

**EXPLORING THE ROLE OF AN ONLINE LEARNING
COMMUNITY IN SUPPORTING PRESERVICE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE TEACHERS' SCHOOL PLACEMENT IN A CHINESE
NORMAL UNIVERSITY**

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
In the Faculty of Humanities

2012

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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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ABBREVIATIONS

CMC	Computer-mediated Communication
ELT	English Language Teaching
CoP / CoPs	Community of Practice /Communities of Practice
FO	Frequency of Occurrence
JE	Joint Enterprise
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge
PETE	Preservice English Teacher Education
ME	Mutual Engagement
MOE	Ministry of Education
Moodle	Modular Object-oriented Dynamic Learning Environment
SR	Shared Repertoire
STs	Student Teachers
VCOS	Various Components of Online Support
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been growing enthusiasm among researchers for the promotion of online learning communities designed to support professional learning in preservice teacher education. The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the role of such an online community in supporting student teacher learning during the school placement in a Chinese Normal University, and hence to enrich the understanding of student teachers' learning experiences in an online ecology.

The study's subjects included a cohort of 42 student teachers enrolled on a four-year preservice teacher education programme, along with two university supervisors at one of China's teacher-training universities. Primary data were collected from six weeks of online threaded discussions and from semi-structured group interviews. Supplementary data were taken from an end-of-school-placement evaluation and web-tracking logs. Data analysis has been informed and illuminated by the theoretical proposition of communities of practice.

The findings of the study indicate that the online learning community is a valuable resource for supporting student teachers both personally and professionally. Findings suggest that online communication not only helps student teachers tackle immediate teaching concerns and technical problems, but, more importantly, provides them with opportunities to reflect collectively, to co-construct new teaching ideas, and to gain professional discourse competence through articulating and negotiating their evolving thoughts on teaching as a profession.

In this regard, student teachers are found to be more comfortable with online self-disclosure of their personal and professional encounters and critiquing each other than they are with face-to-face communication. The research also shows that university supervisors experience mixed feelings about the fact that student teachers are more able to take ownership of their learning and therefore become less dependent on supervisor guidance as time wears on. Furthermore, these findings provide evidence suggestive of a possibly reciprocal relationship between Chinese view of learning and the building of

online learning communities.

Based on the results of the study, I provide recommendations as to how the significance of the school placement can be reinforced in fostering distributed student teachers' professional growth. The results also contribute to a better understanding of the key factors in the design and implementation of effective online learning communities within preservice teacher education in China. Finally, the analytical approach used in this study provides fresh methodological insight into an alternative means of analysing online postings. It thus contributes both to the theorisation of learning communities in the context of computer-mediated communication, and to the further development of concepts drawn from the communities of practice literature.

DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to on the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this university or any other university or other institute of learning.

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To my parents, husband and son, Yingzi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This PhD journey has been a bumpy ride full of ups and downs. I could never have completed this thesis by my efforts alone.

I wish most sincerely to thank my supervisors, Mrs. Diane Slaouti and Dr. Julian Edge for their unlimited support both academically and personally. Their rigorous scholarship and thought-provoking critiques have fundamentally helped me refine this study. In the small community of practice we have had for the past five years, Diane and Julian have nurtured me in my transition from a legitimate peripheral participant to a keen researcher prepared to take up my place in academe. As that small community becomes memory, I will surely utilise all of the skills and experiences learnt from the masters to *broker* a new world. I thank the University of Manchester and the School of Education for offering me a full studentship. Without the financial support, my academic pursuit would not have been possible.

I am indebted to Professor Etienne Wenger and Professor Rosalind Pritchard for the advice that they generously provided. I am grateful to Professor Xiaoming Xi for her tremendous support in making my fieldwork run successfully. I am deeply appreciative of my previous ‘anonymous’ colleagues and the cohort of student teachers for their participation in my research. I am very grateful to my external and internal examiners, Dr. Steve Mann and Dr. Juup Stelma, for their insightful critiques and formative feedback on the further improvement of my work.

I am thankful to my parents and husband for their love and unwavering support. Their pride in me has been a force pushing me forwards. I owe a great deal to my husband who has been brave enough to live with a wife whose work came first during her PhD studies. Not only did he have to be content with late nights, long absences and mood swings, but he did it always with love, care and encouragement. Lastly, I wish to thank my friend Lulu for providing helpful advice about how to communicate my ideas.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the issue which provides the focus of the study as well as a succinct account of the research design (Section 1.1). Examination of the background to the study (Section 1.2) is provided, the motivation behind the study discussed (Section 1.3), statement of the problem, aim of research and research questions presented (Section 1.4), and an overview of the thesis (Section 1.5) outlined. Conclusions are drawn in Section 1.6.

1.1 Introduction

School placement (also referred to as practicum, field experience, student teaching, practice teaching), in the fields of preservice teacher education and language teacher education, has been widely recognised by many teacher educators (Turney *et al.*, 1982; Maynard, 2001; Tang, 2003; Carter, 2005; Hsu, 2007) as the most significant stage of preparing student teachers as it allows them to improve their pedagogic skills and acquire new knowledge and dispositions. Hascher *et al.* (2004) further recognise that the value of school placement is that it both supports student teachers' 'socialisation within the profession' and provides 'a protected field for experimentation' (p. 626). School placement also enables student teachers to better comprehend the theoretical knowledge being taught in university (Frey, 2008) and explore its application in real practice. However, in reality, school placement is often characterised by various forms of disconnection and isolation (Schlagal *et al.*, 1996; Bonk *et al.*, 2000; Carter, 2001; Mayer, 2002) and therefore loses its significance and value. The case of Chinese preservice teacher education is no exception. In fact, few empirically-based studies have been conducted to improve the quality of school placements, and consequently there is a pressing need for more substantial and credible studies to be conducted in China.

This qualitative study is directed towards exploring the role of an online learning community in supporting student teacher learning during school placement in China, and

hence enriching the understanding of student teachers' learning experiences in an online learning environment.

The conceptual framework of communities of practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998) is employed to provide both theoretical and analytic implications for understanding the whole inquiry. This study involves a cohort of 45 student teachers enrolled on a four-year preservice teacher education programme and two university-based supervisors, along with myself as a participant researcher at Goldstone Normal University in China (The term 'Normal University' equates to a teacher training university.).

As the research aims to generate cultural and contextualised understandings and provide a chronological narrative of relevant events, an ethnographic case study approach appears to be most appropriate. This involves investigating 'a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context' (Yin, 2003, p. 13), unveiling the complexities and dynamics of human social interactions, relationships and cultural dimensions (Cohen, *et al*, 2000), and incorporating multiple data sources converged via triangulation (Yin, 2003). Informed by the preliminary implications of a pilot study (see Appendix 9), the case study employs a qualitative research method and adopts a flexible design that evolves, develops and unfolds as the research proceeds (Robson, 2002).

1.2 Context of Study

In many societies, education has been recognised unanimously as a fundamental means of achieving prosperity and reinforcing national competitiveness in a globalised world economy. The early 1980s brought reform and development of modernisation initiatives; and since then, education has been considered to be of paramount importance in China (Li, 1999; Hu, 2002a; Zhao and Guo, 2002; Hu, 2005a). Consequently, teacher education is a direct result of the relevance of education to China's socioeconomic progress. In other words, if education is dedicated to national development, teacher education serves as the cornerstone of education itself and a crucial measure in the strategic development of education (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2000).

In comparison with nationwide teacher education for other disciplines, the preservice English teacher education (PETE), professional preparation of English teachers for secondary schools in particular, has received more recognition and support in China (Hu, 2005a). This is largely due to the strategic role ascribed to knowledge of English in national revitalisation by the Chinese leadership (Hu, 2002a). The English language competence of a significant percentage of its citizens is regarded as a key factor for any country's access to cutting-edge knowledge and information for social advancement, and its active participation in the global economy (Richards, 2008).

Over the last decade, Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been given support to set up preservice teacher education programmes (MOE, 1999a; State Council, 2001) in order to 'ameliorate the problems of quantity and quality with the teaching force' (Hu, 2005b, p. 667). In contrast, preservice teacher education in normal schools, teacher colleges and Normal Universities is still primarily run on the basis of a three-tiered educational system (Liu, 2001; Zhu and Han, 2006). Normal Universities shoulder the main responsibility of educating teachers of other disciplines for secondary schools in China.

Normal Universities in China offer a four-year undergraduate programme which leads to a bachelor's degree. The PETE, like other preservice teacher education programmes in Normal Universities, consists of three key strands—disciplinary studies, educational studies and school placement (Sha and Li, 2005). As a result of the prevalent standpoint that language teacher education means language improvement for the teachers, the PETE programme in China is 'a mixture of teaching English as a subject and learning about teaching as a profession' (Zhan, 2008, p.56) with a primary focus on linguistic aspects. The first two and a half years of the PETE programme focus largely on the improvement of student teachers' all-round English language skills and knowledge about English (Yang, 2007). Course modules such as educational psychology, general education and pedagogy are delivered in the third year. In the final year, student teachers attend an English language teaching (ELT) methods course in which basic theories and methods of ELT are taught through lectures accompanied by a few simulated teaching practices in the first term.

In the second term, student teachers undertake a one-off six-week school placement. As a core requirement of the preservice teacher education programme, school placement is the application and realisation of theories and pedagogical knowledge acquired through didactic teaching. A group of four to six student teachers are placed together with one university-based supervisor. An ideal school placement experience provides them with ample opportunities to observe different class teaching, interact with their peers in a group, conduct teaching for a week or so and fully participate in the management of student activities under the joint supervision of a university-based supervisor and a cooperating teacher from the placement school.

Nevertheless, the rapid and constant expansion of enrolment in the Normal Universities of China (Shi and Englert, 2008), which began in the late 1990s, has brought with it the emergence of some disquieting issues regarding the school placement in particular. Obtaining and securing school sites for student teachers has become a constant problem for Normal Universities (Li, 1999). Most Normal Universities usually have one secondary school as a steady school site; however, it is impossible for that one school to accommodate all student teachers. An increasing number of student teachers are encouraged or even compelled to contact placement schools, and this tendency is reinforced because many of them have the intention of getting a job in that school after graduation. However, due to the constraints of geographical distance and the availability of university-based supervisors, no supervision is provided to these individual student teachers.

For those who take up a school placement arranged by the university, supervision tends to involve hurried ‘check-up trips’ (Mayer, 2002, p. 181) to schools and rushed visits to student teachers because university-based supervisors have commitments to lectures in the university. Some realistic problems, such as the timing of teaching in the university and observing and supervising in schools, and transportation issues, are obstacles to effective and sufficient guidance from, and connections with, supervisors. In addition, supervisors are often allocated in light of ‘their availability instead of their areas of expertise’ (Yan and He, 2010, p. 66). Given these practical problems, the role of supervisors during student teaching placements has not been fulfilled.

Moreover, in the study of problems and issues perceived by Chinese preservice English teachers in their school placement, Yan and He (2010) point out that the phenomenon of supervisors' lack of motivation prevails due to the fact that supervisors do not gain the same level of professional acknowledgement from supervisory responsibilities as they do from teaching and research. Unsurprisingly, a common complaint from student teachers focuses on 'the unsatisfactory quality of supervision and guidance available' (Hu, 2005b, p. 677).

Apart from experiencing disconnection and abandonment, student teachers also face other challenges in placement schools. Many cooperating teachers in secondary schools are candid about the fact that they consider school placements to be a nuisance as they interfere in their normal teaching routine (Sha and Li, 2005). They claim that they are pressurised by the increasing prevalence of standard, high-stakes testing, for their salary and promotion opportunities are closely associated with their students' performance in examinations. Under these circumstances, they are afraid that student teachers' experimental teaching practice may cause their own students' results to drop, and thus only assign student teachers some non-instructional responsibilities such as grading homework and tests, along with some extracurricular activities after class. In some other cases, with no previous teacher training experience, cooperating teachers have no concept of what their supervisory role is. Furthermore, some cooperating teachers do not regard student teachers as a part of their culture and thus do not assume any responsibility for them.

The past two decades have seen the most interesting and rapid period of reconstruction in the teacher education system in China (Zhu and Han, 2006) and great emphasis on the quality and improvement of school placement (MOE, 2006). Despite this, issues such as those described above still prevail and no solution has been found. While ICT provision in universal schooling in China still has a long way to go, the last decade has witnessed considerable investments in educational technology which makes computer-aided education applicable both at secondary schools and universities (Shi and Englert, 2008). The situation of implementing ICT in pre-service teacher education in China is consistent with research findings (Watson, 1997; Galanouli and Collins, 2000) that

student teachers do not make sufficient use of ICT at their placement schools, either as a useful tool for teaching, or a virtual venue for them to learn and develop their expertise and confidence in teaching, in particular. The lack of related research and consequent pedagogical practice (Zhao and Xu, 2010) on the application of ICT in education in China, has contributed to the severe underdevelopment of ICT integration in education, and especially in teacher education. There is an urgent need for Chinese teacher educators and researchers to engage in more empirical research on the development of school placement quality, especially in the context of computer-mediated communication, and thus rectify the dearth of tangible research.

1.3 Researcher's Motivation

The original idea behind this research inquiry springs from my personal and professional experiences both as a teacher learner and a preservice English teacher educator at the school of Foreign Languages, Goldstone Normal University, China. After completing my Master's degree in Educational Technology and English Language Teaching (ELT) at the University of Manchester in 2005, I was considering furthering my education and applying for a PhD programme in Applied Linguistics in the UK, as the field appeared to enjoy a very high degree of recognition among academics working in the field of ELT in China. A letter from a former student and a conversation with a colleague, who later became dean of the school and fully supported the conduct of my research, completely altered my professional path and led me to undertake this piece of research.

Yuanyuan, a bubbly female student I taught for three years before I left for Manchester University in 2004, always dreamed of becoming a teacher. In her letter she told me about the unpleasant experience she had during her school placement in her hometown, which eventually caused her to give up teaching. She described herself as 'a stupid intruder in an unknown territory, totally abandoned and ignored by the outside world'. She wrote:

'...I was allocated a small office at the end of a corridor in the teacher building...a small room offering no chance to meet other teachers in the main teacher office. My

cooperating teacher didn't even properly introduce me to his pupils on the first day... What I did most for my cooperating teacher was to supervise the morning reading at 7:30, and grade piles of pupils' papers and assignments and check the cleanliness of the classroom at 5:30 in the afternoon... The real nightmare was that one day he asked me to give a one-hour lesson to the pupils on the spot and made me stand on the platform without being prepared. He sat at the back of the classroom and watched me. I knew he wanted to test me. I guess he enjoyed seeing me losing face in front of him and all his pupils. He commented on my performance in the presence of the pupils too!!! Can you imagine? I don't mind him pointing out my weaknesses, wrong spelling or pronunciation, but not in front of the pupils. How could I regain their respect for my later classes? I tried hard not to cry, but cried my eyes out on the way home. Ironically, when I told him I would likely get a teaching post from the school, he suddenly changed his attitude. No more errands. I only graded pupils' homework and made preparations for one week's teaching. When I asked him to comment on my teaching performance, he always said I was fine or I was doing great. Obviously he didn't want to have a bad relationship with me if we became colleagues in the future ... I had many questions left unanswered and many ideas untried. Anyway, I don't think I am suitable for teaching although I always wanted to be a teacher. I don't want to face the same situation in the work place. I don't know if I should have chosen to do my teaching practice with the school, but anyway, it doesn't really matter now...'

(Translated from Chinese and abridged)

I was quite shocked after reading her email. Leaving aside Yuanyuan's debatable assertion that she may be unsuitable for teaching, I was surprised to hear about her solitary and unsupported school placement experience. Though I worked as a teacher trainer for five years, I was never involved in the final stage of teacher preparation in the school. My notion of school placement was still based on my own student teaching experience in 1999, before the rapid expansion of enrolment in universities.

A few months later, I casually mentioned Yuanyuan's encounter to a colleague during a telephone conversation. From an experienced supervisor's perspective, my colleague believed that Yuanyuan's experience only reflected one aspect of the problem of school placement in the university as a whole. As more student teachers choose to find their

own placement school, the university finds it increasingly difficult to manage this learning process effectively at distance. In practice, the university loses track of student teachers and their learning. The only information they have about a student teacher's school placement is a brief report written by the cooperating teacher. How and what they have learnt remains unknown.

According to my colleague, the situation for those who undertake their school placement in the partner school is also difficult. While the secondary school is labelled as a partner, it is merely doing the university a favour. Therefore, the university is placed in too undesirable a position to demand all-around assistance and support. As noted above, the allocation of cooperating teachers in the placement school is based on their availability rather than their experience of mentoring (Hu, 2005b). Student teachers suffer when they are left unattended by both the university-based supervisor and cooperating teacher, neither of whom is willing to shoulder the responsibility; or when they are left confused by conflicting feedback from their supervisor and cooperating teacher. The one or two check-up visits made by the supervisor prove inadequate and ineffective. The one joint assessment of student teacher performance by the supervisor and cooperating teacher at the end of school placement is seen as a post-mortem (ibid) and believed to leave student teachers little or no time to address the gaps identified in the assessment.

While my colleague and I were reminiscing about the good old days, she suggested my pursuing doctoral study into teacher education. Having considered her advice as well as my student's case, I looked up the limited literature on teacher education and English language teacher education (Zhu and Zhu, 2001; MOE, 2003; Wang, 2004; Hu, 2005a, 2005b) in China. The existing research indicates that more and more questions are being raised about teacher education on all fronts, and concrete action must be taken to meet environmental demands. I was motivated by the fact that MOE (2001) strongly encourages and funds higher education institutions to carry out research on the various aspects of teacher education. My postgraduate study on using educational technology to enhance ELT also offered me a unique insight into the issue of problematic school placement in my university, and Normal Universities throughout China. The school where I had worked previously appeared to be an ideal setting, as it would be simple to

gain a permit for access to participants and to conduct the fieldwork. After taking the whole situation into account, I decided to take up the challenge in the hope of contributing to the improvement of school placement in my teaching context.

1.4 Statement of Problem and Aim of Research

White (1989) claims that school placement is ‘a rite of passage’ that enables novice teachers to gain cultural knowledge about teaching and thus ‘transforms them into teachers from one social group to another’ (p.177). Despite the acknowledged importance and value of school placement and student teaching, various forms of disconnection and isolation prevail in the preservice teacher education setting. The problem has been recognised by some Chinese teacher educators (Li, 1999; Sha and Li, 2005; Yang, 2007) and researchers (Hu, 2005a; Hu, 2005b; Lai, 2009) but has not yet been satisfactorily resolved in China.

The body of research indicates that disconnection and isolation due to geographical distance results in inadequate supervision from university-based supervisors (Mayer, 2002; Harrison *et al.*, 2007) and little communication or support from peers, with whom, in an ideal situation would be shared and professional encounters discussed (Schlagal *et al.*, 1996). Consequently, the lack of supervision from university-based supervisors and lack of collegial dialogue among peers impedes student teachers from making the connection between educational conceptions developed prior to school placement and experiences gained during student teaching (Zeichner and Tabachnic, 1981; Russell *et al.*, 2001; Allsopp *et al.*, 2006).

Moreover, apart from the supervisory and psychological isolation, dispersed student teachers also experience disconnection in placement schools on the grounds that their experience is almost exclusively restricted to teaching in a single classroom with very limited exposure to the diversity of the school’s activities (Lortie, 1975; Schlagal *et al.*, 1996), or with little involvement in professional conversations with the other teachers (Farrell, 2003). The perception that teaching is a solitary activity is reinforced by isolation and furthermore, student teachers’ learning-to-teach experience is ‘overly

narrow' (Tang, 2003, p. 485). Thus, the value and significance of school placement, to a large extent, are weakened.

One possible way of alleviating the disconnectedness and isolation experienced by student teachers is the integrated use of information and communications technology (ICT), especially the implementation of computer-mediated collaborative learning communities during the school placement period. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), as an accessible and low-cost means by which to transcend temporal and spatial constraints, presents an opportunity for student teachers and supervisors who may not otherwise be able to communicate. Along with the increasing popularity and recognition of CoPs (Wenger, 1998) as a powerful catalyst for teachers to promote and enhance their practice (Knight, 2002; Schlager *et al.*, 2002;), in recent years researchers have been enthusiastic in their promotion of online CoPs to support and enhance professional learning in preservice teacher education (Rogers, 2000; Lambe and Clarke, 2003; Goos and Bennison, 2004; Hough *et al.*, 2004; Gómez and Rico, 2007).

Nevertheless, few studies have explored specifically the complexity of interaction and learning processes in online communities of practice, where a cohort of student teachers and their supervisors embark on a 'joint enterprise' of improving teacher competence in order to expand their 'shared repertoire' of teacher knowledge through 'mutual engagement' in teaching practice. Whilst some studies have provided evidence linking CMC to social constructivism, the majority tend to focus on individual learners' anecdotal experiences or narratives (Anglin and Morrison, 2000; Stein, 2000, cited in Hendriks and Maor, 2004). Furthermore, few studies on preservice teacher education investigate in depth the perceptions of both student teachers and supervisors regarding the role and contribution of online learning communities to support learning, the factors influencing the implementation and sustainability of online learning communities, or the influence of culture on relationship-building in such online communities.

Therefore, the overarching research question this qualitative study sets out to interrogate is:

How can an online learning community support Chinese preservice English language teacher learning during the school placement?

In order to achieve a thorough exploration of the overriding question from different angles, a set of three sub-questions will be examined:

1. What evident is there of student teachers' shared learning through online interactions during the school placement?
2. How do student teachers and university supervisors perceive their roles and the contributions of an online learning community during the school placement?
3. How does the integration of the online learning community in school placement interact with Confucian views of learning?

To be more specific, sub-question one focuses on seeking evidence and particular aspects of shared learning. The aim of sub-question two is to hear from participants' directly and thus bring their perception of such an online learning experience to the fore. Since ethnographic inquiry is situated in a Chinese context of CMC, sub-question three aims to explore potential socio-cultural aspects of this case study. Once the answers to the three sub-questions are discovered and verified, they will ultimately provide a response to the overarching research question.

1.5 Overview of Study

The thesis is structured in three parts and is composed of nine chapters, including this introductory chapter.

Part I: Exploring learning to teach in online learning communities

The first part consists of chapters one to three. Overall, this section establishes the context of this situated research in the complex area of the school placement as part of preservice teacher education in China. It provides a review of relevant research and presents a detailed account of the design of the online learning community.

Chapter two synthesises the review of existing literature in the following interrelated research areas; learning to teach, online dialogue, online learning community, online communities of practice, cultural influence of learning and online ecology in the Chinese context. It begins by reconceptualising the development of learning to teach *per se* and related conceptual aspects of school placement; it identifies issues of learning to teach in an online learning community, and examines the relationship between the influence of Chinese culture on learners and learning in an online environment. The literature review aims to develop a detailed, and arguably justified, theoretical basis that frames the research design and informs the analysis and interpretation of the study.

Chapter three provides the rationale for using the free open source software ‘Moodle’ to create the online learning site for this study. An account of my technical journey and reflection on the pros and cons of Moodle are also provided.

Part II: Designing and analysing learning to teach in the online learning community

The second part focuses on the actual design of the research and more importantly, the detailed documentation of qualitative analysis. There are two chapters in this section.

Chapter four presents the research methodology employed in the research design. The study is conducted in the qualitative research paradigm. I start with a brief exposition of my qualitative philosophy in terms of the ontological and epistemological perspectives in educational research. I then provide the rationale for adopting an ethnographic case study approach. Research settings, research participants and ethical considerations are presented. I also detail the five data collection instruments, fieldwork and method of data analysis by weaving in the preliminary findings from a pilot study. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of how the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research can be assured.

Chapter five details the mechanism and procedure used for data analysis. I provide a technical description of analysis, and an explicit account of actual analysis. I also

identify some key methodological issues and challenges that I faced, and ultimately resolved. Examples will be provided by way of illustration. I address the importance of documenting the analytical process in qualitative research since mystery surrounds the way in which qualitative researchers conduct data analysis. This chapter consists of 6 sections: part one discusses the importance of documenting the analytical process; part two provides an account of preparations made for data analysis; part three focuses on how analytical procedures were employed at different stages to make sense of data; part four explains how three techniques were used to achieve trustworthiness of my study; part five deals with methodological serendipities occurred during data analysis; a reflective account of data analysis is presented in the final part.

Part III: Understanding learning to teach in the online learning community

Drawing on the analysis presented in *chapter five*, the last part of the thesis provides answers to the research questions. Part three consists of *chapters six to nine*, all of which present a detailed discussion and interpretation of research findings, and relates them to the aim of this study and current research.

Chapter six presents and elucidates the key findings in relation to the nature of student teachers' shared learning in the online learning community. In light of the analysis of online postings, the evidence and content of student teachers' professional learning and growth are detailed in this chapter, enabling us to answer sub-question one.

Chapter seven gives the findings of the interviews with participants, which aimed to understand their perception of this type of online learning-to-teach experience, and thus provide answers to sub-question two.

Chapter eight sheds light on the interplay between the Confucian view of learning and the online learning community by means of discussing and cross-referencing the findings of the online postings and interviews. The answer to sub-question three is presented in the chapter.

Chapter nine summarises the key statements derived from the findings of the three sub-questions in order to provide a holistic answer to the overarching research question. Contributions and limitations of the study and recommendations for further research are addressed in this chapter.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have referred to the recurrent and disquieting phenomenon of disconnection and isolation which occurs in the final stage of preservice teacher education, and the problems it brings, both universally and in China particularly. I have argued that there is an urgent need to conduct this type of study in the region by expositing the current situation of teacher education in China. I have also talked about my professional development and the motivation which led me to undertake this study. The aim of the research has been presented accordingly, and an overview of the thesis provided.

In the next chapter, I will present a review of the literature pertaining to this study and develop a conceptual framework which will underpin the study.

CHAPTER 2: THE LITERATURE REVIEW: LEARNING TO TEACH IN AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Introduction

As previously noted, the main objective of this inquiry is to investigate the role of an online learning community in supporting a cohort of student teachers' professional learning during school placement. The context is that of Chinese student teachers learning to teach English as a foreign language. The literature review presented in this chapter, therefore, addresses the interrelated areas of concern relevant to the study.

It begins by synthesising the theoretical underpinnings (section 2.1) which guide this study. A brief review of learning to teach (section 2.2) is provided in terms of three key orientations, and the key issues of professional isolation and marginality in the current system of preservice teacher education are discussed. In section 2.3, I review how research on the implementation of online learning communities in teaching and learning provides an effective solution to connect learners and teachers and support learning. The key features of online dialogue that help build an online learning community are examined (section 2.3.1). The literature review then moves forward to identify the specific contribution of communities of practice to current studies centred on the process of learning-to-teach in online learning communities (section 2.3.2). Discussion of the importance of relevant communities of practice to this study is presented in section 2.4, while the challenges of developing online learning communities are explored in section 2.5. The impact of traditional Chinese culture and technology on student teachers' learning is also addressed (section 2.6). The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature review, highlighting gaps in the existing research which this study intends to address.

2.1 Underlying Theoretical Assumptions on Learning to Teach

The following diverse but influential views on learning are synthesised into an integrated theoretical body which provides the foundation for the study and guides the creation and development of an online learning community to support student teacher learning.

Different kinds of learning theories put forward different perspectives of learning; all of these stand in their own right under appropriate circumstances. As Wenger (1998) points out:

To some extent these differences in emphasis reflect a deliberate focus on a slice of the multidimensional problem of learning, and to some extent they reflect more fundamental differences in assumptions about the nature of knowledge, knowing, and knowers, and consequently about what matters in learning. (p. 3)

In this study, the understanding of learning is kept within the boundaries of socio-constructivism and situated learning. Learning to teach has been increasingly recognised as a situated social practice (Samaras and Gismondi, 1998; Johnson and Golombek, 2003; Hawkins, 2004) in which student teachers construct their knowledge and understanding of teaching by means of interaction with real teaching contexts, their supervisor and peers. While discussions of socio-constructivism and situated learning theory ‘draw on different references, and clearly have specialised languages, actual interpretations of situativity and constructivism share many underlying similarities’ (Barab and Duffy, 2000, p. 25).

2.1.1 Socio-constructivism and Implications

Vygotsky (1978) proposes that socio-constructivism developed out of psychological constructivism. This view of learning, according to Vygotsky, stresses the critical importance of social and interpersonal interaction among learners and teachers in cognitive development.

In his seminal social development theory of learning, Vygotsky (1978) proposes that learning depends on social interaction which eventuates in cognitive development. In the framework of socio-constructivism, learning is defined as a fundamentally social phenomenon rather than an individual process. In this regard, learning is no longer a process that occurs solely inside an individual learner's mind, or a passive development of behaviours moulded by external factors (McMahon, 1997). On the contrary, learning is a social construct mediated by language (Vygotsky, 1978). The social nature of learning indicates that learning occurs in the process of people's interaction and relationship-building, as McDermott (1999) highlights that learning no longer happens merely as individual learners' own endeavour, but rather happens in diverse conversations that they are a part:

[Here] learning is in the relationship between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organise a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance. Without the points of contact, without the systems of relevancies, there is no learning, and there is little memory. (p. 17)

Another significant and fundamental tenet in Vygotsky's theory is the notion of 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) explains the phenomenon of ZPD as 'the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (p. 86). Learning within the ZPD relies on full social interaction. In other words, learning that could otherwise not be achieved alone can be facilitated or achieved under teacher guidance or through peer collaboration. Vygotsky stresses the importance of the presence of 'expert scaffolding' as well as the social context; meanwhile, he highlights that the term 'scaffolding' also indicates the learning process in which learners gradually move from assisted learning to non-assisted learning (1978).

Because Vygotsky's view of learning emphasises the critical interdependence of the individual and social interaction, it has many implications for research in the educational field. Sawyer (2002) points out that Vygotsky's theory suggests that collaboration might support teachers' internalisation of new meanings and the promotion of control over

practice. The socio-constructivist perspective has been advocated and adopted in recent years to reconceptualise student teachers' teaching and learning. Language teacher education and student teachers have been a primary research focus (Freeman and Johnson, 1998a; Richards, 1998; Johnson, 2009).

Socio-constructivism appreciates the significance of learning context and other individuals within that context, and affirms that knowledge is constructed and generated through socialisation and interaction with others. In this context, learning is viewed as 'participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to the construction of meanings rather than receiving them' (Bruner, 1996, p. 84). In the context of learning to teach, the ZPD can be interpreted as a symbolic space in which student teachers' pedagogical knowledge and teaching-related skills are developed and nurtured under the guidance of university-based supervisors as well as the interaction with and support from their more able peers.

Most recently there has been a move towards a learning communities view of student teaching experiences (Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008) and towards 'a more shared learning and joint construction of what it means to teach' (Le Cornu, 2008, p. 4). With the emphasis on collaboration and interaction in communities under the framework of socio-constructivism, student teachers are expected to work closely with their peers, supervisors and cooperating teachers. According to Le Cornu and Ewing (2008), the shift from an individual focus towards a more shared one is rather significant because the process of learning to teach is essentially reciprocal and participatory, which requires interdependence and commitment among people involved in learning.

2.1.2 Situated Learning

Lave and Wenger (1991) believe in the social nature of learning, and hence propose the model of situated learning which stresses the link between person, context and social relationships and in relation to other communities of practice over time. According to them, understanding different forms of social engagements and interactions among learners is essential to discovering how and why learning occurs. Lave and Wenger

(1991) elaborate on the model of situated learning by observing how different newcomers such as Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, quartermasters, butchers, and recovering alcoholics, become integrated in communities of learning by 'legitimate peripheral participation' (LPP) leading to 'full participation' (p, 37). Learning embodies a process of social interaction and participation, which creates opportunities for individuals to construct knowledge and understanding from their practice. Moreover, learning as a social activity indicates that people make sense of their experiences as the scope and degree of their participation in the norms and practices of a community increases and develops (Lave and Wenger, 1998).

Learners are therefore ineluctably participators in socio-cultural practices of communities in which they acquire knowledge and skills, and progress gradually from newcomers toward full participants in communities. The concept of LPP offers a clear lens through which to appreciate the relationships between different members (newcomers and old-timers) and activities, identities and artefacts constructed collectively over time. The meaning of learning is embodied in a social process that 'includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills' (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 29).

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), legitimation, peripherality and participation are three inseparable aspects that define each other. Legitimation and participation together determine the characteristics of belonging to a community, while peripherality and participation relate to the degree of engagement and identity in the social process of learning. LLP indicates learning as a holistic part of practice situated in the social world. In this regard, learning to teach can be viewed as a situated activity (Mantero, 2004; Dewhurst and McMurtry, 2006) because student teachers interact in teaching practices or activities which are always contextualised and oriented towards achieving specific goals. During the process of learning to teach, student teachers increase their participation in the activity of teaching, gaining insights into the practices of teachers, and the values and norms of the placement schools.

2.2 Overview of Learning to Teach

It is acknowledged that school placement has a dual mission: it aims to improve learning to teach and teaching to learn. How we prepare English language teachers for their profession is influenced by the ways in which we think about learning and teacher learning (Johnson, 2009). Therefore, the section synthesises the main developments and issues in the field of learning to teach. First, a critical evaluation of three major orientations of learning to teach, termed as traditional, reflective and learning communities (Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008), will be presented in order to reconceptualise the current trend. Secondly, key issues embedded in preservice teacher education will be identified in order to better address the needs of student teachers and support their learning experience and professional growth during the course of their school placement.

2.2.1 Development of Learning to Teach

Views of learning to teach have broadly fallen into transmission and reflective models, while social models have more recently been a focus of attention in their own right, reflecting socio-constructivist learning concerns. As Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) suggest, in terms of application to any teacher-learning context, these may not be totally ‘discrete entities’ (p. 1801), but they merit some exploration in their own right to understand their underlying concepts, and to identify how these have informed Chinese pre-service teacher education and the role of placement therein.

2.2.1.1 Traditional Approach

Traditional approaches to learning to teach have involved the transmission of skills and theoretical understandings to novice teachers. Wallace (1991) describes the craft model in which ‘expertise in the craft can be passed on from generation to generation’ (p. 6) and the applied science model which arms trainee teachers with knowledge gained from those who are ‘expert in the knowledge or experiential base’ (p. 9). There is, therefore, a divide which, according to Le Cornu and Ewing (2008, 1801), reflects ‘a theory-practice dichotomy’.

Despite the fact that the teaching of theories is decontextualised, the traditional orientation holds the belief that once they are trained to be equipped with theories of teaching, student teachers will be able to apply what they have learned (theory) in their classroom teaching (practice). In his seminal work on teacher education, Lortie (1975) points out that the emphasis on the command of teaching skills and expertise may be partially due to the traditional belief that it is a matter of survival rather than pedagogical philosophy that student teachers are more concerned about.

Richards (1998) states that the notion of training is the essence of the traditional approach with the underlying beliefs that:

teaching can be defined in terms of a specified set of effective teaching practices and competences, that these can be taught and tested, and that their application is sufficient to produce good second language teaching. (p. xiv)

In line with Richards, Freeman (1982) points out that according to the traditional orientation; ‘teaching is a finite skill, one which can be acquired and mastered’ (p. 21). Within this traditional approach, student teachers are trained to isolate, practice, and master specific behaviours (Gebhard, 2009) with a particular focus on their good command of ‘procedural and managerial aspects of teaching, such as lesson planning, rules and routines for classroom management...ways of opening and closing lessons, techniques for effective questioning, eliciting, and giving feedback’ (Richards, 1998: xiv). Supervision in the school placement takes a clinical supervisory approach which consists of visits to schools by supervisors, class observation, post-observation feedback to evaluate student teachers’ teaching performance, and providing guidance to direct follow-up practice.

The traditional orientation emphasises university supervisors’ and cooperating teachers’ authoritative status in guiding student teachers. Therefore, it is most likely that many student teachers can be disempowered from making independent and critical decisions about their teaching. The fact that the supervisor act as knowledge-transmitter, expert and evaluator may put student teachers in an undesirable situation, leaving them

struggling to make their voices heard. Furthermore, it is likely that some student teachers may rely completely on their supervisor to guide and direct their whole teaching practice, without using their own initiative to make the learning-to-teach experience personally meaningful.

Over the last two decades, an increasing number of research projects and publications on teacher education have critiqued the traditional transmission orientation in which teacher educators are viewed as authorities who prescribe and impart to student teachers effective teaching skills and principles (Shulman, 1987; Gebhard, 1990; Roberts, 1998). In language teacher education this transmission approach fails to realise that student teachers are not merely a row of empty containers to be filled with theoretical knowledge and pedagogical skills (Freeman and Johnson 1998a; Roberts, 1998).

Moreover, the transmission view ignores the fact that the impact of ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975) on student teachers’ preconceptions of teaching may influence their perception of, and beliefs on, what to teach and how. Student teachers are ‘individuals who enter teacher education programmes with prior experiences, personal values, and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do’ (Freeman and Johnson, 1998a, p. 401). The transmission model, according to Richardson (1997), provides ‘neither the interaction between prior and new knowledge nor the conversation’ that are particularly essential for student teachers’ understanding and internalisation of teaching practice (p. 3).

In the same vein, Dewey (1904) critiques this orientation for its overemphasis on skill acquisition, raising the concern that ‘immediate skill may be got at the cost of power to go on growing’ (p. 15). What is considered good practice according to the transmission orientation tends to be static, disjointed and difficult to apply to multidimensional and unpredictable teaching contexts (Johnson, 1996b; Tillema and Knol, 1997). The traditional approach merely focuses student teachers on mastering prescribed rules of practice (Richards, 1998) but fails to engage them ‘in an exploration of the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and thinking that inform such practice’ (p. xiv). This reflective engagement with the ‘self’ as a fundamental component of decision making in situ is

recognised as equipping teachers with the skills to better encounter the unpredictable.

2.2.1.2 Reflective Approach

Reflection is viewed as a vital component for any teacher's continuous professional growth (Richards and Lockhart, 1994). The reflective practice paradigm 'has taken hold in the education community' and 'continues today as a noteworthy reform effort' (Pedro 2005, p. 49).

Dewey (1933) describes reflective teaching as the 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or practice or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the conclusion to which it ends' (p. 9). According to Dewey, reflective teaching requires teachers to critically examine and actively tackle teaching-related perplexities. Under this orientation, student teachers are no longer solely concerned with developing their immediate technical competence in practice. They are encouraged to analytically evaluate their practice, develop their sensitivity to the morals and ethics within practice and gain self-confidence in steering their own professional learning (Calderhead, 1989) according to contextualised teaching situations. It is recognised that reflective practice nurtures 'a greater awareness among student teachers of what constitutes appropriate pedagogic practice and will lay the foundations for development, a process which will be ongoing throughout their teaching careers' (Kullman, 1998, p. 471).

The reflective approach suggests that student teachers be empowered to take ownership of their learning-to-teach experience. Therefore, the role of supervisors in supporting student teachers' learning needs to be reexamined. Richards (1998) suggests that student teachers should have a collaborative and interactive relationship with their supervisors. Student teachers are considered active participants, taking ownership of learning and evaluating teaching content, processes and performance (Zeichner and Liston, 1987) through their personal and social experiences during the course of school placement.

Supervisors, on the other hand, become facilitators or supporters whose responsibility is

to work with student teachers and promote changes through nurturing their awareness, but not to direct them or intervene in their decision-making process (Gebhard, 1984; Freeman, 1989). In the same vein, Chamberlin (2000) argues that a supervisor, once seen as an expert evaluator, should be ‘charged with the responsibility of gaining [student] teachers’ trust and creating an environment that cultivates reflection, exploration and change’ (p. 656).

While the value of reflective practice in teacher education is highly appreciated, reflection is essentially an individual enterprise. There is a tendency for student teachers to fall into the trap of self-defence or justification given that their long history of apprenticeship of observation has an influential impact on their beliefs and assumptions of what teaching means to them. In exploring trainee teachers’ reflective practice, Moore and Ash (2002) discovered that the most useful reflection is derived from the active support and company of their peers and supervisors, rather than coming from solely self-directed inquiry. In recent years, the significance of others in supporting critical and collaborative reflection on learning to teach has drawn increasing attention from teacher educators and researchers.

2.2.1.3 A Learning Community Approach

The *learning community* view of learning to teach is also built around a socio-constructivist perspective and evolves further from an individual focus to a shared one (Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008). Community is conceived by Gee (1990) as ‘a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network’ (p. 143). In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that social interaction in learning and learning in community better facilitates learners’ appreciation and internalisation of knowledge and practice.

According to Feldman (2000), the shift from the ‘Age of the Individual to the Era of Community’ reinforces ‘the essential role that relationship, participation, reciprocity, membership and collaboration must play in any theory of human development that

aspires to guide us' (p. xiii). From the *learning communities* perspective, professional learning, according to Lieberman and Pointer-Mace (2008), is 'rooted in the human need to feel a sense of belonging and of making a contribution to a community where experience and knowledge function as part of community property' (p, 227). The sense of belonging and contributing to a community appears to be particularly meaningful for student teachers. Because student teachers are geographically isolated from their peers and supervisors, a collaborative and accessible venue for them to share and discuss practice, eliminate doubts and seek support from each other might better motivate and engage them in their professional growth.

This orientation engages directly with the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) who claim that learning occurs in a social and situated learning process. In the context of teachers' professional development, Perry *et al.* (1999) identify Wenger's communities of practice (1998) as 'intellectual groups who share goals/purposes and engage in planning, enacting and reflecting' (p. 218). In the reflective orientation, as individual learners, student teachers view reflection as a personal endeavour to be undertaken in private and isolation. In contrast, in the *learning communities* orientation, student teachers not only articulate their thoughts openly and develop their own reflective thinking, but also recognise the insight that their peers may bring, which can in turn foster more self-inquiry. Reflection in this orientation becomes 'a social practice and public activity involving communities of teachers' (Zeichner, 1994, p.11).

Supervision has a different purpose in this context than in the traditional and reflective orientations. Rather than acting as facilitators of reflection, university supervisors and cooperating teachers are in a participatory and equal relationship with student teachers with the aim of understanding various issues involved in the process of learning to teach. Under the *learning communities* orientation, supervisors or cooperating teachers are no longer the sole expert or knowledge provider. Student teachers are empowered to co-construct knowledge of teaching and negotiate meaning with their peers as well as supervisors and cooperating teachers.

Using communities of practice as a model to support teachers' professional learning, and

share practice and reflection in a collective learning environment, has gained considerable currency (Kirschner and Lai, 2007). Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) go so far as to say that it is, therefore, of great importance that student teachers learn how to participate in such communities. Moreover, as Burns and Richards (2009) claim:

Becoming an English language teacher means becoming part of a worldwide community of professionals with shared goals, values, discourse, and practices but one with a self-critical view of its own practices and a commitment to a transformative approach to its own role. (p. 3)

This requires both supervisors and student teachers to change their view of learning to teach, from something personal and private, to one of professional practice which can be better improved if it is made public, discussed openly and reflected upon collectively.

2.2.2 Issues of School Placement

Despite universal acknowledgement of the crucial role that school placement plays, Goodman (1986) argues that teacher educators should not be overly positive and assume that the experience automatically enables student teachers to gain valuable professional experience. It is possible that school placement might fail to meet student teachers' expectations and could provide little meaningful learning. If we stop and think about it, the transition from university to school, and from being students of teaching to teachers of students, is indeed a difficult process which involves a great deal of complexity and ambiguity. Issues such as establishing a workable relationship with cooperating teachers, understanding the code of practice in a particular school, fitting into the school culture and being able to connect theoretical knowledge with classroom teaching or tackling emergent teaching-related problems, can present an overwhelming challenge for inexperienced student teachers. Therefore, it is essential to address the key issues encountered by student teachers in order to better support student teachers and help them make an effective transition. Two major problems which arise during the learning to teach experience have been identified, namely professional isolation and marginality.

2.2.2.1 Professional Isolation

Teaching is acknowledged as a solitary practice in which teachers are strictly confined to separate classrooms or to interacting mostly with students. The lack of professional dialogue with other colleagues consolidates teachers' professional isolation and impedes collaboration and collective professional development. According to Lortie (1975), there are three forms of professional isolation: egg-crate, psychological and adaptive isolation (p. 12). Egg-crate isolation refers to the physical separateness of classrooms where teachers have little contact with other teachers. Psychological isolation describes a frustrating state of mind when teachers are not provided with collegial interactions and are dismayed to think that no one attends to what they do. Adaptive isolation indicates teachers' feeling of being overwhelmed when they are unable to adapt to new demands or teaching strategies.

Isolation is identified by Gordon and Maxey (2000) as one of the six most common difficulties that challenge and dismay beginning teachers. In their view, new teachers often suffer from psychological, physical, social and professional isolation. Such isolation is a particularly troubling situation for new teachers when they are left in their classrooms to figure things out for themselves without any support from their mentors, peers or colleagues. When beginning teachers are assailed by uncertainty and anxiety (Lacey, 1977), there is a tendency for them to overemphasise their weaknesses, rather than understand the actual professional needs. If they are reluctant or hesitant to call upon others for support, beginning teachers further contribute to their isolation (Gordon and Maxey, 2000).

As noted in chapter one, school placement is characterised by various forms of isolation and disconnection. The degree of professional isolation encountered by student teachers is even more overwhelming when they are dispersed to different sites to conduct their practice teaching, as they find themselves away from their university, supervisors and peers for the first time. The transition from university to school and from being students of teaching to teachers of students brings added perplexities and difficulties for student teachers engaging in professional learning; failure (on the part of the supervisor or

institution) to address the issue of isolation or provide effective means of support is likely to make the school placement experience a daunting and negative one for student teachers. Consequently, student teachers' learning-to-teach experience might be compromised when they face difficulties without sufficient support provided.

2.2.2.2 Marginality

The phrase 'marginal people' is used here to describe those who are in a transitional phase, between detaching themselves from their previous community and joining a new one. As a newcomer, a marginal person appears to be a peripheral member, and their full membership has not yet been acknowledged by more established members of the community. In this regard, student teachers, allocated to different teaching sites, are marginal people in placement schools who lack the 'status, the authority or situational knowledge to be like 'real teachers' (Alsop and Scott, 1990, p.1). Under such circumstances, student teachers inevitably experience a certain level of anxiety and difficulty when dealing with situations they are not familiar with in placement schools. They are reliant upon the goodwill of cooperating teachers in order to be accepted and treated appropriately (Sabar, 2004). However, as identified in the first Chapter, some cooperating teachers may regard student teachers as 'a threat to existing conventions and to the comfortable routine' (ibid, p. 148), and hence ignore or exclude student teachers from participating in the school community. This alienation from placement schools can further reinforce their marginalised situation.

Meanwhile, in Britzman's (1991) interpretation, the roots of marginality lie in student teachers' dual roles as both a student and teacher during school placement. He believes that the dilemmas and tensions caused by these dual identities make the world of student teachers persistently intricate in that student teachers need to not only make their voices heard but also respect the balance of power between them and cooperating teachers. As peripheral participants in the placement schools, student teachers are not entitled or empowered to exert as much influence as they initially expect to their classroom and teaching sites. Marginality causes student teachers to experience a deepening sense of isolation and loneliness due to the lack of support, communication and collegiality in the

placement schools.

In addition to this marginal status in placement schools, student teachers are also likely to be marginalised in terms of the support and guidance provided by their university's faculty or supervisors during school placement. Such marginality is particularly prevalent in China where the assignment of supervisors is mainly based on their availability, and supervision is considered to be of lesser importance than their own teaching and research (Yan and He, 2010). In light of this professional isolation and marginality, it is understandable that student teachers need to gain the support of, and connect with, peers who find themselves in the same situation and are faced with similar frustrations.

Thus far, I have evaluated the three major orientations in learning to teach. I have further discussed two of the most pervasive problems, which remain embedded in the school placements of many preservice teacher education programmes worldwide, and should by no means be ignored. The fact that student teachers are marginalised and professionally isolated, just as Johnson (1996a) notes, means that we have limited knowledge of how student teachers view their school placement experience and its overall impact on their professional growth.

2.3 Online Learning Communities

One possible solution to the problems of disconnection and isolation experienced by both student teachers and supervisors is ICT, and in particular, the implementation of computer-mediated communication (CMC) collaborative learning communities. CMC, as an accessible and low-cost means of bridging the gaps caused by time and distance, provides an opportunity for student teachers and supervisors who would not otherwise be able to communicate face-to-face. Hendriks and Maor (2004) point out that CMC is recognised as 'a medium of learning that is highly interactive and capable of supporting interaction and collaboration between learners' (p. 5). In computer-mediated collaborative learning communities, student teachers, their supervisors and their peers, can be brought together to reflect, discuss, debate and critique ideas and any problems

which have emerged during the school placement. This is achieved via the use of asynchronous communication tools such as emails and bulletin board systems (BBS) or free real-time communication software such as MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, and Skype, for instant messaging, voice conversations and group conferencing.

Within an online collaborative environment, student teachers can contact more capable peers as well as their supervisors. This enables them to expand their zone of proximal development in terms of negotiating complex professional meanings through collaborative reflective dialogue (Schlagal *et al.*, 1996). Research on creating learning communities (Wellman and Gulia, 1999a, Haythornthwaite *et al.*, 2000) shows effective outcomes for individual learners and the online learning communities, such as promoting the availability of support, cooperation among members, and the flow of information.

Studies have also revealed that online learning communities can provide beginning teachers with a venue in which to enable connections and emotional support (Scherff and Paulus, 2006), and to gain and refine pedagogical skills (Courtney and King, 2009). Lambe and Clarke (2003) point out that during initial teacher training, online communities offer opportunities for ‘the development of professional dialogue on classroom issues or problems that would be common to the student group generally’ (p. 354). DeWert *et al.* (2003) conclude from their study that as student teachers’ sense of disconnectedness disappears, they become more confident and capable of thinking critically and developing their problem-solving skills. Nicholson and Bond (2003) state that student teachers’ online interactions not only provide unlimited access to emotional and intellectual support, but also encourage the development of reflective discourse over time, a claim similarly made by Moody (2000).

Therefore, in light of the transformative effects that ICT can have, the integration of ICT into preservice English teacher education is essential. It will enable student teachers and their supervisors to connect in spite of time and distance constraints. More importantly, the implementation of ICT aims to ensure that supervisors provide student teachers with timely supervision in a dialectic manner that unfolds as ‘an interactive, integrative and

participatory process’ (Carter, 2005, p. 482). As a result, supervision should enable student teachers ‘at a highly formative and vulnerable stage in their careers’ (ibid, p. 483) to benefit from the collective learning experience and develop their professional competence.

2.3.1 Online Dialogue

As previously discussed in this chapter, both socio-constructivism and situativity theorists see learning as a social, dialogical process which is mediated by language and occurs when individual learners are engaged in different conversations with others. In other words, the social nature of learning emphasises the prerequisites of communication and collaboration among learners. This section will be devoted to the various aspects of asynchronous online communication in supporting learning. The terms ‘communication’ and ‘dialogue’ are used interchangeably in the discussion.

Researchers have hailed dialogue as a pedagogical tool in student learning and teacher education. Freire (1976) points out that dialogue as a social process constitutes a vital factor for learning. Shor and Freire (1987) and Burbules (1993) view dialogue as a powerful pedagogical tool to liberate learners and transform learning in the classroom to be learner-centred, participatory and collaborative. In other words, dialogue ‘rejects narrative lecturing where teacher talk silences and alienates students’ (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 11) and encourages students to engage in the active meaning-making process through interaction with their peers and teachers. Dialogue involves learners’ ability to reason and hence they develop greater understanding, insight and sensitivity. Putnam and Borko (2000) praise the significance of dialogue in enhancing teacher development and educational reform because it enables teachers with diverse knowledge and experiences in the community to interact with and learn from their peers. According to them, online dialogue allows teachers to incorporate each other’s expertise, which creates meaningful discourse and new insights into professional practice.

The power of computer-mediated communication (CMC) lies in its capacity to support both communication and collaboration ‘beyond the here and now’ (Pachler, 2001, p. 21).

The text-based messages in asynchronous CMC have unique attributes. Conversations in asynchronous online communities are usually organised in threads, though responses may not necessarily follow one another logically. Henri (1992) states that despite the fact these messages are text-based, they have more of the characteristics associated with spoken communication than those of traditional written communication. Online communication is ‘a hybrid that is both talking and writing yet isn’t completely either one’ (Coate, 1997, p. 15). Meanwhile, the use of emoticons and acronyms as new linguistic cues in written messages enhances communication as well as a sense of members’ online presence.

It is widely agreed that asynchronous CMC makes dialogue a very powerful means by which to foster communication and deep thinking. Russell (2000) argues that the asynchronous capabilities of text-based CMC allow for more thoughts, reflection and process of information. Likewise, written dialogue is believed by Wells (1999) to support individual reflection better than oral discussion because it allows time for issues to be thought through and responses to be more carefully produced. Harasim (1990) claims that when there is a high level of interactivity in online dialogue, this, in turn, encourages collaboration and thus has a greater impact on the learning process. Online dialogue allows participants to contribute to discussions freely but without worrying about the same limited opportunities or time as they face in the classroom; therefore, all participants can be heard and post without being interrupted.

2.3.2 Learning to Teach and Online Communities of Practice

In recent years, the establishment of online communities of practice has been widely recognised as a desirable model for the development of a collaborative learning environment to support teachers’ professional growth (Kirschner and Lai, 2007). Because the theory of CoPs implies that educators should create learning opportunities in which knowledge is grounded in both learning practices and social relations, the framework of CoPs has been frequently and specifically employed to guide the design of online learning communities (Reimann, 2008).

A number of studies (Rogers, 2000; Hung and Der-Thanq, 2001; Clarke, 2002; Mayer, 2002; Sim, 2006) have explored the challenges of building computer-mediated communities of practice to foster learning, teacher professional development or preservice teacher education. Drawing on different theoretical perspectives of the framework of CoP, those studies encompass various aspects of learning, and learning to teach, in the online CoP.

Based on a comprehensive review of US literature, Barnett (2001) affirms that teacher isolation can be reduced through the implementation of networking technologies that support sharing, help improve teaching practice, and foster the formation of CoPs. In her research on the role of on-line conferences in supporting a cohort of teacher trainees, Clarke (2002) claims that computer-networked communities of practice promote reflective practice and enhance the dispersed student teachers' sense of connectedness. In the absence of geographical proximity, the implementation of information and communications technology (ICT), and computer conferencing in particular, can facilitate and maintain the sense of shared learning despite the distance.

By the same token, Barnett (2006) points out that CMC offers 'great potential for teacher training to enhance communication and sharing of teaching practices that many educators believe can fundamentally reshape the nature of teacher training' (p. 702). Apart from facilitating timely communication, online communities, according to Galanouli and Collins (2000), provide student teachers with opportunities for emotional support and stress relief during teaching practice, and hence improve the bond between individuals and the whole community and promote a great sense of trust and belonging. Strong community bonds, in return, may help encourage the sharing and flow of information between members, and increase commitment to group objectives and collaboration (Galanouli and Collins 2000; Rovai, 2002). Undoubtedly, such communities allow individuals to seek support and help from other willing members in times of needs.

Other researchers have explored the process of online communication and how online CoPs can be used to promote reflection that improves professional practice. Stiler and

Philleo (2003), who employ the framework of CoPs in their study, analysed data collected from self-report questionnaires and discovered that the use of blogs can successfully develop and enhance reflective practice among preservice teachers. More recently, Kelly *et al.* (2007) investigated how communication in an online CoP can foster reflective practice and facilitate participants to establish their professional identity. They present six cases demonstrating how online discussion allows students to reflect on and reappraise their perception of professional practice. In order to facilitate online communication and reflection, Seddon and Postlethwaite (2007) have designed a prototype model to help participants evaluate their learning behaviour and contributions to the collective construction of knowledge in the CoP. Their participatory action research shows that the model proves very useful in terms of understanding the nature of online communication and evaluating participants' online contribution in the CoP.

At this point it is helpful to provide a more detailed exploration of the framework of communities of practice because the increasing volume of research calls for investigators to have a thorough understanding of its theoretical assumptions and its applications in supporting student teacher education in the CMC context.

2.4 Communities of Practice

Wenger (1998) takes the concept of communities of practice (CoPs) outlined in his previous research with Lave, and develops it further in his ethnographic study of insurance claims processors. Wenger (2006) defines CoPs thus:

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

Additionally, Wenger *et al.* (2002) explain the essence of CoPs by stressing:

A community of practice is not just a Web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Having others who share your overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts. (p. 34)

Wenger, *et al.* (2002) identify six main factors that differentiate one community of practice from another: size, life span, membership, location, formality and boundaries. In light of their views, a community of practice, for instance, may consist of heterogeneous or homogeneous members whose number can vary from only a few to hundreds or thousands of people; it can develop and last for a lifetime or it can be abandoned by members or simply cease evolving within a short period of time. A community of practice can exist in a face-to-face situation, in a online model or a combination of the both.

The framework of communities of practice (CoPs) is in accordance with that of socio-constructivism as Wenger (1998) also advocates the view that learning is ‘a social participation’ and knowing is ‘a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises’ and ‘a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises’ (p. 4). Wenger (1998) considers communities to be ‘the social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence’ (p. 5). Such communities promote professional exchange and foster a collective sense of experience or challenges between members through facilitating the sharing of ideas and encouraging joint problem-solving and innovation-developing practice.

2.4.1 Dimensions of a Community of Practice

Wenger (2001) highlights three crucial characteristics which define CoPs as well as differentiate them from general learning communities:

The domain Since a community of practice is focused on a domain of shared interest, it is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. Membership therefore implies a minimum level of knowledge of that

domain—a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. The domain is not necessarily something recognized as ‘expertise’ outside the community.

The community In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. That is how they form a community around their domain and build relationships. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together.

The practice A community of practice is not merely a community of interest--people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short a shared practice. This takes time. (p. 2-3)

Wenger (1998) also puts forward an alternative interpretation of the domain, community and practice described above; namely, mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire.

Mutual engagement (the community) refers to the members’ commitment and their patterns of interaction in the community. ‘Being included in what matters is a requirement for being engaged in a community’s practice, just as engagement is what defines belonging’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 74). Mutual engagement, according to Wenger, has the capacity to embrace homogeneity and diversity, which creates relationships among people. Moreover, through interactions, members shape their culture and practices within the community. Since the practice which connects participants is in essence diverse and complex, the mutual relationships in a CoP also reflect the complex diversity embedded in members’ interactions and relationships. As Wenger (1998) claims:

A community of practice is neither a haven of togetherness nor an island of intimacy insulated from political and social relations. Disagreement, challenges and competition can all be forms of participation. As a form of participation, rebellion often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity. (p. 77)

Joint enterprise (the domain) is the second dimension constituting a source of community coherence. It is elucidated by Wenger (1998) as a shared interest or common

purpose that links members with one another; that defines their collective objective and provides coherence for their joint pursuit. In the view of Wenger, joint enterprise entails three important aspects that keep a community of practice together:

It is the result of a collective process of negotiation that reflects the full complexity of mutual engagement. It is defined by the participants through the very process of pursuing it. It is their negotiated response to their situation and thus belongs to them in a profound sense, in spite of all the forces and influences that are beyond their control. It is not a stated goal, but creates among participants relations of mutual accountability that become an integral part of the practice. (p. 77-78)

It is participants' joint responsibility to share information and provide help and support sought by the community. These relations of accountability include 'what matters and what does not, what is important and why it is important, what to do and not to do, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, what to talk about and what to leave unsaid, what to justify and what to take for granted, what to display and what to withhold, when actions and artefacts are good enough and why they need improvement or refinement' (Wenger, 1998, p. 81).

