
Language teachers and Virtual Communities of Practice: The Case of Facebook

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Abstract:

Educators highlighted technology's great significance in teaching and learning situations regarding the challenging requirements of the network-based environment, which has increasingly dominated different sorts of information exchanges and educational opportunities. This ongoing research aims to identify the importance of technological facilities to allow language teachers developing new strategies that are different from the traditional one through building a community of practice (CoP) on a Facebook platform named "Algerian Association of English Language Teachers". The research opts for an explanatory research method whereby an online questionnaire was administered to 76 EFL teachers from different Algerian educational institutions. A group focus interview was conducted with 15 teachers from over Facebook group chat. The study revealed that participants share knowledge, resources, advice, and insights. They collaborate and communicate to provide feedback, support each other.

Keywords: CoP, digital era, Facebook group, virtual communication, teacher education.

Résumé :

Les chercheurs ont manifesté l'importance de la technologie dans les différentes situations d'enseignement et d'apprentissage en ce qui concerne cette ère numérique, qui a dominé les divers types d'opportunités éducatives. Cet article identifier l'importance des outils technologiques pour permettre les enseignants de développer des nouvelles stratégies à partir d'une communauté de pratique virtuelle (CoP) sur Facebook nommée "Algerian Association of English Language Teachers". La recherche opte pour une méthode explicative par laquelle un questionnaire a été administré à 76 enseignants d'Anglais de différents établissements d'enseignement en Algérie. Une entrevue a été menée avec 15 enseignants via le chat Facebook. L'étude a montré que les participants partagent des connaissances, des ressources, des conseils et des idées sur la communauté virtuelle. Ils collaborent et communiquent pour fournir des commentaires, se soutenir les uns les autres.

Mots-clés : CoP, Facebook, ère numérique, communication virtuelle, l'enseignement.

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Introduction:

One prominent feature of this network-based era is its facilities to connect people worldwide, which shaped all aspects of human life, even the educational and professional ones. During the last two decades, educators attempted to spot the importance of technology to enhance teaching and learning situations; however, teachers were not generally targeted. Hence, the development of online communities for teachers shifted attention from face-to-face interaction to virtually oriented communication wherein teachers use blog forums, Facebook posts and tweets to share their experiences, ask for advice and provide feedback.

This article highlights the importance of online communities of practice created via the Facebook platform for English language teachers. It investigates Algerian teachers' attitudes towards using online communities and the way they affect the teachers' education. Generally, teachers have positive attitudes concerning online communities' use, which help to improve their teaching skills and provide them with valuable resources promoting the teachers' education. This ongoing research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the attitudes of Algerian teachers of English towards using Facebook communities of practice?
2. How does the Facebook CoPs affect the teachers' education?

1. The emergence of the communities of practice

Communities of practice (CoP) are groups of practitioners who share knowledge, concerns, and values within a supportive culture. Wenger (1998) stated that CoP requires the reciprocal involvement of members around a shared space. Members exchange repertoires of different means, experiences, practices, and words that the community has generated or established. These repertoires become a part of the community's proceedings. Therefore, Jung & Brush (2009) claimed that CoP differs from groups or assemblies whereby they seek to develop members' abilities and knowledge to sustain the community. Jones & Preece (2006) argued that the notion of CoP emerged broadly, referring to a group of people who share perspectives and resources related to their work settings formally or informally. With new technologies, they propose that CoP can be figured virtually to be supported by technological facilities. Scholars emphasize the importance of getting engaged actively to learn through these communities of practice.

A virtual Community of Practice (CoP) is a network of individuals who share a domain of interest about which they communicate online. The practitioners share resources (for example experiences, problems and solutions, tools, methodologies). Such communication results in the improvement of the knowledge of each participant in the community and contributes to the development of the knowledge within the domain. A virtual learning community may involve the conduct of original research but it is more likely that its main purpose is to increase the knowledge of participants, via formal education or professional development. Virtual learning communities could have learning as their main goal or the e-learning could be generated as a side effect (Jung & Brush, 2009).

