Factors Influencing Teachers' Level of Participation in Online Communities

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Abstract

The use of an online learning community is one possible approach to teachers' professional development that can enhance the opportunity for collaboration. Discussions in online learning communities not only allow community members to share resources, ideas and expertise, but also contribute to the fulfilment of teachers' needs in terms of continuous learning and professional development. This paper reports the findings of a study that aimed to explore the factors that influence the way teachers behave in online communities. The research participants were 16 teachers from five secondary schools in Malaysia who were teaching English, science and mathematics. These teachers were involved in online learning communities via blogs in which they exchanged stories and experiences related to their teaching and learning activities. Data were generated through one-to-one interviews. Based on thematic analysis, the overall findings indicate that teachers' levels of participation in their online learning communities were largely influenced by cultural issues. Other factors that impacted upon their engagement were time, enforcement by school administrators and their need for an online community.

Keywords: online, blogs, community of practice, teachers, professional development

1. Introduction

Online learning communities for teachers' continuing professional development are not new. Much research has reported on the benefits of such online learning communities. Online sharing activities allow greater flexibility than traditional, face-to-face mentoring; online activities are time- and place-independent, as teachers do not have to travel, but can participate from their classrooms or at home and at their own pace (Boling & Martin, 2005; Watson, 2006). Online communities are also practical in terms of cost and time: an online platform can be used as a medium for synchronous or asynchronous interaction (Baran & Cagiltay, 2006), as well as allowing the development of open and supportive relationships and friendships, and greater cohesiveness within learning groups (Bierema & Merriam, 2002). Furthermore, if the relationships in online communities are developed informally, this leads to greater engagement than through the establishment of more formal relationships (Ensher, Heun, & Blancard, 2003). In addition to what has been said about the advantages of the use of online platforms for communities, there is also evidence from other studies that shows how online communities can enhance members' professional growth through sharing activities with their peers (Akkerman, Retter, & de Laat, 2008; Coffman, 2004; Kim, 2000; McDonald, 2008; McLoughlin et al., 2007; Schlanger & Frusco, 2003; Schwen & Hara, 2003; Young & Tseng, 2008; Zhang & Watts, 2008). However, the successful development of a live community depends on many factors.

1.1 Factors Influencing Levels of Participation in Online Communities

It is crucial to understand the factors influencing levels of participation in online communities, as this will lead to an in-depth understanding of the context of this research. One issue in online sharing activities is trust and Day (1999) and Wenger et al. (2002) stress that without the element of trust, members of CoPs are not able to freely share their ideas and learn from each other. In a community where members have different backgrounds and experiences, it can be problematic for some members to accept others into their 'circle of friends' because individuals may have their own perceptions about their peers, which then affect their engagement. Therefore, it is paramount that in the early stages of community development, members of the community build bonds and

relationships between themselves so as to develop a 'friendly climate' (Glass & Walter, 2000; Grams, Kosowski, & Wilson, 1997; Terehoff, 2002), and so that the values of trust and openness can be developed. In a friendly climate, people use positive words, accept group members and acknowledge others for their contributions. Glass and Walter (2000) found that the members of the online community in their study (nursing students) felt a sense of belonging to their community when they were acknowledged and felt validated by others. Glass and Walter posit that these are key characteristics of good relationships in online communities. Adding to this, Terehoff (2002) emphasises the importance of 'becoming friends', as this will enhance cooperative activities among community members and, as a result, individuals in communities will be more likely to participate in and contribute to the group, knowing that their ideas are respected and accepted.

There may also be hindering factors that obstruct teachers from fully participating in online communities. Researchers such as Young and Tseng (2008) identified that some of the members of the online communities in their study kept quiet with regard to outsiders. Young and Tseng's analysis indicates that these participants felt constrained by their face-to-face teaching community. These teachers were reluctant to participate in sharing activities through online communities because of their rigid and tight-knit face-to-face social networks. Teachers in Young and Tseng's (2008) study tended to share their thoughts with existing community members, and showed reluctance to share with new members so as to retain their superior status. Young and Tseng (2008) describe this phenomenon as localism, by which teachers let their membership of departmental or school communities define their boundaries, leading them to fail to transcend these boundaries to develop new communities with diverse groups of people. This is explained by Wenger et al. (2002) as an issue of boundaries between members. When community members develop tight and close relationships with their peers, it is difficult to open the community up to new members, as letting them in might influence their current shared repertoire and practice.

