

An Analysis of Interactions among Prospective and In-service English Teachers in an Online Community

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Abstract— While recent research has brought increasing awareness that language use plays an important role in online communities, little has been done to study the association between characteristics of interactions and social relationship in terms of discourse functions. This research study attempts to shed light on the issues in the context of a blog-based teaching-portfolio, which serves as an interactive channel for pre-service and in-service teachers in Hong Kong to engage themselves in dialogic and collaborative discussions. Content analysis of comments on the blog and semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine the use of discourse functions and discussion topics. Insights into online learning and recommendations for future research are made.

Keywords - *Online Community of Practice; Blog; Content Analysis; Discourse Functions*

I. Introduction

With technological advancement, online communities have been widely adopted to support aspects of teachers' professional development. As knowing is largely carried out through discourse [1], and individuals rely very much on the words they use to create the fabric of their intellectual and social lives [2], this empirical study attempted to explore how learners/teachers used their language when engaging in an online community of practice (henceforth CoP). Aiming at identifying the association between social relationship and characteristics of interactions through an analysis of the discourse functions identified, the study is significant as it sheds light on different issues pertinent to the enhancement of online communication and learning communities.

The term "CoP" refers to "a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" [3]. Although the original concept of CoPs was premised on situated learning in a co-located setting, CoPs are often deemed to be something virtual with the rapid development of the Internet. Interestingly, the last decade has brought increasing awareness that analysis based on the message types and language use of online CoPs promotes the understanding of one's identity and builds social relationships, which results in teachers' professional development. Starkey and Savvides

[4], for example, observed that the social presence evident in online CoPs helped to create a comfortable environment and encouraged the education professionals to explore more about their discipline. It was also reported that participants of learning communities seemed to worry more about possible face threats and adopted different strategies to mitigate the imposition when evaluating others' messages and presenting a contrasting view, which may have affected the quality of discussion [2]. Yet, most studies have not analyzed the language use in terms of the participants' social relationship or the discussion topics, nor have they related the results to social practice.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fairclough's three-tiered model [5], which explores the relationship between texts, interactions and contexts, is used in the study. At the text level, the description stage is concerned with formal properties of the text. At the level of social interactions, the participants' meaning and their understanding of discourse practice will be interpreted. The third level of analysis is explanation, which focuses on the relationship between interaction and social context [5]. These are translated into the examination on discourse functions, the analysis of participants' interview data and the researchers' understanding of the participants' characteristics of interaction in relation to the context of CoP and social practice.

III. THE STUDY

The study builds conceptually on the literature related to CoPs, content analysis, and discourse functions. A mixed-design which combined both qualitative and quantitative methods was adopted, and the written communicative data were collected from comments identified in selected blog posts on specific discussion topics. In particular, the research addressed the following question:

What discourse functions are evident in the postings in an online community with hierarchical social relationship?

A. Context of the Study

The online CoP being investigated is a blog-based platform named *Platform for English Teacher Education* (PLaTE), set up for prospective English teachers. Taking the

advantages of Web 2.0 concepts of information sharing to construct a web-based community through modifying 'WordPress', PLATE does not only function as a bank of personalized blog-based teaching portfolios that record the student-teachers' work, knowledge and skills, but it is also a dialogic environment which helps to facilitate interactive exchanges among peers and frontline teachers. Student-teachers are required to upload their lesson plans and materials, write reflections related to their teaching on the blog, and interact with their peers and mentors during their teaching practicum. In order to facilitate interaction, they were divided into groups of four or five, with each group attached to two mentors who were frontline teachers.

B. Methodology

Twenty-four prospective English teachers and eight experienced teachers participated in the online discussions during the 5-week Teaching Practicum period. Their relationship on the blog was mentees and mentors. Data were collected from two major sources, namely comments on the blog and semi-structured interviews. The postings collected were naturally-occurring data automatically stored on the blog that could be retrieved for analysis. Only those which included comments from mentors and mentees were selected and analyzed. To uncover the association between social relationship and characteristics of interactions, semi-structured interviews with three mentors and three mentees with the largest total numbers of comments were conducted.

To determine the discourse functions represented by each posting, the coding scheme, emerged from a research project related to online discussions on teaching and learning [2], was adapted due to its relevance to the present study. Table 1 shows the analytical framework.

