Elaine Riordan

University of Hull, UK

Email: E.Riordan@hull.ac.uk

Phone: + 44 (0) 1482-465647

Dr Liam Murray

University of Limerick, Ireland

Email: Liam.Murray@ul.ie

Phone: +353 (0) 61202742

Sharing and collaborating between an online community of novice teachers: CMC in language teacher education

Abstract

New and emerging technologies have transformed the classroom (Mishra and Koehler 2006) and continue to do so, and with the evolution of the Internet, it has been purported that teachers and teacher educators now work in ever evolving environments (Elliott 2009), and it is therefore apparent that teachers need to reassess their pedagogical values (Clandinin 2008). In other words, there is a demand for teachers to be technologically savvy (Hegelheimer 2006; Murugaiah, Azman et al. 2010). Research indicates that varied forms of CMC can be implemented to foster collaborative and social learning (Kanuka and Anderson 1998; Johnson 2001; Cakir, Xhafa et al. 2005; Arnold and Ducate 2006; Hughes 2007), and the formation of communities of practice (Arnold et al. 2005; Wenger, White et al. 2005; Hanson-Smith 2006), and to this end this paper aims to investigate the implementation of both online and face-to-face communication in an ELT teacher education programme.

The main focus of this paper thus lies within the realm of 'open communication' whereby student teachers work in a reciprocal manner freely sharing their pedagogical experiences, learning from each other and participating in a community of practice through various modes of communication. This paper will present some of the results of a three year study employing face-to-face, blog, chat and discussion fora interactions with three cohorts of postgraduate students, with the aim of illuminating the potential such modes have for sharing and collaborating, for providing a space for situated learning and for open communication. Such discussions are held with a peer mentor and thus communication is deemed more 'open' than with someone in a more authoritative role, results of which are indeed demonstrated within the data. Results will be analysed from a corpus-based methodology, drawing on three aspects of community membership (mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire), with the aim of illustrating how such practices can foster open communication and sharing between community members, and what the benefits and drawbacks of such practices are. This paper will then close on a discussion of the implications of such data for language teacher education in a technologically oriented world.

Sharing and collaborating between an online community of novice teachers: CMC in language teacher education

1. Introduction

New and emerging technologies are said to have transformed or have the potential to transform classroom practices (Mishra and Koehler 2006), and with the evolution of the Internet, it has been purported that learners and teachers are gaining further opportunities in that flexibility is promoted and interaction is taking on new forms (Elliott 2009). Clearly, then the mission for both novice teachers and teacher educators is a demanding one. It has been revealed that technologies have created new roles for the teachers, new pedagogical approaches and therefore new teacher education approaches (Pereira-Coutinho 2010). Teachers need training for this because without guidance and training in the use of CALL they face a very difficult task, and it has been suggested that unless teachers are aware of and understand the environment, the tools and the resources, it is unlikely that satisfactory learning will occur within such modes (Stockwell 2009: 111).

The focus of this paper therefore situates itself within the realm of 'open communication' in that student teachers work in a reciprocal manner freely sharing their pedagogical experiences, learning from each other and participating in a multi-modal community of practice. This paper draws attention to some of the key results of a three year study employing face-to-face, blog, chat and discussion fora interactions with three cohorts of students on an MA in ELT programme, and a peer mentor. Such interactions aimed to facilitate sharing and collaboration, and to create a space where situated learning and open communication could blossom. Results are analysed from a corpus-based methodology, drawing on three aspects of community membership (mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire), in order to illustrate how such practices can foster open communication and sharing between community members. This research is considered quite important because, although the development of current technologies presents us with new modes of communication through both synchronous and asynchronous devices (Kanuka and Anderson 1998; McPherson and Nunes 2004), a gap in the literature regarding CMC and the role of technology in LTE has been noted (Kamhi-Stein 2000; Romano 2008), an issue this paper attempts to tackle. Another small, albeit significant point to raise is that despite fruitful research on CMC and its benefits in language learning and teaching, no studies have been found which utilise a corpus-based approach to analyse synchronous and asynchronous

communication in LTE. Before attending to the study in more detail, the following section presents a backdrop to the concepts and issues vital to this paper.

