What makes an online community of practice work? A situated study of Chinese student teachers' perceptions of online professional learning

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Student teachers value the significant presence of others in supporting learning.
- Online learning fosters an embracement of the multidimensional roles they took on.
- Voluntary participation and empowerment emerge as factors of professional learning.
- There is a reciprocal interplay between online CoPs and Chinese views of learning.

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings to the fore a cohort of student teachers' perceptions of an online learning experience during school placement in a Chinese tertiary institution; it critically explores factors contributing positively to online professional learning and the development of the community. An ethnographic case study approach was adopted. Findings indicate that online communication allows participants to recognize the significant presence of others in supporting and transforming their learning. It also fosters an appreciation and embracement of the multidimensional roles that they take on. Voluntary participation and empowerment emerge as key factors making this a vibrant professional community for professional growth.

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1. Introduction

For the last decade, educators and researchers (e.g. Baran & Cagiltay, 2010; Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Clarke L, 2009; Kirschner & Lai, 2007) have been enthusiastic in promoting online communities of practice (CoPs) for collaborative professional learning. There is a general consensus that online CoPs are a powerful catalyst and desirable model to support and enhance student teachers' professional learning. Different from the traditional views of learning to teach (i.e., the craft, applied science, or reflective models), this *learning communities* orientation (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) engages directly with Wenger's (1998) socio-cultural learning theory that meaningful learning occurs in a socially situated learning process in a community of practice (CoP).
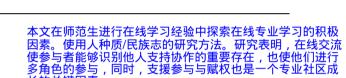
Perry, Walton, and Calder (1999) note that in a CoP, driven by the same purposes, a group of intellectual people engage collectively in 'planning, enacting, reflecting' (p. 218) on their joint enterprise and try to improve what they do and care about. The emphasis on engaging in a communal pursuit enables student teachers to gain access to their peers' teacher thinking and doing: it offers structured opportunities to move from reflection as a private endeavour undertaken in isolation to reflection as a social practice that will ultimately benefit student teachers' professional growth (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Clarke L, 2009; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Zeichner, 1996).

Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) contend that it is highly important for student teachers to learn how to participate in such communities. Such participation requires them to understand the developmental process of an online learning experience. Their perceptions of learning to teach must change from a personal, private view to one of professional practice which can be improved if it is made public, discussed openly, and reflected upon

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collectively. Equally important and apparently overlooked is an analytical understanding of what makes an online CoP work in context (Hoadley, 2012). This paper studies the experience of a cohort of student teachers in China. As such, it intends to bring their perceptions of an online learning experience critically to the fore and, hence, to explore cultural factors that contribute positively to their online professional learning and community of practice.

2. Nature of teacher education in China's normal universities

Over the last decade, Chinese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been given support to set up preservice teacher education programmes (MOE, 2006; State Council, 2001) in order to 'ameliorate the problems of quantity and quality with the teaching force' (Hu, 2005, p. 667). Shouldering the main responsibility for educating teachers of all disciplines for secondary schools in China, Normal Universities (i.e., teacher-training universities) offer a four-year undergraduate programme. The traditional programme consists of three key strands: (1) disciplinary studies, (2) educational studies and (3) a one-off six-week school placement (Sha & Li, 2005). In the final year of their study, student teachers are allocated to a local secondary school in partnership with the Normal University to participate fully in observing different classes, teaching and managing class activities. Meanwhile, they are assigned to be supervised by a university-based supervisor in groups of four to six. The supervisor's roles involve visiting student teachers in the placement school, observing their lessons once a week, and giving informative feedback on their teaching performance.

Nevertheless, since the late 1990s, the rapid expansion of student enrolment identifies some disquieting issues regarding school placement in the Normal Universities of China (Shi & Englert, 2008). Normal Universities have since found themselves in an awkward predicament to obtain and secure placement schools due to the growing number of student teachers (Gao, Zhang, & Qi, 2012; Li, 1999; Yang & Zhou, 2011). Many are encouraged or even compelled to contact placement schools by themselves, and this tendency is reinforced because some of them hope to get a job in their placement school after graduation. No supervision is provided to those individuals who arrange their own placement due to the constraints of geographical distance and limited availability of university-based supervisors. Even for those who take up a school placement set up by the university, supervision tends to be rushed clinical visits because supervisors must combine their many placement visits with lecturing commitments. Given these practical problems, the role of supervisors has not been optimally fulfilled during student teaching placement (Zhen, 2006).

