Building an effective online learning community (OLC) in blog-based teaching portfolios

Eunice Tang *, Cherlotte Lam
Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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A B S T R A C T
Blog-based teaching portfolios have been operating in a teacher education program since 2007. The blog-based teaching portfolios provide a constructivist and interactive learning environment where students, in-service teachers, and faculty staff members negotiate, discuss, reflect and evaluate individual understandings of teaching practice and experience. Studies have shown a positive impact of blog-based teaching portfolios on learning and professional developments. However, the evaluation of online learning communities (OLCs) which evolve from the compilation process and the interactive nature of blog-based teaching portfolios is lacking. In this paper, a qualitative case study approach was adopted to study the functions and characteristics of an effective OLC in fulfilling the design objectives of blog-based teaching portfolios. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six student teachers, three in-service teachers who also played the role as mentors in the blog-based teaching portfolios, and one faculty staff member who was the blog designer. The interview data were transcribed, coded and analyzed to identify the perceived functions and characteristics of an effective OLC in blog-based teaching portfolios. Interview data revealed two major components and related ten factors which affected the effectiveness of an OLC from members’ perspectives. It was suggested that technology proficiency is not a key factor in constructing digital teaching portfolios. What makes the learning process more meaningful and sustainable are active participation and high quality interaction which require collaborative/interactive course elements together with commitment and support from OLC members.

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1. What is an online learning community (OLC) in blog-based teaching portfolios?

With the advancement in information and communication technology (ICT), compiling teaching portfolios on blogs has become popular. A blog is a website where entries are made in a journal style and displayed in reverse chronological order. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. Blog-based teaching portfolios are, however, not just an exhibit of digitized collection of artifacts. The technical design of blog-based teaching portfolios creates opportunities for discussion, inquiry, feedback and reflection in a social networking environment and enables collaborative learning and information sharing among participants. The blogging technology allows participants to record personal voice, critical thinking and reflection. It also opens a virtual environment to deliver or support learning activity within a group of people who are bound together by some common characteristics such as identity features, values, beliefs, interests and goals (Hramiak, 2010; Ramage, 2010). This creates an online learning community (OLC).

McConnell (2006:19) explains that ‘a learning community is a cohesive community that embodies a culture of learning’ and community members have a shared responsibility for learning. The learning process is learner-centered. Other members such as mentors and instructors may also participate in a learning community and play the role as a facilitator or administrator. Learning in a community is considered as a social process since collaborative learning takes place (Brooks, 2010; Ke & Hoadley, 2009; Vrasidas, Zembylas, & Chamberlain, 2004). Community members act together to work through and understand problems (Whalley, 1998) and engage in meaningful exchange of ideas to co-construct knowledge (Watkins, 2005). Through collaboration, the relationship between members is strengthened and a strong bond is forged between them (McConnell, 2006; Vrasidas et al., 2004).

According to Dewey (1938), learning is an active process in which learners are highly engaged in meaning construction. In cognitive constructivism, understandings are constructed within individuals with little or no influence from the outside world and learning is a process of reasoning and inquiry (Gordon, 2009; Piaget, 1972), while cognitive growing is enhanced through interaction with others and the environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Through social interaction, the more competent learners can lead others into cognitive learning which may not take place if they work independently (Sugar & Bonk, 1998; Hay & Barab, 2001). Reflecting on the theories of constructivism, OLCs provide...
learners with space and time to acquire knowledge through reasoning and inquiry. Such a learning process is enhanced when learners communicate and discuss with other OLC members to construct knowledge through collaboration.

Wenger (1998) further exemplifies the collaborative relationship between members of OLCs through the concept of apprenticeship. The idea of apprenticeship is found in OLCs where newcomers often serve apprenticeships to master new skills and receive training in their graduate programs as well as in their first few years of employment (Schwartz & Bryan, 1998) where they see a gap between themselves and their colleagues who are more skillful and knowledgeable. Through interaction and collaboration with peers and mentors, learners acquire knowledge and practice. This ‘act as a living curriculum for the apprentice’ has formed the theoretical framework of Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 2006). Novices can learn in a variety of ways such as collaborating with others and working alongside more experienced members, and gradually adopt the practices of the community (Barab, Makinster, & Scheckler, 2004; Fuller & Unwin, 1999).

