Dialogic Understanding of Student In-service Teachers’ Transformative Learning Experiences in a Double-layered CoP

Kyungmee Lee & Clare Brett
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada
kyungmee.lee@mail.utoronto.ca, clare.brett@utoronto.ca

There have been two emerging efforts to develop teachers’ CoPs and design effective online courses to facilitate teachers’ transformative learning in the field of teacher professional development. However, these two approaches to current teacher education have not been practically integrated with each other and their collective effects on changing teachers’ teaching practice remain unexplored despite their potential synergy. To resolve this conflicted educational situation, we have conducted a design-based research to develop a double-layered CoP model by integrating CoP theories and online course design principles. Taking Bakhtin’s Dialogism as an analytic lens, this paper shows the educational potential that the double-layered CoP model has for in-service student teachers’ transformative online learning, which is effectively connected to their teaching practices.

Background

There have been emerging efforts to develop teachers’ Community of Practice (CoP) in the field of teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond & Bill, 1997; Hawkins, 1996; Kooy, 2009; MacDonald, 2008). The original concept of CoP was proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe learning through active participation in the practices of social communities. Applying the concept of CoP to teacher development practices shows great promise in enabling in-service teachers without enough time or resources to focus on improving their teaching practices and to build professional relationships. Through ongoing interactions in CoPs, teachers have extended opportunities to reflect on their teaching practices and learn from other teachers.

As technological innovation increases, there has been a parallel emphasis on encouraging technological integration into teacher professional development practices through means such as online teacher education courses, which emphasize teachers’ different forms of interaction to construct meaningful knowledge for their teaching. Online education practices, similar to CoP, is rooted in a theoretical base of social constructivism that views learning as social interactions and values dialogues between learners who are in different stages of cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). The major purpose of online learning design, therefore, is not to deliver particular knowledge to teachers, but to provide them with various opportunities to interact with peer-teachers, reflect on their own learning processes; and furthermore, transfer the learning outcomes to their real-life practices (Breuleux, Laferriere, & Bracewell, 1998; Thompson,
Schmidt, & Davis, 2003; Laferriere, Lamon, & Chen, 2006; Schlager, Fusco, & Schank, 2002). Unfortunately, these two major approaches to current teacher professional development have not been practically integrated with each other although there have been several efforts to build communities through online courses. Furthermore, their collective effects on changing teachers’ teaching practice remain unexplored although both approaches regard teachers’ transformative learning as the ultimate aim of teacher development (Servage, 2008). To resolve this conflicted educational situation, we have conducted a design-based research to develop a double-layered CoP model by integrating teachers’ CoP and online course design principles (Lee & Brett, 2013). Taking Bakhtin’s Dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) as an analytic lens this paper shows the educational potential that the double-layered CoP model has for student teachers’ transformative online learning.

A Double-Layered CoP Model

We are using a double-layered CoP model as a fundamental design principle to conceptualize the potential learning outcomes for online teacher education courses (Lee & Brett, 2013). The model consists of four different learning activities: course preparation, foundation building, interactive learning, and knowledge transfer. Schön’s (1983) concept of “Reflection on Action” in which practitioners reflect on their behaviors and practices and often document their intellectual growth and intentional changes, is also added to the model as a critical process for understanding how meaningful learning can be consolidated (Schön, 1991).

The online course structure we are using to explore the model includes three major interactive learning assignments: 1) participating in and leading discussion on weekly readings, 2) conducting a case study in a particular educational context, and 3) writing an insight group paper integrating different perspectives. In addition, writing individual learning journals and reading others’ ones, students can increase their reflective learning opportunities. Different forms of interaction among student teachers and instructors emerge through the course and a shared goal to nurture their course as a CoP is pursued through these interactions. In parallel with nurturing a so-called ‘Internal CoP,’ one that develops inside the online course environment, student teachers are asked to search and participate in an ‘External CoP,’ a self-directed CoP outside the course, based on various personal needs. Despite differences and individualities of their external CoP experiences, student teachers are encouraged to bring those experiences into course discussions and share their thoughts with the peers within the three different course structures.

An Analytic Framework

According to Laura Servage (2008), to uncover the complex problems deeply embedded in current school contexts such as social injustices or inequalities, teachers should face the seriousness of these educational issues. In order to address those issues that have been long
situated in their teaching practices, it is required to alter the fundamental beliefs about teaching and to change their teaching practices radically. This whole transformative process necessarily is accompanied by dialogues for 1) representing the self to others, 2) sharing different perspectives, 3) assessing various values, and 4) reconstructing new beliefs (Mezirow, 2003). A supportive community is one of the most critical requirements for such dialogues since transformative learning experiences may cause different psychic reactions such as hostility, denial, or distress. Furthermore, personal transformation cannot be extended to more systemic changes in school or social context without further collaborative efforts (Servage, 2008).

Although social constructivist theories also suggest interaction as an essential component for successful learning, the characteristics of interaction required for transformative learning may be distinct from those of social constructivism. To examine student teachers’ interactions in transformative learning, therefore, using other analytic tools may be helpful and Bakhtin’s Dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) could be one of those useful tools.

Bakhtin suggests that all discourse is situated in a particular place and time and that all thinking and communicating processes involve understanding and representing oneself through others or socio-historical circumstances around them (Holquist, 2002). A dialogical understanding of learning emphasizes the importance of interaction amongst learners for making meaning out of their conversation and constructing knowledge within diverse “social learning spaces” (Zack & Graves, 2001, p. 235). In a Bakhtinian approach to learning, it is critical to bring diverse voices into the classroom dialogue and to share the meaning through dialogic interaction. However, developing the individual understanding of self and others, which is not a homogeneous piece of knowledge but a unique perception or ideological lens, is the heart of Dialogism (Freeman & Ball, 2004; Hamston, 2006; Kubli, 2005).