The third dimension is the development of a **shared repertoire** (the practice). The collective pursuit of a shared enterprise yields resources for the negotiation of meaning over time. The repertoire, developed over time and shared by all members, according to Wenger (1998), includes, artifacts, stories, actions, historical events, tools, techniques, etc. In other words, the repertoire manifests in a shared history of collective learning among participants. He points out that the richer and larger the repertoire is, the easier it is for the participants to communicate meaning. The shared repertoire opens up new possibilities and alternative perspectives for individual participants to tackle problems and improve practice. The actual interpretation and adoption of the shared repertoire, meanwhile, always comes down to individual choice (Wenger, 1998).

Members of communities of practice, as Wenger (1998) suggests, 'act as resources for each other, exchanging information, making sense of situations, sharing new tricks and ideas, making the job possible and the atmosphere pleasant as well as keeping each other

company and spicing up each other's working days' (p. 47). Therefore, communities of practice suggest that learning is a social practice and knowledge is an intrinsic part of social interaction, social relations and expertise of communities. Once student teachers are involved in the communities of practice where 'learning is their practice, they are engaged in practice which is the stage and the object, the road and the destination' (Wenger, 1998, p. 95).

In light of these three dimensions, some researchers have set out what, for them, are the key aspects of a CoP. For example, Hara and Kling (2002) highlight five key features stemming from the definition of CoPs: a group of practitioners, the growth of a shared practice, informal learning networks, a supportive and trusting culture, and practitioners' engagement in knowledge co-construction. These attributes can help explain why the CoPs framework has the potential to provide researchers with a specific perspective to deepen the exploration of learning in a community. A CoP is, therefore, viewed by Schlager *et al.* (2002) as a community that truly learns.

In addition, the CoPs framework stresses that the processes of learning and membership are inseparable. Because learning is intertwined with community membership, it is what lets us belong to the group and adjust our status within it (Wenger, 1998). Members' attitudes, spirit, willingness to engage in collaborative activities and contributions can be regarded as valuable social capital in CoPs, which can only be accessed through membership of networks. With mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, CoPs are characterised by members' sense of belonging, mutual trust and interdependence as a result of engaging interactions and collaborations which are enhanced by members' pursuit of shared interests over time.

In summary, this chapter has provided a synthesis of the theoretical underpinnings of this study from the perspectives of socio-constructivism and situated learning theory. Subsequently, the three orientations of learning to teach were reviewed, and two key problems associated with preservice teacher education discussed. After an exploration of the significance of online learning communities in supporting learning, particular attention was paid to examination of the features of online dialogue that help build

learning communities, as well as the specific contribution of online CoPs in offering a different perspective from which to explore learning to teach. The dimensions of CoPs pertinent to the study have also been discussed.

The review and synthesis suggest that in order to facilitate and support student teachers' learning to teach and professional growth, one salient condition should be met: a collaborative and supportive learning community should be provided in which supervisors and student teachers can share, interact and communicate, and depend on one another technically, emotionally and socially. Meanwhile, the design, employment and development of such a learning community should help to understand and identify the role of communities of practice in supporting the process of learning to teach. Information and communication technology (ICT) may provide a remedy (Jonassen, *et al.*, 2003) for the isolation and disconnectedness that student teachers feel as it can engage them (regardless of their geographical location) in a learning community with their university supervisors and thus support student teacher learning as well as the supervision process.

2.5 Challenges of Developing Online Learning

Notwithstanding the widespread adoption and appreciation of ICT in teacher education, researchers (Mayer, 2002; Carter, 2005) highlight some challenges and issues which must be addressed carefully if the creation of an online ecology aims to provide more opportunities to improve teaching and learning than traditional teaching does. Such issues include training university supervisors and student teachers to be confident computer users (Mayer, 2002); the need for supervisors to appreciate the pedagogical implications of technology; constant investment in technical support (Carter, 2005); and student teachers' reluctance to disclose their weaknesses in the online communities due to the hierarchical relationship they have with the supervisors who grade their teaching performance (Moody, 2000).

Moore and Chae (2007) conducted a study into how online CoPs were designed to support a cohort of beginning students' professional practice of teaching and to fulfil

their emotional needs. The results of their research indicate while they were able to gain immediate support from their peers in the online community, many participants were not actively engaged in discussing or rarely sharing teaching practice with their peers. Moore and Chae (2007) highlight that nurturing and motivating student learners to participate in the online CoP are key factors in building collegiality. In their study, Kelly *et al.* (2007) warn that not all students ‘benefit from collaborative dialogue’ due to their ‘dispositions towards either speculative or ideas-generating stances or reasoned, thought-through and controlled stances’ (p. 174). They further point out that because of their preferred stances of learning, it is unlikely for some students to learn much from online discussions, even though their active participation contributes to sources of inspiration to promote their peers’ critical self-reflection.

Other researchers (for example, Gibson and Manuel, 2003; Jameson *et al.*, 2006) emphasises the importance of building trust for sharing in the online CoPs. The online CoPs generally lack the opportunity to interact or socialise face-to-face, and this is very likely to discourage students from being engaged in online communication. Murphy *et al.* (2000) point out that a community lacking trust and support among its members is highly likely to malfunction. For an online learning community to be vibrant, particular attention should be paid to maintaining ‘social presence’ (Garrison and Anderson, 2003), an important factor in the nurturing of online engagement and fruitful discussion in text-based asynchronous communities.

Apart from the above-mentioned challenges in instigating, developing and sustaining the use of ICT and online learning communities in the context of teacher education, it is worth noting that Wenger (1998), a leading expert on communities of practice, cautions people not to romanticise or idealise communities of practice. According to Wenger, communities of practice are not inherently helpful or harmful. Instead of glorifying them, we need to recognise them as ‘a fact of social life’ and ‘important places of negotiation, learning, meaning and identity’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 133) which can give rise to a meaningful learning experience and provide a privileged context in which to pursue good practices.

By no means should these factors be overlooked; otherwise, ‘new technologies will, paradoxically, sustain old practices’ (Cuban *et al.*, 2001, p.830 cited in Carter, 2005, p. 494). In other words, if we researchers, who are seriously committed to enhancing the online teaching and learning experience, fail to explore and capitalise on the characteristics of ICT and online CoPs, the replication or simulation of traditional teaching and learning is likely to take place in the ICT ecology.

2.6 Chineseness and Online Learning Ecology

As discussed previously in this chapter, the socio-constructivist perspective stresses that learning is an active, social process of participation and interaction in which people learn and develop their knowledge base. From the socio-constructivist standpoint, the very social aspect of learning is, therefore, inseparable from ‘the cultural/social/historical milieu into which every person is born and lives’ (Schallert and Martin, 2003, p. 34). According to them, people inevitably draw on the social and cultural meaning to interpret and understand the occurrence of situated learning and practice and power difference that impacts on the position of teachers and learners in interactions. Lambropoulos (2005) makes a similar point by stating that the placement of ‘individual learning within the larger physical and social context of interactions and culturally constructed tools and meanings’ (p. 3) is the standout characteristic of socio-constructivism and situativity. Social and cultural contexts, therefore, pose challenges for designing online learning and supporting student teachers’ online experiences.

One potential challenge in creating an online learning environment for preservice English teachers, therefore, stems from the influence of both the classroom and national culture. The notion of classroom in this context can be conceptualised as both traditional classrooms and online learning communities. According to Holliday (1994), the culture of the classroom provides tradition and recipe for both teachers (university supervisors) and students (student teachers) in the sense that there are tacit understandings that are strengthened by common acceptance among peers.

In China, student teachers in the preservice teacher education programme have formed

their culture by studying in a class for three and a half years before school placement takes place. When the traditional face-to-face communication is transformed into a virtual community, close attention should be paid to the following compelling issues: Will there be any conflict between the established interaction of the classroom and the virtual intervention? Will the transformation of communication provide new insights into the interaction between student teachers and their supervisors? Will the use of new technologies disturb long-established norms of interactions between student teachers and supervision and lead to confusion and rejection? Will there be any challenges or opportunities for supervisors to reconceptualise their supervision practice during the school placement? McGrail (2005) points out that in the integration of technology in teacher education, the teachers themselves are a key element because ‘the most important component in a change process is not innovation itself, but the beliefs and practices of the people who are affected by it’ (Fulkerth, 1992, p. 1. cited in McGrail, 2005, p. 6).

These issues need to be considered and addressed because the inability to come to grips with them would to some extent compromise the opportunity to improve student teachers’ professional learning experiences. For instance, in their study of employing telecommunications to promote instructional communications for student teaching, Schlagal *et al.* (1996) conclude that both online communications and the roles of mentors and student teachers are multifaceted as a result of the student teachers’ co-construction of their professional selves with their mentors in the online community. Similarly, Mayer’s (2002) research on the role of ICT in teacher education internship reveals that the conventional roles in which the university staff member ‘supervises’ and the pre-service teacher is ‘supervised’ appear blurred in the online learning environment during the course of the placement learning (p, 193). Although these studies have cast some light on both the transformative effects and the challenges ICT poses to relationship-building between student teachers and supervisors, there is still some way to go to gain in-depth understanding of the influence of traditional classroom culture on relationship-building in the online learning community.

In terms of national culture, a contextualised factor which merits serious consideration is

the impact of Confucianism in educational settings, and particularly its influence on pre-service English teacher education in China (though it is important not to overgeneralise about the influence of national culture on teaching and learning). In his seminal work, Hofstede (1991) categorises Asian countries, such as China and Singapore, as being under the great influence of Confucianism with its four distinct cultural dimensions: namely, large power distance, collectivism, masculinity, and high uncertainty avoidance. In his research, Hofstede (1991) found that China is mostly characterised by its large power distance that is defined as ‘the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally’ (p. 28). He further concludes that the Chinese classroom culture and classroom behaviours are, therefore, inevitably impacted and moulded by the traditional culture of Confucianism. In this study, the notion of the ‘Chinese culture of learning’ is in line with what Hu (2002b) defines as ‘a whole set of expectations, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, preferences, experiences, and behaviours that are characteristic of Chinese society with regard to teaching and learning’ (p. 96).

In China, teachers, university lecturers and professors in particular, are treated ‘with deference even outside school’ because they are ‘gurus (honourable and knowledgeable people) who transfer personal wisdom’ (Hofstede, 1991, p. 31). As a result, teachers are never publicly criticised or challenged. Meanwhile, as authoritative leaders in class, teachers are entitled to criticise learners, who are expected to obey, listen and absorb knowledge. This asymmetric relationship makes students generally timid, reticent and reactive in class.

Since Chinese culture emphasises the importance of harmony and concern for others in social and working relations (Gao, 1998), efforts are made to avoid anything that could potentially make other people lose face (Brick, 1991; Mao, 1994) or cause conflicts and confrontations during the social interactions (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). In other words, Chinese people tend to regard disagreement between people as destructive and, therefore, choose to keep themselves away from any potential face-threatening interactions.

In classrooms, Chinese learners' endeavour to prevent loss of face and avoid causing personal conflicts with their peers makes them inactive and reluctant to voice their opinions or participate in discussions (Tsui, 1996). Hu's (2005b) comprehensive review of professional development of language teachers in the Chinese context yields similar findings. Because of the culturally rooted notion of face and concern for others, in professional development programmes many teachers tend to avoid critical examination in peer feedback and focus only on positive aspects. Hu (2005b) points out that eschewing discussion of weaknesses and problems often 'detracts from the depth of post-observation conversations and makes such professional exchanging less challenging and stimulating than it might be' (p. 685). Saving face and maintaining group harmony are given higher priority than telling truth or claiming any authority; therefore, many Chinese people choose to keep their opinions to themselves.

Hu (2002b) believes that national-level cultural values, which exert a profound influence on the formulation of individual's attitudes towards and styles of learning, are likewise demonstrated in second language communication. It is, therefore, essential that the researcher remain sensitive to issues related to culture when examining learning in the non-traditional learning environment of an online community. At present, there is a lack of literature or research which can provide insights into 'how learning might be affected by the attitudes and expectations that people bring to the learning situation, which are influenced by social forces within both the institution and the wider community outside the classroom, and which in turn influence the ways in which people deal with each other in the classroom' (Holliday, 1994, p. 9). Therefore, in addition to exploring other significant aspects of the online learning community, this qualitative case study also seeks to maintain an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the potential impact that culture has on an online learning environment.

2.7 Summary and Implications

Although the past and current studies analysed above have shed light on certain aspects of the development process of CoPs, either in preservice teacher education or in distance learning programmes, there is still a need for further research which explicitly examines

the developmental process and the extent to which the online learning communities influence student teachers and university supervisors. Concrete evidence that associates CMC with social constructivism needs to be supported and verified by more research; the majority of inquiries thus far have focused on describing anecdotal or idiosyncratic experiences (Anglin and Morrison, 2000; Hendriks and Maor, 2004). The literature on empirically based research into the online model of CoPs, and those CoPs whose membership is dispersed over a wide geographical area specifically, is scarce and largely untested (Stuckey, 2004, p. 2. cited in Lai *et al.*, 2006, p. 6).

Likewise, Kirschner and Lai (2007) agree that while a large volume of literature has explored the theoretical issues pertinent to CoPs in recent years, only a limited number of research has been undertaken to elucidate how CoPs can be used as a toolkit with which to explore shared learning, and what factors contribute to the sustainability of CoPs in professional learning communities. Furthermore, few studies investigate in depth the effect of learning communities on the relationship-building between student teachers and supervisors overtime; the cultural influence (both at national level and institutional level) on the implementation and sustaining of online learning community; and both student teachers and supervisors' perceptions of the contribution online communities make to preservice teacher education.

In summary, this chapter has presented a review of the relevant literature and discussed the conceptual ideas that underpin the research. Exploration of the issues involved in learning to teach, the role online learning communities play in supporting learning and the socio-cultural considerations has led me to focus on exploring the learning-to-teach process and the particular situated context of student teachers engaged in the collaborative construction of meanings in an online learning community. Key to understanding the teacher learning processes are 'the roles of participants, the discourses they create and participate in, the activities that take place and the artefacts and resources that are employed' (Burn and Richards, 2009, p. 4).

The following chapter will detail how the design of the online community can support student teachers' learning during their school placement.

CHAPTER 3: THE DESIGN OF THE ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Introduction

This chapter details the design and development of the online learning community used in this study which aims to support student teachers' learning, both before and during their teaching practice. The chapter consists of three main parts. In the first part, I will briefly discuss what Moodle is and why it was chosen to design the online learning platform for this study. Secondly, I focus on the three stages of designing, developing and maintaining the online learning community, which I undertook before and during the fieldwork. A brief conclusion draws the chapter to a close.

3.1 Overview of Moodle and Its Relevance

The design of the online learning community is guided by the theoretical understandings of socio-constructivism and situated learning which underpin this study. In other words, the educational implications of socio-constructivism and situated learning theory highlight the careful design and creation of social learning environments that embody the situated nature of learning and the facilitate members' active participation and communication (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The design of such an online learning environment should, therefore, coincide with the theoretical assumptions of learning which underpin it. As Plant (2004) points out, 'the ability and scope of a community to interact online is dependent upon the application and systems that support them' (p. 62).

Meanwhile, Preece's (2000) framework of supporting sociability and designing usability is also employed as a practical guideline by which to build the online learning community. According to Preece (2000), both social and technical aspects of interaction have an influential impact on the performance of an online community. How the framework of sociability and usability was used to design the online learning community

will be detailed in Section 3.2.

Moodle (modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment) is a platform designed to support online learning. It is the brainchild of Martin Dougiamas, a computer scientist and educator, who began developing it in 1990. Moodle is an open source educational software programme grounded in social constructionist pedagogy to support interactive and collaborative learning (Dougiamas and Taylor, 2003). Due to its basis in well-articulated educational philosophy and pedagogical principles, open source nature, emphasis on online interactions to foster learning, Moodle has been an integrated component of teaching and learning at many educational institutions worldwide (Suvorov, 2010). So far, there have been ‘over 48,000 active sites, 3.5 million courses, and 35 million people from 211 countries that use this system’ (Moodle Statistics, 2010, cited in Suvorov, 2010, p. 1). In addition to these distinctive features, Moodle gives individuals or organisations permission to download and install it free of charge.

Three different course formats are offered on the Moodle platform to provide a variety of e-learning experiences. To be more specific, the layout of a course can be arranged chronologically by adopting the traditional topic format, a weekly format, or even a social format for more informal and conversation-oriented learning. In this regard, in comparison with other virtual learning environments, Moodle’s emphasis is less upon static content and more on tools for extending discussions and constructing artifacts. The common features of Moodle include ‘tools for course structuring, presenting text and multimedia, interactivity, quizzes and assessments’ (Martinez and Jagannathan, 2008). In particular, a variety of tools provided by Moodle enhances connection and interaction among learners who are enabled to share ideas, collaborate, discuss and reflect upon experiences (Dougiamas and Taylor, 2003; Martinez and Jagannathan, 2008).

The rationale for considering Moodle to be the most appropriate software to design the online community in this study is twofold. To begin with, my previous experiences of learning and using Moodle during my Master’s study have enabled me to develop a good understanding of its capacity and functionality. Secondly, the online discussion forum developed by the Moodle website <http://moodle.org/forums/> provides

opportunities for users and Moodle developers to raise technical and pedagogical issues and seek solutions. The fact that I was already both a user and learner of Moodle also allowed me to reflect and gain useful insights to bear in mind when creating the online learning community for my study. The following section provides a detailed account of how the online learning community was designed, piloted and improved in response to the feedback and input of users as well as implications from the literature review.

3.2 Stages of Designing Online Learning

The online learning community was built and developed in three stages. The first two stages helped build a good foundation for the final stage which involves online discussion and supervision during the school placement and the collection of one of the main sources of data - the archived online discussion.

3.2.1 The Set-up Stage

The initial stage of designing an online learning community focuses on creating the website www.gooele.org.

In December 2006, a former student of mine back in China emailed me to ask for my advice on her choice of school placement: should she choose the placement organised by the School of Foreign Languages in its partnership school or go to a secondary school in her hometown where it was more likely that she would secure a permanent teaching post after the school placement? She expressed her anxiety about being alone without any supervision for the six weeks' teaching practice. During our email exchanges, the idea of conducting a pilot study before I carried out the main fieldwork the next year struck me. (A brief account of the pilot study is presented in chapter four). After gaining her consent, as well as that of another five students, I began to develop the website. Using Moodle at the outset was, in retrospect, more of a convenient choice than a well-thought-through plan. My experience of learning to use Moodle, as discussed in the previous section, made me feel more comfortable with it than any other option.

I then spent three months building the website. Initially I did not intend to create and design a website from scratch, because the Moodle system developed by the University of Manchester is ready to use. In order to check its accessibility, I emailed the link to the six students and asked them to access it either on campus or at home. Their feedback showed that the web link could not be accessed through their campus network. Even though they could access the website at home, the loading time was too long and sometimes they had to refresh the webpage several times before they finally saw a full page. I was, therefore, forced to give up using the existent Moodle system provided by the University. I then contacted the School of Foreign Languages where the fieldwork for data collection was due to take place in the hope that Moodle could be downloaded and installed on the University's web server. Again, the plan failed, partially because of the complexities of gaining permission and technical support, and partially due to the difficulty of liaising with the technicians in a different time zone. I then decided to buy and register a domain name online and develop my own website for the study. I purchased and registered the website www.gooele.org. Moodle was then installed at a web hosting company in China.

Although the main purpose of the pilot study was to test the six student teachers' acceptance of using the website and the functionalities provided by Moodle, the students' feedback and preliminary findings gave rise to further improvements to the online learning community, which would encourage more active participation and communication. For instance, issues of student teachers dropping out of the online discussion, lack of website navigation support, student teachers' limited computer literacy and their inexperience of participating in online learning discussions all stood out as major factors to be taken into account.

3.2.2 The Development and Growth Stage

Taking into account the issues that emerged during the pilot study, I revised the research plan and extended the fieldwork from the original five months to eleven months. Further review of the literature supported this decision. The issues identified in the pilot study are coincident with previous studies. Technical problems and skills can potentially

impede students' online participation; this is a claim also made by Ragoonaden and Bordeleau (2000). Students' familiarity with the online learning environment is reported as being an important factor in promoting engagement and reducing learning anxiety in online discussions (Conrad, 2002; Armatas *et al.*, 2003). Considering these crucial factors, which may have impeded the research if ignored or tackled inappropriately, the primary purpose of the development and growth stage was to provide student teachers with sufficient time and opportunity to familiarise themselves with the online learning environment. In doing so, they were supported and could gradually build their confidence in online communication. Having been through this process, they were expected to understand the value of it when they embarked on the school placement in the later stage.

As noted previously in this chapter, Preece's (2000) framework of sociability and usability was employed to guide the development of the online learning community. Sociability 'is concerned with planning and developing social policies which are understandable and acceptable to members, to support the community's purpose' (ibid, p. 26). The notion of sociality, according to Preece (2000), embodies three key components: a shared purpose, people and their different roles, and policies that guide participants' online communications 'in the forms of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws' (ibid, p. 10). Usability, on the other hand, emphasises the design, functionality, accessibility and effectiveness of technologies that enable easy social interactions, promote dialogue and make online experience enjoyable (Preece, 2000). Good usability is essential because it reduces their sense of frustration with technologies and increases participants' online participation.

Gary (2004) observes that online learning communities sustain and develop only when people see purpose and value in participation; nevertheless, appreciating shared purpose and value in active participation requires time (Cuthell, 2004). The issues of the appropriate length of time and understanding the value of online communication are particularly crucial in this study. Student teachers need time to familiarise themselves with the structure of the community as well as the requisite technical knowledge before they are able to recognise the potential value of online communication in supporting

their learning. Hence, the timescale for induction into the online learning community was changed. Instead of introducing student teachers to the online community two weeks before they left for their school placement, it was introduced in the first semester as part of the English Language Teaching (ELT) Methodology course.

In the beginning of the first semester, a survey was carried out to collect information about the attributes of the student teachers (n=192), understanding their computer literacy, purposes and activities of using computers and the internet, and attitudes towards participating in such an online learning community. Descriptive analysis of the survey helped identify that the majority of the student teachers were confident users of computer and the Internet, although only a small number of them had experience of participating in online discussion forms. None of them had any previous experience of participating in online communities devoted to learning. All of them showed a great interest in taking part in an online discussion for the ELT Methodology course.

In the week after the survey was conducted, I gave two tutorials in the computer cluster showing student teachers the website and its main functionality, explaining how to set up an account so they could enrol in the online discussion and giving them examples of how to create and edit their profile, initiate a discussion and reply to a post. I then assigned them to create an account and reply to the threaded discussion that I had already initiated. By the end of the fourth week, all student teachers had enrolled in the online discussion, introduced themselves by talking about their experience of English language learning, as well as their teaching experience (if they had any), and posted two replies to comments made by their peers, as required. I also provided individual tutorials for some student teachers who had difficulty in setting up an account or navigating the site. Student teachers showed great enthusiasm for this online discussion of their learning, which was not something they had done before.

I soon observed many student teachers uploading their photo to personalise their profile. Although students were required to create their account using their real name, the use of personal photos helped to create an awareness of who was who, or which member of the online community knew what. The fact that they came from three classes and had

attended some of the communal course modules together over the previous three years did not necessarily mean that they knew each other well. I also observed some student teachers experimenting with the functionality of the website. For example, a few pioneering student teachers made changes to their posts by highlighting words in different colours, using a larger font size or making the text bold or underlined; and other student teachers quickly followed. Once the first image was attached to a post, a lot of images appeared in the follow-up posts.

The online discussion was designed in a weekly format. Each week there was a theme for the teachers to focus on. The theme was in accordance with what they were being taught in their ELT Methodology course. Apart from familiarising student teachers with online interaction, other objectives of engaging them in discussion included developing their ability to articulate their thoughts in an online environment, fostering a culture of sharing, and realising the value of online participation in helping them understand the ELT Methodology course.

One thing which particularly captured my attention was the big difference between feedback given about peers' classroom teaching in class and in the online community. The students tended to be quite reserved when asked to comment on their peers' teaching performance. If they were forced to comment, they had a tendency to focus only on their peers' strengths rather than say anything critical or negative. In contrast, when the discussion was carried out online as required, they seemed to talk about the weaknesses of teaching performance with ease and gave suggestions based on their own understanding. The value of the online discussion was reflected by student teachers' follow-up teaching performance and self-evaluation. They said that they had not been aware of certain problems until they were pointed out by their peers in the online discussion.

Meanwhile, the notion of 'netiquette' (Salmon, 2004) was introduced in order to nurture student teachers' awareness of interacting appropriately online. Netiquette is defined by Salmon as network etiquette referring to the use of proper manners and the display of appropriate behaviour online to embrace common courtesy. Preece (2004) maintains that

an awareness of etiquette in an online community is pivotal as it creates ‘stepping stones to trust and social capital development (p.295) and is one of the practices which appear to harbour online community development. An obvious change which occurred after the introduction of the concept was that student teachers’ began to recognise other members’ responses in the threaded discussion. The response rate noticeably increased, although some of the messages were simply acknowledgements such as ‘*many thanks for replying to my posting*’, ‘*Thanks, I appreciated your input. You made a good point*’.

While student teachers were experiencing online communication and interaction, two members of staff who would act as university-based supervisors during the school placement were introduced to the website. Both of them were confident users of computers and the Internet in terms of word-processing and searching for information online, but neither of them had any experience of participating in an online discussion forum. One of the teachers had used a synchronous communicational tool to interact with her students after class. The teachers expressed both interest in participating in this type of online communication and concern about not being able to use the online discussion properly and therefore not being able to fulfil their supervisory role. Having been shown how to use the website, they created their account and enrolled in the community. I assigned them both the status of ‘teacher’ which allowed them to see and experiment with Moodle’s course creating and editing functionality. **Zijun**, one of the two teachers, initiated a discussion topic on the role of culture in learning English which generated a heated discussion among student teachers.

At the end of the first semester, all student teachers had participated in the online discussion. Not only did they join in the discussion as required, but also initiated postings in relation to their interests. For instance, there are posts which share a story and web links for English learning, summarise some grammar terminology, discuss English idioms and others which talk about the poster’s decision on where to conduct the school placement. During the winter vacation, one student teacher initiated a discussion topic based on how she felt teaching performance should be assessed. Despite the fact it was outside term time; many student teachers joined in the discussion, offered their ideas and raised their concerns in regard to the school placement assessment in the following

semester.

I believed that the objectives for setting up the online discussion had been met. I then reviewed the format of the discussions and noticed that the weekly arrangement of discussion forums posed problems. For instance, when a new discussion forum was set up for a new week, it suggested that student teachers would naturally conduct their online communication in the new discussion forum. However, postings by those student teachers who were still keen on expressing their thoughts on the previous week's subject, would not be seen by others unless student teachers visited the old discussion threads themselves and noticed the new postings. This required me to rethink the format for setting up discussions during the school placement period.

A further issue involved the display of some postings which were seemingly irrelevant to the ELT Methodology course. Despite the fact that those postings were related to students' general learning, and were evidence that student teachers were socially engaged, my concern was that the appearance of those postings in amongst discussions dedicated to the course could potentially make navigation difficult and therefore dilute the focus and purpose of online discussion. I was concerned that if the display was to remain the same, it might be difficult for the two supervisors who were new to the online discussion to find their supervised groups. Meanwhile, would the student teachers be able to find their groups? My observation and concerns led me to modify the set-up of discussion forums for the school placement.

3.2.3 The Continuous Growth Stage

Three weeks before the first semester ended, I informed all the student teachers of the nature of my study and invited them to participate. Considering the feasibility of the study, my original design was based on 30 participating student teachers. However, due to the large number of student teachers who were keen to be part of the study, I was struggling to conduct the research in an ethical manner while at the same time scale down the number of participants to 45. I consulted with the two supervisors, and they agreed to supervise five more student teachers each. This meant that 45 student teachers

could be recruited. Meanwhile, having considered the issue of ensuring an equitable learning experience for those who chose not to participate, I informed them that they would still be able to access the online discussion forum. However, for the purpose of data collection, I advised them not to participate in any discussion.

In light of the observations made in the first semester, I created a general discussion forum where student teachers could initiate any topics which were not directly related to their school placement. This forum was placed on the main page which allowed student teachers to navigate to it with ease. I also made student teachers aware of the notifying function which automatically updated them about any new postings since their last log in. The main discussions for each of the six-weeks of the school placement were still arranged in a weekly format. For each week, a brief description of the overall purpose of the discussion was provided on the main page and guidance on how to engage in discussion was always given with clear signposts. I then set up three individual discussion threads for each supervisor and his/her group. In addition, there was a weekly thread encouraging student teachers to share any unforgettable or interesting encounters they had had that week. Meanwhile, student teachers were encouraged to initiate any topics they wished to discuss or draw other people's attention to in relation to their school placement. Threads led by student teachers could be added simply by clicking on 'adding a new discussion topic'. The supervisor and student teachers from the three groups could access each group's discussion thread and post a reply to any postings.

As the school placement progressed, I created new discussion threads in accordance with the users' needs. For instance, I created a discussion thread on sharing teaching techniques in the second week because some of the student teachers started to teach in that week. As this thread appeared to be very popular among student teachers based on the number of replies, I simply moved it to the next week at the end of every week. By doing this, the techniques shared by student teachers could all be discussed and archived in one thread. In retrospect, such an arrangement might have made searching for a certain teaching technique difficult and better formats should be designed. However, my considerations at that time were twofold. Firstly, a single threaded discussion would make it easier for me to perform data collection and analysis at a later stage. Secondly,

requiring student teachers to discuss all teaching techniques in one threaded discussion, to some extent, would force them to read their peers' postings more carefully and thus gather more ideas about teaching.

The format of the six-week's online discussion appeared clearer and easier to follow. Student teachers observed the guidance so well that they only initiated discussions which were not directly relevant to their school placement in the general forum. The two supervisors involved in the school placement managed their online supervision despite their unfamiliarity with online discussion. One of them called me twice to ask for help because she accidentally clicked on an edit button and a whole threaded discussion disappeared.

Although, occasionally a few of them composed postings in English or some used an English word or two, most of the student teachers used Chinese to communicate both prior and during the school placement throughout the whole online communication. Those who used English from time to time were student teachers who were active and willing to answer questions in class and good at English. During the school placement, the use of English was even scarcer. Four out of 43 student teachers composed some short postings in English, other than that, postings were written in Chinese. The overall impression of the limited number of postings in English was that they either explained student teachers' school experience in plain English or listed some key points that student teachers wished to address to their peers. Those postings in English were short and lacking in a strong personal touch. In comparison, student teachers appeared full of affection and expressive when writing in mother tongue, storytelling their emotional changes, teaching performance, thoughts or embarrassing moments experienced in a vivid and detailed manner. It seemed reasonable to infer that student teachers preferred the use of Chinese to English to express themselves and share their professional encounters. In addition, the effective use of English as a second language might present a challenge for student teachers to represent their experiences, especially during the intensive, demanding six-week school placement. The pressure from teaching practice and the eager to express ideas and share stories might be reasons for student teachers to decide upon the use of their mother tongue.

One crucial issue which needs to be addressed is the impact of Internet censorship conducted by the Central government. On three occasions when I was reading or replying to postings in the evening, the website stopped working completely without warning. The Central government restricts use of any online discussion forum via service providers within China when the National People's Congress is held nationwide, which is a government conference taking place in March every year. . The Internet server provider I used was affected in this way. I, therefore, had to find an Internet service provider abroad in order to make the website work as normal, and informed the student teachers by email that accessing the webpage would take some time, hoping that this would not demotivate them.

In conclusion, the use of Moodle in this study was successful in achieving sociability and usability before and during the school placement. Potential obstacles such as student teachers not seeing the value of online discussion, or finding time to participate, and their ability to communicate in an appropriate manner were overcome through use of a prolonged design, student teachers' familiarity with this type of communication and the easy use of the online learning community.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have documented the main stages of designing an online learning community, developing it and maintaining its growth over time. In order to select the right technology platform on which to carry out the study, I examined factors such as the relationship between the theoretical underpinnings and the design of such a learning community; sociability, in terms of engaging student teachers in the online discussion; and usability, in terms of the functionality of Moodle. I have also outlined my design plan, and all the changes made in order to improve the usability of the website and lay the foundations for data collection.

In the following chapter on methodology, I will focus on describing the philosophies, theories and methods behind the study.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Adopting an ethnographic case study approach, the study is conducted using the qualitative research paradigm. The methodological discussion presented in this chapter comprises five parts. I begin with a brief exposition of my qualitative philosophy in terms of the ontological and epistemological perspectives in educational research (section 4.1). I will then briefly examine the qualitative paradigm by summarising some predominant characteristics and major types of qualitative research (section 4.2). My rationale in adopting the ethnographic case study approach is explored in section 4.3. Methodological details, including the research setting and participants, ethical considerations and implications of the pilot study, data analysis, are discussed in section 4.4. I also detail the major sources of data and data collection procedures here. Finally, I look at four components of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Their use ensures the quality and rigour of qualitative research in this study (section 4.5).

4.1 Philosophical Assumptions on Research Knowledge

The research paradigm or philosophical stance of the researcher can be shown to determine their beliefs about the nature of reality, knowledge and methodology. It is, therefore, essential for any researcher to understand and articulate personal philosophical assumptions because ultimately they frame the whole research undertaken, from the methodology adopted to research questions addressed, and hence have a profound impact on the findings and conclusions to be drawn. Hathaway (1995) suggest that we not treat the choice between qualitative or quantitative approaches as ‘a simple decision between methodologies’; that we articulate a sophisticated understanding of ‘the philosophical assumptions concerning reality, the role of the researcher, what is knowledge, and what are data’(p. 555). Researchers should, therefore, ensure explicit articulation of the chosen research paradigm, allowing readers to fully understand their perspective in order to evaluate the quality of evidence and given conclusions.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), a paradigm is viewed as

a set of basic beliefs...that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a *worldview* that defines for its holder, the nature of the 'world', the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts ... The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way to establish their ultimate truthfulness. (p. 107-108)

Similarly, Patton (1990) describes a paradigm as 'a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners: paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate, and reasonable' (p. 37).

The basic beliefs defining a research paradigm are commonly known as ontology, epistemology and methodology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 1998). Ontology questions the form and nature of reality. It reflects on whether or not reality is an objective existence that holds immutable truth or rather a social construction. Epistemology examines the nature of knowledge and the reliability of reality as we know it and asks whether or not researchers should remain detached from their investigations and value-free or stay part of the research and present their findings. Finally, methodology concerns the procedures that researchers carry out in order to find out if whatever they believe can be known. Methodology questions whether or not we should measure variables to test hypotheses or we should search for meaning and generate theories from the words and behaviours of the research participants.

Ontology, epistemology and methodology are inherently 'interconnected' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 108) because standpoint on the nature of reality (ontology) logically influences the researchers' assumptions about the nature of knowledge (epistemology), which in turn impacts researchers' assumptions about how that knowledge can be investigated (methodology). By the same token, Denzin and Lincoln (1998a) state that 'the gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways'(p. 23). Obviously, any

research practice is determined by researchers' intertwined ontological and epistemological faiths and ultimately manifested by means of the tools and procedures employed.

Although paradigms evolve, differ by discipline fields and are often contested, two are discussed widely in literature: the quantitative and qualitative paradigm. **The quantitative paradigm** is most commonly linked to positivism (Merriam, 1998). It is also termed the traditional, the experimental, or the empiricist paradigm (Smith, 1983). Positivism ontologically supposes that there is an objective reality of the social world existing independent of human perception. Hence, reality from this epistemological standpoint has a singular nature which can be observed and quantified. Knowledge derived from scientific design and experimental research is 'objective and quantifiable' (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). Quantitative researchers are, therefore, detached and impersonal outsiders.

In contrast, those researchers subscribing to **the qualitative paradigm** contend that social phenomena do not exist independent of our knowledge. The qualitative paradigm is associated with interpretivism (see, i.e., Hathaway, 1995; Merriam, 1998), which can be described as naturalistic, inductive, relativist (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), phenomenological, hermeneutical, experiential, and dialectic (Hathaway, 1995). This paradigm asserts that there is no single reality but multiple realities constructed socially by those being researched as well as the researcher. Knowledge, generated through an inductive mode of inquiry (Merriam, 1998), is subject to change and cannot be measured in quantity. Interpretivists tend to conduct qualitative research and report findings in a narrative format. Qualitative researchers are inevitably part of their research.

Based on the above overview, I have chosen a qualitative paradigm for the purposes of this study. The study examines the role of an online learning community in supporting student teachers' learning during their teaching practice placement. I align myself with the interpretive paradigm principally because I view reality as multiple and subjective as it has been seen by student teachers and supervisors participating in the study. As each person inevitably holds a different perspective, it follows that everybody experiences

reality in a different way. Researchers should not violate an individual's fundamental world view, but take into account the multiple realities that they interpret (Krauss, 2005). I am also interested in exploring the meaning of such a situated learning experience to the participants in my study and the process by which they arrive in that meaning. This epistemological perspective requires that I interact closely with the student teachers and supervisors involved in this study. Therefore, the qualitative paradigm and underlying philosophy seem appropriate for investigating the issues raised in the study. In sections 4.3 and 4.4, I elaborate upon my chosen method, procedures and research tools, which reflects the epistemological assumptions embedded within which my research.

4.2 The Qualitative Paradigm

This section summarises the pervading characteristics of the qualitative paradigm and major types of qualitative research.

Due to the ontological and epistemological assumptions, qualitative researchers are keen on describing, exploring and understanding particular phenomena in context-specific settings in which they endeavour to make sense of glimpses of reality. Patton (1985) as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 6) defines qualitative research as:

[A]n effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of the setting – what it means for the participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting. . . The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (p. 1)

Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that qualitative research be adopted where there is little understanding about a phenomenon, or when a new perspective or in-depth information can be gained from known phenomena. This is mainly because qualitative research emphasises that reality is a social construct; that the collaboration between the researcher and one being researched is inevitably intimate and that the contextualised

constraints influence inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). In this regard, this study aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of how an online learning community impacts upon the learning of a group of student teachers. It investigates the perceptions of student teachers and supervisors and examines issues related to the possible interplay of communication and socio-cultural factors in the context of an online learning community. As identified in the previous chapter of literature review, there is still a dearth of empirically-based research and unjustified studies on the role of online learning communities in supporting geographically distributed teachers' learning in China. In addition, only a very few studies examine the relationship between an online ecology and Chinese culture.

4.2.1 Characteristics and Types of Qualitative research

In addition to the above discussion, I have synthesised some of the prominent characteristics of qualitative research from the literature (for example, Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Merriam, 1998; Robson, 2002):

1. Qualitative research has an exploratory and descriptive focus.
2. It is an emergent design.
3. Data collection occurs in a natural setting.
4. Qualitative research emphasises human-as-instrument.
5. Qualitative researchers use early and ongoing inductive analysis.

Qualitative research is known as an umbrella concept which embodies many variations. It is not surprising that different types of qualitative research have been identified by scholars (for example, Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002) resulting from the different research questions posed by the researcher. For instance, according to Merriam (1998), there are five common types of qualitative research in education; namely a basic or generic qualitative study, an ethnographic study, grounded theory, phenomenology, and case study. Different types of qualitative research vary widely in form and purpose despite the fact that they do have some attributes in common. All embrace the predominant features of qualitative research as denoted above. The

following sections will explain what an ethnographic case study is and why I chose this method over other types of qualitative research to conduct this particular study.

4.3 Ethnography, Case Study and Ethnographic Case Study

Before explaining why this study is described as an ethnographic case study, rather than simply an ethnographic study, or a qualitative case study, it is necessary to review the definition of ‘ethnographic study’ and ‘case study’, for a clearer understanding.

Ethnography

Ethnographic study is a classic qualitative inquiry that prevails among anthropologists. Ethnography is defined by Cresswell (1998) as research into describing and interpreting a cultural or social group or system in which ‘the researcher studies the meanings of behaviour, language and interactions of the culture sharing group’ (p. 58). While there are many variations in its meaning, the simplified and accepted definition of culture normally refers to the conventional norms, tacit assumptions, values and behaviour that a particular group of people share and follow. The intent of ethnography is to investigate the way a group or social system works, the meanings it gives to actions, artifacts and so on. This results in a holistic cultural portrait of the social group (Cresswell, 1998).

To clarify, an ethnographic study identifies patterns of daily living (culture) by means of exploring people in interaction in ordinary settings: what people do, say and use in order to find out what an outsider would have to know to be able to participate in the group or society in a meaningful way. Ethnographers hold the belief that social realities cannot be interpreted or understood appropriately if researchers divorce the behaviours that human beings have from the culture that ultimately shapes them. Fieldwork is known as the hallmark of ethnography. Through a long period of involvement with participants, ethnographers are able to gain an in-depth understanding of different interrelationships, behaviours and experiences of people in a particular social context. The voices of participants are, therefore, viewed as a vital source of data and should be allowed to be heard in the research (Boyle, 1994).

Case Study

On the other hand, no consensus has been reached so far regarding whether to view case study as a strategy (Yin, 2003), an object of study (Stake, 1995), or a research methodology (Merriam, 1998). Nevertheless, case study as a recognised research approach or strategy has been well documented in the literature (for example, Stake, 1995; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).

For instance, Yin (2003) considers the case study as ‘an empirical inquiry’ that uses ‘multiple sources of evidence’ to interrogate and understand ‘a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (p. 13). According to Stake (1995), case study is characterised by its complexity and individuality. The ultimate goal is to unfold and understand ‘both what is common and what is particular about the case’ (Stake, 1994, p. 238). Merriam (1998) highlights case study as ‘an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit’ (p. 21). Creswell’s (1998) notion of case study is ‘an exploration of a case (or multiple cases) over time, through detailed, in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context’ (p.61).

Despite researchers’ differing opinions on the different aspects of case study methodology; a synthesis of definitions contributes to a solid understanding of the characteristics of this type of research: rich description and analysis of the study phenomena, multiple methods of data collection, a particular/unique phenomenon under study and finally the researchers’ inherent involvement. For the sake of clarity in this study, I align myself with Stake’s (1995) stance to consider case study ‘not a methodological choice but a choice of object to be studied’ (p. 86).

Ethnographic Case Study

Merriam and Simpson (2000) define an ethnographic case study as the ‘socio-cultural analysis of a single social unit or phenomenon’ (p. 109). It moves beyond a detailed,

integrated description and analysis of a social unit and examines the cultural context (Merriam, 1988). This type of research takes account of the community and the larger cultural context as essential components in understanding the processes and dynamics being researched. According to Spradley (1979), in developing case studies employing the ethnographic research approach, inferences are made from three sources: from what people say, from the way people act, and from the artifacts people use. Ethnographic case studies are often carried out over a shorter timeframe to focus on specific fields of interest in order to theorise findings. Nevertheless, ethnographic case studies still seek to contextualise the problem within a wider context, a key aspect of ethnography.

In the following section, I discuss how I reached the decision to adopt an ethnographic case study approach based on theoretical and practical considerations.

4.3.1 Choice of an Ethnographic Case Study Approach

Both Yin (2003) and Merriam (1998) suggest that case studies should meet certain criteria before being selected by the researcher over certain other research designs. According to the former, case studies are most useful when the case in question is ‘a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control’ (Yin, p. 9). Merriam further adds that case study is a particularly appropriate design if the researcher is keen on exploring process. In her view, the meaning of process is twofold. Firstly, it concerns relevant context and a sample of the study to explore the extent to which the intervention or programme has been carried out, to provide immediate and formative feedback, and the like. Secondly, the meaning of process establishes a certain causal relationship that helps to identify or validate the process by which the intervention or treatment demonstrates the effect. Yin (2003) suggests that a case be considered when: ‘(a) the focus of the study is to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context’ (p. 13). In light of the above review of ethnography, case studies and ethnographic case

studies and after considering my research aims, I have chosen to adopt an ethnographic case study approach in this study.

As mentioned previously, the overarching aim of the study is to investigate the impact of an online learning community on student teacher learning. It is vital to explore not only learning development but also the learning processes taking place in the online community. In China, the benefits of incorporating ICT into preservice teacher training are still an underexplored area of research, especially in less developed provinces. The study expects to observe, discover and unfold the evolving interactions of learning events and participants' relationships, occurring through the medium of online communication. In addition, I shall investigate the perceptions of those student teachers and supervisors involved, through observing what and how they learn in the online community and what they believe they have learned. This study intends to explore how student teachers and supervisors make sense of their world and a particular experience in this particular social situation. In this regard, case study seems more appropriate than other research designs.

Furthermore, the prolonged involvement of the researcher encourages collaboration and close working relationships between the researcher and participants. Because of this closeness, participants are made to feel comfortable and are willing to share their stories. The stories that participants construct through their experiences are both valuable and credible because they reveal and embody a personal view of reality which in turn, assists the researcher to better interpret the behaviour of the participants.

Other than addressing the above research concerns, this study combines ethnography with case study in order to describe and interpret the impact of cultural factors on the online learning process for those students making the transition from student teacher to qualified teacher. For the purpose of this study, I view culture as 'embodied in [the] signs, symbols, and language' as well as the 'knowledge people have acquired that in turn structures their worldview and their behaviour' (Merriam and Associates, 2002, p. 236). As Holliday (1994) claims when attempting to explore innovative learning, it is important to take into account the pervasive values, ideologies and structures in society

and consider how their influence is manifested in an educational setting. This can be best achieved through research that is ethnographic in nature. According to Orlikow and Young (1993), there exists a dearth of ethnographic studies that unfold the intricate connections between teacher education sites and practices. They point out that further ethnographic studies would empower teacher education researchers to capture the cultural maps in which people (such as supervisors and student teachers) make sense of the profession.

An ethnographic case study approach appears to be an appropriate choice on the grounds that it requires me as the researcher to enter into a close and relatively prolonged interaction with student teachers and other supervisors and actively take part as a member of the social group. Furthermore, it requires that I pay attention to subtlety and complexity inherent in social interactions. This study should then be able to provide an account of the voices, practices, relationships and perceptions of student teachers and their supervisors and find out more about what is going on in the online learning community, and how online interactions can contribute to professional growth of student teachers?

4.3.2 Determining the Case and Unit of Analysis

The key attributes that differentiate case studies from other types of qualitative research are the ‘intensive descriptions and analyses of a *single unit or bounded system* (Smith, 1978. cited in Merriam 1998. italics in the original) such as an individual, programme, event, intervention, group, or community’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Merriam (1998) think of the case as ‘a thing, a single entity and a unit around which there are boundaries’ (p. 27). In this respect, the case in this study comprises a cohort of student teachers undertaking a teaching practice placement whilst using an online learning community as an aid to learning.

The unit of analysis is one of the defining elements in case study. It is the major entity that the researcher analyses in his/her study. Pinpointing what constitutes the unit of analysis can be a challenge for both novice and experienced researchers alike (Baxter

and Jack, 2008). Nevertheless, the unit of analysis can be defined as a phenomenon occurring in a specific time and space (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Broadly, the unit of analysis investigated in this study is the online learning community with regards to student teachers' situated learning during the school placement. Hence, from the perspective of situativity, the unit of analysis is defined by Barab and Duffy (2000) as 'the situated activity of the learner—the interaction of the learner, the practices being carried out, the reasons the learner is carrying out particular practices, the resources being used, and the constraints of the particular task at hand' (p. 30).

4.3.3 Strengths and Weaknesses

Case studies have many identified strengths. Sanders (1981) claims that 'case studies help us to understand processes of events, projects and programmes and to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or objects' (p. 44. cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 33). Case studies are strong on reality because they provide 'a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles' (Nisbet and Watts, 1984. cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p. 181). Stake (1981, p. 35-36) as cited in Merriam (1998) echoes their point of view stating that case knowledge resonates with our own experience because it is more vivid, concrete, and sensory than abstract (p. 44-45). Case studies can establish causal relationships because they discover effects in real contexts and recognise context as a vital determining factor of both causes and effects (Cohen *et al.*, 2000).

On the other hand, case studies do have weaknesses which echo the most common criticisms of qualitative research as a whole. Qualitative research might generate subjective, biased and selective findings because researchers are the instrumental tool in the collection and analysis of data. Nisbet and Watts (1984, cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p. 184) point out that the results of case studies may lack generalisability except where other researchers can see their implications. They also note that even in addressing reflexivity the researcher cannot avoid observer bias. No research methodology is flawless, but by gaining an awareness of those weaknesses, the researcher is able to

minimise their negative impact on the study as a whole.

In summary, I have so far explicitly explained my ontological and epistemological assumptions by referring to literature (section 4.1). I have briefly discussed the qualitative paradigm, including its predominant characteristics and major types of qualitative research (section 4.2). I have also explored ethnography, case study and ethnographic case study. In light of the research aims and questions in this study, I have discussed my reasons for choosing an ethnographic case study approach (section 4.3). The definition, unit of analysis and attributes of case study are also presented. The following section will describe the nitty-gritty of data collection and its related issues.

4.4 Methodological Details

In this section, four major methodological aspects are discussed. To begin with, I describe the selection of a research site and how I obtained access and acceptance. I present a brief discussion about the pilot study and its implications for the fieldwork that followed. I then discuss the fieldwork and two stages of data collection in detail. A holistic account of data collection techniques is also embedded in this section. Finally, I focus on the analysis of qualitative data with a primary focus on reconceptualising the role of theory in qualitative data analysis.

4.4.1 Sample Selection and Obtaining Permission

Once research problems have been identified, it is suggested that researchers consider the issue of sampling. In qualitative research, sampling usually includes ‘the selection of a research site, time, people and events’ (Burgess, 1982, p.76. cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 47). Qualitative sampling differentiates itself from what sampling commonly means in quantitative research because it is not the qualitative researchers’ concern to draw statistical inference (Merriam, 1998). Patton (1990) names this type of sample purposive or purposeful sampling in that researchers want to ‘discover, understand, and gain insight and, therefore, must select a sample from which most can be learned’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). When considering this study, I found it relatively

straightforward to select an appropriate study group and research site. This is because the research was triggered in the first instance by my personal and professional experience of the School of Foreign Languages of Goldstone Normal University in China. The research problems framed in the study directly stem from what I knew of and experienced in the school. They also seem to mirror the overall problems occurring in preservice teacher education across China. Moreover, the school is ‘specifically selected because it is not in any major way atypical, extreme, deviant, or intensely unusual’ (Patton, 1990, p. 173). The school fits into Merriam’s (1998) definition of a typical sample: it reflects the ‘average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest’ (p. 62).

As discussed in chapter one, I worked as a teacher educator in this school for five years before my PhD study commenced. Obtaining access to the school where the study was to be conducted proceeded smoothly. In September, 2006, I sent the school head a request to obtain research permission. In the letter I explained the purposes of my research, the facilities I needed, whom I wished to involve and an overview of the research design, i.e. methods of data collection, type of data to be collected and what the data would be used for. Shortly afterwards, I received an acceptance letter giving full support to my study.

4.4.2 Pilot Study

Early in 2007, the website www.gooele.org was developed and set up for use. As documented in the preceding chapter, I contacted a few student teachers whom I had taught previously, with the aim of testing the internet connection speed of university campus network and the willingness of the student teachers to use the website. After explaining my purpose and research design, I not only obtained their permission, but was also asked to supervise them during their teaching practice placement, where they would have worked alone without assistance from a university-based supervisor. This unexpected turn of events led to an important pilot study which tested the feasibility of the primary study and improved the research design.

The pilot study lasted seven weeks in total. As a participant researcher, I worked alongside six students (three of whom dropped out during the course of the pilot study). I used the archive of the online threaded discussions and three semi-structured interviews as data for analysis and discussion (see Appendix 9 for a full description of the pilot study report). The key insights gained from the pilot study are summarised as follows:

One of the prerequisites for engaging active online communication is that student teachers feel comfortable and confident. This finding is consistent with Kear's (2010) exploration of factors disengaging students from online learning. Three students withdrew from the pilot study, two of whom expressed their inability to cope with the demands of their teaching practice whilst simultaneously learning to use a relatively new model of communication. This feedback caused me to consider the importance of timing and what I could do to address this issue when I carried out my main fieldwork. I was also forced to consider the ethics and consequences of putting research participants into a situation in which they are uncomfortable. Cohen *et al.* (2000) remind researchers to be mindful of the welfare of subjects at all times, even if this involves comprising the impact of the research. They go on to say that 'researchers should never lose sight of the obligations they owe to those who are helping, and should constantly be on the alert for alternative techniques' (Cohen, *et al.*, p. 58).

Ultimately however, participant drop-out can damage the overall quality of the data collected. Without adequate and relevant data, researchers are unable to generate a holistic understanding of the phenomena or make expositive claims about the educational issues in question. For my main study, I therefore chose to prolong the duration of the fieldwork. I arrived at the study site before student teachers commenced their school placements. This allowed me to conduct a computer-literacy survey and better understand student teachers' computer competence, providing additional support where necessary.

The pilot study also provided me with a valuable opportunity to experiment with the analysis of collected data and decide which analytical method best suited my purposes. I

initially employed a grounded-theory approach to analyse the data through open-coding, axial-coding and selective coding. I then adopted the framework of CoP to analyse the same data and finalised it for data analysis. In the process of data analysis, I was convinced of the strengths of the framework as some researchers (Rogers, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Gray, 2004; Moule, 2006) claim in their studies. I also identified some methodological issues in terms of the implicit analysing procedures and inadequate theoretical propositions, both of which are used in the above research. For instance, the oversimplified categorisation of posted messages adopted by Rogers (2000) might potentially fail to capture the richness and multiple meanings of each message. I was in the fortunate position to be able to play with real data before beginning my fieldwork proper. This allowed me to better understand the process of data analysis. Whilst employing the framework of CoP to analyse data proved to be a thorny endeavour in the later analytical stages, it did increase my understanding of the analytic mechanism of this particular framework. I cover this in detail in Section 4.4.4.

Finally, the pilot study helped test and modify the layout and arrangement of online discussions for the fieldwork. For instance, the design of weekly pre-determined themes for online discussion in accordance with the process of teaching process was reported by the student teachers to be instructive with clear guidance. Meanwhile, student teachers embraced the opportunity to make use of the online platform, voicing emerging issues and topical concerns. Participants also noted that the format of the weekly the discussion board was easy to navigate. These elements of the website were retained and further developed during the course of my fieldwork.

Despite positive feedback, there were found to be some disadvantages to the new weekly format of the forums. As identified in the pilot study (see page 65 in chapter three), new postings in threads from previous weeks often went unnoticed, unless users came across these comments by chance. This seems to be an inherent Moodle design issue and cannot be easily addressed. Supervisors are required to be proactive and monitor the situation. When new postings appear in threads from previous weeks, supervisors can choose to manually move the comments to the discussion board for the current week or draw attention to the relevance of the postings by creating a new threaded discussion.

In summary, the pilot study helped me investigate and revise the instrumental tools of data collection, data analysis methods, and the procedures I would follow in the fieldwork.

4.4.3 Fieldwork and Data Collection Procedures

The fieldwork lasted eleven months including a preparatory stage and a data collection stage. As a participant researcher, I worked closely with the other participants at the research site. Information about the settings and participants, my role as a researcher and ethical issues are addressed in the following subsections. I also present a discussion about the sources of data and data collection procedures I used.

4.4.3.1 Settings and Participants

This study was conducted at the School of Foreign Languages of Goldstone Normal University in Southwest China. At the time the study was conducted, the university campus network was available in different faculties, schools, libraries, multimedia classrooms and students' accommodation on campus.

Two types of participants were recruited in the study. Final year student teachers were the main participants. As previously described in the introductory chapter, the four-year preservice English teacher education programme (PETE) requires final year students to attend an English language teaching (ELT) methods course in the first term. The course teaches basic theories and methods of ELT in the form of lectures and simulation teaching practices. At the beginning of the second term, student teachers participate in a one-off six-week school placement. Student teachers can choose to conduct their teaching practice in a placement organised by the school or they can elect to arrange their own placement. The student teachers involved in the study were representative of the overall demographic of student teachers at the school or indeed student teachers at other teacher-training universities across China. They came from different socioeconomic backgrounds; their English language proficiency varied widely from person to person; they did not necessarily want to be English teachers but the university

has a push to train new teachers in response to the diverse labour market demand in China; and the majority of the students were females in the school.

The other participants were two teachers who had responsibility for supervising student teachers during their school placements. In the following section on data collection procedures, I will give a detailed account of how participants were selected for the study.

4.4.3.2 The Researcher's Role

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in gathering and analysing data. The close involvement of the researcher enables them to maximise opportunities for gathering and producing meaningful data (Merriam, 1998). It is therefore extremely important for any qualitative researcher to spell out their personal and professional standpoint and stay alert for how their assumptions and behaviour may have an impact on the inquiry.

Merriam (1998) suggests that qualitative researchers should have an enormous tolerance for ambiguity, stay highly intuitive and communicate effectively during their study. As there are no set procedures or protocols to follow, the researcher must be tolerant of the unobvious research situation and patient in terms of searching for clues, following up leads, finding missing pieces, and putting the puzzle together (Merriam, 1998). I kept in mind the three traits at all times during the course of my research in order to retain a good balance in dealing with issues that presented themselves.

At the outset, everything I observed seemed to point in different directions and everything seemed important to follow-up and observe in more detail. Being tolerant reduced my anxiety and allowed me not to jump to any hasty conclusions. Participant researchers need to strike a balance between gaining an insider's view and maintaining a degree of sensitivity as researchers. This was especially important in this study, because my years of learning and working experience in the school could potentially have caused me to 'go native' (Patton, 1990, p. 474). Meanwhile, just being a member of the group does not necessarily guarantee the perspective needed to understand the phenomena

being researched. As both participant and researcher I was able to find a balance. I experienced the study from a privileged insider's perspective whilst retaining the ability to describe it for outsider. Finally, a few casual chats with the two supervisors involved in the study turned out to be extremely helpful. I was able to collect some useful data as the conversation developed and took its natural course. I quickly became aware that good communication is as much about developing strong listening skills as it is about effective self-expression. This awareness helped me to build a rapport with both student teachers and supervisors. Once established, the rapport helped break down barriers and encouraged participants to be more open with their opinions and feelings. This in turn, enabled me to feel more comfortable about digging into their experiences.

4.4.3.3 Ethical Considerations

This section discusses the ethical issues that governed this study. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) point out that in educational research and other social studies, the primary ethical concern for the researcher, is to avoid harming the interests of the research participants and to look after their wellbeing. Moreover, Merriam (1998) claims that conducting a study in an ethical manner, guarantees the trustworthiness of the research results.

In order to strike a balance between collecting meaningful and adequate field data and respecting the needs of the study participants, I chose to reveal my identity and background in full. I explicitly explained the purpose of the study and the procedures to be followed. I sought informed consent (see Appendix 1) in a written form from all participants. I excluded any information which could reveal the location of the research site, the identity of the participants or their personal information. The names of the research site and participants are pseudonymous. I also reassured the participants that they had complete freedom to terminate their involvement at any time.

4.4.3.4 Techniques and Design of Data Collection

Systematic ways and procedures to gather the qualitative data are advocated by Lankshear and Knobel (2004) because they 'provide an evidential base from which to

make interpretations and statements intended to advance knowledge and understanding concerning a research question or problem' (p. 172).