The role of leaders and leadership has been cited by other researchers as crucial factors contributing to successful communities (Day, 2000; Fullan, 1991; Sergiovanni, 2001; Wenger et al., 2002). In online communities, online coordinators have a great influence in developing the communities by helping the members identify important issues, planning and facilitating the community's events, fostering the development of community members (Wenger et al., 2002), being willing to set the limits of participation and to contact members who are not participating, and inviting members in by creating a warm atmosphere that promotes the development of a sense of community (Pallof & Pratt, 2007).

Another contributing element to successful online collaborative sharing activities is teachers' individual beliefs and attitudes (Greener, 2009; Terehoff, 2002) regarding the activities themselves. When teachers perceive their online collaboration activities as useful and the platform as easy to use, they will become active participants. From the perspective of reasoned action theory, an attitude towards an object or task may arise from beliefs about the object or task. Therefore, teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards online tasks may influence their readiness to interact and share online. In turn, this may affect their motivational level. Self-efficacy theory, which states that 'people's judgement of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances' (Bandura, 1986), stresses that the way participants perceive their ability to carry out an expected behaviour (in this research context, teachers' perceptions of their ability to participate actively in online sharing activities) is the most important precondition for any behavioural change, and may affect individuals' responsibility, role and willingness to participate in reciprocal sharing activities. This means that when members of any community have a low level of self-efficacy, it is difficult for the community to survive. However, Chene and Sigouin (1997) believe that, despite this, given emotional support, community members with low self-efficacy will gain more confidence and the desire to participate.

Day (2004) asserts that culture is the key condition that influences teachers' ability to exercise their agency and control change. Moreover, recent research has indicated that knowledge sharing, communication and learning in communities are all affected by the cultural values of individual participants (Hofstede, 2001; Hutchings & Michailova, 2004). Wenger et al. (2002) write:

People's willingness to ask questions that reveal their 'ignorance', disagree with others in public, contradict known experts, discuss their problems, follow others in the thread of conversation–all these behaviours vary greatly across cultures (p. 118).

Ardichvili et al. (2006) explored the cultural factors influencing knowledge sharing strategies in virtual communities of practice across four countries: China, Brazil, Russia and the United States. Their study involved 36 managers and employees who were engaged in online communities, and data were generated using in-depth interviews. Among their findings was the fact that employees in China were more likely to shy away from

contributing to online community discussions because of 'worries about face, modesty and the lack of language proficiency' (p. 100) than their Russian counterparts. They also found that among Chinese employees, cultural expectations related to modesty were an important influence on online participation and knowledge sharing. Another finding was that Russian employees were very comfortable with email communication and did not display any particular preference for either face-to-face or phone communication. However, Chinese employees preferred face-to-face over email communication because they were 'more of a people-oriented society and they value face-to-face communication' (p. 103). However, to date, it is difficult to find research in the Malaysian context on how national culture influences the way Malaysians participate in online learning communities.

Another research study, conducted by Zawawi (2008), explored possible variances in values among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia (Malays, Chinese and Indians), using semi-structured interviews with 13 managers working for Nestle in Malaysia. Zawawi's results show that Malay culture focuses on showing proper etiquette, which involves values such as 'accommodating, affiliation, appreciative, filial piety, and obedience' when socialising with other people. Her study also highlights the importance of the value of 'indirectness' among Malays, which is closely related to 'politeness'. In general, Malays view it as inappropriate in most situations to say something directly. Even if it is a positive thing, an individual should try to be indirect when making a comment or expressing an opinion. Zawawi also found Malays to be collectivistic and motivated if they see benefits not only for their organisation but also for their family, community or nation as a whole. This relates to work-life balance among Malays, who, in Zawawi's study, stated that they preferred a 'moderate' burden at work so that they could focus on their families. This also shows the way in which Malays value family as an important component of their lives. Zawawi's (2008) findings suggest that her respondents are 'doing-oriented' performers. As 'doers', Zawawi states, her respondents monitor the link between the amount of effort they put in and the outcomes they receive. They also value family as an important part of their lives. Ahmad (2001) believes that this is due to the Chinese cultural need to gain good social standing in the community. These studies, although limited in number, indicate the cultural influence on how Malaysians value their jobs and personal lives. However, not much research has been done to understand the influence of culture on how community members behave in online communities. This study therefore aims to explore the conditions that influence teachers' participation in online communities.

2. Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the factors that impacted upon the way teachers participated in an online community, particularly the influence of culture. The research questions are as follows:

How did teachers value their online community?

How did teachers behave in their online community?

What were the factors that influenced teachers' levels of participation in their online community?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Participants

The research participants were 16 teachers involved in online learning communities that were designed for their professional development. In terms of their ages, as indicated in Table 1, six teachers were between 24 and 33 years old, seven were between 34 and 43 years old, and the rest (three teachers) were between 44 and 53 years old.

Table 1. Teachers' age

Teachers' age	24-33 years old	34-43 years old	44-53 years old
Number of participants	6	7	3

Four teachers taught English, five taught mathematics and seven were science teachers (Table 2). Three online communities were developed via blogs based on the subject taught, i.e. English, science and mathematics teachers' communities. The selection of participants in this study was purposefully based on a mixture of newly-appointed and more experienced teachers, so as to offer a situation where young teachers could learn from their seniors.

Table 2. Subject taught

Subject	English	Mathematics	Science
Number of participants	4	5	7

3.2 Data Generation Methods

The method used to generate data was one-to-one interviews. The purpose of the one-to-one interviews was to gain an understanding of teachers' views of their online sharing activities, the way they participated in online communities, any hindrances to their participation. This is in line with Cohen and Manion's (1994) view that the main purpose of using interviews is to find out what is in and on the participants' minds, and to understand more deeply their beliefs and practices through their individual perceptions and experiences.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was done using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which allows for careful analysis in finding coherent and distinctive themes. The coding process was done in parallel with the phases of data generation, and the files were transferred and coded based on the chronology of the phases themselves, which meant that the analysis began by looking at the first data generated, i.e. the answers written by the participants on their blogs, followed by focus group transcripts and subsequent one-to-one interview transcripts. While reading the transcripts, the researchers tried to relate the answers to the research questions. However, we also allowed for the progressive emergence of new and related concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

4. Results

4.1 How Teachers Valued Their Online Communities

As indicated in Table 1, teachers had both positive and negative views of the perceived benefits of the blogs.

Table 3. Teachers' perceptions of the benefits of online communities

Positive views	Number of participants	Less positive views	Number of participants
Getting new ideas	16	Required to learn new skills in order to use blogs for discussions	8
Enhancing pedagogical skills	7	Time-consuming	8
Expanding networks	5	Discussions were too formal	4
Fun activities	2	Less content	4

All 16 teachers viewed the sharing activities through the blogs as beneficial for getting new ideas, while seven teachers cited that such activities helped them to enhance their pedagogical skills. They also valued their blogs as a platform for expanding their networks to involve teachers from other schools (five teachers), and two teachers stated that the activities were fun. Of the less positive answers regarding the benefits of their online communities, it was found that eight teachers felt it was difficult to have to learn new skills prior to engaging themselves in online discussions, and eight teachers also named time as a constraining factor. Others saw the discussions taking place in their online communities as 'too formal' (four teachers), and others felt that there was a lack of content (four teachers).

Table 4. Teachers' perceptions of the importance of online communities

	Importance of online communities	
	Somewhat important	Not that important
Number of participants	12	4

In terms of teachers' beliefs regarding the importance of online collaborative sharing activities (Table 2), the

majority of the teachers (12 teachers) stated that they believed in the importance of the online communities in which they were involved. Only four teachers did not see the importance of the online communities. These teachers believed that they relied more on their colleagues to get whatever information they needed (Azie-OTO, Hanna-OTO, Kathy-OTO, Sham-OTO).

