

Building a Community of Practice with Pre-Service Teachers: A Study Using Asynchronous Communication

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Abstract

Asynchronous communication, such as the use of blogs, can be a powerful vehicle to create a community of practice for teachers. This article presents a qualitative study in which a cohort of pre-service world language (WL) teachers at a large university wrote and responded to blogs during the final semester of their year-long internship and were subsequently interviewed a half-year following completion of their program. The questions driving the study were: What topics were the most important for the participants to write about? How did these topics continue to be of primary importance in their initial teaching experience? What impact did a free choice of topic have on the blogging experience? Results of the study report how asynchronous communication was effectively utilized to build a peer-generated community of practice providing insight into how teacher preparation programs might support beginning teachers.

Keywords: asynchronous communication, blogs, Community of Practice, pre-service teachers

1. Introduction

Asynchronous communication is becoming widely used in teacher preparation programs, as well as in the teaching community at large (Ahern et al, 2006; Lord & Lomicka, 2004). Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) can facilitate professional collaboration and encourage critical reflection (Lee, 2009). Additional advantages of asynchronous communication include encouraging a reflective practice, a reduced sense of isolation, influence on classroom practices, and formation of communities of practice (Barnett, 2002). Asynchronous communication encourages a sense of community, in that pre-service teachers can reflect upon the topics of greatest concern to them. Additionally, the responses of their peers can provide a means of affirmation and support for the important issues facing beginning teachers. The purpose of this study was to identify the key concerns and interests of pre-service world language (WL) teachers, identified through their blog essays and one-on-one interviews. These initial interests and concerns were then compared with their perspectives concerning the same issues following a semester of first-year teaching. The responses to blogs, posted by fellow interns and the instructor, were analyzed for their impact on building a CoP (Community of Practice) and the effects of having a free choice of blog topics were examined. The implications drawn from the results of the study inform both the development of Communities of Practice, and teacher training. This study has the following organization: First, a review of the related literature describes the use of asynchronous communication with pre-service teachers and the Community of Practice that can result from an online forum.

Next, the methods of the study are described which include an overview of the study, description of the participants, data collection methods and procedures, and analysis of the data. The results and findings are subsequently reported, followed by a discussion of these results and their implications for future research and teacher training.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Asynchronous Communication

Computer-assisted learning environments have increasingly been utilized by both teachers and learners as an avenue to foster their personal knowledge development through meaningful negotiation and communication (Ahern et al, 2006; Lord & Lomicka, 2004). Web-based technology supports collaborative learning that enriches learning, both for individual knowledge construction and group knowledge sharing (Liaw, Chen, & Huang, 2008). One type of asynchronous communication, blogs, allows people to exchange information without time and space constraints, to broaden their knowledge, and to meet personal needs and interests at the same time (Yang, 2009). It also affords an opportunity to engage in discussion with others about issues that are essential to a teacher's professional development (Romano, 2008) in general and to a beginning teacher's professional growth in particular (Nicholson & Bond, 2003). The benefits of using asynchronous communication in the field of teacher training have been documented in the literature (Abrams, 2005; Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Schrum, 1998; Robey, Khoo, & Powers, 2000; Rogers, 2000; Stacey, Smith & Barty, 2004). Barnett (2002) identified four major themes concerning how network-based communications has influenced teacher professional development. The researcher reports that networking technologies can: reduce teacher isolation and support sharing; foster reflection on practice; influence teaching practice; and support the formation of communities of practice (Barnett, 2002). Furthermore, Gannon-Leary and Fontainha (2007) described the benefits of using information communication technologies as a sense of connectedness, of shared passion, and a deepening of knowledge derived from ongoing interaction. Knowledge development can be continuous, cyclical, and fluid. This is especially seen in the development of Communities of Practice (CoP). The last of these outcomes, the development of a community of practice, is a major focus of this article.