3. Problematizing school placement

Various forms of disconnect and isolation prevail in the pre-service teacher education setting worldwide — not just in China. Geographical distance results in inadequate support and guidance from university-based supervisors (Bowen, 2002; Fry & Bryant, 2007; Mayer, 2002). Consequently, student teachers may experience too little communication, support, sharing, and discussion of professional encounters with their peers and supervisors (Bonk, Hara, Dennen, Malikowski, & Supplee, 2000; Hramiak, 2010; Schlagal, Trathen, & Blanton, 1996). Moreover, they are impeded from integrating educational conceptions, which were developed prior to school placement, with experiences gained in practice teaching because of lack of supervision and collegial dialogue, as reported in a range of international contexts (Allen, 2009; Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, 2006; Le Cornu & White, 2000; Russell, McPherson, & Martin, 2001; Trent, 2010; Zeichner,

2010). In fact, the divorce between the front-loaded teaching theories and practical teaching during the placement remains a worldwide, perennial dilemma of teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Peercy, 2012; Scherff & Singer, 2012; Vick, 2006). Disconnection may also take the form of student teachers being effectively confined to isolated classrooms with limited exposure to the diversity of school activities (Lortie, 1975; Schlagal et al., 1996). Student teachers may have little involvement in professional conversations with other teachers (Farrell, 2003), and disengage themselves from exploring the pre-existing beliefs, past biography, and knowledge that shape their practice (Lortie, 1975; Melville, Campbell, Fazio, Stefanile, & NTkaczyk, 2014; Price, 1989; Richards, 1998). An overly narrow learning-to-teach experience (Tang, 2003) can consolidate their view of teaching as a solitary activity as their practice fails to provide a comprehensive experience of a whole school or a broader understanding of educational system (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Price, 1989). Making matters worse, it is very likely for student teachers to be marginalised in placement schools (Britzman, 1991) in that they lack status and situational knowledge or have limited authority to behave like real teachers (Alsop & Scott, 1990). This may further intensify a sense of professional and psychological isolation. Student teachers can 'feel disequilibrium' and 'vulnerable' when they have to balance the tension between proving their teaching competence and seeking help from their mentors (Scherff & Singer, 2012, p. 264).

From the human perspective, professional learning is embedded in a sense of belonging to the community in which knowledge and practice are fundamental common property (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2008). This sense appears particularly meaningful for student teachers. An online collaborative venue in which they can discuss practice, eliminate doubts, and seek support from each other may motivate and engage them better in their professional growth. Thus international evidence supports the need to consider how CoPs may mitigate such effects.

4. Online communities of practice, learning to teach and Chinese views of learning

As a model to support teachers' professional learning, CoPs have gained considerable currency in a range of international contexts (Baran & Cagiltay, 2010; Hanson-Smith, 2006; Kirschner &Lai, 2007; Lai, Pratt, Anderson, & Stiger, 2006; Reimann, 2008). According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), a CoP is 'a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment' (p. 34). The three key dimensions, (1) mutual engagement, (2) joint enterprise, and (3) shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998), constitute a cohesive community that encourages its members to pursue and define their activities jointly over time. As such, it may develop a shared learning experience with a rich array of resources including meaningful stories, tools, and possible ideas or solutions for dealing with problems.

A number of international studies have explored the benefits of building online CoPs to foster preservice and inservice teacher education. In the UK, recent research affirms the CoPs framework can reduce teacher isolation (Clarke L, 2009; Hramiak, 2007, 2010); develop and enhance student teachers' reflective practice (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012; Seddon & Postlethwaite, 2007); enable them to establish their professional identity (Kelly, Gale, Wheeler, & Tucker, 2007). In Australia, online CoPs are designed to nurture mutual support, peer mentoring and connection (Herrington, Herrington, Kervin, & Ferry, 2006; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010); to support student teachers to define their professional goals and construct communally a professional identity (Balatti, Knight, Haase, & Henderson, 2010; Goos & Bennison, 2008) and to re-appraise the application of educational concepts in their local context (Shin &

Bickel, 2012). Likewise, in North America, researchers reveal that the implementation of online CoPs promotes and deepens reflective practice (Hough, Smithey, & Evertson, 2004; Stiler & Philleo, 2003); allows teachers to share expertise and nature support and friendship (Hanson-Smith, 2006; Paulus & Sherff, 2008); enables them to collaborate and integrate educational theory with teaching practice (Dibbon & Stevens, 2008); increases teachers' self-efficacy and collegial connection (Vavasseur & MacGreor, 2008), and brings a positive perception on a collective journey of learning to teach (Tsai, Laffey, & Hanuscin, 2010). Some researchers (e.g., Cambridge & Perez-Lopez, 2012; Evans & Powell, 2007; Schlager & Fusco, 2003) critique the optimal design, conceptual role and practical use of online CoPs to support educators' decision making, professional development and preservice teacher training. In Asia and other parts of the world, studies have shown that active participation in online CoPs enhances student teachers' critical reflection (Yang, 2009) and knowledge sharing (Tseng & Kuo, 2014); enriches teachers' perspectives on teaching and learning and helps them tackle demanding tasks more effectively through sharing expertise and socializing (Kablian, Adlina, & Embi, 2011; Wang & Lu, 2012); creates a venue for knowledge co-construction and inspiration among student teachers and in-service teachers (Tang & Lam, 2014); and facilitates interpersonal relationship building (Clarke M, 2009), potentially changes pre-service teachers' teaching efficacy (Cheong, 2010) and transforms their perception of teacher identity (Trent & Shroff, 2013).

