BEGINNING TEACHERS FINDING SUPPORT THROUGH AN ONLINE TEACHER NETWORK: AFFINITY LEAR-NING

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ABSTRACT

Teacher attrition remains a concern in the field of education; while this is not a new problem, the reasons why teachers tend to leave the profession are concerning. Recently, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2014) found that nearly one third of all teachers leave the profession within their first three years; many cited a lack of administrative and professional support as a major factor in their decision to seek alternative employment. “The problem takes many forms, including the feeling of being isolated from colleagues, scant feedback on performance, poor professional development, and insufficient emotional backing by administrators” (p.7). While there is no replacement for a solid teacher induction program, it is clear that teacher educators need to find alternative and expansive ways to provide intellectual and emotional support to new teachers as they enter the profession, helping them focus not only on their pedagogical and content knowledge skills, but also on nurturing their emerging and constantly evolving teacher identifications. One way that teachers are able to achieve this level of additional support on their own, bridging the gap from the University to their initial in service positions (supplementing what can sometimes be less than ideal professional development), is to turn to online teacher communities, or what I term online teacher affinity spaces.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the types of support beginning teachers perceive they obtain from voluntary membership within a particular online
teacher affinity space called The English Companion Ning (EC Ning). Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, I sought to identify the types of discursive practices that emerge as beginning teachers participate in the content-specific online space. It incorporates sociocultural and social learning theories (Gee, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998) to explore how beginning teachers, often considered legitimate peripheral participants, display patterns of membership and interaction, as well as how they position and identify themselves as beginning teachers within the discussions they engage in.

The results of this study suggest the potential of online teacher affinity spaces to support beginning teachers, both professionally and emotionally. A salient finding is that beginning teachers tend to take up various degrees of participation in the EC Ning and this can be closely tied to the levels of support they experience at their schools of employment. In addition, the EC Ning displayed elements of affinity space that provided beginning teachers the opportunity to conduct important identity formation and experimentation. The utilization and implementation of these types of spaces as supplemental support, as early on as in teacher education programs, have the potential to provide beginning teachers with the reinforcements they need in order to survive and thrive during their first years of teaching.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

“To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” – bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994, p. 13)

As hooks states, the work that teachers do alongside students is powerful and important; the teaching profession is “sacred”. However, today’s beginning teachers are often given contradictory messages in this regard. In today’s political and social climate, teachers are often the first to suffer the burden of blame for the many perceived failings of schools. In the midst of pervasive discourse on standardized testing, value-added assessment and achievement gaps, teacher attrition is a focus of teacher education and educational policy. Recently, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2014) found that nearly one third of all teachers leave the profession within their first three years. When researchers interviewed teachers, their main reasons for leaving the profession weren’t low pay or difficult students; rather, many cited a lack of administrative and professional support as a major factor in their attrition. “The problem takes many forms, including the feeling of being isolated from colleagues, scant feedback on performance, poor professional development, and insufficient emotional backing by administrators” (p.7). This sentiment is old news to teacher educators and scholars
that cite a lack of support from colleagues and administrators as a detriment to beginning teacher development (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Strong, 2009; Connelly, 2000; and Ingersoll, 2003). It is clear that the field needs to continue to find alternative and expansive ways to provide intellectual and emotional support to new teachers as they enter the profession, helping them focus not only on their pedagogical and content knowledge skills, but also their emerging and evolving teacher identities. We have a responsibility as teacher educators to provide beginning teachers with the support that they need to fully “share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (hooks, p. 13).

**Autobiographical beginnings**

Sonia Nieto (2003) points out that, “all teaching is ultimately autobiographical” (p. 9), and the reasons why I am approaching my work as a teacher educator on the support of new teachers are deeply enmeshed in my own journey as a secondary teacher. I began my own work as a secondary English Language Arts teacher in a dream-like atmosphere, one devoid of explicit neoliberal pedagogy or a hidden curriculum of making sure that teacher education students were seen but not heard. As a Professional Development School intern pursuing certification in Secondary English Language Arts, I had the opportunity to begin my teaching career amidst a community of educators that valued teacher inquiry, peer observation, and an open door policy; it was a local professional community that was both inviting and constructive. In addition to co-teaching for the duration of a year, I also had the opportunity to belong to a teacher inquiry group that met once a
week and discussed educational philosophies, teaching strategies, and approaches to supporting diverse students. I conducted my own action research project on how teachers could transform the classroom by creating a space for authentic student presentation. I visited and was invited to teach in peers’ and other faculty members' classrooms. I presented my academic work at a professional conference at the end of the year. In short, my first year as a member of a professional education community was both dynamic and rewarding.

When I moved on to my first year of teaching at a secondary school in Brooklyn, N.Y., I found an equally stimulating and responsive community. The administrators made sure that the teachers in our small staff (there were fourteen of us) had the chance to pursue professional development in a variety of capacities, both relevant to our individual teaching practices and the larger context of the urban student population that we served. For example, our principal provided full funding for the entire staff to travel to Connecticut for a weeklong summer workshop focused on how to support gifted students. During the school year, we were encouraged to work with local artists, musicians, and professionals to develop unique and engaging elective classes, like the Healthy Living enrichment cluster that paired with a local nutritionist trained by Dr. Oz and the television production club that utilized the studio facilities of the nearby community college. I was faculty advisor for our school’s newspaper and was given the privilege to work with a local NYC journalist as my co-mentor. For a New York City public school with a declining budget threatened by a “meet AYP or close your doors in six months” ultimatum, we
all did the best we could to keep our students and our developing pedagogical philosophies at the forefront of our practice.

Even though I felt supported by my administration and colleagues and experienced significant growth as a young teacher in a variety of ways, I couldn’t help but still feel shameful in my newness. As a first year teacher with a room between two seasoned educators that had been working with students for a combined total of 40 years, I felt a pressure to project myself as the expert teacher that I perceived them to be. While I was given plenty of opportunities to talk about students and pedagogy with my colleagues, as a teacher without tenure, I felt uncomfortable admitting that I was having anxieties, insecurities, and even failures, too. For example, not only had I never taught students as young as the 6th grade class I was assigned, but I was not yet confident in what I then perceived as my classroom management skills. In addition, I struggled to find my voice with other school stakeholders, like parents, school psychologists, and special education teachers.

During that first difficult and rewarding year, I found solace outside of my local school community through my interactions with my teacher education peers, many of whom had moved on to teaching positions in demographically diverse assignments. Because we were all teaching in different contexts, hours away from one another, we relied on social networking to maintain contact and to engage in supportive talk about the journey of being and becoming teachers of English Language Arts. While emails were frequently sent back and forth, we also utilized
Facebook to exchange messages of advice, comfort, and support with one another. When I didn’t feel quite comfortable sharing a disastrous lesson or a scary parent interaction with my school colleagues, I looked forward to signing onto my computer to seek advice and resources, and, often, read words of sympathy, comfort or pity from my teacher education peers.

It wasn’t until I started working at another secondary school, this time in rural Pennsylvania, that I realized just how much I depended on my outside teacher networks to keep me afloat. The summer before I started, my new principal took me on a tour throughout the high school building that I was now to call home. After a long walk down the hallways, shining from floor wax, but scented with the remnants of broken pencils and neglected gym clothes, he finally introduced me to my classroom. After pointing proudly to the newly paint walls and just-installed carpet, he demonstrated, with wide arm gestures, exactly where my desk should go (at the “front” of the classroom) and where the students’ desks should go (in careful, neat rows facing the chalkboard at the “front” of the room). He admonished me to resist the temptation to apply masking tape lines to make sure students knew where to keep their desks or for rearranging the desks in any way, so as to avoid marking up the fresh carpet. He also emphasized how important it was for me to keep posters and other “wall ornaments” to a minimum, for fear that I might sully the new paint job. I was crestfallen. How would I hold Socratic seminars if the desks were figuratively chained to the floor? Where would I hang and display student work? How would I negotiate my position as new teacher in the district with the feelings of
resistance I felt about the implicit pedagogical and epistemological values of my new school community? The teaching philosophies and ideologies that undergirded the simple event of my first school tour became even clearer as I started the school year. Feeling the theme of isolation wrapped in dissent, I once again turned to my trusted community of beginning teachers. Again, the support and camaraderie I felt as a member of my informal community was beneficial, both to my evolution as a teacher and as an individual working out what I believed about pedagogy and instruction. I remember the elation I felt when a peer described the same uncertainties about teaching grammar rules and the pride I experienced when I told about my positive Friday phone call home to the parents of a struggling student.

The description above from my own early years of teaching is not unlike what many beginning teachers face – uncertainty about job security, lack of confidence in student and stakeholder interactions, and myriad philosophical and pedagogical contradictions that pass their way. I came to develop an interest in how new teachers find support like I did and what that meant for the profession. Particularly interested in technology, and a millennial myself (Howe & Strauss, 2000), I was intrigued by the types of interactions and collaborations afforded by Web 2.0 tool for teachers.

**Digital Context of the Study**

**Web 2.0 Tools**

Web 2.0 has been considered a major factor in the way that communication has changed over the last decade. The Internet has moved from being a primarily
consumption oriented space to a more creation-based arena, where users of all types can establish and share their original material. In addition, Web 2.0 has broken down barriers of communication. The implementation of digital technologies in education has allowed users to collaborate without temporal or geographic hurdles and has become quite ubiquitous. While many platforms for interactivity have cropped up since the advent of Web 2.0 technology, there remain a few major outlets for individuals to communicate, collaborate, and create content on the web. Most notably are blogs, micro blogs, wikis, social network sites, and social network platforms (See Table 1.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web 2.0 Tool</th>
<th>Affordances/Examples</th>
<th>Social Interaction Depiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blog/Micro Blog</td>
<td>Created by an individual and then read by an audience. The readers are able to comment on the blog post. Micro blogs take up the same framework as traditional blogs, but require users to limit themselves to a certain amount of characters. Example: Twitter</td>
<td>Focus on individual blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiki</td>
<td>Web-based documents or pages that can be edited and collaborated on by multiple people at one time or asynchronously. Example: Wikipedia</td>
<td>Focus on specific content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social Network Site

“Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2007)

Example: Facebook or LinkedIn

Social Network Platform

Individuals work on their own to interact with other individuals or just communicate within the larger format of an interest group. Groups align and organize themselves, but cross paths with other interests and groups within a shared space. Individuals can be members of multiple groups.

Example: Ning

Table 1: Examples of Web 2.0 tools

Ning

Ning (www.ning.com) is a platform introduced in 2005 that allows users to create their own, independent social networks. These networks, ranging from communities of skateboard enthusiasts to diabetes sufferers, function similarly to popular social networking media like Facebook and LinkedIn; they allow users to build personal profiles while also belonging to groups of their interest. In addition, Ning offers affordances like personal blogging, video uploading, real-time chatting, and image sharing capabilities. However, the Ning platform is unique because it fosters an environment of community, not individuality. The developers of Ning describe this aspect:
The first major difference between a Facebook group and a social network on Ning is that a social network on Ning is its own social network. It’s not a group. It’s not a club. It’s your own MySpace or Facebook for your own particular passion, interest, cause, location, or community (Bianchini, 2007).