2.2 Communities of Practice

The term Community of Practice was described in four seminal works: Lave and Wenger (1991), Brown and Duguid (1991), Wenger (1998), and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). Lave and Wenger (1991) described a CoP as a group who share a common interest and a desire to learn from and contribute to the community with their variety of experiences. Johnson (2001) outlined the components of a Community of Practice as: different levels of expertise that are simultaneously present in the community of practice; fluid progression from being a novice to an expert; and completely authentic tasks and communications. There are several advantages of establishing a CoP for beginning teachers. Members of Communities of Practice are thought to be more efficient and effective conduits of information and experiences. CoPs help foster the process of storytelling among colleagues which, in turn, helps them to strengthen their skills on the job (Brown & Duguid, 1991). A CoP can be an effective hothouse in which new ideas germinate, new methods and tools are developed, and new communities are rooted. Additionally, the CoP can help professionals gain access to, and facility with, ideas, methods, content, and colleagues; help novices learn about the profession through apprenticeship and peripheral participation; and identify established professionals as valued resources and community leaders through informal mentoring and participation in multiple work groups (Lee, 2009; Schlager et al., 2002). Pre-service teachers within the CoP can communicate about issues of most concern and respond to others in a dialog that contributes to their reflections about these important initial experiences in teaching. However, there is a dearth of published research regarding which particular issues pre-service teachers find to be the most compelling and important, and how this information can inform instructors guiding their pre-service preparation. Thus, the researchers conducted the present study to investigate these issues.

3. Methods and Procedures

3.1 Purpose of the Study

The primary focus of the present study was to examine how asynchronous communication can be used to establish a community of practice among pre-service world language teachers that supported their learning in a way that was authentic to their own personal classroom experiences.

3.2 Research Questions

The research questions guiding the investigation were:

- What topics were the most important for the participants to write about?
- How did these topics continue to be of primary importance in their initial teaching experience?
- What impact did a free choice of topic have on the blogging assignment?

3.3 Procedures

A qualitative study was designed for one class of four WL interns who were in the second semester of their internship year. In Phase One of the study, the students were required to write one blog entry per week on a course intranet site designated for instructor-intern communication, and respond to the online entries of their classmates in a timely fashion. (The topics of the entries were selected by the interns themselves, although a list of questions was provided as examples at the beginning of the assignment.) Phase Two of the study consisted of individual interviews conducted with the participants 5 months following the completion of the participants' internships.

3.4 Participants

3.4.1 Selection of Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants in order gain insight from a specific group, in this case, pre-service teachers (Merriam, 2009). There was an element of convenience sampling, since the researchers had access to the participants, both through the weekly seminar led by the intern supervisor, and through the weekly meetings taught by the advising professor.

3.4.2 Description of Participants

The four participants were all graduate students in a teacher training program for world languages. They had each earned their bachelor's degree in a WL and were in the middle of their fifth year, earning a master's degree in education. The participants were in the second semester of a year-long internship placement in nearby schools. Interns in the study taught two one-and-a-half hour blocks, half of a full teaching load. The subject specific content for Antonio and Athena was Latin, Anna taught German, and Maria was a Spanish teacher (all pseudonyms). The genders of the group were three women and one man. All were non-Hispanic, White adults in their mid-20s and came from middle level socio-economic backgrounds. The intern supervisor was an active member of the blogging community. She read and responded to each of the blogs and reminded interns to post each week. Six months after their internship, three of the four participants were teaching in the state, and one was teaching in South America.

3.5 Data Collection

The data collected for the study came from two sources. One set of data consisted of written entries on the course blog website, in which each participant wrote approximately 10 blog entries and responded to each other's reflections. The second set of data came from semi-structured interviews which were conducted with three of the four participants 5 months after the blogging window closed. (The fourth post-intern was out of country and not teaching a WL and was subsequently not included in the interview segment of the study.) Each of these data sources are addressed separately.