2. Background

Current technologies are advocated for promoting interaction and collaboration (Kanuka and Anderson 1998; Stacey 1999; Nachmias, Mioduser et al. 2000; Johnson 2001; Cakir, Xhafa et al. 2005; Arnold and Ducate 2006; McConnell 2006; Hughes 2007), and through this they can minimise student teachers' possible feelings of isolation (Kamhi-Stein 2000; Arnold and Ducate 2006). They can also foster the formation of communities of practice (Arnold et al. 2005; Wenger, White et al. 2005; Hanson-Smith 2006) whereby teachers can share information, offer support and advice, and inevitably, learn from each other and from experienced teachers (Burgess and Mayes 2008). Moreover, research indicates that if student teachers utilise technology in their training, they perceive its use as learners, which may aid them in evaluating the technology when they themselves begin their careers, thus expanding their knowledge and expertise and, in turn, possibly increasing integration (Arnold and Ducate 2006). According to some practitioners, the future of CALL and teacher education therefore looks bright (Hubbard 2008; Elliott 2009), and indeed Hubbard notes that the future of CALL is connected to the future of language teacher education, because language teachers are the key players in that they choose what tools to use and how to use them with language learners (Hubbard 2008). The aim of this research is thus to offer future language teachers experience in using such tools in order to form judgements of their own, while concurrently facilitating the development of content or subject knowledge (Burgess and Mayes 2008) through e-mentoring/online mentoring (Ensher, C.Heun et al. 2003; Tarbitt 2006), and social learning.

The three issues at play here consist of social learning, CoPs, and open communication. We propose that social and collaborative learning and communities of practice intermingle, as through engagement with a CoP, members can learn from each other via discussion and negotiation. In relation to this, research shows that one of the main benefits that new technologies offer is that they allow for collaborative learning (Kanuka and Anderson 1998; Stacey 1999; Nachmias, Mioduser et al. 2000; Johnson 2001; Arnold and Ducate 2006; McConnell 2006; Hughes 2007), and it has been stressed that this type of learning has scope for reformulation as a result of new technologies, in that the setting of the activity is not

restricted, the dynamics of the participants change within such environments, the group configuration is open allowing outside participation of experts, and new technologies offer a variety of media to host interactions, e.g. chat, discussion fora, video conferencing (Nachmias, Mioduser et al. 2000). The concept of 'open communication' is also intertwined with notions of social learning as the student teachers within their CoP can interact, share and openly communicate with each other, and the peer mentor. Therefore we have both situated and social learning within CoPs (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). These issues will be re-addressed in the analysis chapter, however the specific details of the research will first be adhered to.

3. Methodology

The research presented here is a snapshot of a larger project, using a variety of data collection techniques, such as questionnaires, interviews, and face-to-face as well as online discussions within three modes. As mentioned, the interactions in this study were held between student teachers and a peer mentor, and for the purposes of this paper, data emanating solely from the interactions will be presented, although we recognise that results from the questionnaires and interviews would add further weight to relevant findings. The data was collected in the autumn semesters from September to December 2007, 2008 and 2009 from students enrolled in a one-year University MA in ELT programme (the first year being the pilot study)[1]. Once students volunteered to partake, a one-hour training session was held whereby they were introduced to the different tools that would be used in the study. The relevant activities and their aims are summarised in Table 1 below.

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[1] The pilot study (2007) was very successful in terms of participation and is deemed important for inclusion within the analysis. The methodology employed for the pilot study and the main study was similar, in fact the only minor change was a rewording of some questions, for reasons of clarity, on the questionnaire. The methods of data collection techniques concerning the interactions remained constant. We therefore feel justified in our inclusion of the data, and similarly, others argue for the inclusion of pilot study data if it offers valuable data, and if the research design remains stable (Altman et al. 2006; van Teijlingen, and Hundley 2001).

