

Martin Blaszk

Uniwersytet Gdański

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3749-517X>

martin.blaszk@ug.edu.pl

THE POSSIBILITY OF TEACHING PRACTICES AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE BASED UPON THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT-TEACHERS

Abstract

In pre-service training for teachers of English opportunities for dialogic interaction (Skidmore and Murakami, 2017) with a mentor are seen to play an important role in professional awareness and development (Wallace, 1993; Gabryś-Barker, 2012; Howard and Donaghue, 2015). To fulfil the demands of their practices student-teachers work with a number of different people: a school teacher (mentor), academic supervisor and the academic staff who lead the English teaching methodology course (Blaszk, 2015). This being the case, it was hypothesized that teaching practices might exist as a community of practice within which student-teachers in interaction with these different people would be supported in their professional development. The aim of the qualitative research reported in this paper was to discover how the student-teachers in a particular institution perceived their teaching practices and whether or not those practices could be viewed as a community of practice that supported the students.

Keywords: English teaching, teaching practices, teaching practice journals, community of practice, collaborative practice, non-collaborative practice, cooperative development

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie języka angielskiego, zawodowe praktyki nauczycielskie, dziennik praktyk nauczycielskich, wspólnota praktyków, współpraca praktyków, praktyka bez współpracy, współpraca w rozwoju

1. Introduction

The study focuses on students at BA level in the Institute of English and American Studies (IEAS) – teacher specialisation, Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Gdańsk. It was implemented as a result of a growing belief within the Institute that it was not possible to engage student-teachers in a meaningful dialogue about their teaching if all the people who were engaged in that process were not also involved in discussions about it and, following the precepts of the dialogical encounter (Skidmore and Murakami, 2017), that the student-teachers should play an equal role in those discussions. This would mean that all of the people who take part in the teaching practices would be in contact with one another discussing what was occurring, commenting, suggesting and offering ideas producing a supportive environment for the development of the student-teachers. To find out if this was actually the case, it was proposed that the different parties involved in the teaching practices could be viewed in terms of “significant others” (Sullivan, 1953), which would include a school teacher, an academic supervisor and the academic staff who lead the English teaching methodology course (Blaszk, 2015), while their interaction might be understood as conforming to a community of practice (Wenger, 2002). The concept of the community of practice was viewed as an appropriate model to apply as it describes an experience similar to the one offered by the teaching practices: a shared educational process (Wenger, 2014, 1) in which learning takes place through participation (Wenger, 2002, 54). With this in mind, to find out whether the teaching practices carried out in IEAS could actually be considered a community of practice, artefacts produced by student-teachers were analyzed in connection with characteristics for a community of practice taken from Wenger’s (2002) research on the subject.

2. Theoretical background

According to Wenger (2002: 6) communities of practice exist in all aspects of life (families, workers, students, scientists, even garage bands and groups of alcoholics anonymous). In all of these cases, there are a set of characteristics of the community of practice that can be identified. The first of these characteristics is that individuals are involved in a group and contribute to its activities. This mutual engagement (Wenger, 2002: 73) entails that the members of the group are aware of what is occurring in the community at the same time as having an effect upon it, which leads to the maintenance and development of the group as a whole (Wenger, 2002: 74).

Another characteristic of a community of practice is that it is a joint enterprise which is complex and constantly negotiated between its members but

where complexity is maintained. Therefore, negotiation does not have to lead to agreement but a willingness to live with differences as well as align individual wants and needs to those of the group (Wenger, 2002: 78–79). Communities of practice are also indigenous because they are maintained, grow and develop in relation to a specific context. They exist within an institution or a system that strongly influences what they do, although there is scope for individual responses and inventiveness (Wenger, 2002: 79–80). A community of practice also has a shared repertoire that can include routines, actions and concepts that are perceived to be part of the practice, but whose use and meaning can be negotiated. As Wenger maintains, therefore, the reified areas of the community’s practice are always open to be challenged and changed by the members within the community (Wenger, 2002: 81–82).