3.5.1 Blog Entries

The participants were asked to write one blog entry a week, posted to the course website on the Blackboard feature of the large southwestern US university website. They were advised to "reflect deeply" about their school-based experiences, but the topics were self-selected. (A list of 15 prompts was offered as ideas that might prompt their writing.) The date window for blog entries and responses was from mid-January to mid-April of the spring semester. Anna and Athena each posted 11 entries, with 2,773 and 3,514 words, respectively. Maria posted 9 entries totaling 2,212 words, and Antonio posted 7 entries with 1,521 words. There were a total of 31 peer responses to the blog entries (approximately 8 reflections per participant). The postings were not anonymous. That is, the participants and supervisor knew who had written the entries, as well as who had responded to the postings. However, only the four participants, the intern supervisor and the professor had access to the site.

3.5.2 Interviews

Five months following completion of their internship year, the participants were asked to volunteer for 1-hour interviews. Three of the four participants were interviewed, as they were still located in the area. A semi-structured interview protocol, constructed from the themes identified in analysis of the blog entries, was established to guide the interview process. The interviews took place 5 months following the participants' internship year (October and November) and closure of the blogging window. The passage of time was important in order for participants to process their experiences and reflect on the meaning of their postings as it applied to the beginning of their classroom teaching experiences. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcripts of the interviews were made utilizing Dragon Naturally Speaking software for subsequent qualitative data analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Content Analysis

An inductive process called Content Analysis (Merriam, 2009) was utilized to analyze the data. The researchers were investigating the common interests and concerns that emerged from the blogs and responses, and therefore analyzed the frequency and variety of messages. Themes were crafted primarily based on the documentary evidence of the blog entries. Interview transcripts were another source of evidence used for analysis.

3.6.1.1 First cycle of Coding

The first cycle employed the elemental type method of coding called descriptive coding (Saldana, 2009). The central topic of a passage of data was summarized in a word or phrase, and similar topics grouped for the second cycle of coding. Sample topics included Mentor Teacher Relationships and Pacing. Values coding was also utilized in order to reflect the participants' values, attitudes and beliefs. This coding identified which topics were the most important to reflect upon, in the minds of the participants.

3.6.1.2 Second Cycle of Coding

The primary goal during the Second Cycle coding was to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from the array of first cycle codes (Saldana, 2009). As such, pattern coding was selected for the next coding cycle. The documents and interview transcripts were hand-coded; the pattern coding resulted in clear themes and commonalities across the spectrum of the data.

3.7 Verifying of Data

Multiple strategies, including confirmation or triangulation, were used to strengthen the validity and reliability of qualitative analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Multiple interviewees were used so that as many perspectives as possible could be included. The interview questions were used to confirm patterns found in the document coding as well as to expand upon those data. Agreement between and among the participants was identified to address validation issues (Janesick, 2004). A member check was by accomplished by sending the transcripts and notes to the participants and who were then asked to verify the accuracy of the information reported in the transcript (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Janesick, 2004). According to Creswell and Clark (2007), there are a number of ways that researchers can increase the reliability of their qualitative data analysis. A quality recording device was used, and the researchers transcribed the recording using transcription software. A research diary was kept throughout the study, in which the researchers identified possible ways that they might influence the content of the blog reflections and interview responses in a manner that did not accurately reflect the participants' actual experiences. The study's reliability was also enhanced by ensuring that the research questions were clearly outlined and the design of the study matched these questions, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

3.8 Bias and Ethical Considerations for the Study

There were several issues that were addressed concerning bias in the study. First, participants were aware that their entries would be read both by their supervisor and their university methods professor/program advisor. This may have influenced the choice of blog topics and tone of writing. Second, the entries were not anonymous; the participants were identified with their blogs, as were the respondents. This may have inhibited the content of both the entries and subsequently, the interview protocol. Last, it is impossible to completely eradicate the bias of researchers; they bring their own backgrounds, experiences and beliefs to the study. Member-checking, triangulation between data sources and keeping a reflective research journal, however, were three processes for minimizing the impact of bias on the study.