Table 1: Summary of data collection

	Activity	Aim
1	Face-to-Face 1	- to discuss general aspects of teaching, affective issues related to teaching, and the different areas being covered in programme
2	Chat Session	- to discuss language pedagogy (language systems and the theory and practice of language teaching)
3	Private Blogs	- to work as diaries of teaching experience and experiences from the MA overall
4	Discussion Forum	- to discuss theories of learning and teaching methodologies
5	Face-to-Face 2	- to discuss general areas of pedagogy

Throughout the study, the researcher acted as the peer mentor and initiated and facilitated the discussions. Moreover, participants chose pseudonyms guaranteeing anonymity for all online interactions with the aim of allowing them to feel free to discuss and reflect in an honest and open manner. As participation in the study was voluntary, there was mixed engagement at the various stages of this process, and Table 2 depicts this participation over the three years, and offers information on the size of each sub-corpus.

Table 2: Participation and word count

Mode	Participation			
	2007	2008	2009	Word count
F2F 1	7	14	16	
F2F 2	5	9	9	50,782
Blogs	4	1	7	18,221
Chat	4	7	10	7,492
Forum	5	4	6	6,203

These sub-corpora were compiled following the criteria set out by Farr et al. (2004) on the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (L-CIE), and were analysed using Wordsmith Tools (Scott 2004). The means of data analysis chosen for this research is corpus-based discourse analysis as many agree that it can combine both quantitative and qualitative analyses through the generation of word lists, keyword lists, and the scrutinisation of concordances (McCarthy 2001). The following section now draws on these functions in order to dissect the data in terms of social learning and open communication within CoPs.

4. Analysis

4.1 CoP

Applying the concept of CoPs to this paper is perceived as beneficial as 'the community of practice model is part of a social theory of learning in which identity, practice, community, learning and meaning are all interconnected' (Clarke 2008: 35), thus encompassing a variety of pertinent issues at play. We firstly analyse the data under the three oft cited aspects of CoPs, namely mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire, before moving into the analysis of how these areas can feed into social learning, and open communication. Due to the limits of such a paper, we focus on one aspect of language in each of the features, although we do make reference to other features that would also prove insightful.

Mutual Engagement

Mutual engagement is the practice of members actively engaging together in the negotiation of meaning, and in turn defining membership in a community (Wenger 1998; 1998; 2004). It refers to our own competence as well as the competence of others, our own knowledge and actions as well as the knowledge and actions of others, and the ability to make meaningful connections with what other members contribute (Wenger 1998). This thus involves community members engaging in joint activities, by building relationships and sharing and learning from each other (Wenger 2001; 2004). Davies (2005) stresses that interaction and mutual engagement are not only products of face-to-face communication, but electronic means can also allow this type of interaction, which is what was drawn upon for this research.

Question words:

As Clarke notes that mutual engagement is 'participation in an endeavour or practice whose meanings are negotiated among participants' (Clarke 2008: 30), we may assume that for student teachers, mutual engagement is participation within the context of learning to be teachers. In order to illuminate this, we have chosen the use of question words to draw attention to the act of requesting and offering support in order to possibly demonstrate negotiation of meaning, and social learning. We compare the use of questions in the online and F2F corpus, the results of which are presented below. We have chosen four question words, generated their total occurrence within the corpora, then their actual use as question markers, which we have divided between peer mentor and student teachers.

Table 3: Question words in corpora

	F2F (50,782)				ONLINE (31,916)			
	Total	Actual	Peer tutor	Sts	Total	Actual	Peer tutor	Sts
What	364	102	83	19	148	31	21	10
Why	55	18	15	3	38	20	12	8
Who	77	3	3	0	68	5	0	5
How	172	50	31	19	135	50	34	16
Total			132	41	Total		67	39
Percentage			76.30%	23.70%	Percentage		63.20	36.80

What we can see here is that the peer mentor is the one who asks the most questions, therefore signifying her role in mediating the discussion and the engagement. This is not necessarily a negative outcome as we may stipulate that the peer tutor is doing a good job at facilitating the discussion, and indeed from previous research on participation levels within the same data, we found that although the peer mentor takes a lot of turns in the discourse, her turns are quite short and thus regarded as facilitative (Riordan and Murray 2010). Clearly, the student teachers are engaged in the discourse, as in F2F they ask questions 23.70% of the time, which rises to 36.80% in the online data. This confirms previous findings that online interactions may offer more in terms of increased student participation (see for example Kern 1995; Beauvois 1998; Kamhi-Stein 2000). From investigating the concordance data, there is evidence of the student teachers asking each other questions about teaching, and their MA course in general, asking the peer mentor questions on the same issues, asking themselves questions (in particular being quite introspective within the blogs), and asking questions for relationship building and affective reasons, examples of which are presented below.