While there are other instruments of data collection such as documents and audio-visual materials, interviews and observation are widely accepted as the main forms of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). As reviewed previously in this chapter, case study research is mainly characterised by its collection of multiple sources of data. The bringing together of multiple sources of data does lead to an overall enhancement in the quality of the data. Questioning the trustworthiness of a single source of data to draw conclusions, Patton (1990) advocates a combination use of multiple data sources to help the investigator 'validate and cross-check findings' (p. 244). Merriam (1998) further argues that even if a study comprises multiple sources of data, not all of them will be used equally. One instrument of data collection may be more dominant than others depending on how it is used to explore different aspects of the case (ibid).

Given that the study concerns itself with student teachers' collective learning experience as part of an online community, the instruments employed to collect data reflect this characteristic. Online threaded discussions and semi-structured interviews (both group and individual) are presented as the major sources of data along with supplementary data collected from other instruments. The justification for using online threaded discussions and interviews is provided in this section. I begin with a discussion about interviews because much has been written about their value for qualitative data collection.

Interviews, as a major instrument of qualitative research, have been widely acknowledged by methodologists (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, Robson, 2002). Interviews are widely viewed as a conversation with a purpose in which researchers can gain access to the participants' perspective (Patton, 1990). Interviews allow people to interchange ideas on a topic of shared interest and promote knowledge construction (Cohen, *et al.*, 2000). Using interviews as a strategy for data collection aligns with the epistemological assumption in the qualitative paradigm because they enable participants 'to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live and to express how they regard situations

from their own point of view' (ibid, p. 267). In comparison with other research methods, qualitative interviewing is specifically advantageous in terms of probing participants' attitudes and values. For instance, the use of open-ended and flexible questions is likely to elicit a more considered response and hence provide researchers with 'better access to interviewers' views, interpretation of events, understandings, experiences and opinions' (Byrne, 2004, p. 182).

According to Cohen, *et al.* (2000) and Merriam (1998), there are three types of qualitative interviewing: (a) the highly structured, standardised interview where wording and order of questions are predetermined in advance and the same questions are asked in the same sequence; (b) semi-structured or guided approach interviews where a list of specified topics or themes is prepared in advance and there is no specific requirement of the wording or the sequence of questions during the process of the interview; (c) unstructured, informal interviews where there is no predetermined set of questions, and the interview is essentially exploratory. There are different circumstances in which the three different types of interviews are used. The most structured interview is actually 'an oral form of the written survey' (Merriam, 1998, p. 74) and is used for gathering common sociodemographic data such as age, income, employment history and marital status. Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with a focus on the specified agenda at hand whilst leaving room to probe and draw out any emerging information or new ideas. Unstructured interviews are used in the main as a means to gather basic information and learn enough about a situation to formulate questions for subsequent interviews.

The three types of interviews can take place in a one-to-one or group context (Robson, 2002). After a careful review of the interview techniques and their pertinence to the practical research situation in this study, I chose to employ semi-structured interviews and conducted both group and individual interviews.

There are several advantages to conducting group interviews. In comparison to individual interviews, group interviews are an efficient instrument for gathering qualitative data. Group dynamics help to focus on the most important topics and make it

easy to assess the extent to which there is a consistent and shared view. Contributions can be encouraged from people who are reluctant to be interviewed on their own, or feel they have nothing to say. In group interviews, participants tend to 'provide checks and balances on each other and extreme views tend to be weeded out' (Robson, 2002, p. 284). Furthermore, group interviews empower participants to draw on and incorporate each other's comments and thoughts to develop new ideas and understanding. Watts and Ebbutt (1987, cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2000) point out that such interviews provide a useful forum for discussions to create and generate a wide range of responses, especially when a cohort of people have been working or pursuing a common purpose together for some time.

Admittedly, there are also limitations to the group interview model. Group interviews require skilful chairing and appropriate expertise. The interviewer needs to manage participants, provide opportunities for the less articulate to voice their opinions and avoid obvious bias caused by one or two people dominating the conversation in the group (Robinson, 1999. cited in Robson, 2002). Confidentiality can be a problematic issue in a group situation. Nevertheless, having weighed up the pros and cons, I decided upon group interviews to be an appropriate method to gather and yield data about the student teachers' perception of their collective learning experience. It would have been impracticable to interview all of them and handle the large quantity of data thereafter. In this research, the online learning was a collaborative design in essence and participants had been working together for a long time and for a common purpose. The issue of confidentiality was not a challenge. In addition to the group interviews, two individual interviews were designed to explore two supervisors' perception of their online supervision experience.

Online posted messages (threaded discussions) are used as another main data collection method in that they provide a historical archive of participants' online interactions. This method also allows direct observation of participant behaviour in the online learning community. The literature review in chapter 2 (section 2.6) has shown that many researchers regard dialogue as a valuable pedagogical tool. Online postings have been used as a major source of data in a number of research studies dealing with online

learning and teacher education (for example, Hara *et al.* 2000; Mayes 2000; Rogers, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Slaouti, 2007). The benefits of using online postings to explore the effectiveness of an online learning community are obvious. They provide researchers with direct observation opportunities in terms of exploring patterns of online interaction occurring in a naturalistic setting. Such postings are particularly useful for researchers, many of whom emphasise the merit of collaborative and collective learning for learners to achieve desirable learning outcomes. They provide the means to examine how learners engage in co-constructing and co-producing knowledge through communication, and to determine the extent to which online communication supports and evidences learning.

Aside from collecting online postings and conducting semi-structured group and individual interviews I also collected supporting data from the end of semester evaluation (an attitude-scale questionnaire) and the web-tracking logs in order to further supplement the primary sources of data. In the following paragraphs I discuss the supplementary sources of data and their value in relation to the study.

After school placements were concluded, I carried out **an end of school placement evaluation (an attitude-scale questionnaire)** to gauge student teachers' perception of their online learning experience. The design of the questionnaire took into account factors identified in the literature and from my observations of online communication. The descriptive result of the questionnaire was used to inform and construct the semi-structured follow-up interview.

The web-tracking logs provided a numerical understanding of each participant's activity records and identified the correlation between time spent in the online community and level of participation in terms of the number of postings. I carried out a correlated examination of participation, using the participant logs, and took into account the number of their online postings. Student teachers were then categorised according to their level of online participation: high, upper-medium, medium and low involvement. This exercise then allowed me to organise my semi-structured interviews accordingly. The results also helped inform and shape some of the interview questions. For instance,

from the record of the web-tracking logs, I noticed that for a couple of the student teachers, despite their high number of logging hits (i.e. frequency of logging times and length of login), there were less postings than would have been expected. I used this observation as a question of interest for the interview.

In addition, I also kept a fieldwork diary as a record of my research procedures and a reflection on my dual role as both university supervisor and researcher participating in the case study. This allowed for a comparative analysis of my own supervision and online interaction with the group and the two other supervisors. It also helped me to design topics and questions for interviewing the supervisors.

4.4.3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Two stages are involved in the process of data collection. Although I have touched on the design of the online CoP in the previous chapter, I offer a brief recapitulation in the following subsections for the purpose of presenting a coherent account of the complete data collection process.

Stage One: Preparatory Stage

Based on the evidence collected from the pilot study (discussed earlier in the chapter), I divided the fieldwork into two stages. The first stage was preparatory, mainly working with those students and supervisors who agreed to be part of the research. It laid a solid foundation for the data collected in the second stage.

I began the study by teaching an 18-week ELT methods course to final year student teachers at the research site. Altogether there were one hundred and ninety-two final year students, divided in two big classes. I was asked to use a textbook chosen by the school and to follow the predetermined teaching schedule to the letter. In the first week, I introduced myself to the students, divulged a little information about my educational background and explained how the course would be used for research purposes. I told the students that I was introducing an online learning element to the course as an

additional tool, a way to expand upon the teaching that took place in the classroom. I made it clear that the use of online communication was completely optional and would not in any way influence the assessment of their performance at the end of the term.

At the end of the first week, a computer literacy survey was distributed to students in order to gather information about levels of competence and establish whether additional tutorial support was required. The results of the survey indicated that all the students felt confident about using computers and the internet; they all had personal email accounts and had extensive experience of using a real-time communicational tool. However, only a small fraction of students were online forum users and none of them had previous experience of participating in an online learning community devoted to English language learning and teaching. The majority of students indicated a willingness to make use of and participate in, an online learning community.

In week three, following the completion of the survey, I delivered a tutorial to each of the two classes. This included handouts with step-by-step instructions explaining how to locate the website, register as a member of the online community and edit an online personal profile. I encouraged students to experiment and play with the different links and buttons embedded in the site. By the fourth week, every student had registered successfully and posted their first message. During this time, only a few students approached me for additional support to complete their registration.

In this way, online discussions began to develop alongside my classroom teaching. Weekly discussion forums took place on a number of different ELT related topics. Although it was my responsibility to generate a weekly theme for discussion, students were free to initiate conversations about any topic of interest that related to the course of study. As an offshoot of this, a general forum was set up for students to socialise and discuss topics that were not course related. I created a mock teaching-practice discussion thread with a self-evaluation element. It was specifically designed for students to carry out peer-reviews. It was an opportunity for critiquing and self-reflection in a 'safe environment' as many of the group appeared reluctant to give feedback in person. Furthermore, in practical terms, it was extremely difficult to carry out effective

discussion (group or individual) because of the unusually large class sizes. By the end of the nineteenth week, after students had completed their microteaching assessment, there were more than 1,300 messages generated in the forum.

During the course of the fieldwork, I also involved two of my colleagues, who agreed to participate in the research. As previously discussed, both of them have good computer skills and regularly use the internet. Neither colleague had any prior experience of using a bulletin board system (BBS) or accessing an online learning community. I arranged some workshops in order to familiarise them with using the website.

Before the end of the first term, the student teacher must decide whether to find their own practice placement or take up the offer of a placement organised by the School of Languages. Those who arrange a placement independently must submit an official acceptance letter issued by the placement school. These students will not return to campus at the start of the second term with the rest of the group. They will only return to campus once their placement is complete.

In the fifteenth week, I once again reminded students of the aims of my research, the requirements of the study and the expected outcome. For those willing to take part in the study, I reiterated the importance of registering with me. The original plan was to engage thirty student teachers in the study. However, due to an unexpectedly high take up and a general enthusiasm for the project, there were actually seventy-four student teachers willing to participate. From this initial number, forty-five student teachers were eventually recruited to take part in the study. Some of the student teachers had no internet access at home or in the placement school opted out; as did some students placed in non-school settings such as public service departments or tourism offices.

Soon after the completion of the microteaching assessment, I allocated the students to one of three supervisors (either myself or one of my two colleagues). One teacher, **Liang**, took responsibility for fifteen students who went to different schools in distributed areas to carry out their teaching practice. The other teachers, **Zijun** and I, supervised a combination of distributed students and onsite students who conducted their placements

at our cooperative school. The rationale behind the allocation arrangement was that **Liang** had taught those fifteen students in previous years and had a basic understanding of the students in the group. **Zijun** had never taught any of the students before, but being the school placement coordinator, he normally met with the onsite students once or twice during the course of their placement. It made sense and allowed students to meet him in person and find out what he was like.

Stage Two: Data Collection Procedures

In the second term, students were distributed to different secondary schools for their school placement. This was the main data collection phase. The school placement lasted six weeks. Three of the forty-five student teachers withdrew from the study. In this section I mainly focus on how online postings and interviews - the major sources of data - were collected.

The Collection of Online Posted Messages

Before the school placements commenced, the two supervisors and I worked together to design the weekly discussion topics in-line with the overall process and aims of the school placement. In addition, the topics we chose also reflected particular key points that we wanted to draw student teachers' attention to. Although the weekly predetermined themes served as prompts to engage student teachers in discussion, they were encouraged to utilise the forums to drive and explore their own learning and research. Student teachers could raise issues and concerns of interest or importance to them. As discussed in section 3.2.3 of chapter 3, the discussion forum took a weekly format. It was designed this way to help student teachers and supervisors to navigate the online community more easily. I found that it was straightforward to collect six weeks' worth of online threaded discussions because they were automatically archived in perpetuity for easy access at any time. Altogether there were fifty-six discussion threads initiated during the school placement period with a total of 1571 postings.

Semi-structured Group Interviews with Student Teachers

As I mentioned earlier, close examination of correlation between the student teachers' web-tracking log record and the number of postings allowed me to group the forty-two student teachers into four groups. Student teachers may not have been comfortable with their fellow classmates knowing whether they were active online and how much time they spent online. In order to avoid any potential embarrassment to the students, I decided to gather the four groups together separately. I explained to each group how and why they were categorised into different groups and asked if any of them would be willing to be interviewed. Student teachers in each group were given an informed consent form which outlined data protection procedures, the purpose of the interview, proposed content and the anticipated use of the interview data. Students were also made aware that they were free to discontinue the interview at any point. Student teachers showed a strong willingness to be interviewed. Finally, I chose six student teachers from each group to be interviewed and they signed the informed consent form on the spot. Each group comprised a good representation from the three supervisors' groups. The heterogeneous nature of a newly-formed group such as this can stimulate and enrich discussion which may inspire participants from different groups to look at the same topic in a different light (Brown, 1999. cited in Robson, 2002).

Prompt topics and questions were prepared in advance of interview student teachers in group and supervisors individually (see Appendix 4; Appendix 5). These prompts were based on a descriptive analysis of an end of school placement evaluation (see Appendix 3) and informed by some interesting online communication phenomena. I booked a small classroom in which I would conduct all of the interviews. Student teachers were seated in a small circle and were able to see each other. All the interviews were audio and videotaped. The length of the interviews was limited to between seventy and eighty minutes.

Semi-structured Interviews with Supervisors

I gained informed consent from the supervisors when they initially agreed to take part in

the study. The same list of topics and questions was used. The interview with supervisors was conducted as one-to-one. I chose to interview them individually because I worked with them closely and had a good understanding of their personalities. **Liang** is an extremely modest and quiet scholar while **Zijun** is very passionate about educational reform and full of ideas. I was afraid that a group interview may not yield the best data because I could expect that **Zijun** would be a dominant participant and **Liang** would avoid expressing different viewpoints. The two individual interviews were conducted in the same classroom on different dates. Interviews were audio and videotaped. The interviews were approximately forty-five minutes in length.

All six interviews were conducted in Chinese. My consideration of using Chinese language to collect data was threefold. As the tutor of the ELT methods course in the first semester as well as my prolonged online interactions with the student teachers involved in the study, I developed a good understanding of their English competence both in oral and written forms. Student teachers overall demonstrated a wide range of English language abilities. Some very articulated with a good command of English; some were self-conscious of their oral mistakes and lacking in confidence, and others needed more practice to be able to communicate in English fluently and correctly. I felt it would be a big challenge for student teachers to express themselves well in English in the presence of their peers and me. I would avoid any potential unpleasant situation that might bring about discomfort or stress to my participants. Secondly, the primary purpose of conducting interviews in this study was to gather student teachers' opinions, ideas and experiences as rich, detailed and lively as possible. The use of their mother tongue would undoubtedly support my intention satisfactorily. Finally, for some unknown reasons that might be interesting to explore, my colleagues, who were lecturers and professors in ELT in the Goldstone Normal University, somehow did not communicate with each other in English outside the classroom and neither did I.

The use of English language during the interview would appear awkward when none of us were used to speaking English in non-teaching settings and we were native speakers of the same language. In retrospect, the use of participants' national language to collect data proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it does allow participants to

voice their opinions freely and skilfully and benefits the richness of the collected data. On the other hand, when research findings need to be represented or disseminated internationally, translating original data into English proves problematic. It appears daunting and impossible for the researcher to truthfully represent or even try to capture the subtle meanings, culturally-loaded expressions and individual participant's characteristics in a different language. Nevertheless, the issue of translating data will remain challenging and a compromise that the researcher has to face and acknowledge.

4.4.4 Data Analysis

The research concerns itself with exploration of the extent to which an online learning community contributes to preservice teachers' professional learning and growth. Coupled with other analytical steps, the theoretical propositions of CoPs will be employed as an analytical tool to guide the initial categorisation of collected data. As justified and identified in the data analysis of the pilot study as well as in the previous literature review, one salient parameter (i.e., practice as community) of the framework of CoPs (Wenger, 1998) is adopted and presented as a frame of reference to structure the process of data analysis and interpretation.

While the analysis of qualitative data constitutes a core part of a study, data analysis, according to Constan (1992), receives the least thoughtful discussion in the literature and 'is often perceived as shrouded in mystery' (Hoong Sin, 2007, p. 110). I therefore devote some time to documenting analytical procedures and key methodological issues and challenges that I experienced and resolved. A detailed documentation of the qualitative analysis will be reserved until the next chapter.

4.4.4.1. The Role of Theory in Analysis

As previously discussed in this chapter, the epistemological and methodological assumptions from a qualitative paradigm emphasise a theory-generating-and-process-oriented mode of inquiry. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the role of theory in qualitative data analysis should be underplayed.

In the literature of research methodologies (for example, Dey, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998), ongoing discussions have acknowledged the value and usefulness of theory in helping both qualitative analysis and interpretation of findings. Qualitative researchers, as claimed by Constan (1992), ‘wittingly or unwittingly, embrace a particular configuration of analytical preferences’ (p. 254). In other words, even though it is not often made transparent, implications for how qualitative data is analysed and interpreted are influenced by the theoretical underpinning that scaffolds methodology. During the process of data analysis, the issue no longer focuses on whether to use existing knowledge but on how to find a proper focus (Dey, 1993); therefore, ‘the exhortation to beware of bias should not be interpreted as an injunction against prior thought’ (p. 63).

Similarly, in one of her definitive books on qualitative research, Merriam (1998) arguably justifies the comprehensive impact the theoretical framework has on the whole qualitative research design, by critically synthesising several educational research studies. In particular, she points out that the choice of theoretical concepts will inevitably ‘generate the ‘problems’ of the study, specific research questions, data collection and analysis techniques, and how you will interpret your findings’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 46). Acknowledging qualitative research is inductive, leading to interpretive or analytical constructs and even to theory building. Merriam (1998) expands her argument by stating that:

Most qualitative research inherently shapes or modifies existing theory in that (1) data are analysed and interpreted in light of the concepts of a particular theoretical orientation, and (2) a study’s findings are almost always discussed in relation to existing knowledge (some of which is theory) with an eye to demonstrating how the present study has contributed to expanding the knowledge base. (p. 49)

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that qualitative researchers maintain their theoretical sensitivity and employ theory as a ‘creative and open-ended’ means to operate data analysis (p. 303). Worth pointing out here is Humphrey and Scapens’ (1996) understanding of the role of theory in data analysis. The qualitative case study they conduct is in the field of accounting and completely different from the educational

nature of my study; however, I actually find that their viewpoint has some resonance. They (1996) maintain that theories are ‘rhetorical devices for both interpreting case studies and convincing the research community as to the validity of the case findings and interpretations’ (p. 98). In other words, it seems that the transparent use of theories in assisting data analysis, therefore, provides reference points linking back to the literature and enables the researcher to communicate the findings.

I am aware of how theory has played a part at different stages of the research process during this study: the key theoretical propositions of CoPs have enlightened me to frame my research objectives and guide my pilot study. Recent studies have demonstrated their usefulness in supporting qualitative analysis of online postings. It seems reasonable that they can play a role in assisting me to design appropriate analytic techniques and help me to interpret my findings. I align myself with qualitative researchers who recognise the value of theory in constructing data analysis and state that pre-existing theoretical perspectives can be used cautiously to help them to understand what is going on in the data. I believe that a researcher’s explicit articulation of the role of theory in supporting research design and process of data analysis allows other researchers to better evaluate the relevance and implications of the study. Being transparent also enhances the quality of the research.

4.5 Judging Qualitative Research

A major concern for all researchers, undoubtedly, is to gain trustworthy and rigorous knowledge in an ethical manner. Discussion of research quality enables readers to reach their own fully-informed decision about the findings. In this section, I will briefly discuss the criteria that should be employed to evaluate and judge the quality of qualitative research. I will also look at strategies for validating and evaluating the research.

As discussed in section 4.1, the qualitative paradigm and the quantitative paradigm can be differentiated by the distinctive philosophical stances they embrace. Denzin and Lincoln, (1994) and Merriam (1998) note that qualitative research should not simply

adopt criteria employed by quantitative research such as objectivity and validity to evaluate the rigour of inquiry. Instead, they believe that it is necessary and meaningful to establish and use a set of different terminologies and criteria from a perspective that is in accordance with the philosophical stances underlying the qualitative paradigm. Therefore, in the following section I will present and discuss the four criteria which are used to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research, namely: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

Credibility is suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989) to replace the concept of internal validity. It stresses the faithful correspondence between the realities viewed and constructed by participants and those recaptured by the researcher. Credibility is believed to be, first and foremost, an essential criterion to ensure the rigour of quality research. Worth reiterating is the qualitative researchers' assumption about reality: that reality is 'holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, and measured as in quantitative research' (Merriam, 1998, p. 202). Common strategies used to achieve credibility are: triangulation, member checks, long-term observation, peer examination and clarifying of researchers' biases.

Transferability parallels the criterion of external validity or generalisability in quantitative research (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). It concerns itself with the applicability of findings yielded from one study to other situations (Merriam, 1989). The issue of transferability has been tricky and has plagued qualitative researchers for a long time. It is necessary to highlight the fact that the intention of qualitative research is not to present generalisable findings in the statistical sense because the dynamics of social reality and participants' experience cannot be replicated. Erickson (1986) points out that production of generalisable knowledge is an inappropriate goal for qualitative research. In his view, the search is not for 'abstract universals arrived at by statistical generalisations from a sample to a population, but for concrete universals arrived at by studying a specific case in detail' (ibid, p. 130). In other words, we can transfer or generalise what we learn in a particular situation to similar situations that we encounter subsequently.

Meanwhile, Mason (1996) suggests that transferability be understood as theoretical or conceptual to differentiate it from the statistical generalisability perceived in quantitative research. In other words, the more frequent a research finding accords with that of other research which involves different participants and settings but similar research contexts, the more transferable the finding is. Another insight is given by Bassey (1981) who suggests using the term 'relatability' rather than generalisability to judge the merit of the qualitative case study in particular. With particular reference to evaluating the rigor of case studies, Bassey (1981) points out that an important criterion is 'the extent to which the details are sufficient and appropriate for a teacher working in a similar situation to relate his decision making to that described in the case study' (p. 85). In this regard, the achievement of transferability, firstly, requires the researcher to provide thick, explicit description of the study to readers. Secondly, it then relies on the reader's discretion to identify and decide the commonality of the findings that resonates to their own experience or practice.

Therefore, to enhance the possibility of the findings of a qualitative inquiry generalising to other research contexts, the commonly-recommended strategies (Merriam, 1998; Robson, 2002) include: providing rich and thick description, typicality or modal category, and multisite designs.

Dependability is used by Guba and Lincoln (1989) to refer to the notion of reliability. It primarily concerns the issues of stability and consistency pertinent to the results of a study over time. Given the multifaceted nature of realities embraced by qualitative research, the judgement of dependability is no longer concerned with replicating the same results. Rather it highlights the consistency between the results and the data gathered. Researchers can employ several techniques to ensure the dependability of a study: articulating the researcher's position, triangulation, and use of audit trail.

Confirmability is equivalent to the meaning of objectivity in quantitative research. It focuses on the objectivity of the data (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). It is believed to be researchers' responsibility to provide an accurate, holistic, coherent account of the whole research inquiry, demonstrating truthfully how data are collected and analysed, and how

findings are drawn and verified. Qualitative research should provide enough evidence that confirms the data according to the research and show the involvement of others in the text that corroborates the claims. An audit trail and research diary can both be used for this purpose.

In section 5.6 of chapter five, I will document how I use the recommended criteria and strategies described above as a guide to measure the quality of the study.

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter about methodology has focused on two major aspects: theory and my practice. I began by articulating my qualitative philosophy, in terms of the ontological and epistemological perspectives in educational research. I also discussed the rationale of adopting an ethnographic case study approach and the unit of analysis of this study. In the second half of the chapter, I focused on documenting methodological details, including settings, participants, ethical issues, implications of the pilot study, and data collection procedures. I have highlighted the importance of using theory to guide me in the construction of the data analysis for this study. Finally I have presented the criteria employed by qualitative researchers to assure and judge the quality of their research.

The following chapter documents and illustrates the process of data analysis.

CHAPTER 5: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter details how data collected during fieldwork were sorted and sifted, categorised and analysed. The analytical processes used at different stages are documented and exemplified with thick description. In providing a transparent analytical account, I aim not only to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, but also to allow apprentice qualitative researchers to share my learning journey. The chapter consists of six sections. It begins with my motives for providing an explicit account of the data analysis (5.1). I then describe how I condensed the data and selected the computer-assisted qualitative analysis software (CAQAS) MAXQDA for the analysis (5.2). Two analytical procedures, developing a categorisation system and additional analytical steps; are documented in section 5.3. Techniques used for achieving trustworthiness of the study are presented in section 5.4. I then describe how two methodological issues I encountered during the process turned out to be serendipitous (5.5). In section 5.6, I reflect on my experience of conducting qualitative analysis.

5.1 Importance of Documenting the Analytical Process

Qualitative analysis is defined by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) as ‘working with data, organising it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others’ (p.145). Whilst qualitative analytical procedures and strategies have been well codified in the methodology literature (Dey, 1993; Miles and Huberman 1994; Silverman, 2005), data analysis remains ‘the most complex and mysterious of all of the phases of a qualitative project’ (Thorne, 2000, p.68). The air of mystery partially stems from the fact that when documenting qualitative research, many researchers merely mention a particular analytical approach (e.g. ‘a grounded-theory approach was used’) or analysis strategy (e.g. ‘I employed cross-case analyses’) with neither explicit account of how the analysis has taken place nor of how the processes have shaped their understanding.

Moreover, the language of analysis employed by researchers makes it difficult to ‘understand how their findings evolved out of the data that were collected and or constructed’ (Thorne, 2000, p.68). Consequently, much mystery surrounds the way in which researchers engage in data analysis (Bryman and Burgess, 1994), and the results of a veiled qualitative analysis provoke doubts and puzzles pertinent to the rigour of qualitative inquiry (Constas, 1992). The lack of transparency often elicits the criticism that qualitative analysis is not rigorous and robust enough to provide reliable research evidence (Hoong Sin, 2007).

I therefore endeavour to unravel this complex and less visible area by documenting my experience of analysis, warts and all, for public inspection. I provide an explicit account of analytical moves, identifying some key methodological issues and challenges that I encountered, and ultimately resolved. In so doing, I hope to contribute to the discussion of this important but often overlooked and over-condensed area of research practice, and hence encourage apprentice researchers to share the craft and methods used to analyse data and draw conclusions (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

In order to represent the complex analytical process accurately, I document the whole process in a linear way, recognising that in reality, there is no clear-cut division between the three stages of qualitative analysis; data categorisation, analysis and interpretation. The analytical process is recognised as recursive and dynamic, requiring the researcher to go back and forth between concrete pieces of data and abstract concepts, and between description and interpretation (Merriam, 1998). The analysis, as well as its presentation, adopts the general procedures and strategies suggested by Dey (1993), Merriam (1998), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Richards (2005), embracing data reduction, data categorisation and analysis, and interpretation and conclusion verification. As depicted in Figure 5.1 below, the three procedures are a logical succession of steps leading from the first encounter with the data through to the production of an account (Dey, 1993). The qualitative data analysis can be best described as both sequential and iterative.

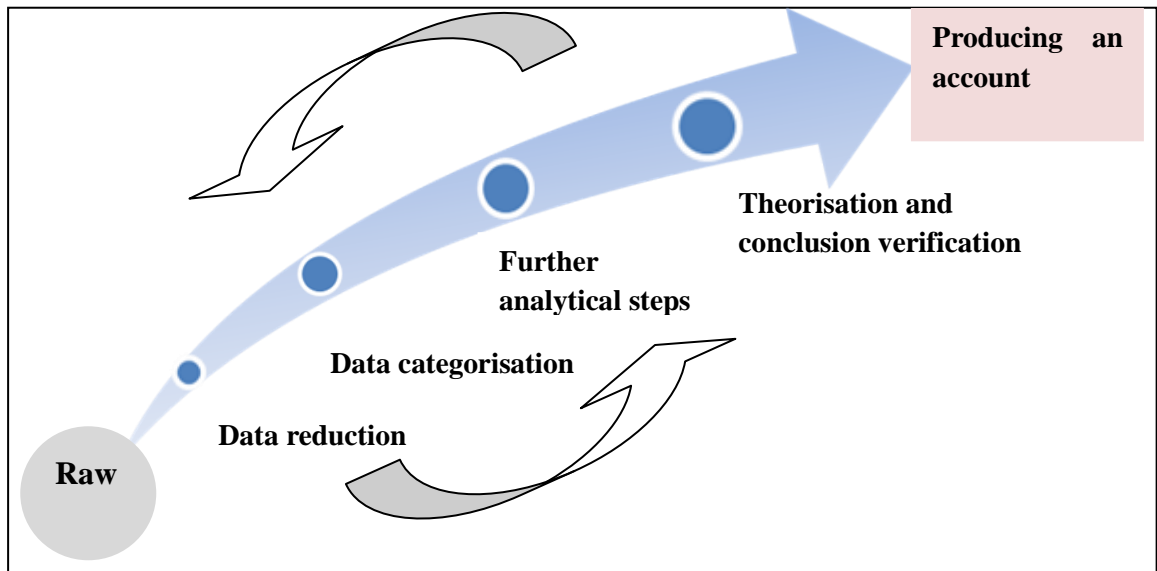


Figure5. 1 Procedures involved in data analysis adapted from Dey (1993), Miles & Huberman (1994) and Richards (2005)

5.2 Preparing for Data Analysis

In this section, the preparatory stage of data analysis deals with data reduction and summary. The qualitative data to be analysed in the study comprise six weeks of online threaded discussions, four semi-structured group interviews with student teachers, and individual interviews with two supervisors. Data analysis is a cyclical process that consists of iterative stages of data selection, simplification, extraction and transformation and hence it ‘sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organises data’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10-11) in a systematic way that enables researchers to make sense of data, and draw and verify conclusions. The processes of data reduction and summarising online postings and interviews are discussed in sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 respectively.

5.2.1 Data Reduction and Summary of Online postings

During the school placement, 56 threaded discussions were initiated, which included a total number of 1571 postings. Considering the primary research purpose, the richness of the collected data and practicality of handling large volumes of data, I discounted the threaded discussions from the two other supervisory groups and focused instead on the

discussions from my group and those initiated by student teachers and myself. This brought the total down to 44 threads. I then discounted six more threads because their content was less relevant to the school placement. For instance, one of the threads was about English words for skin-care and cosmetic products, and another was a word snake game. Data reduction eventually brought the number down to 38 threaded discussions (see Appendix 2 for a summary list of the threads; see Appendix 10 for an example of threaded discussion) with 1184 postings. While the process of reducing data is inevitably affected by the researcher's subjective judgement, I chose the 38 threaded discussions for analysis based on my familiarity with all collected data and the appropriateness of each to my research purposes.

Meanwhile, the total amount of online postings to be analysed was carefully numbered and listed through recursive reading. Each threaded discussion was systematically stored in a word document maintaining its original display format. I then summarised the foci of the 38 threaded discussions and presented them according to the weekly format of discussion (see Appendix 8 for an example of the abstract-like account). They were created to capture all dominant and repeated topics as well as student teachers' major interests. It was not my intention to make an exhaustive or comprehensive summary of all discussion foci in each threaded discussion because I was aware that the topic under discussion sometimes 'goes off-track' or is tangential due to 'improper contributions' (Duncan-Howell, 2008, p.7). Creating such accounts provided me with an overview of what happened in the online community and the main topics members were engaged with during the six weeks. The very process of writing condensed summaries enabled me to gain great familiarity with the data.

5.2.2 Data Reduction and Summary of Semi-structured Interviews

Audio and video recordings were made of the six semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 6; Appendix 7). In comparison with the online postings, data collected from semi-structured interviews were kept more or less intact. I watched each of the videos once prior to transcribing, and noticed that all of the interviews appeared unhurried and relaxed, featuring frequent laughter. I transcribed what I heard as faithfully as possible.

Since I had easy access to the video, and given the purpose for which the interview data was to be used, I decided to save time by transcribing the text without measuring the lengths of pauses or laughter. I then watched the interview video to check the accuracy of transcripts. The transcripts served my analytical purposes well. A brief transcribing and reading memo was created to summarise each interview after transcription, as shown in Table 5.1. I was able to compare one group interview with another easily and identify whether there were any similarities or differences between the four group interviews with student teachers and the two individual supervisor interviews. At this stage, transcription memos allowed me to reduce the interview data by summarising it.

Interview Summary: 1 st group interview (High involvement) 74 minutes	
Student teachers interviewed: Chen, Jingling, Yaozhao, Yeshuai, Zhi, Haicui	
1. What was the general atmosphere of the interview?	Relaxed and casual with laughter
2. Were interviewees active in the conversation?	Who appeared to lead the dialogue most? Who was quiet? Everyone was active. The six contributed to the discussion more or less equally. Jingling, who had been active online, was a bit shy.
3. Were all the pre-determined themes for the interview covered?	(If not, which theme and why?) Yes.
4. Was there any disagreement among the group?	What was the cause of the disagreement? Yes. Two occasions. Yeshuai (the only male student teacher in the study) didn't quite agree with the affective support felt by all five female interviewees. They had different views of whether or not pre-determined discussion themes for each week should be provided.
5. Any surprises?	A metaphor used by one student teacher: if each student teacher's shared experience of school placement is a window on to a school situation, our combined experiences allow us to understand different aspects of many schools from different windows.
6. What could be done better in retrospect?	I should have asked a follow-up question when Zhi said that they would be more motivated to communicate if they were given a virtual reward for active participation, something like rising social rank or virtual currency in the online community.

Table 5.1 An example of initial interview memos

5.2.3 Choosing Computer Tools: MAXQDA

MAXQDA, a piece of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), was chosen to facilitate the entire analytical process. The use of CAQDAS contributes to a more rigorous analysis due to its convenience in terms of data store, management and search, effectiveness in data coding, retrieving and comparison (Dey, 1993; Fielding and Raymond, 1998; Lewins and Silver, 2007). Furthermore, many of the functions provided by CAQDAS facilitate the analytical process.

For instance, the memos function in MAXQDA is convenient and useful. There are different types of memos such as methodological memos, theory memos, definition memos, 'aha' memos for exciting ideas, and question memos, each with an indicative icon. I created definition memos for each category I developed. By moving the cursor over the memo, I was able to read or edit the definition immediately. As qualitative analysis is an ongoing and recursive practice, the definition of a category must be revisited or redefined from time to time to ensure the most accurate response to the data. MAXQDA makes such iterative analyses easy to accomplish. One specific feature of MAXQDA allows all 'coded segments' under certain categories/subcategories to be displayed in a neat table with contextual information, extracted data, and statistics all provided. This particular function makes locating and retrieving data effective and effortless, which facilitates the presentation of findings at the writing-up stage.

5.3 Analytical Procedures

The section documents the actual procedures involved in data analysis. The first analytical procedure presents how the employment of three theoretical propositions of CoPs assisted the categorisation of data. In light of what was analysed and what required extra exploration, the second analytical procedure shows how three specific analytical techniques were employed to further understand the data categorised during the first procedure. Findings, therefore, were drawn and verified through incorporating themes and evidence yielded by the two analytical procedures.

5.3.1 Developing a Categorisation System

This section details the process of categorising and analysing data. I begin with an account of how the theoretical proposition of CoPs was employed and developed to assist the data analysis. I then briefly describe the analytical procedure of developing categories. Next, I present a rich description of the exemplary data analysis from the online postings and interview transcripts respectively. Finally, I explore the issues that I encountered and decisions that I made, which were an intrinsic part of the illustration of the exemplary analysis.

5.3.1.1 The Theoretical Proposition Used in Data Analysis

As noted in chapter four, the role of theory in analysing qualitative data has been discussed and justified. In this study, theoretical understandings were generated from the framework of CoPs and refined into a frame of reference with which to assist the initial process of analysis and interpretation. In light of the literature review in chapter two and preliminary findings of the pilot study described in chapter four, I found that a salient theoretical proposition of CoPs, namely, practice as community, should be explored in order to understand the role of an online learning community in supporting student teachers' learning to teach during the school placement. As discussed previously, in order to associate practice with community (i.e., practice as community), Wenger (1998) proposes three dimensions of the relationship, by which practice is the source of a community's coherence, as summarised in Figure 5.2. The dimensions are mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (refer to section 2. 3.1 in chapter two for a detailed discussion).

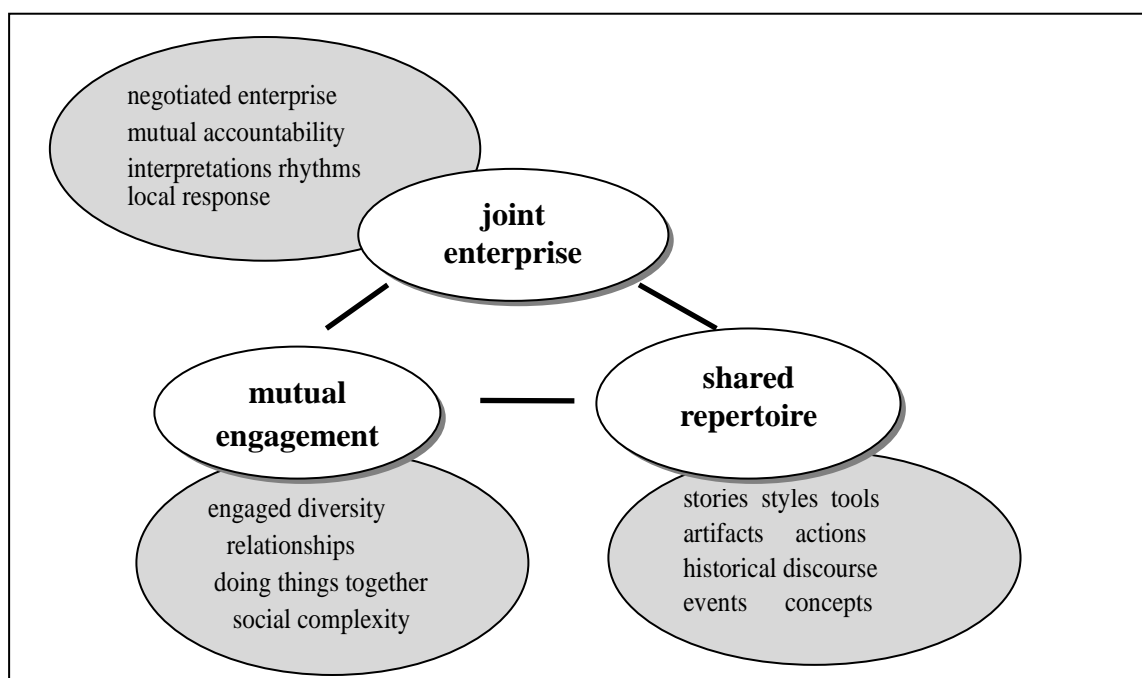


Figure 5. 2 Dimensions of practice as the property of a community (Wenger, 1998, p. 73)

The three characteristics of a CoP are clearly interrelated and, together, constitute a whole unit. In order to understand if and how shared learning occurs in the community, examination of the three dimensions and their correlations is required.

I initially adopted the analytical strategies favoured by those researchers (Rogers, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Gray, 2004; Moule, 2006) who have previously employed the conceptual framework of CoPs to explore online learning in the fields of education and teacher education. Given the overlapping attributes of the three dimensions, the most common approach has been to analyse and discuss the dimensions separately in order to concentrate more fully on each one (Rogers, 2000; Clarke, 2002).

In light of the summaries presented in Figure 5.2 above, I employed the indicators with the most arresting features of each dimension to read and explore the data. However, as my analysis progressed, I became increasingly aware of the limitations of such a strategy. Analysis of each dimension in isolation prevented me from gaining a holistic understanding of the interplay between them. My interrogation of how the online learning community in this study contributed to student teachers' transition to teachers

of students in their placement schools was impeded. The inadequacy of the separate analysis approach, difficulties arising from the analysis and resolutions will be discussed in section 5.6. The following section outlines how the categorising system for data analysis was developed.

5.3.1.2 Category Development Procedures

I was aware that using pre-existing theory to construct qualitative analysis can lead researchers to investigate only their particular area of focus, and hence they could be biased or blind to other issues that arise. I, therefore, followed the approach that Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest is ‘partway between the a priori and inductive approaches’ (p.61). In other words, the categories developed for constructing data analysis should be grounded in the theoretical perspective that is applied to the research design as well as the actual data that have been collected (Bryman and Burgess, 1994).

Category development involved an interweaving process of employing the theoretical proposition and identifying subcategories captured from the raw data, culminating in a rigorous categorising system. In sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2, sample analyses with rich quotes from online postings and interview transcripts are provided to illustrate the analytical actions and creative endeavour associated with the process of categorisation and analysis.

The primary purpose is to provide a thumbnail sketch of some of the questions I encountered during the analytical process, for example: what categories and subcategories were created and how they were refined, why certain decisions were made, and the action I took based on those decisions. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive account or a full list of the categories. Nor do I seek to document all decision-making processes and actions taken as a result. I do, however, aim to establish a trustworthy account of analysis for public inspection. Faithfully representing the act of data analysis has proved quite challenging. It is not easy to strike a balance between describing the analytical process as it developed, and reconstructing the actions I took to flesh out some key moments and discoveries that mattered to the analysis. An explanatory and reflective

writing approach was taken to fit in with the representation.

5.3.1.3 Categorising and Analysing Online Posting

Analysis of the online threaded discussions helped me determine whether or not the online interactions evidenced collective learning, and consequently to understand to what extent, and in what ways, the online learning community contributed to student teachers' learning to teach experience. All 38 threaded discussions were read and organised into categories/subcategories derived from both the theoretical proposition and the original data. The development of the categorising system is summarised in Figure 5.3 below. The categorising process was iterative, involving creation of as many categories/subcategories as possible, identifying and merging similar categories/subcategories through constant comparison, and ultimately finalising the system.

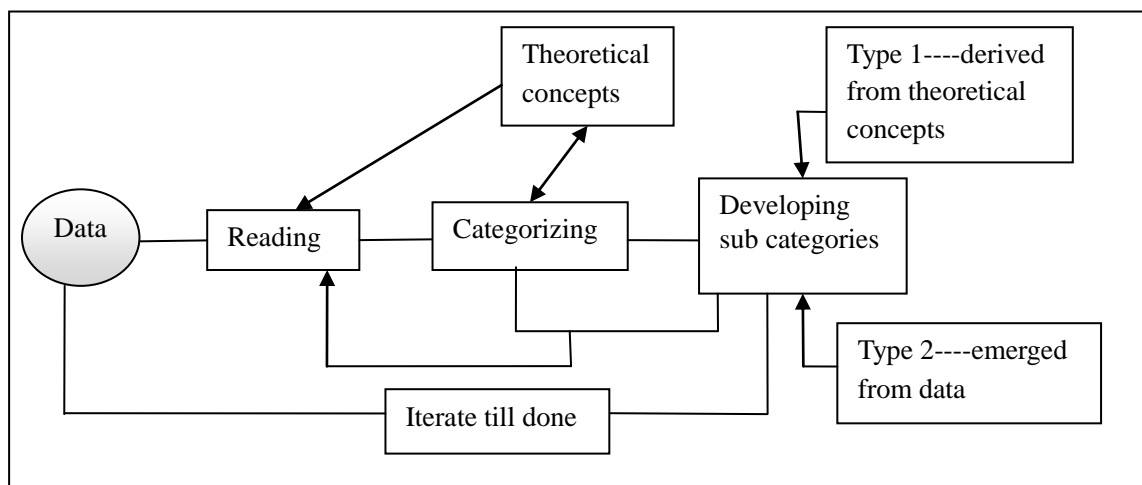


Figure 5. 3 Summary of the categorising process in the first procedure

Data from a discussion held in the first week is used for illustration. In this particular piece of data, 15 student teachers were engaged in a threaded discussion, initiated by me as their supervisor, on what they should pay attention to and how they would make the most of their first week in their placement schools. The purpose of the illustration is as follows. Firstly, analysis of the sample data exemplifies how the theoretical proposition 'practice as community' and its three dimensions: mutual engagement (ME), joint enterprise (JE) and shared repertoire (SR); provided me with a starting point from which

to categorise the data. Secondly, it demonstrates how categories were then created, refined and expanded via the interweaving process shown above in Figure 5.3. Finally, the sample analysis helps me explain the decisions involved in overcoming issues that I encountered during the analytical process.

My initial response to the first week's postings, without having imposed any pre-existing theories on them, was that there were a lot of discussions going on in a single thread. Many ideas were put forward about what they thought would be important in the first week, such as: *'leaving a good first impression'*, *'building good rapport with students'*, *'proactively taking more responsibilities than the cooperating teachers expected'*, *'remembering all students' names and identifying naughty students'*, *'making friends with students or not'*, *'observing cooperating teachers' class and learning tricks'* etc. Some of these ideas were recognised by repetition and confirmation from student teachers, but at the same time, they expressed all sorts of feelings and talked about individual school experiences. The discussion appeared engaging and indicated student teachers' willingness to communicate and lead the debate themselves.

I was excited about the richness of the data, but I was also aware that creating descriptive categories based on what they discussed, what ideas were developed from discussion and what feelings and school experiences they shared would not serve to answer my research questions persuasively. In addition, the interview transcripts in which student teachers claimed that they had learned useful things through online discussion were fresh in my mind. I then asked myself the following questions: What made them willing to actively communicate with one another? What did they choose to share and why? What made sharing and communicating in this online learning community a learning experience? How could I identify the occurrence of learning in the online communication that the student teachers had talked about? How could I draw on my research skills and knowledge to represent those student teachers' views with facts and therefore justify the purpose of my research? Those questions brought me back to the theoretical orientations of my study.

Bearing in mind the concept of practice as community and its three key dimensions, ME,

JE and SR, I went back to reread the same data several times, and closely examined whether or not it could open up a useful analytical avenue to provide credible data categorisations and hence form the base on which to construct the rest of the data analysis. This time the effect of the purposive reading was apparent and stimulating. I could see some connections between ideas discussed or confirmed by student teachers, feelings expressed and school experiences shared. Starting with the indicators of the three dimensions which are summarised in Table 5.2 below, I examined the possibility that those indicators could identify if and how they were mutually engaged; how, if at all, they defined their joint enterprise or common purposes of working together, and if and how their engagement for these common purposes would lead them to build a shared knowledge of their teaching practice. In other words, I tried to find out if the utterances in the online posting were consonant with the indicators of the three dimensions.

Theoretical proposition	Dimensions	Indicators
Practice as community	Mutual engagement	doing things together sharing relationships support/encouragement showing a common commitment to interactions between members
	Joint enterprise	agendas negotiated and defined by members in the process of pursuing them mutual accountability
	Shared repertoire	agreed resources such as artifacts, historical discourse, tools, meaningful statements, stories, gestures, symbols, etc.

Table 5. 2 Theoretical proposition, its dimensions and indicators of the CoPs framework

The following examples show how I initially tried to tease out the fit between the data and the three dimensions by referring to the indicators listed in Table 5.2 above. The sample data analysed are postings from a discussion among student teachers in my supervisory group.

Extracts from online postings (week one)	Dimensions, Indicators & Commentaries
<p>Hee hee☺</p> <p>I think to be liked and accepted by students in the first week is of great importance. It's what we should do. I remember in the ELT Methods Course last semester, we learnt the responses to what makes a good teacher are rather about the relationship between the teacher and students. Since we are not teaching them now, they probably don't regard us as teachers yet in the first week. Our first priority is to get on well with them. For instance, we, as customers, enjoy being treated as god; just imagine if all the students sitting in front of you regard you as their good friend rather than just a teacher, what a pleasant learning atmosphere we will have! No matter what, if we can't make students like us, then at least we won't make them dislike us, will we?</p> <p>All right, this is what I have so far.</p>	<p>→ <i>sharing ideas (ME) to initiate a discussion proposing and defining their common goal by emphasising 'what we should do' (JE) which was recognised and shared by other peers later on in the same thread</i></p> <p>→ <i>negotiating the common goal which she believed important to them by referring to what they learnt before (JE)</i></p> <p>→ <i>reinforcing her idea on their common goal by saying 'our' to show that it is relevant to everyone to be aware of their common agenda to 'get on well with them'(JE)</i></p> <p>→ <i>supporting her argument by giving more examples and making an analogy between customers and god, and between students/teachers and good friends (JE)</i></p> <p>→ <i>re-emphasising what she believed important to them (JE)</i></p>
<p>I'm told some classmates have already begun their school placement. When chatting together, we all feel what we've learned is not adequate. The knowledge seems not adequate to deal with everyday's questions. But I still believe when we get to the mountain, there'll be a way through; when the boat gets to the pier, it will go straight with the current. Things will be figured out. Let's work hard, come on!!!!!!!!!!</p>	<p>→ <i>sharing information and thoughts (ME) revealing the concern she and other peers had</i></p> <p>→ <i>encouraging herself and her classmates not to worry too much (ME)</i></p> <p>→ <i>inspiring everyone to act together (ME), and repeating the exclamatory mark to show strong emotion and commitment (ME)</i></p>
<p>If you know yourself and your enemy, you will never lose a battle.</p> <p>If I don't go to hell, who else goes?</p> <p>Don't wear bizarre clothes.</p>	<p>→ <i>Chinese proverbs/historical discourse adapted to talk about teaching-related issues. Chinese proverbs were used throughout and became a conversational style in the community (SR)</i></p> <p>→ <i>meaningful statement (SR) - everyone knew immediately what it meant to them as teachers</i></p>

Table 5. 3 Identifying JE, ME & SR

As shown in Table 5.3 above, the initial trial corroborated the fit between the theoretical

dimensions and the online postings, though the approach was somewhat rough. The trial gave me the confidence to carry out the formal data categorisation, in which I adopted the three categories and named them ME, JE and SR.

Again, I document the process in three parts with the specific objective of illustrating the analytical process in a more systematic way. In fact, the process of classifying bits of data to the categories of ME, JE and SR and the process of creating subcategories under ME, JE and SR took place without any particular sequential order. Given my accumulated familiarity with data and categories, I was able to assign bits of data to the three categories and their subcategories by reading discussion threads line by line.

Categorising Mutual Engagement

Employing the indicators of mutual engagement, I identified and assigned data to the category ME. I then read the assigned data for the purposes of verification, which, in turn, helped me to develop sub-categories and to stay sensitive and responsive to the raw data. For instance, ‘sharingness’ is a concept which often comes up in the findings of research into online learning communities, as well as one of the key indicators of ME. Hence I displayed all the bits of data in category ‘ME’ to find out if ‘sharingness’ was evident and if so, what had been shared. I broke messages down into sentences, split them, or clustered them through constant comparing and contrasting. I found that under the concept of ‘sharingness’, student teachers shared information and ideas, feelings and school experiences. The following Table 5.4 presents an example to show how the concept of ‘sharingness’ was identified and rationalised from the data.

Category ME	Extracts from online postings (week one)	Aspects of sharing
Sharingness	Chanliao: ...it occurs to me that <i>a few classmates and I had a discussion</i> the other day that <i>we should ‘transform’ our appearance</i> to suit a more adult look...	Sharing information (to establish a shared ground)
They all share something personal	Yaozhao: <i>Personally, I think</i> at present, it's better for us not to over-imagine possible difficulties or problems...	Sharing ideas
	Danxu: <i>Oops, I have the feeling</i> I haven't graduated from High school yet.	Sharing personal feelings
	Zhihuang: <i>I am a person who always focuses on details</i> , and can talk with my students for 10 minutes about steamed bread, for instance. Learn from me ☺, and you guys will find it so easy to get on well with your students.	Sharing personal information
	Yaozhao: <i>I observed two classes</i> taught by one teacher today. He taught them with different attitudes. Students in the PE department are too talkative during the lesson and my cooperating teacher seems not to care at all. After class, just when I was thinking of the difficult PE students, he told me to start my teaching in the PE department on the 10 th , while observing his teaching in the English department. What can I say? He's my boss. It's shocking! If I don't go to Hell, who else goes?	Sharing personal school experience

Table 5. 4 Example of identifying subcategories under the category of ME

Five tentative subcategories of ME were created: ‘sharing information’, ‘sharing ideas’, ‘sharing personal feelings’, ‘sharing personal information’ and ‘sharing personal experience’. I assigned data from the category of ME into those five subcategories as shown above. The process of finding interesting patterns the data was carried out in the same way. Another indicator of ME is ‘a sense of working together’, though it did not manifest here, since posting to an online venue does not necessarily guarantee that people have a sense of working with others in the same community. This also proves that the analytical process was intertwining. That is, the pre-existing theoretical proposition allowed me to interrogate data from a particular angle; meanwhile, being responsive to the data helped me modify or even change some of the indicators in order to better capture the essence of the data without compromising their authenticity. After several

readings, I spotted that student teachers addressed their peers by name when referring to their peers' ideas or giving suggestions. When communicating, they frequently used 'we' instead of 'you' or 'I'. The subcategory 'a sense of working together' was modified to 'a sense of togetherness' in order to better represent my data.

The encouraging and supportive expressions student teachers used in the online discussion, such as: *'Don't worry about it'*, *'keep going'* and *'No matter how hard the school placement will be, we've got to work hard and achieve something from it'*; also attracted my attention. A new subcategory, 'building rapport', was created to respond to this kind of data. After completing sub-categorisations of ME, I examined the subcategories and data extracts to assess their conformity. I noticed that the subcategories of 'sharing personal feelings', 'sharing personal information' and 'sharing personal school experiences' featured common elements: student teachers were so willing to reveal their thoughts to peers and their supervisor that their disclosures were detailed, personal and informative. I then merged the three categories together and named them 'online self-disclosure' which I believed better captured the meaning of the extracted data and also helped to reduce the number of categories.

In the case of some themes, such as recognising others' contribution *'Very good advice! Especially workable for those of us who are about to teach but can't overcome our nervousness'*, and acknowledging others' help *'Miss Hou, thank you for your advice...I'll prepare the lesson well and take it seriously!'* I created a temporary subcategory, 'relationship-building', as there was not enough online posting data to support its creation.

In summary, in classifying data from the first week's discussion, I constructed six subcategories as shown in Table 5.5 below. It is worth mentioning that the six subcategories developed in the first thread proved to be robust enough to categorise the data assigned to the ME category in the rest of threaded discussions. A comparatively uncluttered data categorisation of ME was completed. The way in which some subcategories of ME were further redefined or enriched will be described when the analysis of interview transcripts is presented in Section 5.3.4.

Categories	Subcategories
Mutual engagement	Sharing ideas to initiate a discussion
	Sharing information
	Sense of togetherness
	Online self-disclosure
	Building rapport
	Relationship-building

Table 5. 5 A summary of subcategories under the category ME

Categorising Joint Enterprise

I carried out the same analytical procedure when assigning data to the category JE and subsequently handling the data within the category. Within a learning community, negotiation of what matters to that community is the key to understanding joint enterprise. Having read the extracted data, I noticed that a thread that actively engaged student teachers in discussion began with this idea from **Tianjiao**: *‘to be liked and accepted by students is of great importance’*. It was soon recognised and confirmed by other STs. For instance **Congyan** added: *‘A good relationship is going to make teaching a lot easier, LOL, so the priority is to get on well with both students and cooperating teachers.’* The discussion moved on to the area of *‘leaving a good impression’* as a way of getting on well with students and teachers. Although there were some discussions on other priorities such as observing cooperating teachers’ lessons and taking down notes, the follow-up discussion centred on brainstorming different ways of leaving a good impression:

(Zhi) *‘One’s smile is very important. It makes people feel you are easy-going and friendly and also gives you opportunities to strike up a conversation with students. This is also how we give them a good impression: easy-going and friendly...’*

(Jingling) *‘I think we should also be aware of the way we talk. For instance, we’d better sound humorous. Proper clothes will also give students a good impression...’*

Afterwards, the discussion was diverted to focus heavily on dress, as Table 5.6 shows.

They negotiated what constituted best practice when it came to a teacher's appearance through inviting participation, arguing and confirming their views with one another, and adding new perspectives on why the issue of dress should not be overplayed.

Extracted data from online postings (Week one)	Negotiated practice
<p>... I am thinking if we are dressed up so formally, our students, teenagers in the secondary schools, will probably think we are 'old-fashioned'. The adult look will cause distance rather than facilitate a good relationship. Tianjiao says she isn't worried about wearing formal suits and high heels, but she's afraid of the sharp sound high heels produce. So confusing... any suggestions?</p> <p>I think it's a matter of decency. It's just my personal opinion; we should dress comfortably rather than formally. It's very likely that the formal clothes could bring about an undesired effect if we don't feel confident enough to wear them. Plus, I don't think we are used to dressing in a formal way, are we?</p> <p>I think there's no point wearing make-up, formal clothes or high heels so long as the clothes we wear are clean and decent. When we stand on the platform, it's our knowledge and ways of speaking that attract students' attention. I agree with Zhao Yao that formal dress might have a bad effect. It takes time to transform a person.</p> <p>Don't worry about the clothes. Just remember simplicity is the best policy. What's more, don't ever wear bizarre clothes.</p> <p>I think wearing formal clothes also implies that we take the practice seriously and respect others. Am I right?</p> <p>I didn't wear formal clothes when I went to the school today. No need to change a lot in terms of our appearance, in my opinion. I don't think we will look like teachers just because of the clothes we wear, but I do agree that we should never wear something bizarre. Be simple and plain.</p>	<p>The issue of dress: Formal dress and its impact</p> <p>Matter of decency and feeling comfortable</p> <p>No formal transformation in terms of clothes. Knowledge matters</p> <p>Simplicity, no bizarre clothes</p> <p>Clothes implied attitudes</p> <p>Looks ≠ teacher No bizarre clothes</p>

Table 5. 6 Negotiating the meaning of what constituted teachers' proper clothing

After following the discussion, I found that the concept of negotiation of joint enterprise was helpful in understanding which topics engaged student teachers and thus revealed their main concerns. A subcategory '**negotiated and defined agendas**' was created. Prompted by this subcategory, I asked myself two questions. The first was why the discussion led to something specific, and the second was whether discussions like this

helped them understand the specific issue under debate. I returned to the data with these two questions in mind. I then noticed that a discussion on a specific topic tended to cease when student teachers were no longer expressing uncertainty. For instance, the topic of *‘to be liked and accepted by students’* soon developed into *‘leaving a good impression’* which was further diverted to discussions about what they should wear in order to leave a good impression. Dress appeared to be a contentious topic because student teachers were not certain about whether they should dress formally or casually, and this resulted in different participants making their voices heard, as shown above. The negotiation of joint enterprise was stimulated by various common problems, uncertainties or dilemmas. Therefore, a subcategory of ‘dilemmas in common’ was created based on the data. This prompted me to create a further subcategory, ‘creating solutions’, which concentrated on the process of resolutions: i.e., the means rather than the end.

This additional subcategory, ‘creating solutions’, embraced not only the analysis of bits of extracted data and segmented utterances but also holistic analysis and integration of a meaning-negotiation process. If the decontextualised utterances were only categorised and analysed as isolated suggestions and techniques given by student teachers, or as mere products of their online communication, this would fail to reveal the evolving and dynamic process of meaning-negotiation or knowledge co-construction. In order to progress to a revived description and interpretation of the original data at the later stage of analysis, I reconceptualised the data by asking further questions, such as: ‘What were the focuses of a certain online thread? Who determined them? How were they expressed? In light of this analysis, creating solutions was defined as a joint construction of meaning, negotiated and created by members and featured a beginning, development and natural phasing out.