4.2 Teachers' Behaviour in Participating in Their Online Communities

The data were also analysed to answer the question of how teachers behaved in their online communities. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 5. Teachers' behaviour in participating in their online communities

Teachers	To initiate new postings	To add comments	To accept comments
	P1: Open to share anything related to practice P2: Hesitant to reveal own weaknesses P3: Afraid of being seen as 'showing off' P4: Afraid of having nothing 'new' to offer P5: Careful about revealing sensitive school issues	C1: No ideas to comment on C2: Afraid to hurt others' feelings C3: Gender	A+: Open to negative comments A-: Less tolerant of negative comments
Noni	P2, P4	C1	A+
Lim	P2, P4	C1	A+
Hajar	P4	C1	A+
Masnida	P1	C2	A+
Sherry	P1, P2, P5	C2	A+
Noreen	P1	C2	A+
Azie	P4	C1	A+
Sarah	P1, P5	C1	A+
Nina	P2	C2	A-
Hanna	P2, P3	C2	A-
Eve	P1	C1	A-
Kathy	P2, P5	C1, C2	A-
Sham	P1	C1, C3	A-
Fariha	P2, P3, P5	C2	A-
Aini	P1, P3	C2	A+
Ismi	P3, P5	C2	A-

The analysis covered teachers' willingness to initiate new topics for discussion, to share their comments or thoughts, and how teachers accepted comments from others. Five categories emerged in the analysis related to teachers' openness (P1 to P5). Among these five categories, only one category showed a positive value, i.e. open to share anything related to practice (P1) (cited by seven teachers). Also cited by seven teachers was hesitance to reveal their own weaknesses. New teachers seemed to be hesitant to pose any questions, as doing so may show their low level of knowledge. For example:

I am afraid that others will look down on me. 'Very simple thing, but how come she does not know?' Things like that, you know. (Hajar-OTO)

I prefer to read what they share or discuss, but hardly ever share my thoughts as I think it's not worth doing that. They [other senior teachers] might know it well. So it is not something new to them, they are more experienced than me. (Noni-OTO)

Four teachers cited being afraid of having nothing 'new' to offer, and some others cited being careful about

revealing sensitive issues about their schools. For example:

I think not everybody will be open enough to share negative stories about their school, their classes … I think all of us won't … You don't want to get into any trouble once the principal reads your posting! (Masnida-OTO)

In relation to adding comments to others' entries or stories shared on their blogs, it was found that six teachers felt that they had no ideas for comments. Another emerging category was being afraid of hurting others' feelings, cited by ten teachers. For example:

This is related to a cultural thing, I think. We as Malaysians, we are not used to saying harsh things, or bad things in front of the person. We were always taught to say nice things only. It's hard to criticise people in front of them, you know. In return, we also don't like to be criticised, right. (Fariha-OTO)

I do not mind if others give any kinds of comments, as long as it's for our improvement. However, yes, we as Malaysians, we don't say something bad directly; we don't use harsh words, right? If the intention is good, and the way it is conveyed is acceptable, why not? (Noni-OTO).

One teacher raised the issue of gender. This teacher was the only male teacher, who found it to be difficult to fit in with the group when he was the only one man there. Concerning their openness to accept comments from others, nine teachers claimed to be open to any criticism from other community members, while seven others cited the opposite. For example, one senior teacher was reluctant to receive comments from new teachers, as she said:

It is not good for an experienced teacher like me to be commented on by new teachers, you see. I am not used to it. Usually they turn to me to get help and support, not to comment. I am still learning and will learn when I find new things, but not through negative comments from other teachers here. (Ismi-OTO)

Another teacher said:

We are not used to giving negative comments. Usually we will just give positive feedback. I think, I also don't like to read other teachers' comments on my practice … but it depends on how they say it. (Nina- OTO)

4.3 Factors that Influenced Teachers' Levels of Participation in Their Online Communities

The analysis of the factors that influenced teachers' levels of participation in their online communities is indicated in Table 6.