Requesting Advice

<F2F> **What** happened **what** did you do? (re. losing control of students in class).

<F2F> So **how** do you deal with that? (re. students saying inappropriate things in class).

Opinion sharing

<Forum> Personally, I favour the task-based approach at all levels… not to use it all the time maybe with lower levels but if the task is good **why** not!

<F2F> **Why** do I (plan lessons) the only way is the that you can prove that that's what you were doing.

Introspective engagement

<Blog> I wonder **why**. what was her concern in that moment? **Why** did she want to undermine me? I think the whole thing was quite gratitous. [sic] (re. a disagreement with a lecturer).

<Blog> Now, **how** can I say that I am a good teacher if after these three months this is the result?

Affective / social engagement

<Chat> Ok, Elaine's gone So, **what** do we really think?! Lol.

<Chat> 'Irishosaru' i wonder **who** that could be?! :p (guessing each others' pseudonyms).

On some level, this act of questioning can point to meaning making and negotiation, and although, we do acknowledge that these forms are not the only means of question formation, they offer us some clarity in that we can assume that if the student teachers are connecting with each other about the art of teaching that there is evidence of mutual engagement, and meaning negotiation, and indeed asking for and answering questions is exactly what we want teachers to do so that they can grow and learn from each other.

We are aware that other features may also bring this to light including for example, response tokens (*mmhm, yeah)* demonstrating engagement and listenership, instances of laughter to demonstrate interpersonal relationships, 'insider' jokes, verbs in the past tenses possibly demonstrating narratives, the investigation of the pronoun *I* to demonstrate personal sharing, examples of agreement and disagreement possibly to illuminate harmony and tension, and finally levels of participation the latter of which have been attended to in a previous paper (Riordan and Murray 2010).

Joint enterprise

The second dimension of practice within a community is a *joint enterprise*. Wenger puts forward three aspects of an enterprise that hold a CoP together, namely that the enterprise results from the process of negotiation and mutual engagement, that members define a joint enterprise through the pursuit of it, thus it belongs to them, and finally, that a joint enterprise is not merely a goal, but it also creates mutual accountability among participants (Wenger 1998). This has also been referred to as 'the domain', (Wenger 2001; Wenger 2004). Davies suggests that a joint enterprise is complex, in that it is not only an objective, but 'it encompasses both any physical outcomes and the process of meaning-making itself' (Davies 2005: 562), in other words learning to teach is the joint enterprise for the student teachers, and identity within the art of teaching is therefore key.

We: Identity with the teaching profession

For this to be illustrated, we have chosen to focus on the personal pronoun *we* to evaluate how the student teachers define themselves and identify with their joint enterprise. The table below shows the total occurrences of *we*, and the extracted occurrences of *we* when referring

to the profession of teaching, or the MA programme the student teachers are on, as this itself is their first step in joining such a profession.

Table 5: *We* across corpora

	F2F Total	**Identity marker**	**Online Total**	**Identity marker**
We	351	188	191	120

Most notable here is the significant number of occurrences of *we* which refer to the teachers identifying themselves with the act of teaching, and thus engaging in their joint enterprise. From closer inspection of the online corpus, although the student teachers often used *we* to refer to themselves as a group of novice teachers, they also, expressed themselves in terms of being full members of the community of practising teachers as the following concordances demonstrate:

Figure 1: Concordance of *We*: Online

N Concordance

1   we do now into perspective and can also give us ideas for our teaching...we still don't really know how people learn a second language or even if there

2   see the different culture of the people and know that many of the methods we use in the classroon here need to be adapted for use in Asian countries.