Although there is a wealth of international literature investigating theoretical understanding of CoPs, there has not been much research into how student teachers, with a Confucian heritage culture (CHC) such as China, Singapore, Korea, Japan and Malaysia, construct their practical teaching and learning to teach in an online CoP. 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 (Gao, 1988; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Kim, 2003), have fundamentally defined and shaped the practice of imparting knowledge, student–student interaction and student–teacher relationship. 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, 2002). As a result, CHC learners are commonly portrayed by many Western researchers (Biggs, 1996; Chow, 1995; Neild, 2007) as passive, rote learners and lack critical thinking ability. Zeichner (1994) warns researchers to stay sensitive to cultural conditions when 'importing theories developed in one cultural context into another' (p. 15). The elements of culture and their impact on the construction of online CoPs seem an underexplored area that merits more empirical research.

Researchers (such as Hoadley, 2012; Kirschner & Lai, 2007) call for more empirically-based research into what enables a community to work and why. In addition, few studies investigate student teachers' perceptions of how online communities contribute to their practical learning to teach experience. Johnson (1996), Koerner, Rust, and Baumgartner (2002), Rorrison (2011), and Allen and Wright (2014) point out that we have limited knowledge of how student teachers view their school placement experience and its overall impact on their professional growth. 'The evolution of beginning teacher knowledge and thinking in practice' requires more in-depth understanding (Eick & Dias, 2005, p. 472). Likewise, Hramiak (2007) maintains, 'there is still much to be learnt about the way trainee teachers perceive the benefits of using e-learning tools while on placement' (p, 108). This paper, therefore, centres on exploration of the following questions:

1. How do Chinese student teachers perceive the contributions of an online learning community during the school placement?
2. What contextualised factors enable a successful learning community of practice?

5. Methodology

Situated in an undergraduate programme of preservice English teacher education (PETE) in Goldstone Normal University in China, this paper is based on a mixture of dispersed and on-site student teachers' online learning experience during their six-week school placement. The study lasted for two academic terms from September to May with two corresponding phases. In the first phase of data collection preparation (from September to January), an online learning community was designed and introduced to all final-year student teachers while they were undertaking an English language teaching methodology (ELTM) module on campus. The ELTM module was taught by the researcher who was also the e-moderator of the online learning. In the second phase of data collection from February to May, 42 out of the total 98 final-year student teachers volunteered to participate in the online discussion during their school placement. In addition, two university lecturers, who had experience of supervising school-based teaching practice, voluntarily joined the study as university-based supervisors in the online community. The author (Hou, 2012) was a participant researcher and acted as one of the three supervisors in the learning community. She delivered induction sessions to the two other supervisors in the first term, as neither of them used online learning before. In the second term when school placement took place, each of the three supervisors worked online with 14 student teachers, of whom a majority were dispersed students (in their own chosen placement school) and three or four were on-site students who went to the partner school organised by the university.

The intention was to familiarise participants with a new form of interaction; help them understand different functionalities embedded in the online community; introduce them to netiquette; and train them to write, edit, reply and trace postings. The fact that their involvement was sustained for a long period helped to eliminate potential sources of participant bias such as initial excitement or frustration at using a new channel of communication. Factors that threatened the validity and reliability of the collected data could also be appropriately addressed. Such factors included student teachers facing the extra burden of confronting something new when they were already pressurised by placement teaching; being uncertain about what benefits online communication could bring to them; and potential interference from the researcher's presence (Robson, 2011).

Primary qualitative data were collected from six weeks of online threaded discussions and from semi-structured interviews including four group interviews of student teachers ($n = 6$ per group) and two individual interviews of supervisors. Supplementary data were taken from an end-of-school-placement evaluation and web-tracking logs. Based on the correlation of the number of postings and web-tracking logs, student teachers' online interaction was categorised as high, upper-medium, medium, and low involvement. The initial findings from the evaluation framed interview themes and prompts. The four types of online participation set a baseline for grouping student teachers into four interviewee groups. Adopting an intermediate position between 'the a priori and inductive approaches' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 61), data analysis has been illuminated by the three theoretical propositions (i.e., mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire) of CoPs as mentioned above.

An ethnographic case study approach (Creswell, 1988; Hammersley, 2006; Merriam & Associates, 2002) was adopted to describe and interpret, at first hand, the online behaviour of the group, language used, interactive patterns and cultural characteristics of the CoP. Under this approach, the voices of participants are viewed as a vital source of data and should be heard in the research (Boyle, 1994). This qualitative approach required the writer as researcher to enter into a close and relatively prolonged interaction with participants and to participate actively as a member of the social group. As a result, this study was able to provide a rich account of the voices, practices, relationships, and perceptions of participants and to discover how online interactions could contribute to the CoP and the professional growth of student teachers.