Among different concepts Dialogism suggests, we utilize three critical principles of dialogue for this study: 1) outsideness, 2) heteroglossia, and 3) simultaneity. In social dialogue, participants from different social and cultural contexts are inevitably outsiders to each other (Marchenkova, 2005). Heteroglossia refers to how two bodies in the same event have different relative positions so multiple perspectives and narratives coming from participants’ backgrounds co-exist in a dialogic environment. Another fundamental condition of dialogue is simultaneity; where meaning is constructed only through simultaneous events of meaning-making that accompanies acts of speaking and listening or observing and being observed in a particular setting (Holquist, 2004).

**Research Methods and Data Sources**

This paper presents the data from a qualitative case study based on a graduate online course designed using a double-layer CoP model. Most participants in this course were graduate students who were also in-service teachers with diverse demographic characteristics, online learning experiences, teaching experiences and technological competences. It was a twelve week
long asynchronous discussion-based course using online readings and resources about educational applications of computer mediated communication. The authors of this paper were the course instructor and graduate teaching assistant, closely investigating student teachers’ online dialogue through participant observation. Different course artifacts in the online environment called “Pepper” were collected including discussion threads, learning journals, and course assignments. The discourses created by student teachers through the course period were analyzed using extensive reading based on the analytic framework discussed above.

**Results and Discussion**

We found that in line with transformative learning process (Mezirow, 2003), student teachers were engaged in different interactive phases through the course discussion: 1) presenting simple ideas without revealing the self, 2) representing the self to others presenting relatively superficial thoughts, 3) sharing different perspectives with in-depth description of one’s thoughts, 4) assessing and recognizing various values in others’ perspectives, 5) dialogic understanding of the perspectives with expressing either agreement or disagreement, 6) reconstructing new meanings and beliefs, which are significantly different from one’s previous ones. We considered the dialogue involving the last phase of interaction as the evidence that transformative learning actually took place and noticed such dialogue also met all three principles for Bakhtinian dialogue as we demonstrate next.

1) *Outsideness:* *In dialogue, all beings are in different positions, so relative.*

Outsideness of dialogue was an internal and natural characteristic of the online course. Unlike the face-to-face discussion where all participants physically gather at one place at one time, the asynchronous format of online discussion allowed student teachers to choose their own physical space and time to participate. Within the shared online environment, each discussion was allocated an independent space and each student teacher created his or her own learning journal space as an entry that could be hyperlinked to any other entry anywhere. All discussion and journal entries, therefore, were spatially outside each other in the environment. As one student teacher mentioned that she had a thrill from clicking other teachers’ learning journal pages feeling that she was sneaking into others’ rooms and reading their diaries, student teachers in course dialogue became outside observers to each other. Individual CoP experiences outside the course environment also maintained such outsideness of dialogue but which were brought into the internal course CoP.

2) *Heteroglossia:* *In dialogue, multiple perspectives coexist.*

Twelve student teachers coming from different backgrounds and working in diverse educational

---

1 Pepper is a locally developed online collaborative discussion environment with text, messaging and media capacities used as one of the online learning platforms in the Institution.
contexts brought more than twelve perspectives into the course dialogue. To build an internal course CoP where participants feel safe to present and question different beliefs, we emphasized the value of being different throughout the course. Sharing one’s perspectives and expressing disagreement to others were essential preconditions for transformative learning required reconstructing new beliefs. One teacher activist in the course challenged the common belief that technology can improve educational quality and raised different social issues related to educational computing. As the course discussion progressed, we observed several teachers changing their perceptions of educational technology. Diverse stories from twelve external CoPs also increased the richness, so-called heteroglossia, of the course dialogue.

3) Simultaneity: In dialogue, meaning-making, understanding and being understood, is a shared event.

Escaping from simple technological dual modes of online communication, which are synchronous and asynchronous, student teachers were engaged in simultaneous events of meaning-making through interacting with other teachers in different sets of time and space. Teachers as readers of others’ entries that could have been written minutes, hours, or weeks ago constructed certain meanings out of them and responded to them anytime during the course. Such temporal distance amongst teachers, interestingly, facilitated the simultaneity of dialogue by giving them sufficient time to reflect on different ideas. In Bakhtinian sense, teachers were engaged in simultaneous interactions with each other through the entries remained in the shared online space. The course CoP where teachers discussed and reflected on their external CoP experiences with other teachers allowed them a time-space to reconstruct new meanings out of the experiences. Several teachers talked about how they had continued course discussions and subsequently had more meaningful dialogue with members in their external CoPs, located in their real-life settings. Such cross-CoP interaction indicates another level of simultaneity, which connects teachers’ learning to teaching practices.

Conclusion

As Bakhtin’s dialogism suggests, teachers can better understand different perceptions and develop new beliefs through dialogic interaction. Our online course offers teachers two CoPs, two different dialogic spaces, connecting their learning experiences to teaching practices. The internal CoP provides teachers a safe place for deeper reflection on their external CoP experiences, whereas teachers use their external CoPs as an experimental space to situate their learning into real-life practices. In the course, teachers build a theoretical foundation for their external CoP participation, which turns into useful learning resources to deepen course discussions again. Figure 2 shows the interrelationship between two CoPs, created through student teachers’ iterative journeys between two CoPs.
This paper is an early attempt to conceptualize a useful approach to relate in-service teacher’s course learning with their teaching context in a way that enhances and deepens both contexts. Currently, we are looking in more detail at both successful and unsuccessful cases in this course and developing a set of exemplars that illustrate how the internal and external CoPs may work synergistically. Further research will apply this model to other course contexts for this population to test the robustness of this model.

References