The English Companion Ning

The English Companion Ning (EC Ning) exemplifies one such community on the Ning platform and is the site of this digital ethnographic qualitative study. Membership requires obtaining a username and a password, but is open to the public. When members sign onto the main page, they are greeted by the EC Ning logo, which displays a group of teachers holding a book with the motto: “English
Companion: Where English teachers go to help each other”¹. Created by Jim Burke, a well-known author, researcher and practitioner in the field, the EC Ning offers an online space for teachers to come together around the practice of teaching English Language Arts. Burke, whose commercial success has led to his book being utilized in English teacher methods courses, capitalized on already existing communities of educators from organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Writing Project (NWP). He has worked to keep the EC Ning non-commercial by asking for members to fill in applications to join and by having moderators greet and interact with new members. When Ning began charging for its website hosting in 2010, Burke initiated a movement to have members of the group donate to keep it running; it is still in effect today.

Educators of various experience levels and geographic locations can discuss topics from assessment to classroom management, share ideas about planning a novel unit based on A Tale of Two Cities, engage in book club discussions, and exchange advice and best practice ponderings. The main source of conversation and dialogue revolves around the site’s various discussion groups, of which there are 272. After signing into the English Companion Ning with their login information, members can gain access to the different groups through a link on the homepage. The groups are arranged by topics or themes of inquiry and invite members to engage in discussion around specific interests underneath the umbrella of the teaching of English Language Arts. Examples of groups within the space range from

¹ Image and motto retrieved from http://englishcompanion.ning.com/
“Teaching Shakespeare” to “Common Core Reading Strategies” to “Classroom Management” to, finally, “New Teachers,” which is the primary focus of observation in this study. What happens in the EC Ning space is, essentially, a sharing of the knowledge of the teaching of English Language Arts. As of April 2014, there are over forty thousand members.  

While teaching English Language Arts methods courses for the past five semesters, I’ve asked my own teacher education students to become members of EC Ning. I’ve also become a member and have gained insight into the way that the online network functions, both semiotically and socially. When a previous student of mine, then in her first year of full-time teaching, emailed me to thank me for showing her the space, I began to think about the impact of EC Ning on new teachers. I wondered how other beginning teachers like my student would progress as they exited the safety and theoretically dense atmosphere of the university and entered the often-unstable teacher workforce awaiting them. I began to develop questions about its function and the practices that other members take up within the environment, like what are the benefits to beginning teachers of having asynchronous spaces in which to engage in discussion and sharing resources of the teaching of English? How might participation in the EC Ning site extend what beginning teachers can do and how they develop as educators? How might online teacher networks foster a sense of collaboration and non-contrived collegiality? How might these settings provide induction phase teachers with the support they

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2 This number is up 10,000 members since this study began in 2012
need to feel successful in their first few years of teaching? It is because of these questions that I decided to conduct a digital ethnography within the EC Ning space and formulate more refined research questions.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the types of support beginning teachers acquire from membership within a particular online teacher affinity space called The English Companion Ning (EC Ning). Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, it seeks to identify the types of discursive practices new teachers take up the content-specific online setting. It incorporates sociocultural and social learning theories (Gee, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to explore how beginning teachers, traversing the realm of student to teacher, display patterns of membership and interaction, as well as how they position and identify themselves as beginning teachers. As a former high school English teacher and doctoral student working with beginning educators, I have become interested in the ways in which they obtain pedagogical understandings and nourish their evolving teacher identifications. In addition, because of my experiences with digital tools, I seek to understand how they form and take up practices within online teacher networks around these understandings. Connected to these inquiries are the ways in which beginning teachers utilize Web 2.0 tools to publically work through their initiations into the field of education. As Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2010) maintain, the practice of making teaching public:
...facilitates improved teaching and that all teachers can benefit from making their practices public and sharing them with each other. ‘Public’ in this sense, means making artifacts and events of practice, and reflections on practice, available to interested educational audiences (p. 78).

The social and public nature of online teacher networks provides a conceptual foundation for this study, as it highlights means for an alternative venue for new teachers to share stories, increase their knowledge about teaching, and express themselves through publically accessible discursive practice.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it adds to the body of research on virtual teacher learning spaces. While scholars have explored the structures and practices of these environments before, it is important to note that there is very little to account for teachers’ own perceptions about why they are helpful. While there are many studies on how formal professional development can be moved onto online spaces, the study of non-formal, voluntary participation in an online teacher learning space is rarely mentioned in the scholarship. This study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the reasons why beginning teachers voluntarily seek membership within the EC Ning and what they perceive they obtain through membership. In addition, it provides insight into the patterns of membership and degrees of participation that are taken up in the EC Ning.
Research Questions

Based on my initial questions embedded in my experience as a methods course instructor and a secondary English Language Arts teacher myself, I decided to focus on the following research questions:

1. What motivates beginning teachers to voluntarily utilize the EC Ning space for support?
2. How do they perceive and describe the support that they find on the EC Ning space?
3. What discursive and participatory practices unfold in the EC Ning, particularly the New Teachers group? How do these practices work to serve beginning teachers in the process of identification and belonging to a community?
Glossary of Terms

**Affinity space:** a space that allows groups of people to come together with a central purpose and goal, sharing common interests and agreeing on modes of participation (Gee, 2006).

**Beginning teachers:** Both pre service and induction-phase teachers (Fessler, 1995).

**Community of practice (COP):** a group of people that come together with a central purpose and goal, sharing a common interest and agreeing on modes of participation and community and cultural reifications (Wenger, 1998).

**Computer mediated communication (CMC):** textual or multimodal communication that is afforded by digital tools like computers.

**Legitimate peripheral participant (LPP):** A newcomer to a community or space. Established by Lave and Wenger (1991) but also appropriated in connection with Gee’s (2006) affinity spaces for the purpose of this study.

**Lurker (reader):** preferably referred to as “reader” in this study. A participant in an online community that reads communications and content rather than posting or creating content. Participants can move fluidly within and out of this category.

**Online teacher learning space:** another term used to describe a web-based community where teachers come together to share and learn about teaching.

**Participation:** for the purposes of this study, there are two main types of participation, active and passive. Active refers to when members of an online
learning community create and respond to messages and interactions within that community. Passive refers to when members of an online learning community consume or read within a space. Participation is fluid and can shift.

**Professional learning:** Easton (2008) defines this as learning that puts the onus on the learner and is embedded in context of their classrooms. Used here as a replacement for professional development.

**Social networking site:** Defined by boyd & Ellison (2007) as “…a web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 10).

**Teacher identity:** a fluid and recursive, socially constituted process of being and becoming a certain kind of teacher.

**Teacher identification:** the way that a teacher describes or refers to him or herself.

**Teacher learning:** can refer to the development of teachers, either in formal settings like teacher education and professional development programs, or informal settings like through Web 2.0 tools.

**Web 2.0:** the progression of digital tools from static website consumption to more dynamic creation and collaboration.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this literature review, I will discuss elements of teacher learning and survey scholarship about ways in which digital technologies and teacher education have merged. I will also focus on literature about supporting teachers through the scope of modern digital platforms and describe how scholars conceptualize the landscape of online teacher learning spaces.

Supporting Beginning Teachers

Teacher learning is contextual; it is socially and culturally mediated. Studies have shown that it also needs to be ongoing and consistent in order to transfer to practice (Easton, 2008; Nolan & Hoover, 2007), that teacher readiness is an important factor in the information that teachers internalize (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989), and that teachers move through career cycles that affect what they might need at any given time (Fessler, 1995). While these represent just a fraction of what scholars know about how teachers learn, supporting novices during their first few years of teaching has proven to be especially demanding, since they are bridging the arenas of student and teacher and are refining initial ideas surrounding pedagogical and philosophical beliefs. Fessler’s (1995) description of this induction phase positions beginning teachers as especially in need of not only pedagogical but emotional support: “During the induction period, new teachers strive for acceptance
by students, peers and supervisors and attempt to achieve comfort and security in dealing with everyday problems and issues” (p. 2). Studies focused on secondary English teachers have shown that these everyday issues range from concerns about the knowledge of practice, discomfort with notions like classroom management, interest in gaining credibility in the teaching profession, and desire to find unique ways to teach the content of English Language Arts (Borko & Putnam, 1996; McCann, Johannessen & Ricca 2005, Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). Successful teacher learning attends to the knowledge of practice (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 1999), when teachers merge their theoretical and practical understandings of teaching to create more thoughtful learning environments. All of this proves to be a substantial task, more and more, as teacher education and professional development programs have begun to incorporate the use of digital technologies and Web 2.0 tools to support in the support of new teachers.

**Supporting Beginning Teachers in the Digital Age**

The integration of digital technologies into teacher education has been a topic of interest among scholars and school leaders for years, and, despite what we know about how teachers learn in context-rich situations, much of the focus has been on general, sometimes decontextualized, notions of the differences between the digital literacies of K-12 students and teachers. In “Literacy, Instruction, and Technology: Meeting Millennials on Their Own Turf,” Diane Marks (2009) calls for teacher education programs to reinvigorate their curricula to include authentic assessments that encourage current and future educators to engage more closely
with the digital technologies within which their “digital native” (Prensky, 2001) students are saturated. While the “digital native” theory has undergone extensive criticism for its reductionism of the issue, others have similarly taken up the importance for teachers to engage with digital technology, citing that they are often behind when it comes to using and understanding the digital tools that their students interact with on a daily basis. For example, Buckingham (2007) refers to this phenomenon as “the new digital divide” because of the gap between the digital literacies K-12 students have access to at home and at school. While the term digital divide has previously referred to the technological and socioeconomic divide among students, Buckingham appropriates it to espouse the rift of technological adeptness and usage that exists between teachers and students. This includes beginning teachers who are often referred to as digital natives themselves.

English Language Arts scholars have specifically dealt heavily with this topic, since digital and new literacies are pervasive in the explorations of reading, writing and the use of language, along with critical and media literacy. Many have written about how teachers can utilize digital and Web 2.0 tools to approach the teaching of reading and writing in a variety of ways, from digital writing workshops (Hicks, 2009) to collaborative tablet device apps that track and facilitate guided reading (Kadjer, 2013). In addition, the National Conference of Teachers of English (NCTE) has also recommended best practices for the teaching of prospective English teachers in a digital age, attending to both the issue of training new teachers to work with modern digital tools themselves and their “21st century learners.” They also
review responsibilities of teacher education programs as they continue to support their students during student teaching and beyond (Stover, 2006).

To attend to the implementation of digital tools on a teacher education level, others have also explored the relationships between digital technologies and pedagogy. Mishra and Koehler (2008) developed the TPACK framework for negotiating how the different aspects of technological, pedagogical and content knowledge influence teaching. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) even outlined specific expectations that require teacher candidates to use digital technology in various capacities:

NCATE expects that the education unit’s conceptual framework include a commitment to preparing candidates who are able to use educational technology to help all students learn...expect that candidates use technology in their practice and facilitate student learning through the integration of technology...that candidates have the opportunity in their field and clinical experiences to use technology to support teaching and learning (NCATE, 2005).