Permission to gain access to the research site was granted by the Head of School in the University. Written informed consent was sought from all participants. In order to strike a balance between collecting meaningful field data and respecting the needs of the participants, the researcher's background as well as the purpose and procedures of the study were revealed and explained in full. While 42 student teachers, two supervisors and the researcher used their real name in the online learning community, any information which could reveal the location of the research site, the identity of the participants, or their personal information was excluded in the study. The names of the research site and participants used here are pseudonymous.

6. Findings

Quotes from the interview data are utilised to capture experience in *thick* description via the participants' own voices to answer the research two questions. Supervisors' views are quoted when appropriate to cross check student teachers' perspectives and consolidate trustworthiness of the findings.

6.1. Student teachers' perception of the contributions of the online learning community

6.1.1. A caring community

Participants highly valued their peers' and supervisors' online presence as '*indispensable*', and '*enjoyable*'. The consensus was that without the online connectedness and interaction, the school placement would have been '*a more daunting and difficult undertaking*' and a '*less enjoyable or successful experience*'. '*Being able to talk with each other and ask for help*' and '*having access to what our peers were doing*' in the online community facilitated group cohesion and ultimately promoted professional learning and growth. Acknowledgement of members' affective support was a common theme in their interviews:

'*...I feel like my negativity and the pressure are alleviated when... 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.*' (Student teacher FY in Group Interview Two)

They also highlighted that supervisors' online presence '*helped soothe our nerves*' and made them '*approachable*'. Equally, supervisors praised the impact of affective support in facilitating student teachers' psychological transition into a new school setting, as well as the impact on collective learning afterwards. They viewed the affective '*interdependence*' between student teachers as an incentive to create '*a sense of community*' and admitted affective support of this nature had been '*completely overlooked*' in their previous supervisory experience:

'*The affective role is tremendous...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...they rely on each other for consolation.*' (Interview with **L**)

'*...The online space draws them all together and creates an atmosphere...so students are emboldened by each other... Feelings, especially positive ones, are contagious ... The online space has made a difference to the teaching practice this year.*' (Interview with **Z**)

Student teachers pointed out that the online interaction fostered a sense of togetherness, resonance and security and expressed their willingness to *hang out* in the online community and desire to find out about their peers' situation:

'*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 just enjoy reading my peers' stories about school, picturing their experiences and having a laugh.*' (Group Interview Two)

'*...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 obtain 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)

Apparently, dialogical opportunities were opened up to exchange ideas when student teachers had access to the thoughts and feelings of others engaged in the same professional pursuit. This, in turn, increased retention levels of the online CoP and built a strong bond between student teachers. The feelings that '*I am doing the same thing as everybody else*' and '*I can be honest about my feelings and don't have to worry about being judged...*' (Group Interviews one, two, three and four) not only created a sense of collective resonance, empathy and security but further reinforced their sense of belonging to the online CoP. This community proved an important venue for student teachers to get their emotional needs fulfilled and enjoy each other's company.

Overall, the emotional connectedness appeared to be as keenly sought as professional support which is to be discussed below. In this study, online affection and caring intrinsically interwove and penetrated student teachers' online learning-to-teach experience. The analogy of Russian nestling dolls could be used to explain the significance of social affection and caring as an indispensable synergy that nurtured student teachers; it enabled them to take ownership of their learning and became agents of change in their teaching practice.

6.1.2. A learning community with access to vicarious experience

Professional support was another factor that student teachers felt was crucial to their online professional learning. They described it as '*drawing on the wisdom of masses*', '*reliable*', '*enlightening*' and '*extremely useful*'. Student teachers articulated their reliance upon on other members to confirm ideas and inspire reflection upon their own teaching. The online communication provided them with '*a place to cross-check our ideas and knowledge*'; allowed them to '*compare the teaching technique more and try to discover the differences between us*' and helped them '*become more conscious of weaknesses*' and '*eager to rectify them*'.

It is evident that access to peers' teaching experience offered useful information to mull over and yield ideas. In this online CoP, learning took the form of a constant exchange of ideas, insights and alternative perspectives, and it nurtured student teachers' ability to understand theory and contextualize professional practice. Meanwhile, many student teachers 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 recognized that this moved beyond the simple answering of queries, which was what usually happened in a face-to-face situation. In fact, as the quotes below demonstrate, they viewed it as a means of facilitating professional support that would stay with them beyond their training course:

(**ZQ**) '*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)

(**LY**) '*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)

Likewise, supervisors thought highly of the peer to peer professional support. They were pleasantly surprised by student teachers' creativity and active learning in the atmosphere of '*scratching each other's back*'. Supervisor **Z**, in particular, raised an interesting notion of what he called '*the impact of vicarious experiences on student teachers*'. 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 vicarious 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 making the acquisition of vicarious experience and knowledge possible... It promoted greater communication...in terms of the frequency of communication and the wide range of topics to be discussed.*' (Interview with **Z**)