TABLE 1: CODES FOR DISCOURSE FUNCTIONS

1. Information seeking
2. Asking for an opinion
3. Information providing
4. Experience sharing
5. Elaboration/clarification/explanation
6. Positive evaluation
7. Negative evaluation
8. Positive self-evaluation
9. Negative self-evaluation
10. Managing the group's conversation
11. Previewing the organization of the sender's message
12. Social
13. Making suggestions
14. Expressing hope
15. Expressing thanks
16. Expressing views
17. Claiming actions
18. Giving assurance
19. Showing sympathy
20. Showing understanding
21. Giving encouragement

C. Ethical considerations

To protect the privacy of the participants, all their names were changed into pseudonyms before analysis, and the data collected were kept with strict confidentiality. The assigned initial letter for the student-teachers was 'S', with their pseudonyms being Sally, Serena, Sheldon and so forth. Similarly, the assigned initial letter for the mentors was 'M'.

IV. RESULTS

Table 2 below shows the comments contributed by the mentors differed from those by the peer commentators in terms of their number and length. The results of discourse functions should thus be treated with caution.

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF COMMENTS AND RESPONSES FOR ANALYSIS

	Comments made by...		Responses written to...	
	Number	Number of words	Number	Number of words
Peers	40	6,235	29	2,943
Mentors	67	14,074	28	3,310

A. Discourse Functions

In analyzing peer commentators' and mentors' comments, making suggestions, social and showing support were most commonly used. The message or conversation management function, expressing hope and negative evaluation, however, were rarely used by the participants.

As for the discourse functions identified in the selected responses made by the originators, social responses and expressing thanks were the most frequent while interacting with the peer commentators and the mentors. Yet, the originators seemed to focus more on experience sharing and showing support while responding to the peers but used positive evaluation and claiming actions more often while responding to their mentors. Similar to what has been found while analyzing the comments made by peer commentators and mentors, discourse functions such as giving negative evaluations and providing information remained rare.

In short, comments and responses which had a social function were particularly common. Making suggestions and positive evaluation were frequently used by the mentors and

mentees when commenting on the design of lesson plans and materials, and comments expressing thanks were frequently identified in the responses. In contrast, negative evaluation was rarely used.

B. Understanding the Discourse Functions and the Hierarchical Relationship among Participants

1) Positive evaluation and negative evaluation

As aforementioned, positive evaluation was one of the most common discourse functions derived from the comments posted by peer commentators and mentors as well as the originators' responses, but negative evaluation was rarely used. Different explanations were provided by the student teachers and mentors to understand the situation. For instance, Sally discussed her worries on giving negative evaluations. She revealed her views towards her status in the online community:

Every teacher has a different teaching style. I seldom point out the problems of my peers' work. Perhaps I'm not used to giving negative comments to people whom I'm not very familiar with. I'm also worried that my peers will be bothered. But if they are my juniors, I might tell them how I feel.
(Sally)

She pointed out that she was worried about her peers' feelings towards receiving comments with negative evaluation as they were not very familiar with one another. However, she added that it would be more likely for her to give her juniors comments that include negative evaluation. It is therefore possible to speculate that Sally found it inappropriate to critique her peers as their status was more or less the same.

The mentors also talked about why they did not give negative evaluations. Melanie discussed the issue in relation to her comments related to the pre-service teachers' reflections and suggested that she did not see the need to evaluate what her mentees reflected on as they were personal:

Since I'm not the pre-service teachers, I can hardly fully understand what they've undergone while teaching. To me, there isn't right or wrong in reflections. I think there's actually no need for me to analyze their reflections. (Melanie)

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the other two mentors deliberately avoided giving negative evaluations, like some of the student-teachers did:

Perhaps I often expressed my disagreements in the form of suggestions; you weren't able to identify them... I drafted all the comments before posting them. I thought carefully and would only post comments which I felt comfortable with as I believed that mentors should be encouraging. Besides, every teacher has his or her own teaching philosophy and I respect my mentees even though I'm more experienced. I intentionally gave them

more positive comments and fewer criticisms so that they could be more confident in themselves. This is crucial in teacher development. (Mona)

Mona respected the student-teachers and preferred giving positive evaluations to her mentees. She took her role as a supportive mentor and the student-teachers' confidence into consideration and endeavored to show her disagreements in the form of suggestions. Yet, Marcus felt that there was a need for him to avoid giving negative evaluations because of his role as a mentor:

Although I disagreed with the student-teachers' suggestions sometimes, I had never pointed that out directly. I didn't want the mentees to think that I'm an authoritative figure. I think they'll be bothered if I give too many negative comments...The role of mentors is to develop good relationship with the student-teachers so that they are motivated to take our advice and be willing to improve themselves by making reflections. (Marcus)

To Marcus, his role as a mentor was to develop good relationships with the student-teachers so that they would be motivated to take his advice and improve themselves by making reflections. He thus avoided giving comments that include negative evaluation so that the mentees would not have the feeling that he was superior to them and refuse to listen to his advice because of his authority.