While arguments to train teachers about the technicality of digital tools are pervasive, another important aspect of the discourse is how teachers themselves and their pedagogical practices may benefit from the usage of digital tools like notebook computers, video equipment, and Web 2.0 tools. For example, the use of digital video of teaching incidents has been researched and implemented by teacher educators as a means to marry the realities of practice with pre service and in
service teachers’ theoretical and conceptual understandings (Lampert & Ball, 1998 Murray & Scott, 2008; Oonk, Goffree & Verloop, 2004; Rosaen, Degnan, VanStratt, 2004; Sherin, 2004). Learning from expert others is an important part of teacher education, but beginning teachers should also be encouraged to learn from their own practice. While some teacher educators, like Lampert and Ball (1998), have studied the use of videos of “expert practice” to educate beginning teachers, others (Murray & Scott 2008; Oonk et al., 2004) make use of beginning teachers’ own video for reflection and learning.

Regardless of the methods, what is especially important, as Mace et al. (2007) assert, is that in order to achieve professional growth, teachers need to be exposed to stories and examples of teaching practice. They note that the field of education is not always one amenable to sharing and that teacher educators should focus their efforts on encouraging that the practice of teaching to be made public (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Gomez et al., 2008; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2009). Their efforts and that of other scholars to this end are evident through the work of projects like The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which presents artifacts that are generated and created in their K-12 settings paired with teacher testimonials.

These necessary public examples of teaching practice are increasingly expanding and are not limited to face-to-face training or the use of video cases of practice. In fact, more and more, scholars have focused on ways that understanding of the practice of teaching develops through the use of web-based tools (Luehmann
& Tinelli, 2008; Singer, 2004). The digital technologies they cite as instrumental in building these relationships span from one-to-one computing initiatives to online teacher learning spaces.

**Review of Online Teacher Learning**

As introduced in the previous chapter, many online teacher learning spaces offer affordances like blogging platforms and wikis, and social capabilities like chat and video share functions. Scholars argue that they have potential for rich teacher learning in that they allow for teacher communication and collaboration that wouldn’t otherwise be feasible. Lieberman and Mace (2008) state:

> Teachers are expanding their circle of like-minded colleagues by forming and joining online teaching communities, which allow geographically dispersed members to meet, exchange ideas, and learn from each other. Perhaps if we think of these learning communities as the best professional development for teachers, we can concentrate on offering supports that will encourage the communities to grow and, in the process, create the conditions for more open and collaborative school cultures (p. 233).

Early examples of online teacher learning spaces include collaborative websites like “Tapped In”, which was established in 1997 and brought together teachers from early childhood to higher education to interact in chat rooms and discussion boards. With the personal learning network (PLN) craze came educator blogs that offered individuals personal spaces to share their thoughts and resources and invited readers to follow and interact. One example is Karl Fisch’s “Fischbowl”,


which was launched to promote his video “Shift Happens.\(^3\)” From blogging platforms came collaborative wikis like “Teachers Desk” which brought K-12 teachers together to share their recommendations for helpful resources, websites, and even lesson plans. Contemporary versions of these online teacher learning spaces include Edutopia and The English Companion Ning, which provide virtual domains for teachers to come together to share text, documents, videos of their practice, and even chat in real time despite geographic separation. The history of teacher learning spaces in the field of English Education is especially rich; organizations like the National Writing Project, the Breadloaf network and National Council of Teachers of English all have digital learning spaces that allow members to network and collaboratively share knowledge. In addition, they are also taking up the use of other methods of communicating, like micro blogging through weekly “engchat” twitter feeds and connecting through Facebook groups like Bad Ass Teachers and English Educators.

The social support that online teacher learning spaces provide can be understood through the theory that knowledge is socially constructed. This is especially important for beginning teachers, who are armed with the responsibilities of full-time teachers in addition to acclimating to the environment after leaving the university; this includes trying to merge what they’ve learned in theory and methods courses with the realities of students and other professional contexts (Lampert and Ball, 1998). This sometimes translates to induction phase

\(^3\) The latest version of the video, Shift Happens 5.0 can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrJjfDUzD7M
teachers that are dealing with the unexpected realities of classroom life and even “praxis shock,” (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) or the disconnect between what they learned at the university and what they encounter in K-12 settings. In addition, studies have shown that participation in online teacher learning spaces aids in making practice public, leveraging the mentoring and mediation of ideas, and facilitating evolving teacher identity formation.

**Making Practice Public**

Teacher education and professional development situated in practice helps beginning educators develop the theories of use that teachers engage in, allowing them to discover how to anticipate complex and unexpected situations and act accordingly. In other words, it aids them in solving important problems of practice they encounter in their own classrooms. One method of aiding beginning teachers in anticipating classroom scenarios is to steep their education in views and stories of practice, allowing them windows into the everyday happenings of classroom teachers (Lieberman & Mace, 2010); online teacher learning spaces make this possible by allowing for the sharing of experience related to practice. Scholars maintain that beginning teachers benefit from membership in online teacher spaces because of the contextual experiences and stories of practice that are often topics of discussion and can lead to teacher inquiry and reflection (Singer & Zeni, 2004 & Zuidema, 2011).

**Leveraging Mentoring and Mediation**
In addition to examples of practice, Grossman et al. (2009) establish the importance of an experienced other guiding learning: “The role of the instructor—in planning, modeling, and providing feedback—shapes the learning potential in each of our examples. Who is guiding the approximation, and the nature of the feedback provided during these approximations, matters” (p. 2090). This role of expert others materializes in different ways, from peer to supervisor and colleague to mentor, all whom have a heavy hand in the education of beginning teachers. Through connecting with expert others in online spaces, beginning teachers can learn about the profession from those who are experienced, and share their own ideas, only to have others help mediate and mentor them through decision-making and reflection processes. Scholars like Brady & Schuck (2005) have shown that providing online mentors for teachers during their induction phases greatly enhances local school mentoring programs.

While school districts often provide induction phase teachers with faculty mentors or even individualized professional development, online teacher networks offer another space for meditational interaction to occur where teachers can act as informed others for one another and mediate pedagogical understanding. For example, the EC Ning promotes the notion of collegial interaction in its motto: “Where English Teachers Go to Help Each Other,” which speaks to its commitment to avoid top-down professional development and instead provide teachers with ways in which they can explore together, discuss, and share. A beginning teacher can create a discussion forum in this space about her struggles with teaching poetry
and experienced teachers will respond with advice, guidance or even the sharing of their own classroom-created materials. In fact, many of the members that create discussion posts or reply to others on the “New Teachers” group within the EC Ning claim to be experienced teachers there to assist newer teachers. An eventual outcome of these meditational relationships, essential for beginning teachers, is toward the development of practices that reinforce continual learning, reflecting, self-regulating and negotiating of new information (Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984).

*Self-directing Learning*

Because knowledge of teaching is constructed collectively within local and broader communities, one important component of online teacher networks is that questions about the knowledge of teaching are open to discussion. This allows beginning teachers themselves to play central and critical roles in generating understandings about practice. Online teaching communities take this into consideration; many are created by and for educators. Teachers are able to advocate for themselves and take professional learning into their own hands, building on the necessary components of life long learning. As Duncan-Howell (2010) noted in her study of online teacher communities, teachers’ modes of participation in these communities are based on their current perceived needs:

- Participation was topical; members were motivated to participate according to the topic under discussion. This did not diminish the worth of membership, but instead transforms their potential for professional learning ‘just-in-time’. Members joined their community for professional
requirements and emotional support, further illustrating the just-in-time advantage (p. 338).

In this way, online teacher networks provide an alternative to one-dimensional professional development that can often be focused on irrelevant or narrow topics of study. For example, ReadWriteThink\(^4\) has a professional library where community members share their ideas about professional development texts and scholarly articles concerning Language Arts topics, working toward a type of knowledge of practice by bringing in their own experiences and perspectives on various issues, like classroom management and teaching English language learners. Since teachers can choose which area of the site they want to interact with, based on the relevance to their teaching situation and needs, their readiness for learning important pedagogical concepts becomes central. This allows them to pull what they want from the site and feel a sense of relevance that they can take back to their classrooms in very real ways.

*Moving Toward Teacher Reflection*

Teacher learning is enhanced when teachers engage in experiences and then reflect on them using relevant concepts, methods, and theories. While Dewey (1933) and Schon (1984) have provided the field with important ideas about how reflection is based on practice of an individual, others have since contended that reflection is social work, a dialogical activity that happens in dialogue with others (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). One powerful implication of this attention to the social nature of

\(^4\) http://readwritethink.org
online teacher learning spaces is that they can set the foundation for teacher reflective practice. Killeavy & Moloney (2010) maintain that teacher reflection does not always come easily and these alternative spaces might help ease the distraction of what can sometimes be stagnant school culture:

It is also understood that teachers find it difficult to reflect on their own practice, for reasons that include the close link between teacher personal identity and their classroom practice, the absence of certain professional dispositions or the culture of isolation within teaching (p. 1071).

While reflection is a difficult feat, Loucks-Horsley (2003) describes it as a critical component of teacher professional development because it has the power to inform before, during, and after, a teacher’s practice. Because online teacher learning spaces are asynchronous, scholars suggest that discussions and chats that transpire within them enable dialogue to surround all aspects of an induction phase teacher’s practice at each of these stages. Singer and Zeni (2004) credit this additional “think time” as a way in which this component of teacher networks can promote reflection (p. 46). In addition, they provide a social arena for reflection to occur, one that is semi-permanent and can be used as a record of learning. Sharma and Fielder (2007), while focused on individual blogging practices, categorize another important aspect that online teacher learning spaces share in promoting reflective practice: their ability to act as a log for teacher exploration:

Individual weblogs are artifacts that can represent one’s learning experiences, reflections, accounts of learning activities, and products and
resources created as part of a learning project. This ‘learning log’ captures
the history of a learning project in action and records the personally
meaningful material that can foster and facilitate reflective practices such as
conversations with self and others (p. 10).

While reflection is by no means an inherent practice that comes along with
membership in an online space, studies show that there is potential for that practice
to be taken up in those spaces (Herrington, Herrington, Kervin & Ferry, 2006;
Killeavy & Moloney, 2010). Of course, teachers need to be shown how and given
models of reflection on practice; often, memory of an incident or classroom
experience can be faulty or imprecise. That said, beginning teachers can utilize such
“logs of learning” to reflect on their evolving pedagogical understandings and ideas.
This cataloguing affordance also has potential to record aspects of evolving
professional identity that are especially relevant for induction phase teachers that
are just beginning to establish themselves as members of their field.

**Exploring evolving teacher Identity**

Examples of context and practice are important in demonstrating to new
teachers possibilities and promoting reflective stances toward their own teaching.
In addition, when beginners engage in the discourse(s) of their profession, also are
afforded the opportunity to nourish their emerging teacher identities. Developing a
sense of professional identity requires many steps, including uncovering core
beliefs, revealing assumptions about teaching and learning, and tackling the
apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975).
In *The Development of the Personal Self and Professional Identity in Learning to Teach*, Rodgers and Scott (2008) outline the assumptions associated with identity that can be applied to a teacher’s evolution. They maintain that:

1) Identity is dependent upon and formed within multiple contexts which bring social, cultural, political, and historical forces to bear upon that formation; 2) that identity is formed in relationship with others and involves emotions; 3) that identity is shifting, unstable, and multiple; and 4) that identity involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning through stories over time (p.733).

These stories over time are often shared within and among online spaces where teachers come together to communicate and collaborate. While studies have shown that teacher identity formation is deeply linked to language and self-expression (Luehmann, & Tinelli, 2008; Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010), just how beginning teachers perceive their identities as being connected to the practices they take up in online spaces is a potential area of interest. The notion of identity as a social construction is influential in understanding the practices new teachers take up in social spaces during a time when they are deciding who they are and want to be as educators while also trying those identities on in conversations with others.