Z's notion of the importance of indirect experience or vicarious learning ([Bandura, 1977](#)) 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, a space for facilitating purposeful and experiential learning between them through 'observing' peers. Interestingly, student teachers' comments were strikingly similar to **Z**'s. Student teacher **YS** used the phrase '*opening a window on a different school and thus providing each other with a different and useful experience*' to explain one of the reasons why the online communication was indispensable in enriching and deepening their understanding of teaching. As he stated,

'*Because of the online communication...you are exposed to so many different aspects of teaching, different school situations, types of students, issues, textbooks, teaching methods and teachers...You feel you have experienced far more than just your own six-week learning ... I feel I am well prepared for my forthcoming teaching job .... 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 vicarious experience*' and '*a window on to a different school*' suggest that the online community is to some extent characterized by a capacity to provide a multidimensional and collectively diverse school placement experience for potentially disconnected student teachers.

6.1.3. Student teachers' embracing multidimensional roles

The third finding reveals that student teachers began to take on multidimensional roles as the online communication unfolded. They embraced their roles which progressed beyond those of pure learners to knowledge providers, knowledge constructors, inspirers, and most importantly, reflective teacher learners.

Student teachers discovered that being exposed to '*new ideas and methods shared online*' enlightened them to transmit knowledge to each other instead of just '*being taught, guided and instructed what to do by their teachers*'. They expressed a gradual shift from always treating teachers as '*most important, or only, source of knowledge*' to a realization that when pulling everyone's contribution all together; a young person could learn '*a great deal from my classmates in the online community, much more than I expected*' and that '*it's easy to accept ideas from peers as we are going through similar experiences and emotions*' (Student teachers in Group Interviews one, three and four). Thus, the online community cultivated learning opportunities for them to realise their capacity of imparting knowledge and acting as each other's source of information.

Student teachers also came to believe themselves as knowledge creators. In their view, they were allowed to '*embark on a journey of self-initiated learning*' and '*make sense of realistic knowledge*' by themselves during the course of voicing their opinions, negotiating meaning from different perspectives and drawing on each other's ideas. 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 discussion broadened their horizons and stretched their understanding of teaching.

(**YZ**) '*...I am often surprised and interested in reading why my classmates think in a particular way, something I never thought of. Then, I'll be stimulated to think differently too...*' (**HC**) '*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)

(**JL**) '*I think the thread about collecting the frequently asked questions in the classroom is a good example of how we create knowledge together...to deal with difficult questions and unexpected situations...I don't think I will forget those questions or answers.*' (Group Interview Three)

Student teachers claimed that they had better, more vivid recall of new knowledge co-constructed through discussion as '*We figure things out together*' (Group Interview One). Online discussion seems to enable them to better internalise their understanding of the teaching problems, because participation in an online discussion involved a multidimensional process in which they had to evaluate, synthesize others' postings and organizing their own thoughts to interact. This process ultimately engaged student teachers in deep learning which is the goal of, but not always achieved by, direct teaching.

Besides treating each other as knowledge sharers and constructors, some student teachers stressed the inspirational quality of their peers' role. They considered some of their peers to be critical sources of inspiration and role models that gave them the strength to face the daunting school placement experience. A collective state of mind that '*when I see everyone work so hard, I don't want to be left behind*' and '*I felt quite ashamed of myself*' created an online learning atmosphere that was '*a positively competitive*' and '*inspiring*'.

Of all the roles that student teachers took on, they viewed the role of reflective practitioners as being '*the most important and beneficial*'. They pointed out that their reflective ability had been enhanced because of the opportunities to expose their ideas in public and receive comments. According to them, the interactive feature of online communication fostered a dialogic and collective discussion that ultimately motivated and steered reflection. In the form of mindful writing, they learned to critique their and peers' teaching and articulate their position. '*We've enhanced and deepened understanding of our own teaching experience because reading our peers' reflections is like looking at ourselves in the mirror.*' (Group Interview Two). They felt that '*people are not good at seeing their own problems and mistakes … And the onlooker sees the most of the game*'. Many expressed that '*It's much easier for us to reflect on and rectify our problems when we can hear different opinions*' and '*get new insights and ideas when reading others' reflections*'.

The collective dimension of online reflection, embracing the feature of interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction (Collin & Karsenti, 2011), seems to encourage many student teachers to go beyond description to critical inquiry, and foster an ability to question their practice and thought underneath it.

Supervisors, meanwhile, acknowledged the changing roles that student teachers embarked on and were amazed to see student teachers '*take initiative in learning to teach, plunge into trying new teaching ideas, steering the collegiality between them and learning 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 **Z**)

'*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 **L**)

It can be concluded that along with their roles evolving, student teachers reshaped the traditional views of their part in learning, and supervisors reframed their perception of their students. 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. The finding corroborates that of Le Cornu (2008) who highlights that increased peer support empowers them to adopt different roles and deepen their situated learning experience. The dominant supervisor-centred practice in China may be potentially reshaped through student teachers' self-realization and embracement of a more independent and self-directed learning. The emergence of student teachers' multiple roles may also potentially challenge supervisors' view of teaching and learning and require them to de-centre and adjust themselves to new situations where student teachers no longer treat them as the main source of knowledge and even disagree, in principle, with them.