CoPs regard learning as a social process and emphasize mutual engagement and social interaction which foster learning. It started to rise amid the crisis of the traditional way of knowledge transfer which separates learning from practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Through interaction, ample opportunities for tacit and explicit knowledge sharing as well as lifelong learning are offered in CoPs (Baran & Çağiltay, 2006) and they bring about construction and co-construction of new knowledge. As Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) put it, CoPs are:

“groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis... Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice.” (p. 4–p. 5)

Studies on blog-based teaching portfolios have shown positive results in scaffolding reflection (Barrett, 2007; Perschbach, 2006), mediating teacher education reform (Berge & Collins, 1998), fostering teacher competencies (Kalibah, 2005), and asserting individual behavioral changes and overall impact on the institutional environment (Tang, 2009). Existing studies on OLCs have also illustrated the positive impact on teacher professional development (e.g. Hramiak, 2010; Pearson, 1999; Starkey & Savvides, 2009, etc.). Over the past 10 years, despite a plethora of research regarding OLCs in teacher education, only a few attempted to look into the characteristics of effective OLCs. Ke and Hoadley (2004) suggested what features an effective OLC should have after an examination of the activity theory. Vrasidas et al. (2004) listed 16 characteristics of an effective OLC simply based on a reflection of their own teaching experience. Carr and Chompers (2006) discussed the features of successful online communities with reference to previous literature. Levin and Waddoups (2000) investigated the features of a successful OLC and took into account the learners’ views; however, with insufficient information about the research methods, the research is low in both validity and reliability. In most other studies, characteristics of an effective OLC are often not the focus of the research (see Carr & Chompers, 2006; Ke & Hoadley, 2004; Levin & Waddoups, 2000; Vrasidas et al., 2004). Most importantly, members’ views and perceptions of their needs are neglected (see Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004; Trinidad & Pearson, 2008).

2. Significance of the study

In Hong Kong, blog-based teaching portfolios were developed in 2007 (hereafter called ‘the blog’) for a pre-service English language education program and they continue to operate. The blog is available at http://plate.fed.cuhk.edu.hk. It is an asynchronous blog-based platform developed with the Web 2.0 concept for the student teachers taking a 4-year language education program at university. Members of the blog include student teachers, in-service teachers and faculty staff members. As such, an OLC is formed in a blog environment. The purpose of the blog is to ‘promote a reflective, collaborative and dialogic environment for academic and professional developments’ of the learners (Tang, 2009:89). Learners are required to compile their own teaching portfolios and actively participate in discussion during their Teaching Practicum (TP). To compose their teaching portfolios, learners have to upload their lesson plans, reflections and video-taped lessons and initiate discussion and exchange views by leaving and responding to comments on the blog. To enrich the TP experience, a Mentorship Scheme was introduced to provide support and professional advice to the learners in an e-environment. Experienced front-line teachers are invited to serve as mentors and attend the pre- and post-TP meetings as well as taking part in the interactive discussion on the blog. Structural groupings were introduced so that mentors would have more focused interaction with a small number of student teachers on the blog. More specifically, two mentors were assigned to a group of six students. All members in the same group were teaching in similar schools. There were altogether eight mentors and 24 students on the blog. The documentation uploaded and their participation in discussion on the blog accounts for 20% of the total TP grade.

This present study aimed to identify how members of a blog-based teaching portfolios platform defined an ‘effective online learning community’. A qualitative case study approach was adopted to investigate the role of an OLC for pre-service teachers in fulfilling the design objectives of blog-based teaching portfolios and the students’ needs. The evaluation was conducted through semi-structured interviews with different members of the blog, including student teachers, in-service teachers who played the role as mentors in the community, and a faculty staff member who was the designer of the blog. Results can be used by the developers of blog-based teaching portfolios to improve OLC design and development to enhance collaboration and learning.