4. Results and Discussion

Whereby full discussions of the participants' data are not presented here, the results of the study are fully supported by the data captured from the participants and are divided into two major components. The first reports the impact that a free choice of topic had on the blogging assignment; the second concerns the topics that the participants chose to write about in their blogs. The blog responses, in particular, indicate a potential for establishing a Community of Practiced based upon the experiences of and support by their peers, who are facing similar challenges and successes.

4.1 Free Choice of Topic

One distinctive element of this particular asynchronous communication assignment was that the participants had a choice of blog topics. Students were given a list of 15 reflection questions as examples of topics they might write about, but they were not required to reflect on coursework, theory, or other types of structured prompts. As corroborated in the research of Arnold and Ducate (2006), the participants in the present study felt that there were benefits to this type of design. One of these was a forum for venting emotion. Anna commented, "I think the way that we had it where it was very free of us to choose our own topics, was a very good venue for us to vent....it really kind of helped us mentally to be able to feel like "Uh, I'm having this problem! Is anyone else having this problem?" Anna also commented that many other professors had required them to reflect in blogs that semester, so much so that she wondered if it were "a conspiracy." Her original feeling was that it was just another assignment forced upon her by professors. However, she said, "As we did it, we were like, 'You know what? This is a little bit different than what other people have asked us to do, because we can be freer, and we can have a conversation, and we don't have to worry about being politically correct.'" At the end of her entry she added, "Oh, this is my one chance to say what I really feel."

Athena was also asked to compare this assignment with other types of asynchronous communication in her courses. She responded, "The blogs that I had to write, especially for the technology courses, were focused on how many words we wrote... These blogs were really about conversations. In this assignment, we wrote about what mattered most to us." Antonio also spoke about the value of choice. He said, "...it was sort of a good venue to let things go...It's therapeutic to get the low points off your chest...and have other people say, 'Yes, Antonio, I know what you're going through. I'm right there with you.'" While the blogging assignment was initially viewed by the participants as just another assignment, they changed their opinions of its value after taking part in the CoP, not unlike the results of research reported by Lee (2009). One intern shared, "I actually enjoyed reading everybody's blogs for different reasons, because we all really did have different experiences... it was just good to see what everyone else was going through... there were common concerns even though we were all having different experiences." Entries from others stated, "a lot of the time we interns would just sort of talk to each other like we would if we were sitting here in a coffee shop" and "I did read the responses that others made to my entries. The responses of my colleagues were more focused on affirming, supporting, and making each other feel good."

4.2 Blog Topics

The topics that interns chose to write about are of primary importance to this study and indicate what was of major concern to them during their second semester of teaching in their year-long internship year. Their interests and concerns are the foundation upon which a Community of Practice is built. Through reflecting upon and communicating about these topics, interns processed their experiences and thought deeply about what is important in their teaching (Black, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Participants wrote a total of 38 blog entries, for a total of 10,020 words. Many ideas and experiences were reflected upon during the 3-month period. Nonetheless, three main themes surfaced through analysis. They were: Building Relationships with Students, Time Management and Pacing and Working with the Mentor Teacher.

4.2.1 Building Relationships with Students

The participants wrote about building relationships with students 18 times and their reflections fell into two categories: successful interactions as well as challenges encountered.

4.2.1.1 Blog Data

The pre-service teachers wrote a great deal about concerns and challenges with building relationships with students, which suggests that this is an important topic to address in teacher education classes. Three examples are provided: an experience visiting another school; a situation regarding tobacco use; and a confrontation between intern and student. Antonio wrote about an observation that he made while visiting another school and the concerns the experience raised about his own classroom management. He wrote, "This experience showed me what will happen if I let things get out of hand. It has always been hard for me to be strict, but I will do what I have to." Antonio was accustomed to working with students in a positive environment of learning. It was eye-opening for him to realize that he may not always teach motivated, enthusiastic learners. Maria, one of the other WL intern, had a confrontation with a student concerning tobacco use after which the mother of the student wrote several aggressive emails to her concerning this issue. Even though the majority of Maria's relationships were positive, she had difficulties establishing them.