6.2. Factors that define a successful learning community of practice

6.2.1. Willingness of participation and collaboration

In the inquiry, it is apparent that features, such as voluntary participation, willingness to share and empathetic listening, have led to a highly sociable and intellectually engaging learning experience. In order to understand the high level of willingness, we need to unveil the social-cultural beliefs and values imprinting on Chinese student teachers. In fact, this study intends to provide an alternative interpretation of how online collaborative learning is intertwined with and further promoted by the collective orientation embedded in Confucian views of learning.

As discussed earlier, the philosophical underpinnings of Confucianism highlight group orientation and concern for others (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Littlejohn, 2011); Chinese people have the inclination to attend to others' needs and show them consideration during the interaction. This collective, altruistic orientation is also evident in Chinese perspectives on teaching and learning. In this study, participants viewed successful completion of school placement as both a group pursuit and an individual interest. Consequently, joint endeavour was motivated by achieving communal goals and satisfying personal needs. The fact that student teachers were connected with each other personally and professionally reinforced the care rooted in their cultural norms. In addition, voluntary participation was fundamentally enhanced by a past history of studying together in an institution for nearly four years. Knowing each other not only enabled them to share a sense of trust, but brought other-oriented conducts to the fore. Intertwined with the cultural factors mentioned above, social reciprocity (Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002; Hwang, 1987; Song, Cadsby, & Bi, 2012), a Confucian trait that implies a serious communal social responsibility and exchange beyond doing a favour for a favour, intrinsically gears up active participation. Student teachers expressed that it was their '*obligation to scratch each other's back*'. If they failed to contribute to the online discussion, return favours or log in as frequently as they thought that they ought to, student teachers often appeared apologetic and expressed a sense of guilt. Views from the first group interview typify those of other groups:

(**JL**) '*I have been lurking … 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.*' (**CH**) '*I quite agree with JL, when I learn something new from postings shared by my classmates, I feel I should do something for everybody too.*' (ZI) '*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…, and learned lessons from them, I feel very guilty if I don't participate in discussions.*' (HC) '*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 communal social obligation, concern for others and each individual's desire to express self-fulfilment were harmoniously unified in this online CoP, leading to a benign reciprocal interplay between student teachers who were both receivers and givers of their mutual contribution.

6.2.2. Student teachers' empowerment

The findings of the study suggested that student teachers empowered themselves in self-directed learning with purposes when they realised they were the agents of change and demonstrated a preference for assuming responsibility of learning. Empowerment appears to be another key attribute contributing to success of this online CoP. Taking ownership of what they wanted the most from online participation, to certain extent, accords with Wenger's (1998) notion of member's mutual accountability, which deals with members' decisions on 'what matters and what does not, what is important and why it is important, what to do and what not to do — what to talk about and what to leave unsaid —, when actions and artifacts are good enough and why they need improvement or refinement' (p. 81). Although accountability is believed to be an integral part of the practice (Wenger, 1998), there is little discussion on what conditions give rise to accountability. Student empowerment and independent learning, at the first glance, appear contradictory to the deeply-rooted Confucian beliefs in education that emphasize teachers' authority and students' obedience while discouraging individual learners' self-expression and self-fulfilment (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hu, 2002). In fact, those traditional cultural norms were being challenged and reframed in this context of computer-mediated CoP.

The finding suggested that the Chinese notion of face (the avoidance of losing one's own public image, or causing others to lose theirs: Gao, 1988; Hwang, 1987) was weakened and de-emphasised by student teachers when communication was mediated by the online community. They felt 'less intimidated and more comfortable' about sharing their 'embarrassing' and 'awkward' professional encounters that made their face 'red and burning'. They claimed that they would not have ventured such self-revelation in face-to-face communication: 'I felt freer because we weren't seeing each other in person', '…everything is online….There's no direct contact', 'Nothing is going to influence your emotions because you don't 'see' others.' (Group interview one, two)

It seems that student teachers were liberated 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. Online communities created a subtle yet comfortable psychological distance and 'invisibility'. In addition, empowerment also stemmed from student teachers' bravery in openly disagreeing with each other and their willingness to voice alternative opinions. Chinese teachers rarely see students expressing disagreement and critiquing each other in classrooms. Six-week online communication provided various attestations of how they 'dared to' be critical and express real thoughts and 'enjoyed being expressive' in the online environment:

(**JL**) '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.' (**YZ**): '…things like 'I don't agree with you'. 'I think differently'…. Basically, things you wouldn't normally want to say for fear of making each other lose face.' (Group Interview One)

(**WY**) '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)

The findings also suggested that central to empowerment was psychological comfort from invisibility and self-initiated

participation. This corroborates the ideas of Thompson and Ku (2005) and Wang (2005) that Chinese participants are more willing to express their real thoughts in an online community than in a face to face situation. Communicating through the community seemed to alleviate their anxiety about causing conflicts and disharmonious interactions.