There appeared to be a degree of correlation among the subcategories **‘negotiated and defined agendas’**, **‘dilemmas in common’** and **‘creating solutions’**, which were housed within the category JE. They all presented an evolving process of defining their common agendas, identifying common problems within those agendas and working towards resolving those problems. A summary of the category JE, its subcategories and some examples of subdivisions are presented in Table 5.7.

Categories	Subcategories	Examples of Subdivisions
Joint enterprise	Negotiated and defined agenda	Establishing a good relationship/leaving a good impression Dress issue Evaluating the usefulness/function of teaching observation
	Dilemmas in common	Defining appropriate clothes for teachers Conflicts between theory and practice Defining proper relationships with students
	Creating solutions	Voice protection and strong vocal skills Marking student assignments

Table 5. 7 Example of subcategories/subdivisions under the category JE

Categorising Shared Repertoire

Based on the indicators of shared repertoire, the objective of creating subcategories within the SR category was to identify whether any agreed resources, teaching techniques, strategies, discourse, meaningful statements, stories etc. were derived from student teachers' interactions with their peers and supervisors. In other words, what were the outcomes of student teachers' joint enterprise? Were student teachers able to make sense of their professional encounters in their placement schools by referring to the history of their collective learning?

Due to the scope and content of the first week's thread, there was not sufficient evidence upon which to base many subcategories under SR. Nevertheless, one interesting phenomenon did arise - student teachers tended to use a lot of Chinese proverbs in their discussion. Table 5.8 below presents the four proverbs which were used in the first week's discussion.

Proverbs	Context of use
1. If you know yourself and your enemy , you will never lose a battle.	<i>Talking about students in placement schools</i>
2. Simplicity is the best policy.	<i>Talking about what to wear, and how to dress as a teacher in order to be perceived as a role model by students</i>
3. When we get to the mountain, there'll be a way through; when the boat gets to the pier, it will go straight with the current.	<i>Used to comfort and encourage poster and her peers when showing concern about their inadequate knowledge of teaching</i>
4. If I don't go to Hell, who else goes?	<i>Talking about some cooperating teachers assigning more work for them to do</i>

Table 5. 8 Proverbs used in the threaded discussion in the first week

As the proverbs were used in student teachers' communication for multiple reasons, I was uncertain whether they should be categorised according to their different communicative purposes (as I had originally) or if they should be re-categorised in light of the particular style of discourse embedded in student teachers' communication. For instance, the first proverb was used as a metaphor for treating students as their enemies, and the school placement as a battle. The purpose of using it was to encourage student teachers to make the most of their first week by studying and understanding their students.

After browsing through a few more threaded discussions, I noticed the prevalent phenomenon of relating Chinese proverbs to the school placement experience. According to Wenger (1998), shared repertoire also embraces certain historical discourse by 'which members of the community create meaningful statements about the world, as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members' (p.83). Student teachers' preference for using Chinese proverbs to express their thoughts and feelings was a featured communicational style in the online community. I therefore created a subcategory, 'Communicational style –using Chinese proverbs'.

In retrospect, creating subcategories in this part appeared complicated despite the existence of many indicators of shared repertoire. Such indicators as stories, tools, events or concepts could not be identified easily without associating the interview transcripts to the online posting data, because shared repertoire is defined as a collective ability which opens up different ways of interpreting meanings. The different perspectives cannot be captured accurately by focusing solely on one or other of the data sets. The process of refining and developing subcategories under SR, therefore required association of different data across time and from different data sets. A typical example of the interview data is used here to demonstrate how interview transcripts could help to supplement and complete the analysis of online postings. It comes from my analysis of a group interview transcript where student teacher **Zhi** recalled how she dealt with her anxiety about teaching in front of her students by getting help online. She said:

(Zhi) ‘...I fell about laughing when I read Chen’s reply. She advised me to imagine my students as one Chinese cabbage after another sitting neatly in the classroom... [Three other student teachers nodded their heads and echoed this, saying ‘oh, yes, yes, I remembered it too’] Guess what? When I stood on the platform, and was just as nervous as I expected, her suggestion suddenly came to mind. One Chinese cabbage after another, I couldn’t help smiling. Magically, I no longer felt nervous.’ (Group interview one)

Although I was quite confident about my familiarisation with the online postings, this particular post by **Zhi** did not ring a bell. I located this threaded discussion using the lexical search function provided by MAXQDA. I noticed that the bit of data ‘*Chinese cabbage*’ had been assigned to the subcategory ‘building rapport’, under the category ME. Semantically speaking, **Chen**’s reply was mainly intended to comfort **Zhi** by making a little joke. However, other surprises followed. The search results indicated that the same phrase had appeared in another group interview. After some comparative thinking, I excluded this piece of data from ‘building rapport’. Instead I reassigned it to the category SR, under which I created a new subcategory ‘memorable stories told’, to encompass the coping strategies that student teachers shared in those stories. There were many other similar instances where it became necessary to re-categorise bits of

categorised data (online postings) more appropriately in light of complementary information provided by the interview data. The creation and development of all subcategories under SR followed the procedure documented above. Table 5.9 summarises the finalised subcategories which resulted from coding all the online postings.

Categories	Subcategories
Shared repertoire	Communicational style –using Chinese proverbs
	Memorable stories told
	Teaching technique repository
	Lesson plans
	Publicised reflection

Table 5. 9 Subcategories under the category of SR

5.3.1.4 Categorising and Analysing Interview Transcript

As an additional primary data source, analysis of the interview transcripts helped me explore the participants’ perceptions of their six week collective learning experience in the online community. Moreover, the findings can later be used to review the role of the online learning community and triangulate the conclusions drawn from analysis of online postings.

By the time I began analysing the interview transcripts, a category system had already been developed, based on the analysis of online postings. Instead of hastily applying the category system to analysis of the interview data, I browsed through an interview transcript to gauge how appropriate the existing system would be, and confirmed that it would in fact be suitable.

For instance, during the course of categorisation, I had no difficulty classifying bits of data into the categories of ‘mutual engagement’ and ‘shared repertoire’ and their subcategories. In practice, most of the subcategories within ‘mutual engagement’ and ‘shared repertoire’ were enriched and further refined as a result of categorisation of the interview transcripts.

A case in point was the subcategory ‘sense of togetherness’. Based on the online posting data, the subcategory had been defined as the use of phatics, salutations and vocatives, addressing participants by name and the group by ‘we’, or inviting participation. However, while reading the interview transcripts, I noticed that student teachers from four different interview groups expressed their feeling of being connected in the following ways:

‘I feel assured and relieved when I know from peers’ postings that I am not doing things alone.’ ‘I just like to hang out there because I always want to check if other classmates have a similar state of mind.’ ‘I don’t feel uneasy but rather comforted because I am behaving like everyone else does’ ‘...when communicating with other classmates online, I realise the problems I face are almost the same as the ones every other classmate has, I just feel so relieved.’ ‘It’s so easy to find resonance online’ ‘I know what they are talking about and they know what I am talking about.’

Those statements indicate that student teachers felt they were connected, despite the distance, because their online communication helped them relate to others. The sense of togetherness was demonstrated not only by the use of salutations, the pronoun ‘we’ or addressing each other by name in the online posting data, but was also salient in the interview transcripts, as discussed above. Therefore, I refined the subcategory ‘sense of togetherness’ by further adding the definition ‘feel assured and relieved because they are connected rather than isolated’.

Revision of the subcategory ‘relationship-building’ provides a further example. As documented previously, the online postings did not yield sufficient data to warrant the creation of the subcategory. However, the interview transcripts threw up some surprises. For instance, offline friendships among some student teachers were nurtured and enhanced as a result of their online sharing and mutual understanding.

(Tianjiao) *‘...I made two new friends because of the online communication. We were just on nodding terms before, but I got to know them well because we had so much in common. I always tried to find out if they were posting anything new and I wanted to*

talk with them.'

(Group interview three)

Some student teachers believed that their online communication created opportunities to get to know each other and extend their interaction offline.

'...during online discussions, there were always times when I felt resonance with someone else. For instance, Huang and I didn't talk much, because we are not in the same class...I then found what she posted online was exactly what I was thinking and wanted to say too! We've been chatting and sharing more online since. We are close now.'

(Group interview one)

Others in the same group expressed a similar view, and further emphasised that the online interactions and positive learning atmosphere encouraged them to treat their teaching practice seriously and gave them a reason to work hard. The fear of being left behind appeared to provide strong motivation.

(Yuanqiong) *'Exactly, I felt the same. Why bother working hard? I knew I could easily pass the placement assessment...and would graduate...But when I saw everyone was so active in communicating and encouraging each other in the online community, I knew if I didn't work hard, then I couldn't be part of their online communication. It was the atmosphere that everyone there was working so hard that meant I could keep working hard till the school placement ended and I learnt quite a lot from it.'* (Group interview two)

(Chen) *'Because I started one week later, I got really panicked when I read that other classmates were in full swing; they were enjoying their school experience, and they had tried this or that, I didn't want to be left behind. I wanted to keep up with them.'* (Group interview one)

What could be gathered from the examples above was the effect of the delicately competitive atmosphere created by the online communication. The examples indicate a

communal sense of positive competition that was nurtured by the collective learning experience, and further reinforced by each individual. In light of this, I renamed the subcategory 'relationship-building' as 'creating relationships' to better respond to the richness and diversity of the data. I then redefined the subcategory to embrace the following concepts: acknowledging, respecting and trusting members, recognising member's contribution, making friends, gaining new understanding of classmates and feeling a positive spirit of competitiveness. The subcategory 'creating relationships' was then split into three subdivisions to reflect the relationships between student teachers themselves, between student teachers and their supervisors, and between supervisors. Likewise, the subcategories under 'shared repertoire' were enriched and refined in the process of categorising the interview transcript data. The story about Chinese cabbages, which was discussed in the section on categorising online postings, illustrates the way in which the subcategory 'memorable stories told' was enriched by means of associating two data sets.

As detailed above, the existing category system generally proved suitable for the categorising of interview data. However, it was not appropriate for all of the interview data. The group interviews, to some extent, were a collective discussion of, and reflection on, online learning during the six-week school placement. The activities and actual online communication were no longer the primary concern or discussion focus. Student teachers and supervisors were more concerned about judging and evaluating the effect of their online communication, and the learning outcomes, if any. As a result, a small amount of the interview data could not be categorised using the existing system. I therefore employed the grounded-theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to create the appropriate categories. I adopted open and axial coding to create categories and link them together through analysis. Robson (2002) affirms that open and axial coding should serve the analytical purpose well if the researcher's primary concern is to describe and explore the phenomena being studied. Therefore my choice of approach was well-founded. Since I used grounded-theory to analyse a relatively small amount of data in the context of this study, I do not intend to select a core category as a centrepiece of my analysis, or develop theories based upon it.

The open coding was straightforward. I mainly used the in vivo categories (i.e., a direct quotation from the data) with a few descriptive categories summarised from the data. For instance, many categories such as: ‘*draw on the wisdom of masse*’ ‘*onlookers see most clearly*’, ‘*equal distribution of the right of speech*’, ‘*scratch each other’s back*’ and the like; were captured directly from the data themselves. Once open coding was complete, I then linked together all of the categories developed through the process. The axial coding was, essentially, a move to merge discrete categories into more abstract themes through the process of finding relationships and connections between them. I grouped together categories which shared similar attributes through the constant comparative methods and created a new label to tag the grouped categories. The process of grouping categories and creating new labels actually served to convert those categories into subcategories and subordinate them to new overarching categories.

For instance, after careful comparison, I grouped categories ‘*equal distribution of the right to speak*’, ‘*sense of achievement*’, ‘*no restriction of time or space*’, ‘*sense of freedom in terms of airing independent views and critical thinking/ feel free to think or act differently from teachers*’, and ‘*inspirations from others*’ into a new superordinate category labelled ‘*stimulating active communication*’. The completion of grounded-theory style analysis resulted in the construction of another three categories (see Table 5.10) which supplemented and completed the analytical framework drawn from pre-existing theoretical propositions.

Categories resulting from open coding	Categories resulting from axial coding
Equal distribution of the right to speak (supervisors and student teachers (STs)) Sense of achievement (STs) No restriction of time or space (Supervisors and STs) Sense of freedom in terms of airing independent views and critical thinking/feel free to think or act differently from teachers (STs) Inspirations from others (STs)	Stimulating active communication
Drawing on the wisdom of masses (Supervisors and STs) Onlookers see most clearly (STs) Scratching each other’s backs (Supervisors and STs)	Perceived roles of the online community

Raising reflective awareness/ enhancing reflection (Supervisors and STs) Invigorating peer learning (Supervisors and STs) Teaching benefits learning and vice versa (Supervisors and STs)	
The pros and cons of pre-determined themes (STs) Issue of online supervision/tutoring (Supervisors and STs) Re-assessment of the definition of supervision time, issues of supervisors' commitment and according reward (supervisors) The potential threats of disempowerment/losing control of the right to speak (supervisors) Training supervisors to be computer-literate (Supervisors)	Issues of successful online discussion management

Table 5. 10 Summary of the extra categories derived from the interview data

To recap, the sample analysis in sections 5.3.1.3 and 5.3.1.4 faithfully documented the main procedures, analytical processes and decisions that I made. The same procedure was carried out repetitively and consistently until the stage where the various categories were saturated and I had gained a good appreciation of what I had captured in the various data sets overall. Attention was also paid to deviant data which could not be assigned to any categories. I created memos and folders in which to store this deviant data, with the aim of examining its relevance, finding negative cases or contradictory data for scrutiny at a later stage.

In section 5.3.2 below, I will detail why and how additional analytical steps were employed to further make sense of the categorised data under categories **JE** and **SR**.

Before I move on to the next part of the discussion, it is worth briefly describing the process by which I dealt with the subcategories under category **ME**. The subcategories were neat. As Figure 5.4 shows, connections had already been found between them, along with their embeddedness with the joint enterprise category. There was a strong degree of interdependence and reinforcement between the six categories. The presence of one category reinforces the presence of another. For instance, as student teachers began to disclose their school encounters and personal feelings more and more, they nurtured an atmosphere of being together. The sense of togetherness in turn invited

further self-disclosure activities. The ideas and information shared during their mutual engagement would give student teachers a purposeful grounding in determining and negotiating what mattered to them.

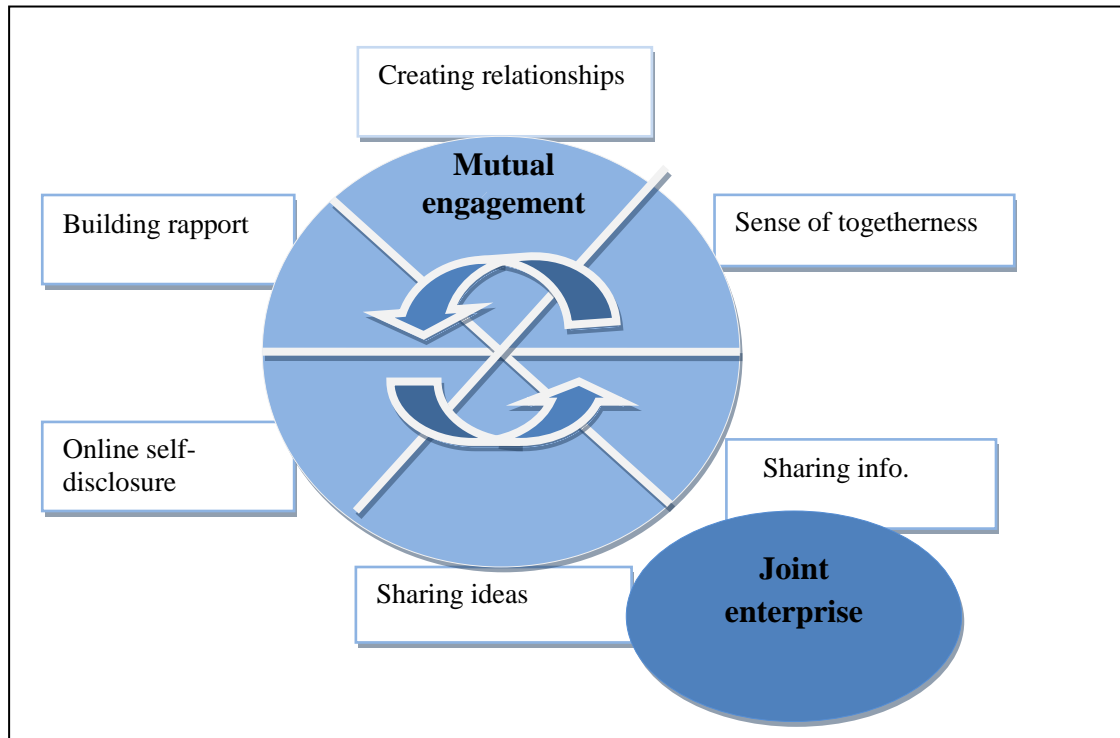


Figure 5. 4 Relationships among subcategories & embeddedness with joint enterprise

5.3.2 Additional Analytical Steps

The employment of the three theoretical propositions of CoPs effectively assisted the categorisation of massive data and the sub-categories/sub-divisions under category ME (Figure 5.4) indicated explicit connections between each other. The initial data categorisation and analysis, as demonstrated in sections 5.3.1.3 and 5.3.1.4, made three promising findings. Firstly, the majority of student teachers were actively involved in discussing their feelings about teaching and their professional encounters. Secondly, their online interactions nurtured opportunities for them to collectively reinforce, negotiate, construct and reflect on their understanding of what the professional experiences meant to them. Finally, they affirmed that the process of online interactions enabled them to look at teaching-related issues from various angles. The data analysis at

this stage pointed convincingly to the fact that student teachers had indeed had a shared learning experience. Nevertheless, I found that the categorised data under categories JE and SR required additional analysis in order to probe what happened behind the categorised codes such as ‘negotiated and defined agenda’, ‘dilemmas in common’ and ‘creating solutions’ as well as their association with categorised codes under SR.

To be more specific, since student teachers had been identified to have a shared online learning experience, it was essential to dig out further evidence from the categorised data in order to pinpoint evidence of aspects of student teachers’ shared learning and their professional growth. Equally important was the discovery of what constituted the driving force that motivated and sustained student teachers’ online discussions over time, despite the pressure they were under elsewhere. For instance, they were working in an unfamiliar and challenging setting. This would help us understand in what ways and to what extent this online learning community supported their professional learning during the school placement, what they learnt about their learning-to-teach experience and their peers and supervisors, and how this online learning experience might have shaped their perceptions of learning.

Therefore, this section details how the additional analytical steps of clustering, the checklist matrix and event listing were employed to make further sense of the categorised data. They helped tease out the relationships between different subcategories/subdivisions (see tables 5.7 and 5.9), within or across the developed categories, and hence led to the generation of meaning from the data. As Dey (1993) and Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest, the databits that had been broken down and categorised need to be beaten up by means of seeking connections and relationships among different categories to identify themes. Such a process is a stepping stone to creating theories and constructing themes with which to answer research questions (Richards, 2005).

The following part demonstrates the actual analysis involved at this stage. Each analytical tactic and the rationale behind my decision to use them to generate meanings from the data are also presented respectively.

5.3.2.1 Clustering

Clustering is used to group events, places, people, or processes together, in order to explore whether or not they have similar patterns or characteristics (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Clustering was mainly employed in order to understand the connections between subcategories and their subdivisions, developed horizontally under the category **JE** (i.e., the depth and breadth of student teachers' **joint enterprise**), and thus construct common themes by associating the underlying commonalities. As shown in Table 5.11 below, the connections between different subcategories and their subdivisions were identified and labelled with tags which were either conceptually or empirically based, as suggested by Dey (1993). Through clustering, six salient themes which appeared throughout the student teachers' joint pursuit of their common purposes were identified. These embodied different aspects of their professional learning during the school placement.

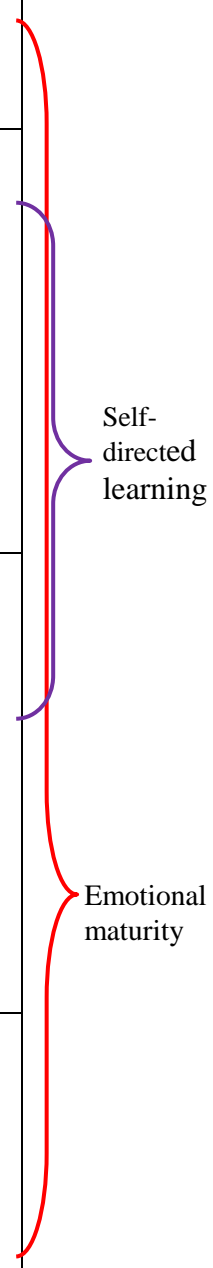
category	Displaying and regrouping all subdivisions in the subcategories of ‘Negotiated and defined agendas’, ‘Dilemmas in Common’ & ‘Creating solutions’ under category JE	Themes	New themes
Joint enterprise	Establish good relationships, leaving a good impressions, Important of clothes, Issue of defining proper dressing, Handling a proper relationship with students, evaluating one’s own relationship with students and cooperating teachers, confidence building	Initial confrontation	 <p>Self-directed learning</p> <p>Emotional maturity</p>
	Observing and commenting on cooperating teachers’ teaching, evaluating the usefulness of class observing and working out rules for effective observation, reflecting on and evaluating one’s own teaching, peers’ reflection	Evaluation and Reflection ---Evaluating teachers’ teaching ---Self and group reflection	
	Disciplining and praising students, commenting on papers, marking students’ assignment, use of smiley face icons, nurturing an active learning atmosphere & balancing a moderate learning atmosphere, using humour, discussing teaching plans, sharing various teaching techniques, inviting trials, reporting the results of trials, evaluating & refining teaching techniques, the role of grammar translation methods, task-based teaching, warming up activities, ineffective teaching of reading, pros & cons of using Powerpoint to teach, voice protection and strong vocal skills, defining best teaching methods, handwriting, use of blackboard confidence building	Developing pedagogical content knowledge	
	A working perception of teaching itself, , teaching strain, attitudes towards cooperating teachers, being a good form teacher, , student’s negative attitudes towards learning English, discovering dynamic relationships between students and their teachers6. test-oriented or quality-oriented education, purpose of teaching English/educational system/purpose of education	Understanding teaching as a profession --Teachers /students --Educational system, purpose, value and end	

Table 5. 11 Clustering to identify themes

The six themes listed above coincide with Wenger's (1998) list of the subjects negotiated by members of a learning community of practice:

What matters and what does not, what is important and why it is important, what to do and not to do, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, what to talk about and what to leave unsaid, what to justify and what to take for granted, what to display and what to withhold, when actions and artefacts are good enough and when they need improvement or refinement. (p. 81)

5.3.2.2 Checklist Matrix

The checklist matrix is used to analyse field data on a major variable or general domain of interests (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As the major variable in this study centres around the 'support' of the community, a checklist of types of support, based on the developed categories, was created to assess its appropriateness. The checklist allowed me to cross-reference and weigh the identified evidence across all the databits.

Online support is tied to the successful implementation of the online learning community in this study and there are strong arguments for this in the literature of ICT and teacher education. In fact, the overarching research question aims to explore how the online learning community supports student teachers' professional learning. 'Online support' was therefore chosen as the key variable. Following the procedures suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), I created a checklist matrix, as Table 5.12 below demonstrated. By associating and cross-referencing different databits across the whole category system, the checklist matrix was created to test hunches, themes or even some bold guesses and to determine whether there was sufficient evidence from which to generate meanings.

The checklist matrix consists of four columns: various components of online support (VCOS), rating, frequency of occurrence (FO) and sample evidence from online postings or interview data. The rating allowed me to rate the evidence as very strong, strong, adequate, or weak. (Designations of 'none' or 'not applicable' were also used where appropriate). The rating given was dependent on my thorough involvement and

total familiarisation with the actual data and was the result of careful and constant comparison and inspection. The ‘frequency of occurrence’ (FO) column quantified the components coded by MAXQDA. It was used to supplement the practice of weighing and rating evidence because quantification can play a role in both the ‘generation of hypotheses and the verification of patterns that had been noticed’ (Mackey and Gass, 2005, p. 224). Meanwhile, close attention was paid to maintaining the uniqueness and individuality of the databits throughout, because I was aware the frequency with which a particular component of online support occurs does not necessarily guarantee its significance. The final column was created to provide substantial evidence from the retrieved data. The sample evidence featured in that column in the example provided below is not exhaustive and intended purely for illustrative purposes. In the actual process of retrieving the relevant data, I repeated the whole operation until I was convinced that the rating and weighing had arrived at a stage where no new factors arose from the data. Table 5.12 below is mainly used for illustrating how the checklist matrix supported me to further explore the themes identified by the analytical step ‘clustering’ in the previous stage and seek evidence to confirm or disapprove the validity of the themes.

VCOS	Rating	FO	Sample evidence from online postings or interview data
emotional support (student teachers and supervisors)	Very strong	94	<i>Hang in there! Don't give up easily (online posting)</i> <i>I think you've done very well. (Zijun/online posting)</i> <i>I regain my positive spirit every time I let out my frustration and problems (interview)</i>
professional support (student teachers and supervisors)	Very strong	154	<i>...Can anyone comment on my lesson plan? (online posting)</i> <i>You get what you need. You can throw a question out there about phrase translation, grammar, lesson plans and so on (interview)</i>
supporting reflection (self-reflection and collective reflection)	Strong	97	<i>The thread 'sharing a technique of marking students' assignments' shows student teachers' reflection-in-action collectively.</i>
supporting sharing and developing of teaching techniques and ideas	Very strong	133	<i>Using 'cloze test' form to recap a lesson is very useful. You get all the students' attention and it helps our students' to consolidate what they've just learnt. Try it. (online posting)</i>
enabling understanding various aspects of teaching as a profession	Strong	73	<i>...Teaching is never easy. Now I understand why my former teachers sometime treated us like that...(online posting)</i>
new relationships and understanding (student teachers and supervisors)	Strong	36	<i>...our supervisors become our equals because we are all sitting in front of a computer. There is no more absolute teacher-leading, student-learning.(interview)</i> <i>...now she's my pal (interview)</i>
supporting repeatedly asserted ideas	Strong	11	<i>Discussions such as 'Grammar teaching is still very important', 'Don't wear bizarre clothes.'(online posting)</i>
the right to speak	Strong	26	<i>...when the communication is conducted online, student teachers have full command of their right to speak (interview)</i>
supervisors' new understanding of supervision	Strong	8	<i>But now, student teachers are taking initiatives and they are directing the supervision to suit their needs. Supervision is all about their needs and concerns (interview)</i>
student teachers' empowerment of exerting an influence on classroom teaching	Adequate	37	<i>I used Dandan's rap-music technique to teach new words; it's a success and my students liked it. (online posting)</i>

Table 5. 12 An example of checklist matrix: components of online support

5.3.2.3 Event Listing

Event listing is a sequential analysis that arranges a series of concrete events chronologically, sorting them into several categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Using this technique showed the continuity and discontinuity of online discussion activities during the six week communication period.

As an effective means of inspecting data in chronological order, event listing served to trace the developmental process of learning-to-teach over time. To be more specific, the six major themes emerged through clustering, and the aspects of support identified by the checklist matrix were embodied in the constructed incidents that exemplified student teachers' professional growth over time as a result of shared online learning.

The event listing was composed of a series of constructed events which took place during the six-week school placement. The events were cross-referenced with data from online postings as well as interview transcripts. A lower case 'x' was used to mark the occurrence of a constructed event in that week and a capital 'X' to indicate that the constructed event had dominated the weekly threaded discussion. An 'interview' label was included in the listing for any events which were referred to by student teachers and supervisors in the group interviews. The listing enabled me to gain a clear overview of what subjects engaged student teachers over the six weeks' online discussion and how those discussions impacted on the overall process of school placement in practice. The construction of event listing helped me identify the occurrence, continuity and discontinuity of topics which could be reconstructed across time to different events. Table 5.13 below is an example of the event listing table.

Constructed events	Time during (weeks)						Interview
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
How do teachers dress themselves?	X	X					X
Does GTM have a role to play in teaching English?	x	X	X	x	X		X
On the effective use of the smiley face icon		X	X	X	X		X
What does it mean to be a form teacher?			X	X	X		X
Issues of blackboard writing	x			X		X	x
Protecting our voice		x	X	X			X
Techniques for commenting on papers		X	X	X	X		
Why doesn't class observation help improving our teaching?	x	X	X				x
Warm-up exercises	x	X	X	X	x		X

Table 5. 13 An example of the event listing

In short, the constructed events echoed the six themes identified through clustering, as well as the components of support identified and justified through the checklist matrix. The majority of the events were composed of various aspects and levels of discussion under the theme 'pedagogic content knowledge'.

5.4 Theorisation and Verification of Findings

As I emphasised in section 5.1, the analytical process, though documented in a linear fashion, involved recursive and continuous activities which cannot be plotted easily on a single timeline. Conclusion drawing and verification take place almost simultaneously with analytical procedures. The process of data analysis leads to theorising and verifying findings through examination of their representativeness and validity. In this section, I will discuss the three main strategies I used to confirm the findings: triangulation, checking for representativeness and weighing the evidence. Other strategies were used at the same time, including constant comparison, keeping reflective memos, being critical of any conclusions reached, and checking if any coded data were left unexplained; all of which were steps on the path towards the end of the analysis.

5.4.1 Triangulation

Triangulation is known to be a valuable and widely used strategy through which to enhance the rigour of research (Robson, 2002). I used two types in this study: data triangulation and theory triangulation which helped to achieve conformability and completeness of the data analysis.

Two different types of data were analysed: online postings and interviews. Triangulating what student teachers did in the online community and what they said in the interview helped me to make the distinction between learning as it happened, learning as it was experienced and learning as it was spoken about. Therefore the findings were drawn from evidence and supporting facts from both data sets.

The other example of triangulation was the use of two different theoretical perspectives to guide the analysis. Although the occurrence of this triangulation was unexpected rather than designed, it ended up increasing the credibility of the analysis. As I have mentioned in sections 5.3 and 5.4, theoretical propositions from the CoPs framework were used to construct the data analysis. In addition, the grounded-theory approach was adopted in order to examine a small amount of data from the interview transcripts. Though data was categorised from two different theoretical perspectives, there were no discrepancies between them. In fact, the data analysed using the grounded-theory approach showed a strong degree of conformity with data analysed according to the CoPs framework.

5.4.2 Checking for Representativeness

Miles and Huberman (1994) remind us of the three most common pitfalls which threaten the validity and reliability of qualitative research. These are sampling non-representative informants, generalising from non-representative events or activities, and drawing inferences from non-representative processes (ibid). In this study, the 42 student teachers, who participated voluntarily, accounted for 1/4 of the whole final-year student teacher population of the research site. Their gender, age, family backgrounds and academic

performance reflected the universal characteristics of student teachers in the Normal Universities of developing provinces in China. In order to avoid generalisation from non-representative findings, extra effort was made to check any potential exceptions or 'outliers' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.269) which appeared to go against the drawn conclusions.

For instance, I noticed that one student teacher, **Laufang**, withdrew from active participation in the online community at the beginning of the third week. I was aware of the sudden change in her behaviour, but I did not take any action. I was concerned with my dual role as a researcher and supervisor at that time, and afraid that my interference would be inappropriate. During a later interview, **Laufang** confessed that her cooperating teacher had given her a very difficult time and she felt so discouraged that she just gave up. Her supervisor had not taken notice of it at all until I talked about **Laufang**'s situation with her during the interview. It was apparent that **Laufang** did not feel that she could be supported by her peers and supervisor. This incident provoked me to reassess the degree of support given by supervisors.

An additional extreme incident involved another student teacher, **Chengyao**, whose online participation was categorised as low involvement with only six postings and a web log of 74 hits. Although she was very active in the group interview, she seemed not to understand most of the questions I was asking. When I asked how they felt about the support from the university-based supervisors, she talked about her cooperating teachers. When I asked how communicating online was different from face-to-face communication, she talked about the ways she used to encourage her students to participate in the learning activities. Finally, I asked her if she would feel the same with or without the communication in the online community, and she gave a positive answer. The process of checking this negative incident also prevented me from making an absolute statement on the role of online learning community in this study.

The last of the pitfalls pointed out by Miles and Huberman (1994), drawing inference from non-representative processes, will be discussed in the following section because I relied primarily on the method of weighing the evidence to test the representativeness of

the constructed events.

5.4.3 Weighing the Evidence

The technique of weighing the evidence was found to be extremely useful in examining and strengthening the findings. With the help of MAXQDA, giving any piece of coded data a weight score is easy. By default, MAXQDA gives a score out of 100 to each segment when it is categorised. Based on analysis of the data, the researcher can assign a score to a piece of categorised data to indicate its relevance to the research question. The given score can be deleted or re-modified if necessary. The categorised data can also be retrieved according to its weight score. This text retrieval by score function meant that I could easily compare the different categories and weigh up their importance.

I carried on using this technique to examine the components of ‘support’ and ‘degree of support’ in the checklist matrix, only this time it was done manually. I identified repeated behaviours, discussion activities and repeatedly expressed views. In light of this, weighing the evidence allowed me to objectively decide why some bits of data were stronger or more relevant than others for the purposes of drawing findings.

Although I have only discussed three techniques through which to confirm the findings of the analysis process, other implicit methods were also employed. For instance, I constantly compared and contrasted bits of data and different categories, and identified themes. While analysing the data, I was highly aware of my own subjectivity and kept reflecting on my thoughts and actions in my research diary. Documenting the analytical process also ensured the reliability and validity of the study as I presented as much of the back stage information (Chenail, 1995) of my research as possible. Chenail (1995) describes ‘back stage information’ thus:

you communicate as clearly as you can what it was that you did to create your project, what were your choices along the way, what else did you consider doing in the project but chose not to do. Get clear with yourself what it is that you are doing at every point along the way of doing your project. Note it and present it to your readers. (p. 2)

I believe that presenting the back stage information not only increases the transparency but also enhances the rigour of the study.

5.5 Methodological Serendipities during Data Analysis

Two methodological issues which appeared difficult to handle when I began developing and refining analytical categories turned out to be serendipitous. In the following sections, I will discuss these issues and how I dealt with them. Particular emphasis will be placed on discussion of the second methodological issue because its complexity eventually became an insightful analytical angle from which to explore the meanings of, and relationships between, the categorised data.

5.5.1 Defining the Unit of Analysis

The first issue involved defining units of analysis. Due to the complexities of online postings in this research, a neat unit of analysis was neither possible nor advisable. Burbules (2000) claims that dialogue has a multiplicity of communicative purposes; the asynchronous online discussion in this study is no exception. Xin and Feenberg (2007) point out that online discussion is paradoxical since it combines features of incoherence, chaos and order. One posting may embrace ‘several themes addressing different issues or questions raised during the discussions’ (Pawan *et al.*, 2003, p.112). The posting by **Lingli**, depicted in Table 5.14, could be a case in point.

<p>I went to the school today. I wasn't as nervous as I had expected¹. I didn't wear formal clothes². No need to change a lot in terms of our appearance, in my opinion³. I don't think we will look like teachers just because of the clothes we wear⁴, but I do agree that we should never wear something bizarre⁵. Be simple and plain⁶.</p>	<p>1 is an instance of sharing personal information and feelings.</p> <p>2 'I didn't wear formal clothes' could also be viewed as Lingli exemplifying her experience.</p> <p>3 is an instance of sharing ideas.</p> <p>4 is an instance of extending discussion by justifying her view.</p> <p>5 is an instance of confirming peers' viewpoint.</p> <p>6 has multiple functions: it can be viewed as Lingli recapping her point, as a closure of her conversation, as a confirmation she gave to support her peers' opinions offered in previous discussion and as a suggestion she wanted to give and emphasise.</p>
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Table 5. 14 An example of a multiplicity of communicative purposes in online postings

An online message like this is often viewed as a complete communicative unit (Henri, 1992) when it comes to analysing online threaded discussions. Although they acknowledge that multiple meanings and complexities can be conveyed in a single posting, many researchers (Rogers, Garrison *et al.* 2001; Clarke, 2002; White, 2003) choose a complete posted message as the unit of analysis by focusing on a singular, but the most salient feature of a message and assigning it to a correspondent category. Admittedly, a message-level unit of analysis, methodologically speaking, would appear more systematic and applicable for projection in similar research. It would also reduce the amount of labour and time invested in data coding. However, it runs the risk of sacrificing the complexity of the original data, and hence this approach means it is not possible to mine the data for interpretations at later stages. Capturing such complexities in data analysis is particularly critical in this study because one of the research aims is to disclose if and how online communication evidences student teachers' professional learning and growth.

Therefore, instead of following the more traditional analytical path, I disassembled online postings into manageable bits. I then defined units of analysis in this study as a

combination of message, sentence, phrase and even, in some cases, a single utterance depending on the actual meaning it conveys. Interestingly, as the categorising process unfolded, I became more aware that the boundary of a unit of analysis was determined by ME, JE and SR. The online posting from Table 5.14 above is used again to exemplify my epiphany.

<p>I went to the school today. I wasn't as nervous as I had expected¹. I didn't wear formal clothes².</p>	<p>ME: the ST is engaged in revealing her professional experience at the placement school</p> <p>JE: she is negotiating her understanding as well as confirming her peers' views</p> <p>SR: She reclaimed her perspective for others to consider and interpret.</p>
<p>No need to change a lot in terms of our appearance, in my opinion³. I don't think we will look like teachers just because of the clothes we wear⁴, but I do agree that we should never wear something bizarre⁵</p>	
<p>Be simple and plain⁶.</p>	

Table 5.14 An example of a multiplicity of communicative purposes in online postings

Using ME, JE and SR to decide the unit of analysis allowed me to avoid falling into the trap of analysing different functionalities of dialogue purely at the surface level, such as asking and answering questions. Instead, they enabled me to divide the message into segments, concentrate more effectively on the core concepts of each dimension and then assign bits of data to the categories ME, JE or SR by matching the arresting feature of the discourse to the indicators of each dimension. The separated analysis proved helpful in categorising data that may otherwise have been difficult to analyse.

Therefore, when it came to organising data according to the three categories, the unit of analysis was defined as any segment of speech that could be linked to indicators generated from ME, JE and SR. As the process was bidirectional, analysis of the segments of speech also enriched and redefined the scope of subcategories under ME, JE and SR.

5.5.2 Embeddedness among Categories

The second issue to arise at the data categorisation stage was the overlap between the categories (ME, JE and SR) which had been created using the three dimensions of a cohesive community of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. As we have seen in the previous section, the discrete categorisations of ME, JE and SR proved useful in the classification of online postings.

As my analysis progressed, although I was convinced by its effectiveness, I became increasingly aware that the separation approach prevented me from identifying the interconnections between the three dimensions. I did notice some degree of overlap among subcategories under one category, or across categories. Therefore, to ensure greater accuracy, the identification of overlap was redefined as embeddedness among categories. The sample data featured in the previous section will be used here to illustrate the embeddedness of the three categories. I also wish to use it to show how I gained a useful insight into the analytical framework and how that insight contributes to current understanding of the CoPs framework.

In the discussion on what they should pay particular attention to and how they would make the most of their first week in their placement schools, student teacher **Tianjiao** said: *‘I think to be liked and accepted by students in the first week is of great importance...’* This is undoubtedly evidence of the subcategory sharing ideas under the category mutual engagement. Her posting triggered a whole discussion on what student teachers could do to be liked and accepted by students in the first week. ‘How to be liked and accepted by students’ then became a **raised agenda** agreed and negotiated by the student teachers under the category **joint enterprise**.

Among the various strategies proposed by student teachers on how to be liked and accepted, agreement on ‘the importance of proper clothes’ was quickly reached. It was not only the **raised agenda** agreed by student teachers, but also appeared to be a **dilemma in common** as their discussion progressed since the word ‘proper’ caused disagreement among them.

Some thought the word ‘proper’ implied wearing formal suits; others thought the type of clothes was not important as long as they looked decent. Student teachers’ postings revealed their concerns about the possible consequences of failing to dress in the right way: examples include: ‘*causing bad effect*’, ‘*creating distance in the relationship between them and students*’, ‘*we are not used to dressing in a formal way*’, ‘*afraid of the sharp sound high heels make*’ and ‘*so confusing...any suggestions?*’. In airing their different views and concerns about how to dress properly, student teachers were also actively engaged in resolving those problems by **creating solutions** through communication.

For instance, **Yaozhao** responded: ‘*the safe strategy is to neither look too mature nor too young*’, while **Haicui** suggested that ‘*if we are not sure about what to wear, maybe we can just copy the way our cooperating teachers dress.*’ **Jingling** replied to **Chen**’s question about the noise made by high heels by advising her to go and have the problem solved at a particular shoe-repair shop. As their discussion deepened, two different opinions were emerging. Some student teachers believed that proper clothes meant dressing formally and also implied they took the practice seriously and respected others, while others thought that casual dress was also an appropriate option because they were not used to dressing formally. It seemed to be a difficult-to-solve problem for student teachers.

A third opinion was provided by **Tianjiao** who said: ‘*I think there’s no point wearing make-up, formal clothes or high heels as long as the clothes we wear are clean and decent. When we stand on the platform, it’s our knowledge and ways of speaking that attract students’ attention.*’ **Tianjiao**’s opinion gained three other student teachers’ recognition and support. **Lingli** added: ‘*I don’t think we will look like teachers just because of the clothes we wear.*’ **Congyan** comforted her peers by saying: ‘*don’t worry too much about the clothes*’ and added her view: ‘*just remember simplicity is the best policy. What’s more, don’t ever wear any bizarre clothes*’.

As professionals, teachers have been granted high social status and recognition in China, both historically and in the modern day; they are therefore expected to be a role model

and set an example for their students. They must watch their words and deeds carefully as their students will mimic them. The connotation embedded in '*don't wear bizarre clothes*' is tacit and shared knowledge among student teachers. Consequently, **Congyan**'s advice gained other students' approval. **Lingli** emphasised the dressing rule to '*be simple and plain*' and shared her personal experience with other student teachers by posting '*I went to the school today...I didn't wear formal clothes.*' The very process of creating a solution involves building up student teachers' shared repertoire.

In summary, the discussion of proper dress was triggered initially by student teachers' shared thoughts and was then identified as a common problem. As various opinions and personal experiences were shared, the discussion of proper dress was brought to an end through the agreement of negotiated statements, such as '*don't wear bizarre clothes*', '*simplicity is the best policy*' and '*be simple and plain*'. The utterance 'bizarre clothes' was identified as a **meaningful statement** under the category **shared repertoire** when interview data was analysed. The discussion of proper clothes, as part of student teachers' practice carried out within the online learning community, would have an impact on their choice of clothes and consideration of their physical appearance when they went to the different secondary schools, which are teaching communities of practice.

As discussed above, identifying the embeddedness of the three categories allowed me to reappraise the interconnections between them. Even though the first week's thread was a simple discussion compared to those of the following weeks, its categorisation still enabled me to discover the relationship between the three categories. They are not merely related aspects which constitute a cohesive CoP. There is also undiscovered continuum between the dimensions showing both an embedding and hierarchical interconnection, as Figures 5. 5 and 5.6 summarise.

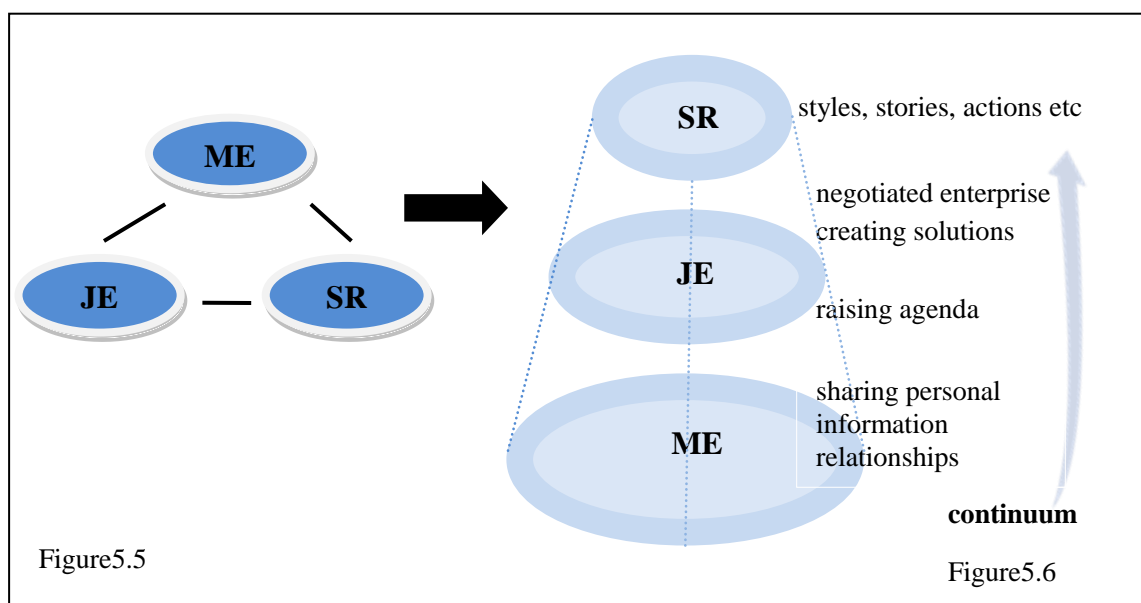


Figure 5. 5 Dimensions of practice as the property of a community (Wenger, 1998)

Figure 5. 6 Reconceptualising the relationships of the three dimensions ME, JE and SR (Wenger, 1998)-Refined

As shown on the right hand side of the diagram, when student teachers build their rapport and share their ideas through mutual engagement, **shared ideas** or information become the basis on which to nurture the possibility of their joint enterprise. In other words, student teachers' discussion or negotiation of their joint enterprise is grounded by their mutual engagement. As the 'proper clothes' episode demonstrates, as student teachers successively define commonly-agreed problems and try to work them out, they are building their collective ability to find solutions or new perspectives. If a problem is solved or a resource discovered, it must contain elements of both mutual engagement and joint enterprise. In other words, shared repertoire is always built upon mutual engagement and joint enterprise. Any community which claims to be a community of practice must demonstrate that mutual engagement and joint enterprise are part of the basis for shared repertoire. Apart from the feature of embeddedness, there is a subtle hierarchical interconnection among the three dimensions. In any CoP, there must be strong components of mutual engagement if joint enterprise is involved. However, a community which shows a high level of mutual engagement or affective support does not necessarily lead to joint enterprise.

Therefore, the features of embeddedness and hierarchy among the three dimensions are the key to understanding why the data categorised via separate analysis must be explored in a holistic way by finding the links and associations among them. This also led to the decision to document the process of further linking data analyses in order to seek answers to research questions in sections 5.3 and 5.4.

So far, drawing on concrete examples from the data, I have illustrated the developmental process and complexity of creating categories/subcategories and allocating bits of data to them. I have also addressed the methodological issues I encountered. Having completed the categorisation and analysis of data I moved on to the next level of analysis: linking analysis to the research questions in order to answer them and draw findings.

5.6 A Reflective Account of Analysis

The primary purpose of this reflective account is to raise and clarify issues which I believe are important in order to enhance the transparency and hence the trustworthiness of the study. The issues provided me with opportunities to learn about research and my own professional development. The four main concerns articulated in this section are selection of a sample analysis to include in this chapter, choosing whether to translate the collected data from Chinese into English, reflecting on the absence of my voice as a supervisor in the interview data, and difficulties in producing an analytical account.

Miles (1979) describes qualitative analysis as ‘an attractive nuisance’ (p. 590). For him the process is ‘more memorable for its moments of sheer despair in the face of the mass of data, alternating with moments of achieved clarity, soon followed by second-guessing scepticism’ (p. 597). By the time the documentation of data analysis was approaching its end, and the conclusions had been drawn and verified, I had indeed gone through the ups and downs Miles refers to.

As a researcher and the primary instrument of data gathering and analysis (Merriam, 1998; Robson, 2002) for this qualitative inquiry, I am aware that my own biography, theoretical assumptions, passion for the study, interaction with research participants,

struggles and dilemmas, decisions made, and actions taken at every single stage have ultimately influenced and shaped the process and outcome of the research. Conversely, I have also noticed the significant influence the inquiry has had on me as a researcher, which, as Edge (2011) states, is a less noticeable aspect of reflexivity. I have emerged from the research experience different from when I went in (ibid). Therefore, reflecting on this experience is no longer ‘so much concerned with guarding against such influences as it is with noticing them, accepting them, exploring them and making them a part of the research’ (ibid, p. 36).

5.6.1 Selection of a Sample Analysis

The threaded discussion on what mattered to student teachers and how they made the most of their first week in the school, might not, in retrospect, have been the best representation of the way in which conclusions about the evidence of online learning were drawn deductively and inductively at the later stage. Nevertheless, it was my very first trial, and in it I encountered many challenges, conflicts and dead ends. The first trial, to some extent, well captured the start of the analysis, process of analysis and changes of my emotions. What is more, it proved that the general suitability of the applied theoretical framework increased my capacity to construct a more elaborate account to explicate the process of decision-making at various stages and disclose how the analytical process eventually shapes and generates findings (Raymer, 2009).

Implementation of the CoPs framework in qualitative analysis is still a relatively new practice. Therefore, providing a detailed account of how data are categorised and how related problems can be addressed is of great importance. For one thing, transparent documentation can enhance the reliability and validity of the analysis; for another, the explicit account can promote further implementation of the CoPs framework in data analysis. Nevertheless, contrary to my expectations, this experiment with the CoPs framework indicated that it was not yet a ready-to-employ analytical tool which one could use to tackle the complexity of the data in this study or similar studies. What I learned during the process of analysis was the meaning and scope of the term ‘flexible design’ in qualitative research. Being flexible when the research is at a certain stage can

feel like a dead end, and requires the researcher to adapt to circumstances and be willing to take risks. The switch from reliance on the CoPs framework to employing additional analytical steps is a case in point. It also reinforces the widely-held belief among qualitative researchers that no single uniform approach or procedure can make sense of qualitative data.

5.6.2 Issue of Language Used in Research

As noted in chapters three and four, all of the threaded discussions as well the interviews were carried out in Chinese, though English words were used on a few occasions in both contexts. At the outset I decided to translate all the data into English. In practice, I translated almost half of the threaded discussions and one interview transcript. Due to the differing structures of the two languages and the culturally-embedded meaning of words, I constantly encountered difficulties in finding the equivalent expressions or appropriate grammatical structures. Meaning seems easily misrepresented or lost in translation and this greatly compromises the rigour of research (Smith *et al.*, 2008).

A case in point is the Chinese four-word set phrase ‘奇装异服’ (pinyin ‘*qi-zhuang-yi-fu*’), which was translated into English as ‘bizarre clothes’. Although this literal translation appeared to be equivalent to the Chinese phrase, the connotation of the original Chinese phrase as it had been used in the context of describing teachers in China, was totally lost. In China, teaching is considered nationwide to be the most brilliant and noble profession under the sun. Teachers are believed to be engineers of the human soul. Teachers are gardeners, hardworking bees, cows or burning candles that are fully committed to the work that they do best. Such high social status and expectations, on the other hand, require teachers to be mindful of what they do and say, and what they should wear, as they are role models for their students in every single aspect. Clothes which look tight, revealing or short, or have striking accessories are deemed ‘bizarre clothes’ and are not decent or acceptable in the Chinese secondary school context. Therefore, when student teachers used the phrase in their discussion, everybody understood its tacit meaning in this particular context.

Without additional explanation, the English translation ‘bizarre clothes’ would not bring out the special sociocultural meaning embedded in it. Furthermore, I had great difficulty in capturing and representing the subtleties and idiosyncrasies revealed by student teachers’ diverse choices of words and individual ways of thinking and speaking. There appeared to be no solution to the problem of meaning-loss during the initial trial of categorising data from the first week’s threaded discussion. I had to constantly make memos to explain certain culturally contextualised words or expressions in order to make sense of the data in the English version. Having weighed up the pros and cons, I discarded the translated data and decided to analyse data in the original language. Meanwhile, memos, summaries, reports and quoted data were all written in English.

Another issue was my ignorance of the phenomenon of code-switching between Chinese and English, which occurred in the online discussion and during the interviews. Although the total number of English postings was low, there were occasions when I posted or commented in English, and follow-up postings from the student teachers were composed in English. Some postings were written half in Chinese and half in English. Those postings exhibited a range of proficiency in English from excellent to poor. There seemed to be a connection, perhaps out of respect or courtesy, between the language the supervisors used and the language the student teachers used in response.

In retrospect, I should have raised the examples of code-switching during the interviews and sought to understand whether or not there was any connection between student teachers’ proficiency and the language they used. Alternatively I could have probed the phenomenon from their perspective rather than take it for granted. During the data collection process, as described in sections 3.2.3 and 4.4.3.5, I assumed that student teachers chose their mother tongue to communicate as the school placement was an intense experience for them, and using Chinese would make writing and thinking easier and quicker. I should also confess that I faced a dilemma. On the one hand, I believed that the student teachers should be encouraged to communicate in English as the majority of them were soon to become teachers of English. On the other hand, based on my understanding of their language competence, I was anxious that some of them would not fully grasp the meaning of the supervisors’ comments, suggestions and instructions if

they were made in English. I regretted having overlooked the phenomenon as it might have been an interesting aspect to explore, especially given that their subject of study was English language teaching.

5.6.3 Loss of My Voice as a Supervisor

When reflecting on the collection and analysis of the interview data, I experienced two contradictory feelings: pride and regret.

Whilst preparing for interviews and refining the prompts and topics to be covered, I revisited the methodological literature on do's and don'ts for the researcher. The key messages I kept in mind were to remain nonjudgmental, to encourage interviewees to tell their stories in as much detail as they wished, not to share my ideas or feelings, and to restrain my overall participation in the conversation to prevent student teachers from figuring out what my expectations and assumptions were. During the four group interviews with student teachers and two individual interviews with the supervisors, I managed to adhere to these goals. Conducting the interviews was effortless as student teachers in each group, regardless of how much they participated online or took away from the learning experience, appeared very willing to voice their ideas, answer questions and give detailed examples. In an intense and unique way, their collective learning experience allowed them to build good rapport, share thoughts and feelings and enabled them to check each other's answers and enrich the information I wished to elicit. When it came to interviewing the supervisors, the online supervisory experience was so new to them that their excitement was evident and they talked at length about the whole experience. At the end of the interviews, I left the room feeling proud that I had accomplished what I had set out to achieve and of being in full control. Though at some critical points I was eager to participate in the conversation, or add in an unplanned question which was inspired by a previous interview, I managed to resist the urge.

I still remember vividly the scenarios in which I had to manage not to quote comments from an earlier interview group's thoughts to invite comments and discussions from other interview groups. There are two examples. Student teacher **Yeshuai** commented on

how his understanding of different school situations was enriched through online communications with others: *‘...I feel each of us is opening a window on a different school and thus providing each other with a different and useful experience of learning to teach...’*. Another comment made by **Mulan** in the second group, who felt the online learning experience had changed her perception of learning and the teacher’s role:

‘In a traditional classroom, teachers always stand on the platform in front of us; therefore, teachers are ‘leading us as knowledge transmitters’ and we as students are expected to ‘listen to them and learn from them’. However, when communicating online, our supervisors become our equals because we are all sitting in front of a computer. There is no more absolute teacher-leading, student-learning. I think, to a certain extent, we become equal participants...’ (Group interview one)

As a researcher, I was thrilled to hear comments like these and excited about using them as questions to probe what other student teachers thought by quoting the comments and asking questions like ‘some people would say that [quote]. What do you think of such an opinion?’ However, I was afraid that they would sound like leading questions. I was not sure whether it was legitimate for me to share such comments even though I kept them anonymous. I talked about my concern about this occasion in my journal:

‘I am very excited today about the interview with students in the first group...I especially liked Yeshuai’s analogy. How unique is it to compare the role of online communication as a window that enables them to know more than one individual school placement experience!!... Just wonder if I could quote him when interviewing other two groups, and see how they think about it. But... will this be read by my students a leading act that indicates I wish to hear positive confirmation from them? Of course I do, and I reckon they will do. I know they liked me and they would just chime in with me, yes, our online community opens up a window for us to know more about different schools. Should I or should I not?...’ (Reflective journal, 24th April, 2008)

Similar incidents occurred during the interviews with the two supervisors. As a result of my excessive concern with researcher neutrality at that time, I missed the opportunity to

be part of the conversations the interviewees were engaged in. I also wondered whether I would have ended up with different data and opened up more inquiries if I had participated in the interviews and co-constructed the learning experience with my interviewees. Even though that might not constitute approved methodology, as long as I made my voice heard and acknowledged my influence, would I have taken greater ownership of the data and triggered different outcomes? Although I am still not certain of the right answer, given the chance, I would do it differently.

Not until I started analysing the interview data, did I realise with increasing regret that my voice as a supervisor was missing from the study. I seemed to have taken on the role of a mere instrument of data gathering, and forgotten that I was a participant and supervisor at the same time. I overlooked the possibility that student teachers and the two supervisors, as my colleagues, might be interested in hearing my voice too. In retrospect, concern over the issues of subjectivity and reflexivity led me to draw too strict a line between being a pure interviewer and being a participant interviewer. I cannot help wondering if the data collected would have been any different if I had not been in the room, but left the student teachers with a camera, a digital recorder and a set of interview themes and prompts. Where was I in the interview?

In recent years, some qualitative researchers (see, i.e., Fontana and Frey, 2000, cited in Watt, 2007; Mann, 2011) have questioned the ignorance of the interviewer in the process of collecting data due to the influence of the positivist view of conducting research. Fontana and Frey (2000, p. 646) as cited in Watt (2007) write that ‘interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two or more people leading to negotiated, contextually based results’ (p. 90). Similarly, in a critical review of qualitative interviews, Mann (2010) states that it vital for qualitative researchers to understand that ‘interview talk is inevitably a co-construction between the interviewer and interviewee’ (p. 4). Mann further points out that such recognition not only empowers the researcher to gain awareness of, and reflection on, their impact on the data collected, but also requires the researcher to allow their readers to ‘access this co-construction in either transcripts or analysis’ (p. 7).

Unfortunately, in comparison with the interactive and co-constructive nature of qualitative interviews recommended by researchers like Mann (2010) and Fontana and Frey (2000. cited in Watt, 2007), I conducted my interviews under the guidance of a more positivist perspective. Nevertheless, I concur with Mann's view that in analysing data and discussing findings, a researcher should show 'a more reflective and critical engagement with practice and process' (p. 6). This is because each question I asked the direction I chose to probe or follow up, the way I talked to the interviewees and the consequences of my choices were inevitably shaped by my theoretical perspective and my relationship with interviewees.

Although my voice as a supervisor is missing from the interview data, the reflective journal will be used when presenting and discussing findings to add my voice as a participant researcher. I will address the potential drawbacks when outlining the achievements of the research.

5.6.4 How Good is Good Enough?

I began writing up the account of qualitative analysis with high self-expectation and confidence, and believed that upon completion I would have successfully opened up the mysterious black box of qualitative analysis. Interestingly, while I was sure of the openness and quality of the account and I endeavoured to present 'a personal tale of what went on in the backstage of doing research' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 741. cited in Watt, 2007, p. 83), towards the end of writing the chapter, I felt increasingly insecure and anxious. Writing did help me clear up the doubts in my mind and even facilitated the way I analysed the data. However, even writing as truthfully as I could did not capture the moments of sudden epiphany adequately. It appears to be the case that the qualitative researcher 'cannot always explain where an insight (that may later be a finding) came from or how relationships among data were detected' (Merriam, 1998, p. 156).