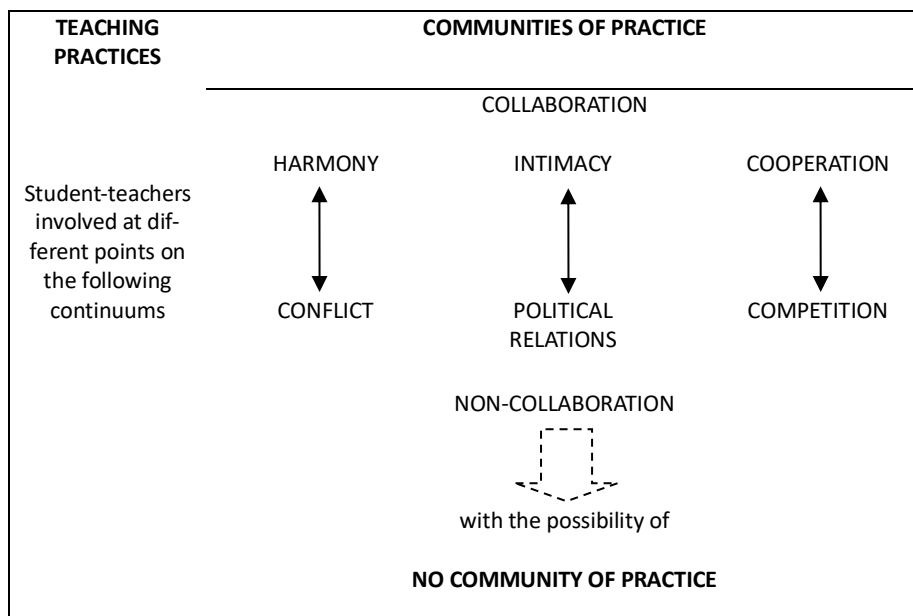


Figure 1: The oppositions that can exist in a community of practice.

In connection with the above, it can be seen that a community of practice does not necessarily entail people working together in total agreement towards fulfilling a particular goal, but involves constant negotiation over meaning and action and where, ultimately, there may not be shared agreement in connection with either of these among members of the group. Indeed, a community can be characterized by traits which lead to non-collaboration. These traits are seen by Wenger (2002: 56–57) to be in antonymic relations with those that are part of collaboration. As such, harmony, intimacy and

cooperation have their counterparts in conflict, political relations and competition. Additionally, as far as the author of this article is concerned, if these non-collaborative traits become too dominant, the community of practice may cease to function. Figure 1 shows the oppositions that can exist in a community of practice, the dominance of non-collaborative traits leading to the possibility of no community of practice. The antonymic relations provided a set of characteristics with which to interpret the data gathered for the empirical part of the research.

3. Research

3.1. Research objectives

The research carried out was a qualitative inquiry which aimed to gain a greater understanding of how the teaching practices in IEAS functioned from the perspective of the student-teachers who took part in them over three consecutive cycles. Unlike quantitative inquiry, which is used to prove a particular hypothesis or generate data and results that will build towards a generalized theory, this research was implemented to provide information to help the author, as well as other members of the teacher education team working in IEAS, come to decisions about how to develop the teaching practices. The inquiry takes the form of a case-study in that it concerns a particular group of people involved in a particular activity (Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik, 2010: 154). It is also action research where structured reflection concerning a particular issue involves questioning and data collection, with the resulting ideas and solutions being applied to further professional action (Wallace, 2008: 14).

3.2. Methodology

To carry out the research, data was collected from 90 texts created by student-teachers who took part in the teaching practices in the years 2014–2015, 2015–2016 and 2016–2017. The texts came from the final section of a journal that the students completed and handed-in for assessment. In this part of the journal – *Overall Comments* – the student-teachers gave their responses to the teaching practice as a whole. In doing so, each student wrote approximately 4 pages of text (A4) guided by the following set of questions:

- a) Give your overall impression of your teaching practice.
- b) Briefly describe what you found to be the differences between teaching at the primary level between classes: 0 and 1,2,3; 1,2,3 and 4,5,6?
- c) From the observations you carried out and the lessons you taught:

- i) describe the knowledge / skills you have gained from your teaching practice. Give specific examples.
 - ii) describe the things you view to be the successes of your teaching practice. Give specific examples.
 - iii) say what you feel you still need to work on as a teacher. Give specific examples.
 - iv) say what you would do differently if you could do your teaching practice over again. Give specific examples.
- d) Other comments relating to this part of your practice that you would like to share. (Teaching Practice Information, 2018)

To analyse the data given in the student-teachers' texts, cross-sectional indexing was applied (Mason, 2002: 159–160). First of all questions were formulated which were then applied when reading the texts written by the student-teachers. The questions were:

Who or what is described?

How do the people act in the situation described?

How does the author of the text interpret what occurs?

How do these descriptions relate to the categories given for a community of practice?

Using these questions, the texts were read and re-read to establish and then confirm categories which were then placed in connection with the characteristics for a community of practice given above in section 2. A number of the categories that were produced through this process are given below in Figure 2, while analysis of a selection of data processed in this way is given in section 3.2.