**Conclusion**

Through membership in online teacher learning spaces, studies have shown that beginning teachers can gain access to public accounts of teaching practice, take professional learning into their own hands, cohort with both peers and expert
others, build on the necessary components of life long learning and reflection, and work on developing identity formation.

Scholars catalogue and present analyses of how online social networks function to help teacher education students and beginning teachers cohort and connect in various ways (Singer & Zeni, 2004 & Zuidema, 2011), while also providing them with chances to observe practices made public. In fact, many institutions and induction programs, like those in the University of Arizona and Penn State University, require beginning teachers to participate in some iteration of an online teacher learning space. What presents a gap in literature is how beginning teachers perceive their own practices in online environments and what motivates them to participate voluntarily in these online networks.

While more and more is being written about how useful these networks can be for teachers and while many call for partnerships between universities and K-12 schools toward this end (McCann, Johannessen & Ricca, 2005), what is missing from many of these discussions is how teacher educators might leverage the pervasiveness of online teacher communities to promote teacher education programs that better prepare their pre service teachers to join the workforce and to continue to be supported in their journey of teacher learning. A review of the theoretical frameworks that construct the foundational lens for how to investigate this study and support these types of inquiry will follow.
Chapter 3

Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I will discuss important concepts related to sociocultural theories of learning that provide a framework and foundation for the study of online teacher learning spaces. They include: distributed intelligence, identity, legitimate peripheral participation, communities of practice, and affinity spaces. In addition, because social theories of learning maintain that learning is a collaborative process, the nature of language and discourse within communities will also be reviewed.

Situated Learning Theory

Sociocultural theories of learning maintain that it is situated in everyday social contexts and involves changes in participation (Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1991). Knowledge is dynamic, not something that can be passively transmitted to learners; it is social, contextual, and contingent. Scholars have taken up this epistemological stance (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Lampert & Ball, 1998; Means, 1994; Murray & Scott, 2008) to promote the social nature of learning about the profession of teaching. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, the concept of mediation in sociocultural theory is rich as it works to establish a necessary connection between teacher development and collaboration, whereby more informed individuals help to facilitate others’ learning processes (Rogoff &
Wertsch, 1984: Vygotsky, 1986). In addition to the concept of mediation, other sociocultural concepts can be applied to the area of online teacher learning, like distributed intelligence, legitimate peripheral participation, communities of practice, and affinity spaces.

**Distributed Intelligence**

One particular aspect of situated learning is what Pea (1992) refers to as “distributed intelligence,” whereby knowledge is distributed among members of a group. The EC Ning, which contains forums and groups co-constructed by members based on interests, opinions, or causes, allows for this type collective sharing of ideas and knowledge about the teaching of English Language Arts. These components of community lead to what Laferrière & Chan (2006) consider are highly important for supporting beginning teachers because, “Internet-based technologies support teacher learners, distributing cognition across persons, tools, and resources to expand the system’s expertise members create and improve knowledge of the community collectively” (p. 78). Social networking in education has harnessed the attention of educationists for its potential to facilitate community participation that transcends traditional linear structure of organized induction programs by placing the onus for knowledge on beginner and experienced teachers alike.

**Identity**

In addition, while the co-construction of knowledge is an important aspect to online learning spaces, the idea of distributed intelligence is important to this study
because of the affordances that Web 2.0 tools, like blogs or wikis, provide not only for shared knowledge and understanding but also for participant identity development. This shift from consumption oriented digital culture to creation oriented digital culture has powerful implications for the construction of teacher identity. Wenger (1998) maintains, “Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (p. 4). Thus, identity formation is strongly tied to our social interactions. Because of this connection to identity, the ways in which members of online learning communities participate can have powerful implications for how they identify themselves. For example, if a member of a learning community is mostly passive, that might signal that the particular member does not feel fully part of the community and needs support to become more active. While this is not always the case, as both active and passive participation denote belonging to a community in some way, many understandings of how groups of people construct knowledge together rely on the idea of degrees of participation.

**Legitimate Peripheral Participation**

As mentioned previously, the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has expanded the definition of participation from acquisition based to creation oriented, where members of online spaces take up more of an effort to collaborate and generate multimodal content for the sharing of knowledge (Barab & Duffy, 2012). Lave & Wenger’s (1991) term “legitimate peripheral participants” is useful in describing the type of apprenticeship model in which newcomers enter
communities from the periphery and move toward the center as they become more and more knowledgeable. According to Lampert and Ball (1998): “Teacher education is therefore better understood as a process of being inducted into a community with its own tools, resources, shared ideas, and debates” (p. 36).

Eventually, sustained membership in an online teacher network has the potential to blossom into a space where those beginning teachers are sharing their own knowledge about teaching. Galucci (2007) applies these concepts to professional development by maintaining that teacher learning is situated in everyday social contexts and that learning involves changes in participation in these contexts.

Often, participation in a community changes and shifts depending on the context of a situation. Pringle’s (2002) study of online alternatives to professional development demonstrated how using web-based discussion communities, like discussion forums and blogs, also helps beginning teachers to take up more of a role in their own professional learning. She talks about the idea of “co participation” which “implies the presence of a shared language that becomes accessed by all as they engage in the activities of the community with a goal of facilitating meaningful learning” (p. 218). When applied to teacher learning, gaining experience in taking up the “shared language” of a professional community of teaching English Language Arts can help beginning teachers gain access to further pedagogical and content knowledge.

Participating in an online community can take a variety of forms, flowing between extremely passive and extremely active. In their text, Digital Habitats:
Stewarding Technology for Communities, Wenger, White & Smith (2012) discuss that not everyone that is a member of a group can always be an active participant. This is supported by social networking theory, where, for example, according to Bruggeman (2008) “on average, people know about 750 others, and not more than 10,000, even though this number varies greatly from a hermit to a politician” (p. 17). EC Ning, with over 40,000 members, is a good example of a space where it is not even preferable for all members to be active. This is normal for an online environment (Wenger, et al. 2012). It is important to note that individuals that are passive participants in an online space can still consume and even take learning and knowledge from one community to another. Not only might teachers utilize the community’s distributed knowledge for themselves, but they also have the potential to share it with colleagues and peers in their local schools, individuals that may or may not be members of the space at all, but instead may be members of their local teacher learning communities.

Teacher Learning Communities

While participation is an important aspect of the distribution of the knowledge of teaching, establishing and belonging to a teacher learning community is essential in partaking in this collaborative generation of the knowledge of practice of teaching. There are many names given to the groups of individuals and spaces that come together to work toward and negotiate common goals and interests, these include knowledge building communities (Hoadley, 2011), practice fields (Barab & Duffy, 1998), third spaces (Bhabha, 1994), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998),
and affinity spaces (Gee, 2006). For the purposes of this study, I will highlight how the two latter inform the approaches and theoretical lenses consulted throughout the duration of this study. The reasons for choosing these two frameworks include the fact that they take into account important aspects of beginning teacher learning, like modes of participation and identity construction. In addition, they also provide a natural connection to the methodological issue of how to analyze and interpret discursive interactions because of their attendance to social communication and construction of knowledge.

**Communities of Practice**

Wenger’s (1998) “communities of practice” (COPs) refer to groups that come together with a central purpose and goal, sharing common interests and agreeing on modes of participation, community and cultural reifications. While the phrase “communities of practice,” much like Schon’s (1984) “reflection,” has been appropriated and frequently misused to describe educational settings and most of the work on COPs has surrounded other professional contexts, some concepts of communities of practice can be applied to the EC Ning space; this includes the treatment of members both new and old and the construction of shared knowledge. According to Yang (2009), these communities of practice, when applied to education:

...can be defined as a group of professionals and other stakeholders in pursuit of a shared learning enterprise, commonly focused on a particular
topic (e.g., methods to promote early literacy learning, strategies for increasing parent participation) (p. 266).

Mace et al (2007) relay a similar sentiment by setting up the notion of community of practice as a means to engage in professional inquiry by sharing materials created by teachers for other in-service and pre service teachers. While these two applications attempt to portray what happens in a COP, what they are actually describing is more akin to Gee’s (2006) affinity spaces.

**Affinity Spaces**

While the notion of COP is often used by researchers to frame studies of online teacher networks, an alternative to thinking about an online space like EC Ning as a community of practice is to entertain Gee’s notion of “affinity spaces” (2006); this is the term that will be taken up to describe EC Ning for the duration of this study. An affinity space is a space that allows groups of people to come together with a central purpose and goal, negotiating common interests and agreeing on modes of participation (Gee, 2006, p. 18). Before discussing the differences between the two spaces, it is important to denote how they are similar. Both have members with shared interests and goals, including newcomers on the periphery and old-timers that have participating in the community for varied lengths of time. Because they are both grounded in socially constructed knowledge, they also both tend to lend to the social construction of identity. Neither online COPs or affinity spaces are self-contained entities; they both rely on outside networks and organizations to fuel them and provide members.
Based on the idea of semiotics, it is also evident that both ideas of community develop and nurture certain ways of interacting in online spaces that differs from how one would otherwise; online discussions provide access to a different genre of writing than letter writing or texting or emailing because of the modes and patterns of socially acceptable interaction. As Gee (2006) states: “Knowing about a social practice always involves recognizing various distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, knowing, and using various objects and technologies that constitute the social practice” (p. 15). Members of a group come to learn these practices as they involve themselves in the literacy of the community, either by reading or by “writing” online (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). For example, members of the EC Ning space illustrated that they understood the implicit rules of the semiotic space by taking of common and repeated practices, like norms for who gets to initiate posts to how members might respond to others’ requests for support.

Affinity spaces differ from communities of practice in several important ways. First of all, they specifically support the exploration of how members take up semiotic interactions in a given space, rather than how members take up interactions within a community. In essence, the idea of a space becomes more salient than the group of people that make up a community. According to Gee (2006), the notion of affinity spaces derives from the new literacy studies “a body of work that argues that reading and writing should be viewed not only as mental achievements going on inside people’s heads but also as social and cultural practices with economic, historical, and political implications” (p. 8). Under this model, the
teaching of English Language Arts is the semiotic domain central to an affinity space because for members of the EC Ning, it is the semiotic domain through which they interact. With this comes certain norms, expectations, language structures, actions and goals embedded in the practices of the domain, like who gets to post in the space, what kinds of replies members provide, when they post, and what they share when they create posts.

The notion of affinity spaces also takes into account how individuals can overcome top-down learning models, which is helpful when we think about the problem of praxis, the rift that exists between the theory-laden teacher education programs and the practice-based school cultures that teachers join once they are certified. Gee (2006) describes the active processes that are necessary when gaining ground in a semiotic domain, much as new teachers do when they enter a classroom for the first time:

When we learn a semiotic domain in a more active way, not as passive content, three things are at stake: 1. We learn to experience (see, feel, and operate on) the world in new ways. 2. Since semiotic domains usually are shared by groups of people who carry them on as distinctive social practices, we gain the potential to join this social group, to become affiliated with such kinds of people (even though we may never see all of them, or any of them, face to face\(^5\)). 3. We gain resources that prepare us for future learning and

\(^5\) Italics added to original citation for emphasis
problem solving in the domain and, perhaps, more important, in related domains” (p. 23).