Talking about the responses made by the originators, only Sally suggested that she had tried to ask for explanation, clarification or elaboration from her mentors when disagreeing with them. Yet, the other two student-teachers suggested that they avoided showing disagreements with their mentors purposefully:

I'd pay even more attention while responding to my mentors (when compared to my peers). I think it might be related to our different social roles. Since they're actually my superiors, even if I don't genuinely agree with what they say or feel that their thinking is too ideal, I still have to pretend that I do agree with their opinion and will definitely take their advice into consideration while replying to their comments. (Serena)

Serena indicated that because the mentors were superior to her, she would pay special attention while responding to them and pretend to agree with their views even though she did not genuinely feel so. This clearly revealed Serena's awareness on her hierarchical relationship with the mentors and intent to avoid challenging them because of their higher status. Remarkably, Sheldon chose not to disagree with his mentors due to another reason:

It's wastage of time to explain to them about my thoughts. I'd rather spend more time on my lesson planning. Yet, I'll share with my peers how I feel if

I don't agree with them. I think the mentors are stubborn. (Sheldon)

This suggested that not all the student-teachers avoided making negative evaluation because of the hierarchical relationship with their mentors, and that the perception on their gains from participating in the blog might have also been a factor affecting the choice of discourse functions used by the participants.

2) Relationship between the perceived social roles of participants and making suggestions

It was common for the peer commentators and mentors to make suggestions on the blog, but there were proportionately more mentors making comments. When being asked to explain their major roles in the online community, only one student-teacher talked about making suggestions on the blog but all the mentors mentioned that they were responsible for doing so as they had more hands-on teaching experience. For instance, Melanie thought that her major role on the blog was to give the mentees practical feedback by making suggestions to facilitate reflective thinking. Similarly, Mona indicated that her role as a mentor was similar to a teacher who offers students advice:

Mentors are similar to teachers as they're responsible for making suggestions and giving solutions to the mentees. Although there might be some micro-teaching for them to demonstrate their teaching skills, the situation wasn't very authentic. As a mentor who has hands-on teaching experience, I believe I should share what I've encountered with the mentees and give them advice. (Mona)

From the viewpoint of the pre-service teachers, the mentors were perceived as someone knowledgeable and experienced. Although Sheldon did not have a pleasant experience in the blog previously and was thus unwilling to ask for clarification when he had disagreements with the mentors, he admitted that he viewed the mentors as someone who were responsible for giving him practical suggestions on teaching as they were regular teachers with hands-on experience. Serena also talked about the mentors' role in giving her guidance:

The mentors are very useful. Since they've hands-on teaching experience, they might be able to handle students' individual differences better. Besides, they can recommend different lesson activities to us... and give us guidance. I've the feeling that my peers might not be able to offer me advice as practical as the mentors'. (Serena)

As illustrated, she believed that the mentors were more helpful than her peers as they had hands-on teaching experience and could offer her guidance. Making suggestions seemed to be perceived as the major role of the mentors, and it

is possible that the student-teachers might be a bit reluctant to give their peers advice on the blog because of this.

Also, Serena's views towards her perceived roles on the blog and the mentors' status explained how she dealt with the mentor's suggestions:

I'm a student teacher in the online community...my responsibility is to report what I've experienced in my teaching practice. But more importantly, I've to communicate with the frontline teachers and take their advice into consideration. They (the mentors) are my seniors...with higher status who give me advice which I've to follow and report to them the effectiveness of their suggestions after carrying them out. In my opinion, I won't have to think so highly of what my friends or peers say. I don't have to worry about reporting to my peers and think about the consequences of not following their advice. (Serena)

Seemingly, Serena thought highly of the mentors' advice as she portrayed the mentors as people who possessed a higher status than she did. This might help to explain why claiming actions were commonly identified in her responses to mentors.