3.2. Data analysis

The student-teachers' written reflections and the resulting pictures they gave of their practices were mixed. On the one hand, students wrote about the support and ideas they received from their mentors as well as the usefulness of the ideas provided by the English teaching methodology course at IEAS, which the students were able to implement in the classes they taught. In contrast to these "positive" views, student-teachers also wrote about how they received little or no support from their mentors or had to teach in a way which was different to the one proposed on the didactics course.

The following comments build a picture of a community of collaboration where there was harmony intimacy and cooperation. One student wrote of the "very good contact" she had with her mentor because "we were discussing some

topi[c]s after the classes for quite a long time” and that the mentor was interested in showing her what the job of a teacher looked like. This meant, for example, taking part in a “project to show me that leaning English as a foreign language is not only working with the coursebook” (PB 14–15).¹ Another student-teacher commented that the English teaching methodology course had given her “theoretical knowledge of planning and activities, preparing materials, organizing lessons, information about varieties of methods”, although she was equally aware that it worked in tandem with the teaching practice, which taught her how to use the knowledge “during 45 minutes of a lesson, how to catch learner’s (sic) attention, fully use the given time” (IS 16–17).

Examples of categories – teaching practices	Characteristics of a community of practice
<p><i>stimulating atmosphere</i>: use of English (L2) by mentor, learners, student-teacher, engaging tasks and activities, possibilities for experimentation;</p> <p><i>supportive mentor</i>: discussion, guidance into and through the job of teaching;</p> <p><i>various and reciprocal learning processes</i>: cognitive and affective development, learners, mentor, student-teacher learn from one another.</p>	<p>Collaborative</p> <p>Harmony</p> <p>Intimacy</p> <p>Cooperation</p>
<p><i>mismatch</i>: English teaching course aspirations and school realities, learner-centred as opposed to teacher-centred teaching;</p> <p><i>peripheral mentor</i>: too busy to talk, too little feedback, feedback after the fact;</p> <p><i>controlled atmosphere</i>: use of Polish (L1) by mentor, learners, student-teacher (not to disrupt), follow the coursebook, fulfil the syllabus.</p>	<p>Non-collaborative</p> <p>Conflict</p> <p>Political relations</p> <p>Competition</p>

Figure 2: Examples of categories produced through the process of cross-sectional indexing data from teaching practice journals linked to the characteristics of a community of practice.

¹ The code used in the data analysis gives the initials of the student-teacher involved in the didactics practices followed by the year she/he took part.

Students also described how learners were used to and interested in the way the students taught, which appeared to make the learners as much a part of the community of practice as the students, mentors and academic staff involved with the teaching practices. Student-teachers also reported how the classes were run in accordance with ideas espoused on the English teaching methodology course: English (L2) and extra, creative activities were used, not only the coursebook. In relation to the use of L2, one mentor encouraged learners to “try to use English as often as they can”, with the result that to the student’s “great surprise [...] the learners were speaking English even while communicating with one another during group work” (TR 15–16). Additionally, a student praised her mentor because “even though [...] [the learners] were very young and it was their first contact with English language, she managed to communicate with them without using Polish” (PP 15–16).

With regard to extra and creative activities, another student-teacher wrote how she “tried to prepare tasks which would make [...] [her] students engaged and interested in the lessons [...] to include some game and fun element or, in lower classes, to let the learners leave their desks and move a little” (PD 14–15). Some of the student-teachers also felt they had the freedom to experiment, which led one student – inspired by learners in second grade (8 year olds) – to teach vocabulary sitting under the tables in the classroom:

I had this very persistent problem during that lesson, and that being one of the pairs of students repeatedly, for whatever reason, [kept] diving down under the desk, giggling. I tried to fight this tendency in a variety of ways [...] but to no avail. Even worse: more pairs followed the first ones under their desks! I felt hopeless. So [...] I crawled under my desk myself and instructed all the children to do the same, and we followed through the rest of the lesson with complete involvement, no further problems, from under our desks. (SG15–16).

As well as the above, student-teachers mentioned that the learning process on their practices was reciprocal. In a process that displayed the intimacy that can be part of a community of practice, students described how they learnt from their mentors and the mentors wanted to learn from them, while contact with the learners also provided opportunities for the student-teachers to develop and grow. For example, one student wrote that his mentor commented “we are here to learn from each other” (PK 14–15), while a student who used tasks and activities from the internet and other sources was asked by her mentor “to write plans [instructions – MB] for more complicated tasks [...] [because] probably she would use them in her work” (MR 15–16). A number of students also described how they learned from the learners they were teaching. In one case, it was development of the student-teacher’s own lexis

because learners “ask vocabulary questions many times [...] [which are] quite difficult and there were cases that I had to check something in the dictionary” (PB 14–15). In another case, it was a positive effect on the skills and affective factors that are part of teaching, where a student could report: “An intensive contact with young learners influenced positively my social skills, creativity, an ability to deal with stressful situations, spontaneity, self-control, assertiveness and openheartedness” (MJ 15–16).