In the interviews, student teachers further formulated their own theory by comparing the two modes of communication: in class, there had been 'unified learning' with 'a conclusive, final answer' leading them to 'just accept what our teachers tell us', but in online community, everyone 'is free to express their opinion' and there was no pressure to 'fret about being different or expressive', but more focus on formulating ideas and discussing practice. They contrasted the individuality supported by online communication with the situation in class where only 'extrovert, confident students dominate the discussion'; in the online CoP, 'introvert and quieter students' were given 'a free space' to voice their opinions. Student teachers mentioned how they felt 'empowered'; that change of power relationship between them and their supervisor fostered 'equal distribution of the right of speech'; the control which teachers used to have over students' right to speak in a traditional classroom setting was removed. Student teacher **MU**'s interpretation of 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…we become equal participants. We still learn from teachers, but I realise I also learn from my classmates, and they learn from me too.'

Student teachers were awakened with a strong sense of fulfilment and self-reliance, which, in turn, enhanced their willingness, self-assurance and competence in taking active charge of their learning; they moved gradually away from teacher-orchestrated learning to self-directed and peer-supported learning. Engaging in an online CoP helped students 'reject narrative lecturing where teacher talk silences and alienates students' (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 11). In the same vein, Supervisor **Z** commented on his online supervision experience as 'an eye-opener', and fundamentally changed his long-held one-dimensional view of teaching and learning.

> '…In retrospect, it was me who primarily decided what was important for student teachers in my past experience. 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.'

7. Discussion

7.1. The power of cheerleading

The findings of the study indicate that student teachers' sense of connectedness was demonstrated by them cheering each other up, giving and receiving timely encouragement, enjoying each other's company and recognizing peers' and supervisors' presence. 'Closer connections among online CoP members can lead to great recognition of and altruism towards others' (Tseng & Kuo, 2014, p. 43) and recognition by peers, in turn, is 'a powerful group cement' in an online learning community (Hanson-Smith, 2006, p. 309). Effective interpersonal relationships were nurtured, developed and demonstrated through the way they interacted with one another

(Laferrière, Breuleux, & Erickson, 2004). When they are mutually engaged in responding to dilemmas and aspirations, members of a CoP are closely connected by the relationship they create (Wenger, 1998).

The provision of emotional connectedness is considered essential to student teachers' professional growth and it smoothes their transition from university students to teachers (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). This also echoes Caires and Almeida's (2007) and Paulus and Scherff's (2008) studies, both of which stress the impact of supervisors' personal and emotional support on the quality of student teachers' school placement experience. For instance, student teachers highlighted that '*the humane aspect of teachers that we see in the online community is not something we experience in the classroom*'. A lecturer-dominated teaching style, which views teachers as an absolute knowledge transmitter and authority figure (Abubaker, 2008; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Littrell, 2006), means that CHC lecturers seldom have interaction with students, give verbal encouragement or made personal revelations in the classroom setting. By contrast, student teachers claimed that supervisors' online comforting, praising, or inspiring remarks meant a great deal. Student teachers' active learning and self-esteem are heightened because they are in 'respectful and caring relationships with others who see their potential, genuinely appreciate their unique talents' (APABEA, 1993, p. 8. cited in Kayler & Weller, 2007, p. 137). Studies (Aragon, 2003; Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Wang, 2005) have highlighted the importance of social, affective support in relation to student satisfaction; there appears in the literature insufficient exploration of a profound causal relation between online emotionality and knowledge sharing and construction. There seems a general assumption that once an online social relation is built up, an online CoP will naturally work towards higher levels of engagement in meaning negotiation or knowledge co-construction, neglecting the fact that online communication is not inherently interactive. Only when members of an online CoP view learning as caring, purposeful, relevant, connected and a set of obligations, will they be willing to engage collectively to support each other.

7.2. Professional accountability

Learning to teach, as mentioned earlier, has been increasingly viewed as a situated social practice (Hawkins, 2004; Johnson & Golombek, 2003) in which student teachers construct their knowledge and understanding of teaching through interacting with real teaching contexts, their supervisors and peers. In an online CoP, dispersed trainees are conversant with one another to discuss and decide what matters to them and how they better improve their practice. In this online CoP, vicarious experience not only helped student teachers build up teaching efficacy, but addressed the long-held criticism of a 'one-shot' school placement, namely that they are exclusively restricted to classroom teaching with very limited and overly narrow exposure to the diversity of one school (Lortie, 1975; Schlagal et al., 1996; Tang, 2003; Zeichner, 1996). They had more exposure to various aspects of teaching. Through sharing information and stories, student teachers were empowered to look beyond one single school or classroom and therefore broaden their view to different teaching environments. Such professional support, to a large extent, helped alleviate their nervousness and anxiety about their ability to handle the demands of teaching when first entering the profession.