Nevertheless, I still hold the belief that the mystery of qualitative data analysis can be unfolded through explicitly explaining the procedures, delineating the employed strategies, acknowledging any muddled situations and illustrating the analysis with

examples. In so doing, the transparency and sincerity can be embedded in the analysis and improve the trustworthiness of a study. As Richards (2005) points out, when a coherent and complete account is presented before any potential audiences, they might not necessarily agree with everything the researcher says, but they can understand why the study has been conducted, analysed and interpreted in that way. Moreover, in the process of analysing and writing, I began to understand that provided the theories constructed or findings reached can be traced back to the data with solid evidence rather than from the researchers' imagination or desire, I should be convinced of their appropriateness.

The task of writing analysis was daunting, but it turned out to be a meaningful learning experience and enabled me to be more critical of and reflective on my role as a qualitative researcher and more cautious about re-examining any moves I took and any conclusions I drew from analysis.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have documented the way in which data were reduced, categorised and analysed as well as how findings were verified. I have described the analytical techniques, demonstrated the categorisation procedure with exemplary data and detailed the additional analytical steps. My motives for including this chapter have been discussed. Two insightful analytical perspectives which arose from the methodological issues have been touched on and illustrative data presented. A reflective account of reflexivity and the problems faced has also been given.

The following chapters will focus on the presentation and discussion of findings drawn from the analysis demonstrated in this chapter.

CHAPTER 6: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT TEACHERS' SHARED LEARNING

Introduction

This chapter presents and interprets the answers to the first research sub-question: what evidence is there of student teachers' shared learning through online interactions during the school placement? The examination of online postings, detailed in chapter five, provides us with five salient themes for discussion. These are:

- *Student teachers' growth in pedagogical content knowledge*
- *Student teachers' growth as reflective practitioners*
- *Student teachers' growth in a deepened understanding of teaching as a profession*
- *Student teachers' growth in taking ownership of their learning*
- *Student teachers' growth in emotional maturity*

In the following sections, constructed events and quotes from the online postings will be used to exemplify aspects of the evolution of student teachers' professional learning in the online learning environment.

6.1 Student Teachers' Growth in Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Analysis of the online postings as a whole indicates that during the course of the school placement, topics about various points of English language and various pedagogical concerns about presenting comprehensible knowledge were the most frequent and dominant foci of student teachers' online interactions with their peers and supervisors. Student teachers were engaged in ongoing communication, in giving and receiving pedagogical support to solve immediate instructional concerns, and discussing issues such as teaching techniques, lesson plans, the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, the design of activities, and the interpretation of teaching theories. In the course of online interactions, student teachers demonstrated progressive, professional learning that

ultimately shaped and deepened their understanding of real world teaching practice and its complexities.

According to Shulman (1987), such professional growth embodies teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which is an essential knowledge base for effective teaching. In this study, student teachers' professional learning was demonstrated by an observable change 'from being able to comprehend subject matter for themselves, to becoming able to elucidate subject matter in new ways, reorganise and partition it, clothe it in activities and emotions, in metaphors and exercises, and in examples and demonstrations, so that it can be grasped by students' (Shulman, 1987, p. 13). A constructed event will be used as a representative example of student teachers' professional growth in their PCK. It clearly explicates how online discussions enabled student teachers to collectively examine their theoretical knowledge in realistic teaching situations, and gain a deepened and situated understanding of the relationship between the theory and practice.

6.1.1 Understanding the Role of the Grammar-translation Method

Prevailing criticisms leveled at preservice teacher education include the disconnection between theory and practice during the school placement (Lugton, 2000) and the way in which theoretical understanding of teaching gained in the university can be 'washed out by school experience' (Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1981, p. 7). In this study, however, the findings show that student teachers' ongoing online interactions enabled them to associate theoretical knowledge with realistic practice and vice versa. This helped them to develop their situation-specific knowledge base (Moore, 2003). The constructed event relating to grammar teaching is a case in point. The topic of grammar teaching, encompassing aspects such as the importance of grammar, methods of grammar teaching, and means of presenting grammar points, was constantly being discussed, debated and referred to throughout the six-week online discussion.

In light of the constructed event, the developmental change of student teachers' views of teaching grammar is comprised of three stages: unanimous, dichotomous and finally miscellaneous.

A unanimous view

The enthusiasm displayed by student teachers for discussing grammar initially sprang from commenting on their cooperating teachers' classroom teaching in the second week. According to student teachers' postings about their class observation, the grammar-translation method (GTM) was the approach most frequently adopted by their cooperating teachers to teach English. In the initial discussions, many student teachers held a consensus that GTM was '*boring*', '*ineffective*' and '*outdated*'. For instance, student teacher **Yehua** wrote:

'It's so boring. She reads a sentence, translates the meaning and explains the structure. Occasionally, she asks students to translate the sentence, but mostly, she is the only one who speaks. Students look bored and some don't pay any attention.' (Message from the thread in week two – 'Helen's supervisory group')

Other student teachers criticised GTM's ineffectiveness in engaging learners or helping them gain communicative skills. For instance, **Chen** posted the following:

'I admit my cooperating teacher explains the grammar points well. But if the students are not interested, I don't think they will learn anything. Language is for communication. We were taught like this many years ago. Now the students are still learning dumb English. The grammar-teaching method is an ineffective way of cultivating competent speakers of English. Don't you think so?' (Message from the thread in week two – 'Helen's supervisory group')

Chen's dislike of GTM was echoed by some of her peers who felt they '*had once been the victims of GTM*' (student teachers **Liaochan** and **Yaozhao**) and that English teaching should focus more on '*students' communicative competence*' (**Haicui**). **Lieyue** wrote:

'GTM is outdated! We shouldn't teach grammar rules in isolation. In Miss Hou's ELT methods course, she said that teachers nowadays should use the communicative approach.' (Message from the thread in week two – 'Helen's supervisory group')

It can be concluded that, at this stage, student teachers' general disapproval of the GTM was based mainly on their direct observation of students' negative reaction to grammar-focused teaching. As many of them expressed similar thoughts about their observation, each individual's disapproval appeared to be reinforced by their collective experience. Furthermore, the impact of theoretical input from the ELT methods course they had previously taken was obvious, as many student teachers used the theory as a reference point.

A dichotomous view

The issue of grammar teaching attracted constant attention in student teachers' discussions about their classroom observation and commencement of teaching. Towards the end of the second week and during the third week of online discussion, there emerged an attitudinal shift in their appraisal of the usefulness of GTM, from a singular view to a dichotomous one.

According to student teachers, the change in view was partially due to greater exposure to cooperating teachers' teaching and student teachers' reappraisal of the role of grammar. The advantages of using GTM, according to some student teachers, were its effectiveness in helping students get good scores in examinations, its inherent importance in English language learning and its convenience for teaching. Student teacher **Yaozhao** stated:

'...GTM just works in helping students learn English. Remember the saying; it doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice and it's a good cat.'
(Message from the thread in week two –'Sharing the unforgettable/interesting/embarrassing experiences of the week')

Her colleague **Jingling** agreed with her, and emphasised that '*grammar is the foundation of everything*'. This view was supported by another student teacher, **Tianjiao**, who, after observing more classroom teaching in the third week, wrote:

‘I am with Jingling on the importance of grammar. Once students have a good command of English grammar, their communicative ability will naturally build up.’ (Message from thread in week three – ‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

My posting *‘[T]o use GTM or not to use GMT, that is the question’* seemed to amuse many student teachers who replied to me with a smiley face. Student teacher **Zhi** argued the importance of teaching grammar from the perspective of assessment, saying:

‘We have to face the reality that teaching grammar helps students pass exams and get good scores. Don’t forget, the percentage of spoken English in an exam is only 10%. Not worth the effort.’ (Message from the thread in week three – ‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

The convenience of using GTM to present grammatical rules was another reason that some student teachers acknowledged its role in teaching English. **Zhi** posted the following:

‘I found my teacher’s explanation of subject-verb agreement to be simple and clear. I don’t think we could achieve the same effect if we used English. My English is not good enough for me to explain all the grammar points, so I find it easier to use the GTM in my class.’ (Message from the thread in week three – ‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

On the other hand, those who questioned the use of the GTM in teaching English re-emphasised its weaknesses and discussed the meaningful purpose of teaching English to students. The notions of ‘victim’ and ‘dumb English’ were mentioned again by some student teachers. For instance, in response to **Zhi**’s argument that teaching grammar was important as it helps students gain good marks, **Yehua** said:

‘GTM may be very useful for passing exams and getting high marks. But what about after the exams? We were the victims of dumb English, so we shouldn’t let it happen to our students.’ (Message from the thread in week three – ‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

Use of the expression ‘dumb English’ drew responses from some student teachers in which they recalled their own experience of learning English at secondary school. **Congyan**’s posting typified the views put forward:

‘...but if you can’t utilise them in effective communication, grammar rules are nothing. Knowing about grammar and speaking fluent and accurate English are two different things. In six years of learning English at secondary school, we didn’t have much chance to speak English. It was all about grammar; grammar and passing exams.’
(Message from the thread in week three –‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

Some student teachers continued to advocate the communicative approach in teaching English. **Lieyue** stated:

‘I still prefer to focus on the communicative aspect. If a student is making progress in his/her spoken English, it’s also a sign that he/she is learning English grammar.’
(Message from the thread in week three –‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

Student teachers such as **Haicui** and **Zengbao** cited the strengths of the communicative approach taught in the ELT methods course in their call for peers to abandon the use of the GTM in their English classes.

It is obvious that student teachers’ discussions underwent an attitudinal change from a singular, one-dimensional, negative view of the GTM to a dichotomous one. The opposing standpoints were formalised and rationalised through student teachers’ prior learning experience and greater exposure to classroom teaching through observation, as well as their own teaching. In addition, the resonance student teachers felt with their peers’ discussions promoted the emergence of such a dichotomous view.

Miscellaneous views

While there was no mention of the topic in week four, discussions on teaching grammar reappeared in the last two weeks, and the fifth week in particular. Many of those student teachers who had initially held a singular view, appeared to review and modify their

standpoint in light of their experiential teaching. As a result, a more neutral, mature and comprehensive perspective was cultivated and shared among student teachers.

In week five, reflecting on a less-successful lesson in which she taught ‘reported speech’, student teacher **Yehua** referred to my posting ‘to use GTM or not to use GMT, that is the question’ from week three:

‘Grammar is indeed important...I was wrong before. I thought focusing on grammar was the cause of dumb English, but now I also realise that a lack of proper teaching of grammar can lead to dumb English, because some rules have to be taught and explained clearly before any communicative activities are done with students... Maybe it’s not a matter of either grammar or a communicative skill, what we need is to keep a balance of the two.’ (Message from the thread in week five – ‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

Her posting triggered some interesting discussions. **Jingling**, who had stressed the importance of grammar teaching in her previous posting, responded to **Yehua**:

‘I think you are quite right, Yehua. I totally agree! I always prioritise the presentation of grammar rules over other aspects of English language teaching. I watched a showcase lesson this Monday in my school where a senior English teacher demonstrated how an interactive and communicative lesson can also deliver language points well. (I’ve already shared this in the weekly ‘most interesting/unforgettable’ discussion.) Students were given a lot of activities which enabled them not only to practice speaking, but also master the correct use of grammar. I learnt a lot from that lesson. A grammar lesson should be, and can be, interactive and communicative too.’ (Message from the thread in week five – ‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

Tianjiao’s reply to her peers regarding the issue of grammar teaching typified the views shared by other student teachers:

‘Some of the points in the ELT methods course have started to make sense to me: teaching grammar and cultivating communicative competence are not mutually

exclusive. We should combine them to foster their strengths and circumvent their weaknesses.’ (Message from the thread in week five –‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

As the course tutor for ELT methods as well as one of the supervisors, I was delighted to see such a developmental change taking place in Tianjiao and other student teachers. In response to their new discovery, I wrote:

‘Hi everyone, I am very impressed to see that you’ve come to realise that the question we ask as English teachers is not whether or not we should teach grammar, but how and when we should teach grammar. Very well done! If some of you still believe grammar teaching is more important than communicative skills or vice versa, I think it’s time to give it some serious thought. Any more comments?’(Message from the thread in week five –‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

In week six, some of them reaffirmed that *‘it was a matter of designing engaging and communicative grammar teaching activities’* and two student teachers even made jokes in their discussion. For instance, **Congyan** wrote that she would ask the students to flip a coin to decide whether they should be taught grammar or do communicative activities.

Overall, unfolding interactions in the final two weeks showed a further shift from the divided view to rather mixed attitudes about the role of grammar in English language teaching/learning. By the fifth week, many student teachers had taught English in their placement school for three weeks. This practical teaching experience provided them with rich and real incidents from which to re-examine their understanding of abstract teaching theories and their implications in actual teaching situations. Being able to share and exchange their evolving views online enhanced the collective learning experience. The joint pursuit of learning about teaching (i.e. joint enterprise) not only enabled them to connect local practice and theory, but also made their changing understanding and positions accessible to other student teachers.

More importantly, online interactions further expanded the repertoire of alternative teaching methods and fostered the meaning-making process of understanding

professional discourse. In the process of articulating their standpoints and interacting with each other, student teachers increased the linkages between the theory and practice. It was because of the online communication that the theory taught in the university was not ‘washed out’. On the contrary, the theory was being put into actual teaching contexts and real practice. Student teachers not only gained a deepened understanding of the theory but also a situation-specific knowledge base, as Moore (2003) asserts.

6.2 Student Teachers’ Growth as Reflective Practitioners

Another significant finding yielded by the analysis indicates that student teachers’ online communication fostered interactive reflective practice between them and hence led to a traceable transformation in their professional growth. Promoting reflective practice has long been a key objective in teacher education. The willingness to conduct self-critical inquiry and analytical evaluation of one’s own teaching is believed to be essential for a new teacher’s life-long professional development (Calderhead, 1989). Nevertheless, reflective practice, acknowledged as being ‘a solitary process’ (Zeichner and Liston, 1996, p. 18) and private endeavour, primarily takes place in an individual’s mind. In this inquiry, the online learning community provided student teachers with a dialogic venue that promoted the publicization and joint discussion of private reflection on their professional practice. Reflective postings were observed, and appeared to engage student teachers in active communication and initiate new postings which expanded the breadth and depth of discussion contents.

In the online community, student teachers’ collective reflection centred around evaluating their own personal teaching and making sense of what good teaching practice meant to them. Student teachers’ online reflection generally featured four aspects: returning to experience, attending to feelings, re-evaluating experience (Boud *et al.*, 1985) and setting up new goals.

In light of the above teaching practice that they focused on and the ways in which they engaged in discussions, how student teachers achieved analytical evaluation and self-critical inquiry, and what they learnt from their joint reflection in the online community,

became evident. Student teachers' communal professional growth is identified and constructed from these main aspects:

- *Learning from self-critical inquiry about personal teaching*
- *Reappraising good practice in teaching*

6.2.1 Learning from Self-critical Inquiry about Personal Teaching

From the second week on, student teachers were seen to write postings evaluating their teaching performance with the help of their peers and supervisors in the online community. Reflective writing included detailed context-and content-specific information, exploration of and reasoning about student teachers' strengths and weaknesses, a genuine eagerness to improve their professional practice, and intense emotions. The ability to conduct pedagogical reflection and reasoning is essential for teachers to achieve transformative professional learning (Shulman, 1987). Overall, student teachers' reflective posts displayed a strong degree of openness and comfort in revealing their professional weaknesses or failures in front of their peers and supervisors. Such reflective postings often generated heated discussions, raised student teachers' awareness, instigated new threaded discussions and ultimately enhanced the collective practise of reflection. Prior to presenting and discussing the findings, I need to make one justification that some lengthy postings are purposefully cited here to illustrate student teachers' deliberate thinking about their professional practice. In order to best capture their critical inquiry and articulation of their inner thoughts, I consider it appropriate to present the postings in their original, context-rich form. Such postings appear suitable to demonstrate how student teachers were able to formulate their own theory and understanding of the situated teaching practice through articulating their inner thoughts.

In the following detailed posting, student teacher **Yongyan** not only articulated her new understanding of teaching based on her own practice, but also directed her peers' attention to those issues:

'I've learnt a few lessons through my own teaching which may be worth us discussing.

Firstly, I spoke English slowly in my class as I thought this would suit my students and be a means of making myself understood, but I ignored the impact that pace and tone of speech can have on the classroom learning atmosphere. A slow, monotonous tempo makes students bored and tired. So it's important to speed up when necessary to make the atmosphere more active and regain students' attention. Secondly, when asking students to answer questions, I think we should give more opportunities to students sitting in the back rows, or less capable students, instead of just paying attention to top students or those in the front rows. For one thing, slower students probably long for their teacher's care and attention more than top students do. As teachers, giving extra care and attention to slower students is vital. For another, we get more feedback about student learning and the types of mistakes they make when directing questions to less capable students. Thirdly, I've learnt not to run the risk of over-explaining grammatical rules or mistakes to students. In my class, the more I explained, the more confused my students became. As a result, they were so frustrated that they started chatting to each other and lost their interest in learning. I've come away from this failure with three strategies. Firstly, be brave enough to ask students to help explain, because sometimes we learn better from our peers. Secondly, know when to stop. We're better off telling them honestly that we can't explain the problem now, but will provide a more complete answer next lesson. And make sure we DO provide a good answer in the next lesson. The third solution is to ask host teachers or peers to help, if any are present. Be flexible. Finally, I think it's important to be aware of the way we speak. I've found I constantly make a lot of inane sounds like 'er' 'uh' and 'ah' when teaching. They can be distracting if we over-use them...' (Message from the thread in week two – 'My teaching and classroom observation')

Four issues were raised and reflected on in the above posting: the effective use of voice, consideration of asking questions to different students, tactics for explaining difficult points of grammar, and self-criticism of the use of redundant words. The discussion of those issues demonstrated **Yongyan**'s open, critical self-awareness and her active engagement in understanding her faults and comparing them to ideal professional practice. Equally importantly, she was eager to share the lessons learnt with her peers. Obviously, **Yongyan** treated her posting as a means to tell others about her experience

and to elicit professional dialogue from her peers and supervisors.

Yongyan's reflection drew responses from many student teachers because they had similar teaching experiences. For example, **Jingling** described her own unsuccessful experience and wholeheartedly agreed with **Yongyan**'s suggestion:

'I think as a new teacher, being flexible and quick-witted is so important. It can save us from losing face in front of our students. From my experience, I can't agree more that we should avoid getting trapped in teaching. I haven't taught my students properly yet, but I did a thirty-minute exercise lesson for my cooperating teacher. Unfortunately, I got stuck on a question about attributive clauses. I knew the answer but couldn't explain clearly why 'that' was the right answer among choices of 'what' 'where' and 'which'. I was so nervous and embarrassed when my students said 'no' to me the third time I asked if they got it. A student even said, 'Miss Zhao, don't be nervous, maybe take a break. We can ask Mr. Zhang to tell us later'. So embarrassing!! I wish I had been smart enough to use the methods you shared. If the same thing happens again, I will be honest with my students and say 'I don't know how to answer the question here, but I will find the right answer out for you in the next class.' (Message the thread in week two –'My teaching and classroom observation')

What is apparent from above message is the same degree of sincerity and openness revealed in **Jingling**'s storytelling. The online community allowed student teachers to relate to their peers through sharing their similar professional encounters, and promoted ongoing dialogue. The opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice collectively alleviated the negative feeling that individual teachers had after less-successful classroom practice. Meanwhile, in the process of articulating their view of teaching, student teachers were engaged in questioning themselves and meaningful thinking. In her reply to **Yongyan**'s reflection, Haicui suggested asking students questions from a different angle. Recalling her own classroom teaching, she pointed out that it was '*more than a simple matter*' of giving opportunities to less capable students and expressed her puzzlement:

'I found myself in a dilemma. When asking questions, I saw some students who were so eager to answer raise their hands. Should I just ignore them and instead give the opportunity to students in the back rows or the slower students? I can't pretend not to see those who raise their hands high and say 'Miss, me, me, I can answer the question.' If I ignore them, they might be very disappointed. So I just directed questions to those who wanted to answer them. Now I am thinking, what if I asked slower students and they were reluctant to answer? Would this cause tension in the classroom? Would they become upset and feel that I caused them to lose face in front of their peers? What's the best way of asking questions? I really don't know.' (Message from the thread in week two – 'My teaching and classroom observation')

Although there was no clear solution arising from the discussion, the very process of probing the problem in an analytical and critical manner indicated a significant negotiation of meaning shared and constructed by student teachers. The awareness and reasoning of 'more than a simple matter' was evidence that student teachers had gained a broadened understanding through a critical thinking process.

Moreover, enlightened by **Yongyan's** reflection on the effective use of voice, **Chen** initiated a new threaded discussion sharing techniques for making better vocal sounds in teaching. This topic generated 19 responses. The discussion encompassed proper breathing techniques and ways of producing sounds, medical and routine care for teachers, confidence building in public speaking, simulation practice, and standing in the middle of the classroom when teaching. During the process, student teachers built on each other's ideas to achieve creativity. It can be concluded that when an individual's private reflective practice became a publicised and joint act, it supported members to review, affirm or critique ideas and practice in the online community, and thus deepened student teachers' understanding and exploration of their professional learning.

Another representative example of collective reflective practice is the discussion of teaching English reading skills. When formally commencing classroom teaching during the third week, many student teachers expressed doubts about their own suitability to become a good teacher. A sense of dissatisfaction and frustration, and feelings of being

overwhelmed generated by less-successful teaching practice were evident in many postings that were full of emotional remarks. Examples included: *‘I discovered I may not become the teacher I had hoped to be’*; *‘after those days spent teaching reading skills, I felt completely shattered and disappointed in myself’*; and *‘Feeling down. Hours and hours spent planning the lesson proved to be of little use’*. For those who were critical of their own teaching performance, being able to teach reading in a satisfactory manner proved a further challenge. This was because they realised a single reading lesson involved a complex mixture of teaching sentence structure, certain grammatical points, new vocabulary, passage comprehension and meaning translation.

Realising the complexity of teaching English reading skills was essential to formulate their own theory and understand of practical knowledge in teaching. The resonance and common concerns contributed to student teachers’ reciprocal reflection. For example, **Jingling** uses a particular posting to articulate her struggle to meet the aspirations she has for her practice as a reading teacher. **Jingling** engaged in a process of self-questioning and reasoning both from her own position as a teacher as well as from her students’ perspective. I provide the extended posting to illustrate the sharing of her internal debates.

‘I am teaching a new unit again this week. Both my students and I enjoy the early listening and speaking sessions. However, the problem comes whenever I teach reading. My understanding of the aim of teaching reading is to improve students’ overall ability in reading comprehension and their appreciation of written English. So in my lesson, I always make sure the focus is on helping them understand the meaning of the passage, and learning and using reading strategies effectively, such as finding topic sentences or guessing the meaning of new vocabulary from context, in order to complete the pre-and post-reading exercises. I then allocate time to analyse and explain grammar points and sentence structures from the reading passage. I think such a design makes reading a more enjoyable experience with a particular focus on training students’ reading competence. In my teaching so far, I have tried my best to direct my students in this type of learning. But the truth is I don’t see much enthusiasm from them. It’s hard to teach when students are not motivated to participate and I feel I am performing a one-man

show most of the time. In fact, just yesterday, a few students asked me again if I could teach reading and explain grammar rules and sentence structures at the same time. They said that they could understand the overall meaning of the passage under my guidance, but they struggled with sentences with complex grammar structures, and they preferred to learn grammar and sentence structures while reading at the same time. I feel reading shouldn't be treated purely as a means to help students learn English grammar. I don't want to give up my way of teaching reading, but how can I react to my students' suggestions? Should I alter my teaching to cater for their needs or should I stick to my plan? How can I help my students appreciate that reading is more than just analysing sentence structure? After all, my teaching should serve students' needs. I really hope there is a good way to serve both my teaching design and my students' requirements.' (Message from the thread in week three—'My teaching and classroom observation')

Jingling's concerns resonated with some of her peers. Student teacher **Yaozhao** suggested that she stick to her own design as that was the correct method of teaching reading. **Haicui** posted about a similar encounter where she found the teaching of reading was crucial, but her practice and its outcome were not satisfactory. **Haicui** added:

'I realised that it was more important to change our students' perceptions than to teach them. If our students don't appreciate the lessons we have put our hearts into, no matter how beneficial the lesson would be to them, they just won't learn. Changing their attitudes towards the way reading should be taught is the key. But I also have a problem here; suppose we help them change their perceptions and they begin to like the way we teach reading. What happens when we finish our teaching practice and leave? Will our cooperating teachers think we've caused trouble for them? Is this unfair to the students?' (Message from the thread in week three –'My teaching and classroom observation')

Joining the discussion in week four, student teacher **Chen** replied to **Jingling**, sharing her practice and understanding of teaching reading:

'My procedure for teaching reading is the opposite of yours, Jingling. I let my students read the passage by themselves first, and get them to underline any sentences or words

they don't understand. I then give them explanations based on those problems. After this, we go over the passage together, focusing on reading comprehension and reading exercises. I am not saying my way is better than yours, but I think if students understand the complex sentences and words first, they might be more willing to read and learn. In fact, the more I teach, the more I think the design of reading in the textbook is mainly for teaching grammatical rules, sentence structures and new words in context. When a passage is so difficult and there's little help from teachers, students are likely to lose interest. Maybe this is why your students didn't appreciate the teaching of reading strategies to find topic sentences or guess the meaning of words. I think each reading passage is carefully selected for the purpose of teaching grammar and vocabulary. What do you think, comrades-in-arms?' (Message from the thread in week three – 'My teaching and classroom observation)

As their supervisor, I observed and participated in the discussions. In order to lift their spirits and encourage them to expand their understanding, I acknowledged their awareness and wrote:

'I hope you'll gradually begin to realise that there is no single best method of teaching. A good reading lesson often requires us to draw on several different methods. Jingling, I don't think there's anything wrong with the way you teach. Students do need to understand one of the purposes of reading class is to develop effective reading strategies and habits. It will surely be difficult, if not impossible, to change their perception of learning reading in a very short time when they have been taught in a certain way for years. Maybe you can inspire them to think about their experience of learning our mother tongue to help them understand your point. In Chinese reading lessons, we don't always stop to analyse the sentence structure or look up words in the dictionary when we don't understand; we learn to work out meaning from the context. Haicui's concern about changing students' attitudes and the aftermath when you leave is very thoughtful. Chen, I agree with your judgement of the English textbook. The reading passages are indeed designed to serve that purpose, as you discovered. However, it doesn't mean that we just ignore other meaningful purposes of reading in our teaching. Having said that, I think your method of teaching reading gives us a good example. When we make students

decide what they want to know, and discover what they don't know, they will be more motivated to learn from us as they have a reason to listen and participate.' (Message from the thread in week three – 'My teaching and classroom observation')

After both **Jingling** and **Chen** responded to my posting and promised to take my suggestions into consideration, discussions on this topic ended in week four. It was unknown whether **Jingling** reached a definite solution to the conflict between what she wanted her students to learn and what her students expected her to teach. Likewise, it was not clear whether **Chen** would embrace the teaching of reading strategies in her practice. Nevertheless, this finding coincides with the notion of shared repertoire highlighted by Wenger (1998) who points out that the shared repertoire of a learning community indicates new possibilities and alternative perspectives to improve practice, but it always comes down to individual choice of how to view, interpret and utilise the repertoire in relation to their own situation.

During the course of articulating, conceptualising and justifying their positions, student teachers demonstrated self-awareness, a desire to better their professional practice and an authentic revelation of their inner voice. The collective dimension of conducting reflective practice provided student teachers with a forum in which to make their voices heard and be appraised by peers and supervisors. More importantly, the unique 'interpersonal and intrapersonal' features of collective reflection, as Collin and Karsenti (2011) point out, 'fuel reflective practice, which is in turn reinvested into professional action' (p. 578).

6.2.2 Reappraising Good Practice in Teaching

Apart from conducting self-critical inquiry about their own teaching, student teachers were also actively engaged with their peers and supervisors in an ongoing reflective process of negotiating, mulling, contextualising and reshaping good practice in teaching. Rather than just live it, student teachers chose to consciously examine their practice in order to optimise its impact on teaching and student learning. Reflection, in this regards, became another important dimension of student teachers' joint pursuit of common

enterprise nurtured from their mutual interest and similar teaching encounters. Moreover, the process, which identified agendas worth pursuing and aimed to refine practice-in-action, demonstrated student teachers' transformative learning in 'reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1983). According to Schön (1983), 'describes practitioners' capability of 'thinking on your feet' (p. 54). Reflection-in-action allows teachers to think practice through while simultaneously working on it, and eventually empowers them to 'generate both a new understanding of a phenomenon and a change in the situation' (p. 68).

Use of the Smiley Face symbol in Marking Assignments

The constructed event 'on the effective use of the smiley face icon' is a representative example of how student teachers were emotionally and professionally involved in ongoing experimental learning and co-construction of good practice in teaching. Lasting four weeks, this particular thread generated 50 responses in which student teachers reported the results of their trial, drew on each other's practice to furnish new perspectives and even problematised the use of the smiley face icon and its alternatives in different situations. In the course of reasoning and purposeful exploration, student teachers gained a situated, sophisticated understanding of the best use of the smiley face icon. For illustrative purposes, I have reorganised the threaded discussion into four main stages: recognising, flourishing, problematising, and finally, developing, in order to recapture the way in which student teachers reflectively engaged in making sense of this technique in their practice. In reality, however, the discussion did not unfold in such a linear manner.

Recognising the technique

The threaded discussion '*sharing a technique for marking student assignments*' was initiated in week two by student teacher **Haicui**. She shared an exciting discovery of the powerful effect of drawing a smiley face in her students' exercise books. She wrote:

'Hi, comrades, just wanted to share a small technique. I have tried drawing a smiling face like this ☺ when marking my students' homework. When they discover the smiling

face, they all get very excited. I think it's an additional way for us to communicate with our students. Strongly recommend it! If you think it works, please reply to my post.'
(Message from the thread in week two – 'Sharing a technique for marking student assignments')

Her peers showed great interest in **Haicui**'s trick. The number of comments from her peers and supervisor indicated their recognition of this simple but useful method. For example:

(Majuan) *'Couldn't agree more. Thanks for sharing. It could help build rapport between us and the students. If students think we care about them, they will be motivated to work hard. I can't wait to try it out.'*

(Zijun) *'Marvellous idea! From such a small act students can tell their teachers' care about them.'*

(Tong) *'I am using it now. It's like an intimate communication between me and my students. They love it.'*

(Tianjiao) *'My students also love the smiley face I draw because it gives them a sense of fulfilment, and they are motivated to take their assignments seriously. Those students who haven't got a smiley face yet will be motivated to get one. I like it very much.'*

When the technique was first introduced, many student teachers enthusiastically tried it out in their own teaching and agreed with **Haicui** about the effect it had on their students.

Flourishing the technique

The discussion flourished as many student teachers continued to share new ideas and suggestions with each other based on their experimental learning. In the following weeks, new ideas and creative alternatives were shared between student teachers. For example, *'Besides drawing a smiley face, I also write some encouraging words such as 'very good', 'well done' and 'keep going' to make the communication more personalised'.*

Danxu mentioned: *‘I also give a smiley face to those students whose assignment could be better finished in order to encourage them.’* **Zennian** suggested *‘we should not ignore those less capable students who need more attention and encouragement from us. I tend to write a few lines to encourage them. I can tell it works perfectly. When I hand back the assignments to the class, I often see them exchange their assignments with each other, whisper my comments and smile at me.’*

Reaffirming the usefulness of this trick, some student teachers looked for alternative methods in order to carry on the good practice, and to help cope with their workload. For example, with up to 120 assignments to mark every day, **Jingling** shared her new technique:

‘I’ve realised it is time-consuming too but I don’t want to give it up... I bought a few stamps of different patterns and pictures...Using them is very very efficient. You can try it.’

Similarly, her peer **Wangyang** suggested the use of stickers to deal with the pressure of marking and keeping students motivated:

‘Using stickers may be another good alternative. I have used them and told my students that once they collect 10 stickers, I will give them a small prize. My students are really motivated.’

In the course of online communication and conducting teaching practice in placement schools, rather than rely on this one technique, student teachers were keen to make new attempts to develop their understanding of how the effect of motivating and communicating with students could be further achieved.

Problematifying the technique

While actively experimenting with and enriching the trick in assignment marking, many student teachers simultaneously provided their critical evaluation of the usefulness and purpose of using the technique or its alternatives. They reflected on their experience and

pinpointed potentially problematic areas when applying those techniques.

Student teacher **Yingzhou** reported in her posting *‘I’ve tried it with my students in the senior high school. It didn’t seem to work. Smiling faces probably work better with younger students, but not students at the age of 16 or above.’* Meanwhile, a few student teachers started to question whether or not they should give all students a smiley face and warned that overuse would mean it lost its purpose and effectiveness. For instance, **Fangyu** said:

‘I don’t think we should give the smiling face out so easily. Students need to earn it. I suggest we only give a smiling face to those whose homework is well-written and of high quality.’

Lee echoed **Fangyu**’s opinion and shared her own practice in terms of when to draw a smiley face and write encouraging remarks:

‘If a piece of homework is of high quality, I will give both a smiling face and a comment like ‘well done’, or ‘excellent’. If a piece of homework is poorly-written, I will encourage the student to work harder by writing ‘you need to make more progress. I know you can!’

Lee’s view of giving encouraging remarks was later expanded upon by **Yeshuai**:

‘Comments are highly necessary. Even a little attention will be valued by our students. When giving comments on students’ performance, I think we must sound genuine, and give specific and meaningful remarks. Don’t abuse encouraging words such as ‘excellent’ or ‘great’; otherwise, they will lose their effect.’

Meanwhile, some student teachers critiqued the use of stamps and stickers shared by **Jingling** and **Wangyang**. For instance, in **Nana**’s view:

‘It becomes a mass production and loses the personal touch. If I were the student, I

might not be motivated any more when I know I am given the same sticker or stamp as my peers. What about those who are not doing well? If we don't write anything or give a stamp, how can we encourage them then? What do you think?’

By the same token, **Yeshuai** commented on **Wangyang**’s use of stickers saying:

‘Your method only suits primary school students. It will be thought of as childish and stupid by students in the secondary schools.’

The dialogue demonstrated that student teachers were gaining an awareness of their learners and contexts of teaching, and using this awareness in making decisions about when and how to use a particular technique or its alternatives to achieve the best effect.

Developing the technique

The most striking aspect of the discussion lay in student teachers’ capacity to develop what they already knew into what could be better achieved in their practice.

In this representative example, besides sharing and evaluating the effectiveness of smiley faces, encouraging remarks, stamps or stickers as means of motivating students, communicating with them or showing that their teachers care, a few students directed the discussion towards effective ways of pointing out and correcting students’ mistakes in their assignments. They felt that rectifying mistakes directly was not good practice. Instead, student teacher **Wenhua** shared her technique:

‘Don’t correct mistakes for students as they won’t really learn anything from them, unless they make the correction themselves. I underline the mistakes and then use different symbols to indicate the types of mistakes made. For instance, s for spelling, g for grammar, t for tenses etc. It helps students identify their mistakes immediately.’

Commenting on **Wenhua**’s posting, student teacher **Zhi** not only shared specific practice with her peers but also described how she had formulated her personal theory of how best to correct students’ mistakes.

'I've found the best way is, as you said, through marking. We gather all the common mistakes and discuss them in the class rather than just mark them in each student's assignment. Firstly, let students have their assignment to hand, and ask them to check whether they have made the mistakes we are discussing. Secondly, when pointing out mistakes, we must make sure we protect our students' feelings and prevent them from suffering from low self-esteem or feeling hurt. Let them know that the purpose of discussing their mistakes in class is to raise their awareness of the types of mistakes they make and to help them overcome those mistakes. Be sure not to mention any individual student's name when presenting major mistakes. Thirdly, I usually try to use many different examples. When giving examples, we should also consider making them simple and interesting. After the presentation and discussion of common mistakes, I like to ask students to redo the assignment, but this time, I ask them to mark each other's work. I notice they all enjoy acting like a teacher. I advise you to try it out. I have used it a few times, and it works well. I know from my students' feedback that they like it!'

The four stages embedded and captured in the threaded discussion are a concrete exemplification of reflection-in-action as advocated by Schön (1983). They illustrate how student teachers were shaping and evaluating their understanding of what constitutes good practice. Student teachers' sincere commitment to improving their teaching was evident in the process of conceptualising the technique in real practice, as well as initiating new methods by drawing on each other's inspiration and resources.

It can be concluded that the online learning community created for this study nurtured and enhanced student teachers' critical awareness of their teaching as well as their involvement in collective reflection. It is in the very process of 'collaboration, negotiation, debate, peer reviewing and mentoring' (Grabinger and Dunlap, 2000, p. 37) that student teachers' professional learning takes place. Their willingness to share and examine their professional encounters, and disclose their teaching problems in detail, created a solid foundation for the conduct of purposeful reflective dialogue with their peers and supervisors. The collective dimension of online reflection encourages many student teachers to go beyond description to critical inquiry. Deepened learning and critical thinking are therefore cultivated during the process of co-reflection. This

ongoing process of ideas-sharing, reflecting, critiquing and meaning negotiation, demonstrated in the constructed event, featured student teachers' collective pursuit of their shared interest (jointer enterprise) and indicated a significant breakthrough towards the final co-construction of new and enriched insights into their own situated teaching practice (shared repertoire).

6.3 Student Teachers' Growth in a Deepened Understanding of Teaching as a Profession

The third important finding to emerge from the data analysis suggests that student teachers' shared learning contributed tremendously to broadening and deepening their understanding of education in a wider social context, beyond the traditional boundaries of classrooms. The online interactions reveal an expansion of student teachers' learning territory that went beyond what could have been a singular classroom experience or a primary focus on the survival of teaching, to a solicitude for and contemplation of various aspects pertinent to teaching as a profession. Student teachers' joint discussion and ongoing exploration of their professional encounters helped them with the formulation and development of a more balanced and broadened view of the following diverse but intertwined aspects of teaching as a profession: understanding of students' negative attitudes towards English language learning; student-teacher relationships; the dilemma of motivating and maintaining students' interest in learning whilst coping with the demands of exam-oriented education; teaching effectiveness; educational purpose and its value and end.

A constructed event '*on the educational purposes and end*' will be used to illustrate the ways in which student teachers endeavoured to make sense of the complexities of teaching as a profession in China. The exploratory discussion of educational purpose and end began with student teacher **Jianyang**'s concern about the negative impact of cramming information into students whose individual needs and interests were overlooked;

'...My cooperating teacher advises me not to spend too much time making lessons

interesting. Instead, time and energy should be spent on teaching more grammar points and doing more exercises with students. I can't help wondering what the purpose of education is. Is it our job to train students to become excellent exam machines or help them become competent and active users of knowledge?' (Message from the thread in week two –'My teaching and classroom observation')

Jianyang's bewilderment about the purpose of education resonated with other student teachers. It seems that what she experienced in her placement school was pervasive in her peers' schools too. For example, student teacher **Majuan** pointed out that dissonance between '*the advocating of competence-oriented education*' and '*the prevailing of examination-oriented education*' confused teachers and students.

As online discussions unfolded, this topic was brought up again in the third week. This time, it was triggered by student teachers' direct observation of the negative attitudes their students held towards English language learning, and learning in general. Student teacher **Chen's** reflection showed her dismay as well as her sympathy for her students. She posted: '*students sitting in the back rows are not paying any attention*' and '*I feel sorry for my students and I know they are under so much pressure*'. Her colleague **Yezhou** quoted her students' words to express the shock she felt and her sense of helplessness as a teacher. The mixture of confusion, de-motivation and puzzlement in her posting typifies the views and emotions experienced by most of her peers'.

'...He just told me 'Miss, leave us alone. There's no use persuading us to learn English when that doesn't interest us at all. We can never learn it. Stop it, please!' I was so shocked at that very moment that I didn't know what to say to him when I caught an undemonstrative and smirk smile on his face. I think the only thing I can give him is my empty encouragement. Somehow, I feel he projects a gloomy impression of the ELT throughout the whole senior high school. I feel a bit saddened. I want to do something to change it, but the problem in front of us is a big one, requiring teachers' time, commitment and resources etc. My passion for teaching senior high school students has been gradually fading away because of this school placement experience. I want to work in a secondary school where you can see the kids' curiosity for knowledge, funny class

behaviours and hear their naive questions. I'd feel motivated to work with them. That's why I fret about my students and feel so hopeless because I can't find a better way to help them. I can only encourage them to pick up their books and try to motivate them. In the breaks between lessons, I always try my best to stay with them in order to increase our communication. I know there's only so much I can do, but I really want to help them out. Sigh... I don't know if you people have had similar feelings and experiences?' (Message from the thread in week three – 'My teaching and classroom observation')

Yezhou's sharing generated follow-up postings from her peers' which surface a collective concern about students, perceptions of unsettled teaching situations and a reinforcement of the purpose of education. It appears that **Yezhou's** experience was not unique. In response, student teacher **Nana** expressed her worry about becoming the kind of teacher she would disapprove of:

'My cooperating teacher said he had an illusion of what an ideal educational system should be like when he first started teaching. Now though, all he cares about is how many students in his class might stand out in the entrance examination so as to be admitted by the top five senior high schools in our hometown, and how much of a bonus he can get for achieving this. I am so shocked. Will I end up like him someday—a teacher who tells students off all the time, forces them to do loads of assignments and doesn't care about what their needs and interests are?' (Message from the thread in week three – 'My teaching and classroom observation')

Similarly, student teacher **Airong** voiced her concern about the '*the prospects for our education and students*' in light of the importance of competence-oriented education for lifelong development.

'Getting high scores in exams doesn't necessarily guarantee a student a good job or a bright future once they graduate. There are other, more important, elements in education: teaching students to be honest and civilised citizens, nurturing students' creativity, building up their confidence and self-esteem. We were victims of exam-oriented education. We shouldn't let it happen to the next generation.' (Message from the thread

in week three –‘My teaching and classroom observation’)

Participating in the discussions, student teacher **Yaozhao** inspired her peers to probe the complexities embedded in education through questioning, while staying positive about their contribution to teaching and students:

‘This is really depressing. Whose fault is it? Who should be blamed? Who is responsible for students’ lack of interest and poor performance in school? The educational system, the irresponsible teachers, parents with unrealistic expectations, students’ own expectations? There are so many factors involved, and it can’t be solved simply by relying on one of us. Like you said, as long as we all try our best to help them and show our responsibility; I hope we will always have the same passion for teaching and for our students in the years to come.’ (Message from the thread in week three –‘My teaching and classroom observation’)

Meanwhile, affirmative attitudes towards teaching, and the cultivation of students’ interest and educational values, were also expressed by student teachers who noticed positive changes taking place in their schools. For instance, **Zhiqing** described the situation in her school as more desirable, and encouraged her peers not to lose heart:

‘Things aren’t so bad. In developed cities like Shanghai, teachers are required to make their teaching more meaningful and personalised to cater for students’ needs and interests. In my placement school, if students don’t like a teacher’s teaching style or don’t think he/she is responsible, they have a say in deciding if he/she should become a supply teacher without a set class to teach. Teachers are forced to change their old views of teaching and put students at the centre of their teaching now. There’s still hope.’ (Message from the thread in week three –‘My teaching and classroom observation’)

Student teacher **Zhi** echoed **Zhiqing**’s positivity in her posting. She told her colleagues not to be disheartened as *‘there may be things we as teachers can’t do much to change, but as long as we focus on things we can do and do them well, I think*

it will bring about positive changes' (Message from the thread in week three –'My teaching and classroom observation'). It appeared that student teachers' collective discussion of aspects of education increased their awareness of the complicated factors behind the existent problems. During the course of discussion, student teachers gained a realistic understanding of what they were capable of doing, despite the current undesirable circumstances. Therefore, what emerged was an increasingly positive realisation of their own role in making teaching better for students and for society.

Student teachers' deepened understanding of teaching as a profession was also demonstrated in discussion of their developing cognizance of the meaning of being a teacher. Through reference to their online discussions and developing professional practice, many student teachers showed a more balanced view of what it meant to be a teacher. They also gained in-depth knowledge of the types of responsibilities, dilemmas, pressures and compromises confronted by teachers. Compared with the perceptions they held at the start of the school placement period, student teachers became more able to empathise with and understand their cooperating teachers, as well as students whom they might previously have thought of differently.

This change in attitude began in the fourth week and lasted until the end of the school placement. Views commonly shared and mutually supported by many student teachers included: *'it was not easy to be a teacher'*; *'teaching is such a painstaking job'*; *'now I understand being a student is fixed term imprisonment, but being a teacher is life imprisonment. It's year after year that we teach students, see them graduate and teach new students again'* and *'teaching is such a hard but fulfilling and glorious undertaking'*. A summary presented in student teacher **Huanqing**'s posting is a representative example which indicates their consciousness of the various expectations and demands made on teachers.

'Hi hardworking comrades, being a teacher isn't easy. I am increasingly aware of the various pressures we have to deal with as teachers. Pressure from the standardised exams is the primary one. It's a teacher's responsibility if students fail to do well in

the exams. Besides teaching, after class, teachers have to seek all sorts of methods to improve students' learning. Now each of our students is the only child in their family and they are being spoiled. They are in a subtle transitional stage both physically and psychologically, and some of them are so rebellious and difficult to communicate with. Again, it's the teacher's responsibility to provide a positive influence and guide them onto the right life path. Teachers must be patient and full of love for our students, care for them, pay extra attention to details and hope for the best. No wonder our job is regarded as the noblest profession under the sun. I have learnt that as a teacher we shouldn't be so easily defeated, and we should keep our sense of wonder to find beauty and affection out of ordinariness and pettiness.' (Message from the thread in week six – 'Helen's supervisory group')

In summary, findings indicate that student teachers realised that they might not be able to change the paradoxical and complicated educational issues that teachers face today, but it was their responsibility to make the classroom a better place for their students to learn and enjoy learning. As discussions developed, these tacit perspectives on educational issues were gradually surfaced and shared, contributing to a sense of a collective delving into China's education situation.

This particular finding is consistent with opinions shared by student teachers in the interviews. They claimed that they might have ended up with '*a very biased and one-sided view of inherently complicated educational issues*' if they had not had access to other participants' input and discussion to enrich their understanding (Group interviews one, two and three). Some student teachers gave further credit to the contribution of supervisors and peers to this collective construction, describing them as '*very experienced and capable of all-round thinking and acting maturely*' (Group interview two). Admittedly, the scope of the specific discussion around the purpose, value and ends of education in China seemed limited in terms of the totality of student teachers' online activity. However, this gave insights into the fact that not only did online communication nurture opportunities for them to engage in collective professional discourse, but also seemed to lay a good foundation for them to broach teaching issues from different angles.

6.4 Student teachers' Growth in Taking Ownership of Learning

The analysis yields convincing evidence that in the six-week online communication period, student teachers' shared learning effectively contributed to their professional growth in terms of taking initiative in their learning. There was increasing ownership of the direction of discussion as they sought to make good sense of teaching together. Apart from participating in the pre-determined weekly threaded discussions or posting new discussion foci, many student teachers proactively initiated new discussion threads, such as: *'Sharing students' psychological characteristics and corresponding strategies to education them*, *'Collection of frequently asked questions in the classroom'*, *'Help! The theme of the class meetings'*, *'Sharing methods for maintaining a strong voice and making yourself heard in class'*, *'How to write a weekly teaching journal'* and *'Why is classroom observation ineffective for learning about teaching?'*, to name just a few. Those threaded discussions were dedicated either to sharing teaching ideas and creative techniques or addressing concerns about various matters related to teaching, all of which expressed an explicit desire to take charge of learning as well as a critical awareness of their own specific learning needs and interests. Making a decision on what mattered to them and what needed to be learnt demonstrated an emerging tendency for student teachers to become active problem discoverers and thinkers.

Some of the threads did not elicit heated discussions nor did they generate a large number of follow-up responses, however, others did trigger ongoing, serious discussions for weeks. As illustrated in sections 6.1.1, 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 above, the constructed events such as *'Does GTM have a role to play in teaching English'*, *'Reflection on teaching of English reading'* and *'The use of smiley face symbol in marking assignments'* are representative vignettes which exemplify the extent to which student teachers were engaged with their peers and supervisors in meaningful professional interactions. It was during this interactive process of ongoing meaning negotiation and knowledge construction that they gradually gained new perspectives, and those perspectives influenced the way in which they repositioned their teaching and approached their work.

This process of dialogic interaction indicates significant collegial communication

between student teachers that ultimately empowers them to take ownership of their learning, as well as reshape their view of learning. The notion of collegiality is defined by Little (1990a) as the extent to which teachers create a sense of mutual responsibility, reveal and scrutinise each other's teaching. She points out that collegiality enables teachers to 'call for, tolerate or reward initiative in matters of curriculum and instruction' (p. 512) in a collaborative manner. Student teachers were observed to willingly disclose their professional encounters, and evaluate their own teaching performance and that of their peers; more importantly, they were jointly involved in helping each other out and making teaching a more collaborative learning experience. In other words, in this study, student teachers' willingness to share, help each other and collaborate in a supportive atmosphere is found to accord with Little's (1990a) identification of storytelling and scanning for ideas, aid and assistance, sharing and joint work as four important means of fostering collegiality between teachers. Furthermore, this awakened consciousness of their ability to work together enabled student teachers to gain a strong sense of fulfilment and self-reliance, which, in turn, enhanced their willingness and self-assurance in taking active charge of their learning-to-teach experience in a virtuous circle. Student teachers' realisation of their ability to take ownership of their learning will be further explored in section 7.2 where the multidimensional roles that student teachers developed during the online interactions are presented and discussed.

6.5 Student Teachers' Growth in Emotional Maturity

The last important finding suggests that student teachers' online shared learning fostered their growth in terms of professional emotional maturity, arming them with the tools to handle various emotional encounters during the school placement.

As demonstrated in the sections above, during the course of the six-week online communication, student teachers were found to have gone through an intensive learning curve that featured various types of emotions exhibited in their interactions with peers. These were in close association with their professional encounters, and included feelings of excitement, passion, puzzlement, pessimism, anxiety, concern, frustration, self-doubt, self-reassurance, satisfaction, disappointment, tolerance, and understanding. There is

traceable evidence suggesting that student teachers gradually became more able to show a calm and mature disposition as the school placement and online communications progressed.

While they were still confronted with challenging teaching situations and complex issues from time to time, many student teachers began to adopt a more positive and understanding attitude when professional problems occurred. It can be concluded that student teachers' emotional maturity comes from the combined results of their professional growth in the building up of pedagogical content knowledge, capacity to reflect on their teaching performance and identify their strengths and weaknesses, a deepened understanding of various aspects of teaching as a profession, and finally the empowerment of self-directed learning. The supportive learning atmosphere in the online community is another noticeable factor indicating how student teachers were helped to achieve a grown-up attitude towards teaching matters. A short constructed event entitled '*What does it mean to be a form teacher?*' will be presented below to explicate how these factors contributed to student teachers' development in terms of their emotional maturity.

From the third week of the school placement, student teachers had been required to act as form teachers, which is a compulsory part of their placement. The responsibilities of a form teacher range from direct classroom teaching to many non-English teaching duties such as taking charge of extracurricular activities, student conflicts, and arranging themed class meetings. Many student teachers found this particular role difficult and challenging, and complained about the heavy workload and its negative impact on relationship-building between them and students. For instance, in this posting on her dislike of being a class teacher, **Chen** showed her uncertainty and anxiety about conducting the themed class meetings:

'Do we really have to learn to be a form teacher? Is there some way to avoid this practice? I have been told to organise a themed class meeting this Friday, but I have no idea of what I can do with them? Help, help, please!' (Message from the thread in week three – 'Helen's supervisory group')

Many of her peers expressed similar emotions, and their responses detailed the common reasons for their reluctance towards this particular practice: *‘it damages the relationship I’ve built up with my students because they feel I am being mean to them’*; *‘there are too many things for form teachers to do and I don’t have time to prepare my lessons’*; and *‘I am afraid it will become a fight between me and them as I will have to criticise their naughty behaviour, and check which students were late for the morning reading and didn’t hand in their homework’*.

Feeling incapable and concerned about the consequences of unsuccessful class meetings, student teacher **Yangqiong** initiated a new thread in the same week inviting her peers to brainstorm good ideas for the themed class meetings. The discussion thread lasted until the fifth week.

Initially, complaints such as *‘it’s my turn now. I just hate it’* and *‘it’s boring’* featured in their discussions. However, as online communication unfolded, their understanding of students’ lack of interest in learning English grew and their understanding of student-teacher relationship and other aspects of teaching as a profession began to evolve, many student teachers demonstrated a more mature attitude towards the practice of being a form teacher. Although some still regarded the arrangement of themed class meetings as *‘less meaningful’*, *‘time-consuming’*, and *‘unproductive’*, many of them were engaged in more fruitful discussions in which they tried to build up a corpus of approaches to accommodate both the cooperating teacher’s requirements and their own ideas on how to motivate students. Some suggestions, such as *‘telling them about an inspirational person’s biography’*, *‘similarities between Olympic spirits and English language learning’* and *‘listening to students’ needs in order to decide the theme’* received many favourable comments from student teachers. **Zhi** wrote:

‘While many of the responsibilities of the form teacher’s job seem trivial, if we can show students our sincere care, and let them know that our work is all about them and their growth, they will appreciate our efforts. I truly believe so.’

Another comment from **Yaozhao** found resonance with many fellow student teachers:

‘I am increasingly aware that teaching is an art that is always associated with a certain degree of regret or imperfection. We might never reach perfection or please every student, but as long as we keep our students at heart, we will see boring tasks as meaningful, and will keep reflecting on our performance. Perhaps all teachers learn through regrets or imperfections.’ (Message from the thread in week six— ‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

Student teachers exhibited an inclination to adjust their feelings in a professional manner. Their realisation that teaching was not all about being interesting showed their professional achievement in emotional intelligence. Their awareness that a professional attitude was required in order to face times when they might stumble was raised and fostered.

In addition, student teachers’ objective review of their school placement and adequate evaluation of their own learning is another convincing piece of evidence of their development in terms of emotional maturity. The following exemplary postings from student teachers **Jingling** and **Congyang** capture and summarise student teachers’ well-developed understanding of their learning-to-teach experience.

(Jingling) *‘Time flies and our six-week teaching practice is now coming to an end. Through this practice and online learning with you all, I’ve come to know that transmitting knowledge and educating people is a hard undertaking, and I’ve become aware of the nobleness of teachers as well as my own shortcomings. In class, my use of the blackboard still needs further improvement. I now understand that teaching isn’t all about feeding students knowledge, but letting them enjoy it and explore on their own if possible. I still need to improve my overall ability as a form teacher... I have learnt a great deal, understood the real joy of being a teacher and fallen in love with teaching, a glorious profession. I will carry on improving the way I teach, taking on the teaching techniques and feedback given in our discussion forum. I am confident that I will make progress on the path to becoming a teacher.’* (Message from the thread in week six— ‘Helen’s supervisory group’)

(Chongyang) *‘Looking back on our teaching practice now, I feel it’s been a bittersweet experience. Completion of the school placement is the very beginning of our journey as teachers. There’s still a long way for us to go before we achieve the goal of becoming the teacher we wish to be.’* (Messages from the thread in week six—‘My teaching and classroom observation’)

This finding supports the ideas of Koerner *et al.* (2002) who highlight that school placement is in essence ‘a complicated, emotional and interpersonal experience’ (p. 36) that ultimately influences student teachers’ approaches to dealing with their professional encounters as well as their conceptualisation of what professional practise experience means to them. Student teachers find themselves in a new environment with unrealistic expectations about themselves, their teaching practice, cooperating teachers and students (Maynard, 2001). That newness, according to Henry and Weber (2010) can bring about emotions ranging from ‘elation to dejection’ (p. 67). In this study, being connected to peers and supervisors in a supportive learning community prevented student teachers from suffering in silence and enabled them to deal with their constantly changing emotions. It can be inferred that student teachers’ professional growth in terms of emotional maturity provides insight into the contribution made by online interactions in supporting their teaching in general. The emotional development, including a mixture feelings of excitement, passion, anxiety, puzzlement, tolerance, self-reassurance and understanding, indicates student teachers’ mutual engagement in ‘all the forms of participation’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 77) that foster them to adjust to their situation for the joint pursuit of their professional learning. The shared, negotiated and refined views and feelings of teaching as a profession demonstrate the feature of embeddedness in a learning community in which a positive learning outcome (i.e., shared repertoire) is inseparable from participants’ mutual engagement and negotiation of a joint agenda (ibid).

Conclusion

This chapter has given an explicit account of to what extent, and in what ways, student teachers achieved shared learning through online interactions during their school

placement. Analysis of online postings has demonstrated that student teachers' online interactions led to a transitional growth of learning in five major areas, as presented and interpreted above.

In the following chapter, student teachers' and supervisors' own perceptions of the contribution made by their online interactions will be analysed to further espouse the findings discussed in this chapter, and recapture their collective learning history in their own words.

CHAPTER 7: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT TEACHERS' AND SUPERVISORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES

Introduction

This chapter focuses on presenting and discussing the answers to the second research sub-question. The aim of the sub-question is to investigate how student teachers and university supervisors perceived their roles in the online learning community, as well as the contributions made by their online interactions to the student teachers' learning to teach experience. Drawing primarily on the analysis of interview data, and cross-referencing the online postings as supplementary evidence, this inquiry yields four salient findings:

- *Recognition of the significant presence of others*
- *Multidimensional roles developed during the online interactions*
- *Supervisors' experience of role ambiguity and uncertainty*
- *Recognition of the administrative role of the online community*

These findings will be addressed from the standpoints of student teachers and their supervisors. They will be supported by quotes from the interview data, thus utilising the participants' own voices to represent and recapture their experiences in thick description.

7.1 Recognition of the Significant Presence of Others

Analysis of the interview data indicates that both student teachers and supervisors valued the significant presence of others highly during their learning-to-teach experience. Participants described the online presence of their peers and supervisors as '*indispensable*', '*important*', and '*enjoyable*'. There was consensus among student teachers and their supervisors, that without the online connectedness and interactions between them, the school placement would have been '*a more daunting and difficult undertaking*' and a '*less enjoyable or successful*' experience. Supervisors **Liang** and

Zijun both highlighted the contribution of the online community, describing it as '*vital and valuable*'. The shared recognition of the significant presence of others confirms the ideas of Vygotsky (1978) who stresses the importance of the presence of 'more capable peers' (p. 86), interdependence and scaffolding from teachers during the process of learning.

According to student teachers and supervisors alike, '*being able to talk with each other and ask for help*' and '*having access to what their peers were doing*' in the learning community effectively glued participants together, reduced their sense of isolation, nurtured their strong sense of attachment to other members, and ultimately promoted professional learning and growth. Both student teachers and their supervisors highlighted three salient aspects of their online communication which serve to explain the importance of others in their school placement experience.

- *Availability of support*
- *Sense of belonging and security*
- *Need to be heard*

Availability of support

One of the major reasons why student teachers and supervisors emphasised the significant presence of others was the availability of support within the online community. For participants, this refers to affective and professional support from peers and supervisors. Recognition of peer support and supervisor support is consistent with findings derived from the online posting data exemplified in sections 6.1 and 6.5 of chapter six, in which student teachers' shared learning was analysed.