Table 6. Factors that influenced teachers' levels of participation in online communities

Factors	Number of participants
Time for online discussions	14
Enforcement by school administrators	12
Openness	12
Hierarchical culture	9
Real need for online communities	8
Family commitment	7
Skills to use blogs	6

The majority of the teachers (14 teachers) named time as the most prominent factor. This was due to their workload at school, which required them to spend time after school hours on work such as marking students' assignments and exercises, preparing for future classes, attending meetings and handling co-curricular activities. For example:

I have no time for all this during school hours. Usually I will spend my time marking books in the staffroom or meeting students who come to see me. I do not want to bring schoolwork home. (Eve-OTO)

12 teachers believed that without enforcement of the use of online learning communities as one of their official tasks, their participation in online collaborative sharing activities would remain low, or they would only log on to the blogs whenever they had time to do so. In other words, these activities were not considered important by the teachers, which therefore limited their commitment. For example:

I think firstly because not … it is just not in our … I mean officially in our … stated as one of our duties and

then I don't think the school will recognise this as one of our duties, so maybe it is not the priority … I can say … it's not a priority … so … the teachers will just leave it aside. (Kathy-OTO)

From their answers, it seems that their perception of the importance of online learning communities was related to how these activities were officially valued by their schools. Since their participation in online activities was not considered as part of their official job, the teachers tended to regard it as unimportant.

The analysis revealed that 12 teachers gave answers related to their openness, which prevented them from fully participating in their online communities. Hesitancy to reveal their weaknesses, fear of having nothing 'new' to offer and fear of being seen as 'showing off' were found to be closely related to culture and teachers' identities. The teachers were concerned about what other people thought about them, especially when it might involve negative perceptions. Younger teachers refrained from asking questions, as they feared that others would belittle them; they considered themselves as having little knowledge and therefore felt that they were not eligible to contribute to the discussions. They were comfortable staying silent, but at the same time they learned from what others had written and shared. Teachers worried that they risked revealing a lack of experience that could threaten their social position. Meanwhile, more experienced teachers refrained from giving too much as they were afraid that others would see them as showing off their skills.

Another emerging theme was related to hierarchical culture (cited by nine teachers). This was due to differences in professional background, in that junior teachers tended to respect senior teachers, and this hierarchy impeded communication between these teachers. This hierarchical system seemed to be established and well-accepted among the teachers: new teachers should not talk too much, and senior teachers expected others to come to them for support.

Commitment towards their family was cited as a factor by seven teachers. Some had to go home immediately after school hours to take care of their children and other family members. For example:

Like myself ... my priority for this [online sharing activities] will be the last ... frankly speaking to you ... my priority is my schoolwork done first, and then my obligations, later on my obligations towards my studies and my family, that comes second, so this is ... I always put it at the end ... when I have the time to go in ... then I go in … so I cannot take is as an important task. (Kathy-OTO)

A factor cited by nine teachers was their real need for an online community. These teachers were mainly subject teachers in their schools. The existence of face-to-face communities in their schools was perceived as being enough to meet their needs. Many teachers described how they got support in terms of ideas or strategies for teaching from their colleagues, especially those who were more experienced. New teachers seemed to benefit from discussions with their seniors whenever they were stuck on teaching certain topics with which they were not familiar. For example:

They knew better and had experience using the strategies in their own classes. I am lucky to have those experienced teachers who are always there to help me. (Noni-OTO)

The last factor emerging from the analysis was the skills to use blogs. This was cited by six teachers, the majority of whom were senior teachers. For example:

Old-timers like me … it took me longer to learn these new technical skills, you know. So I need to learn properly. (Fariha-OTO)

I can contribute but to really sit down and go and upload and all those things ... because we are the old generation ... so it's quite ... we are not expert in all these things ... when you are not expert you tend not to do ... you tend to do other things that you are good at. (Ismi-OTO)

They were concerned about having to learn new skills that were time-consuming. This made them perceive online sharing as a complicated activity in which they had to spend more time on learning the required skills:

Learning too many technical things was so time-consuming, too. You have to be skilled in order to use this. So sometimes I felt it as a burden. (Hanna-OTO)

Because they had to learn many new skills, this diminished the motivation of some teachers, as Ismi mentioned:

Since we had to learn so many things, so many procedures, and sometimes we failed ... so I think this is the problem, at least for me. I have to learn many procedures, in the Virtual Interactive Platform [VIP] for example. It is so technical! And this is not something that I really enjoyed ... (Ismi-OTO)

5. Discussions

The findings indicate that most teachers in this study had positive views of the benefits and the importance of

online communities, which helped them not only to expand their networks to include teachers from other schools, but, more importantly, to get new ideas and to enhance their pedagogical skills. However, the ways teachers behaved in their online communities were found to be bounded by certain factors. The teachers indicated some hindrances to being more open towards giving comments, especially negative ones.