The six-week school placement unfolded 'a set of issues' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27), a domain of practice or a communal purpose which was shared and reflected upon among all of them. The findings of the study showed that this collective purpose was the catalyst leading them willingly to exchange information, share professional skills, make sense of teaching-related issues, evaluate other perspectives

and empower themselves to be active and independent learners, and knowledge creators. The findings showed student teachers' willingness to disclose teaching problems and question their professional encounters. Such willingness created a solid foundation for purposeful reflective dialogues in public with their peers and supervisors. Their open-mindedness, wholeheartedness and responsibility were found to corroborate the prerequisites highlighted by Dewey (1933) for people to become fully engaged in reflective practice.

It seems that student teachers' active online interaction was both the cause and consequence of their strong sense of togetherness and shared desire to survive and thrive in the teaching practice. During the course of interaction, student teachers became more capable of unravelling underlying meaning through reconstructing their experience in words, and more responsive to and proactive about discussions led by their peers and supervisors. A collective and situated learning history was therefore evident in the online CoP. It opened up new possibilities or alternative ways of optimising their teaching performance and enriched their shared repertoire. Moreover, collective professional reflection, which may have been impossible outside such an online community, created massive opportunities for student teachers to learn and reflect on their own teaching practice and hence illuminated insightful perspectives to improve situated knowledge as well as practice.

7.3. Reciprocity between online CoPs and Chinese views of learning

The findings of this inquiry provided striking evidence to suggest a reciprocal, intertwined relationship between Chinese views of learning and online interaction. 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. The hierarchical relationship between teachers and students was weakened and a more egalitarian relationship developed and accepted in the online community. Freed from the constraints of direct face-to-face contact, online communications provided a degree of psychological comfort for student teachers to alleviate their concern for face to engage actively in sharing embarrassing professional encounters, voicing different opinions and critiquing each other's teaching performance and techniques, all of which were absent in a face-to-face situation. 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' willing and faithful self-expression, the online communications contributed to the emergence of a deepened understanding of their peers and supervisors, and a more equal student–teacher relationship surfaced and was welcomed.

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, in turn, promoted enhanced collaborative learning and fostered collective reflective practice. In this study, the group interest of successful completion of school placements took precedence over individual needs, though it coincided with student teachers' individual interests. They were motivated in their joint pursuit of this shared purpose because of the congruity between the communal and personal goals. Moreover, rooted in Confucianism and Chinese views of learning (Confucius, 2008; Kim, 2003; Lai, 2006), the emphasis on self-reflection 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.

8. Conclusion

Online communication is by no means inherently interactive or productive. Wenger (1998) warns people not to romanticise CoPs as they 'are not intrinsically beneficial' (p.85). The framework of CoPs appears to have been increasingly employed by researchers from a performative perspective that centres on how to do it well rather than on critically identifying what factors may be important and how they may make a CoP effective (Davenport & Hall, 2002; Hoadley, 2012). The study presents the findings of a situated examination of student teachers' perception of an online professional learning and may be of interest to teacher educators both in China and internationally. In this qualitative inquiry, what emerges from data analysis convergently and recursively points to the reciprocal relationship between online communication and Chinese views of learning. The framework of CoPs, a Western construct, shows a high degree of compatibility with Chinese styles of learning. The CoP mediated by online mode of communication has greatly impacted, and ultimately reshaped, a hierarchical social behaviour pattern that Chinese student teachers and supervisors adopt, leading to a revolutionary change towards a more equal student–teacher relationship which would be unacceptable or even unimaginable in the traditional Chinese views of learning. It empowers student teachers to shift from teacher-orchestrated learning to self-directed and peer-support learning. On the other hand, Chinese views of learning have also exerted force on the building of the online learning community. The highly-valued virtues embedded in learning, such as collective interest, pursuit of communal goals, concern for others and the importance of self-reflection, in turn, promote collaborative learning. While this may make online CoPs particularly useful in the Chinese context and other CHC countries, it does not preclude the use of this method in other contexts, given the evidence above.

The notion of passive, quiet, obedient, dependent, uncritical Chinese learners (Biggs, 1996; Chow; 1995; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Zhang & Huang, 2008) has been challenged in this study. The findings provides alternative evidence directly from the perceptions of Chinese student teachers and supervisors to suggest that with the increasing and seemingly unstoppable permeation of online learning in both China and Western society, and with the increasing number of Mainland Chinese students, as well as CHC students from East Asian countries, who pursue their higher education in the UK, the US, Australia, Canada (Rajaram, 2013), it is meaningful to add a cultural dimension to how stakeholders, universities and course tutors can create an affectively cohesive and more risk-free learning community; this can help transform them into proactive, expressive and self-regulated learners.

Acknowledgements

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