The distinction made above concerning the affiliation of members of a space provides yet another difference between COPs and affinity spaces; members of affinity spaces are much less likely to meet and interact in face-to-face settings. A review of the additional differences between the two can be found in Table 2:

**Table 2: Comparison of Communities of Practice and Affinity Spaces**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communities Of Practice</th>
<th>Affinity Spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All participants interact in some way, no matter what level</td>
<td>Participants might never cross paths with others in the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More structured, linear process of being a peripheral participant</td>
<td>More egalitarian approach to membership that is discursive and dialogical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on individuals that are members of the community</td>
<td>Focused on the space that members use to interact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproduction cycle – constant development of new members to old timers</td>
<td>Members come and go within the space more freely, depending on need</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social Nature of Language**

While the notion of affinity spaces is helpful in understanding and describing the EC Ning space, it does not provide a methodological framework for study. In an effort to consider how beginning teachers’ dialogue might be understood and analyzed, it is helpful to consider the social nature of language. The work of Bakhtin
highlights this nature; for him, humans’ identities, desires, and voices are connected to language (Bakhtin, 1981). In society, we often define ourselves by what we are not, historically and socially. This notion is not limited to identity, though; it applies to the very roots of the language that we use to define others and ourselves. Pollard (2008) points out:

Without the other we are in a void and cannot exist. We can see ourselves only in what the other reflects back to us and we are entirely dependent on the other’s transgressive position or outsideness in relation to us to ‘complete’ us (p. 38).

This notion is important to teacher learning, because when it happens socially, much of it happens in comparison and contrast with other educators. Holt (2003) explains how speech is social, not merely linear but rooted in sociohistorical context:

Words, to Bakhtin, not only cannot be conceived devoid of social contextualization, but also are subject to modification as they ‘live’ through social intercourse. Words and utterances are neither stable nor self-equivalent, but rather constantly negotiated in the dynamic flux of social interaction, with the result that living language adamantly resists classification: bluntly put, it is just too messy (p. 226).

This leads to the consideration of heteroglossia, which is Bakhtin’s notion of how we have multiple voices within discourse.
Heteroglossia

Bakhtin maintains that within discourse, there are multiple voices. These multiple voices are not limited to multiple individuals. In fact, Bakhtin’s work reinforces the idea that remained a thread throughout class this semester: that within all of us are multiple voices. According to Pollard (2008), the lack of a central “I” within discourse is one that Bakhtin maintains as a product of the subjects’ multiple voices and selves. This lack of “I” reinforces the deep connection to socio cultural theory and the idea that our interactions are social and laden with meaning making; not even individuals are singular. She points out:

The relationship between these different voices or viewpoints is dialogic: a dialogical relationship differs from a logical relationship in that the same words spoken by a different person or the same person from a different temporal or spatial position have a different meaning even though the words themselves may be identical (p. 35).

In addition to different dialogic voices, the idea of heteroglossia also informs language construction and meaning. According to Bakhtin (1981), “Language represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given in bodily form” (p. 291). He defines the struggle between normative forces (centripetal) and those that strive to diversify (centrifugal) as heteroglossia.
What does heteroglossia look like? Bell (2007) notes that it works to both limit and open up language by transforming everyday language:

Where variety is lost on the one hand, it tends to be gained on another. Language loss often leads to dialect gain. A minority may give up its language, but simultaneously it is creating a new variety of the majority language which will serve its identity and communicative purpose (p. 99-100).

Often times, the phenomenon is thought of in terms of what is appropriate speech for a particular situation. Kirkland (2010) discusses the notion of official and unofficial languages and the relevance genre plays as it applies to online interactions, maintaining that we transform our language to “suit the complexities of digital contexts” (p. 299). Dyson (2008) also refers to language for official use; people have an understanding that certain languages and sub languages hold certain distinctions and are appropriate in certain contexts. Humans are hyper aware of this phenomenon from a young age. For example, the language we use in school may be very different than the language we use when we are talking to our parents and that may be very different than we are with friends. Within the pre service teaching context, heteroglossia is relevant to describe the way in which beginning teachers deal with a push and pull between putting into language their concepts of what a teacher is and what kind of teacher define themselves as. This is intrinsically connected to Gee’s previous notion of semiotic domains, for when we belong to a particular domain, we take up the practices that the domain creates and perpetuates.
Big “D” Discourse

In addition to acknowledging multiple voices, Gee also works to present the idea of multiple identities. His theory of Discourses is applicable. According to Gee (1990), Discourse is “…a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or a social network” (p. 143). Identity is an especially important issue for beginning teachers, as they are bridging the world between student and teacher, a transition that may prove to be quite arduous. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) discuss how the evolving teacher identity requires enlisting multiple narratives of self:

Narratives composed as scripts from teachers’ histories in gender, social class, and racial, ethnic, and family groups; multiple and often conflicting conceptions of teaching and education in our popular culture; and the stories surrounding teaching and learning that pre service teachers have posed from years of experience in educational institutions (p. 75).

These narratives of self seem akin to the voices that are inherent in the language that subjects use. These years of experience create what Lortie (1975) and Hammerness, Darling-Hammond & Bransford (2005) refer to as an “apprenticeship of observation” or, the influence that twelve plus years of schooling has on individuals who want to become teachers. In Reinventing Ourselves as Teachers: Beyond Nostalgia, Mitchell and Weber discuss teachers’ experiences as students.
The fact that we all have had extensive experience in classrooms as students informs a great deal of our work as teachers. How does our past experience play into who we are and how we teach today? How can we revisit or use that past to study and reinvent ourselves as teacher? (p. 4).

Ideological beliefs about what teachers should look like, wear, and do are also embedded in education-related discourse. In essence, we initially construct understandings of what teachers are, how they speak, how they dress, through our own experiences as students. The beginning teacher identity is especially layered because they are, for the first time, deciding what kind or style of teacher they want to be. Hammerness et. al. (2005) recommend continual, guided reflection of assumptions and positionality as a way to circumvent the normative ideas of teacher-ness. What better way to begin than by promoting beginning teachers’ reflections on their own writing and use of language through the use of online teacher learning spaces? It is within these types of communities, Britzman (1991) offered, that pre service teachers negotiate varying discourses (normative and non normative) associated with the profession of teaching.

Acknowledging that speech is social, Bakhtin (1981) reinforces the idea: “The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of utterance” (p. 276). Understanding that the “dialogic threads” of our language are vast and numerous, it is here that one might be able to revisit the language of and
surrounding the field of education. For new teachers, participation in the EC Ning community offered an opportunity to engage in discussions with others who are part of their teacher discourse community (peers, mentors, faculty, field supervisors).
Chapter 4

Methods and Approaches

In this chapter, I will describe my digital ethnographic approach (Markham 1998, 2005; Boellstorff, T., et. al., 2012) to the study, concerning participants, collection of data, and analysis that, as Charmaz (2006) states consists of “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2). I will catalogue how I utilized purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2005) to choose my participant pool for interviews and observation to understand how my participants create meaning from their particular social phenomenon (Glesne, 2011). In addition, I will discuss the impact of ethnographic participant observation (Spradley, 1980), the resulting fieldnotes and memoing that informed my study, and worked dialogically with my qualitative interviewing techniques, and to help ensure the triangulation of data, and, in addition to member checking, a degree of internal validity.

Table #3: Data Collection and Analysis Timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Location/Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observational Data</td>
<td>Feb. 2013-May 2014</td>
<td>EC Ning/Microsoft Word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldnotes and Memos</td>
<td>Feb. 2013-May 2014</td>
<td>EC Ning/Microsoft Word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>Apr. – June 2013</td>
<td>iPhone/Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>Oct. – Dec. 2013</td>
<td>iPhone/Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3</td>
<td>April – May 2014</td>
<td>iPhone/Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member Checks</td>
<td>August 2013 &amp; April 2014</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because I was studying how beginning teachers take up practices and identities in a particular online social network, I utilized qualitative grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) to plan and organize my data. This allowed me to focus on participants’ own perspectives and stories. In addition, I used digital ethnographic observation (Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., & Taylor, T.L., 2012) to supplement the interview data. This approach allowed for me to observe the practices that beginning teachers utilized in the community aspect of the online affinity space. I was then able to analyze the data using grounded theory analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006) to develop theoretical codes that were grounded in the experience of my participants. This included a constant comparison coding method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that prompted me to identify themes and codes across both participants’ interviews (elicited texts) and interactions on the EC Ning space (extant texts) (Charmaz, 2006, p. 36-37). The chapter concludes with a brief description of the process of analysis that leads into two subsequent data findings chapters.

**Background Information**

This study was born out of inquiries generated by the construction of a pilot study on the use of Ning with pre service teachers in my methods course. In 2009-2010, I created the Ning sites 495C and Beyond and 495C and Beyond Spring 2010 for pre service teachers in the seminars that I taught in the fall of 2009 and the spring of 2010. I designed the sites for the students as a means for reflection and discussion before, during and after their field experience. Participation in the site activities for
both seminars was voluntary, not part of the final grade for the semester. While I established a few of the topics and forums for the site to stimulate conversation, all site posts, comments, and activities are up to site participants, including when students participated. For my 495C pre service teaching students, participation in the Ning community allowed them to engage in discussions with others who are part of their teacher discourse community (peers, mentors, faculty, field supervisors). Because of the feedback I received from students, I continued to utilize Ning, transitioning to content-specific EC Ning, with my methods course students. In addition to requiring them to acquire membership in EC Ning as part of their grade from the class, I also helped maintain a private discussion group within the site that was created by college faculty.6

**Researcher Positionality**

In addition to acknowledging the background that led me to my present inquiry, it is important to discuss my own positionality as a researcher. I have been a member of EC Ning since 2009, when I started using it with my own students. While I am considered an insider of the EC Ning space, my own activity was retained to mostly reading posts rather than generating them. Merriam (2009) discusses the role of the researcher in ethnographic studies like these, especially when prior membership to a community or culture exists. “In reality, researchers are rarely total participants or total observers. There is often a mix of roles wherein one might

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6 During two pilot studies, I collected data based on the teacher education students’ use of the EC Ning space. This is rich ground for further study, but will not be explored within this text.
begin as a full participant and then withdraw into more of a researcher stance” (p. 125). Due to my positionality as a participant observer in the EC Ning space and my desire to research the voluntary participation that unwinds there, I made sure to recruit participants that were not my former students. I do acknowledge, however, that this is a facet worth looking more into, particularly how it impacts the usage of the space after individuals move on from their teacher education programs.

Because of my position as a member of the EC Ning, I decided to review and share an example of my own posting within the space. One example is below. Within my response to another member’s post about how to motivate students to read novels, I make a few commonly leveraged moves that teachers in the EC Ning space rely on. These moves, as will be highlighted later in the text, demonstrate a belonging and understanding of the semiotic domain in which I am a member. For example, I refer to another member’s (Marie) previous post, acknowledging the typical turn taking that happens when there is dialogue in the space. In addition to offering advice, I also provide a hyperlink to an additional resource.
Often, and as an ancillary concern not necessarily associated with this particular study, I struggle with my membership on the EC Ning. Despite teaching English Language Arts for several years and having innumerable narratives and strategies to discuss and share, I feel quite on the peripheral because of my position as a doctoral student and teacher educator; no longer am I “in the trenches.” Acknowledging and pondering this was an important step in allowing me not only to move forward with my study but also to feel a heightened understanding about how members of a space gain access to or understand the practices that unfold within that environment. The fact that I am no longer a practicing secondary English teacher made it even more important for me to collect the perspectives of the teacher members.