Athena also reflected upon her struggles with students and in her second blog, she described a dream concerning her ability to manage a class. "I was teaching my class...several of the students were being defiant outright.... instead of keeping my usual cool and laughing it off...I reached out and slapped him." Athena wrote about several real incidents with students. In one reflection she wrote, "...there's something truly terrifying about a group of people roughly your size who decide to go into all-out rebellion against you.... that was honestly one of the longest minutes of my life." It is in reflections like these that a supportive CoP is critical. Athena knew that her fellow interns liked and respected her. She also had positive, caring relationships with her intern supervisor and professor. Because of this supportive network, Athena was able to share her deepest fears and most frustrating experiences. In her ninth reflection, Athena described another difficult interaction with students in which she lost her temper with them when they did not listen to instructions. Athena continued to work through her thoughts and feelings about student relationships and the way she managed her classes. In her penultimate reflection, she had processed a great deal of experiences, and came to this conclusion, "It got me thinking--building a relationship with your kids is so subtle, you might not even believe it's happening sometimes... we end up knowing each other very well." Through these reflections, it is clear that the interns' primary concern was building positive relationships with their students. Through their blogs, they were able to discuss their joys and successes concerning their students; they were able to share painful and challenging experiences, reflect upon their significance, and find deeper meaning in their teaching.

4.2.1.2 Interview Data

Each of the participants referred to the importance of building relationships with students. Anna spoke at length about the importance of building relationships with students and observed, "Relationship building with this particular demographic is really hard, because they have trust issues, and they are used to not trusting adults.... I am just beginning to see relationships start to form with these kids.... I care about their success." She described two particular students, sisters, who were a challenge to reach. Anna told a story about trying to build a relationship with the older student, and how she tried to convince the student that regardless of how she acted, Anna still cared about her success. She completed the story with what a student said to her, "Who says that you have to care about us. That's not part of your job." Anna retorted, "No one has told me that I have to care about you. I choose to care about you." Both Antonio and Athena also talked about specific students that they struggled to build relationships with. For Athena, the student was a girl in her class who was shy and reticent, much like Athena herself. She talked about her attempts to draw this girl out. Antonio stated that the challenging students for him were two boys who were much like he is. He also said that building student relationships continued to be important to him. These examples demonstrate that building relationships with students is of primary concern to these beginning teachers.

4.2.2 Time Management and Pacing

4.2.2.1 Blog Data

Of the many elements of planning, instruction and assessment, use of time was the most frequently reflected upon by the participants. Their primary concern was of course pacing and the question "How do I cover all of the material?" In most cases, they reflected that it was difficult to plan and revise lessons to teach the necessary units during a semester.

Athena wrote, "...I would need to cover about one unit and a half per quarter to get the students where they need to be....the end of the quarter is next week, and I've just finished my first unit of new material." A snow day during the semester resulted in both an increase in the pre-service teachers' sense of effectiveness and also a concern about pacing. Maria, Anna and Athena found that the day off was a help to their instruction; Antonio was more reserved in his enthusiasm. While he enjoyed the day off, he realized the implications on his pacing when he blogged, "I won't...say that I don't enjoy the snow. I cherish these days off from my busy schedule, but I am afraid that they will add up as the year goes on....My schedule was tight already without the snow." Pacing and time management are difficult issues for even experienced teachers. The struggle with these concepts was evidenced in the reflections of the interns.

