared Knowledge

Due to the fact that teachers spend most of their time interacting only with the students, there is no room for receiving peer feedback about their practice (Dowling, 2009). That is the reason why once PSTs were provided with the opportunity to participate in a community, it was observed they were eager to share the strategies, methods or techniques they used to intervene in the conflicts. For instance, as seen in examples below (4) and (5), the following comments made by two PSTs show their ideas on how to solve conflicts in the classroom:

(4) “Students should feel that they can ask for forgiveness, forgive and improve their behavior” (PST 4).

(5) *“It is important to say that the teacher is a guide, not the person who must solve the conflict, for that reason he/she should motivate his/her students to solve their own conflicts”* (PST 5).

They both are referring to what is known as the restorative approach and restitution process where people not only take responsibility for their own mistakes but also learn from them so they can improve the relationships with their peers (Smith, Fisher & Frey, 2015 as cited in Smeltzer & Erb, 2018). This information is relevant because according to Smeltzer and Erb (2018) the project “Making Amends”, designed under this approach, has been a great tool to diminish teachers’ participation in classroom conflicts and to empower students to decide how they are going to repair the harm and resolve the conflict, as mentioned above in the second comment.

Taking this into account, we hoped these contributions were enlightening for other teachers who assured they preferred the traditional approach, as it is seen in entries (6) and (7):

(6) *“If it is a disciplinary conflict, it is necessary to take into account the regular conduct of the institution according to the seriousness of the matter”* (PST 6).

(7) *“If they cannot solve their problems, I sit them apart and give them negative points in the disciplinary grade”* (PST 7).

Because as Gossen (2004) pointed out, disadvantages of this approach include teenagers being “subjected to anger, guilt, humiliation, or isolation” and the weakening of “relationships in the long run”.

Offering Solutions

Lastly, the practice community was used as an instrument to offer solutions they might not have thought for the conflicts they have encountered. Since it was observed how comfortable PSTs were when sharing their cases, we decided to go further and give some feedback and ideas to implement in the class. As an example, one participant commented on a situation she had when teaching fruits to a group with one student from Venezuela:

(8) *“I brought some pictures of fruits to show in class. We remembered the fruits’ names in Spanish and then I showed the name in English. The problem was when I took the passion fruit and everybody said maracuyá ‘passion fruit’ but at the same time the student*

from Venezuela said panchita. Students made fun of her because of how she named the fruit. I continued the class and told her 'in Colombia we say maracuyá` and that was all' PST8.

The PST teacher commented later she knew she had made a mistake when she told the student “In Colombia we say maracuyá”; therefore, we made several suggestions or recommendations like not to translate the vocabulary if she uses flashcards or to use mnemonics as another option to teach vocabulary. Moreover, because translation is quite common with young learners, we advised her to be prepared in case translation comes up.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study show that building a community of practice with pre-service teachers, boosted participants’ professional development. Throughout the stages, PSTs were able not only to identify common issues in their classrooms but also to learn about them by interacting with each other. Furthermore, it was evidenced that participants were eager to participate by including not only their experiences and knowledge but also using references and citing authors. Hence, we found that the CoP increased their willingness and abilities to do research and to recognize their partners as valuable sources of information. Similarly to Kong (2018) who concluded in his study that “the teacher community of practice has not only enhanced the ESL teachers’ teaching and research abilities, but also strengthened the exchange and interaction among the members.”

Since building a community of practice using a blog created a space in which participants felt comfortable, pre-service teachers were able to use the blog as a teaching journal, that is to say, despite being aware of the fact everyone was going to be able to see what they were posting and because the community of practice made the pre-service teachers feel they would not be judged, members tried to be as specific as possible in each comment without being afraid of being honest about their teaching practices and their ways to approach conflicts inside the classrooms. As a result, the blog became in a sort of teaching journal for pre-service teachers and as we mentioned above, traditionally teacher journals have played an important role in group discussions, so in this case, teacher journals were replaced by the blog.

Besides, it can also be concluded that using an online tool like a blog offers easy access to the information, saves time, lets participants interact no matter the distance, and it is convenient. These are some characteristics that face-to-face communities don’t offer, thus, it is suggested that online communities of practice are built to assist new educators in their learning process in an interactive way.

Finally, by interacting in a community of practice, members can obtain pieces of advice, suggestions and new ideas to approach different issues that are affecting their teaching labor, from their tutors or other participants. Moreover, these suggestions and advice can be provided with feedback based on the cozy environment created by the community of practice.

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