3) Relationship between the perceived social roles of participants and showing support

In addition, the relationship between discourse functions and the perceived social roles of participants were also shown by the use of showing support, which was one of the discourse functions most commonly used by both mentors and peer commentators, as well as the student-teachers' responses to peers. To begin with, all the mentors being interviewed believed that they were responsible for giving the student-teachers emotional support. For example, Mona described that she was responsible for giving the mentees assurance so that they could become more confident, and Sheldon suggested that he was responsible for giving encouragement to the mentors and confirming their teaching belief. Nevertheless, it was believed that giving practical feedback was more important than showing support:

There should be more comments or responses related to showing support among peer because they're more familiar with one another. They're supposed to support one another. However, I wouldn't post a post with only 'cheer up' due to my role. I believe it's more important for me to stimulate the student teachers' thinking by giving them suggestions with different perspectives and practical feedback as I'm more experienced. (Melanie)

Being more experienced than the student-teachers, Melanie felt that she was responsible for stimulating the mentees' thinking by giving them suggestions and practical feedback as the student-teachers were more familiar with one another and were supposed to give one another emotional

support. She shared a similar belief with Mona and Sheldon, who believed that the comments and responses made by student teachers might be less constructive when compared to the mentors' as the student teachers might be more reserved in terms of giving suggestions because of their perceived role as a student-teacher. Two student-teachers being interviewed, Serena and Sally also talked about giving their peers support on the blog:

We have to comment on one another's work frequently because we have little teaching experience and we often encounter difficulties in our teaching. We should give one another more emotional support especially when we're frustrated... (Serena)

Serena believed that it was important for her to show her peers support as pre-service teachers had little teaching experience and would encounter a lot of difficulties in their teaching. Her view was shared by Sally, who suggested that it was her responsibility to show her understanding to the peers as they might feel frustrated very often.

As pre-service teachers, we might feel frustrated very often. I believe that I should show my peers sympathy and understanding by sharing the experience I gained in the teaching practicum so that they would be comforted and be less anxious about their teaching performances. (Sally)

Remarkably, Sally added that she seldom wrote about showing support to her mentors as she saw little need to do so:

The mentors are supposed to show us support, not the other way round. In particular, I don't think I've to show them my assurance as they actually know more than I do. They don't have to listen to me because they are more experienced. (Sally)

She pointed out that the mentors are more experienced and there was no need for her to show them her support. She assumed that the mentors did not need her support but were supposed to show the mentees their care as they should be capable of handling the problems with their experience. This appeared to reveal the different roles of mentors and mentees perceived by Sally and how her discourse function related to showing support could be affected.

In brief, all the mentors being interviewed reported that they were responsible for providing practical feedback and showing support to the mentees, but it seemed that they considered the former role their priority. Only one mentee mentioned making suggestions as the major role of student-teachers in the online community, and showing support to the peers seemed to be considered a more important task because of the frustration pre-service teachers might encounter. The research also revealed that years of teaching experience served as an influential factor that shaped the hierarchical relationship among the mentees and the mentors, and it appeared to be

associated with the participants' perceived roles and the use of discourse functions on the blog.

V. DISCUSSION

Before any conclusion can be drawn about the study, one has to be aware of the limitations of the study. For one thing, the association between the use of discourse functions, social relationships and the other factors (e.g. the participants' personality) are correlational instead of causal. Also, the results might not be generalizable due to the small sample size and convenience sampling, but should rather be treated as working hypotheses for similar situations in other contexts. Despite the limitations, it does not necessarily mean that we should dismiss the claims suggested. Rather, it only suggests that they should be treated with more caution.

A. Use of Positive Evaluation and Avoidance of Negative Evaluation in relation to Social Status

Regarding the high occurrence of positive evaluation and low occurrence of negative evaluation, it was found that the majority of student teachers avoided disagreeing with their peers or mentors. There were cases where the student-teachers pretended to agree with their mentors because of their hierarchical relationship with the mentors. This could possibly be attributed to the influences of Chinese culture with a long tradition of unconditional obedience to authority, in that a teacher is not seen as a facilitator but as a 'fount of knowledge' that is delivered without any concession to students and that students 'must struggle to attain' [6], which is known to many scholars such as Liu [7] and Littlewood [8]. As noted, the mentors served as teachers of their mentees to a large extent since they were assigned to offer support and comments on the work posted by the novice teachers. Although it might be argued that the attitude of Chinese students has gradually been influenced by western culture, the low frequency of negative evaluation identified in the student-teachers' responses to the mentors seems to support the view that the experienced teachers are more authoritative and should be respected.