The research aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the functions of an online learning community in blog-based teaching portfolios?
2. What characterize an effective online learning community in blog-based teaching portfolios?
3. What are the factors which affect the effectiveness of an online learning community in blog-based teaching portfolios?

3. Research design

A qualitative case study which entails an intensive and in-depth analysis was conducted in this study. The approach best achieves a fuller understanding of the important aspects of any new and contemporary phenomenon in its natural setting and allows a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of meanings constructed in its context (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005; Yin, 2003).

3.1. Subjects

Purposive sampling, in which subjects with different characteristics and background are chosen, was adopted. By examining perspectives from different community members, a one-sided case which only gathers data representing a single point of view is less likely to occur (Yin, 2003).

The level of participation in the blog was also used as the selection criterion. Members with varied levels of participation may have different views towards the characteristics of an effective OLC. The
numbers of posts and comments were used as criteria to select the subjects of the study. Three active student teachers (T1, T2 and T3) and three less active ones (T4, T5 and T6) participated in the study. Three mentors (M1, M2 and M3) who had made a higher number of responses to student teachers’ blog entries also agreed to participate in the study. Prof. A, the TP subject co-ordinator as well as the designer of the blog who was assumed to have a full understanding and knowledge about the blog, acted as a key informant of the study. These selected members were likely to provide important insights into the blog. A total of 10 members were invited to take part in the interviews (see Table 1 below).

3.2. Interviews

A member’s perception is regarded as incorrigible which is ‘first and foremost known by the person who holds it, and known by others only insofar as that person discloses it’ (Gomm, 2004:185). An effective research method to uncover and understand people’s thoughts is interview (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Gomm, 2004; Punch, 2005). A semi-structured interview was conducted with selected student teachers and mentors. In the first round of individual interviews, they were asked to comment on whether the specified learning objectives of the blog were achieved and to give their views on the possible gains while taking part in the blog activity. The interview data was transcribed to identify emerging themes. The themes were then selected to formulate the questions in the second round of individual interviews in which members were asked to identify factors which led to an effective OLC.

3.3. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and coded through identification of any recurring phrases or regularities in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To avoid the researchers’ preconceptions or a priori theoretical knowledge about the issue, no pre-specified codes were used (Flick, 1998). All the initial codes followed closely the terms and concepts used by the respondents to enhance the validity of the research (Punch, 2005). Once the initial set of codes was generated, each transcript was analyzed using the codes. New codes were added whenever new concepts emerged. The coding was an iterative process as all the transcripts were analyzed again after revisions of the codes. In the final stage, the codes were simplified and major themes were developed.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Functions of an OLC in compiling the blog-based teaching portfolios

A great majority of the pre-service teachers believed that mentors’ constructive and practical feedback on lesson plans, and suggestions of activities enriched their understanding of teaching as well as their teaching effectiveness. The pre-service teachers claimed that reading lesson plans and teaching materials from their peers also inspired them to think more. The reflective process helped develop their teaching beliefs and identity as teachers. Thus, the accomplishment of the learning outcomes which are relevant to the course and the professional development is crucial. These learning outcomes should be maintained by a constructive, supportive and collaborative environment that involves practitioners who can offer expertise for knowledge building, reflection and shaping of beliefs.

In addition to the identifiable learning outcomes, interviewees shared other perceived functions of the blog. Table 2 below lists the themes which emerged from the interview data.

Both student teachers and mentors highlighted emotional support as the greatest gain.

In compiling the teaching portfolios, pre-service teachers seem to value the blog environment where they posted their works. The interactive and dialogic features of the blog and the presence of identifiable audience create opportunities for more immediate and interactive feedbacks as well as closer attachment to one another.

4.2. Perceived characteristics of an effective OLC

In the interview data, two major components which led to an effective OLC were identified. They were i) active participation of community members, and ii) the relevance of comments on the blog.

