The International Research Foundation
for English Language Education

Title of Project:
English Language Teachers' Learning to Teach with Technology
through Participation in an Online Community of Practice:
A Netnography of *Webheads in Action*

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Summary:

Through an ethnographic approach, this study aimed to examine one long-standing, globally-distributed, online community of practice created by English language teachers, called "Webheads in Action," whose shared domain of interest centers on exploring the pedagogical uses of web-based technologies in English language teaching. The overarching goals of this study were to understand the broad culture of learning, collaboration, and mentoring in this online language teacher community by exploring and analyzing the characteristics of the shared repertoire of resources, and activities; the ways that members engage in the collective development of this technology integration practice; and the role of participation in such an online community of practice plays on developing language teachers' technological pedagogical content knowledge when designing instruction.

The study was theoretically framed by situated learning, communities of practice, and technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) frameworks. It employed a *netnographic* approach—an ethnographic approach to studying communities that exit online. Through online participant observation, I engaged in the community's synchronous and asynchronous activities over a year. As suggested by the netnography approach, I collected all the data through online means. I took reflective observational fieldnotes of my observations and experiences in these activities, conducted in-depth interviews with four key persons in the community and five individual members, archived email communication that occurred during my participant observations in the community for further analysis, and archived screenshots, links, and documents from the community archives. Through an inductive analysis approach that is often applied in qualitative research, I coded and categorized the data to find out the emerging patterns and themes to answer my research questions, which were the following:

1. What are the main activities (and artifacts and resources related to these activities) carried out by Webheads that help develop their shared practice? How are these activities organized? What are the characteristics of these artifacts, activities, and resources?
2. Through what forms of engagement do members of WiA develop their shared practice? In what ways does their membership status (newcomer vs. long-term

member) play a role in the ways they engage in the community and its shared practice?

3. How are new members introduced to WiA and its practice? How do they become a part of this online community of practice? How do they move from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation?

4. How participation in WiA helps members develop in their understanding of pedagogically-sound integration of technology into language teaching as perceived by five selected members? What do their learning journeys within this community consist of?

The findings as related to the culture of this community suggested that this multi-site, globally-distributed online community, which gradually emerged as an online community of practice from an online workshop that was carried out in 2002, bases its activities on certain principles and values that facilitate individual members' participation and contribution to the community and its collective practice. Webheads believe that knowledge should be free and accessible to everybody, and they organize and archive their activities through open source technology tools freely available on the Internet. Their activities are collaboratively conducted by the members on a voluntary basis. Webheads also construct their practice by celebrating the idea that learning is a social activity, which is the reason for collaborative efforts behind their activities. Membership in Webheads is fluid, and there are no clear-cut boundaries between novice and experts. Webheads value one another's expertise and believe that everybody has something to share and to teach to others. Therefore, a variety of expertise levels results in a variety of participation patterns and levels, which contributes to the diverse nature of the community. Collaboration naturally takes place in the form of telecollaboration because the community exists online. A variety of telecollaboration patterns result from ongoing interaction among the active members, who develop professional partnerships within the community. Finally, interculturality and diversity is embraced and intercultural exchanges are encouraged in this community, which gives way to intercultural telecollaborative projects among the members.

The findings also suggested that new members in this community are oriented towards the community's practice and activities through hands-on practice provided by their annual online workshop. Once they are invited to become a member in the main email list, new members are encouraged to contribute to other activities, and they are not stigmatized as novices. Active members are invited to moderate the annual workshop, which designates a movement towards full participation in the community's activities. Members move from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation as they not only participate in the community activities by simply logging into the community platforms or checking the emails, but also by remaining visible to the community members through interaction, contribution, and collaboration with other members. Webheads sustain their community not only through a community-oriented engagement, which contributes to their psychological sense of community, but also through a practice-oriented engagement, which revolves around exchanges on pedagogical uses of web-based technologies in English language teaching.

The continuous practice-oriented and community-oriented engagement helps mediate teachers' TPACK, as they share sample uses of technology, discuss affordances of technology, solve one anothers' technical problems, update one another in terms of technological advances and news, and share technology resources. By sharing their own ways of using technology tools

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for their teaching, members develop their own repertoires of ways of technology integration into language teaching, which in turn improves their practice. Individual members' stories indicated that their use of technology was limited to that of an "internet consumer" while soon after they join the community and actively participate in the activities, they become "technology leaders" not only within the community but also in their own teaching contexts.

This study has several implications for developing online as well as face-to-face communities. The characteristics of this online community imply that participation, interaction, collaboration, and contribution in online communities are necessary to sustain communities online and develop in-service language teachers' TPACK and technology integration practice. Because of their busy schedules, and because of the rapid advances in technologies, in-service teachers do not always benefit from one-shot traditional workshops on technology integration. They need constant support, which can be facilitated with such online communities. However, the organic nature of the community, collectively developed shared practice, opportunities for hands-on practice with the tools, regular synchronous and asynchronous events that are organized by members regardless of the members' membership status (long-term vs. new) should be considered in creating and sustaining such communities either online or face-to-face.

The study also shed light on how TPACK can be mediated in online communities of practice. Although this is a complex process, it was evident that the backgrounds of the participants played a role. Therefore, it is suggested that such communities should be constructed around practicing language teachers from the same subject area. This leads to the ongoing application of the pedagogy and content to the technology explored. When members are from different subject areas, in which different pedagogies are employed, it may be difficult for members to continue to engage in technology-oriented dialogue because their contents and pedagogical needs are different. Moreover, because of the rapid technological advances, online communities serve as a source of support for teachers in order to develop their technology integration practice. They may have an understanding of how the dimension of technology might interact with pedagogy and content; however, if they are not updated with information about the new emergent technologies on a regular basis and do not learn about affordances of each technology specifically for language teaching, they will eventually fall behind. Therefore participation in an online community of practice provides language teachers a situated context to learn to teach with technology.

Finally, this study also revealed potential for netnography as an approach to studying online language learning and language teaching communities through rich and thick description achieved by online participant observation. As part of the future research efforts, online language learning communities such as Busuu.com, or telecollaborative language learning or teaching groups over Facebook or Edmodo could also be "fields" for netnographic research as it applies to language education.

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