Barriers and Bridges: Occasional New Teacher Induction

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Abstract

This small-scale exploratory qualitative investigation highlights the differential experiences of new teachers classified as occasional (supply/substitute). We address the lack of formal professional support offered to them and review the implications for their inclusion within an online Community of Practice (CoP). The findings spotlight the participants' resilience and higher than normal levels of social insight as being way finding methods of coping.

Keywords: Occasional teachers, community of practice, induction.

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Introduction

In Ontario (Canada), the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP, 2006). It remains a confusing concept prone to ambiguity and misunderstanding. However, as presented in the *Induction Elements Manual*, the program has been designed to support the growth and professional development of *new* teachers. One notable type of new teacher absent from the program are those classed as occasional (supply/substitute) teachers. We recently attended a New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) year-end debriefing session for one local Ontario board of education where there was considerable discussion and concern about how to better support the differential needs of new teachers in the upcoming school year. As expected, notably absent from the conversation and documentation at this meeting was any recognition of the large pool of occasional (supply/substitute) new teachers. The focus on this day was supporting part- time and full-time contract new teachers who fall within the preview of the current Ontario NTIP. It was suggested that part of the challenge with connecting these new teachers to the necessary people and resources required was the expansive geographical nature of the school district (rural). It was at that moment that we presented the notion of an online professional learning community.

Ambiguity or Community of Practice (CoP)?

Given the challenges within the provision of quality mentoring for new teachers, it (online professional learning) was curiously absent from the Ontario NTIP (2006, 2009) since it is a provincial and local board level online professional learning component that seeks to connect new teachers, including occasional teachers, to a wider range of educational professionals, teacher resources, and most importantly, moral supporters. Wenger (2004) suggested that the element of inspiration that can be located and cultivated within a community of practice is a by-product of bringing practitioners together into a collective where their lived professional experiences and stories can be shared. We believe this can be done both as a face-to-face and virtual experience online. The comfort, insight, and knowledge, both tacit and explicit, which can be gained from this practitioner-based collective, are critical aspects of a CoP within any organization we believe. Although Wenger (2004) explains how the CoP is all around us, many in the field of education were largely unaware or confused by the CoP concept. Cox (2005) has laid out the concept of a CoP. Nonetheless, we are left with a sense of ambiguity when addressing the Cop conceptually. Researchers, Guldberg and Mackness (2009) have pointed out that the complex interplay of factors

that impact the CoP development and the vast array of contexts in which they exist as being problematic for some participants within the CoP.

Online CoP

While there has been a considerable body of scholarly literature surrounding off-line communities of practice (CoP), Stuckey (2004) suggested one barrier facing online versions of the CoP is the lack of empirically based literature and inquiry. Providing some challenge to this assertion, Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2005) provided an insightful and comprehensive review of nine research papers that covered a broad range of topics related to online communities. Their review examined the design, theory, and practice that ultimately underscored their development. Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2005) relate one important observation; that increasingly online communities rarely ever exist solely online, and are seldom restricted to just one medium. Given this conclusion, defining a community as *online* may be misleading and problematic herein.

Today, the challenge for researchers examining the notion of online community (CoP) is gaining an authentic understanding of their nature and being. It has been noted; "[Today] Populations tend not to be bounded, so getting a clear picture of the community's context can be difficult, and sampling is tricky and prone to error" (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005, p. 2).

In theory and in practice

In theory and in practice, a CoP certainly seems to suit the needs of a program like the Ontario NTIP. An online CoP can include, by definition: (a) a shared domain of knowledge and interest, (b) members engaging in joint activities and discussions, helping each other, sharing information, building relationships that enable a reciprocal learning process, and (c) practitioners who share and devise a repertoire of specific resources that may include: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in brief a shared practice (Wenger, 2004). Further, Wenger and Lave (1999) explained that the social theory of learning by which a CoP is framed sees individuals actively engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities. For an online CoP, it implies that learning involves the ongoing refinement of practice and the assurance of new generations of members. At the organizational level, learning implies the sustainment of an interconnected CoP through which an organization comes to know what it knows and thereby becomes effective and valuable as an organization (Wenger & Lave, 1999).

The darker side of community

The revitalized view of learning and mentoring that a CoP may propose to offer is not without its challengers. The complexities of a socially and collaboratively constructed knowledge in an educational context combined with the considerable challenges and stressors of actual teaching practice today are likely to result in what Yanow (2000) regarded as "clashes of practice" (p. 260). The utopian conception that the language of *community* inherently implies may be misleading. Reynolds (2000) reminded us that there is a *darker side* of community. Looking past the pastoral idyllic, Reynolds perceived the *politics of difference* that were very much inherent to any community, as tainting its image.