4.2.1. Active participation of community members

Most pre-service teachers and mentors considered active participation on the blog as the major means of achieving the learning goals and appreciating the value of an OLC. They believed that active participation among members of the blog inspired learners to reflect more.

Their comments corresponded with the underlying philosophy of the blog asserted by the OLC designer.

I believe that new information is constructed through blog members’ contribution and negotiation. This new information will then be transformed into knowledge. (Prof. A_12)

All interviewees believed that the pre-service teachers should play a more active role in the blog if the learning outcomes were to be achieved. An active pre-service teacher (T1) commented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Summary of the selected members.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service teachers/mentees</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less active members</td>
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<td>Mentors</td>
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<td>Faculty member</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2 Other functions of the blog activity.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Getting emotional support</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Gaining practical knowledge from mentors</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Learning from peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Developing a learning community</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Developing teaching beliefs</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
By comparing my classmates’ lesson plans and teaching materials with mine, I could see our different strengths and weaknesses... Since I was willing to reflect, visualize my teaching and evaluate myself, my own participation was the most essential part in my learning. (T1_100)

The comments from T1 could further be illustrated by the remark from a less active pre-service teacher.

I was not active and I did not upload my lesson plans very often in the first TP. That’s why I rarely learnt from my lesson plans or achieved anything in the blog. (T4_44)

4.2.2. Relevance of comments on the blog
In defining the effectiveness of the blog, specific and useful comments made by community members during interaction were perceived as equally essential as active participation.

The greatest help provided by peers was their feedback... my classmates often had experienced what I encountered. Then they could give me emotional support as well as practical guidance. (T3_74)

It seems that practical advice from mentors was particularly helpful to less active pre-service teachers. For them, comments from mentors provided direction for their reflection. Mentors’ feedback on lesson objectives, task design, teaching methods, time management as well as classroom management enhanced the pre-service teachers’ understanding of teaching. Prof. A believed that bringing in more experience as well as classroom management enhanced the pre-service teachers’ lesson objectives, task design, teaching methods, time management.

The reflections written by one of the learners were rather descriptive... so my partner and I would inspire her by asking ‘Could you share more about your feelings rather than simply describing your experience?’ (M1_36) Mentors would ask us ‘How would you change the lesson arrangement so as to facilitate students’ learning?’ This kind of questions allowed us to further reflect on how we could improve our teaching before we conducted the lesson. (T5_36)

Although there was only one faculty member in the OLC, her presence appears to have been crucial to the pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers claimed that the feedback from the faculty member was more relevant to their learning than the mentors’ comments as she was more knowledgeable and she knew their personality and ability better than the mentors.

The advice from the in-service teachers was based on their teaching experience at schools and thus more practical. But the comments from our professor are likely to be more theoretical and are different from the mentors’, so her comments allowed us to learn more about teaching. (T2_74)

Within the concept of CoP, a supportive environment is crucial in an OLC since learning is regarded as a social process (Vrasidas et al., 2004; Wenger, 2006) during which members develop personal relationships and construct knowledge by interacting with each other (Wenger et al., 2002). A hospitable learning environment with a provision of support and care should be established for members. Unlike the traditional classrooms where learners receive knowledge transmitted by teachers, knowledge is co-constructed in an OLC. The collaborative and interactive nature of OLC allows OLC members to exchange their views and share their knowledge and experience with each other whenever they want. Through discussion and collaboration with other learning peers and experts in the community, learners can obtain immediate feedback on their work, ask for suggestions on overcoming their problems and seek practical advice for future improvement. This interactive process inspires learners to think from different perspectives and deepens learners’ knowledge and expertise. Many studies have regarded online discussion as opportunities for greater reflection (e.g. Carr & Champers, 2006; Pearson, 1999; Starkey & Savvides, 2009; Yang, 2009, etc.).

In order to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge, people who are more experienced and knowledgeable in the field such as front-line practitioners should be involved. Experts can share their knowledge and experience with learners who often look up to them for advice and help especially when they encounter problems. Exchanges among novice and experienced practitioners can inspire one another and deepen their knowledge and skills in the community of practice. Within the concept of apprenticeship, learners who are newcomers in the field gradually adopt the practice of the community by acquiring skills and receiving training from their masters (Schwartz & Bryan, 1998).