**Methods of Gathering Data**

**Observation and Fieldnotes**

While I conducted hours of observation within the larger context of the EC Ning community as a whole, because of my interest in beginning teachers, I decided to focus particular energy on a discussion group embedded on the EC Ning called “New Teachers”. The New Teachers group, as will be explored in more detail to follow, functions as a space where beginning educators post questions, seek advice, and share resources with each other. As of April 2014, the New Teachers group has 1489 members.

During my initial ethnographic observation of the environment, a two-month period from mid-February to mid-April 2013, I visited the New Teachers group
twice a week (on Mondays and Thursdays, respectively) to collect documents for analysis and then record descriptive fieldnotes after each observation. One of the first attempts at making sense of my research questions about how beginning teachers specifically are supported in the EC Ning space involved looking specifically for the interactions among participants in this community that allowed new teachers to express their fears, concerns, and also their triumphs. General observational questions I asked during this preliminary stage included: Who seems to be doing the posting? Who seems to be responding? What topics are most frequently discussed? What do other typical modes of participation on the site look like?

Since Ning is organized in discussion threads, I collected screen shots during each site visit and read new forum postings and frequented older postings to read the latest activity and responses. I also recorded, in research memos, the phase of teaching for each member that participated in the forum discussions. Information on their teaching experience was gained through viewing their personal profiles on the space or by personal details they mentioned in their discussion postings. During this process, I kept track of screen names of teachers that identified themselves as beginning teachers (in their first three years of teaching) that had added new discussions or had replied to others’ discussions on the New Teachers group site.

**Interviewing**

In addition to looking at the EC Ning New Teachers group holistically for patterns in membership and participation, I decided to conduct individual
qualitative interviews with a subset of EC Ning members that had self-identified as beginning teachers. I went through all of the members in the site and looked at which had posted in the last six months in the New Teachers group. Then, I also looked at how the teachers identified themselves. Sometimes this was done by looking at their posts and seeing if they described themselves in certain ways, for example, “I’m a first year teacher” or “Now that I am in my third year of teaching...” Sometimes, I looked at their individual profiles to see if they had noted the amount of years they had been teaching. I gathered a list of thirty teachers using the criteria and sent out a recruitment script that described my dissertation and asked them if they would be willing to be interviewed on their use of EC Ning and their perspectives on their membership on the site. From that initial inquiry, I received eight responses. From those eight responses, I narrowed the list down to four, based on willingness and availability. I planned and conducted multiple, extensive interviews with the remaining four, all white women. A case-based approach to describing the participants will follow in the next chapter.

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7 I acknowledge that there are many members of the EC Ning that belong to the New Teachers group that do not post at all. While their “reading” participation (the definition of which will be explained in detail in a later chapter) is valuable, I chose not to contact teachers that hadn’t actively participated in some way for the purpose of my study looking at identity and discursive practices.

8 See Appendix A

9 See Appendix B

10 It is important to note here that the purpose of this study was not to generalize. However, it is interesting to note that there is sufficient research that this demographic is representative of the population of high school teachers in the United States today. As cited by Strong (2009), the U.S. Department of Education report from 2005 determined that 75% of teachers were female; in addition, 83.7% of teachers in the U.S. identified as White, non-Hispanic.
Because all of the women lived and taught at least eight hours away from me, I was not able to collect face to face interviews. This provided not only a consideration of how to collect interview data, but also how to obtain informed consent. Recently, as more and more researchers are leveraging online spaces for study, there has been discussion about alternatives to signed informed consent (Boellstorff, T., et. al., 2012). Thus, for this study, I provided each subject with the informed consent form via email and requested written email consent before we began the study. In addition, when talking to each participant during the interview, I ensured that I secured verbal consent before proceeding with interview questions.

For the semi-structured life world interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2005), I utilized my iPhone and an app called Call Recorder IntCall, which allowed me to record the conversation to an mp4 file directly saved to my phone. The first interviews were conducted at the initial stages of my data collection and observation of the New Teachers group, and the last round of interviews was at the final stages of my data collection. In between, I communicated with each participant multiple times via email or online chat, to secure informed consent and to provide them with copies of their interviews and my initial data analyses. This final step aided me in the beneficial practice of member checking.

My participant interviews allowed me to gain perspective from EC Ning users that I wouldn’t have otherwise been able to gather, like background information about each beginning teacher and how she came to the field of secondary English education. It also provided me with some initial data on how each participant
understood and identified herself as a teacher of English Language Arts. In addition, codes and themes derived from my conversations with participants provided me with a guiding lens through which to conduct my subsequent ethnographic observations of the EC Ning space. As Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, (2012) point out:

Texts may be part of that study, but in the case of virtual world ethnography, texts alone are not sufficient. We study forms of interaction, meaning making, and cultural production through text. It can be tempting to take conversations that take place in online forums as indicative of larger patterns within a culture; however, this is not always the case (p. 119).

In addition to trying to understand the perspectives of the four participants, I conducted additional focused observations of the EC Ning community. During my participant observation fieldwork, I captured screenshots of conversations that took place on the New Teachers group. These screenshots were collected in a folder, categorized by date, and pasted into word processing documents where researcher memos could be added. Because my screenshots included interactions in the EC Ning space with identifying information, profile pictures and screenshots of members, I utilized simple photo editing software to alter the image to remove identifying information.11 As Pink (2007) points out, screenshots “are most usefully treated as representations of aspects of culture; not recordings of whole cultures or

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11 It is important to note that because EC Ning is a public space, all conversations that were collected were also visible to the public.
of symbols that will have completed or fixed meanings” (p. 75). While collecting screenshots of the interactions were helpful in cataloguing the community discourse, it was also important for me to view the threaded discussions in context of the participants and their interview data.

**Iterative Data Analysis**

I began my data analysis while I was collecting data, both during the interview and observation process. This is an approach not only supported by grounded theorist, but also often taken by digital researchers (Boellstorff, T., et. al., 2012; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) as the field and the data origins are constantly updating and changing, almost as if they are living things. This made the analysis of data an iterative process that included several levels and stages of coding and theme development.

**Bricolage Interpretation of Text**

Because this study focuses on discursive practices, I sorted the discussion forums that teachers had started according to topic or theme, using a larger unit of analysis of the discussion itself. In favor of a holistic approach, my purpose in coding data was not to generalize but to identify patterns that may arise and prompt additional analyses. I initially used open coding, without predetermined themes in mind, to develop categories for each discussion, writing in the margins of my fieldnotes and screen shots (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). After three iterations and reaching a point of saturation, I condensed the initial coding categories to four
themes that showed up in the content posted on the site: 1) Reading posts, 2) Seeking support, 3) Extending support, and 4) Connecting collegially, with codes to accompany each theme\textsuperscript{12}.

While often a grounded theory slant eschews preconceived frameworks for analysis, I did survey various approaches to analyzing virtual discourse practices. Most relevant is Gunawardena, Lowe & Anderson’s (1997) Interaction Analysis Model (IAM) and Scherff & Singer’s (2008) framework for sorting teacher interactions. While both provided the most helpful insight into how computer-mediated discourse can be analyzed, what I decided was more important than the topic or content of the posts (what the two studies focused on) were the patterns and interactions that took place on the space.

In the end, I attempted to look more thoroughly at initially acquired themes through a “bricolage interpretation” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2005), which is a hybrid of mezzanine level discourse analysis traditions (Bakhtin, 1984; Gee, 2006, Parker, 2005; Schrire, 2006; Strauss & Feiz, 2014) to try to understand the participants’ contributions and their positionality behind online interactions, especially on the part of the self-identified new teachers.

As I was collecting additional ethnographic data, I also revisited the interview data and prepared for subsequent interviews with the four participants, utilizing the codes and themes that developed along the way to guide my interviews. Thus, open-ended interviewing techniques later became more structured as I

\textsuperscript{12} See Appendix C
observed the participants in the space throughout the year. Despite this added structure, at the end of each interview, I made sure to ask the participants if they had any information that they wanted to share or if they had questions for me, including any lines of inquiry within the EC Ning space they thought might be valuable.

Overall, I went through interview data for each individual five times, using a constant comparative analysis method (Creswell, 2012). Directly after each interview, I completed accompanying fieldnotes (Bogdan, & Biklen, 2006). For each interview, I transcribed and hand-coded simultaneously. I imported my raw interview data into an application called ExpressScribe to decelerate the audio tracks so that I could type and transcribe as I was listening to the interviews; at the same time, I worked on a Word document, adding comments when codes and patterns emerged. Interviews were coded by emic perspective (concepts that participants use in making sense of their experience), to develop an interpretive understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the practices on EC Ning (Kvale, 1996). Then, I went back and re-coded based on initial themes and patterns I found in what each participant said and compared the codes and themes for each individual participant to the other participants to come up with some master themes. I followed this process twice as I conducted follow up interviews with each participant during the next school year. At the end of the process, I distilled each of the smaller themes into main themes. I also utilized member checking (Maxwell, 2013).

To see a list of these initial codes, refer to Appendix C.
2005) by sharing my interpretation of data with participants as the study progressed.

In addition to analyzing the interviews and observational data produced from field observations of EC Ning, I also considered my dissertation memos as data themselves (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995). This process of viewing, reviewing and reorganizing memos helped me to narrow in on important topics and themes that emerged during my study. At times, analysis of dissertation memos prompted me to revisit other modes of data for additional themes and codes.

**Additional consideration: Ethics in a Digital Study**

There were added considerations in the approach to methods for this study because of the virtual nature of the space that I was studying. Many factors were taken into account to protect the identities of the participants in my study. For example, anonymity on the site included EC Ning members’ screen names; when referring to any of the members by name, I utilized pseudonyms.

Issues concerning ethics came into focus because of the public nature of the online community, which makes it possible, though not probable, to conduct a search and identify the participants based on their discussions. This was an issue that I struggled with at the beginning of the research process, in the early stages of data collection. As an added measure, I researched the codes of contact explicated on the EC Ning website. I found a statement that supported my assumptions about the public nature of the space and the expectations that members might have about privacy:
Using Boellstorff, T., et. al., (2012) as an added reference, and with the additional blessing of IRB, I grew to accept, however reluctantly, that: “Even when informant names are anonymized in written work, those who were on the scene may readily decode the cast of characters in activities in which they participated or that they observed, resulting in ‘deductive disclosure’ beyond the control of the ethnographer” (p. 137). To deal with this issue, I did contact all members of the New Teachers group that were a part of discussion threads that showed up in the findings section of this dissertation. While I did not hear back from all, I did get consent on the parts of most. Boellstorff, T., et. al., (2012) attend to this even further by addressing the expectations of privacy in virtual spaces:

In our view it is legitimate to see subscription-based virtual worlds as having public areas where it is not necessary to have every person in an interaction sign an informed consent form – just as there is nothing inherently unethical about taking a picture of a tourist in an open, general area at an amusement park, which is a public place although an admission fee is charged (p. 135).
As a researcher of digital spaces, I know have an amount of awareness of the complexity of privacy issues surrounding scholarship that takes up the interactions in public spaces. As the field continues to grow and expand, new considerations are sure to arise.
Chapter 5

Four Unique Cases

This chapter serves to introduce readers to the four participants that I communicated with and digitally observed on the EC Ning space over the course of two academic school years (spring 2013-spring 2014). While a larger, ethnographic representation will follow, a basic introduction to four members that self-identified as beginning teachers of secondary English Language Arts is helpful in understanding the context in which individuals situate and identify themselves as part of the larger digital habitat. While the support structures, geographic location, size and philosophical underpinnings of each of the participants’ home schools varied, there rose clear commonalities among why each member sought out membership in the EC Ning space and made meaning out of her participation in the EC Ning.