Student teachers wholeheartedly appreciated the concern, encouragement and timely instructional support from peers and supervisors. This was a common theme in their interviews:

(Jingling) '*I feel really touched. Seems everyone is so caring even though some of us*

have just known about each other's existence in class, and haven't had any proper communication in reality. But online, everyone is so friendly, supportive and kind. I like the online atmosphere.' (Group interview one)

(Fangyu) *'Were it not for the online community, I'd be very upset. My school is new and strange to me. The atmosphere in the school and office is depressing. You just can't help feeling depressed there. I feel like my negativity and the pressure are alleviated when I come back to see everyone here and we communicate with each other online. When you know you are with your pals and teachers, the sense of assurance makes teaching practice different. I've gained tremendous emotional support and it helped me complete my practice more smoothly.'* (Group interview two)

(Tianjiao) *'When we feel frustrated or upset, it is the place we go and vent. There are always encouraging and sympathetic words either from our classmates or supervisors. When we feel productive and excited about our progress, it is the place we go and share. Then we receive praise, and this boosts our confidence further.'* (Group interview three)

Student teachers pointed out that *'intensive spiritual support'* (Group interviews one, two, and three) from their peers and supervisors was the driving factor encouraging them to stay the course through the whole process and, in particular, face difficulties with confidence. For instance, student teacher Jili compared the support she received online to *'a small petrol station to keep my engine running'* (Group interview three). Student teacher **Haicui** expressed a similar view, stating *'I regain my positive spirit every time I let out my frustration and problems'* (Group interview one). Those student teachers whose online participation was classified as 'low-involvement' viewed the affective support slightly differently. From their perspective, although they did not need it all the time, they knew it was a resource they could turn to whenever necessary. Among this particular group, student teacher **Loudan's view** was widely accepted: *'Knowing it's there all the time and knowing it's a place where I can reach everyone, my peers and supervisors, I don't feel worried anymore, but secure.'* (Group interview four)

Meanwhile, student teachers highlighted the value of affective support from their

supervisors. They claimed that comforting, praising or inspiring remarks meant a great deal to them because teachers seldom gave such encouragement or made personal revelations in the classroom setting. Student teachers' sincere gratitude for this support was evident from their tone of voice.

(Yuanqiong) *'Professor Liang taught us three years ago. In our minds, she is a very strict and unapproachable professor. We worship her but don't dare to talk to her. So when she encouraged me to have faith in myself and shared an unpleasant teaching experience she had years ago, I was so thrilled and inspired. I told myself, if Professor Liang had come through a similar situation, then so can I. And I don't want to let her down.'* **(Nachen)** *'Miss Hou, you've been a great mentor and supporter throughout the whole teaching practice. You can always foresee problems and warn us of them in advance. Your constant encouragement has motivated us.'* (Group interview two)

(Majuan) *'Mr. Zijun always encourages us in our group. He has a very calm presence, we can tell from the way he writes. It helps soothe our nerves, especially if everyone happens to have a bad day all at once.'* (Group interview three)

(Zhi) *'For us, Miss Hou is a firefighter. When we need you, you are there. You are young and humorous. Above all, you speak the same language as we do in the online forum. You really understand our concerns and care about us. I very much like the way you cheer us up. I am grateful that I am part of this team.'* (Group interview one)

The three supervisors' views coincided with those of the student teachers. Whilst **Liang** and **Zijun** had been involved in supervising teaching practice for a number of years, it was the first time that they had conducted supervision online. With their past supervisory experience as a basis for comparison, they highlighted the importance of affective support in smoothing student teachers' psychological transitions into a new school setting, as well as the significance of the collective learning afterwards. The affective *'interdependence'* between student teachers was viewed as an incentive to create *'a sense of community'*. They stated that affective support of this nature had been completely overlooked in their previous supervisory experience. They highlighted its

significance to student teachers:

‘The affective role is tremendous, really tremendous, in my opinion, for students. The online space offers such strong emotional support. When students are suddenly thrown into an unfamiliar school, knowing no one and feeling desperate, lost and upset, or when they can’t find the right direction, the affective communication among them can lift their spirits and give them strength... You know, they rely on each other for consolation.’

(Interview with **Liang**)

‘To be honest, it has never occurred to me that being placed in a new school as a new teacher can be a daunting experience for many of our students, especially those who are scattered in different schools. The online space draws them all together and creates an atmosphere in which they can share feelings and experiences. So students are emboldened by each other to deal with their own teaching... Feelings, especially positive ones, are contagious. I am very impressed by the emotional support they give to each other. The online space has made a difference to the teaching practice this year.’

(Interview with **Zijun**)

Apart from psychological support, professional support was another factor that student teachers felt was crucial to their professional learning. They described the professional practice support from their peers and supervisors as ‘*drawing on the wisdom of masses*’, ‘*saving you from hell*’ and ‘*reliable*’, ‘*enlightening*’ and ‘*extremely useful*’. Many student teachers enthusiastically stated how the professional practice support for their immediate teaching concerns dramatically reduced their anxieties and relieved them from feeling diffident or inadequate for teaching. The timeliness of that support drew specific mention. Student teacher **Mulan** recalled a critical incident which illustrates this point well.

‘Our online community was my saviour. I know I’ve told the story many times. I was given an exercise lesson with less than three hours’ notice. Two hours’ preparation for a lot of grammar exercises with no reference answers provided! Plus, grammar has always been my weak point. I got stuck on a few prepositional phrases and wasn’t sure if

my answers were correct, or how I should go about explaining them. I decided to try my luck and used the computer in the teachers' office to log on to our forum. Really a desperate attempt, now I look back! It was around 2pm, and I was due to teach in 30 minutes' time. Anyway, I posted the questions, refreshed the screen every 30 seconds and was anxious to see a reply. And guess what, I did get a reply! Yeshuai was online at that moment. It was so close. Thanks goodness for our community, otherwise, I would have been so dead.'

(Group interview two)

Mulan's experience embodies the immediacy of online communication and its implications for the support of distributed learning. Moreover, student teachers articulated the value they placed on professional support in terms of relying on other members to confirm ideas, and being inspired to reflect on and better their own teaching. The following quotes, extracted from three group interviews, represent many student teachers' positive views of their peers' and supervisors' online presence in their learning to teach experience.

(Yeshuai) *'The online communication provides us with a place to cross-check our ideas and knowledge about certain things. I feel more confident if I get confirmation or assistance from my peers or supervisors.'* **(Jingling)** *'Most of the time, you get what you need. You can throw a question out there about phrase translation, grammar, lesson plans and so on.'*

(Group interview one)

(Wangyang) *'One of the reasons I like the online interactions is that it's so easy to get inspiration from my classmates and supervisors. I frequently find good teaching techniques or ideas from reading postings. Not only do I want to try those techniques and ideas in my own class, but it also makes me want to stretch or challenge myself a bit to become as creative as them.'*

(Group interview two)

(Nana) *'When I read my peers' reflections and summaries of their teaching, as well as my supervisor's comments, I automatically reflect on my own practice and compare it with my peers', asking for example, have I done that? How have I done it?'* **(Dan)** *'I tend to compare the teaching technique more and try to discover the differences between*

us. This helps me become more conscious of my weaknesses and eager to rectify them.’
(Majuan) *‘I agree with you. You get to know more about your own teaching through learning about what others do in the online community. For instance, if I read that my peer has delivered a good lesson and the feedback from the cooperating teacher and students is very positive, but I haven’t achieved such success myself, I will naturally explore the reasons why my lesson wasn’t successful.’* (Group interview three)

These extracts suggest that student teachers considered online communication with their peers to be a useful resource. This concept was first identified in contributions of student teachers and supervisors in terms of giving professional help and answering technical questions. Secondly, access to other people’s teaching experience provided useful information for them to mull over and borrow ideas from. The concept of the useful resource was also evident in their online communication, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Interestingly, the way in which supervisors provided professional assistance was particularly noted by student teachers. Many of them specifically pointed out that supervisors gave them an *‘awareness of other related problems’* as *‘when giving suggestions, they also asked a lot of questions to guide us’*. They added that supervisors *‘not only helped us solve the immediate concern, but more importantly, they drew our attention to underlying factors or reasons and enhanced our understanding of similar problems.’* Many student teachers recognised this move beyond the simple answering of queries, and viewed it as a means of facilitating professional support that would stay with them beyond their training course.

(Zhiqing) *‘It’s a matter of deep learning and acquiring knowledge. As our Chinese saying goes, give a man a fish, and you can feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you can feed him for a lifetime.’* (Group interview two)

(Lieyue) *‘All of you show us a way of thinking and working out problems. I’ve learned that it’s not about the problem itself, a single matter, but rather what is underneath the problem.’* (Group interview three)

There was, nevertheless, a difference in assertions about professional support according to the amount of online involvement exhibited by individual student teachers. Those whose online involvement was low seemed not to rely on the professional practice support available as much as those whose participation was active. Some of them claimed that the main reason they relied less on the online interaction was that their cooperating teachers were willing to provide similar support. In these cases, the cooperating teachers' willingness to do so was because they had either taught the student teacher previously, or they knew the student teachers' family. This suggests that the online community provided specific support for those who were less confident in their more local networks. However, though these student teachers did not depend on the online communication for support, they stated that they gained inspiration and ideas from reading the postings.

Supervisors thought highly of the professional support that student teachers offered to each other. They were pleasantly surprised by student teachers' creativity and active learning in the atmosphere of *'scratching each other's back'* and *'helping each other out'*. This was obvious from their tone of voice, and further proved as they recalled certain online scenarios they experienced with their student teachers. When evaluating the significant professional contributions of the online communication, **Zijun**, in particular, raised an interesting notion of what he called *'the impact of indirect experiences on student teachers' development and knowledge related to teaching'*. He elaborated:

'Because everyone's direct experience is limited, and nobody can gain all of their knowledge through first-hand or direct experience, we have to rely heavily on indirect experience. In other words, make sense of the world by seeing it from other people's perspective. The online community, it's fair to say, expands our student teachers' indirect experience makes the acquirement of indirect experience and knowledge possible... It promoted greater communication between us and the student teachers, in terms of the frequency of communication and the wide range of topics to be discussed.'
(Interview with **Zijun**)

Zijun's notion of the importance of indirect experience pinpoints the significance of the online learning community. It is not merely a venue where student teachers hang out together and gain emotional support, but more importantly, it is a space for facilitating purposeful and experiential learning between them. Interestingly, in two group interviews, student teachers' comments on the impact of the online learning community on their learning to teach experience were strikingly similar to **Zijun**'s. For instance, student teacher **Yeshuai** used the phrase '*opening a window on a different school*' to explain one of the reasons why the online communication was indispensable in enriching and deepening their understanding of teaching.

'Because of the online communication, I feel each of us is opening a window on a different school and thus providing each other with a different and useful experience of learning to teach. You are exposed to so many different aspects of teaching, different school situations, types of students, issues, textbooks, teaching methods and teachers. Although it's only a six-week school placement, you feel you have experienced far more than just your own six-week learning. We feel so experienced already, in terms of knowing about all sorts of problems and teaching-related matters. I feel I am well prepared for my forthcoming teaching job because I've learnt so much from the others. You know, it's like a feeling that I've been there, seen that and done it. We feel confident we will know what to do if we come across a problem.' (Group interview one)

The notions of '*the impact of indirect experience*' and '*a window on to a different school*' suggest that student teachers' learning in the online community is multidimensional. Student teachers learn from their own direct experience, as well as from their peers, through sharing and communicating with each other.

Meanwhile, supervisors, **Liang** and **Zijun** in particular, expressed some self-criticism as they reflected on the professional practice support they provided to the students. The theme of timeliness returned in their discourse. In retrospect, they thought they could have given more assistance if it had not been an exceptionally hectic term for them. There were a few occasions on which their feedback and help was given so late that they felt they had failed to provide timely support. Notwithstanding, they agreed that the

online communication made supervision and guidance ‘*no longer paying lip service but an achievable and down-to-earth act*’. Moreover, they considered online supervision to be ‘*interactive, challenging and demanding*’ and to provide good opportunities to reflect on their previous supervision and discover room for further improvement. Supervisor **Zijun** expressed a sense of being overwhelmed sometimes at the breadth and depth of student teachers’ problems and discussions, and felt inadequately prepared to offer any concrete suggestions. He explicated his feeling of inadequacy by recalling a scenario in which student teachers invited him to an online discussion about the common phenomenon of puppy love among secondary school students. He said;

‘I felt the students were treating me like an expert, and expected me to come up with a wonderful solution to their question. They must have been disappointed because I couldn’t give them any real help. What I did was to have an open discussion with them and there was no guarantee of a solution.’

(Interview with **Zijun**)

The unpredictability of these moments of very personal challenges appeared to catch him by surprise, and carries particular implications for the supervisor opening himself up to the shared community of practice.

Sense of Belonging and Security

Being vulnerable, marginalised and professionally isolated, student teachers find little sense of belonging to an unfamiliar teaching environment, and instead experience strong feelings of insecurity. There are many aspects of the school placement that student teachers might feel insecure about, such as the behaviour expected by cooperating teachers and students, fear of losing face, inability to answer students’ questions, proper forms of interaction and relationships with students inside and out of the classroom, strategies used to deal with emergent situations, using teaching methods that are different from those of cooperating teachers. All of these can cause extra anxiety and tension when student teachers lack reassurance about their acceptability in the school and when they are unsure of their performance in relation to assessment. Along with this lack of a sense of belonging, such insecurity can stop them from experimenting or being

innovative in their teaching; consequently, some may choose a safe strategy and go along with their cooperating teachers, and thus fail to take ownership of their learning-to-teach experience.

In this inquiry, student teachers, especially distributed ones, pointed out that the online presence of peers and supervisors created a strong sense of belonging to the online learning community. Moreover, they believed that being connected to peers and supervisors fostered a sense of resonance and security. The sense of belonging was generally described by student teachers as a willingness to *hang out* in the online community and as a desire to find out about their peers' situation. These quotes, from student teacher **Fangyu** and student teacher **Chen**, typify those of their peers.

'The first thing I do after getting home from school is turn my computer on and log onto the website to check what's been going on since my last visit. I don't necessarily have to post; I just enjoy reading my peers' stories about school, picturing their experiences and having a laugh.' (Group interview two)

'When we first started, I felt somewhat obliged to log onto the community because I promised to participate in your research. But the moment I was there reading, I just felt I had been so wrong. The discussion was so much fun and I was fascinated to read my classmates' different stories: what they did, what their students were like and how they felt. So it became a habit to log in, and then spiritual ballast. I start to fear that I will miss something important if I don't log in, especially when I receive more responses from others.' (Group interview one)

Obviously, having access to what others engaged in the same professional pursuit do and think opens up dialogical opportunities to exchange ideas. This, in turn, increases retention levels in the community and builds a strong bond between student teachers. From **Yuanqiong**'s perspective, the sense of belonging also stemmed from the degree of identification she felt with her peers' postings: *'I know what they are talking about and they know what I am talking about'* (Group interview two). **Yuanqiong**'s view was echoed and expanded on by fellow student teachers in another group interview. For

instance, **Lieyue** stated: *'I feel so assured and relieved when I know from my classmates' postings that I am not doing things alone'* (Group interview three). It appears that student teachers' willingness to spend time in the online community was derived from a strong sense of reassurance, as they could easily empathise with their peers' *'similar state of mind'* (Group interviews one and two) and with the professional encounters others underwent. In so doing, they gained a sense of security in that *'I behave like everyone else does and I am normal'* (Group interviews one, two, three and four).

The feeling that *'we are in the same boat'* (Group interviews one, two, three), *'I am doing the same thing as everybody else'* (Group interviews one, two, three and four) *'I can be honest about my feelings and don't have to worry about being judged if I say something stupid'* (Group interviews two and three), and that *'I am not alone'* (Group interviews one, two, three and four) not only created a sense of collective resonance and security but further reinforced student teachers' sense of belonging to the learning community. The emotional commonality shared by student teachers made the online learning community an important venue for them to enjoy each other's company.

Need to be Heard

In all of the interviews, student teachers emphasised their need to be listened to. This was another key reason they valued the presence of others in the learning community. The majority saw the online community as an appropriate channel through which to satisfy their need to speak out, recounting stories and feelings as they occurred. Without it, there was no one around them who would empathetically listen to or understand them. Student teachers shared a natural desire to converse with others.

(Zhi) *'In an ordinary situation, for example, when we conducted the simulated teaching practice in the ELT methods course last semester, I definitely wouldn't go and find Chen and say. 'Hi, Chen, you know, I did my simulated teaching today, and blah...blah...blah'. [Smiling and nodding her head, Chen added:] 'Yes, exactly. You don't do it. It's just weird. But in the online community, I just have a strong need to speak out my mind and share the experience.'* (Group interview one)

Those whose teaching practice was arranged for them in the university's partner school confirmed this. Student teachers **Lieyue** and **Tianjiao** did not discuss their own teaching practice with one another even though they worked in the same school.

(**Lieyue**) *'I don't quite know how to explain why we don't discuss our teaching in school. It doesn't mean I don't want to talk about it. Actually, I really want to. That's why when I get home, I just log in and let it all out.'* (**Tianjiao**) *'Well, we do talk a little when we sometimes meet in the office or run into each other in the corridor, don't we, Lieyue? But that kind of talk is very superficial and quick, nothing concrete or specific. This is why we prefer to communicate in the community. You can write out whatever you want to talk about. And you know someone will care and listen. There are more than 40 people here. Someone will surely pay attention.'* (Group interview three)

It seems the dual factors of the physical distance between them (no matter how great) and their psychological need to communicate means this online learning community serves to make student teachers feel more at ease, as well as more eager to speak to each other. The significance of seeking opportunities to be heard within the online community lies in the student teachers' perception of the school placement, i.e. that it is by nature a personal and solitary enterprise for the individual. With the advent of the online community however, it becomes a collective pursuit.

In this collective environment, supervisors' replies to their postings were considered an important and motivating personal touch. A student teacher described the supervisors' attention as engendering *'a very special feeling of being taken good care of'* (Group interview one). This view was echoed by her peers, who stated: *'I think it's a common state of mind, no matter who we are, primary students or undergraduates; one just wishes that their teacher would focus more on himself/herself'* (Group interview one), and *'We all want our teachers' attention, and are always delighted when they pay it to us'* (Group interview two).

Student teachers even compared the response they got from supervisors in the online community and classroom: for example *'I feel the attention is one-to-one in the*

community, but in classroom, it's one-to-many' (Group interview two). According to them, the online community gave everyone '*the right to speak*' and express themselves freely, while in class, the right to voice one's ideas was controlled by teachers.

(Mulan) '*... good students generally receive more attention in class, and are given more chances to speak, while shy or ordinary students like us are often neglected by teachers. Our need for attention is overlooked. In the community, one doesn't need to worry about not being heard, because everyone can post freely. All our ideas are listed and will be read by everyone.*' (Group interview two)

Overall, student teachers' willingness to express themselves indicates a need for a sympathetic ear and need to be recognised by their peers and supervisors. Many student teachers stated that their sense of fulfilment was enhanced when peers and supervisors read their postings and made positive or encouraging comments about the effort that they had made in their teaching practice. This finding partially concurs with a study by Romiszowski and Ravitz (1997) which highlights the importance of empathetic listening in ensuring that student teachers do not feel isolated or overlooked.

7.2 Multidimensional Roles Developed during the Online Interactions

The analysis of interview data reveals that student teachers were conscious that they began to take on multidimensional roles as the online communication unfolded. Looking back on their online learning-to-teach experience, many student teachers saw their roles developing from **pure learners** to **knowledge providers**, **knowledge constructors**, **inspirers**, and most importantly, **reflective teacher learners**. The findings based on student teachers' shared learning in chapter six, support the assertions about multidimensional roles made in this chapter. Student teachers discovered that they were able to transmit knowledge to each other instead of just being taught what to do by their teachers.

(Chen) '*We always treat teachers as the most important, or only, source of knowledge. We are so used to waiting to be taught, guided and instructed by teachers. Now,*

whenever I am exposed to new ideas and methods shared online, I soon realise they all know something I don't and that I can learn a lot from them. For example, I learned how to use rap music to teach vocabulary from Dan.' **(Jingling)** *'I agree. I've learned a great deal from my classmates in the online community, much more than I expected. Techniques of doing cloze exercises, summarising reading passages, warm-up activities, managing blackboard layout, to name just a few. And it's easy to accept ideas from peers as we are going through similar experiences and emotions.'* (Group interview one)

Student teachers from other groups shared this thought. Comments like these prevailed; *'Everyone knows a few tricks, and when we put them all together, it's amazing to see how much we can learn just from each other'* (Group interview three). *'You look at a lesson plan, and think, 'oh, that's a good idea. I should try it in my next class, too.'* (Group interview four).

Thus, the online community opened up learning opportunities for them to realise that they were capable of imparting knowledge to peers or acting as each other's source of information.

In addition to this role as knowledge transmitters, student teachers realised that they could be knowledge creators, who jointly build up new understanding of a topic under discussion. In their view, the process of voicing their opinions, negotiating meaning from different perspectives and drawing on each other's ideas to enrich their understanding, allowed them to *'embark on a journey of self-initiated learning'* and *'make sense of realistic knowledge'* by themselves. They claimed that they learned to direct their own learning and answer their own questions. During the process of joint discussion, many student teachers felt *'a sense of fulfilment'* and pride as a discussion broadened their horizons and stretched their understanding of teaching.

(Yaozhao) *'You can't know every aspect of a subject. So when we are discussing our teaching from different perspectives, I am often surprised and interested in why my classmates think in a particular way, something I never thought of. Then, I'll be stimulated to think differently too. This helps me come up with new ideas.'* **(Haicui)** *'I*

like discussing our ideas with each other. It's so different from classroom learning where we are just being told what is what, or the right answers. Learning is a step-by-step process in the online community, and it requires us to think things through rather than just accept them. You read, think, express your ideas and see others' comments; the content of the topic gets richer and wider.' (Group interview one)

(Nana) *'I have learnt so much from my classmates. They have motivated me to explore new teaching ideas and be bold and brave enough to try them out in my teaching.'*

(Fangyu) *'I agree. My classmates and supervisors are my teaching resource pool. I borrowed Dan's vocabulary rap activity in my teaching and my students just loved it. It was a great success!'* **(Yuanqiong)** *'Dan's vocabulary rap activity must be used by almost everyone here. I used it, and I know Jingling used it too. It is easy and effective.'*

(Group interview two)

(Jili) *'I think the thread about collecting the frequently asked questions in the classroom is a good example of how we create knowledge together. Do you remember the questions we posted, and some of the good answers we worked out together to deal with difficult questions and unexpected situations? It's a good one. I don't think I will forget those questions or answers.'* (Group interview three)

Student teachers claimed that they understood and remembered new knowledge constructed through discussion better and more vividly as *'We figure things out together'* and *'You remember what's being said, by whom and how it was said.'* (Group interview one). It seems that online discussion enables them to better internalise their understanding of the problems under exploration, because participation in an online discussion involves a multidimensional process combining reading, thinking and evaluating others' postings, and organising and composing their own thoughts. This process ultimately engages student teachers in deep learning, which is different from being taught directly by teachers.

Besides treating each other as knowledge sharers and constructors, some student teachers highlighted the importance of their peers' role as inspirers. The notion of being

inspired was particularly expressed by student teachers in two interview groups. They considered some of their peers as critical sources of inspiration and role models that gave them the strength to face the daunting school placement experience.

(Nachen) *‘...Initially, I thought, ‘I’ll have no problem obtaining a favourable evaluation report and graduating. Why should I make myself suffer so much?’ But it all changed when I saw that everyone was so actively engaged in the online discussion, encouraging each other. I thought to myself, ‘If I don’t work hard, I won’t be able to communicate with everyone. It is because of the inspiration and encouragement from you that I’ve managed to carry on with my school placement and learn a great deal from it.’*

(Wangyang) *‘Exactly, I used to get up at eight during the school placement, but when I read the postings from Jingling and a few other classmates who get up at six-thirty in the morning, I felt quite ashamed of myself. So I decided to get up at seven and I did so until the school placement was complete.’* (Group interview two)

(Tianjiao) *‘When I see everyone online so committed and hardworking, I am inspired to work as hard as they do.’* **(Majuan)** *‘The online learning atmosphere we have created is so positively competitive. When I see everyone work so hard, I don’t want to be left behind.’* (Group interview three)

Of all the roles that student teachers took on, they viewed the role of reflective practitioners as being *‘important and beneficial’*. They pointed out that the online communication nurtured their ability to reflect. The online community provided opportunities to expose their ideas in public, and to invite comments. According to student teachers, the interactive feature of online communication fostered a dialogic and collective discussion that ultimately motivated reflection. In the form of writing, the process of learning to critique their own and others’ teaching and articulate the formalisation of their position seemed to *‘enhance and deepen understanding of our own teaching experience because reading our peers’ reflections is like looking at ourselves in the mirror.’* (Group interview two)

(Mulan) *‘When I post teaching ideas online and get from peers and supervisors*

feedback which is so different from mine. I will automatically ponder over why they are suggesting things being done differently. If there were no online communication, I would have just followed my own teaching design and there surely wouldn't be any self-reflection taking place.' (**Zhiqing**) *'Exactly, people are not good at seeing their own problems and mistakes. That's why we say the onlooker sees the most of the game. It's much easier for us to reflect on and rectify our problems when we can hear different opinions.'* (Group interview two)

(**Lieyue**) *'The most fascinating thing is that reading my peers' reflective postings allowed me to evaluate my teaching more critically. I have learnt a great deal about my own teaching by reading their reflection.'* (**Dan**) *'As new teachers, we face similar problems. As individuals, we aren't always able to figure out why they happen, but when you read others' reflections, you can always get new insights and ideas. I help them discover their problems, and they help me.'* (Group interview three)

Moreover, the interactive feature of online communication promoted reflection on alternative ways of doing a particular thing.

(**Haicui**) *'I remember a thread initiated by Xiaoyu suggesting that there was no need for us to make detailed lesson plans, but that a brief outline would be fine. I used to think that too, so when I saw his posting, I just felt we were like-minded. But a few of our peers argued for the need to make detailed lesson plans. This dichotomy made me wonder. In order to understand which approach was better, I made a detailed lesson plan for one class and an outline for a different class. From my trial, I found that it's highly necessary for us, as new teachers, to make detailed lesson plans. So I composed my reply to the thread. I think my response will have something of an impact on Xiaoyu and other classmates. This is why I believe that the process of reflection is not mere introspection. Your reflection will make others think when you share it with them. So I think reflection is both intrapersonal and interpersonal, a bit like a chain reaction.'* (Group interview one)

Supervisors, meanwhile, acknowledged the changing roles that student teachers played

from ‘*passive knowledge recipients to active knowledge transmitters*’. They pointed out that they were amazed to see student teachers ‘*take initiative in learning to teach, plunge into trying new teaching ideas, steer the collegiality between them and learn to be critical of each other’s teaching*’, in particular.

‘I was quite surprised to read how widely and deeply they can dig in their teaching. They are very critical of themselves, which is something we as teachers don’t normally have a chance to find out.’ (Interview with **Zijun**)

‘I’m pleased to observe they can be critical of each other and willing to comment, which is important, but it’s not something we commonly get them to do in the classroom... Sometimes, reading their posts provokes mixed feelings. I still treat them as kids, yet, all of sudden, they appear professional, use teacher discourse and seem to really care about the practice they are undertaking.’ (Interview with **Liang**)

We can conclude that the evolution of student teachers’ multidimensional roles in the online community reshaped the traditional views held by students and teachers, and reframed supervisors’ perception of their students. Both student teachers and supervisors realised that students are no longer passive knowledge recipients waiting for teachers to spoon-feed them. During the course of online interactions, student teachers gradually shifted their dependence for assistance away from supervisors, to rely instead on collaborative learning with their peers. Meanwhile, supervisors were no longer regarded as the only knowledge provider, though student teachers did acknowledge their supervision.

7.3 Supervisors’ Experience of Role Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Whilst student teachers embraced the evolution of their roles as the online communication unfolded, the three supervisors, in contrast, experienced varying degrees of role ambiguity and uncertainty. As presented in sections 7.1 and 7.2, supervisors highly valued the contribution of online interactions in supporting the school placement. They also complimented student teachers wholeheartedly on having taken ownership of

their learning. Meanwhile, student teachers also acknowledged the significance of supervisor presence to them on both an affective and a professional level. Nevertheless, supervisors were confused and uncertain about the exact role or roles they were supposed to play.

Due to their existing teaching commitments, two of the supervisors claimed that they were struggling to find enough time to participate in the online supervision. This was evident from the number of postings they had made, responded to and initiated. In comparison, my interactions with student teachers outnumbered theirs in terms of the amount of postings, threads initiated and time spent online. However, the total hits of the two supervisors' web-login tracks were comparatively much higher than the number of postings they had made. This suggests that the supervisors were in fact online, lurking in the background, without participating in the discussion. **Liang** expressed her uncertainty and the feeling that she was out of place when she observed her student teachers actively interacting with each other in the online community:

'I have the feeling that I may be intruding into their territory. They seem to know what they are doing well enough, and they are able to help each other out in most cases. I feel I am not necessary. When I respond or write, I sometimes worry that I am trying to be wise after the event.'

(Interview with **Liang**)

This feeling of intrusion may explain why she chose to remain in the background rather than participate in discussion. She further commented on her mixed feelings about losing control of student teachers' right to speak.

'In class, it is me who normally controls the distribution of student teachers' right to speak. I am the one who leads the teaching and discussion. However, when the communication is conducted online, student teachers have full command of their right to speak. They can decide when to speak and what to say. I am glad to see them take ownership of their learning, but I need some time to get used to letting go of my power and control.'

(Interview with **Liang**)

Although she was on her way to embracing the changing roles of student teachers in the online learning community, Liang was apparently still under the influence of the traditional, one-dimensional view of students and teachers. Given the fact that this was her first online supervisory encounter, she was unsure of the specific role/roles she could play. Though she was familiar with being the knowledge transmitter who imparts skills and wisdom to student teachers, Liang seemed to lack a clear understanding of what alternative roles she could take on, or how she could act appropriately and acceptably in a new role. The dynamic synergy of online interactions fundamentally alters the way teachers and students communicate, as they are used to doing so in a traditional classroom where communication is mostly top-down, directed by teachers. Therefore, the lack of clear answers to her questions, which included ‘*Should I join in their discussion?*’, ‘*What do they expect from me?*’, ‘*Should I act as a teacher or just equal participant?*’ and ‘*What tone should I adopt?*’ (Interview with **Liang**) caused further uncertainty and hence led to hesitation or decreased engagement in discussions with her student teachers.

As presented in sections 7.1 and 7.2, **Zijun**, too, appreciated the impact of the online learning community in supporting student teachers’ learning to teach experience. He held student teachers’ self-directed and peer-supported learning in high regard. However, like **Liang**, **Zijun** expressed confusion about the expected role/roles he should take on. Influenced by his years of supervisory experience, **Zijun** held the belief that supervision of teaching practice was mainly ‘*to provide clinical supervision, answering specific questions related to English language teaching only, and to assess student teachers’ performance.*’ Hence his perception of supervision was challenged. He talked about feeling overwhelmed when he was exposed to the breadth and depth of topics under discussion in the online community.

‘All of a sudden, many non-English language teaching questions were asked by the student teachers in my group, such as how we deal with the phenomenon of puppy love, how we decide on a theme for a class meeting and how to arrange it, and whether we should use corporal punishment on students. None of these questions are related to language teaching, but they are part of teaching. I hadn’t come across those questions

before, so I didn't have good answers to hand. As their supervisor, I definitely shouldn't avoid answering their questions; instead, I should try my best to answer them. When I can't provide an answer, I always tell them I can't answer it at present, but I will try to find a better solution.'

(Interview with **Zijun**)

It is apparent that **Zijun**'s understanding of being a supervisor was that supervisors should be able to provide student teachers with answers to all of their questions. Surely this would leave him feeling overwhelmed, especially as it is difficult to provide a definitive answer to some of the questions. The uncertainty about his role(s) in the online community meant that in his view, he had not fulfilled his expectations of himself as a supervisor. This sense of dissatisfaction also sheds light on the reason why both supervisors were critical of the professional practice support they provided for students. Moreover, **Zijun** pointed out that the online supervision experience was '*an eye-opener*,' and fundamentally changed his long-held one-dimensional view of supervisors.

'...In retrospect, it was me who primarily decided what was important for STs in my past supervisory experiences. But now, student teachers are taking initiatives and they are directing the supervision to suit their needs. Supervision is all about their needs and concerns.'

(Interview with **Zijun**)

As a supervisor myself, I also experienced contradictory thoughts about my role, as well as a sense of uncertainty during the six-week online communication. However, the other two supervisors were unaware of the correlation between the changing roles of the student teachers and their own. My own uncertainty stemmed mainly from my conflicting roles as both a supervisor and participant researcher in this inquiry. In retrospect, I found it a challenge to strike a balance between being a supervisor, who should be engaged as actively as possible in the online communication with students, and a participant researcher who should be constantly aware of their own effect on the collection of data. As a result, I put myself in an intractable dilemma. The following extracts taken from my reflective journal typify the conflicts I experienced and were recorded when I was debating whether to act more as a researcher or as a supervisor. On each of the three occasions, I could not decide what the appropriate behaviour was for a

person with dual roles.

*‘Blimey, here it comes again! I notice that **Laufang** has been inactive since the second week. Should I ask her what happened and why all of a sudden she’s not as enthusiastic as she had been about sharing ideas with her peers? Shall I just note it down in here and let it continue without any interference? If I ask her, will I influence the natural occurrence of the research design and eventually end up with biased data? I don’t know.’*
(Reflective journal 18th March, 2008)

‘Linawei almost never shows up in the forum now. Hope she’s doing OK. She was one of the most active participants in the online learning community in the first semester and initiated a lot of interesting threads for others to discuss. But now, she rarely comes and even if she does, she seems only to post her questions or frustrations and then disappear. She should be the one who makes the most of online communication to help her with her school placement. Wonder what on earth she is doing in her placement school. Should I send her an email to check how she is coping with teaching or should I just observe and do nothing? Could this be an important ethical issue to think about?’
(Reflective journal, 20th March, 2008)

‘I notice Zijun’s supervisory group has been a bit quiet this week. Not many student teachers have participated in any discussion in the pre-determined discussion topics. In fact, I’ve seen a few of them actually posting in my group. What should I do? Should I just let them do it? Should I remind them that they’d better interact with their peers in their own group? Will this be fair since Zijun doesn’t log in as frequently as I do to check upon them? Will Zijun be annoyed if he sees his group is quiet in their own discussion forum but quite active in my group? How does this affect the online supervision if this is no longer research but an actual component of school placement?...’ (Reflective journal, 26th March, 2008)

Unfortunately, due to the powerful fear of the effect I would have on the study as a researcher, I occasionally restrained myself from being a supervisor, and prioritised the researcher role. In hindsight, I would choose to prioritise my role as a supervisor, but

keep my decision transparent and acknowledge my subjectivity.

Overall, despite the student teachers' acknowledgement of their supervisors' contributions to their learning to teach experience, and the tangible support evidenced in the online postings, supervisors experienced some uncertainty about their role(s) and the behaviours expected by student teachers. This clearly has implications for future practice, as will be discussed later. When supervisors' roles are left unspecified or ambiguous, they become dissatisfied with their work. When supervisors engage in supervision but do not feel they are fulfilling their role, there is a risk of low involvement, despite the fact they are indeed enthusiastic about the work they do.

7.4 Recognition of the Administrative Role of the Online Community

Finally, one of the interesting but less-discussed findings in other similar research suggests that the online learning community can be a valuable tool through which to provide administrative and logistical support. During the interviews, both supervisors flagged this particular form of support as being important for two reasons. Firstly, they both pointed out that there was observable evidence enabling them to keep track of what each student teacher was doing in their school placement. In the past, supervisors had often been kept in the dark as regards student teachers' actual learning or teaching. Secondly, the online community meant: *'it is much easier to communicate with them, and remind them of the documents and files they need to bring back to the university after the school placement.'* **Liang** pointed out that in her previous experience, student teachers, including those distributed students who had not been assigned a supervisor, would contact her frequently. Their enquiries involved issues such as the deadline for submitting a school placement report, or the required formats for reflective reports and lesson plans. According to her, the community:

'makes all sorts of administrative and logistical support very easy. I saw you upload the standardised lesson plan template for student teachers to download and use. A notice about all sorts of things that student teachers need to remember can be accessed online. The online community makes arrangements trouble-free. Very convenient! Student

teachers also receive consistent information from our school. All these things contribute to a quality of support we weren't able to provide before.' (Interview with **Liang**)

Student teachers' views were consistent with Liang's. For example, they said they '*can have access to the required forms online and can ask each other to clarify the exact information.*' (Group interviews two and three)

This particular finding was unanticipated and suggests that the implementation of online learning communities can help teacher education institutions reinforce the significance of school placement and regain contact with distributed student teachers during the school placement. As discussed in chapter one, schools and universities are often left in the dark when student teachers are allocated to different secondary schools across the country. Online learning communities allow institutions to keep track of their student teachers' progress during the school placement. Moreover, the availability of online interactions keeps distributed student teachers up-to-date with the latest information in relation to their teaching practice. This cost-and-hassle free function has been evident in the current study.

This is particularly significant for teacher training universities in China, since an increasing number of student teachers are encouraged to secure their own placement schools. This alleviates pressure on their universities, whose representatives admit they are unable to find enough secondary schools to accommodate all the student teachers.

Conclusions

This chapter has elucidated four salient findings, generated from the analysis of interview transcripts, to shed light on student teachers' and supervisors' perceptions of their roles and the contributions of online interactions during the six-week school placement. The findings reveal that:

- Both student teachers and supervisors viewed each other's online presence as valuable, indispensable and enjoyable. The significance of student teachers' and

supervisors' online presence lies in the affective and professional support provided by members of the online community, the sense of togetherness and security felt by student teachers and the psychological need to be listened to empathetically by peers and supervisors.

- Student teachers were conscious of, and satisfied with, the multidimensional roles that they took on during the six-week online communication. Student teachers progressed beyond being passive knowledge receivers to being knowledge providers, knowledge creators, inspirers and most importantly, reflective learners. They embraced those roles comfortably and demonstrated their capacity to perform each role well.
- Without a clear understanding of their role(s) in the online community, together with the loss of their traditionally-held absolute authority, supervisors expressed their uncertainty about fulfilling their roles. Despite student teachers' recognition of their contributions, supervisors were critical of the supervision provided and felt they may not have fulfilled student teachers' expectations. Supervisors' inability to adjust to the impact of student teachers' changing roles, or to deal with the wide range of discussion topics, was the main factors which hindered their online interactions with student teachers. The conflict I experienced with regard to my dual role as a participant researcher and a supervisor will be reflected upon in the final chapter.
- The online learning community makes administrative and logistical arrangements easy, cost-effective, hassle-free and consistent for both supervisors and student teachers. It enables supervisors and institutions to keep track of student teachers' school placements.

The following chapter will focus on exploration of the third research sub-question.

CHAPTER 8: UNDERSTANDING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN CHINESE VIEWS OF LEARNING AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Introduction

This chapter presents and elucidates the answers to the third research sub-question, which examines the interplay between a Chinese view of learning and computer-mediated communication. The term ‘Chinese views of learning’ is used interchangeably with ‘Confucian views of learning’ or ‘Confucianism’ in this chapter. In light of examining and cross-referencing data from interviews and online postings, I will highlight two striking findings that provide evidence suggestive of a reciprocal relationship between the Chinese view of learning and the construction of online learning communities. The findings are:

- *Online communication and reshaped social and interactive behaviours*
- *Confucianism and reinforced online collaboration, reflection and collective minds*

In the following sections, quotes from online postings and interview transcripts will be used to exemplify the interplay between Chinese views of learning and online communication. Findings will be discussed and interpreted by drawing on critical discussion of other relevant research dedicated to the study of Confucianism, Chinese learners and online communications.

8.1 Online Communication and Reshaped Social and Interactive Behaviours

The findings reveal that the integration of an online learning community fundamentally reshaped the behaviour patterns adopted by student teachers and supervisors in their interactions with each other. Asynchronous online communication provided participants with sufficient time to think teaching matters through before composing thoughtful

postings. The online behaviour patterns exhibited features which represent a shift from interpersonal interactions in conventional Chinese face-to-face communication. More importantly, in this study, student teachers' and supervisors' featured social and interactive behaviours –influenced and reshaped by the online communication mode of learning community – appeared to help them surmount the challenges of learning whose views are profoundly shaped by Confucianism, and thus, to some extent, contributed to student teachers' professional growth during the school placement. These reshaped online communication behaviours afforded insights into the success of an online learning community into the learning-to-teach experience in the Chinese context. The analysis of data from both online postings and interview transcripts yielded two distinct features of online interaction. These are:

- *Lessened face concern and comfort in sharing, disagreeing and critiquing*
- *New relationship-building between participants*

Confucianism promotes respect for hierarchy and social harmony; it prioritises group interest over individual needs in society. In addition, it advocates that people should try to maintain mutual face in any interpersonal relationships in order to avoid conflicts that might jeopardise social harmony. The educational implications of Confucianism, therefore, emphasise teachers' authority status, students' obedient role and group effort to achieve communal goals while discouraging individual learners' self-expression and fulfilment of their own needs (Hu, 2002). However, the findings of this research inquiry imply that those traditional cultural norms are being challenged and reframed in the context of computer-mediated learning communities.

As exemplified in the two preceding chapters, student teachers actively shared their professional encounters, disclosing their emotions and voicing individual opinions, as well as evaluating each other's teaching, shared practice and techniques. Their willingness to reveal their true selves, both personally and professionally, in the online learning community (e.g. 6.2.1) is rarely seen in classroom contexts. As we have seen, the online learning community met student teachers' need for security, a sense of belonging and having their opinions heard and recognised (7.1). Furthermore, they felt

comfortable sharing and disclosing their professional experience as they were less concerned about the possibility of *'losing face in front of others'* when disclosing their weaknesses and problems or confessing their vulnerability. They *'felt less intimidated and more comfortable'* about disagreeing with each other or expressing different opinions in the online community. This psychological comfort was evident in the online discussions as well as in student teachers' group interviews.

In addition to the pre-determined threads and those initiated by student teachers, six discussions were set up in which they could share their most interesting/unforgettable/embarrassing experiences of the week. Over the six weeks, 207 postings were shared by student teachers who were actively engaged in recounting their experiences in detail. Many of the postings featured moments and scenarios in which student teachers felt that they had made mistakes albeit often inadvertently. Those postings were usually filled with exclamations such as: *'it's so embarrassing'*; *'I didn't know what to say and I was astounded'*; *'it's awkward'*; *'my face is red and burning'* and *'I wish there were a hole in the ground to swallow me up'*. The incidents shared online included various aspects of their teaching and teaching-related encounters, and can be broadly classified into three types: issues relating to subject matters; issues relating to classroom management, such as mixing up students' names or classes; and issues relating to appropriate interactions with students. Regardless of the embarrassment they claimed to feel, student teachers seemed to be comfortable revealing these episodes to their peers and supervisors. They no longer seemed to be concerned about the public loss of face. For instance, in the fourth week, student teachers shared unflattering examples of their excessive use of Chinese in teaching. Student teacher **Yeshuai** wrote:

'I have something embarrassing to tell you. I used too much Chinese when I taught today, and a few students were whispering to each other 'Is this a Chinese lesson?' I just felt so humiliated and ashamed. <Sigh>. Next time, I must control my use of Chinese when doing warm-up exercises.' (Message from the thread in week four–'Sharing the most interesting/unforgettable/embarrassing experiences of the week')

In contrast, student teacher **Guanyu** expressed her frustration at her students' excessive

reliance on Chinese and their reluctance to participate. Her interpretation sees her debate her own possible contribution to this as if the cause lies with her:

‘What makes me feel awful is I have to translate every single classroom English into Chinese. Even the sentence ‘could you translate this for me?’ has to be translated to get students to answer my questions. Is it because my spoken English is so dreadful? Alas... And my students are so shy. They clearly know the answer, but every one of them is so bashful that no one speaks. I asked them to discuss the topic ‘people who have helped you in your life’ in groups. They did discuss it in their groups, but when it came to the group report in English, no one spoke! I’m so upset!’ (Message from the thread in week four–‘Sharing the most interesting/unforgettable/embarrassing experiences of the week’)

Postings like the one above abounded in the six-week threaded discussions. The common element was student teachers’ openness in disclosing their weaknesses, frustrations and unpleasant encounters in the online communities. In the interviews, student teachers admitted that they would not have ventured such self-revelation in face-to-face communication:

(Jingling) *‘I felt freer because we weren’t seeing each other in person’* **(Chen)** *‘Exactly... I like to share my awkwardness online, and I always feel much better after letting the negative stories out.’* **(Haicui)** *‘The key is because everything is online; you don’t need to worry about how others sitting in front of another computer might think of you. There’s no direct contact.’* (Group interview one)

(Nachen) *‘I feel I am more willing to talk about my embarrassing experiences online and I can make fun of myself when I write. After sharing, I no longer let it bother me or beat myself up about it.’* **(Tianjiao)** *‘When you talk to someone in person, you constantly check their facial expressions to discern what they think of you. A tiny facial change can influence how much I want to talk, or make me just too intimidated to talk any more. But in the online community, you can’t see anyone. I feel like I am writing my diary - I can be truthful in saying what I feel or want to say. And when you’ve finished, you can simply hit the submit button. Nothing is going to influence your emotions because you don’t ‘see’*

others.’ (Mulan) ‘Also, everyone is supportive online and whatever you say, you don’t feel humiliated or lose face. Supervisors are sympathetic and our peers are empathetic.’

(Group interview two)

This subtle psychological distance and ‘invisibility’ afforded during communication seemed to liberate student teachers from worrying about the immediate judgement of their interlocutor, which they would be able to sense straight away if they were speaking face-to-face. The feeling of losing face was therefore reduced and became of less concern to student teachers. In fact, the online community appeared to encourage them to share stories and provide them with a channel through which to vent frustration and negativity without worrying about potential loss of face.

In addition, online communication empowered student teachers to make their voices heard by their peers and supervisors. What emerged from the online interactions was student teachers’ bravery in disagreeing with each other and their willingness to voice alternative opinions. This direct expression of disagreement and different ideas is behaviour rarely seen in classrooms as evidenced in my own face-to-face teaching and online observation in the first semester (see 3.2.2). Constructed events ‘*Does GTM have a role to play in teaching English*’ (6.1.1), ‘*Use of smiley face symbols in marking assignments*’ (6.2.2) and ongoing discussions about methods of teaching reading (6.2.1) in chapter six illustrate how student teachers were sufficiently engaged to critique, disagree and express different ideas among themselves. They provided various attestations of how they ‘*dared to*’ be critical and ‘*enjoyed being expressive*’ in the online environment:

(Jingling) ‘*You feel less formal when expressing different opinions online. Things that are difficult to say in a face-to-face situation become a lot easier to talk about.*’

(Yaozhao): ‘*...things like ‘I don’t agree with you’. ‘I think differently’, or ‘I think maybe you should try this’. Basically, things you wouldn’t normally want to say for fear of making each other lose face.*’ (Group interview one)

(Wangyang) ‘*Online communication is much more comfortable. You feel pressurised*

when standing up to speak in the classroom because everyone looks at you. And you struggle with the impact of revealing your genuine thoughts especially when you believe you are right and your classmates are wrong, you know, like hurting others' feelings, causing disharmony, or making them unhappy or dislike you. But in the online communication, it's a bit like letting hundreds of schools of thought coexist. You become less worried about others and more concerned about expressing the real you.' (Group interview two)

Online communication seems to alleviate student teachers' anxiety about causing conflicts and disharmonious interactions with each other. Student teachers in the second group went on to explore in-depth the reasons behind their overall preference for communicating online rather than face-to-face. They formulated their own theory by comparing the two modes of communication, and highlighted the individuality supported by online communication:

(Zhiqing) *'In class, we are a group or a union. So we have to come up with a consolidated opinion, even if our own views are different. Eventually, we emphasise unified learning. But in the online community, everyone is free to express their own opinion, and there is no pressure to agree with each other.'* **(Fangyu)** *'In class, after we answer a question, our teacher will always give a conclusive, final answer. Gradually we just accept what our teachers tell us.'* **(Nana)** *'It also has so much to do with everyone's personalities. In class, those who are extrovert, confident and good at learning dominate the discussion. And we introverts and quieter students won't argue with them or express our opinions, even if we disagree completely. But in the online community, we have been given a free space where you don't feel the same pressure or fret about being different or expressive.'* **(Mulan)** *'I totally agree. When I express my opinions in class, if my classmates say something different, my first reaction is to feel attacked and upset. But in the online space, when I see disagreement from my peers, I don't feel the same way at all. Instead, I reflect and think about it from their perspective.'* (Group interview two)

Concern about disagreeing with others which might be interpreted as aggressive or as a

personal attack was also mentioned by student teachers in a different group interview. They pointed out that online communication helped them distance themselves from their personal feelings and become more mature and comfortable about accepting different comments or critiques.

(Majuan) *‘In a classroom discussion, if I share my view and someone disagrees with me, I tend to get emotional somehow, feeling that they are targeting me as a person, not just my view. And if they happen to disagree with me all the time, I will feel very upset and think them aggressive. No one likes aggressive people, or to be labelled as aggressive themselves. This kind of feeling makes everyone reserved about expressing their real thoughts or having constructive discussions with each other. But online communication is different. I voice my genuine views and I’m not afraid to disagree because it’s an opinion I am disagreeing with, not my classmate. And writing gives us more time to think through a better way to disagree or critique. In face-to-face communication, it’s easy for us to take disagreement personally and you have to think and speak at the same time, no much time to pay extra attention to the expressions used.’* **(Liejue)** *‘Online communication is all about posting-to-posting, not person-to-person. This is why we all feel less intimidated about joining discussions, and dare to comment and give advice without worrying too much about hurting our classmates or damaging our relationships.’*
(Group interview three)

Though the importance of the Chinese notion of face (the avoidance of losing one’s own face or causing others to lose theirs in public: Hwang, 1987; Gao, 1988) is widely acknowledged, findings indicate that it is weakened and de-emphasised by student teachers when communication is mediated by the online community. Consequently, student teachers were observed to have become more comfortable and more expressive than they would be in traditional classrooms, making their voices heard, disagreeing with their peers and supervisors, and accepting different inputs; a fact they acknowledged themselves too. Looking for corroboration from other studies, Tu (2001) also found that Chinese students generally regard CMC as ‘a more comfortable media to express their thoughts due to non-confrontation and face-saving concerns’ (p. 57).

In this particular regard, however, findings do contradict two other specific studies in the teacher training context (Chen, 2006; Zhang and Huang, 2008). For example, Chen's study found that Chinese trainee teachers avoided commenting critically on their peers' performance and carefully protected their peers' face. Similarly, Zhang and Huang's study highlighted Chinese trainee teachers' concern with preserving face when interacting with their British counterparts. There are two possible explanations for this discrepancy.

One is the participant profile and the second is the length of their involvement in the research. Unlike the participants in Chen's (2006) six-week research, who came from different schools and had teaching experience ranging from one year to more than six years', participants in this study had similar learner characteristics, had studied in the same school and known each other for more than three years. Furthermore, they had been communicating with their peers in the online community for over four months before their school placement started. Participants' homogeneity and prolonged involvement in online communication are therefore plausible explanations for both the decreased concern about face loss and active participation in voicing different opinions. This, in turn, may reshape how they position themselves in interactions with their peers. Likewise, discrepancies with Zhang and Huang's (2008) study may stem from the fact that the circumstances of their research were markedly different from my own. In Zhang and Huang's research, Chinese participants were required to interact in English for eleven weeks with their British counterparts, who came from a divergent learning culture. It is understandable that Chinese participants prioritised their major concern of preserving face over actual learning when required to write in English to the same standard as the British participants.

8.1.2 New Relationship-building between Participants

Findings also suggest that participants' frequent online interactions contributed to the building of new relationships between them. Two major types of bonds were forged. One was the friendship nurtured between student teachers online and in an extended offline setting. The other was the more equal relationship that emerged between supervisors and

student teachers as a result of the online communication. This would have been unimaginable in the traditional Chinese views of learning.

Because of the emphasis on collectivism, group interest and harmony, ‘others-oriented’ talk (Kim, 1995, p. 34) features heavily in Chinese interpersonal interactions. In other words, Chinese people have the inclination to attend to others’ needs and show them consideration during the interaction. In this study, the fact that student teachers were connected with each other personally and professionally reinforced the care and consideration rooted in their cultural norms. As chapters six and seven elucidate, student teachers developed and recognised their multidimensional roles during the six-week online interactions. Some of the roles, such as knowledge sharers, knowledge co-constructors and inspirers (see 7.2) nurtured the establishment of friendship between them. Student teachers’ sense of camaraderie was evidenced in their online interactions and their sense of friendship was highlighted in the interviews.

Student teachers’ online friendship was traceable from the ways they interacted with, and addressed, each other. In China, first names are reserved for family members and suggest an intimate relationship among friends. Besides giving each other nicknames and starting to use first names, many student teachers used images like ‘*battle-companions*’, ‘*comrades*’ and ‘*comrades-in-arms*’ when encouraging their peers to ‘*hang in there*’ and ‘*fight for*’ their school placement together.

Regarding the sense of camaraderie, student teachers pointed out that online communication provided them with a different lens through which to better discern their peers’ competences, special talents and personalities, and thus enabled them to feel greater resonance with one another. They discovered different aspects of their peers’ characters and readjusted their impression of them accordingly. As a result of accumulated understanding, some of them progressed from having previously been mere nodding acquaintances offline, and some of them built up completely new friendships offline. The names of several student teachers, including **Jingling**, **Lieyue**, **Majuan** and **Qingli**, cropped up repeatedly in the interviews when student teachers talked about gaining an insight into their peers and the new discoveries they had made about them.

For instance:

(**Chen**) *'I am quite impressed by Jingling and Lieyue. Especially Jingling. We've been classmates for nearly four years; I've rarely heard her speak in class. I thought she was shy and invisible. But online, she is such a witty and bubbly girl. I enjoy reading her postings and often find we share similar thoughts. This makes me feel closer to her. I then follow her postings closely. As a result of our online communication, we are now good friends.'* (**Yeshuai**) *'I totally agree. Jingling, you are so different when you are talking in the online community. I felt I got to know a new you.'* (Group interview one)

(**Yuanqiong**) *'You soon discover who's good at what, and who you can ask for help.'* (**Mulan**) *'Yes, yes. Nana's good at making Powerpoint presentation. If you ask her for help, she will always be able to solve the problem.'* (**Wangyang**) *'For example, Haicui once helped me solve an urgent problem. Out of appreciation, I started to respond to her postings a lot. As time has gone by, we became comfortable enough to joke with each other and now she's my pal.'* (Group interview two)

Student teacher **Jili** explained how online communication facilitated her offline interactions with peers:

'Online discussion has nurtured the soil for friendship to grow. I don't have a particularly close interaction with anyone. However, because I tend to respond widely to posts, I have got a general impression about most of them. After returning to university, I've met a few girls from another class. It would be weird not to have a chat with them because we have chatted online. We've all felt it quite natural to become friends afterwards.' (Group interview three)

Nevertheless, a few student teachers said that online communications did not greatly influence their views of their peers because they had already got to know each other very well in the previous years.

The contribution of online communication to the building of friendships and positive

interpersonal relationships in this study accords with Yang and Tang's (2003) findings. Their work indicates the effectiveness of online communication in supporting the development of close relationships between learners, and hence suggests a tentative causal relationship between students' closeness and their learning performance.

In addition to the new friendships nurtured between student teachers, a more equal teacher-student interaction and relationship was identified, and acknowledged in both online interactions and interviews. This degree of equality can be understood as the result of student teachers' developed multidimensional roles (7.2), supervisors' awareness of losing absolute control of the right to speak, and student teachers' empowered collegiality (6.4).

What was striking was the unusual ease with which some student teachers disagreed with their supervisors. Although the majority of them highly valued and appreciated their supervisors' feedback and suggestions (7.1), some of them did break out of the conventional Chinese teacher-student relationship where teachers dictate or guide, and students accept and follow.

For instance, in her supervisory group, **Liang** suggested that students should not be allowed to use digital dictionaries in class. Student teacher **Luo** disagreed, *'I won't stop them using them in my class though, because I use my digital dictionary all the time.'* Another typical example is student teacher **Yuanqiong**'s response to my critique of her lesson plan for presenting and explaining the rules of the passive voice:

'Thanks Helen, I agree that providing sufficient examples first to allow students to discover the features of the passive voice will encourage them to think independently and absorb the rules better. But as a student myself, I prefer to be taught explicitly about the rules and usage by the teacher.' (Message from the thread in week four – 'Lesson planning discussion')

According to student teachers, supervisors were no longer treated as the only source of knowledge, or figures of absolute authority who should never be challenged or

disobeyed by students. Instead, many student teachers thought of them as ‘*equal participants*’, ‘*critical friends*’ and ‘*communication facilitators*’. Disagreement with supervisors in the online community was ‘*a less threatening or terrifying act*’. Student teachers felt that the online communications had changed the balance of power relation between them and their supervisors. Student teacher **Mulan**’s interpretation of the teacher-student relationship was well supported by her peers. In her view:

‘In a traditional classroom, teachers always stand on the platform in front of us; therefore, teachers are ‘leading us as knowledge transmitters’ and we as students are expected to ‘listen to them and learn from them’. However, when communicating online, our supervisors become our equals because we are all sitting in front of a computer. There is no more absolute teacher-leading, student-learning. I think, to a certain extent, we become equal participants. We still learn from teachers, but I realise I also learn from my classmates, and they learn from me too.’ (Group interview two)

The personal touch exhibited in supervisors’ postings (7.1) is another major reason why student teachers felt they are more ‘*approachable and amiable*’ than they were in class. For instance, student teacher **Tianjiao** said:

‘I especially like the humane side of our teachers that we see in the online community, which is not something we experience in the classroom. In class, the priority for teachers is to follow their lesson plan in order to impart knowledge to us. They are knowledgeable and lectures are organised, but there is not much communication or discussion between us. Online learning is different. There isn’t much structured knowledge to teach. Teachers are willing to listen to us and have discussions with us. I feel respected and my views valued.’ (Group interview three)

Meanwhile, the online discourse used by supervisors was no longer authoritative or evaluational, but rather encouraging. Expressions indicating tentative suggestions were commonly used, such as ‘*Maybe, you could try this...*’, ‘*What about...*’, ‘*I’m not sure if this will definitely work, but...*’ Similarly, student teachers noticed that the expressions supervisors used were different from what they were familiar with in the classrooms, and

showed their appreciation for their teachers' encouragement:

'...but more importantly, supervisors drew our attention to the reasons or factors underneath it and enhanced our understanding of similar problems.' (Group interview two)

'It's a matter of learning and acquiring. As our Chinese saying goes: give a man a fish, and you can feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you can feed him for a lifetime.' (Group interview three)

Supervisor **Zijun** also expressed his awareness of the new teacher-student relationship in his interview. He made particular reference to the equality between him and student teachers and the shift from teacher-oriented teaching to teaching that attended to students' real needs:

'I can tell my tone and choice of words have changed in the online community, but I can't really pinpoint the reason for such an interesting phenomenon. I think, perhaps, the online communication forces us to respect each other and respect our students, a feeling of being equal.' (Interview with **Zijun**)

'Before, teaching practice supervision centred around students absorbing and reifying supervisors' guidance and suggestions. This online supervisory experience has made me reflect on my previous experience. Instead of subjectively judging what students must know, I think supervision should be student-centred. We really need to serve students' needs and support them.' (Interview with **Zijun**)

As a supervisor, this identified change of supervisory style resonated with me. I wrote the following in my reflective journal:

'I found something fascinating in my interview with Liang and Zijun. Both of them talked about how the online community subtly changed the way they gave students advice. They said they tended to avoid using the authoritative method, and stopped saying 'you

should do this,' 'you should do that' or giving a direct answer. Instead, they have become more encouraging in order to guide students to explore their own teaching problems. I actually found myself doing a similar thing, and recall how I revised my responses to student teachers before submitting my postings. And I did try to sound more approachable and friendly, and avoided giving very top-down or direct answers.' (Reflective journal, 20th May, 2008)

In summary, this study shows that computer-mediated communication influenced and reshaped the conventional social and interactive patterns between student teachers and supervisors. Two factors which are deeply-rooted in the Confucian view of learning, (i.e. the maintenance of mutual face to avoid potential conflicts between participants, and the hierarchical relationship between supervisors and student teachers) were de-emphasised in the online learning community and lost their traditional importance. Moreover, new online relationships between student teachers and supervisors were fostered and developed. They, in turn, contributed to an affective and supportive learning community.