Interestingly, some student-teachers avoided giving negative evaluations on their peers' work but suggest that they would not do so if the work were posted by their juniors. It was also observed that the mentors deliberately included positive comments and avoided giving negative evaluations while interacting with their mentees on the blog so that they could appear less superior and be able to develop a better relationship with the student-teachers. Although most studies reported that those in the position of authority used language as a manipulative tool to control debate and suppress others' thoughts, the present study reported markedly different findings as the mentors, who were in the position of authority, considered relationship building in the online community essential. This might be due to the fact that the online platform is perceived as a CoP, whose members interact, build relationship and learn together [9] instead of a place where the group of people with higher status and position limits the

freedom of action of the other members by exerting control in terms of cognition.

B. Making Suggestions and Showing Support in relation to the Perceived Roles of Participants with Different Social Status

Making suggestions and showing support occurred very often in the comments made by the mentors and peer commentators, while expressing thanks and claiming actions were more commonly identified in the responses made by the originators to the mentors, and there were proportionally more showing support and experience sharing when interacting with the peers.

Being more experienced in terms of teaching, the mentors believed that their major role was to offer practical advice to the student-teachers by making suggestions in order to cultivate thinking. Their view echoes Murphy and Laferrière's finding, which observed that teachers are given opportunities to view problems in alternate perspectives while participating in an online community so that their reflective thinking can be enhanced [10]. It was not clear why the student teachers were also active in making suggestions to their peers, but it is likely that they would like to show their ability to apply the teaching pedagogies and subject knowledge they had learnt in their undergraduate courses through making suggestions on the blog as their participation in professional dialogues was one of the assessment criteria in their teaching practicum.

Concerning the high frequency of showing support in the comments analyzed, both mentors and peer commentators emphasized the importance of giving reassurance and encouragement or showing understanding and sympathy to the student teachers as they had relatively little teaching experience and were likely to encounter a lot of difficulties in their teaching. It is worth-mentioning, however, that the mentors believed they should dedicate more effort to giving the student-teachers practical feedback rather than showing support because they were more experienced and were supposed to stimulate their thinking. Furthermore, the data emerged demonstrated that the pre-service teachers seldom showed support to their mentors and saw little need to do so due to their rich experience. Learning to teach is a very complicated process. Educators encounter different problems in their work regardless of their years of experience, and the lack of support from other teachers was found to be the culprit in teacher burnout [11]. The misconception held by the student-teachers concerning the need of support for mentors seemed to be caused by their hierarchical relationship with the mentors.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

The study has contributed to an understanding of how social relationships shaped the ways in which the mentors and mentees interacted with one another in an online CoP. It has important contributions to the field of discourse analysis and implications in terms of teacher development in online communities.

A. Building Relationship to Facilitate Teacher Development

One key point to consider is the importance of relationship building in the online community. As noted, the mentors and student-teachers avoided giving negative evaluations or showing disagreements in order not to intimidate their interlocutors as they were not very familiar with one another. However, it was believed that both negative evaluation and negotiation of ideas play an important role in teachers' professional development as they enable teachers to learn about the problems of work and clarify their ideas respectively. Also noteworthy is the fact that some of the participants proofread their comments deliberately in order to ensure the politeness of their messages and build a better relationship with other members on the blog. Yet, it is believed that the reaction time could be improved and the participants might be able to devote more effort into giving constructive feedback and sharing ideas if less attention could be paid to their language use. These findings suggested the importance of relationship building among members of online CoPs as it is believed that the situations might be improved provided that the participants are more familiar with one another. Thus, it is recommended that a few face-to-face meetings be arranged before the commencement or in the beginning of teaching practice in order to facilitate relationship building and promote teacher development in a sustainable CoP.

B. Enhancing Technical Support of Online CoPs

Another implication of the findings in this study is that technical support may need to be enhanced in the online CoP. As noted, the student-teachers and mentors sometimes avoided giving negative evaluations or giving suggestions on the blog as they were aware that these face-threatening acts could be viewed publicly. In addition, some student-teachers refused to seek help from other members of the online community due to the time gap of asynchronous discussions. The enhancement of technical support such as enabling the function of sending private messages, exploring the possibility of including synchronous discussions on the blog, or mobile learning might be vital for the future development of online communities.

VII. CONCLUSION

A principal conclusion derived from the above discussion might be that the use of discourse functions are associated with the participants' hierarchical relationship, but other factors (e.g. the participants' cultural background, awareness of the language used, personality and features of the online community) also play an important role in communication. The present study did not attempt to find out the extent to which social relationship contributes to the change of the participants' thoughts or actions on teaching, nor had it taken gender differences into consideration. It is recommended that more research be done to enrich the field of discourse function in the emerging online communities.

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