Then, COP is an online community of participants who share the same area of interest and sources with the primary objective to develop knowledge and share experiences. Wenger- Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2015) attributed that CoPs have three principal characteristics: the domain, the community, and the practice. Accordingly, CoPs include friends or connections and individuals who share the same domain

of interest. A participant, therefore, commits to this shared domain, which further requires one to develop corresponding competencies. These individuals constitute a community wherein they help each other, exchange information about the shared repertoire like experiences and tools, allow collaboration and interpersonal relationships to improve learning.

2. Benefits of CoP

Brody & Hadar (2015) suggested that creating a CoP focuses on the professional development of individuals within their discipline while highlighting the significance of relationships, caring, and mutual support within the community. In addition, Gannon-Leary & Fontainha (2007) provided the following benefits for CoPs:

- ✓ They enable more communication, participant interaction, and implementation of collaborative pedagogy paradigms.
- ✓ CoPs facilitate simultaneous and asynchronous communication and access to and from physically separated groups and international information exchange.
- ✓ They develop a sense of connectedness, similar interest, and knowledge growth can be fluid and cyclical due to constant engagement.

3. Critical Success Factors

In considering the critical success factors (CSF) for an online CoP, Gannon-Leary & Fontainha (2007) stated that given components are vital as the utility of technology, confidence, and approval, interpersonal connectedness, cross-national and cross-cultural dimensions of the CoP, shared perceptions, a shared sense of purpose, and longevity. They further clarified (2007):

- ✓ For a virtual CoP, the accessibility of technology is a critical success factor, as the online community requires an internet connection, bulletin boards, and available web technology.
- ✓ The second CSF is communication, which is essential for trust between community members. Continuous communication, collaboration, the development of shared values, and a shared understanding are all ways to build trust (Gibson & Manuel, 2003).
- ✓ Memberships in CoPs is another CSF. Andrews and Schwarz (2002) reported that identifying members with prior mutual knowledge helps develop a sense of trust.
- ✓ Fourthly, members of the CoP should feel belongingness as insiders (Brown & Duguid 2002). Accordingly, Trayner, Smith, and Bettoni (2006) claimed that paying attention to cross-national and cross-cultural dimensions in international online communities increases the cultural impacts on the ability of members to promote a shared perception, and sub-groups of the community based on these cultures can emerge quickly. Within the practice of the community, a shared register may comprise evolved routines, language, methods of working, and tales, which are formed via negotiation to imply (Wenger 1998).
- ✓ CSF requires the CoP to have a purpose. An online CoP should have a clear objective that could be attainable through ICTs. The purpose behind the CoP involves leadership to monitor, regulate, maintain boundaries and respond to the change (Stuckey and Smith, 2004). The necessity for driving leadership becomes increasingly critical as the group gets large.

Hadar and Brody (2010) suggested a three-layered design concerning the effectiveness of a virtual CoP in teachers' education, wherein each layer is a requirement to the next one. Breaking of isolation represents the first layer where members need a safe environment for discussions, social and professional interaction, and cross-area communication to promote the CoP's professional connections. Followingly in the second layer, communication leads to enhancing teaching and research situation. The result, finally, increases self-efficacy and competence, providing the third layer of the design.

With all advancement and technological facilities, people have immersed themselves with the web 2.0 technologies that fashioned their everyday lives, especially the social network, which was designed to meet the users' needs for social interactions. Having 2.45 billion active users worldwide (Facebook, 2019), Facebook has become the most noticeable social network on the spot for educational research since 2005. Although the primary focus of Facebook is creating electronically connected platforms for users to interact and make friends, a need to establish communities has developed among its subscribers. Therefore, the most significant feature of Facebook is to communicate online and share different resources, which makes it ideal for forming virtual CoP to promote collaboration and knowledge building.

4. Facebook as a CoP

According to Abdallah (2013), advancements in Information and communication technologies (ICTs) led to specific pedagogical domain applications, uses, and processes. For instance, Casimir & Doris (2013) affirm that Facebook and other forms of social media are gradually and steadily transforming education and how most subjects are taught because of its interactive nature as participants can produce, update or share information. They add that Facebook has "the potential to become an exciting instructional tool given its popularity and students' familiarity with its site".