8.2 Confucianism and Reinforced Online Collaboration, Reflection and Collective Minds

The findings of this study, nevertheless, indicate that Chinese views of learning positively reinforce student teachers' collective learning and reflective practice in the online community. To be more specific, the virtues which are highly valued in Confucianism, such as group interest, communal obligation, concern for others and the importance of self-reflection, in turn, enhance a virtuous circle which frames the process and outcomes of student teachers' professional learning experience. Three salient themes were identified in this study to be the products of the influence of Confucianism. They are:

- *Enhanced online collaborative learning*
- *Fostered collective reflective practice*
- *Communal reinforcement*

8.2.1 Enhanced Collaborative Learning

Findings presented in chapters six and seven provide a convincing demonstration of how a positive, supportive collective learning experience supported student teachers' professional learning. Nevertheless, this section sheds some light on an alternative interpretation of how collaborative learning is further promoted by the collective orientation embedded in Confucian views of learning.

The philosophical underpinnings of Confucianism highlight group orientation, communal obligation and concern for others (Hofstede, 1991). Group interest takes precedence over individual needs or rights, and thus requires the individual to contribute their effort to the communal pursuit. An individual's needs must be suppressed, or even sacrificed, when they conflict with the group interest. In the online learning community in this study, supporting successful completion of school placement was both a group pursuit and an individual interest. Consequently, both achievement of communal goals and satisfaction of student teachers' personal needs motivated student teachers' joint endeavour. For instance, in both online postings and interview transcripts, participants, and student teachers in particular, expressed the strong communal sense of responsibility they felt to participate actively in discussions. If they failed to contribute to the online discussion or log in as frequently as they thought that they ought to, student teachers often appeared apologetic and expressed a sense of guilt:

(**Meizhi**) *'I am really sorry for being here so late. Hope you won't be angry with me.'*
(Message from the thread in week two—'Helen's supervisory group')

(**Xingli**) *'Something unexpected has come up back at home; this is why I haven't been here for the past few days. I am very sorry.'* (Message from the thread in week five—'Helen's supervisory group')

Meanwhile, student teachers' sense of guilt and consciousness of mutual obligation to give support and return favours were also evident in the interviews. Views from the first group interview typify those of other groups:

(**Jingling**) *'I have been lurking in the background a bit. But the more I lurk, the guiltier I become as it seems as though I only want to gain knowledge from others without thinking of making my own contributions. I don't want to become the kind of person who only reads and takes, but never posts or returns.'* (**Chen**) *'I quite agree with Jingling, when I learn something new from postings shared by my classmates, I feel I should do something for everybody too.'* (**Zhi**) *'I have been a long-term lurker in other discussion forums. But in this forum, I have a sense of responsibility. After I have learned so much from reading so many of my classmates' earnest postings sharing their learning, and learned lessons from them, I feel very guilty if I don't participate in discussions.'* (**Haicui**) *'It's reciprocal. After learning from others, I feel the obligation to share, and give feedback on how I used the teaching methods shared by my classmates. Otherwise, I would feel very embarrassed. At the same time, I also have the desire to share useful techniques I have tried and want to hear everyone's feedback on them.'* (Group interview one)

The social obligation to show concern for others and each individual's desire to express self-fulfilment were harmoniously unified in this community, leading to a reciprocal interplay between student teachers, who were both receivers and givers of their mutual contribution.

8.2.2 Fostered Collective Reflective Practice

An oversimplified view commonly expressed in studies by Western researchers (Chow, 1995; Biggs, 1996) is that Chinese learners are passive, rote learners and lack critical thinking ability, or that they 'have not been trained to ask questions' (Katchen, 1989, p. 81. cited in Zhang and Huang, 2008, p. 746). What such an interpretation misses is the complex impact of multidimensional and intertwined Confucian values and beliefs on Chinese learners. The notion of 'passive learners' does convey the reticent, obedient and respectful character of Chinese learners who only speak when requested to, and who treat teachers as absolute knowledge gurus whom they should not challenge or disagree with (Hofstede, 1991). On the other hand, it fails to reveal some other subtle characteristics of Chinese learners. Being passive does not necessarily mean they simply

accept what has been taught without internalisation or digestion. Apart from showing respect to teachers, being passive in class also comes from the emphasis on concern for others. This interprets the act of asking teachers to answer individual questions in class as inconsiderate, since individuals should not take up others' time to fulfil their own needs. Unless an idea is well-thought out and beneficial for others to hear, one should keep silent in class.

In essence, the complexities and seemingly paradoxical beliefs grounded in Confucianism require respect for authority, but they also emphasise that learning should never be separated from critical thinking. The line 'to learn without thinking is blindness, to think without learning is idleness' from *Confucius Analects*¹ (1990) is well-known to Chinese learners.

In recent years, many researchers have begun to develop a more enriched and holistic view of Chinese learners. Yang *et al.* (2006) state that Chinese learners are 'more reflective than impulsive' and tend to take 'a slower and more systematic approach' to learning (p. 352). The Confucian view promotes and stresses the importance of critical and reflective thought in improving learning. In accordance with the three prerequisites, 'open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness' highlighted by Dewey (1933), reflection advocated by Confucius also:

presupposes and reinforces such critical thinking skills as examining underlying principles, being open-minded in listening and considering the views of others, being fair-minded in balancing and assessing evidence, and thinking autonomously in judging and assuming responsibility for one's beliefs. (Kim, 2003, p. 73)

Coupled with the prevailing practice of self-criticism advocated by Communism in China, critical reflection is a familiar concept and practice that Chinese learners are able to get to grips with.

¹ Confucius Analects (pinyin *Lun-yu*) is a collection of the ethical and moral sayings and philosophical ideas of the great Chinese thinker Confucius.

As discussed in section 6.2, student teachers in this online learning community demonstrated their willingness and ability to reflect collectively on what constituted good practice. The joint act of reflection was further supported by the reciprocal interplay between Confucian views of learning and online communication, both of which advocate and support reflective practice in learning.

8.2.3 Communal Reinforcement

Another interesting finding suggests that the emphases on conformity, social harmony and group orientation in Confucianism give rise to reinforced collective thinking between student teachers in the online community. The phenomenon of communal reinforcement surfaced from time to time during the six-week online interactions. The first week's threaded discussion on what student teachers should pay attention to when first entering their placement schools serves as a case in point. As elaborated in chapter five, student teachers' joint negotiation of what mattered in the first week of their experience eventually boiled down to how to dress appropriately for school. Student teachers' consensus about the importance of clothing geared their discussion primarily towards this topic. It seems that the interplay between collective thinking and online communication makes an idea become a fact or truth when it is being repeated and reinforced a great many times by other members in the community.

Stemming from joint social interaction, this psychological construct was also evident in the interviews. When asked which of the lessons and experiences they felt would be most useful in their upcoming teaching careers, many student teachers in four of the groups mentioned that knowing what constitutes proper clothing for teachers was one of the meaningful learning experiences that they would always remember. It can be surmised that because the group had collectively come to the conclusion that teachers' dress code was important, student teachers gave it greater significance than if they had thought about it individually.

Similarly, when emphasising the positive contribution made by the online learning community in supporting the learning-to-teach experience affectively and professionally,

supervisor **Liang** pointed out the significance of collective minds:

'I believe an individual's behaviour is easily influenced by the others in a group... because quite often we human beings have a tendency to follow the crowd.' *'If this is what others do, then I will do the same...'* *'This is particularly common when people are losing sight of their direction or are ill-equipped for their task and don't know what to do. Referring to others as their benchmark of behaviour is very common in a group.'*
(Interview with **Liang**)

Admittedly, the phenomenon of communal reinforcement itself provides no inherent indications as to whether a repeatedly asserted concept or idea is actually right or wrong. Members' intellectual judgement of a communally reinforced concept or opinion depends on the degree of discretion they are capable of exercising. Therefore, in a society like China where collective orientation and group conformity, harmony, mutual trust and accountability are highly-regarded virtues or established norms, communal reinforcement can be either constructive or destructive. Take the constructed event *'Does GTM have a role to play in teaching English'* as an example. Here, student teachers' joint negotiation of meaning eventually allowed them to develop a sophisticated view on the topic, rather than a one-dimensional or biased one. Such a repeatedly asserted concept proves positive when it reinforces the correct and beneficial practice to student teachers. It can therefore be considered constructive. Conversely, 'destructive' communal reinforcement may encourage student teachers to believe things which are indicative of bad teaching practice or beliefs.

Therefore, for student learners in the Chinese context, who are in the transitional stage of learning situated professional practice, the guidance of a supervisor is essential in helping them to differentiate communally reinforced feelings or ideas from facts or truth, and to formulate their own positions in the online communication. The implication of this particular finding imposes extra requirements on the role of supervisors in supporting student teachers' online learning-to-teach experience. This further supports Slaouti's (2007) finding, which draws educators' and researchers' attention to a dialectical aspect of online technology. Slaouti reminds us that online technology

originally exploited to optimise learning ‘but the very characteristics it embodies can in turn become a threat to intended outcomes’ (p. 295).

Conclusion

This chapter summarises and interprets two salient findings which suggest a reciprocal relationship between Chinese views of learning and the computer-mediated learning community. The next, and final, chapter will provide answers to the overarching research question. Contributions and limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for future research, will also be discussed.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Introduction

The objective of this qualitative inquiry has been to interrogate how an online learning community contributes to student teachers' learning-to-teach experience during their school placement. The study took place in the context of a Chinese Normal University and took socio-constructivism and situated learning as its theoretical underpinnings. Three of the theoretical propositions from the communities of practice framework (i.e., mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire) were employed as a useful toolkit with which to understand student teachers' professional learning in this online learning community. In order to better understand the contribution of the online learning community, three sub-questions were asked. The questions examined aspects of shared learning, the contributions of the online community as perceived by student teachers and supervisors, and the reciprocal relationship between the Confucian view of learning and the online communication.

Drawing upon the findings of the three sub-questions outlined in chapters six, seven and eight, I will present and interpret the main conclusions to answer the overarching research question. I will then go on to discuss the contributions of the study from methodological, professional and theoretical perspectives. The limitations and implications of the study will be presented. Based on the findings, I will provide recommendations on how to reinforce the significance of the school placement by fostering distributed student teachers' professional growth.

9.1. Conclusions

The contributions of this online learning community to student teachers' learning-to-teach experience can be summarised in the following *seven* aspects.

9.1.1 Online Learning Community and Affective Support

The online learning community created for the study made it feasible for student teachers to be connected to their supervisors and peers, and thereby significantly enabled them to seek and offer affective support whenever needed. The sense of disconnectedness, loneliness and insecurity often felt by student teachers during their placement was, therefore, dramatically reduced. Throughout the six-week school placement, student teachers' sense of connectedness was demonstrated by them cheering each other up, venting their frustration and disappointment, giving and receiving timely encouragement, appreciating the help and contribution of their peers and supervisors, and enjoying each other's company. The social and affective support was nurtured, developed and demonstrated through student teachers' mutual engagement with their peers and supervisors. The sense of togetherness, online self-disclosure, and rapport and relationship building characterised the ways in which the student teachers of this online community interacted with their peers and supervisors.

The provision of affective support from peers and supervisors is considered essential to student teachers' professional growth and smooth transition from university students to teachers (Beck and Kosnik, 2002a). In this study, this psychological assistance appeared to be as keenly sought as professional support. The affective support was viewed as more significant than professional support from supervisor **Liang's** perspective as it established a solid foundation for collective learning. This finding coincides with previous research which has shown that online learning communities create a new sense of place in their participants and thus reduce the feelings of disconnectedness and isolation (DeWert, *et al.*, 2003; Herrington *et al.*, 2006). This finding is also in agreement with the finding of Caires and Almeida's (2007) research which shows the impact of supervisors' personal features and emotional support on the quality of student teachers' school placement experience. The significance of receiving affective support during the school placement is that 'learning and self-esteem are heightened' when student teachers are in 'respectful and caring relationships with others who see their potential, genuinely appreciate their unique talents' (APABEA, 1993, p. 8. cited in Kayler and Weller, 2007, p. 137). The sense of togetherness and availability of affective

support provided by the online community are therefore of great significance to student teachers who are traditionally seen as being professionally isolated, marginalised and vulnerable during the school placement.

9.1.2 Online Learning Community and Professional Support

Besides the sense of emotional connectedness, in this study, student teachers were professionally connected through online interactions to their peers and supervisors as well as to realistic teaching practice during the school placement. The online learning community enabled the majority of student teachers to receive, as well as give, professional practice support, which empowered them to practice and acquire situated teaching tactics and broaden their horizons, allowing them to construct understanding of profound educational issues. Peers and supervisors provided student teachers with timely assistance and ideas that helped them deal with immediate instructional concerns or urgent problems encountered in the course of everyday teaching. Such professional support, to a large extent, helped alleviate student teachers' nervousness and anxiety about their ability to handle the demands of teaching when first entering the profession. Thus, the availability of online professional support from peers and supervisors made teaching a less daunting experience.

In addition, the online dialogue fundamentally nurtured and developed the majority of student teachers' long-term professional growth. Through the process of negotiating meaning and expanding their shared repertoire, student teachers were gradually equipped with a better understanding of what teaching meant to them and how they should contextualise their practice to suit their teaching purposes. The cultivation of student teachers' ability to relate abstract teaching theories to real teaching practice is particularly important, as learning to teach is increasingly viewed as a situated social practice (Johnson and Golombek, 2003; Hawkins, 2004) in which student teachers construct their knowledge and understanding of teaching by means of interaction with their supervisors and peers in real teaching contexts,.

These results are consistent with other research (Weasenforth, *et al*, 2002; Meyer 2003)

that shows that the interactive online communication provides student teachers with opportunities to explore in depth a wide range of topics which interest and concern them. The ongoing discussion allows student teachers to share multiple viewpoints, build on each other's input and explore alternative perspectives. The results corroborate the findings of a great number of the previous research studies in this field that student teachers are no longer exclusively restricted to classroom teaching with very limited and overly narrow exposure to the diversity of the school (Lortie, 1975; Schlagal *et al*, 1996; Zeichner, 1996; Tang, 2003). Instead, besides gaining a collective understanding of many teaching-related issues, they are able to exchange information, share ideas, make sense of situated practice and co-construct meaning together. Information and stories shared by their peers empower student teachers to look beyond one single school or classroom and therefore broaden their view to include other teaching environments.

The most common criticisms of the school placement are that it focuses on student teachers' application of technical skills but fails to engage them in exploring their beliefs, previous experience and knowledge that shape their practice (Lortie, 1975; Price, 1989; Richards, 1998); and that student teachers are confined to an individual classroom without proper support offered to experience a whole school and gain a broader understanding of educational system (Price, 1989; Guyton and McIntyre, 1990). Communication in an online learning community, as this study shows, fosters student teachers' professional growth in terms of both technical skills and widened perspectives of educational systems. Drawing on the wisdom of masses, the online communication encompasses different aspects of teaching, which provide student teachers with access to a wide range of perspectives on possible solutions to pedagogical practice or teaching-related problems. Overall, the finding of the current study is consistent with those of other researchers (see, i.e. Clarke, 2002; Stiler and Philleo, 2003; Barnett 2006; Kirschner and Lai, 2007) who have found the implementation of an online learning community or online CoPs to be a suitable model for use in supporting teachers' professional growth.

9.1.3 Online Learning Community and Collective Reflective Practice

The online learning community created for this study stimulated student teachers to conduct reflection collectively. Student teachers' willingness to examine their professional encounters in placement schools, and disclose their teaching problems in detail, created a solid foundation for the conduct of purposeful reflective dialogue in public with their peers and supervisors. Student teachers' open-mindedness, wholeheartedness and responsibility demonstrated in their collective reflection are found to corroborate the prerequisites highlighted by Dewey (1933) for people to become fully engaged in reflective practice. Student teachers' active online interaction is both the cause and consequence of their strong sense of togetherness and shared desire to survive and thrive in the teaching practice; therefore, the sharing of stories, problems, uncertainties, teaching techniques and successful teaching experience not only allows student teachers to articulate their thinking in public and unravel underlying meaning through re-constructing their experience in words, but invites their peers and supervisors to build up collective discussions. Moreover, the visibility of and access to each other's professional reflection, which may have been impossible outside such an online community, creates massive opportunities for student teachers to learn and reflect on their own teaching practice and hence illuminates insightful perspectives to improve situated knowledge as well as practice.

The non-linear nature of discussion in the context of computer-mediated communication, meanwhile, also contributes to student teachers' ongoing dialogue. This finding coincides with that of Berge and Collins (1995) who point out that because an online discussion can continue for several days or weeks, student teachers have a great deal of flexibility as to whether they participate in discussion, reread it, lurk in the background or reflect on it. In addition, in this very process of constructing narratives of teaching, exchanging views on what matters to them and what practice can best improve their learning-to-teach experience, student teachers are actively engaged in critical thinking and ongoing reflection in a collective manner. The collective dimension of online reflection, embracing the feature of interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction (Collin and Karsenti, 2011), encourages many student teachers to go beyond description to

critical inquiry. Deepened learning and critical thinking are therefore cultivated during the process of co-reflection.

9.1.4 Online Learning Community and Self-directed and Peer-supported Learning

In an educational system which is massively influenced by Confucianism, students are often thought of as dependent, quiet and uncritical learners. However, online discussions in this study effectively empowered student teachers to shift from teacher-orchestrated learning to self-directed and peer-supported learning. Student teachers were fostered to take ownership of their learning. They no longer viewed themselves as passive receivers of knowledge or their teachers as knowledge gurus or primary knowledge transmitters. Instead, many of them gradually became active sharers, providers and creators of knowledge in teaching practice. As a result, they began to recognise their own capacity for learning and depended less on their supervisors. Student teachers enjoyed acting as sources of support to their peers as well as replying on their peers as sources of support.

In the online learning community where everyone could make their voices heard freely, the control teachers have over students' right to speak in a traditional classroom setting was removed. This freedom to speak empowered student teachers and prompted them to take further initiative by expressing themselves, offering help and steering their own learning. Being able to provide support and receive it from others nurtured a sense of confidence and responsibility which in turn reinforced student teachers' initiative in taking control over their learning as well as their willingness to support each other's teaching practice.

9.1.5 Online Learning Community and Chinese Views of Learning and Relationship-building

The philosophical values and beliefs of Confucianism are entrenched in, and have a dominant impact on, Chinese views of learning. Among them, the notion of face, concern for others, respect for hierarchy, and emphasis on social harmony, collective orientation and self-reflection, to name just a few, have fundamentally defined and

shaped the practice of imparting knowledge, student-student interaction and student-teacher relationships. Chinese views of learning, therefore, emphasise teachers' authority and their status as knowledge gurus, that students should be obedient and diligent in their learning, and the importance of group effort to achieve communal goals and maintain harmonious relationships in the classroom (Hu, 2002b). In order to preserve harmony and prevent loss of face, Chinese students tend to avoid giving direct criticism (Hwang, 1987). This includes instances when the intention behind the criticism is to provide constructive suggestions to improve learning performance. In short, any interpersonal interactions that have the potential to threaten another's 'face' are generally avoided.

However, the findings of this inquiry provide striking evidence to suggest a reciprocal relationship between Chinese views of learning and the computer-mediated learning community. The findings indicated that the online mode of communication greatly impacted upon, and ultimately reshaped, the social and interactive behaviour patterns that student teachers and supervisors adopted. Freed from the constraints of direct face-to-face contact, online communications provided a degree of psychological comfort to student teachers that helped lessen their concern for face and hence make them comfortable enough to engage actively in sharing embarrassing professional encounters, voicing different opinions and critiquing each other's teaching performance and techniques. Student teachers were eager to make their voices heard since their opinions had been lost, or seldom-heard, in traditional classroom learning. Because this feeling of comfort supported student teachers' deep self-revelation and faithful self-expression, the online communications contributed to the emergence of a deepened understanding of their peers and supervisors, and new relationships blossomed between them. Online friendship between student teachers was nurtured and extended offline; a more equal student-teacher relationship surfaced and was welcomed (see, i.e., 8.1). Since an equal student-teacher relationship is unacceptable or even unimaginable in the traditional Chinese view of learning, the latter development can be seen as a revolutionary change.

On the other hand, Chinese views of learning exerted a reciprocal force on the building of online learning communities. The highly valued virtues embedded in Chinese views

of learning, such as collective interest, pursuit of communal goals, concern for others, and the importance of self-reflection and self-criticism, in turn, promoted enhanced collaborative learning and fostered collective reflective practice. In this study, the group interest of supporting the successful completion of school placements took precedence over individual needs, though it coincided with student teachers' individual interests. The congruity between the communal and personal goals motivated student teachers in their joint pursuit of this shared purpose. Moreover, the emphasis on self-reflection rooted in Confucianism and Chinese views of learning (*Confucius Analects*, 1990; Kim, 2003; Lai, 2006) has familiarised Chinese learners with self-reflective practice. Reflective practice, supported by the features of online communication and learning communities, as well as Chinese views of learning, was another joint act fostered by the reciprocity between culture and online technologies.

Meanwhile, the educational implications of Confucianism regarding the importance of conformity, social harmony and group orientation, gave rise to communal reinforcement, a form of group hegemony that may mislead student teachers into taking ideas or empirical opinions as fact or truth without questioning them. Findings suggest that the interplay between collective thinking and online communication has the tendency to turn a hotly-debated idea into a widely-accepted fact when it is repeated and reinforced by members in the learning community. The finding implies that in a society such as China where collective orientation, harmony and mutual trust are highly-regarded virtues as well as valued norms, group hegemony can cause disquiet because learners need mindful teachers to guide them in differentiating communally reinforced feelings or ideas from facts. The implication is that educators and researchers should be cautious about the dialectical features of online technologies: the very feature we embrace to support learning might threaten intended outcomes (Slaouti, 2007).

9.1.6 Online Learning Community and an Emerging Community of Practice

In the course of online communication and school placement, student teachers were observed to be actively involved in pursuing their common purpose of learning to teach. Through sharing ideas, negotiating meaning and constructing new understanding of

teaching issues, student teachers were engaged in ongoing online dialogic interactions with their peers and supervisors to decide what mattered to them and how they could improve their practice. For student teachers, the six-week school placement was ‘a set of issues’ (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 27), a domain of practice or a common purpose which was shared among all of them. This shared purpose was the catalyst for student teachers to engage in the online interaction and ‘figure out how our engagement fits in the broader scheme of things’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 162). The very process of being socially and emotionally connected and collectively making sense of teaching in realistic teaching contexts led to student teachers’ noticeable transformation in their professional learning. Not only did they survive in the pursuit of their common purpose together, but they also built up a collective history in the online learning environment. Such a collective and situated learning history evidenced their growth in terms of pedagogical content knowledge and deepened understanding of what teaching meant to them. Relying on each other and their supervisors, student teachers built up their confidence in teaching; developed and refined teaching techniques, new ideas, and theories in connection with real teaching practice; learned to critically evaluate their learning about teaching; and opened up new possibilities or alternative ways of optimising their teaching performance. Thus, a community of practice gradually emerged out of the online communication.

9.1.7 Online Learning Community and Administrative Support

One of the interesting findings of this study which has not been fully developed here, as it falls outside the main research focus, indicated that the online learning community could be a valuable tool in the provision of administrative and logistical support. As discussed previously in chapter one, schools and universities are often left in the dark once student teachers have been allocated to secondary schools across the country. Online learning communities allow institutions or universities to keep track of their student teachers’ progress during the school placement. Moreover, the opportunity to interact online provides distributed student teachers with access to the latest information about their teaching practice.

This study supports this cost- and hassle-free benefit of online communities. The unexpected finding is particularly significant for teacher training universities in China. Firstly, an increasing number of student teachers are being encouraged to secure their own placements in order to relieve pressure on institutions that admit they are unable to find enough secondary schools to accommodate all of the student teachers. Secondly, it reduces the universities' concerns about lack of access to what student teachers are doing in a placement school and how they are doing it.

9.2 Contributions

In this section, the contributions of this qualitative inquiry are presented from the following perspectives: methodological, professional and theoretical.

9.2.1 Methodological Contributions

A key methodological contribution of this qualitative inquiry is the detailed and transparent documentation of the analytical steps taken in exploring the data in order to answer the research questions. Despite their acknowledged importance, the actual analytical processes adopted in many qualitative studies are frequently not fully reported. In this work, I have faithfully provided an explicit account of some of the key methodological decision-making moments, my attempts to employ alternative methods of analysis, adoption and reasoning behind additional analytical steps, benefits and challenges of using both Chinese and English, evaluation of my subjectivity as a researcher, etc. All of the above are defining factors that have ultimately influenced and shaped the outcome of this study. In addition to helping establish the trustworthiness of the study, such an elaborate description is of value in terms of highlighting relevant implications for novice qualitative researchers who may be confronted with similar situations when conducting research elsewhere.

A further meaningful methodological contribution is the adoption of theoretical propositions from the conceptual framework of CoPs to analyse student teachers' online interactions and their perceptions of online learning, as well those of their supervisors.

The use of the three inherent propositions of CoPs (i.e., mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire) demonstrates an alternative way to understand learning in an online environment. Coupled with maintaining sensitivity to raw data, the study details how categories were created and refined by examining the indicators of each proposition. Employment of the three propositions provides an effective angle from which to tackle intricate issues, such as defining the unit of analysis when coding data and dealing with the multiple meanings of online dialogue. In recent years there has been increasing enthusiasm among researchers for exploring the characteristics of online collective learning in preservice teacher education within the framework of CoPs. However, employing that framework to unfold the occurrence and progression of online learning is still an underexplored area. It is therefore important to continue to evaluate the conceptual framework of CoPs rigorously in order to open up its potential and understand its limitations within an accountable framework (Bentley *et al.*, 2010).

9.2.2 Professional Contributions

The three key professional contributions this study makes in relation to preservice teacher education in China and other contexts will be presented as follows: the practicalities, challenges and potential value of creating an online learning community to support student teachers' learning-to-teach experience during school placement in the Chinese context and other similar teaching contexts.

9.2.2.1 Institutional Practicalities of Creating Online Learning Communities

In practical terms, there are a number of challenges to be overcome. For instance, there is increasing pressure on Normal Universities and teacher-training institutions to prepare large numbers of qualified teachers for secondary schools throughout China. In order to improve the underexplored and less than desirable current practice, teacher-training universities/institutions need to develop an appropriate overview of the challenges contained in China's preservice teacher education both now and in the future. The continuously rising number of undergraduates enrolled in the preservice teacher education programme challenges the ability of the universities to maintain the

significance of the school placement. Another challenging paradox exists between the acute demand for good teachers in both public and private sectors, and the increasing number of unemployed novice teachers, who cannot meet the requirements of elite secondary schools or private teaching organisations.

On the other hand, there are some promising aspects. On the governmental level, these include the fact that China's Ministry of Education has recognised the importance of ICT integration in teaching and learning, and that central and local governments are continuously investing in educational technologies in both universities and secondary schools. For their part, student teachers have adequate computer literacy skills; they benefit from increasing availability of personal computers, and access to the internet on university/school campus, in student accommodation and at home. On a research level, promising signs include Chinese teacher educators' increasing awareness of conducting empirical studies, and the availability of research implications from a large volume of international literature in the same, or similar, areas of study. All of the above provide a sound foundation for the integration of CMC into the preservice teacher education programme.

The successful completion of this study has provided a representative example which enables Chinese teacher educators and researchers to see its implications in the context of preservice teacher education across different subject disciplines in Normal Universities/teacher-training institutions. The research site, student teachers and supervisors involved in this study represent well the attributes of their counterparts in other Normal Universities throughout China, especially those institutions in less-developed provinces.

9.2.2.2 Identifying Challenges for Maintaining Online Learning Community

The second professional contribution is the means of overcoming challenges in relation to the sustainability and development of the online learning community.

Effective online supervision requires supervisors to be adequately **trained, supported**

and rewarded. Previous research (Moule, 2006) suggests that supervisors' lack of computer literacy could be a threat to their willingness and capacity to provide supervision in the online community. Essential ICT training should be given to enable supervisors to best provide student teachers with the support they need. A familiar and user-friendly online learning community would reduce the level of anxiety that supervisors may experience. As a result, their attention could be directed more effectively to communicating with student teachers and tackling their concerns. For instance, supervisor Liang recalled the time that she accidentally clicked a few buttons which resulted in the disappearance of a whole threaded discussion:

'I was totally stunned. My mind went blank. Instead of reading postings and communicating with student teachers, I spent a whole night trying desperately to solve the problem. After that accident, I was very cautious and afraid of making the same mistake again. That's the main reason why I stopped cross-reading postings from other supervisory groups.' (Interview with **Liang**)

Secondly, as previously pointed out, in Chinese universities, supervision is often less valued than teaching or research. Therefore it is of vital importance that academic staff involved in supervision be provided with adequate support. There are a few questions to which universities and researchers should seek workable answers. For instance, should supervision be given the same status as teaching and research? Should supervisors be given fewer teaching hours, or even no teaching commitments at all, during the course of school placement? How can IT support be best provided in order to respond to supervisors' needs in a timely manner? Should the time required for online supervision be allocated rigidly or at the supervisors' will? Answers to these questions will ultimately shape teachers' participation in online supervision.

Thirdly, online supervision automatically raises the tricky question of how universities can appropriately define the time and effort that supervisors devote to supporting student teachers. In this study, it proved difficult to quantify the supervisors' workload or the degree of support they provided. It is very likely that teachers who conduct online supervision while still fulfilling other teaching commitments as well as prioritising their

research could lack motivation or even refuse to play an active part in the school placement. This led to consideration of how supervisors could be rewarded according to the amount of time they spend on supervision.

Finally, successful online supervision and learning requires researchers to design the layout of online interactions carefully. For instance, in this study, the pre-determined discussion themes seem not to have taken into account the practical dissonance between the cohort of student teachers who conducted their school placement in institutions arranged by the university, and the other student teachers who were in different placement schools scattered across the country. It is common for the dispersed student teachers to start their school placement either before or after the schedule fixed by the university. This difference in scheduling can pose serious problems. Some student teachers pointed out that if they started ahead, there would be no discussion or guidance for them to follow. Others talked about the opposite situation, whereby they started their teaching practice later than their peers in the university-led school placement. When joining the discussion, they often found that the topics being dealt with were different from what they were doing in the school. Therefore, designing discussion-themes to suit different student teachers' practical needs is another important factor.

9.2.2.3 Implicational Value for Preservice, Inservice and TESOL Teacher Education

In light of the practicalities and challenges discussed above, the value of this qualitative inquiry lies in its direct transfer of insights to help policymakers and teacher educators address the prevailing issues in preservice teacher education in China through the careful implementation of online learning communities to support collective learning as well as supervision. Problems such as student teachers' sense of professional and emotional disconnectedness from their peers, the severe lack of supervision provided to dispersed student teachers and the continuing decline in the quality of school placements should be eradicated.

In addition, this study sheds some lights on ways of supporting and maintaining inservice teachers' continuous professional development in China through the

implementation of online learning communities. The strategic role ascribed to knowledge of English in national revitalisation by the Chinese leadership (Hu, 2002a) has given rise to a rushed and unprepared enormous expansion of EFL provision across China and a massive number of untrained teachers entering the teaching profession (Hu, 2005a). In order to effectively upgrade inservice teachers' knowledge base as well as their educational qualification(those in underdeveloped cities and rural areas in particular), the MOE has launched various training projects and particularly invested in modern educational technologies to optimise nationwide distance inservice teacher education. However, the severe lack of empirical and tangible research in the field of inservice teacher education and online learning has so far yielded little evidence to demonstrate the feasible model of online learning communities in promoting inservice teachers' continuous professional development (Gao and Zhang, 2009; McQuaide, 2011), nor has it addressed, the employment of online learning communities to create a collaborative learning experience that connects inservice teachers from different schools, cities, or rural areas to foster and promote their collegial dialogue of teaching with each other. The present study sheds professional and practical insights into how online learning communities can be created and maintained to better support those teachers' professional development.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the professional significance and implications of this study have been disseminated step by step through my involvement in the postgraduate TESOL programme at the University of Ulster. This MA TESOL programme offers a six-week overseas teaching practice placement in our partner secondary schools in the city of Győr, Hungary. As identified previously in the chapters of background and literature, some of the issues relating to teaching practice including supervisors' limited and rushed school visits, a top-down supervisory style, professional isolation, severe lack of collegiality between trainee teachers, and little chance to promote collective reflective dialogue, are causing some disquieting concerns in this similar programme. Working closely with other members in the TESOL team, we have tentatively set up an online discussion forum to guide and foster trainee teachers' interaction with peers and reflection upon their practice during their microteaching practice in the University. In addition, during their professional placement in Győr, Skype conferences are provided

by careful pre-arrangement to allow a group of five or six trainee teachers to sign up at a time for synchronous communication with their supervisor focusing on the discussion of emergent and tricky teaching issues.

In summary, it is hoped that some of the findings in this study will provide ‘sufficient and appropriate details’ for other teacher educators ‘working in a similar situation to relate his/her decision-making to that described in this ethnographic case study’ (Bassey, 1981, p. 85).

9.2.3 Theoretical Contributions

Two types of theoretical contribution will be discussed in this section. The findings of the study have contributed to an enriched theoretical understanding of the framework of communities of practice. They also provide theoretical insight into the potential interplay between online communication in learning communities and Chinese views of learning.

9.2.3.1 The Feature of Embeddedness

In this study, Figure 5.2 *Dimensions of practice as the property of a community* (Wenger, 1998: 73) were employed as an analytical toolkit to structure exploration of student teachers’ professional learning in an online learning community during the school placement. In using the three dimensions (mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire) as a point of departure from which to explore the data, I developed and refined a new perspective from which to reappraise the relationships between these dimensions. As noted in section 5.6.2 in chapter five, the relationships between the three dimensions are not single-layered, but multilayered within the characteristics of a hierarchical construct. The analogy of Russian nesting dolls can help to explain the feature of embeddedness between the three dimensions. Figures 9.1 and 9.2 below present reconceptualisation of the three dimensions in the framework of CoPs.

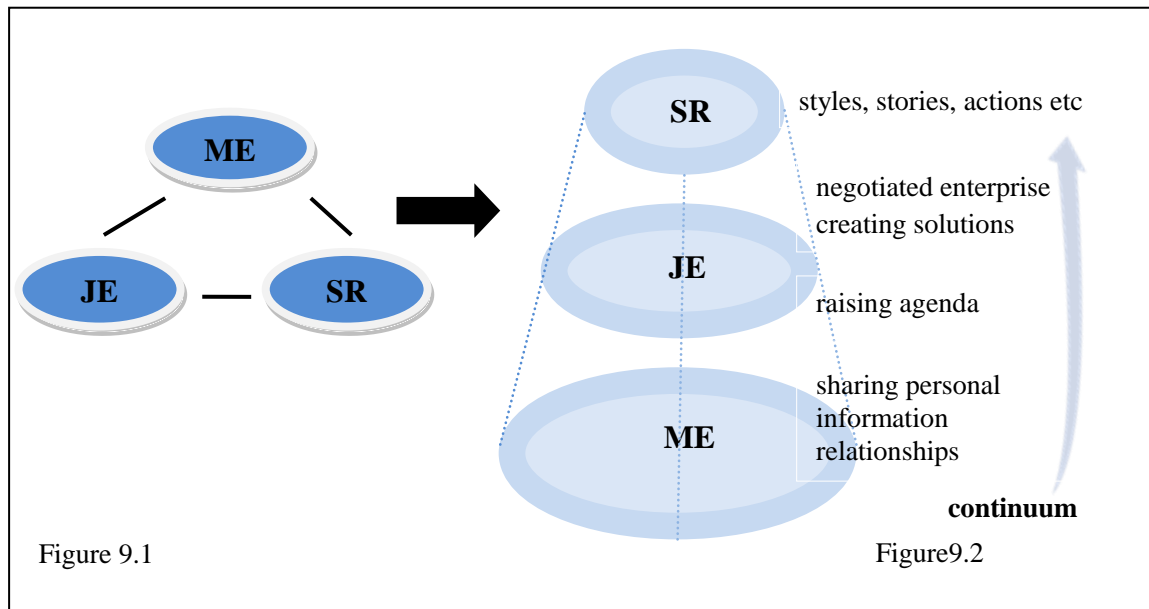


Figure 9. 1 Dimensions of practice as the property of a community (Wenger, 1998)

Figure 9.2 Reconceptualising the relationships of the three dimensions ME, JE and SR (Wenger, 1998)-Refined

For those who have dedicated themselves to researching online learning communities or online communities of practice to better support the learning experience and professional growth of a group of learners, this particular theoretical contribution provides a new understanding of the framework of CoPs and unveils the facts in two areas:

- It establishes the inherent feature of embeddedness between the three dimensions and clearly defines their hierarchical structure. In a community of practice, embodiment of any shared repertoire must embrace elements of members' mutual engagement as well as their joint enterprise. More importantly, this feature of hierarchical embeddedness becomes the key point in determining whether a particular community can be defined as a genuine community of practice.
- It restates the significance of mutual engagement as an indispensable grounding that nurtures opportunities to define and negotiate a domain of practice and ultimately leads to the construction of a shared learning history.

9.2.3.2 Reciprocity between Culture and Online Learning Communities

The elements of culture and their impact on the construction of an online community is an important research area that merits more empirical research, especially in the framework of CoPs. In recent years there have been an increasing number of studies dedicated to understanding how learners from a Confucian-heritage culture background construct learning in a CMC environment (Tu, 2001; Gerbic, 2005; Chen, 2006; Zhang and Huang, 2008). The majority of the studies are situated in an intercultural context where Chinese learners' online learning behaviour, perceptions of learning and outcomes of learning are compared with those of their Western counterparts. Moreover, the complexities embedded in the 'paradox of the Chinese learners', as highlighted by Biggs and Watkins (1996, p. 269), and the dynamics and profoundness of Confucianism, continue to pose both challenges and opportunities to conduct situated research that might shed light on the process and product of Chinese learners' online learning experiences, as well as their perceptions of such a learning experience.

The theoretical contribution made by this study to enriching understanding of Chinese learners in computer-mediated learning communities will be explained in the following points.

Many of the existing studies in this area focus primarily on importance of the impact of Chinese views of learning on Chinese learners, and insist on transferring this inference to the online learning community, regardless of the changed mode of communication. However, the findings of this work yield suggestive evidence of a reciprocal relationship between Confucian views of learning and online communications. Empirical studies on the reciprocal interplay between Confucian views of learning and online communications are yet to receive sufficient attention. Therefore, the first theoretical implication of this study lies in the fact that it offers scope for continuous research into how the positive characteristics of Confucianism can be utilised to support Chinese learners' online learning.

Secondly, although a great number of studies have explored Chinese learners' online

learning experience in various contexts in recent years, so far few have explored Chinese university teachers' online supervision experience, their perceptions of online interaction with student teachers, the challenges they experienced or the potential issues that need to be flagged. This work addresses that gap and contributes to theoretical understanding of Chinese teachers who, despite being equally important agents in learning, have not yet been researched sufficiently.

Thirdly, as discussed in chapter eight, an oversimplified and fractional view of Chinese learners still prevails in research into Confucian views of learning. This study synthesises the literature to justify the position that Chinese learners should not be classified simply as passive, rote-learning or lacking in critical thinking. On the contrary, the study demonstrates that Chinese students are familiar with self-reflection and self-criticism, and the integration of online learning communities creates the conditions to further enhance this important professional practice. Furthermore, this study provides new research scope for teacher educators and educational technologists to continue the exploration of online technologies to support student teachers' professional learning.

The final theoretical implication of this study concerns its methodological design. Devised as an ethnographic case study, this work involved an eleven-month situated investigation into a cohort of student teachers' online interactions in supporting their learning-to-teach experience during their school placement. The very characteristics of this study, such as its longitudinal nature, representative sample size and my prolonged involvement as both a researcher and a supervisor, help eliminate factors that might pose a threat to validation of the findings. This may help interpret some of the discrepant findings between prior studies and this research (e.g., 8.1.1). In addition, driven by the problem-solving approach, this research aimed to address the issue of student teachers' professional and psychological disconnectedness with peers and supervisors during the school placement. This was achieved through exploration of integration of an online learning community. In other words, the investigation of cultural aspects is not the driving force of this research, but a reflection on the researcher's theoretical sensitivity and curiosity. As a result, the research has maintained a balanced, cautious view and refrained from over-emphasising the impact of Chinese culture on student teachers'

learning. The two key findings which are described as being culturally-bound were drawn and validated as such only after other plausible alternative explanations of student teachers' and supervisors' online learning and supervision experiences had been exhausted. The featured methodological design helped consolidate and interpret the theoretical contributions asserted above.

9.3 Limitations

The limitations of this study lie in the two following areas. My intention in addressing them is to suggest that the success of the study should be evaluated within the context of its limitations. My introspective view of its limitations encouraged me to examine whether or not there are alternative approaches available to explore the same research topic.

9.3.1 Respondent Biases and Researcher Biases

Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight that respondent biases and researcher biases are potential threats to the trustworthiness of qualitative research. According to them, respondent biases comprise two key features, including participants' withholding information when they view the researcher as a threat, and the *good bunny* syndrome, whereby participants try to provide the answers which they believe the researcher needs. Researcher biases are defined by Lincoln and Guba (ibid) as the assumptions and preconceptions the researcher brings to the situation, which may have a significant impact on the decisions the researcher makes such as the selection of participants, selection of questions, or selection of data for analysing and reporting.

Upon completion of the study, I realised the importance of making the two types of bias transparent.

I must point out that throughout the research I have communicated faithfully with participants about the nature and purpose of the study. I have also reminded them that they are expected to engage in critical evaluation of their online learning-to-teach

experience for the purpose of enriching my understanding of factors contributing to, or impeding, the employment of the online learning community in supporting their school placement. Nevertheless, a few student teachers told me that they believed that helping me get the right result was important to them, and they therefore promised to try their best to communicate as much as possible with their peers. I have drawn upon two different sources of data to triangulate the analysis and interpretation of my findings. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge the possibility that I might have received biased input from those who viewed their participation as ‘doing me a favour’ because they ‘really liked me’ and, therefore, may have given me ‘socially correct’ answers.

The second form of bias involves my own subjectivity. I confess that I am an enthusiastic supporter of the use of online learning communities to support preservice teacher learning. Again, whilst I am fully aware of the assumptions I may have brought to this particular study, and I have endeavoured to ensure the rigour of the study through constant reflection on, and articulation of, my assumptions, I cannot help asking myself whether taking the role of non-participant researcher would have helped me tackle the process of data analysis more objectively. I also need to make it clear that my intercultural experience of living and studying in the UK has fundamentally shaped my view on the type of relationship teachers should have with their students. Therefore, when I communicate the findings on relationship-building between student teachers and supervisors, I concede that my unique experience clearly differentiates my supervision style from that of the two other supervisors. The interpretation of my supervision, patterns of interaction and the relationships with students developed over time may not be representative enough. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted and a non-participant research approach could be considered as an appropriate alternative.

9.3.2 Methodological Limitations

In section 9.2, I stated that one of the contributions of the study lies in the analytical approach adopted. I claimed that the employment of theoretical parameters drawn from the conceptual framework of CoPs proved successful in structuring the data analysis. My attempt, together with the transparent documentation of the analytical phases, may shed

some light on future research which endeavours to explore the same area.

However, I am aware that the use of theory in qualitative data analysis can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provided me with useful insights into exploring the richness and dynamics embedded in the collected data. The analytical product also enriches understanding of the complexities of the three inherent dimensions of CoPs. On the other hand, I realise that it may constrain or limit the interpretation of findings. Although I have made my theoretical assumptions and choice of data analysis method clear, the above factors should be taken into consideration when the findings of the study are examined.

9.4 Suggestions for Future Research

This study has highlighted and confirmed the significance of integrating online learning communities into student teacher education to enhance their learning-to-teach experience and ensure a smooth transition from students-of-teaching to teachers-of-students. In addition, it has yielded new insights into student teachers' functioning in the context of an online learning environment. Furthermore, the study has enriched understanding of the reciprocal relationship between Chinese Confucian culture and learning in the context of CMC. With regard to reinforcing its significance in fostering distributed student teachers' professional growth, I provide the following suggestions on the creation of online learning communities to support school placement:

Exploring negative cases Although the online community of practice provided a means of alleviating the sense of disconnectedness and made supervision possible, online learning would not necessarily work for every student teacher, and therefore should be regarded as a powerful option, rather than a panacea. One negative case was identified in this study. One of the student teachers, who was categorised as a participant with low-involvement in the online communication, seemed not to understand the meaning of online discussion. Although she was quite active in the interview and expressed her opinions on her teaching practice experience, she seemed at a loss whenever I asked her a question relating to her online learning and communication.

When I asked her if the online communication made a difference to her learning during the school placement, she gave a negative answer. A couple of student teachers chose to opt out at the beginning of the school placement, although they did show interest in participating in the online communication. When asked about their reason for quitting online communication, their answers did not yield any concrete information. There is a need for further research into non-participation and negative cases, in order to maximise the potentialities of the online learning community in supporting the school placement in preservice teacher education.

Clarifying the role(s) of the supervisor Two of the supervisors in this study embraced the use of an online learning community to provide supervision and support student teachers' professional learning. However, they were uncertain about issues such as their role(s) in the online community, student teachers' expectations of supervision, and their own expectations of their supervision in terms of appropriate communication and online behaviour. As a result, they experienced a sense of role ambiguity and uncertainty when interacting with student teachers. They felt that they had failed to fulfil the expectations mentioned above. This indicates that the lack of clarity surrounding supervisors' role(s) had an influence on their involvement in online communications and supervision. Moreover, the interplay between Chinese views of learning and the online interactions will continue to pose challenges for supervisors who need to adjust to student-directed learning and to the loss of their absolute control over student teachers. Therefore, the establishment of an explicit understanding of supervisors' multiple roles, and ways of fulfilling them, in the online community will ultimately influence the type and quality of support they can offer to student teachers, and consequently, student teachers' satisfaction with the support they receive.

Areas worth further exploration More research should be conducted in the following areas to enrich understanding of online learning communities as well as the framework of CoPs in supporting preservice teachers' professional learning in Confucian heritage countries:

- Further research on the interplay between Chinese culture and the online ecology

should be conducted in order to gain confirmation, as well as a more solid understanding, of the reciprocal relationship between socio-cultural factors and CMC.

- A research area that is worthy of examination is the relationship between teacher cognition and the integration of online technologies in supporting teacher education in HEIs in China. At present, the Chinese government's continuous emphasis on the paramount importance of teacher education and ICT innovation in education (MOE, 2004; Hu, 2005a; Li *et al.*, 2011) requires university teachers and teacher trainers, in particular, to embrace the use of technologies in their professional practice; this will enable them to fulfil the performance standards laid out by the policymakers. This study identified supervisors' positive attitudes towards contributions of the online community in supporting learning as well as their concerns about the sustainability of online supervision. Research into culturally-situated teacher cognition on ICT in education and its impact on university teachers' ICT practice is highly likely to yield insights that contribute to the integration of ICT into teaching. This, in turn, will illuminate issues that need ironing out to facilitate supervisors' embracement of online technologies to enhance student teachers' professional learning.
- It would be fruitful to conduct research exploring how such an online professional learning experience can influence and shape the way that a teacher thinks about and conducts his/her teaching in their first year after qualification. More specifically, the long-term impact of the learning-to-teach experience on new teachers' formulation and conceptualisation of teacher identity is an area that is particularly worth exploring.
- The dynamics of relationships between student teachers and supervisors in traditional classrooms as well as an online environment is another area that merits further research. Comparative studies will undoubtedly provide broader insights into what constitutes good practice for student teachers to optimise their professional learning and supervisors to offer the most needed support.

Conclusion

In summary, this piece of research has shown that the online learning community is a valuable forum which provides student teachers with the necessary emotional and professional support to enable them to survive and thrive in a daunting and transitional learning-to-teach experience. A community of practice emerges during the course of student teachers' active engagement in their self-directed and peer-supported interactions with peers and supervisors. In this emergent and transitional online community of practice, student teachers 'act as resources for each other, exchanging information, sharing new tricks and ideas, making sense of situations, making the job possible and the atmosphere pleasant as well as keeping each other company and spicing up each other's working days' (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). In this study, student teachers developed new perceptions of learning, new friendships and new understandings of their peers and supervisors; they enriched professional knowledge and broadened their educational perspectives through co-constructing meaning together; they began to show their capacity for brokering other teaching communities. The student teachers in this study have demonstrated that they are a vibrant professional community that learns, grows and transforms.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Informed Consent for Participants

A PhD student in the University of Manchester, I am conducting a research project exploring the role of information and communications technology in preserve teacher education in China. The research will attempt to explore the optimal application of educational technology to support the school placement in Chinese Normal Universities. It is hoped that the final report may be of benefit to the school and to those who take part. I would therefore like to gain your permission of being part of the research in which you will be involved in participating in the **online learning environment** for 8 weeks from March to May, **an end of online learning evaluation** and **a semi-structured interview afterwards**. The interview will last 30 minutes in which I hope to gain your permission to audiotape the interview.

Under no circumstances your identities will be revealed to anyone for any other purposes other than to be assessed by Manchester University for the completion of my PhD research only. All information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without any detriment to you. You have right to access the data, verify statements when the research is in draft form. A copy of the final report will be sent to you if you are interested. Your permission will be sought from if the issue of publication arises at a later stage.

Your kind assistance would be greatly appreciated.

Signed_____ Date_____

The researcher has explained to me the nature of her observation and interview. I consent to allow her to observe classes twice and conduct an interview afterwards as she requests.

Signed_____ Date_____

Appendix 2: An Overview of the Threaded Discussions

The following is a summary of the 38 threads used for data analysis. For demonstrative purpose, I have categorised them into six types as follows. The first five types of threads were designed jointly by two supervisors and me and initiated by me. Threads 19 and 20 were originally designed in a weekly format. However, I found it beneficial for student teachers to have access to all the discussions on shared techniques and skills, and lesson planning in a continuous manner, rather than six individual threads in a weekly format. The rearrangement of threads is well supported by the functionality of Moodle. Therefore, at the end of each week's discussion, the two threads were transferred to the discussion forum in the following week for easy access.

The last type of threads was initiated by student teachers themselves. The official start date of school placement, organised by the School of Foreign Languages was on 3rd March. The school placement lasted six weeks till 11th April. Since some distributed student teachers began their placement either a few days earlier or later than the one arranged by the School, the first week threaded discussion commenced on 27th February, 2008.

No. of Threads	Types of Threads	Duration of Discussion	
		Date of first posting	Date of last posting
	Helen's supervisory group (侯老师指导区)		
1.	Week One	27/02/2008	12/03/2008
2.	Week Two	09/03/2008	22/03/2008
3.	Week Three	17/03 /2008	23/03/2008
4.	Week Four	24/03/2008	01/04/2008
5.	Week Five	31/03/2008	07/04/2008
6.	Week Six	07/04/2008	17/04/2008
	Sharing the unforgettable/interesting/ embarrassing experiences of the week 分享一周最有趣/难忘/尴尬的一件事儿		
7.	Week one	27/02/2008	18/03/2008
8.	Week two	09/03/2008	19/03/2008
9.	Week three	17/03 /2008	22/03/2008
10.	Week four	24/03/2008	30/04/2008
11.	Week five	31/03/2008	08/04/2008
12.	Week six	07/04/2008	14/04/2008
	My teaching and classroom observation (上课记听课记)		
13.	Week one	27/02/2008	18/03/2008

14.	Week two	09/03/2008	19/03/2008
15.	Week three	17/03 /2008	25/03/2008
16.	Week four	24/03/2008	30/04/2008
17.	Week five	31/03/2008	08/04/2008
18.	Week six	07/04/2008	13/04/2008
	Discussion of lesson planning, teaching techniques and skills (教案讨论教学技巧分享区)		
19.	Week two—six Sharing teaching techniques and skills 教学技巧方法分享	09/03/2008	14/04/2008
20.	Week three—six Lesson planning discussion 教案讨论区	17/03/2008	11/04/2008
	Other discussions (其他话题讨论区)		
21.	Week one—six Other discussions	27/02/2008	09/04/2008
	Threads initiated by student teachers		
22.	Week one—The first week of my school placement 实习一周了	07/03/2008	08/03/2008
23.	Week one—My first day of school placement 实习第一天	29/02/2008	07/03/2008
24.	Week one—My feelings 我的感觉	29/02/2008	09/03/2008
25.	Week two— Sharing students' psychological characteristics and corresponding strategies to educate them 分享初中生高中生的心理特点及相应教育措施	09/03/2008	17/03/2008
26.	Week two—Sharing a technique of marking students' assignments 分享一个改作业的方法	08/03/2008	12/04/2008
27.	Week two—Sharing methods for maintaining a strong voice and making yourself heard in class 分享在课堂让声音洪亮的方法	09/03/2008	17/03/2008
28.	Week two—Let's discuss the teaching of reading 有关阅读教学的讨论	10/03/2008	17/03/2008
29.	Week three—Help! The themes of class meetings 救助 主题班会	21/03/2008	27/03/2008
30.	Week three—How to write a weekly teaching journal? 实习周记怎么写呀	19/03/2008	31/03/2008
31.	Week three—Collection of frequent asked questions in class 课堂问题大收集	19/03/2008	02/04/2008
32.	Week four—Why class observation is effective for learning about teaching? 听课为什么收获不大?	26/03/2008	07/04/2008
33.	Week five—Confidence, habit, methods? 信心习惯方法	01/04/2008	06/04/2008
34.	Week five—Help! Urgent! 救命呀, 十万火急!	01/04/2008	01/04/2008
35.	Week six—Fear of not knowing our shortcomings 最怕自己不知道哪里不知道	02/04/2008	05/04/2008
36.	Week six—Post-reflection after the teaching practice 实习后的反思	11/04/2008	14/04/2008
37.	Week six—We're free at last 解放了	12/04/2008	12/04/2008
38.	Week six—What will happen to our forum after completion of teaching practice? 实习结束后论坛怎么办?	13/04/2008	18/04/2008

Appendix 3: End of Evaluation

Below are a number of statements about your feelings about using the online learning space (www.gooele.org) to communicate with others and your online learning experience during the school placement. There is **NO ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer**. I am interested in your personal opinion. Please give your answer sincerely as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation. Thanks very much for your help and attention!

For each statement, **tick one response** for each statement.

A. Never true of me (NT)

D. Mostly true of me (MT)

B. Mostly not true of me (MNT)

E. Very true of me (VT)

C. Sometimes true of me (ST)

F. Not sure; undecided (NS)

Statements	N T	M N T	S T	M T	V T	N S
1. The online communication was an enjoyable learning experience during my school placement.						
2. The weekly-guided online communication guided me to focus on important issues in each week.						
3. The online communication made me feel connected and not isolated.						
4. The online communication made me become more reflective on my teaching practice.						
5. The online communication improved my ability to deal with issues related to teaching (such as relationship between teachers and students, classroom management, teaching methods, decision making.)						
6. The online communication offered me affective support.						
7. The online community provided me with a channel to express different emotions during school placement.						
8. Online supervisors were approachable.						
9. Technical problems demotivated me.						
10. I felt I was too busy to participate in online communication.						
11. University supervisors' online supervision was timely and helpful.						
12. Peer students were supportive in the online learning community during the school placement.						

Statement	N T	M NT	S T	M T	V T	N S
13. I got to know my peers better through the online communication though we had been classmates for four years.						
14. Online supervisors were more like a friend with wisdom.						
15. Online supervisors were no longer a mere authoritative figure.						
16. I felt less dependent on my supervisor's ideas and suggestions as the online communication went on during the school placement						
17. I feel more motivated to communicate when my supervisor communicated more online.						
18. I felt more motivated to communicate when my peers communicated more online.						
19. I learnt many teaching skills by reading peers' online discussion.						
20. The thought of losing face made me reluctant to share embarrassing experiences online.						
21. During the online communication, I tended to observed rather than reply to or initiate a discussion.						
22. During an online discussion I went along with the group opinions even though I did not fully agree with them.						
23. I spoke my mind freely during an online discussion.						
24. I felt guilty if I did not communicate much online.						
25. I felt obliged to participate in the online discussion.						
26. I felt comfortable to disagree with my supervisors' ideas and statements online.						
27. I felt it beneficial to cross-read other groups' discussion.						
28. I was satisfied with my online interaction.						

Please feel free to add below any comments or views that you think have not been covered in this questionnaire:

Thanks for your time!

Appendix 4 Semi-structured Interview Prompts (Student teachers)

The interview prompts included questions I intended to explore. Worth pointing out is that I did not ask all of the questions in each interview. The reason was because that the interviewed student teachers were categorised into four different groups according to their different levels of online participation. And all the questions listed in the following table were not asked in the same sequence.

<p>The role of online learning community during the school placement:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To what extent and in what aspects is the use of the online learning community affecting positively on your school placement?2. How would you describe your learning in the online community?3. In what ways is the online communication a pleasant learning experience? (All student teachers in the questionnaire claimed that the online learning was an enjoyable learning experience.)4. In what ways does the online community affect your learning? (95% student teachers in the questionnaire said the online communication helped them improve their ability to deal with issues related to teaching)5. What are the negative aspects of your online learning experience?
<p>Student teachers' view of their supervisor's support</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What support have you received from your supervisor?2. How do you think of your supervisor's online supervision?3. In what ways does the online communication affect your views about your supervisor?4. What do you feel about the relationship you have with your supervisor in the online learning communication?5. Why do you think your supervisor is more like a friend? (75% student teachers in the questionnaire said so)
<p>Student teachers' view of their peers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do you think of your peers in the online forum?2. What are the things you have learnt from your peers?3. How do you think about your communication with your peers?
<p>Online interaction and behaviour:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What do online communications affect your relationship with your supervisor? How would you describe the pattern of interaction and communication with peers and supervisors in the online community?