4.2.2.2 Interview Data

Antonio and Anna reiterated the importance of time management and pacing within their first months of teaching. Anna was especially emphatic about her ongoing struggles with these issues. She stated, "Oh Gee. Time management—there isn't enough time to manage! It's very difficult...trying to instruct bell to bell and then you have all of these other things...plan my lessons, do research and try to find new things that work." Antonio also reconfirmed the importance of time management and pacing. "I always call November and April 'Hell Months' because you're going to get sick and everything is due, and you're going to be working twice as hard.... thank God for Nyquil, Mucinex and a semi-long weekend." The interview data confirmed that these two topics-- Building Relationships with Students, and Time Management and Pacing-- were the issues and concerns of most importance in their internship field experience. They also corroborated that these issues continued to be of primary importance in their first year of teaching following their internship program.

4.2.3 Working with Mentor Teachers

4.2.3.1 Blog Entries

Working with mentor teachers was the third most frequently discussed topic, mentioned in 15 entries. These reflections fell into two major categories: positive feelings of support by the mentor teacher and the challenges that the interns faced working with mentor teachers with different teaching philosophies or with mentor teachers who were not always in attendance to give support and guidance.

4.2.3.1.1 Positive Relationships

In the case of Maria, she reported a great deal of support from her mentor, and recorded feelings of gratefulness to her. This emphasizes the important, positive role that mentor teachers can bring to the pre-service teacher's experience. Maria wrote in her fourth reflection, "...having (Ms. X) as a mentor this year has been so great! She has been teaching for 15 years and is still constantly coming up with new ways to engage our students. The best part...SHE SHARES THEM ALL WITH ME!" Maria went on to say that a new intern from another university had a mentor teacher who did not provide materials or otherwise support his planning. This helped Maria appreciate her own mentor. Clearly, this was a mentor/intern relationship that was working well. Anna also had a positive working relationship with her mentor teacher. She had been moved from her first internship assignment because of irreconcilable differences in philosophy and teaching style with her mentor teacher. Therefore, this new positive relationship was a critical one. She wrote, "So... the first week at a new school went really well. I was very nervous about changing schools mid-year, but it worked as smoothly as possible.... I was able to begin everything feeling very organized and put together." It was important, then, that the interns communicated well with their mentor teachers, and that the mentors provided materials, years of experience, and organizational techniques.

4.2.3.1.2 Challenges

Several interns also recorded challenges working with their mentors. These challenges included working alone prematurely, differences in teaching styles, and incompatible teaching philosophies. In Anna's case, her mentor teacher was frequently absent. She discussed the impact this had on her own development in four blog entries. One example is the following. "So [my mentor] is gone Thursday and Friday of this week....AND we have Open House tonight,none of the administrators showed up to do their part, and the sub...didn't show either. So I covered the entire thing by myself." Overall, both Maria and Anna had positive, supportive relationships with their mentor teachers. Since Anna reflected upon their work together five times, and Maria wrote about her mentor three times, this topic was of primary concern to these two interns.

Athena also had a relatively positive relationship with her mentor teacher. However, there were fundamental differences in their teaching philosophies that Athena wrote about five times. Her main challenges concerned student acceptance of her, differences in types of teaching strategies, and incompatible assessment philosophies. Athena reflected several times on the difficulties students had understanding that her expectations for them were different than her mentor teacher. Athena attempted to establish her own set of expectations for and relationships with students, yet she felt that students resisted her. In one of her last entries, she blogged, “The atmospheres that [my mentor teacher] and I produce are so different that it's jarring for me to take command of a classroom that clearly expects an attitude from me that I simply don't have.” She adds in frustration, “I was expecting them to realize that I am in most ways [her] opposite, and there was a lot of friction when both of us were so disappointed in our expectations [for each other.” The challenges in the working relationship between Athena and her mentor teacher were most evident in their philosophy about assessment. Athena felt that her mentor did not challenge the students sufficiently in their evaluation; students sometimes resisted Athena’s more stringent methods. Athena’s entries on working with her mentor teacher and their conflicting philosophy of assessment indicate a deep sense of reflecting upon her own experience during her internship. By considering the differences between her own philosophy and that of her mentor teacher, Athena was able to crystallize her own beliefs about teaching and instruction.