An unsupportive climate

In the province of Ontario the support offered to newly hired teachers has been deficient. As suggested by Glassford and Salinitri (2007), many schools across Canada, with the exception of the province of New Brunswick, should receive a failing grade in this area. Consider that in Ontario those classified, as occasional teachers are not included within the formal 2-year induction process. According to Reig, Paquette, and Chen (2007), novice teachers continue to be assigned the most challenging teaching assignments and are regularly placed in classrooms late in the fall when the school year has already begun. Reig et al. (2007) found a lack of confidence due to a lack of experience, unclear perception of status, conflict between advice and expectations, and a lack of coping mechanisms for dealing with stress as being key stressors. It is logical to assume these stressors would be compounded for new teachers who are working as *on demand* supply (substitute) teachers, regularly entering schools where they often don't know the students, teachers, or local school culture (Ryan, 2009).

Where have all the new (Ontario) teachers gone?

Now more than ever, new teachers entering the profession require more than just access to teaching resources; they require a fundamental source of inspiration and mentoring. Recent trends and projections have severely diminished the hopes and possibilities of new graduates finding work in the province of Ontario. As reported by the Ontario College of Teachers in the State of the Profession 2007 Survey (Browne, 2007), there were 8,000 more new teachers licensed each year in Ontario than the number of teachers retiring from the

profession. With so few new teachers projected to enter the profession, it may be difficult to find new teacher candidates for the NTIP. A result of this trend is that many new teachers entering the profession now find themselves having to spend several years volunteering and taking supply (substitute) teaching assignments before actually securing full-time teaching positions. Notable is that newly 'hired' supply teachers are not eligible for the Ontario NTIP, which makes little sense and is worthy of further examination.

Rationale and significance

The subject of new teacher induction has never been timelier in Ontario. At this stage of the NTIP there is considerable room for growth considering the obvious lack of a unified online presence and the lack of professional induction and support offered to new occasional (supply/substitute) teachers. This investigation examines the expectations of new teachers acting as occasional teachers. More specifically, it examines their perceived needs and their understanding of online professional learning environments, current levels of experience within them, and expectations for them.

Research Questions

The data gathered from this study was utilized in an attempt to respond to the following questions:

a. What are the primary expectations for support by new occasional teachers in their first years of teaching?

b. What are the experiences of new occasional teachers within online professional learning environments?

c. What are new occasional teachers' understandings of the concept of a community of practice?

Methodology

Instrument

For this investigation we opted for a qualitative research methodology using a comparative set (Ragin, 1987) of case studies (*N=2*) with a semi-structured interview procedure. Shank (2002) defined qualitative research as "a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning" (p. 5).The empirical aspect is rooted in the

experiential nature of participant's lives. Our study was further built upon the conceptual framework constructed by Stake (1995), who notes that *the art of case study research* places considerable value on the experiences, social reality, and insights of others acting within that specified reality. He further advised that it was common for case study researchers to make assertions based upon a small number of (multiple) cases.   This methodology seemed to complement our epistemological stance. It was an understanding and view of knowledge as an entity that is dynamically created in an ongoing manner by groups and individuals in relation to their own perceived social reality. In this sense, it was assumed that knowledge was not something that was inherited. Instead, it was our assumption that it was constantly being reproduced by people acting on their interpretations of it. This position, that is currently evolving, borrows heavily from sociology and exposure to the pioneering work of Berger (1963) and Ragin (1987, 2000, 2008).

Participants

The selection of the research participants was not based on any consistent sampling technique. In essence, it was a *sample of convenience* (Ferber, 1977). Ferber noted, "the object in this case is not to measure any sampling errors or biases but rather to make it as simple and economical for the researcher to get a set of data" (p. 57).   Both participants were *new* teachers who had a combined total of 5 years of occasional teaching. At this time they were categorized professionally as '*new hire supply teachers*'.

Procedures and process

Each participant was sent an electronic version of the consent form. This outlined in detail the research project. An invitation to clarify and to ask questions prior to the face to face interview was offered. The average time for the *formal* interview process was approximately 40 minutes. Interviews were completed in a narrative-style and this mode has been advocated by several educational researchers who explain the benefits of using this mode to inform educational research while enhancing experience (Connely & Clandinin, 1996; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991). In order to enhance the reliability of the transcribed data, each participant was invited to review the transcript and to attest to the authenticity of it prior to its analysis. The principal analysis means used was comparative thematic analysis, which has been linked to Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From the onset of the analysis we initially focused on coding and thematically analyzing one teacher's data, then eventually comparing these outcomes to our second case.