In addition to comments that showed the teaching practices as a collaborative community, there were descriptions by the student-teachers that placed it as non-collaborative. For instance, in connection with the conflictive and competitive elements that might exist in such a case, Polish (L1) was used in lessons most of the time, the coursebook was followed closely and extra, and creative activities were discouraged because of lack of time or because they disrupted order in the classroom. In connection with the use of L1, a student-teacher wrote about how the learners in one class were stunned into silence because she gave them instructions for an activity in L2, the reason for their amazement being “the fact that the teacher [mentor – MB] didn’t use much English during the lesson” (AD 16–17). Additionally, student-teachers also commented about work with the coursebook. For example, a student wrote that “it was impossible to introduce many extracurricular materials and games, because a vast number of material is to be covered each week. It also gave me no choice but to follow the book – I was simply expected to do that by my mentor and the principal” (KS 15–16). Meanwhile, another student commented on the negative side of this: “the more the coursebook is used, the more dull the lesson becomes” (OW 16–17)

In terms of a more direct expression of the conflict present between what was proposed on the English teaching methodology course and what actually occurred in the classroom, another student wrote: “the theoretical knowledge acquired during methodology and didactics was nowhere close the factual situation in Polish schools. Most of the games and activities are really useful, but not in a class of 25 students, yet in smaller groups of 4–6 pupils” (KS 15–16).

It was also mentioned how the English teaching methodology course did not prepare student-teachers for what they experienced in school, so that one student commented that she was “stunned to see some of the [...] principal concepts of applied didactics basically flying out of the window the moment the bell rang: there is no lesson nor is there any course that will properly prepare you for the chaos and frantic atmosphere of a school break situation” (SB 15–16). In practical terms, the lack of preparation was connected with the issue of discipline and student-teachers’ concerns about whether or not they

were using the appropriate method. On a more fundamental level, however, there was a difference between the learner-centred view promoted on the English teaching methodology course and the more traditional and teacher-centred concerns of some of the mentors. For instance, a student-teacher who “wanted to teach [...] [learners] a song that involved dancing and pointing to things” was told that she could not do this and that she “should avoid any kinesthetic learning unless [...] [she wanted the] class to turn into a disaster and let people harm themselves” (AD 15–16).

With regard to the political relations that can be part of a non-collaborative community of practice, one student commented that although her mentor provided a good model for teaching she was often too busy to discuss matters, which the student felt “negatively influenced [...] [her own] preparations and performance as a teacher” (MK14–15). Another student-teacher, meanwhile, complained that she “never heard any forms of disagreement or, what is more important any support, or constructive feedback.” The only real feedback came in the formal documentation the mentor had to complete after the practice was completed, which led the student to comment: “It is a shame I got to know about that after such a long time and had no chance to improve my abilities throughout the practice” (AW 14–15).

3.3. Discussion

From the perspectives of the students outlined above, when a student-teacher works with a “like-minded” mentor, one who is cognizant of trends in English teaching methodology parallel to those espoused on the methodology course run by IEAS and is able to negotiate the needs of learners with those of the formal concerns of schooling, then a community of practice of “collaboration” exists. This means there can be “harmony”, “intimacy” and “cooperation” in the following ways:

- **harmony** – there is agreement between the “significant others” involved in the teaching practices as to what should be done during lessons in the classroom,
- **intimacy** – the student-teacher and mentor feel comfortable and confident enough in each other’s company to comment upon as well as share in openness and honesty the ideas and experiences they have
- **cooperation** – the “significant others” involved in the practices work together in agreement to facilitate the enterprise of teaching.

In opposition to this, other comments made by the student-teachers suggest the contrary is true, so that “conflict”, “political relations” and “competition” are to the fore:

- **conflict** – the student-teacher does not agree with the way their mentor works, or the student-teacher accepts the way their mentor works even though she/he sees it as opposed to what was learned on the English teaching methodology course or what she/he feels to be “good” practice,
- **political relations** – there is a relationship in which a frank exchange of ideas and experiences is not possible,
- **competition** – the need to fulfil the syllabus is a priority, creative involvement is seen to be too time-consuming or detrimental to teaching-learning, the English teaching methodology course offers a different “version” of what occurs (should occur) in school.