Miniaoui & Halaweh (2011) explained that Facebook is a social network service and website where users create a personal profile then build their network of contacts by adding other users as friends. They can exchange messages privately or in public through synchronous or asynchronous communication, receive/send automatic notifications when they update their profile or post a link, photo or video. Moreover, "users may join common-interest user groups, school, a company or any religious, political, cultural community".

5. Barriers to Virtual CoPs

Gannon-Leary & Fontainha (2007) provided the following list of limitations to the use of virtual communities of practice:

- ✓ Some disciplines, such as the sciences and technology fields, may require specialized expertise to conduct a virtual CoP.
- ✓ Academics included in virtual CoPs where the shared knowledge is already known, and the community members already know each other.
- ✓ A virtual CoP necessitates hard work to manage energy and a high level of cooperation and assistance in which membership shifting would lead to the group's destruction.
- ✓ Virtual CoP lacks the opportunity of face-to-face communication and socialization that interrelates members, which may fail to engage them.
- ✓ Crossing virtual barriers between institutions, which creates a trust barrier, can lead to institutional-related concerns, particularly legal ones such as data protection and intellectual property.
- ✓ A further barrier involves the choice of ICTs' use. Regardless of their digital literacy, many academics, professionals, and students are strategic users of ICTs, aligning their use to achieve their operational needs.
- ✓ The question about the CoP being task-based or practice-based is raised. A virtual learning community may be short-lived have a limited opening and end. The task-based, therefore, set for a particular learning activity.

The following chart explains the benefits, barriers, and critical success factor characteristics of CoPs:

Table (01): Benefits, Barriers and CSFs of online CoPs

Benefits	Barriers	CSF
Enhanced learning environment Synergies created Abilities extended to a higher level Knowledge sharing & learning Getting insights from each other Developing knowledge, innovation & expertise Cyclical, fluid knowledge Sense of connect Ongoing interactions Assimilation into socio-cultural practices Practice-based usage	Perpetuation vs. change Disciplinary differences Culture of independence Tacit knowledge Transactive knowledge Physical community Shifting membership, Maintaining information flow No F2F to break Read-only participants Hidden identities, adopted personas Lack of trust – personal and institutional Selectivity in ICT use Task-based usage	Good use of ICTs Technological provision Institutional acceptance of ICTs as communication media Good communications Trust Common values Prior knowledge of members Sense of belonging Cultural awareness Purposefulness Sensitivity in monitoring, regulating, facilitating Time to build up the CoP Coordination to achieve interaction

Source: Gannon-Leary & Fontainha (2007)

6. Methodology

6.1. The context

A sequential explanatory research method was designed to achieve the main goal of the study. It has started by collecting and analyzing quantitative data, followed by a qualitative method developed based on quantitative data (Creswell, 2017). The quantitative part of the study was designed under the survey method and distributed online. The survey is a method of collecting data through interviews or surveys (Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun, 2015) and aiming to reveal the general view of the group. The qualitative data was collected from a group focus interview to collect high-quality data in a social context (Patton, 2002). The participants were interviewed through Facebook instant messages wherein a group chat was created, and the teachers were invited to take turns. For the questions, they answered them orderly.

6.2. The participants

The study participants consisted of English teachers connected to the Facebook group "Algerian Association of English Language Teachers". In this context, 76 EFL teachers who were selected randomly responded to the online questionnaire. They work in different academic institutions throughout Algeria. Concerning the qualitative dimension of the research, only 15 teachers were involved in the group chat. Volunteerism was the basis for teachers' participation in the study in which they were questioned at the very beginning of the study.

6.2.1. The platform

The "Algerian Association of Teachers of English" is a public group established on Facebook in January 2014. It is all about teaching English and administered by Algerian English language teachers. The group contains more than 104000 members with an activity of more than 100 posts per day. Participants share resources, ideas, knowledge, teaching practices and many other tasks. They collaborate altogether in order to improve themselves and their practices.

6.2.2. The procedures

The survey was architected and distributed online. A 10-item questionnaire was delivered to 76 EFL teachers who joined the Facebook community "Algerian Association of English Language Teachers". The questions of the surveys have covered two basic concepts related to the aim of this research, which are (1) Personal information including age, teaching level, teaching experience and their competence using technology, (2) Teachers' education via Facebook CoP referring to the teachers' use of online communities on the Facebook platform and their attitudes towards its use.