4.2.3.2 Interview Data

The interviews with the participants yielded no significant insights yet reconfirmed in part the focus and content of their pre-service blog entries and served to emphasize both the challenges and benefits of working with new colleagues, some of whom were assigned to the new teachers as peer mentor teachers.

5. Conclusions

Two topics were of primary interest and concern for these pre-service teachers both during their internship and in the first months of their independent classroom teaching, post- internship. The first was that of building relationships with students. All of the participants wrote on this topic in their blogs multiple times and subsequently discussed recent classroom issues in their interviews. The entries by Anna, Maria and Athena indicate deep reflection that went far beyond classroom management. They were not merely attempting to control student behavior but build meaningful relationships in difficult circumstances. The second topic of primary concern was that of time management and pacing. Again, these issues were of importance both during the internship year and in their first semester of teaching on their own. The interests and concerns of beginning teachers have a great implication for establishing the importance of Communities of Practice, as well as for addressing these concerns within teacher preparation programs. Over all, the blogging assignment was considered valuable by the participants. They stated that sharing their stories was “therapeutic” and the support and shared stories helped them reflect upon and their busy internship experience. Additionally, having open-ended, non-structured topics allowed the participants to practice self-efficacy and write about what was truly meaningful to them on their journey to become professional educators.

6. Limitations, Implications and Call for Further Research

As is the case of most research studies, this study had its inherent limitations. The participant sample was small and drawn from one university’s world language intern cohort. Additionally, only qualitative data (drawn from asynchronous communications and interviews) were gathered and analyzed. Therefore, results of the study cannot be freely generalized to all other populations in teacher preparation programs. With that being said, the present study and its results have valid implications that can potentially inform teacher preparation programs. The effective use of asynchronous communication (i.e., blogs) can be a helpful with pre-service teachers and serve as a mechanism for self-discovery and support. The design feature of free choice of blog topics for pre-service was considered important in this study. Each of the participants stated that having an open-ended choice of topics allowed them to discuss experiences that mattered deeply to them, and moved the blogging from just another assignment to something that they truly valued. The need for further research is therefore indicated which compares the merits of structured topics versus self-selected topics for pre-service teachers. Published research has documented the efficacy of the establishment and nurturing of Communities of Practice, as has this present study. Therefore, due to the fact that the discussion of common interests and concerns is an integral part of Communities of Practice, it is important to first identify the concerns of pre-service teachers who are members of these CoPs.

In the present study, the issues of primary concern to the participants were building relationships with students, pacing and time management and working with mentor teachers. The identification of these themes resulting from the analysis of the data collected in this study, may be guardedly generalized to other pre-service teachers and therefore have implications for training pre-service teachers in other venues. Therefore, it is suggested that discussion and class activities in teacher preparation coursework, concerning establishing and nurturing teacher-student relationships, need to go beyond fundamental classroom management techniques. Further research is indeed necessary to investigate how teacher education instructors can address the complex topic of relationship-building, with their own students as well as with colleagues and peer teachers. The relationship between a pre-service and mentor teacher is a complex one. This has implications for the importance of a university facilitator to mediate potential issues and challenges as well as for the university faculty who oversee teacher preparation programs and offer pre-service teacher coursework. Pacing issues such as scope and sequence and unit development should be also be explicitly addressed. In addition, further research is necessary to identify the interests and concerns of pre-service teachers on a wider scale and to address them in both pre-service settings and in the field. Indeed, these issues are of key importance in a Community of Practice. The act of semi-structured blogging and reflections to posted blogs may allow teacher preparation programs to address authentic and meaningful issues of concern during pre-teaching and intern/student teaching experiences. This asynchronous communication forum can also serve as a valuable medium for teachers-in-training to receive support from their peers as well as from program supervisors and teacher educators. Network-based communication offers instructors a window through which to glimpse the real issues facing pre-service teachers, address those issues proactively in the university classroom, and provide support for them in the field.

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