3   however, we also should not focus on methods solely to the extend that we "forget" about our students. Cultural awareness is the first step and then

4   teacher should be a motivator, stimulator, inspirer and even a provocateur. We should be able to challenge students' minds, thus encourage

5 respond well to some activities and not so well to others. The more in touch we are with the culture of our learners, the easier it is for us as teacher's to

6 nteresting! Its great to think that we are all intelligent in some way and that we as teachers need to move away from conventional ways of showing

7 can learn how to avoid traps, by knowing stuff or preparing better to lesson we might become better teachers ;) I think it wou

8   ... :(LATERS! I agree with Witch's comment. We are teaching grammar. I feel like in the earlier stages we might take a

9 ook later and tell the student later after I've checked it ...thats part of how we learn as teachers...it's impossible to keep all those rules in your head all

10   the rules...we are teaching English not grammar afterall.. we as teachers shouldnt underestimate Ss knowledge of grammar, that's

11   is used and can extrapolate back from first principles to the rules...we are teaching English not grammar afterall.. we as teacher

12 of learning a language and the different theories for how we acquire it can we develop an effective teaching style. well, som

In particular here, lines 6, 7, 9 and 10 specifically use the pronoun *we* along with the category of teaching. This may signify that a joint enterprise does exist for the student teachers, in that they are learning and working with each other to both cope throughout their MA programme, as well as to develop and grow as teachers in the broader sense. As well as engaging in this joint enterprise, we would hope that through this identity positioning, the student teachers are learning from other teachers' identities in the same group, which can in turn strengthen their association with the CoP. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, in F2F there is evidence of identification with the MA course (lines 1, 6 and 9), the practice of teaching (lines 7, 8, 11 and 12), however there are also examples of them referring to themselves as trainee teachers, thus aligning themselves with the practice, and possibly placing themselves on the trajectory

to full membership (lines 2, 3, 4, 5and 10), even though they may not feel as though they are full members.

Figure 2: Concordance of *We*: F2F

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N Concordance
1            thing after another climbing on there was not time and it was really only when we stopped with the lectures in December I had time to sit and think about
2                                      Main teacher they know them as well they know we're training . Fifty fi
3                                 Mmhm. +and if you remember that we are still learning until the very day we finish and for years and years after
4                              Mmhm. +you know we're not we're not teachers not yet anyway you know some of us are working or might have
5                                      . Yeah. Because we are we are here to be trained+ Mmhm.
6                             chool or wherever+ Mm. +you're we've been going through teaching practice here trying to bring in all different
7            sure whether to=. And the thing is as well us as teachers we don't have the perfect definition it's very very difficult to get the perfect
8     any teacher whereas am listening skills and speaking skills are something that we have in the baggage of our teaching. And they t
9                    . It was different this semester cos | because we had to teach the grammar and I did find like the conditionals that we had to
10                                  know like+ Yeah. +we're a part of the process as well it's not just teachers begin perfect I mean
11    omething I do notice and I I constantly kind of try to remind myself as much as we try to be a best teacher I just don't think it's right to forget about studen
12                      an compare different varieties yeah. And the rules that we teach them 'this is how we say it' and then it's totally different laugh
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What we can therefore suppose through the examination of *we*, is that the majority of cases are being used by the student teachers to align themselves with the teaching profession, who are thus engaging in a joint enterprise and learning from each other while negotiating their identities. We also acknowledge that features which merit further analysis include for example 2nd and 3rd person pronouns (*you, they, them*) possibly referring to the student teachers discussing their students, lecturers etc., and the investigation of lexical words to extrapolate the topics of discussion and meaning making in the interactions in a more universal sense.

Shared repertoire

The third dimension of practice within a community, that Wenger (1998) cites, is a *shared repertoire*, which includes words, stories, gestures, and certain ways or doing things that have become part of the community and are inherent in its practice. The repertoire includes the discourse used by members to make meaning, and the styles used by them to convey their identities and their forms of membership (ibid). It is also known as 'the practice', which is in essence the result of mutual engagement within a joint enterprise (Wenger 2001; Davies 2005; Clarke 2008). In relation to this, Table 6 below depicts the top most frequent 50 content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) within each corpus. Immediately, the most striking feature is the presence of metadiscourse, which are the tools used to talk about their trade (teaching).