4.3. Factors affected the effectiveness of an OLC

In the second round of the interviews, community members were asked to elaborate their views on how their participation and the relevance of comments could be enhanced to improve the effectiveness of an OLC. Their feedback was classified as follows:

4.3.1. Presence on the blog
An increasing number of non-contributors on the blog had the effect of causing more members to lose interest in participating in the blog.

During the TP in secondary schools, many classmates gradually disappeared from the blog and they rarely uploaded their work. It somehow affected our learning attitude. At a later stage, we all uploaded less and less. (T2_70)

However, if there are members contributing on the blog, the members would participate more actively.

When I knew that mentors would read my work, I would work more seriously. (T4_126)

4.3.2. Understanding the value of the blog
All three groups of the community members thought that the way pre-service teachers viewed the blog would affect the level of participation. An active pre-service teacher commented:

I visited the blog whenever I had no lessons at school... I believed that if you did not give others feedback and if the others did not comment on your work, it’s a waste of the blog. (T3_142)

Less active pre-service teachers had different opinions on the usefulness of the blog.

I did upload my work onto the blog but I think that the blog was time-consuming and it’s not worth taking part in it, so I did less. (T5_192)

4.3.3. Role of assessment
Assessment was considered by pre-service teachers as a driving force for participation. Some of them admitted that if the blog was not assessed, they would not take part in it. An active pre-service teacher even wanted to increase the assessment weighting on their contribution to the blog.

I believe that if the assessment weighting was increased to 30 or 40%, our level of participation would increase as well. (T2_124)

In general, assessment and its weighting were likely to have an impact on the level of participation. However, some less active
pre-service teachers admitted that their preference towards face-to-face communication and the heavy workload demotivated them from interacting with others on the blog. Thus, they put at risk the 20% of the grade.

4.3.4. Work schedule
Pre-service teachers shared that they were very busy during the TP. They stated that if they had more time, they would participate more. This is particularly so for less active pre-service teachers.

It took me lots of time to write the lesson plans. After uploading the lesson plans, I would feel that I had finished my work already. (T6_40)

4.3.5. Accessibility to blog contents
Some pre-service teachers claimed that they were not willing to share and participate because of the security and privacy concerns. They said they were afraid that the teaching staff or students from the TP schools would be able to access the contents of the blog. Some did not want their peers to read their personal discussion with the mentors.

When the instructor pointed out my mistakes on the blog, I just wanted to delete her comment as it’s very embarrassing. (T6_40)

4.3.6. Personal choice of communication tool
There was one pre-service teacher who particularly disliked e-communication and preferred strongly face-to-face group discussion. She proclaimed:

I had to wait for others’ responses and checked frequently if there was any reply when discussing on the blog. This lowered my motivation to participate in it. (T5_44&46)

4.3.7. Timely schedule for uploading
For mentees, it was observed that many pre-service teachers uploaded their lesson plans the evening before teaching or after they had already taught the lesson. Thus, both peers and mentors preferred not to comment on these lesson plans since they thought the pre-service teachers would not be able to read the comments and make changes on their lesson plans before delivering the lesson.

I would think that it’s meaningless to comment on the lesson design as it would be very likely that the learner would have conducted the lesson when he/she read my comments. (M1_10)

For mentors, they were all full-time teachers at school. So they did not have much time to read all the posts, particularly if mentees uploaded their lesson plans the evening before implementation. They expressed their concern about not having enough time to read or make comments on the posts. As one mentor commented if they had more time, they would leave more comments on the work of their mentees. One pre-service teacher added that one of her classmates got more frequent and longer comments from the mentors than the others as she finished and uploaded her work very much in advance.

4.3.8. A sense of community and rapport
A strong relationship among community members is likely to increase the frequency of comments. Most pre-service teachers reported that they rarely commented on posts written by classmates that they were not familiar with.