Following the analysis of the data obtained from the survey, a semi-structured focus group was prepared. It attempts to answer the research question concerning teachers' education when interacting through online Facebook groups. The time allocated for communication ranged between 10 and 60 minutes. The Participants' answers were collected from the instant chat for Messenger. The textual answers are depicted numerically by creating themes and analysis units within the framework of research problems.

7. Results

According to the quantitative results, all the participants (100%) willingly participated in the study. The participants' age ranged from 21 to more than 50-year-old. Hence, most of the participants (32.9%) were aged between 21 and 30. The majority of the teachers' age (34.2%) varies between 31 and 40. Another group of participants (21.1%) was between 41 and 50 years old. The minority (11.8), then, was more than 50-year-old teachers.

Therefore, almost (57.9%) of the participants were middle school teachers and (27.6%) of them taught at secondary schools. However, the minority of the teachers (14.5%) who took part in the study were teaching at university or worked privately. Some of them (10.5%) had a teaching experience for less than one year, wherein the great majority (55.2%) were experienced in teaching English as a foreign language between one year and ten years. Nevertheless, some of the participants' experience (19.8%) in teaching reached almost 20 years, and a few of them (14.5) were teachers for more than 20 years.

The participants' answers demonstrated that the majority (46.1%) of them had an average level using the information and communication technologies (ICTs) and others (34.2%) were competent users of technological devices. Still, about (10.5%) of teachers indicated that they were pretty skilled with the ICTs use. However, the minority (9.5%) claimed that they had a poor level concerning the use of technology.

The results revealed that, on the one hand, the majority (35.5%) of participants were connected to about five groups on the Facebook platform. Others (39.5%) were members in about 15 communities on Facebook. On the other hand, some teachers (25%) belonged to more than 20 online Facebook communities. Teachers' answers showed that (15.8%) allocate less than one hour weekly for participation in the groups. They had also stated that (51.3%) of the teachers spent around 3 hours per week participating in the online groups. The other group of correspondents (22.4%) spent about 6 hours per week contributing

to the online communities. The minority of teachers (10.5%) were used to spend more than 9 hours in a week participating in the online groups.

On the first hand, some participants (89.5%) pointed that they were influenced by the online teaching communities wherein they changed some of their classroom practices. On the other hand, another group of teachers (10.5%) stated that they did not change their teaching routines due to participating in teachers' virtual groups. However, all the teachers who participated in the study (100%) considered their contribution in online communities helpful to the teachers' education in which the majority (86.8%) claimed that these communities met their professional expectations, whereas the minority (13.2%) did not.

Concerning the importance of teachers' participation in Facebook teaching communities, a group of participants (20%) assume that communities devoted to teaching on Facebook are an important place for sharing teaching resources and material to help teachers achieve their teaching goals. Thus, most participants (46%) claim that these groups allow them to exchange knowledge and experiences related to classroom practices. Teachers are encouraged to self-reflect their work, update innovative teaching methods and improve teaching competencies through collaboration and teamwork. The following table explains how important the use of Facebook communities as expressed by the participants.

Table (02): The importance of teachers' participation in Facebook teaching communities

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Sharing resources and materials	15	20%
Exchanging knowledge and experiences	35	46%
Improving Teachers' competencies	39	51%
Encouraging self-reflection	20	26%
Updating innovative teaching methods	15	20%
Collaborating	12	16%

Concerning the group focus interview conducted with the teachers, all participants (100%) stated that they adopted given activities from the teachers' group. They also asserted the utility of the different ideas members share and how they helped them develop their teaching skills. Regarding the development of close interpersonal relationships between members, most correspondents (75%) confirmed establishing mutual bonds with members they had never met before. They claimed that Facebook CoPs facilitated their interaction, promoted their engagement to the group, and increased their sense of connectedness. However, few teachers (25%) insisted that Facebook does not show people's real identity as the majority use fake names and use web-generated photos for their profiles. Accordingly, building a connection with the knowns can be hazardous. This would result in a mistrust and prevent teachers from being at ease when acting in the group.