Table 6: Top 50 content words across corpora

	BLOGS	CHAT	FORUM	F2F
1	AS	GRAMMAR	AS	KNOW
2	BE	THINK	LEARNING	LIKE
3	STUDENTS	BE	THINK	SO
4	CLASS	TEACHING	BE	THINK
5	GOOD	SO	TEACHING	JUST
6	HOW	AS	DIFFERENT	BE
7	SO	HOW	STUDENTS	THERE
8	THINK	GOOD	LANGUAGE	AS
9	TEACHING	LANGUAGE	THERE	WELL
10	TEACHER	STUDENTS	SO	THEN
11	THERE	KNOW	METHODS	TEACHING
12	LIKE	AGREE	METHOD	REALLY
13	ALSO	THANKS	ALSO	KIND
14	TIME	JUST	VERY	HOW
15	LANGUAGE	THEORY	GOOD	GOING
16	FEEL	PRACTICE	AGREE	CLASS
17	VERY	LIKE	TEACHER	STUDENTS
18	JUST	QUESTION	WAY	GET
19	NOW	WAY	LIKE	SAY
20	CLASSES	LEARNING	USE	WAY
21	LESSON	DIFFERENT	LEARNERS	TIME
22	EVEN	TEACHERS	CULTURE	VERY
23	LAST	TOO	HOW	MEAN
24	STUDENT	WELL	METHODOLOGIES	UP
25	BEING	SYSTEMS	THEORY	DIFFERENT
26	KNOW	TAUGHT	CULTURES	GO
27	ONLY	ENGLISH	LEARN	ACTUALLY
28	TEACHERS	LESSON	TAUGHT	GOOD
29	WAY	VERY	IDEAS	PEOPLE
30	WELL	YES	INTERESTING	DOING
31	UP	APPROACH	THEORIES	LESSON
32	GET	GET	USED	NOW
33	MAKE	THERE	APPROACH	THINGS
34	DIFFERENT	CLASS	FIND	THING
35	LEARN	TEACH	PEOPLE	GONNA
36	TOO	WAY	PRACTICE	GRAMMAR
37	PEOPLE	BOOK	SOCIAL	EVEN
38	BACK	SORRY	COME	TEACHER
39	SAY	HERE	NEED	FIND
40	SCHOOL	SCHOOL	BASED	SEE
41	THEN	SEE	CLASS	BEING
42	PLAN	TEACHER	CLASSROOM	WANT
43	TP	FEEDBACK	CULTURAL	LEARN
44	DAY	SOMETHING	EVEN	TEACH
45	EXAM	STYLE	IDEA	SAID
46	LEARNING	THEN	KNOW	DONE
47	NEVER	USE	ONLY	LOT
48	QUITE	FIND	STILL	TALKING
49	DOING	GIVE	TASK	HERE
50	SEE	LEARN	BEHAVIOURISM	USE

Tokens highlighted in grey are the features associated with the art of teaching, which appear to make up a lot of the words in the top 50 of each corpus. This shared knowledge and technical discourse demonstrates the focus of the conversations, and the shared understanding these members have regarding pedagogy. Other features such as shared stories, and routines could also demonstrate a shared repertoire, but are beyond the scope of this present paper.

From this section, we have determined features which point to the formation and practices of CoPs, which themselves are said to promote social and collaborative learning, therefore identifying that community practices are in flow in the data is our first step in the examination of social learning. Further qualitative research uncovering the other characteristics mentioned will surely add more to this discussion, and will indeed be focussed on in future papers. The final section of the analysis now attempts to investigate open communication and sharing to further exemplify our arguments.

4.2 Sharing and open communication

Using the above wordlist, we have isolated other aspects that may point to social learning (highlighted in grid form). Firstly, there are frequent affective devices, which are obviously being integrated into the interaction for stance and interpersonal reasons. These include, for example, *like, feel,* and *find.* Furthermore, we have evidence of evaluation stemming from words such as *good, very , different, interesting* and *really*, and we also have a number of cognitive words, perhaps implying meaning making and negotiation (*think* and *know*). What is a particularly welcome finding is the frequency of question words which was mentioned previously (*how* and *why*), and possible evidence of meaning making in the appearance of *agree.* Lastly, the use of interactive devices such as *sorry* and *thanks* are possibly being used here as interpersonal markers in that they compensating for the lack of paralinguistic cues in online communication.