If we were not close with each other, or if we did not have a concept of learning partners, we would feel that we were not in the right position to give comments to others. (T6_44)

Prof. A also observed that for comments written to close friends, pre-service teachers tended to be more constructive. However, comments written to other classmates with whom they were not that close would be more general.

If the relationship among the learners was good, they would be more critical and more willing to provide practical feedback for their peers. If the relationship in the group was less cohesive, they would simply leave comments like ‘keep going’, ‘well done’ or ‘you could do it’. (Prof.A_58)

This was also indicated in the communication between mentors and mentees. Interviewees said that the closer the relationship between mentors and mentees, the more exchanges would take place among them. Prof. A also believed that both mentors and mentees would not be interested in interacting with each other if they did not have a good relationship. The mentor, M3, shared that if she was not familiar with the mentees, she would avoid being too direct in order not to irritate the mentees. However, if she had developed rapport and trust with the mentees, she would be more open and explicit in commenting.

If I had some time to meet and know more about my mentees, I would have a better understanding of their style and we would get closer… Then I could provide feedback that matched the learners’ personality and style. (M3_40)

4.3.9. Selection of mentors
When discussing the relationship between mentors and mentees, all three groups of community members mentioned the importance of finding the appropriate mentors. They all thought that a mentor has to be an experienced practitioner who is willing to share the knowledge and experience with the novice.

I tried to find graduates of the programme to serve as mentors because they knew the programme objectives well and they knew the problems and difficulties that these pre-service teachers had to go through in their study and in their teaching practicum. Such mentors would more likely be sympathetic and caring, and show more understanding to the needs of these pre-service teachers. (Prof.A_6)

It seems that the selection of graduates as mentors probably helped promote a closer relationship among community members for interaction.

4.3.10. Grouping
In this OLC, mentors and mentees were grouped according to their current teaching/working contexts. This was to ensure that they would have similar topics and experiences for sharing and exchanges. Since the mentor and mentee ratio was low, interaction could then be more relevant in terms of the frequency and quality. This was reflected in the TP mentorship scheme evaluation in which both mentors and mentees rated highly the idea of grouping.

Structural grouping was effective when there were not too many mentors in the learning community. (Prof.A_6)

However, the situation can be improved if the OLC is to be expanded to accommodate other members from the CoP. If community members were pro-active in the learning activity, it would not be necessary to have structural grouping because members would have the initiative to read the posts and leave comments for one another.
In the interviews, members indicated that participation and relevance of comments were the main components that characterized an effective OLC in the blog-based teaching portfolios. Active participation was heavily emphasized. They advocated that the interactivity among members, their identification with the OLC, the role of assessment, the work schedule during TP, the accessibility to blog contents and personal choice of communication tool all affected their incentive to participate. As well as participation, the frequency of commenting and the quality of the comments within the community were raised as key aspects that lead to an effective OLC. According to the members, the relevance of commenting was influenced by the timely schedule for uploading, the relationship among community members, the selection of mentors and the groupings. In this study, none of the members mentioned any technophobia or technical problems, which hindered their participation on the blog or perception of an effective OLC. This could probably be explained by the computer literacy of this generation and also the choice of a user-friendly blog interface.

Selection of mentors is always a concern in any mentorship scheme. Certain criteria have to be devised in order to find the right person for the right job. Some considerations, such as experience and knowledge, personality and passion, sense of commitment, and mentors–learners ratio, should be taken into account. In addition, an established relationship between mentors and mentees could facilitate an open and honest communication (Sinclair, 2003). In contrast, with a bad relationship which results in inadequate understanding of the mentees, mentors will not be able to provide individualized feedback that suits the mentees. Closer relationship among members will lead to a higher sense of community which refers to a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to the scheme. Certain criteria have to be devised in order to make the learning process more meaningful and sustainable.