The participants (100%) credited that Facebook communities of practice are considered as a problem-solving resource. They stated that whenever someone shares a post about an inquiry or a problem, other members with different backgrounds and varied levels of knowledge try to help by giving advice, support, feedback, or even share their experiences. Thus, Facebook CoPs are of great benefit to them as they may find whatever they seek after. The support that members provide each other with promotes teachers' education and help them evolve their teaching skills and develop new apprehensions regarding their task.

8. Discussion and conclusion

This study targeted the English language teachers' participation in different teaching communities on the Facebook platform and how this later affects teachers' education. The sample under investigation reflects Wenger and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) claim that CoP can differ in size, geographic location, and fundamental purpose. CoP demonstrated Wenger and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) three elements of domain, community, and practice. The Algerian Association of Teachers of English Facebook group complies with these criteria, and all were formed by individuals who engaged in the process of collective learning in a shared domain of teaching. Thus, teachers' participation in an online CoP served to break isolation and support their professional growth.

To establish meaningful professional development, encouraging conditions that allow teacher educators to share experiences, attitudes freely, and concepts must be present (Ben-Perez, Kleeman, Reichenberg, & Shimoni, 2010). Accordingly, Hadar and Brody (2010) claimed that the significance of the initial development of relationships and the social nature of learning as a requirement to discussing more topics was crucial. The teacher in this study created the necessary structural and supportive human environment to facilitate intentional, collaborative learning and the application of that learning through an online platform, therefore, leading to continuous progress in teacher education. Engagement with online CoPs sustained the teacher education developmental process over initiating meaningful conversations, resulting in building a shared belief between group members. It also created challenging situations to increase the level of interaction to solve problems and help to foster teachers' competencies to deal with such conditions. Joining these communities spreads group process aspects like commitment, safe space, professional relationships and shared focus.

Facebook seems to be everywhere and permeate nearly every aspect of society. However, there are still several pending questions regarding using social media to assist pedagogical practices. This research showed that when individuals within the same domain (teaching) form a community supporting their practice, they could create a collaborative and supportive CoP within Facebook. It does not mean that Facebook is the only social media platform for creating a CoP or that any Facebook group can be a CoP that supports learning. The Algerian Association of English Teachers seemed to be a good CoP where Algerian English teachers share the same interest to evolve their teaching practices wherein its accomplishment depends on the willingness of the community members to trust, share, and participate in the CoP. The Facebook group continued to be used since the data for this research was gathered and analyzed. Accordingly, the Facebook platform is considered more than a social networking site for entertainment and chatting. It proves to sustain teaching and learning practices through creating different beneficial spaces and communities where both teachers and learners can freely meet virtually and develop their capacities.

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Appendices**1. Teachers' questionnaire***Teachers' Education through Facebook Community of Practice*

1. Your consent is required to participate. Tick in if you agree to the declaration.
2. How old are you?
[21-25] [26-30] [31-35] [36-40] [41-45] [46-50] More than 50
3. Where do you teach?
Middle school University
Secondary school Private school
4. Teaching experience
Less than one year [1-5] years [6-10] years
[11-15] years [16-20] years More than 20 years
5. How do you grade your level in technology use?
Very poor Poor Average Competent Very competent
6. How many online communities do you belong to on Facebook?
[1-5] [6-10] [11-15] [16-20] More than 20
7. What is the average amount of time per week you spend participating in groups?
Less than 1h [1-3] [4-6] [7-9] More than 9 h
8. Have you changed any of your teaching practices because of participating in online teaching communities?
Yes No
9. Has your membership to the online communities met your professional expectations?
Yes No
10. How can you identify the importance of participating in such communities to the teachers' education?

2. Group Focus discussions

1. Have you used any ideas or activities from the community discussions in your classroom?
2. Have you formed closer personal relationships with any member?
3. Do you consider Facebook online community of practice as a problem-solving resource? Justify.
4. Do you think that membership to an online community of practice represents a key to teachers' education?
5. Is the continuity of using community of practice on Facebook is advantageous?