2. In what ways do online communications affect the way you communicate your ideas? (80% say they speak their mind freely)
3. In what ways do the online communications affect the way you express your feelings?
4. In what ways is cross-reading beneficial? (All student teachers claimed they crossed read postings)
5. What factors motivate you to communicate?
6. Half of you said you sometimes tend to observe rather than reply to or initiate a discussion, what are the reasons for you to do so?
7. When you say you never or hardly ever lurk, what are the reasons?
8. What do you feel about sharing embarrassing experience online? (More than half of the student teachers said they never considered the thought of losing face online?)

Relationship-building over time:

1. How do you think of the online relationship among members of the online community?
2. What do online communications affect your relationship with your supervisors?
3. What do online communication affects your relationship with your peers? When 85% you say you know your peers better through online communication, by 'better', what do you mean?

Other questions

1. What are other things you would like to talk regarding your online learning experience?

Appendix 5 Semi-structured Interview Prompts (Supervisors)

General questions to know their previous experiences of school placement supervision

1. How long have you been supervising student teachers?
2. How many students do you often supervise?
3. How often do you go to the placement school to meet them?
4. Could you describe a typical supervision meeting you would have with your students in your previous supervision?
5. What other aspects of your previous school placement would you like to talk about?

The role of online learning community in supporting the school placement:

1. To what extent and in what aspects, if any, is the use of the online learning community affecting, either positively or negatively, your supervision in the school placement?
2. What impact do you think of the online learning community has on the student teachers?
3. What do you think of the online communication?
4. What differences/similarities do you notice about online supervision and onsite supervision?
5. What concerns do you have regarding the use of online learning community during school placement?

Teachers' online supervision experiences

1. How do you think of your online supervision?
2. What support or guidance do you give to your student teachers?
3. How do you think about the students' learning in the online community? (for one supervisor of the two: once in a causal talk we had, you gave me an example to illustrate how you felt you were learning by supervising your students which was something you never got from the previous supervision, could you talk about it in more details?)
4. What is the pressure you feel when supervising online? (Both of you once said you feel you were under pressure which is something you never experienced before, what do you mean by feeling under pressure? How does this affect your supervision?)
5. What do you mean by saying that student teachers were empowered the right to speak in the online community? (For another supervisor, once you said students were empowered the right of speaking in the online community and you are no longer be able to control who should/shouldn't speak, what do you mean by saying that? Can you explain a bit more? How do you think about this phenomenon?)

Online interaction

1. In what ways does the online communication affect your views about your student teachers?
2. How would you describe the pattern of interaction and communication with student teachers in the online community?
3. Do you cross-read the postings? What are reasons for you to do the cross-reading? How do you feel about other colleagues' online supervision?
4. How does the online space affect the way you supervise your students?

Relationship-building over time:

1. What do you think of your communication with your students?
2. What do you learn about your students through online communication?
3. How does the online communication affect your relationship with your students and colleagues?

Other questions

1. Will you be willing to supervise student teachers in the online community again if the intervention is adopted by our school? What factors do you think need to be addressed?

Appendix 6: A Sample Interview Transcript with Student Teachers (Both the Translated and Original Chinese Versions)

The following is a sample transcript of the second group interview that I had with six student teachers whose online participation was categorised as upper-medium in light of the number of their web logs and number of posts.² The sample presents the transcribed discussion of the first thematic prompt (Appendix 4_1): student teachers' view of the role of online learning community. I began the interview by briefing the descriptive findings of the questionnaire that they did before the interview and then started with questions as shown in Appendix 4.

Helen: ...Ok, in light of the claim from everyone that the online learning is an enjoyable experience and you regard it positive, I would like to ask in what aspects and to what extent you think the online learning community positively affected your school placement experience?

Yuanqiong: We get all connected with our classmates, you and our supervisor. Had it not been this media, we wouldn't have been so actively engaged in learning to teach, ask so many questions and get so much support. If using other communicational channel like making telephone calls, we would have asked few questions or got little help. [The rest of the group is nodding their head and smiling.] **Fengyu:** It's extremely useful, extremely positive. It's just good! [Everyone laughs.]

Helen: So you mean, it enables you to directly ask your classmates or supervisor for help?

Zhiqing: Yes. Yes. In my opinion, there are two aspects that the online learning is positive. Firstly, during the online communication in the community, we as novice teachers have learnt how to think and reflect better. A lot of the methods we learnt in the

² The interview excerpt is included with the consent of the student teachers.

ELT methods course are very theoretical and abstract, because we communicate together; we learn how to understand the actual use of the theories into our practice. The second is that we rely on each other emotionally. According to what I know about the teaching practice conducted by the previous students, most of them chose not to have their placement organised by our School, so they had no contact or little supervision from teachers in the university. There was little chance for them to communicate or solve pedagogical problems together. Now, because of the online community, we are all connected to our classmates and supervisor. This enhances communication and supported us. [The rest of group is nodding their head and saying ‘Yes’ while she is talking.]

Wangyang: You know, I’ve had my teaching practice in my hometown. It’s, of course, so much easier to conduct the school placement in one’s own hometown. My parents take care of me and cook for me, and I only need to focus on teaching. I am the only student teacher working in the school, so I feel quite lonely. But, our online community makes us connected. One of the reasons I like the online interactions is that it’s so easy to get inspiration from my classmates and supervisors. I frequently find good teaching techniques or ideas from reading postings. Not only do I want to try those techniques and ideas in my own class, but it also makes me want to stretch or challenge myself a bit to become as creative as them.

Fangyu: Can I add something? I think, were it not for the online community, I’d be very upset. My school is new and strange to me. The atmosphere in the school and office is depressing. You just can’t help feeling depressed there. I feel like my negativity and the pressure are alleviated when I come back to see everyone here and we communicate with each other online. When you know you are with your pals and teachers, the sense of assurance makes teaching practice different. I’ve gained tremendous emotional support and it helped me complete my practice more smoothly. [All are nodding their head.]

Nachen: I agree too. The most important part to me is the spiritual support from peers and the supervisor. **Yuanqiong:** Just like, you feel you know what they are talking about and they you what you are talking about. [Everyone laughs and nods their head]

continuously]

Helen: How would you describe your learning in the community?

Wangyang: I think it's enjoyable and I have learnt a great deal from reading the messages and communicating with my classmates and supervisor. [Others: Yeah, I agree too.] Because there are so many of us participating in the online community, the dialogue is not just between two individuals. You get all types of information, advice, different answers and sometime unexpected, innovative answers, and then you can have more options and incorporate all of the ideas to find out the best way of solving problems. [Others are nodding.] **Mulan:** I also think it more flexible. No restriction of time or space. I can choose when to ask and answer questions. It's just so convenient. **Nachen.** Yeah, yeah. I think it's much freer. Everyone, including both us and supervisors, has more freedom to ask or answer questions. And the online communication provides us with enough time to think and, therefore, we are more able to give a more holistic and accurate answer. **Yuanqiong:** I want to add something different that I strongly feel about our online learning, I think it gives me more motivation because I decide what I'd like to know and learn from my own situation. And another good thing about online learning is I am not alone. **Zhingqing:** Eh, I think there is a clear sense of purpose. What do I want to know, and what can I learn from my peers and supervisors?

Helen: Thanks. Very interesting. All of you here said in the questionnaire that the online communications help you improve your ability to deal with problems related to teaching. In what ways does the online community affect your learning?

Fangyu: It's simple and straightforward. If I don't know something or feel uncertain about a language point, I just post a message to ask for help. **Yuanqiong:** I think it changes my ways of learning and thinking. For example, I remember I saw a question asked by Nanwang, but at that time I didn't know how to give a good answer to help her. But in the following day, when I saw the advice and answers from other classmates, I would be enlightened to come up with some different, new answers. I feel having access to others' view can stimulate me to create new ideas. I'd say our online community is a

very good learning platform fostering us to learn from each other and improving learning together. [**Zhiqing** and **Wangyang** nod their head.] **Wangyang**: I have some similar feelings too. Because we are all novice teachers, we are bound to face a lot questions and challenges we have never met before. Sometime, I can't help thinking why I am so incompetent. I then lose self-confidence because I can't answer many questions. But when communicating with peers online, I realise the problems I face are almost the same as the ones every other classmate has, I just feel so relieved. I don't feel so terrified by those questions. Secondly, especially when you see so many classmates brainstorm their different ways to solve problems, you can draw on their ideas to decide the suitable way to face and solve the problem, then, I feel more assured. **Mulan**: another thing is, most of us are distributed to different schools to conduct our teaching practice alone. Each school is different with its own characteristics. Through online communications, we get to know other schools' features and there will be some good idea(s) that we can pinch from our classmates and use them in our own teaching. In this way, we've compared and broadened our views of different teaching methods, and better teaching techniques and models. **Nachen**: It's like to draw on the wisdom of masses. [Everyone smiles and nods their head.]

Helen: Er, very interesting indeed. You have talked about the positive aspects, what are the negative aspects of your online learning experience?

All: No, nothing. Nothing negative. [Looking at each other, they shake their head.]

Helen: [laughing] Nothing ? Really? Are you sure there is nothing bad or you don't like?

Mulan: Nothing. We all enjoyed it, didn't we? It supported us so much. How can we dislike it? Er...I will tell my story one more time.

Helen: What is it?

Mulan: Our online community was my saviour. I know I've told the story many times. [Everybody laughs. **Nachen:** Yes, I know what you are going to say. [She laughs. So does Mulan.]] I was given an exercise lesson with less than three hours' notice. Two hours' preparation for a lot of grammar exercises with no reference answers provided! Plus, grammar has always been my weak point. I got stuck on a few prepositional phrases and wasn't sure if my answers were correct, or how I should go about explaining them. I decided to try my luck and used the computer in the teachers' office to log on to our forum. Really a desperate attempt, now I look back! It was around 2pm, and I was due to teach in 30 minutes' time. Anyway, I posted the questions, refreshed the screen every 30 seconds and was anxious to see a reply. And guess what, I did get a reply! Yeshuai was online at that moment. It was so close. Thanks goodness for our community; otherwise, I would have been so dead. [Everyone laughs happily.]

Helen: Oh, it's dramatic. I didn't know that. So, Yeshuai saved you then?

Mulan: Yes, he did. That's why I don't think there's anything bad or negative about our online community. [Others laugh.]

Original Chinese Transcripts

Helen: 上个星期我们做了一次数据收集...那, 我要问的第一个问题是根据大家的问卷得出的结果。大家都认可这个网上论坛的积极作用, 现在我想问从哪些层面或者说在哪种基础上你们觉得它是积极的影响了你实习这一段时间的经历?

Yuanqiong: 和同学, 你, 还有我们自己指导老师的交流。如果没有这个媒介的话我们遇到什么问题就没有这么积极的去问, 也不会这么积极学习如何搞好教学, 同时也得不到那么多的帮助。通过其他途径像电话就会问得少很多。[大家都点头认可, 微笑] **Fangyu:** 实在太有用了, 超级正面积极的影响, 反正就是好。[大家笑。]

Helen: 那你的意思是说, 网络论坛能让你自己跟同学和导师直接联系上, 并获取帮助?

Zhiqing: 是的，是的。我觉得从个人的角度来说的话我觉得有两个方面。一个是我们这些新老师在网络交流的过程中学会了更好地思考。因为我们以前学的一些教学法，教育学各个方面学到的东西都是非常理论抽象的东西，通过交流讨论，就学会怎样把理论，运用自己教学中去。另一个方面就是让我们情感有依靠。根据以前的师兄师姐实习的情况看，他们很多也都是不会跟我们学院实习，大部分的学生在和指导老师的交流和解决教学问题的机会是很少的，最多也就是打个电话什么的。但现在通过这个网络交流我们同学之间，与指导老师之间更好的起到了交流的作用。[大家点头认可。]

Wangyang: 大家都知道，我是在老家实习的。在家实习肯定有好多方便的地方。有爸妈照顾有好吃的，我只要全力以赴搞实习就行了。不过我今年是学校里为一个的一个实习老师，觉得挺孤单的。所以有了网络论坛就把我们都联系起来了。我喜欢网上交流的其中一个原因是，大家交流容易让我找到灵感。我经常在浏览帖子的时候发现好些教学方法和技巧。我不仅偷师学艺，我还进行改革，受启发也想自我挑战一下，让自己变得比较有创意。

Fangyu: 我能补充一点吗？我个人觉得，要是没有我们这个论坛，我的实习就太让我郁闷了。我对我实习的学校一无所知。而且整个学校和老师办公室的气氛都比较压抑。待在那里人也忍不住跟到压抑喏。回家上网跟大家网络交流，帮我把负面的想法，压力呀，情绪什么的，都排解好多。你想你跟老师和同学是在一起的，心里是比较有底的。所以我觉得论坛给我的积极影响就是精神上的极大支持。让我实习变得顺利。[大家一边听一边点头认可。]

Nachen: 我也是这种感觉。最重要是能获得老师和同学们精神上的支持。

Yuanqiong: 啊呀，就是心心相印，相互理解。[大家笑，一直点头。]

Helen: 那你如果看待你在论坛上的学习？

Wangyang: 我觉得很舒服。感觉自己通过读大家的帖子还有跟知道老师和自己的同学交流学到非常多东西。[大家插嘴，嗯，是的我也有同感] 因为网络论坛上参与的人比较多，不是单一的对话，网上可以得到很多各种各样信息，建议，同个问题不同的答案，还有些奇思妙想的东西，可选择性就广了，你可以汇总各种资源得到你觉得最好的决绝问题的方法。[大家点头附和。]

Mulan: 我还觉得比较网上学习比较灵活。不受空间时间的限制。可以自己选择哪个时候问

问题回答问题，时间上很方便。

Nachen: 对，对。我也觉得我网上学习更自由。每个人都比较自由，包括提问的，和回答问题的老师同学都比较自由。而且会让回答者有足够的时间去思考，从而能做出更全面和准确的答案。

Yuanqiong: 我还想说点不同的，我自己感触深的。我网上的交流人让我积极性提高了，因为我自己决定自己想学什么东西来处理我自己的教学情况。还感觉学习不孤独了。

Zhiqing: 恩，就是有比较明确的目的性，知道自己需要学习什么？可以从老师同学那里学到那些东西？

Helen: 谢谢大家的积极发言。很有意思。那在问卷里，在座的各位都说网上交流帮助你提高了处理教学的能力。那大家能说说看，这个网络交流是怎样对你的学习产生影响的？

Fangyu: 很简单直接嘛，就是不懂或是不确定一个教学点的时候，就发帖求助呗。

Yuanqiong: 我觉得是改变了我学习和思考方式。例如王楠提出一个问题，我去看到了，当时没有什么答案能帮助他，可第二天看到别的同学给出了一些建议和答案，我自己会受他们的建议得到一些启发，而想到不同于他们的新的答案，别人的观点可以刺激你产生你自己的新的观点。所以说这是一种互相推动互相促进的很好的交流学习的平台。[Zhiqing 和 Wangyang 点头赞同。]

Wangyang: 我也是有类似的感受。因为我们都是新老师，实习生，当我们去到一个学校实习肯定面对很多从没遇到过的问题和考验，有时候难免就会想问什么自己怎么这么差呀，就被很多问题弄得心里很没有底，可当你到网上去和同学交流的话，你会发现其实你遇到的很多问题担心什么的其实是每个同学都会遇到的。就会感到也这些问题也并不那么可怕了，其次，特别是看到很多同学在论坛上进行头脑风暴，想出各式各样的解决办法，自己就可以选择适合自己的方法去面对和解决问题了，然后自己心里就有底了。

Mulan: 还有就是，因为我们是单一的分散实习，是自己去找实习学校，而每个学校的特点都不一样。通过网上的交流你可以知道别的学校不同的特点，有些好的 idea 你可以借用到自己的实习上，从而比较两个或是更多的学校的教学方法得到你觉得更好的一些方法和教学模式。

式。

Nachen: 就是集百家所长。[大家微笑点头]

Helen: 嗯，真是挺有趣的。好，大家讨论了我们网上论坛的积极方面，那你们觉得有哪些负面不好的网上学习经历呢？

集体: 没，没有。没什么消极的影响或是经历。[相互对视检查，摇头。]

Helen: [笑] Nothing? 真的？你们确定真的没有？没有不满意的地方？

Mulan: 没有。我们都挺喜欢我们的论坛的，对吧？对我们帮助这么大，怎么会不喜欢？嗯，我想再说一个我的经历。

Helen: 什么？

Mulan: 就是我们的论坛是我的救星呀。我知我是祥林嫂啦 [大家都笑。Nachen，我知道你要说什么。[笑]。Mulan 也笑。] 我的实习指导老师临时让我给学生上习题课，就提前不到 3 个小时通知我。也不给参考答案，两个小时准备好多跟语法有关的联系。本来语法就是我的弱项。有好些跟介词有关的词组我就是弄不太清楚，也不晓得如何给学生讲解他们之间的区别。没办法，我就想说试下自己的运气上论坛上发个帖子问问看，就用办公室的电脑登录我们的网站。现在看起来，当时真孤注一掷。我记得是下午 2 点左右，我是 2 点半上课。Anyway，我就发了个帖子，然后开始刷屏更新，30 秒，30 秒。渴望有人能正好看到我的帖子给我个答复。结果，猜猜，我还真的到我要的答案。Yeshuai 当时也在网上挂着。真是紧急呀。感谢老天爷，感谢我们的论坛，不然我就死定了。[大家笑。]

Helen: 哦，这样，听起来还挺戏剧化的。我还真不知道有这个事情发生。那 Yeshuai 真是救了你呢？

Mulan: 是呀，是呀。所有我才说我不认为我们论坛有什么消极或是不好的地方嘛。[大家都笑。]

Appendix 7: A Sample of Interview Transcripts with Supervisor Liang (Both the translated and Original Chinese Version)

The following is the translated version of an excerpt from the interview I had with one of the supervisors, Liang. I was taught by Liang before I became a colleague of hers. So we knew each other very well. During the interview, I felt that there was no need for me to probe follow-up questions as she was very expressive. Meanwhile, I would be uncomfortable to ‘push’ her as she was my former teacher and a senior colleague. The extracted interview transcript focused on exploring the first thematic prompt: her attitudes towards the role of the online learning community in supporting student teachers’ school placement.³ Before I asked her about her perceptions of the online communication, I asked questions about her previous experiences of school placement supervision.

Translated Version

Helen: This year, we have introduced the online community and integrated it into our student teachers’ school placement. Liang, what impact do you think it has on our student teachers?

Liang : En, I think it’s just fantastic, vital and valuable. [Both laugh.] It is far far beyond what we did before to merely give a final assessment of their teaching performance. Just as I said a moment ago, before, we normally visit students twice. The first time is to check whether or not they have any problems in teaching and give some advice. The last time is just to evaluate whether or not they can pass the teaching performance assessment. It’s mainly a product-oriented supervision. But now, during the whole process of school placement, we and students can have all sorts of and different levels of communication. The focus is, now, on the actual process of learning to teach. I think what has been significant is the slogan you put there to give them the affective

³ The interview extract is added with Liang’s consent.

support: ‘We are new teachers and we are afraid of nothing’. Novice teachers will be undoubtedly terrified and worried about their initial teaching performance and a lot of them are lacking in enough confidence to teach. So the first step is to overcome the discomfort and boost their confidence. This is the most important. After the psychological barrier is tackled, we can then focus on how to teach on the platform

Helen: En.

Liang: In this regards, the affective role is tremendous, really tremendous, in my opinion, for students. The online space offers such strong emotional support. When students are suddenly thrown into an unfamiliar school, knowing no one and feeling desperate, lost and upset, or when they can’t find the right direction, the affective communication among them can lift their spirits and give them strength. The confidence comes from their online interaction with us and their peers. [Helen nods her head and Liang and she look at each other, smiling.] For instance, in the first week, questions in relation to their initial encounter were given to guide them to discuss how to interact with students in school, how to leave an good impression and how to take different aspects into careful consideration in order to get well prepared for their practice. The students took an active part in discussion. The online interactions just promoted the sense of learning together. You know, they rely on each other for consolation. This interdependence between them is meaningful to students. Sometimes, I think an individual’s behaviour is easily influenced by others in a group.

Helen, En, Liang, can you explain what you mean by saying this?

Liang: I believe an individual’s behaviour is easily influenced by the others in a group, because quite often we human beings have a tendency to follow the crowd. If this is what others do, then I will do the same. If I have no clue and don’t know whether something is right or wrong, then I will refer to my classmates for the hint. This is particularly common when people are losing sight of their direction or are ill-equipped for their task and don’t know what to do. Referring to others as their benchmark of behaviour is very common in a group. [Helen: En.] The point is that students are in a

new teaching environment, an environment that they are not familiar at all. It's just like if we are thrown to a new city, it's always good to find someone we know. [Both laugh.]. For them, they can't find an acquaintance or friend in the placement school [Liang laughs.], but they can see a bunch of classmates and friends in the online space doing the same thing, they can feel the resonance. Because online communication enhances this kind of feeling, naturally, their confidence can grow.

Helen: Besides the affective support, what other support do you feel the community provides?

Liang: Of course, there are other types of support. The online community also supports them to deal with their actual teaching problems too. But I think the affective, emotional support is the most important. The most significant aspect is that the community connects everyone together to give them a sense of community. Therefore, the teaching practice is no longer an individual undertaking but a group effort. This group effect will be, possibly, more obvious for those distributed students. The fact is, even students who conduct their teaching practice organised by the School and guided by the supervisor, only interact within their own small group. There is only a little communication even within a supervisor's group, let alone outside the group. On the contrary, in the online community, the connection has been expanded to the whole group. The interaction or communication is no longer just within two or three students. Before, we divided students into groups for each supervisor randomly, and it depended on luck, sometimes, there would be all very capable students allocated to work with one supervisor in one group. Students were not well mixed based on their different levels or competence. However, when they, top students and less capable ones, come to the online community to communicate, the peer learning coming from peer support will be remarkable. The difference of abilities and competences between students themselves allows more able students to help less able students. Meanwhile, they all work in a similar teaching environment and experience similar things. Naturally, they are willing to share and learn from each other because of the shared experiences. Another thing, I think, is that they treat the school placement with a serious attitude.

Helen: Serious attitude? Can you say a bit more?

Liang: You know, their conscientious attitudes are traceable through the discussions they have. Every week, they are participating in discussions focusing on different topics. I know from my years' supervisory experience, many students work in a placement school alone with a cooperating teacher. What they do is to bury their head marking assignments every day, or they are being ordered around to give a dictation to one class, or conduct extra-curricular activities. Unless we go to the school to observe their teaching or talk to them, we don't know what they are doing in the placement school. But now, I can tell straightaway through their online discussions that they are engaged in their teaching practice with a diligent attitude. The online community connects everyone together and we can tell they are studying. This becomes a powerful thing to motivate them to study. When they have access to others' situation, knowing others are working so hard and learning useful things, and when they don't do much, they will feel left behind and will be panic not to keep up with others.

Helen: So in your opinion, the online community gives a sense of community, and knowing what others are doing is important to individual students, right?

Liang. Absolutely, I am sure the role has been facilitating and motivating them to work harder, because people go along with the trend. I don't know if this is just our Chinese's mentality. We always like to follow the main stream. I must do things that others are doing. The community fosters them to take initiative in learning. I read from students' posting that many get up very early and go to the placement school every day. I have the feeling this initiative is fostered by the group effect. This especially motivates those who are always dependent on teachers' constant guidance to work. Such a positive learning atmosphere is very contagious. At least, we as teachers can really sense that they are treating their teaching practice seriously. They take initiative in learning to teach and plunge into trying new teaching ideas. This also gives us, the teachers, a lot of food for thoughts.

Helen: En, Liang, in what aspects? Can you explain a bit?

Liang: The first thing is that teaching practice supervision is no longer paying lip service but an achievable and down-to-earth act. The online discussion also enlightens me to reflect how we should help our students improve their teaching and guide them to discover their problems. During the online interactions in which students talk about their feelings and understanding of being a teacher, I also gain a different perspective from them to observe myself. [Both laugh and say: self-reflection.] What I have learnt is that we used to see our students play a passive role in learning in the classroom and we didn't pay much attention to explore their positivity and self-initiative in learning. We didn't give them the chance to release their positive energy out. As a result, they always look passive in the class. In the future, possibly, we need to give them more opportunity to take ownership of learning. I can tell from the way they interact and communicate with each other, they are thoughtful and full of ideas. They know how to steer and they are in control. I have changed my attitudes towards who they are. So, you see, the online community is fantastic.

Helen: [smiling] So, besides the positive aspects you've just mentioned, what are the negative aspects of the online community that you have experienced?

Liang: There's no negative aspect. [Both laugh.] I'd say the online community is very good. [Both laugh.]. All in all, very efficient, and it has ensured the quality that the face-to-face supervision fails to achieve in terms of supporting students' school placement experience, and improve their reflective practice as well as ours. We should have adopted the technologies earlier. [Both laugh.]

Transcripts in Chinese

Helen: 那今年我们把网络, 网上的交流放到实习当中来了, 这个网络以及网上交流它在实习指导中的作用, Liang, 你是怎么看的, 能说说你的体会吗?

Liang: 嗯, 我觉得这个作用是太好了。重要而且有价值。[俩人同时笑] 远远不是以前就给一个最后一个评估一样的东西。就像我刚刚说得, 以前学生实习的时候, 我们就听两次课,

第一次看看学生的问题指导一下，最后一次就是考核，评估。主要就是看结果。现在整个过程老师和同学们都可以进行很多交流。尤其强调这个实际的学习教学的过程。我觉得你搞的好的就是论坛上的口号‘我是新老师，我怕谁’。新上讲台的老师都是心惊肉跳，好多更是没有自信，不知道该如何教，那这一关是心理上的不适应，首先这个是最重要的，要把心理上的这种障碍消除以后那才谈得上第二步怎么上讲台。

Helen: 嗯

Liang: 所以从这个角度来说，我觉得这个精神上作用对学生来说太重要了，非常重要。论坛给学生非常多的情感支持。学生突然间安排到一个陌生的环境，不是一个他们熟悉的环境，一个人都不认识，自然会沮丧失落。他在迷茫的时候，找不到方向的时候，那这个时候这种情感上的交流可以给他精神上的一种支持，一些力量。大家交流的时候互相有一种壮胆的作用。[Helen 点头，俩人对视微笑] 我记得第一个星期，指导学生讨论第一周在新学校要如何和学生相处，给老师留个好印象，各个方面的话题，为实习作好准备。学生都在积极讨论，自然把一起学习的氛围营造出来了，就是，大家找到一个籍慰。这种相互依赖对大家的促进还是大。一个人有时候我感觉到人的行为很容易受他所在群体的影响。

Helen: 噢，Liang，能具体说下你这句话的意思？

Liang: 我觉得因为很多时候我们有一种倾向就是跟随别人。人家都是这样做，那我也照样。那我在盲目的时候，这样做是对还是不对，那么我这个时候一看，同学都是这样做的，这个特别常见，对一个人来说，他在迷茫的时候，找不到方向的时候，那最常做的就只有参照周围的人。[Helen: 嗯] 关键就是，学生是到一个陌生的环境，不是一个他们熟悉的环境，一个陌生的环境时，就像把我们丢到一个陌生的城市，你找到一个熟人还是好的。[俩人对视笑] 我感觉就像这样。在学校里找不到熟人（笑），但是他在网络上同学一看还有这么多熟人，都在做同样的事儿。他们就会有感受到共鸣了。然后大家这么一交流的时候互相有一种壮胆的作用，心里面也就有自信了。

Helen: 那除了从情感这个角度来说，你觉得这个网络还有没有起到其他方面的作用？

Liang: 当然有了。实际的学习教学经验方面也很有帮助。我觉得更重要是精神上的作用。最重要是他们有一种群体的感觉，不是一个人单枪匹马地在外实习，而是大家的事儿。就是说

网络把人都联系在一起，成为一个群体，我觉得这一点，可能是在分散实习中最明显的。哪怕就是集体实习的学生也只是本小组内人稍微有点接触，一个老师指导下稍微有点接触，小组外那根本就不接触。那么像这个，一扩大的就是所有小组的人都在一起交流了，不是一个两个。实际就把这整个群体扩大了。以前，这个小组内一般来说分配也不是有强有弱的，有时候是碰运气的，一个组里全是能力强的学生。分配不是根据学生的强弱来搭配的。但是在论坛上，群体当中弱的强的都在一起时，互相都在交流，取长补短，都在学习经验，那我觉得群体的作用比较大。同伴之间有差别的这种，好的同学交流经验，比较弱的同学也从其中一起学习很多东西。而且，他们处境差不多，自然也愿意分享和相互学习。有话题。还有就是，我觉得他们的重视程度提高了。

Helen: 重视度？怎么说？

Liang: 就是，认真地每一个星期都参与，论坛讨论看得出来。每周都有讨论主题，大家都参加。如果像以往的实习，根据我的了解，单独在学校里，就是原任教师分自己，他们，你们，改本子，那他就天天坐在那里埋着头改本子，你去给这个班上的学生给他搞个听写，然后你到那里去给他们搞个课外活动，单枪匹马一个人去搞。除非我们去指导或是跟他们交流，不然做得好或不好也不知道。但现在像这种形式我们马上了解他们做什么，态度认真。通过跟同学交流，人人都在学东西。大家彼此都了解对方在做什么，看到大家搞得那么认真，网络这么一把他们联系起来，无形中对他们是一种促进作用，人家别个都在这样做，[俩人同时笑]，我在那里什么都没做，心里有些恐慌，怕落后。

Helen: 把大家联系在一起，了解彼此的情况，是吧？

Liang: 对。这个肯定对每个人都有个推动和促进的作用，因为人就是随大流的，看到别人在干嘛而自己不干，不晓得是不是我们中国人的心理。总是喜欢随大流，看到人人都在做的事情，我不做不行。网上讨论激发了他们的自觉性。许多学生说自己天天早起去学校。这个就是集体激发出来的自觉性。尤其是对那些平时依赖性特别强，总靠老师管理督促的就是一种激励。这个论坛的氛围是有感染的。至少我们老师是能体会他们对这个实习重视了，而且通过他们的交流看得到进步。这个对我们老师也是以后一种启发。

Helen: 你觉得启发在哪些方面？

Liang: 一个就是今年我感觉指导实习不再是个敷衍的差事，而是真的做得到，落实到实处。还有启发以后我们的教学怎么点拨学生，怎么去，就是怎么引导学生的问题，怎么引导学生去注意这些方面，还有看了学生这些当了老师的体会，作为老师来说，就好像从另外一个侧面体会到我们当老师有这么多对于这个，怎么说，从另外一个侧面来观察老师。[同时笑，同时说： 反思自己] 对我们来说有启发的就是看到学生，还有一点好像在教室里看到学生都是在被动地学，以前我们不太注意挖掘他们身上这种积极主动学习的这一种，这一部分能量，没有给他发挥出来，所以他们总是在我们面前处于被动的，可能以后我们教学里要更多给他们自己发挥才能的机会，让他们更加主动地学习。因为这个就可以看出来。他们完全就能把握自己而且自己知道自己该做什么，而且他们都是很有思想很有想法的。对他们的看法，观点，理解产生了改变。

Helen: 你觉得这个网络的讨论除了这些积极的作用外，你在这个网上指导交流当中，你觉得他有没有那些消极或是不好的方面？

梁: 没得负面影响。我想说网上指导非常好！[俩人同时笑]。总的来说，效率高，对于整个教学，对教学的反思各方面都能起到非网络能达到的效果。早就应该使用高科技了。[俩人同时笑]

Appendix 8: A Summary of Weekly Threaded Discussions In Supervisor's Group

Week	Pre-determined themes	Student teachers' main agendas
1	What are the most important things to do and how can we make the most of the first week?	To be liked and accepted by students and cooperating teachers; brainstorming and discussing various ways for leaving a good impression; debating on the meaning of proper clothes
2	What makes a good class observation and what have you observed? Looking into the mirror, we can modify our look; looking into people, we can know our gains and losses.	Reporting individuals' class observations; commenting on cooperating teachers' teaching, such as teaching techniques and ways of interactions with students in class; identifying various issues regarding teaching, such as debates on grammar translation methods; discussion on the disconnection between theory learned in the university and practice observed in the class; ways of introducing a new lesson; problems of the educational system in China; ways of teaching reading; ways of teaching vocabulary etc.
3	Classroom management: how cooperating teachers manage their classes? And what is your idea about the issue?	Ongoing comments on cooperating teachers' teaching; reporting and reflecting their own teaching experiences with extreme feelings about their own ability and teaching expressed: confidence or self-doubt; expressing concern about students' negative attitudes towards learning English; discussing the role of grammar, being a form teacher; comforting and encouraging each other
4	Teaching in progress: how is your teaching going? Are there any issues you would like to talk about?	Further discussing what teaching means; sharing their attitudes towards teachers as a profession by reflecting on their own teaching practice; commenting on shared teaching techniques by peers including ; ongoing reflection on their own teaching; raising issues of disciplining students and managing class
5	Teaching in progress: using self-evaluation to improve your teaching	Ongoing reflections on their own teaching practice; continuing the discussion of what teaching means as well as sharing their attitudes towards teachers as a profession; raising issues of how to be a good class teacher; sharing teaching techniques particularly in different methods of maintaining an active learning atmosphere
6	Looking ahead: what you have learnt in the past six weeks helps you to look into the future?	Continuing the discussion of what teaching means and expressing their attitudes towards teachers as a profession; raising questions about submitting reports and evaluation form for their school placement; continuing sharing techniques especially in using Powerpoint in teaching, expressing feelings about and reflecting on their six weeks' teaching experience; looking into the future

Appendix 9: Pilot Study Report

This pilot study report consists of five parts: participants and data collection methods, the data analysis method, a sample of data analysis, discussion of findings and need for refining the data analysis method, and finally it concludes with the limitation of the study.

1. Participants and data collection methods

The pilot study involved six participants and me both as a participant researcher and supervisor; however, three of the six participants dropped out of the research either due to their inaccessibility to the Internet or inability to cope with the anxiety resulting from their school placement. Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and the use of the data. For each week, although there was a broad theme as a prompt to engage participants in the online communication, the discussion foci were mainly negotiated and driven by participants' learning and teaching agenda at hand.

Weeks	Themes	Participants' main agenda
Week One	Reflection on Teaching Methods Course	N/A
Week Two (School placement begins)	Classroom observation and working with cooperative teachers	What does 'the presentation of a lesson plan' mean? How to present it?
Week Three	Class management	Ways of grading students' assignment Questioning ideal teaching and contextual teaching practice
Week Four	Sharing, critiquing teaching techniques and strategies	Teachers' role, style, relationship with students
Week Five	My own teaching	Lesson plan and teaching scenarios
Week Six	My own teaching	Teaching scenarios
Week Seven	Reflection	A new teacher?

Table 1 Main online activities in the seven weeks during their school placement

Data collection methods consisted of participants' online postings, semi-structured interviews with 3 participants (audiotaped), and my research diary both as a record of the research procedures and reflection.

2. Data analysis

Qualitative analysis was mainly employed in this study with some quantitative data presented to thicken the description. The data analysis was predominately informed and guided by the conceptual framework of CoPs (Wenger, 1998). Some recent studies (Rogers, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Gray, 2004) have documented the implementation of the framework as an analytical instrument focusing on the analysis of three salient dimensions which characterise a community of practice, i.e.:

- a.) **Mutual engagement:** relationships, sense of connectedness and membership developed as a result of working together (Wenger, 1998, p. 74-76).
- b.) **Joint enterprise:** an essential dimension and a major source constituting a community of practice. It is 'defined by the participants in the very process of pursuing it' (ibid, p.77), 'not just a stated agenda but something that creates among participants relations of mutual accountability; that become an integral part of the practice' (p. 78).
- c.) **Shared repertoire:** a collection of resources created and developed through the joint pursuit of an enterprise. This includes routines, ways of doing things, stories, styles, artifacts, discourse, tools so on. It embodies 'the discourse members use to create meaningful statements about the world as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members' (ibid, p. 83).

Informed by the previous research (Rogers, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Gray, 2004; Moule, 2006), the analysis of the three dimensions was conducted discretely for the purpose of concentrating on each individual dimension more accurately. Participants' online postings and interview transcripts were chosen to demonstrate the online interaction with

reference to each dimension in the online community. Participants' name, reference to other people and schools where they taught were pseudonymous. Postings and interview transcripts in Chinese were translated into English and postings in English were quoted verbatim.

During the course of writing up the report, I noticed that the analytical framework and ways of analysing employed by the above studies were instructive but somewhat inadequate. Because there is a degree of overlaps and interdependency among the three dimensions as Wenger (1998) states and some studies (Rogers, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Gray, 2004; Moule, 2006) have discerned, a segmental analysis would fail to fully capture the interplay among the three dimensions and hence fail to provide a holistic picture of practice as a community. Moreover, the holistic investigation of the three dimensions requires expanding the current analytical framework to include the analysis of other salient parameters of CoPs in supporting online learning.

A sample analysis of mutual engagement is **therefore** presented in the following section and discussed in section 5 in order **to demonstrate** the use of the framework as an analytical tool to structure the data analysis and interpretation, **to justify the need to** integrate the separate analysis into a whole and **to** bring in other parameters to structure the analysis in my later study.

3. A sample of data analysis

Mutual engagement

According to Wenger (1998), mutual engagement indicates doing and sharing things together. Participants in a CoP are engaged in a common negotiated activity, sharing ideas, showing their commitment to communicating and interacting with other members of the community. Mutual engagement is primarily embodied by doing things together through work or practice, exchanging information and opinions, and negotiation of meaning.

Initially, quantitative evidence was provided to show participants' mutual engagement in the online learning community.

Participants	Number of initiations	Number of responses	Both	Total
Researcher	28	35	7	70
Nana	17	20	8	45
Yuanyan	17	10	4	27
Wei	5	6	3	14
Total	N/A	N/A	N/A	156

Table 2 Number of online postings

There were altogether 156 postings of which 86 were posted by the 3 participants, 70 by me. The number of postings of each participant was categorised by the number of initiations (raising questions or emergent issues, asking for help, story-telling, and socializing), responses (giving answers, commenting/giving feedback, critiquing, and showing affective support), or both. Although contributions were not equally distributed, all participants claimed that they read all messages and learnt a great deal even if they did not always respond or participate in discussions. This was also reported by Gray (2004) who points out that participants can learn through 'lurking' in the background to incorporate other members' ideas and online contribution (p. 26) without contributing much to the community.

The following analysis focused on the qualitative analysis of the gained data.

<p>During the seven weeks, participants were active in the online communication which covered a wide range of topics, such as their developing perspectives of cooperative teachers and students, sharing teaching techniques, questioning teaching theories, developing new insights into teaching with tension and offering affective support throughout the online communication and etc. There is one threaded discussion instance among participants when they talked about the dissonance between the ideal teaching theories and real practice. In the discussion, participants were engaged in the process of producing meanings that 'extend, redirect, dismiss, reinterpret, modify or confirm - in a word, negotiate a new – the histories of meanings of which they are a part' (Wenger, 1998, p. 53).</p> <p><i>Why</i></p>	<p>The curve of mutual engagement</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Negotiating of meaning</p> <p>Expressing their opinions, exchanging ideas, and developing their understanding through mutual discussion or</p>
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<p>by Nana- Thursday, 15 March 2007, 07:18 AM</p> <p>Hi, I am coming, an early bird☺</p> <p>Unbelievable, I found all the classes I observed in the past week were all teacher-centered! In the university, we were taught to use communicative approach, but in this school, students are only given 10 minutes to do oral English practice in a 50-minute long lesson. My cooperative teachers told me he isn't keen on teaching students to speak good English. He only cares about if his students can pass the exam and get good marks. But what's the point of learning English if our students can't speak it well? Miss Hou, should I still insist on communicative approach and give students more chances to speak or should I just do as my cooperative teacher says? Yuanyan, Wei, what are your opinions?</p> <p>Re: Why</p> <p>by Helen Hou- Thursday, 15 March 2007, 01:26 AM</p> <p>Nana, I am the late bird then, no, even earlier than you, haha...</p> <p>To my best knowledge, many secondary school teachers don't teaching English in the communicative approach although they are required to do so according to the National English Curriculum for ELT at secondary schools. But, while they don't use this approach, it doesn't mean they don't believe it or don't want to use it in conducting their teaching. For some teachers, they don't have a choice. I think it's understandable because they are under pressure to make their students all pass the standardized examinations and their salary and yearly bonus are always associated with their students' academic performance. You will know more about it in Sep when you become a real teacher. Yes, we should emphasize the communicative aspect of language teaching, but teaching grammar is very important too, at least, in my view. I learnt my English through the grammar translation method. Tell you what, I actually enjoyed it.</p> <p>I can't make the decision for you, really, but if you think what you believe is right, then there's always a way to strike a balance between teaching grammar and improving students' communicative ability. Talk to you later. Gonna sleep☺</p> <p>Re: Why</p> <p>by Nana- Thursday, 15 March 2007, 08:28 PM</p> <p>Thank you very much for your opinion, Miss Hou. You're right. If I believe I am right, no reason to give up. I don't believe you learnt English through grammar-translation method!!!! Do you still remember how many role-plays, pair work and group work you asked us to do in the first year? Do you believe Miss Hou's story, Yuanyan and wei?</p> <p>I must say Miss you, you went to bed too late. Take care.</p> <p>Re: Why</p> <p>by Yuanyan- Friday, 16 March 2007, 12:06 PM</p> <p>Hi, Nana, it's the same thing in my school. What makes me more disappointed is the students aren't interested in practicing their spoken</p>	<p>'mutual ability to affect and to be affected in the process of producing meaning' (Wenger, 1998:53)</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Nana mentioned the conflict between teaching theories and real practice, and then ask what she should do?</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Researcher responded to her question by extending her understanding of why there was such a conflict, and offering her suggestions.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Nana confirmed her own belief on teaching</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Yuanyan at the same time agreed with Nana that it was the same situation in her practicum school, talked about her cooperative teacher and students, and expressed her opinions that she didn't want to teach grammar rules. (Participants are</p>
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<p>English. In the morning reading activities today, I asked them to do a role play dialogue, only a few students participated. I shouldn't judge my cooperative teacher, but his spoken English is really... Maybe that's why he doesn't like to focus on the communicative side of the language teaching, and maybe that's why the students don't like to practice speaking. For me, I don't want to teach grammar rules and doing simulation papers all the time in my future teaching.</p> <p>...</p> <p>Re: Why by Yuanyan- Monday, 19 March 2007, 05:44 PM Hello, I think I made a silly and wrong comment last week, hehe:-P. I observed my cooperative teachers' class again. Somehow, I changed my impression on him. Yes, his spoken English isn't good enough, but he is a good teacher. He is so knowledgeable. And I am so impressed by his patience in encouraging some shy students to answer questions and also the way he explains some grammar points. I learnt a lot from his lesson. I think I should change my opinion about grammar teaching, hehe. Anyway, never jump quickly to judge a person. Bye...</p> <p>Re: Why by Nana- Monday, 19 March 2007, 04:23 PM Hehe, you're right, being a good English teacher requires more than just speaking fluent English. I think it's really hard for middle school teachers to follow what is believed right in the ideal teaching. I am afraid I will be driven by the standardized examination when I become a real teacher and soon give up my teaching belief...</p> <p>Re: Why by Wei- Monday, 19 March 2007, 09:41 PM Hello, I finally got some time to come here. I wish I had a computer at home. It's interesting to read your discussions. Nana, it's not a contradictory thing to teach grammar and also emphasize the communicative English teaching. We can balance them. You shouldn't give up your teaching belief so easily. Also, I agree with Miss you. I don't think grammar teaching methods are of no good. I enjoyed last week's working in the school, although there were some unhappy things happening ...</p> <p>Chiming with the analysis of participants' online postings, data from interview transcripts also showed participants' sense of mutual engagement which according to Wenger (1998) is organized around what they are there to do and hence to develop a shared practice. (Please note the highlighted phrases.)</p> <p>'[Nana] I've formed a habit of logging into the website to check if anyone posts anything new in the forum every day, sometimes more than twice a</p>	<p>mutually engaged in negotiating their joint enterprise)</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Yuanyan later reinterpreted her understanding of her cooperative teacher, and changed her view about teaching grammar. (Yuanyan's participations crossed the boundaries between the online community and the community of her practicum school, bringing new perspectives into the negotiation of meanings)</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Nana showed her new understanding which was gained through the meanings produced and negotiated by all participants in their interaction. She realized the tension in teaching and expressed her new worries.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Wei participated in the discussion through reading the recorded interactive conversions, and expressed her opinions. She also brought up new stories in her practicum school which would lead to other new focuses in ongoing</p>
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<p><i>day. Do you still remember, I told you once the computer in my home broke down; I went to the internet café. Because I really want to know what happens to my classmates in their school, if they have come across something unusual or interesting. Even in the future I think I will still visit the website and talk with you, if you still keep it open to us.’</i> (Nana does visit the online community occasionally after her school placement. Her last posting is on 5 July telling us she has just found a job in her hometown and will begin her teaching career soon.)</p> <p><i>‘[Yuanyan] The best thing is I don’t feel alone and panic because I know I can always have someone to help me out when I need some help... I enjoy reading our postings and even copied some of the discussions in the forum to my own space. I also keep my teaching diary as you suggested in the discussion for reflecting on my teaching, finding my weaknesses. It’s beneficial, I think, but I felt guilty not coming so often...’</i></p> <p><i>‘[Wei] I am the only one in my class doing my school placement in this county, but I don’t feel isolated. I read their postings about their teaching stories, what cooperative teachers are like, and naughty students, I feel I was there with them, and can picture what happened there, so I don’t feel I am alone. By reading their postings, I can compare my experience with theirs, and know where I did well, and where I could improve next time. It’s relievable to know I am in the same situation with them and I am not the only one who suffers in the teaching practice...’</i></p>	<p>discussion.</p> <p><i>(All participants were mutually participated in discussion where they negotiated the joint enterprise (i.e., communicative/grammar) via their own understanding, other participants’ input or new perspectives gained from their interactions across community boundaries. Then the negotiated meaning, participants’ reinterpretation and new understanding of the same issue, and the shared stories in the online communication finally became the shared repertoire.)</i></p>
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Postings like the above example indicate participants’ willingness to participate in discussion and idea exchange. Mutual engagement was enhanced by participants’ different opinions about teaching, and views changed through ongoing discussion and even the caring expressions and intimacy developed over time. In the online learning community, student teachers learned to develop and incorporate resources of inspiration from each other, beginning to appreciate that meaning and knowledge were negotiable and constructible and enriching their own perspectives of learning to teach and teaching to learn in this small learning community.

4. Findings and implication

This part focuses on discussing if findings helped to answer my research questions and also what implications were gained from the findings.

4.1 The role of an online CoP in supporting teacher learning during school placement

The findings in the pilot study suggest that the interaction and communication in the online CoP solved the problem of disconnectedness and isolation experienced by both the university supervisor and student teachers during the school placement. Beyond gaining the sense of togetherness, participants claimed that they had a strong sense of learning through online discussion in which they exchanged information, shared stories, sought for affective support, learned useful teaching techniques, reflected on their learning and teaching experiences, and gained new insights into teaching practice via constant negotiation and inspiration from their peers' knowledge contribution. All of these helped to expand the scope of their original understanding of what teaching and teachers meant. In other words, student teachers and supervisors were mutually engaged in the shared practice of school placement which shaped their joint enterprise of improving teacher competence and satisfactorily expanded the shared repertoire of teaching strategies and skills. For instance, Nana said in the interview:

*'I don't think I would be learning so many wonderful teaching tips and making my teaching interesting **if there were no our online communication**. I had always thought the best way to learn is to attend lectures and study on my own. I really didn't realise just **talking can also help me to think and reading your postings also helped me a lot**. I am not very good at new ideas, but I **began to see how other people think to create new ideas**. I think I am so lucky as to be invited to your study. After the school placement, I am even more determined to be a teacher.'*

One of the significant attributes of a CoP is the medium it provides participants for developing a sense of identity, and making sense of and understanding their work (Wenger, 1998). Learning, in this regards, embodies a process of knowledge transformation and a particular social context that shapes participants' identity.

Findings reveal that participants' online discussion together with their teaching experience in their practicum schools helped them understand their role as a teacher and

hence helped them define and negotiate what kind of teachers they wished to be. For instance, Nana initiated a discussion pertaining to the relationship between students and teachers. Other participants shared their ideas. Through continuous interaction, they reached an agreement that teachers should be friendly and rigorous, flexible and inflexible under certain circumstances, knowing when to be demanding and authoritarian and when to be laid-back and democratic.

4.2 Online discussion and interaction evidence teacher learning

Many interactive discussions or shared storied indicate that participants were learning together or from each other. In the previous data analysis part, the exemplary instance that participants discussed the dissonance between teaching theories and real practice showed that participants gained a new insight into teaching grammar. Another example is that, in the online discussion, Yuanyan shared her techniques on how to use blackboard to teach new vocabularies and play word games with students, which inspired a heated discussion on her teaching techniques and other possible modification or improvement of her techniques in different situations. One more example is that Nana reported the positive feedback from her students when she employed Yuanyan's unique way of grading students' assignment. Wei also remarked:

'Although I didn't have chance to try all of their teaching techniques, I will definitely experiment with them when I have my own students in September.'

4.3 Participants' perceptions

This research question explores participants' perceptions of their role, peers' role and supervisors' role on the premise that their online communication does evidence their learning. Participants' different aspirations, problems, expertise and unique identities all of which are defined by Wenger (1998) as diversity enable them to take on a unique significance in the community, while at the same time, participants' complementary contribution or competences make them benefit from each other. Wei commented on her classmates' role by saying:

‘My classmates played an active role by sharing their teaching techniques. I am surprised that Yuanyan talked and shared a lot of teaching ideas in the forum...’

All of them thought of themselves very much as learners. Although there were scenarios in which they actually gave their peers constructive suggestions by telling their own teaching stories, three participants did not see their own contributive role despite all valuing their peers’ contribution. Two participants in the whole study never changed their perception of my role as a knowledge transmitter and authority, though I was sometimes unexpectedly being humorous. They all showed their respect to me with evidence gained from both interview and online postings; for instance, in the online discourse; they addressed me as Miss Hou. They trusted my words and suggestions. One participant in the interview said that she gradually treated me more like a friend with whom she could share her own life stories, and express all kinds of feelings. I was surprised to know how creative participants were in teaching techniques, and felt I became a learner and benefited from their postings from time to time. My awareness of student teachers’ high expectation on their teachers as gurus and my own expectation on me as a teacher sometimes put me under pressure.

Data from online postings and interview transcripts implies that student teachers perceived my role as indispensable in that I guided and sustained online discussion, helped them to reflect on old issues and encouraged them to participate. For instance, Yuanyan said in the interview:

‘I think I have learnt a lot from everyone, especially you. I sometimes don’t know what to talk about, but every time I read your postings, I can always find something to say, and to share.’

In accordance with Yuanyan’s remark, Nana once posted a message requesting me to provide them with new discussion prompts and said she felt better directed in the online interaction by following my guidance or requirement.

While learning in CoPs emphasises informal and peer to peer learning, many studies suggest that learning in online environment call for teachers to moderate, facilitate or even direct when necessary, the communication (Bonk, *et al.* 1998; Salmon, 2003; Gray, 2006). On the other hand, as novice practitioners in their school placement, student teachers need university supervisors to apprentice them learning through providing feedback on student teachers' performance and misconceptions, and giving a clear guidance to help them with particular teaching tasks and instructional skills. The interaction and communication in the online CoP allow student teachers to jointly construct new knowledge through the negotiation of meaning and shared repertoire that help them better understand their contextualised teaching practice, as Wenger (1998: 162) points out that the purposes of participants' mutually engagement in a community of practice in pursuing are twofold: not only do they jointly pursue their negotiated enterprise to better their practice but also try to understand how their pursuit can be applied to a broader social context.

My dual role as a researcher and supervisor and relationship with participants are therefore challenging but worth exploring in this study. As an inexperienced researcher who is afraid of the issue of subjectivity, I endeavoured to remain as sensitive as possible about my role as a researcher and then downplayed my role as a supervisor in the online community. In accordance with Gray's retrospection (2004) on her role in an informal online CoP, I am fully aware that my educational background with intercultural experience in particular, motivations, and personality shaped the role. There is a need for involving other university supervisors in the research in order to provide a more holistic and persuasive account to fully explore the role of an online CoP in my research context.

4.4 Online relationship building

Participants claimed that they started to know one another better through story sharing, self-disclosure and expressing their worries as well as happiness, for instance,

[Nana] ...I and Yuanyan are friends already, but our online communication helped me to better understand her, as I said just now, she was surprisingly creative... when you read

the postings, you have their image in your mind, and feel they are no longer just a classmate, but something more...

[Yuanyan] ... because we couldn't see each other during the time, I gradually feel it's a good place to come and 'meet', I mean, communicating... I am glad we support each other and give encouragement, which doesn't happen in our normal class learning.

[Wei] Surprisingly, we have been classmates for four years, but we don't really know each other well, at least for me, I don't socialise with my classmates a lot after class. So it's a good chance to get to know each other and you know, by sharing stories, expressing worries and asking for help, I think I feel more attached to my class now.

There are many examples in the online discussion where participants sometimes agreed with each other's opinions or disagreed with each other by challenging other participants' postings or offering their own understanding. The instance in the previous data analysis part is a case in point. Participants' also expressed the tension they experienced, for instance, Wei said in the interview:

When knowing their progress in their teaching practice, I sometimes felt it would be better for me not to know. I felt under a lot of pressure. I am afraid I was not doing as well as they were, you know, left far behind them.

Wenger (1998) contends that 'disagreement, challenges, and competition can be forms of participation' which often disclose 'a greater commitment to mutual relationship than does passive conformity' (p. 77).

In terms of their relationship-building with me as a supervisor, they thought that I was more approachable, humorous and caring than they expected which encouraged them and set me up as a role model.

One interesting finding may indicate a potential influence of Chinese Confucian-heritage cultures on the online learning experience. One participant worried about losing face in

the online community through self-disclosure and story-telling in the presence of their supervisors and peers. The cultural phenomenon ‘face’, according to Hu (2002a), lies at the heart of Confucian teachings on social and interpersonal relationships; therefore, it shapes Confucian-heritage learning styles (Park 2000). A few recent studies (e.g., Wang, 2004; Ramsay, 2005) have attempted to investigate the reciprocal influence between Confucian-heritage cultures and learning mediated by information and communications technology. There is lack of investigation of cultural factors in Wenger’s framework of CoPs. Participants’ concern on their face-losing issue is not embodied in the framework of CoPs, for instance. Therefore, further analysis in the later study will remain sensitive to the possibility of more convincingly culture-specific data emerging.

5. Limitations, further work and conclusion

The data analysis and interpretation in the research demonstrated and solidified the employment of the conceptual framework of CoPs as a strong analytical tool in the research. Nevertheless, during the course of reporting the findings, I noticed that the emergent patterns from the richness of the data call for an integrated analysis of the three dimensions as it was mentioned earlier on. Arising from the data is also the need to expand the propositions to include the analysis of both practice as meaning and practice as boundary in the framework of CoPs (Please also refer to highlighted italics in the right column of data analysis in section 2).

Recent studies (Rogers, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Gray, 2004; Moule, 2006) have revealed that the separate analysis of the three dimensions of a cohesive community of practice (**practice as community**) does help to gain a good insight into understanding how learning takes place in the community. However, the separation of analysis also prevents researchers from providing a holistic interpretation and understanding of how the three dimensions interplay with and enrich one another. A case in point would be the example provided in the previous data analysis part, where participants were mutually involved in discussing the difference between ideal teaching theories and real teaching practice. During their interactive discussion (exchanges on the communicative approach and grammar teaching on 15/16/19 March), all participants are mutually participating in the

process of negotiating their joint enterprise. Through sharing stories, negotiating the meanings and gaining new insights based on one another's different perspectives and interpretations, they expanded the shared repertoire.

Apparently, the three dimensions centre around meanings which are either exchanged, negotiated, produced or jointly constructed among participants. Therefore, analyzing practice as meaning, one of the important parameters in the framework of CoPs, can further complement the understanding of three dimensions of a CoP via the investigation of how meanings are negotiated or produced through participation and reification (Wenger, 1998). They are two significant characteristics to further understand how a joint enterprise is continually negotiated among participants.

On the other hand, practice as boundary explores the use of participants' multi-membership in different communities to transfer some elements of one practice into another, which is defined by Wenger (1998: 109) as 'brokering'. In this case, student teachers as newcomers temporarily join their practicum schools and become part of the school' CoP while at the same time they retain their membership in the online CoP in their university. Student teachers' participation crossing the boundaries of the two CoPs allows them to establish connections and introduce elements of one practice into another (ibid). Student teachers' brokering also provides them with the potential to identify and negotiate their identities and roles changed over time. At the same time, the diversity of the community will be enriched by student teachers' transformation of one practice to another. As a consequence, student teachers' are provided with more opportunities to mutually engage in their joint enterprise for the purpose of developing their repertoire, style and discourse within the online CoP.

Yuanyan's postings on 16/19 March well exemplified her experience as a broker through the interactions between what she experienced in her practicum school and what she communicated with others in the online community. Yuanyan saw the same thing on teaching grammar and the same cooperative teacher, but understood more. The shared stories and follow-up discussions in the online community meanwhile enabled the rest of the group to get access to the negotiated meanings. The online discourse produced by

them then became their shared repertoire. Including practice as a boundary in the analysis will help to explore participants' identities and roles changed over time and capture the developmental process of the shared repertoire, and hence enable the researcher to provide a more complete investigation of an online CoP's developmental process over time.

The volume and frequency of the online communication in the pilot study was constrained by the seven-hour time zone difference between me and participants, the number of involved participants and their computer literacy and accessibility to the Internet. As a result, the collected data may not be sufficient to fully capture or illustrate all characteristics of the three dimensions of CoPs defined by Wenger. Notwithstanding, the data analysis along the line indicates that this pilot study has demonstrated the conceptual framework of CoPs as a strong analytical tool to be employed in the research.

To sum up, the pilot study has helped to investigate and revise the instrumental tools of data collection, data analysis methods, and the procedures to be followed in my fieldwork. My research knowledge, techniques and understanding of being a researcher are also enriched through keeping research diary, reflecting on each research decision, and managing data analysis and interpretation. The pilot study has built up my confidence about the feasibility of my proposed research.

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Appendix 10: An Example of a Complete Threaded Discussion (Both Translated and Original Chinese Version)

The following is thread initiated in the second week by student teacher Haicui who shared a technique of marking students' assignments. This thread has been used to support the presentation of the finding that student teachers were actively engaged in the process of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) in 6.2.2. I would like to point out that all threads were converted into a rich text format in order for me to analyse them in MASQDA. Some of the original features of online postings might be lost because of the format conversion. The linear feature of hierarchical threaded discussion allows student teachers to post and reply freely to a particular individual they choose to communicate. As discussed in preceding chapters, this particular feature forces student teachers to read each posting in a thread and promotes reading and reflection in context. However, the downside of this linear feature makes all the postings piled up and displayed in a flat format, resulting in some *disruption* that appears to disturb the seemingly logic flow and time sequence of postings.

This threaded discussion is added with the consent of the student teachers and supervisor Zijun. Some of student teachers personalised their display picture and some of them used the smiley icon by default. The permission of keeping their profile pictures used in the study was sought and granted. However, all the hyper links, except mine, were disabled for the purpose of protecting student teachers' private information even though the website no longer exists or functions.