All of the participants first found out about EC Ning during their teacher education programs, ranging from recommendations from mentor teachers to an insistence on behalf of a supervisor. Interestingly enough, none of the four participants claimed to be members of other online teacher social spaces, even though they made it clear that they were aware of others existing. Each of them cited some type of isolation (geographic, pedagogical, emotional, physical) as a main
exigency for their continued participation\textsuperscript{14} in the space. While they varied in ages from 25 to 48, interestingly enough, each participant sought advanced certification to being and becoming teachers; all were certified to teach during Master’s programs after majoring in another field during their undergraduate tenure. They each attributed a lack of time and/or access to explain why they wished they could more frequently participate in the EC Ning, both as passive readers and active discussants. Table #4 displays additional information.

\textsuperscript{14} See glossary for definition of participation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cecilia</th>
<th>Leia</th>
<th>Jolene</th>
<th>Roxanne</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td>Caucasian, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Caucasian, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Caucasian, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Caucasian, non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>Suburban Midwest</td>
<td>Rural Northwest</td>
<td>Urban Northeast</td>
<td>Urban Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years of experience</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional certification(s)</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Certificate to teach college courses</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Special Education endorsement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grades/courses Taught</strong></td>
<td>6-8th grade English</td>
<td>10-12th grade English; drama and speech</td>
<td>5-6, 9 and 11th grades English</td>
<td>8th grade English and special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heard about EC Ning?</strong></td>
<td>Google and student teaching colleague</td>
<td>Student Teaching Mentor</td>
<td>Methods course professor</td>
<td>Pre-student teaching supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year joined</strong></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date of first post</strong></td>
<td>7/2012</td>
<td>8/2011</td>
<td>10/2012</td>
<td>06/2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong># Groups joined</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong># Discussions initiated</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong># Discussions replied to</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>219</td>
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<td><strong>Time estimated passive participation</strong></td>
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<td>98%</td>
<td>80%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time estimated active participation</strong></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived level of support at in service school</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table #4: Participant demographics

Several themes became apparent during participant interviews; the most prevalent was the theme of isolation. For example, all women described in detail how membership on the EC Ning aided them in easing feelings of being alone in their teaching, whether that be related to their emerging teaching identities,

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15 All participants have been given pseudonyms
16 At the end of the 2-year study
17 As described by interviewee and ordered relative to the other participants
evolving pedagogical stances, or lack of geographical and physical support they experienced at their in service schools. In addition, the higher the level of support they perceived from their brick and mortar school community, the higher their tendency to passively participate on the EC Ning space. The following presents an analysis of the ways in which the participants discussed the EC Ning space, the practices that they perceived they take up in the space, and the benefits and limitations they saw associated with membership in the online teacher community.

In addition, Strauss & Feiz’s (2014) review of discourse analysis practices, specifically the ideas of indecicality and identity are helpful in understanding the ways that teachers discuss themselves and their practice. How people use certain pronouns to identify themselves, in addition to the semiotic terms that they use to establish themselves as part of certain groups remains a central concern.

**Cecilia: Predominantly Peripheral**

*Well, I used to work in public relations, and while I liked working with language and all the writing, at the end of the day, I didn’t like that I was working to generate money for business, and sometimes defending business practices I didn’t really believe in. So, I sort of took that love of language and asked myself what other profession would fit. And honestly, at first I was a little wary of teaching because I haven’t spent a lot of time around kids; I’m from a small family and I’m the youngest. But I actually think because I don’t look at kids as this "other," I’m able to cultivate great relationships with them. Anyway, I decided on teaching English. I was supposed to be high school, but I got a job in middle school (and was wary about that initially, too) and here I am (personal communication, December 23, 2013).*

As demonstrated above, when I first talked to Cecilia, she described herself as a “career changer”. She received her MEd in English Education after working for three years in public relations. While she completed her student teaching in an urban school district, she ultimately received a position at a suburban middle school
in the Midwest. When we first talked, she was 29 years old and in her first year of teaching.

Cecilia discovered the EC Ning by doing a Google search while compiling resources for student teaching assignments and lesson planning. She then became aware of its potential after hearing positive reviews from a student teaching colleague. Of all four participants, Cecilia was the least active participant of the group. She estimated that she spent about 98 percent of her time logged in to the space reading others’ posts. She also mentioned that it took her a while to feel comfortable posting her own content: “I think I was intimidated to post anywhere on the site at first. I didn’t know what questions were too obvious, or had been discussed recently” (personal communication, May 5, 2013). This uncertainty about how and what to post about relates to her position and self-identification as a first year teacher.

It was only after holding membership for “long enough” to get a sense of the practices that other teachers took up in the space that she started posting. Cecilia admitted that she began creating discussion threads out of a sense of a need to share her wonderings about teaching. In addition, reading what other teachers were regularly posting about provoked an additional sense of belonging: “It was probably a bit of desperation to talk about ideas mixed with seeing other questions and issues repeated so I wouldn’t feel as bad” (personal communication, May 5, 2013).

While Cecilia’s participation on the EC Ning is mostly consumption-oriented, she recounts that what originally drew her to the space was a problem of praxis; even though she had a “good teacher education experience”, she mentioned that she
wasn’t quite prepared for the classroom when she started her first full-time job. For example, Cecilia cited that the EC Ning was valuable in easing the isolation that came with being a new teacher:

I think it helps new teachers not feel so isolated. Even if we’re not posting about specific issues or questions we’re having. I think for me, isolation comes because of the Common Core State Standards shift. I do feel isolated when it comes to curriculum development. I wish I had more people to bounce ideas off of. It’s just an overwhelming year (personal communication, May 5, 2013).

Not only was Cecilia experiencing praxis shock (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), but she was also entering teaching a time of much change and transformation. She was trying to develop who she was as an educator, and at the same time trying to revisit and rewrite school curriculum alongside the other members of the English department. This additional external pressure inspired her to seek guidance outside of her school community.

Finding comfort in the EC Ning space as a brand new teacher, Cecilia consulted the various groups and discussion forums to learn about teaching specific texts, like *The Great Gatsby* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and to gain ideas about first day activities. She recalled a time when she felt especially grateful for the space after she implemented a strategy suggested by another teacher:

When I was researching first days of school activities, I saw a lot of ideas that I was sort of unfamiliar with, and then many more new ones. It does sometimes get overwhelming the number of ideas out there, but I put
together a scavenger hunt of my classroom based on someoneʼs suggestion. It was successful! The kids were moving around, talking, getting to know each other, and learning about the resources in the classroom (personal communication, May 5, 2013).

This sense of success, especially at the beginning of the year, seemed helpful for Cecilia, not only in how she approached her own classroom, but also in how she regarded the support she derived from that EC Ning. Though in our second interview she continued to describe herself as a passive participant, she recalled a few times when she eventually felt comfortable enough to post advice to others when an activity she implemented went successfully. For example, she shared a vocabulary activity that she did using kinesthetic movements and skits:

I also teach word strategies (per Marieʼs response). But when it comes to specific vocab instruction, I select tier 2 vocab (Beck model, hereʼs a resource: http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/title1/08fallconfhandouts/vocab.pdf) from what weʼre reading and pre-teach it. I usually make a power point presentation with funny/memorable pictures to help aid comprehension. While I go through the presentation, my students fill out their vocab tables. One column is notes on what I say about it, another column is the student-friendly definition, another is a visual aid, the last what they think is a synonym and antonym.

Then, usually several days later we do “30 second vocabulary” where groups of students have 30 seconds to creatively teach the word to the class. Many perform mini skits, some do television reporting, some draw on the board (which I usually leave up).

I know this seems like a lot of class time to vocabulary, and it can be, but I think itʼs worth it. Just this week, students told me how they were “vexing” their friends at lunch, while another student drew a monocle and a mustache on a paper duck (random homeroom art activity) because he wanted it to look “pretentious.”

In this example, Cecilia not only discussed what worked for her own students, but also provided a concrete narrative to pair with her recommendation. In addition, she linked a resource for the initiating teacher. The repeated use of the first person pronouns here suggests a confidence about her practice and the advice.
that she is providing. “I know this seems like a lot of class time to vocabulary, and it can be, but I think it’s worth it” conveys to readers a sense of confidence about the advice she is giving. This seems to be a shift from the woman that was intimidated by posting during an earlier interview because she was afraid she would ask the wrong question.

In addition to utilizing the EC Ning space for pedagogical and curricular advice, Cecilia also discussed how she began to utilize the EC Ning space to help her gain ideas for a Donors Choose project that she was coordinating:

My classroom library sucks; it’s a mishmash of my mom’s old classroom library (and she was a science teach and has been retired for 4 years) and some other freebies I’ve acquired. So I wanted to beef it up with more relevant reads especially for my more reluctant readers. I used a lot of resources to select the books I wanted, but one of them was Ning. I know there’re several threads about YA lit, so I looked at those and researched the books I was unfamiliar with to help me decide.

While the community helped her find recommendations for her classroom library, Cecilia also commented that she likes to mine the space for personal book recommendations. Although she cited numerous benefits about utilizing the EC Ning space as a new teacher, she also pointed out the need for teachers to critically discriminate when searching for resources:

I would tell them to definitely research and look for ideas online but not to get too bogged down in it. I sometimes would spend hours doing that and then realize I hadn’t actually done any lesson planning. I think I wasn’t
trusting myself enough, if that makes sense. Also, I would tell them to make sure they're still making time for family, friends, exercise, etc., because it's easy to just work, work, work (personal communication, December 23, 2013).

In this last response, Cecilia acknowledges her uncertainty as a new teacher. The idea of “not trusting herself” places her in the category of a newbie. As this comment is reflective, it’s important to note that she also makes recommendations for other new teachers – that prioritizing friends and family is something that she learned to do and wants for them to take advantage of as well. In the end, while Cecelia expressed that she felt a high level of job security and support, she still turned to the EC Ning when struggling for answers.

**Leia: Gaining Ground**

*I became a teacher to connect with kids. I had a hard time when I was a kid, and I found a great deal of comfort from my English teachers because they always seemed to teach us about not just the subject of Language Arts, but of the deeper human experience, and I always treasured that. I want to be that for some kids. I am that teacher that is a little laid back and quirky, but passionate about my content and life in general, and I want to share that with my students*” (personal communication, December 13, 2013).

When I first contacted Leia, she was in her third year of teaching in a rural Northwest mining town with a population of only 1,000 people. Like Cecilia, the theme of isolation bubbled up within Leia’s interviews. Not only was Leia dealing with geographic isolation, but she was also dealing with a level of isolation related to her teaching content. With the next closest district fifty miles away and a small student population (about 200 in total), Leia was one of two English teachers in her
whole school; she stood as the only teacher for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade English, along with two dual-credit college courses and the school drama club.