5. Future development

The blog-based teaching portfolios of this research take the form of asynchronous communication. Asynchronous online communication is very different from sharing face-to-face since the former lacks para-linguistic features such as facial expressions and pitch. Learners who are active and confident in sharing face-to-face may feel reluctant or difficult to share online (Pearson, 1999:231). Levin and Waddoups (2000) recommended a balanced use of both asynchronous and synchronous communications and suggested developers to choose the technology or communication tools appropriate to the tasks designed for learners. The integration of synchronous and asynchronous communication provides learners with more learning opportunities and allows a more open and honest manner of sharing online. Introducing synchronous elements in a blog such as instant messaging can facilitate the flow of discussion and enable learners to seek help quickly when required. With the advancement of ICT, different social network sites on the Internet such as Facebook, Skype and Microblogging and mobile interaction tools such as Whatsapp can help promote active interaction. Notifications of new posts and comments can be sent to the participants through e-mails or short message service (SMS) so that more immediate responses can be given. Simple features such as a ‘like’ button which is found in Facebook can be introduced to indicate others’ reading and increase the sense of social presence. All these features in modern social networking and social media technology can enhance the e-environment.

6. Implications for practices in higher education

The issues of ‘learning to learn’ and ‘learning to teach’ continue to be a central focus in higher education. Students enter university at an early stage in the development of their expertise in their field of study; new teachers in the profession aspire to become established members of the university and experts in the field; academics who are experts in the field strive to become professional teachers. Although there are differences in their pursuit, they are all involved in their professional learning journey. In the road of learning, we recognize the importance of sharing and exchanging knowledge while soliciting support from peers and other personnel. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is a social phenomenon that involves collaboration and interaction in a situated learning environment. The design of blog-based teaching portfolios in pre-service language teaching education and the development of OLCs for pre-service English teachers realize the social theory of learning and theories of cognitive apprenticeship and communities of practice that promote legitimate peripheral participation between students and teachers. Similar structures can be replicated to create learning opportunities for different groups of academic staff in the higher education context. The compilation of digital teaching portfolios for annual appraisal can be spun off to accommodate an OLC within the department or faculty between new teachers and more experienced mentor teachers. For newcomers, their participation enables knowledge acquisition and development of a sense of belonging to become established members of a group and hence assume the role of expert. The sharing of digital teaching portfolios in a blog or Web 2.0 platform promotes interaction between academics and other academics across institutional boundaries and potentially across the globe. For academics, their collaborative contributions support knowledge co-construction which leads to changes and innovations. As academic staff members move from the periphery of the learning community to its center, they become more active and engaged within the culture, practices, and beliefs of their profession.

However, the idea of engaging students, teachers, researchers, and even administrators in active learning, information sharing, and evaluation of practices in professional learning communities is often met with challenges. As pointed out by Wenger (2001), the very characteristics that make communities of practice an appropriate and effective milieu for “stewarding knowledge” – autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, and crossing boundaries – are also characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organizations.

7. Conclusion

This case study is an empirical inquiry into the conceptualization and perceived characteristics of an effective OLC held by members of blog-based teaching portfolios for pre-service English teachers.
Semi-structured interviews with six pre-service teachers, three mentors and one faculty member were conducted and transcribed. An analysis of the interview data has legitimized the learning outcomes of blog-based teaching portfolios designed for the course. Members also acknowledged the achievement of other learning objectives and the gains from participating in the OLC. They indicated that they got practical advice and emotional support from peers and mentors. They became more cohesive as members in a teaching community where they could develop their belief and shape their identity.

With the improvements to the OLCs signalled by this research, they can be a powerful tool for effective and sustainable learning. While the research focused on the Hong Kong context, the benefits of OLCs in blog-based teaching portfolios can be utilized in a range of contexts across the globe. Effective digital teaching portfolios are likely to take place in a dialogic, interactive and synchronous online platform which involves a cohesive learning community. Without time and geographical boundaries, community members can take part in learning whenever they can get access to the Internet. As long as members remain active, they will be able to get continuous support and feedback from others. Besides, discussion and resources can be stored and retrieved at any time. A growing community of members and a record of work and resources to be communicated and accessed at anytime and in anywhere can, therefore, contribute to sustainable learning.

References