Although the above examples require further exploration, there is evidence of the student teachers interacting with each other in a reciprocal manner; sharing their experiences. There are numerous instances of teachers telling stories, and giving advice from previous experience, one example which is presented below. This concerns the anxiety one teacher is experiencing regarding her first time being in the classroom, and how the other teachers support her:

<Guessgold> Yeah what if you just kinda blank like?
<Kimwho> Yeah.
<Guessgold> +just like you know freak out you don't know what to do or whatever? what happens then?
<Amandahuginkiss> You just be flexible and.
<Eileen> You just keeping talking.
<Leon> Ask the student to say something <$E> laughing </$E>.
<Amandahuginkiss> Yeah or just say sit quietly amongst yourselves until you figure you're going to say.
<Homersimpson> You know like have kinda exercises or something to fall back on cos that actually does happen when you're just going on+
<Elaine> Mm.
<Homersimpson> +sometimes like you can't speak you know cos like I can't continue speaking all the time so I need them to do something I mean just to have something there for back up.
<Leon> Yeah have something up your sleeve .
<Thecoolness> Bag of tricks <$E> laughing </$E>.
<Eileen> Big back of tricks absolutely.
[taken from F2F1 2008]

Here we see the sharing of advice and tips, and those putting the less experienced at ease regarding teaching, and thus offering emotional support. One other issue to be discussed in relation to open communication is that of the presence of the peer mentor. What was noticed within the blogs, and the F2F in particular was that the student teachers complained a lot (the question formats in chat and discussion forums were much tighter, and therefore students stayed on topic more). They did so about their MA course, the lecturers, their students, and it is felt that if such conversations were held with a lecturer rather than a peer mentor that such free flowing and open interaction would not have occurred. Further to this, there were many instances where the student teachers asked for clarification that the lecturers would not have access to the data, and this adds weight to the suggestion that they felt at ease within the environment, and possibly would not have done so if interacting with someone in a more authoritative role. Unfortunately, within the limits of this paper, we do not have scope to present this, although it is an issue which warrants further scrutiny. The final section now moves into the discussion and conclusions we draw from the overall results.

5. Discussion and conclusions

From the above discussion, we can deduce that both the online and face-to-face interactions provide a space for social learning, interacting and communicating within a community of practice. There is evidence of question formation, and thus meaning making; identity formation within the teaching community; and the use of specific language that those in a CoP can relate to. This forms a framework for social learning and collaboration. While we

have tentatively demonstrated that the student teachers did have the opportunity to discuss issues they may have not had the chance to talk about otherwise, we have not at this point discussed the merits the varied tools have for certain interactional aspects. For example, while chat discussions are reported to be fitting for social functions, it is the asynchronous forum which is more celebrated for reflection and cognition, and while face-to-face conversations are known to be useful for sharing and collaborating, the use of online tools overall might not only provide another means of interaction, but they may also offer more in terms of anonymity, 'openness', and in turn a closer reflection of reality. These are just some of the issues that need further expansion.

To close this discussion, we would like to draw attention to something that was noted as far back as 1995, in that 'Computer-mediated discussion is not a panacea for language acquisition, nor is it a substitute for normal classroom discussion. What it does offer is a powerful means of restructuring classroom dynamics and a novel context for social use of language' (Kern 1995: 470), something which appears true for the student teachers in this study. What we can admit, as set out by Dawes (2001), is that CMC breaks boundaries of location and time and allows students and teachers to work in ways that previously were just not as feasible. This is not only useful for language students who can, for example, interact with native peers, but also for language teachers, as CMC has been used effectively to boost current and future teachers' knowledge base and professional development (Davis 1999; Augur, Raitman et al. 2004; Arnold, Ducate et al. 2005; Sime and Priestley 2005; Hirvela 2006). We do not argue that CMC will replace traditional teacher education processes, but should complement them and provide further access for student teachers to share, collaborate and improve their practices.

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