In terms of the factors that influenced the way teachers participated in their online communities, time was the most hindering factor, as teachers stated having to give more priority to their school-related tasks over online discussions. Some of the teachers were hindered by family commitments that required them to spend more time after school with their families. It was also highlighted that, due to the fact that their participation in these online communities was not acknowledged by their school administrators, some teachers viewed it as an unimportant task. In Malaysian culture, professional development is institutionalised, i.e. Ministry-approved, so there is perhaps a need to make engagement in online communities as part of the administration's expectations for teachers. This would then motivate teachers to give their best to these sharing activities. It is anticipated that enforcement such as assessment and monitoring by school administrators would also make teachers take online communities more seriously. Wenger et al. (2002) view the voluntary nature of community engagement as being central to active participation in communities of practice; however, within the context of Malaysian teachers' professional development, volunteerism seems unlikely to support the development of successful communities. Teachers also did not see any harm in not having online communities as they already belonged to other (officially recognised) informal, face-to-face communities in their schools, such as Subject Panels and form teachers' groups, or examiners' communities outside their schools (Khalid, 2013).

In addition, Malaysian culture was found to play a role in shaping the way teachers participated in their online communities. Teachers mentioned how they were bound by Malaysian culture; for example, they stated that their culture prevented them from saying harsh words in the presence of others. They also held themselves back from sharing 'too much' on the blogs to avoid others thinking that they were exaggerating their expertise and knowledge or showing off. This is closely related to the value of modesty (Zawawi, 2008): in Malaysian culture, people tend not to show 'too much', as doing so is against the value of modesty. These teachers believed that it was important to remain humble.

At the same time, more experienced teachers had their own sense of dignity or self-esteem. All of the more experienced teachers admitted that it was not easy for them to accept comments from other teachers, especially when they contained negative statements. The issue of their openness affected their behaviour. Teachers mentioned their concerns that others would label them as 'arrogant' if they talked too much in the discussions. What they wanted to do was to behave modestly. The senior teachers found it difficult to accept criticisms from other teachers, especially younger teachers.

When teachers felt a sense of competence, they felt that it was not appropriate for them to be criticised by others, especially newer teachers. This might be associated with Malaysian culture itself, where the concept of hierarchy still exists within the teaching culture in Malaysian schools (Zawawi, 2008): newer or younger teachers are expected to show respect to their elders by not saying harsh or negative words to their faces. Zawawi further explains that Malaysian culture focuses on showing proper etiquette, which involves values such as 'accommodating, affiliation, appreciative, filial piety, and obedience' (p. 417) when socialising with other people. Her study also highlights the importance of the value of 'indirectness' among Malays, which is closely related to 'politeness'. In general, Malays view it as inappropriate in most situations to say something directly. Even if it is a positive thing, an individual should try to be indirect when making a comment or expressing an opinion.

Another influence of Malaysian culture can be seen in teachers' explanations why many of them, especially the more senior ones, suppressed themselves for fear of being seen as arrogant or as demonstrating, as Bansler and Havn (2003) describe, 'a form of boasting and inappropriate self-endorsement'. The teachers said that it was not good to show everything they knew, as this could be seen as showing off. The value of modesty should be retained. Modesty is the act of 'expressing a lower opinion of one's own ability than is probably deserved, thus hiding one's good qualities' (Zawawi, 2008, p. 418). Kurman (2003) suggests that modesty is a dominant issue in collectivistic cultures like Malaysian culture. Modesty, as defined by Kurman, is 'the public under-presentation of one's favourable traits and abilities' (p. 501). Kurman found that in collectivistic cultures, people agree on the importance of showing modesty, and this is related to a low level of self-enhancement among people in this type of culture. Ardichvilli et al. (2006) see this aspect as being connected to people's reluctance to actively participate in online community discussions, as they try to avoid creating the impression of being arrogant.

These overall findings indicate the importance of understanding the cultural aspects that may influence participation in online communities. Although the level of participation in this study was impacted by other

factors, the cultural issue seems to be the most relevant factor, especially in this research context.

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