Results

Stage 1: Transcription (ethical considerations). The transcription process was informed by previous research as we found that taking the time and effort to personally transcribe the digital audio data forced us to carefully *listen* to the respondents. This also ensured a higher standard of confidentially for the participants.

Stage 2: Towards a theoretical interpretation. According to Stake (1995), the process of interpretation is the hallmark of qualitative investigation. As the principle of relativity is inherent to most qualitative case study, each researcher contributes uniquely to the investigation of a case. During the transcription phase there were many commonalities that became apparent between the two cases (see Breaking down the common ground: Figure 1). These served as a starting point for my analysis of the data.

Stage 3: Compare. Another crucial step in the qualitative data analysis process, was to invoke a method of comparison (Ragin, 1987, 2000, 2008).

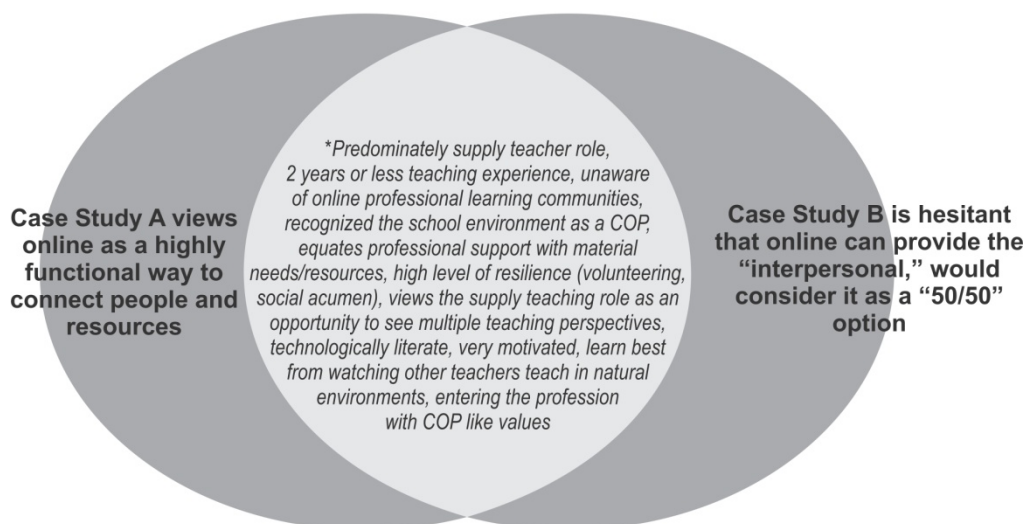**Common Ground Comparitive Analysis of Similar Traits & Understanding**

Case Study A views online as a highly functional way to connect people and resources

*Predominately supply teacher role, 2 years or less teaching experience, unaware of online professional learning communities, recognized the school environment as a COP, equates professional support with material needs/resources, high level of resilience (volunteering, social acumen), views the supply teaching role as an opportunity to see multiple teaching perspectives, technologically literate, very motivated, learn best from watching other teachers teach in natural environments, entering the profession with COP like values

Case Study B is hesitant that online can provide the "interpersonal," would consider it as a "50/50" option

Figure 1. Breaking down the common ground

Breaking Down the Common Ground!

The challenges facing new full-time teachers have been highlighted by many researchers such as Reig, et al. (2007). Some insights into the differential challenges facing a new teacher acting as a *supply* came from participant A when it was acknowledged, "coming into a room where the kids are obviously not ours and there is very little time to develop a rapport [is a challenge]" (August 02, 2010). Participant B identified the stress caused by not knowing where teaching resources were within a classroom. She noted that having no lesson plan provided adds considerably to the stress of supply teaching. In a bid to avoid this stress participant B comments, "sometimes I go much earlier, maybe 1 hour, so I can talk to teachers in the school [and find the resources]. I am also prepared for this" (August 03, 2010). Another less evident stressor uncovered was the constant pressure to "put yourself out there" (participant A, August 02, 2010) in order to secure daily work. Both participants clarified that "putting yourself out there" meant many hours of volunteering. In putting himself out there, participant A was able to secure 115 days of teaching last year. A key observation and belief by participant A was that many new teachers simply do not have the capacity to effectively connect with teachers and principals. This is something that is never taught. It was his belief that his tacit understanding of how to do this was largely passed down through his family that has a long lineage of teachers. Later in the interview, participant A identified these types of skills as being the type of information that could be shared in an online learning community. The drawback of such a practice would obviously be the loss of a competitive edge over those competing for the same supply days. Participant A did not seem concerned about this fact and expressed willingness and a desire to share his knowledge. As repeatedly noted by Wenger (1998, 1999, 2004), who advocates for online collaborative learning communities, trust and respect is an essential element. Participant A seems to have entered the profession with inherent CoP-like traits.