From what the student-teachers wrote, the teaching practices as a whole cannot be viewed as one homogeneous community of practice. Rather there appear to be communities of practice, each reliant on the individual “significant others” who come together to create them. Furthermore, these different communities of practice exist as variable states, where each student-teacher can expect to be involved on continuums where the experience is between (following Wenger’s typology) collaboration and non-collaboration, including variables such as, harmony and conflict, intimacy and political relations, cooperation and competition.

This does not necessarily mean that the teaching practices as viewed by the student-teachers failed to function as a community of practice, because as Wenger (2002: 76) states: “Mutual engagement does not entail homogeneity, but it does create relationships among people. When it is sustained, it connects participants in ways that can become deeper than more abstract similarities in terms of personal features or social categories. In this sense a community of practice can become a very tight node of interpersonal relationships.” However, when the student-teachers went into environments where there was little support, where creativity was discouraged and where there was lack of agreement between the mentors (school and academic) as to a shared repertoire (section 2 above), Wenger’s “tight node” of relationships appeared not to exist. In this case a non-collaborative community of practice was apparent.

With this uncertain picture of the teaching practices as a community of practice, the question arises of whether or not it is a model that can be successfully applied to guide developments of the teaching practices in the future. The limitations of the research carried out here is that the data and analysis

is restricted to one set of people – student-teachers – in the group of “significant others” that constitute the teaching practices. Further research would be needed to reveal how mentors and English teaching methodology course providers view their involvement in the teaching practices. Additionally, and in relation to the question which is the basis for this research, if the teaching practices as a whole are different communities of practice, or indeed, do not exist as a community at all, is there an alternative way of viewing them that reflects more truly what they are? One answer to this may be found in the fact that although this research was interested in a community of practice as a collective enterprise inclusive of all of its participants working together towards one particular aim (all the student-teachers, all of the mentors and all of the learners from all of the schools involved in the practices, as well as the didactics team in the Institute facilitating a shared idea of the teaching-learning process), the picture that emerges is one where meaningful relations with regard to teaching-learning (or, indeed, the contrary) appear to be at the level of individuals interacting together rather than larger groups. Therefore, a more appropriate model for viewing the teaching practices when collaboration is apparent might be Cooperative Development, which emphasizes reflection and growth in teaching through one-to-one contact (Edge, 1992: 4). This being the case, continuing research into the functioning of teaching practices in connection with this perspective also needs to be explored.

4. Conclusion

The research was instigated to determine whether the teaching practices at BA level, carried out in IEAS at the University of Gdańsk, can be considered a community of practice. There were seen to be advantages to this, especially as the aim within the Institute is to continue to develop the practices as a reflective and dialogic enterprise: teaching practices as a community of practice would mean the “significant others” who are involved in the practices would be in contact, discussing what was occurring and offering each other ideas. The research showed that while the “positive” aspects of a community of practice: collaboration, harmony, intimacy and cooperation, were apparent, other aspects were also seen to exist: non-collaboration, conflict, more political relations and competition. Because of this, a more appropriate way of conceptualizing what occurs in the practices might be Cooperative Development, which allows for reflection and dialogic relations but at a level of contact between individuals rather than larger groups of people.

REFERENCES

- Blaszk M. (2015). Between didactics, the mentor and the pupils: Trainee reflections concerning their teaching practices. *Neofilolog* 45/1: 9–25.
- Edge J. (1992). *Cooperative Development*. Harlow: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Gabryś-Baker D. (2012). *Reflectivity in Pre-Service Teacher Education. A Survey of Theory and Practice*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Howard A., Donaghue H. (eds.) (2015). *Teacher Evaluation in Second Language Education*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Mason J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage Publications.
- Skidmore D., Murakami K. (eds.) (2017). *Dialogic Pedagogy: The Importance of Dialogue in Teaching and Learning*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Sullivan H. S. (1953). *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Teaching Practice Information. Retrieved 17/02/2018, from https://fil.ug.edu.pl/wydzial/instituty_i_katedry/institut_anglistyki_i_amerikanistyki/praktyki/praktyki_nauczycielskieteaching_work_experience [DW 18.08.2019]
- Wallace M. J. (2008). *Action research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wallace M. J. (1993). *Training Foreign Language Teachers. A Reflective Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger E. *A Community of Practice. A Brief Introduction*. Retrieved 15/12/2014, from <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/> [DW 12.01.2020]
- Wenger E. (2002). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilczyńska W., Michońska-Stadnik A. (2010), *Metodologia badań w glotto-dydaktyce. Wprowadzenie*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo AVALON.