Resilience and Vulnerability

In a bid to alleviate some of the disconnection between the teachers, students, and resources that both case studies identified, both indicated that considerable effort was given on their off days, and while in the schools, to talk to and meet with teachers. In the words of participant A: "I like seeing them at work in their own environment. I observe a lot before I integrate myself into a situation or a classroom" (August, 02, 2010). For participant A, this comment seems to rebut any notion of online as being a functional option for mentoring and professional growth. However, as he clarified later, it merely underscored the need for a *hybrid* model that allows for both a personal in-school mentoring relationship and the type of support that can be offered in an online CoP proposed by Wenger (2004). Participant B supports this

view in the following comment: "[Do you think an online CoP is something you could benefit from?] It would be 50/50 because I like being personable. I like talking with people one on one. But, I also think online would be very helpful as well because you wouldn't be talking to 3 schools, you would be talking to 26 schools" (August 03, 2010). As confirmed by both participants, no formal mentoring program or any form of online support is offered to them. It seemed that a higher level of resiliency offset any lack of professional support and the stress caused by not having a close connection to a class or school environment. This was largely accomplished by a willingness to make personal connections with teachers happen by going out of their way. Participant B noted that her "strategy" (August 03, 2010) was to focus on three main schools and to get to know the principals, teachers, and students all very well. Establishing these interpersonal connections made the chances of securing work more likely and aided in reducing the stress of entering the unfamiliar. A key observation is that both participants demonstrated what I would regard as a higher than normal level of *social acumen* and *resiliency*. The extent to which this type of tacit knowledge can be shared and cultivated in an online manner is the object of some debate by scholars. However, these tacit understandings were vital to the success of the participants in making connections and supporting their own professional development despite a lack of formal support. A less resilient new teacher without these skills would surely be more vulnerable.

The Nature of Support

As noted in the literature review, the type and nature of support offered to new teachers, not to mention marginalized occasional teachers has been suspect (Glassford & Salinitri, 2007). The participants in this study highlighted this concern, as both indicated they were largely unaware of any professional resources available to support their differential needs. Any supports that they were aware of and had access to were mostly limited to nominal monetary funds and curriculum resources. Access to even these *lower level* professional supports was restricted as noted by participant B: "There is the classroom support center, I was allowed to take things out under another teacher's name" (August 03, 2010). This not only substantiates the marginal status ascribed to new occasional teachers, but it also indicates a lack of concern for the *higher level* supports required by new teachers that include emotional support, successfully developing an identity and comfort within a practice, stress management, and classroom management. Participant A confirmed the lack of support identified by participant B: "[in response to is there any formal support] Not to my recollection. I am not even sure" (August 02, 2010). The lack of support offered to a new occasional teacher that is highlighted by these results is cause for

concern.

Taking It Online: Understandings and Expectations

A key part of this investigation was to gain some insights into the experiences and understandings that these new teachers had in online professional learning environments. Somewhat surprising, neither participant made regular use of online professional resources, and both were largely unaware of any that could support their professional practice: Participant B "[are you aware of any online professional resources?] Available to pay for you mean? (Interviewer response) Not to pay for, just anything online like a professional community that you could belong to to get some support? (participant) No I am not actually. That could be my lack of knowledge" (August 03, 2010). Although substantiating the lack of use of online professional resources, participant A did recall being part of a Facebook community in his Bachelor of Education year: "Well back in my BEd year, Facebook was really coming out and our section leader hooked us up to a Facebook group and linked our group to a bunch of resources for every division" (August 02, 2010). Given these responses, it was not surprising that neither participant was explicitly aware of the concept of an online CoP; however, once the concept was clarified for them, both felt they were a part of one. Their responses clarify Wenger's (2004) belief that CoP are all around us, despite not knowing what they really are: Participant A "[After listening to a reading about what a COP is, have you ever felt like you belonged to a COP?] Absolutely! In a couple of spots. At one school in the staffroom. It is a very inviting place for ideas. Same thing at the other school I teach at with three other teachers" (August, 02, 2010). A further notable response from participant A was that a CoP was equated in his mind with the practice of "team teaching" (August 02, 2010) and that he equated the World Wide Web with a CoP as it is a "giant sandbox of ideas that anyone can play in and pick from." Based on these results, it is fair to say that both of the participants seem to have entered the profession possessing what may be regarded as "CoP-like values and behaviours" (Evans & Powell, 2007, p. 205). As Evans and Powell recognize, and as I can substantiate, more and more students entering teacher-training programs are entering with these values.

Willing and Likely Candidates

Although largely unaware of the practice of online professional learning communities, both participants are likely and willing candidates for inclusion in one. Both regarded their technology skills as above normal and did make regular use of

technology in their social lives. Participant A noted that a key reason for his ability to connect with the students he taught was his propensity for technology, while participant B attributed her technology skills to some high- level training in her teacher training year. Highlighting their expectations for an online professional learning community was the ability to connect with a broader range of professionals in a more timely and cost efficient manner. Participant B seemed excited at the possibility of being connected to a wider range of professionals; however, she remained adamant that online was not going to be the final answer: "[How could you benefit from an online CoP?] You would be getting different points of view from all over. A wider range of people. So yes, online would be good. I still prefer the up close and personal interactions with others in the school" (August 03, 2010). Participant B would get some comfort from the findings by Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2005), offered at the onset of this paper, that suggest few online communities exist primarily in one format; many have off-line physical components.

Discussion and Implications

Implications for the NTIP: Where Do We Go From Here?

One critical finding as a result of this investigation is that new teachers with the supply teacher status may be largely left professionally vulnerable.

Some insights were also gained into the differential reality that is experienced by new supply teachers. It is one that is punctuated by a disconnect to resources and a single school culture. This would tend to corroborate the assertion by Glassford and Salinitri (2007) that support offered to new teachers in Ontario has earned the failing grade that they have given it. The challenges of supporting a category of teachers that are not *connected* to a school and who are not directly connected to a principal may be a latent reason for the NTIP's inaction. Today, an online CoP seems to hurdle this obstacle by removing the barriers of geography and school affiliation. In this sense, the implementation of an online learning community for the NTIP seems to be a *starting point* for offering professional support. It may also be a cost-effective solution in this time of fiscal restraint.

The participants in this study caution that any program must be a hybrid model that allows for an interpersonal in-school mentorship in conjunction with the online component. What is less clear is whether an educational program like the NTIP can find the capacity within itself to devise an online portal that aspires to cultivate and allow the critical dimensions of a CoP recognized by Wenger (mutual engagement, joint enterprise, shared repertoire, trust; 1998) to transpire. Although

technologies like Internet-based technologies, mobile, and digital technologies offer some hope in supporting and sustaining an online CoP, there are those that are skeptical that instructional technologists can effectively design a CoP (Evans & Powell, 2007; Hung & Nichani, 2002). The interventionist and lock- down mentality that seems to pervade those working in educational instructional technology often deflate the descriptive power that can be an integral part of it. As noted by Tattersall et al. (2005), participation in an online learning environment is often limited by a poor technological experience. The participants in this study seem to posses the willingness and technological "*wayfinding* skills" (Guldberg & Mackness, 2009, p. 534) and CoP-like values that come from their online experiences to make use of an online CoP. For programs like the NTIP, some greater questions become, "Who should be included in an online CoP?" "Who will moderate it?" and "What should the platform and interface be?" The sum of the answers to this will have a dramatic impact upon the experiences that the members of the community will have and whether it will ultimately have a positive impact upon new teacher practice. Although the findings of this project are limited to the reflections and insights of new supply teachers, it seems reasonable that any online development must be open to all categories of teachers if it is to meet the objectives outlined by Wenger. However, the issue of belonging is a key one as noted by Eraut (2002), who laments, "if one defines a community of all the health care workers in a particular location, then multiple professions imply multiple perspectives and multiple practices, the antithesis of a community of practice" (p. 13).

Conclusion

The findings of this limited investigation reveal that new teachers acting as supply teachers have some CoP-like values entering the profession, however, no explicit understanding and involvement in formal online learning communities. Their comfort level with technology combined with their expressed willingness to explore and learn from such communities indicate that they would be excellent candidates for inclusion within such a community. At this time, the lack of professional support offered to this category of new teachers is cause for concern. Providing an online learning community that is connected to the NTIP seems to offer some promise of hope. Future research should continue to investigate the differential needs of all categories of new teachers and continue to expand the limited understanding and research about online versions of CoP.

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