Among all of the participants, Leia had been teaching for the longest. During our first set of communications, she had remained at the same school for the duration of her three-year in service career. In her spare time, she was a part of a small community theater, performing once a year and giving the proceeds from ticket sales to charity. Like other participants, Leia described how she had to request permission to get her district technology center to unblock EC Ning from the school filter. Even though her level of active participation tends to be more frequent than Cecilia’s, she shared that she reads discussion threads and group posts about other teachers’ experiences more than she creates posts about what she is doing in her own classroom. This was especially true early in her career as she was juggling broadened expectations that came along with working at a small, rural school. Leia’s account of her first year of teaching is not dissimilar to other first year teaching experiences, for she was tasked to straddle various teaching assignments and numerous preps:

I luckily found a job right after I finished my internship, in the middle of nowhere (laughs). But yeah, once I was out here, they dropped a few things on me like ‘Oh, by the way, you’re teaching Speech,’ and I had never planned on teaching that. You know, things like that. So I taught Speech for two years and I really needed a lot of help, having four different preps all in one day ... I really started using the site at that point because there were not a whole lot of people around to support me, other than the one other English teacher.
You know? So I was kind of flying by the seat of my pants for that whole first year. It was pretty brutal (personal communication, May 18, 2013).

Like Cecilia, even though her school community and English Language Arts colleague were quite encouraging, Leia’s sense that she was “flying by the seat of her pants” encouraged her to seek outside support. The fact that she had to deal with unexpected tasks and expectations is very typical of beginning teachers. While the district provided teachers with regular staff meetings and the occasional digital resource, Leia noted that the level of professional development offered to the teachers is fairly low: “They have people come a few times a year and do little workshops with us, you know? But it’s pretty sparse, you know, compared to other places, I’m sure, because we just live out so far that it’s hard for people to get out to us in the wintertime.” To supplement the district resources, Leia took summer classes a few years in a row to obtain certification to teach college-credit courses. She also credited her English teaching colleague (the other educator in charge of the seventh, eight and ninth graders) as her main source of support outside of the electronic community:

She’s a little bit older than me. She’s been teaching for about ten years now, and she has just been a wonderful, like, person to come to. She’s always been open with me, like, at the interview, and even during that summer before I started, she was running around trying to find us a house and all kinds of stuff (personal communication, May 18, 2013).

Despite expressing this feeling of adequate emotional support on behalf of her mentor teacher, Leia mentioned how she used EC Ning as a way to feel
supported in her decision-making at her school. Since she was the only teacher of senior high English, she often went to Ning to find justifications for choices she made about her curriculum:

Yeah, I came under fire a little bit from some of the faculty. It’s a small school, so everybody gets up in each other’s business. Like daily, I fly under the radar okay, but every once in a while they will focus in on me and somebody had questioned me using MLA format. So I had searched on (EC Ning) MLA format question mark or something, and all these people had already been talking about it and whether or not they teach the other styles or not, you know? And I found reassurance that it was good to show them where to find that information and to teach them that there are different ones, but that it’s not necessary as an English teacher to have to teach them all of them, you know? That made me feel a little bit, I don’t know, I always feel like I’m not doing enough, you know, I’m not doing things the right way. Because here’s nobody else to compare myself to, because I’m the only one that teaches those grades. So, it just felt nice to have some affirmation that ‘Okay, it is kind of up to me if I want to do this or not.’ You know? (personal communication, May 18, 2013).

In her description above, a few key terms and phrases stand out. First of all, her pattern of “flying under the radar” is congruent with other participant comments and suggests a desire to not want to be noticed or focused on. Also, her sentiment of “always feel like I’m not doing enough” and doing things “the right way” convey her uncertainty with her position; a typical feeling on the part of a
beginning teacher. Being questioned by other, senior members of her school staff and then receiving affirming responses from members on EC Ning for her decisions. Realizing that it is up to her to decide what she does in her class is something that teachers don't necessarily gain while they are student teaching.

While she utilized the space to mostly request and read about pedagogical and curricular ideas, Leia's most influential use of the EC Ning pertained to another, more personal reason. She shared about how the amount of extra emotional support that she received when she posted about a student of hers passing away unexpectedly:

I ended up using it last year when a student passed away that I was really close with. I actually hopped on there and, you know, just posted what happened and I was, like, I got so many replies about people that went through the same thing. And I thought that was really cool because when stuff like that happens you don't know how to process it (personal communication, May 18, 2013).

In addition to the support she received with her initial posts, Leia also had other members of the space “check in” with her on other groups and discussion threads; this is a common practice taken up by teachers on the space and will be touched upon in the next chapter. She recounted that she received responses to her initial posting six months after she wrote it. This is an example of the type of asynchronous, sustained support that an online community can provide for a teacher, which Leia mentions is essential for beginners:
If they’re new (laughs), I would recommend just putting yourself out there and finding people that are willing to help you because, especially in small areas where you’re teaching four or five different grades, that’s a lot of planning (laughs). You know, when I was student teaching it was just one grade and a drama class that I was doing, and I was still swamped. So, when I got out here, it was like, ‘Oh my god.” So I would tell them to just calm down and remember that the first, like, two years at least are going to be really scary, you know? And that’s totally normal and if they find other people to talk to, they won’t feel alienated (laughs) (personal communication, December 13, 2013).

For Leia, embracing the chaotic nature of the first few years was a step to being and becoming a teacher. The idea that being scared is “totally normal” and that time and experience ease the sense of fear supports the notion that teachers need to have support during a time that can be quite confusing.

**Jolene: Balance Believer**

>I became a teacher because I wanted to give kids, underprivileged kids, help that would contribute to their paths out of being underprivileged. I think education is the most meaningful way to do that, and I chose English because writing was a really powerful outlet for me growing up. I wrote a lot of poetry and I drew a lot, and I had kind of a tough upbringing and that was my own way of processing it all… I guess I really focus on rigor now before that therapeutic type of writing but there are touches of that in my teaching”(personal communication, November 16, 2013).
When I first talked with Jolene, she was in her first year of teaching secondary English at charter schools associated with a public school district in the Northeast. During this initial year, she was shifted to new teaching assignments twice during the course of the school year, even transferring school campuses. She started off the year teaching 9th and 11th grade English, then she was shifted to teaching the reading intervention program, Read 180. Finally, she was transferred again to teach 11th grade English at a different school campus. To make matters more complicated, the charter school that was her last first year placement had just announced that it would be closing at the end of the school year; employment instability was a pervading element in her burgeoning career.

Jolene was introduced to EC Ning by her English education methods course instructor, and used the site in coordination with Jim Burke’s teaching text, *The English Teacher’s Companion*. Jolene’s participation on the EC Ning represented a mix of creation and consumption, reading and posting. During our initial interview, Jolene expressed great satisfaction with the EC Ning space for its different types of support:

I use it a ton now. I just taught a unit on the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and I never read it before I was starting to teach it, so I used a lot of the resources that people had available. Also, the classroom management things that are on there are helpful as well. I guess really I use the EC Ning a lot. Sometimes it’s as an observer. I don’t necessarily talk a lot on it, but I’ll read a lot of the New Teacher things, and it really makes you feel a little bit, uhm, it
makes you feel like you’re not alone. There are a lot of other people
struggling with the same things (personal communication, April 29, 2013).

Jolene categorized herself as a mostly passive participant on the space, but
when compared to the other interviewees, she actually fell into the top half as far as
frequency and quantity of posts. Again, we see the theme of isolation in her
response above. She spoke about how this feeling of not being alone was important
to her, especially during her first year when she was transitioned so much.

While Jolene credited her mentor teachers for day-to-day support, she
reluctantly admitted that she still felt isolated as a new teacher, especially with the
immense weight of job instability that she felt as a result of her tumultuous first
year:

I don’t know, maybe it was because I was brand new, but I didn’t feel like I
could have those conversations. I guess it was just my ego or something, but I
didn’t want to like talk about it, so the Ning was so helpful because I could be
invisible there but still get so much information. I didn’t have to admit to
people that I was struggling but I could still get help for it (personal
communication, November 16, 2013).

This notion of “being invisible” relates to Leia’s efforts to “fly under the
radar,” and is indicative of a novice teacher’s uncertainty about her position. When I
asked Jolene to discuss if she had ever had positive experiences discussing her
uncertainties or struggles, she could not come up with an example. Instead, she
described a time when she did approach administrators about a classroom
management issue she was having. While willing to share her uncertainties and
insecurities with her first placement’s school community, she received criticism and “punishment” for admitting her vulnerability:

I did admit that I was struggling and I kind of got in trouble for it. It was mostly about classroom management; they ended up transitioning my position at the beginning of the year at the first school that I was at to a reading intervention program. I didn’t want to do the reading intervention program that they put me in and I wanted to be teaching English, I wanted to be creating my lessons, but they put me in this very scripted program and were like, ”This will be better for you.” It was horrible. Then I ended up, a position opened up at the school that I was a paraprofessional at and I went for it because I just felt like there was more of a future there but then that school closed. So, it was such a crazy first year, but I learned so much in the process, you know? (personal communication, November 16, 2013).

Jolene’s unstable and often-unsupportive local school culture(s) motivated her to seek advice and support on the EC Ning; it became her safe place to reveal her insecurities. In addition to relying on the space for external validation, she also mentioned that she valued her participation in professional organizations like NCTE (she attended the national conference a few years in a row). Feeling like she had a supportive department in her second year when we talked again, Jolene shared that she still felt less awkward admitting concerns or questions to teachers she works with. In addition, she also mentioned that she regularly sought collegial face-to-face relationships outside of her school community:
My curriculum coordinator at the school that I was at that closed last year is now teaching sixth grade at another charter school and then my old department head is also teaching sixth grade at another charter school, so we have made time to get together and plan together. Like, when I’m starting a unit, for example, I know that they did poetry first and they did fiction first so I called them and said, ‘I need ideas, what should I do, there are so many terms that (students) don’t know’ and things like that, so they’ve been like an invaluable resource for me (personal communication, November 16, 2013).

It is important to note that of all the participants, Jolene was the one that talked most extensively about the professional networks within which she belonged, most of them voluntarily. When asked about the origins of her fervor for teacher learning, she credited her teacher education program for providing extensive, practice-based support. Her two mentor teachers from her teacher education program, which was a professional development internship, were her main supports during her trying first year.

The support group that she formed with other teachers she worked with provided her with continued outlets for growth – both women had more teaching experience than she did and she regularly sought them out for teaching strategies and ideas. This stance of seeking out support and information when she needed it (even, as previously seen with her first year, when it resulted negatively), seemed to have some transfer to how she participated in the EC Ning, as a more active member in the space than other two of the other interviewees. In addition to the self-directed
teacher study group she belonged to, Jolene also noted that EC Ning provided her with the ability to feel like a more valuable part of the teaching profession:

I think that (EC Ning) is also a really good resource for new teachers because it makes you part of, like, a professional discourse community outside of your school. So, especially if your teacher preparation program has a lot of, I don’t know, a lot of people without too much experience, a lot of what you say in a teacher preparation program is kind of just positing or just ideas that you’re not sure about yet. So, uhm, there’s this level of going into a school and having all of these veteran teachers available to you, but there’s also this kind of hesitation that happens, I think, because you don’t want to seem like a rookie. It sucks to be a rookie (personal communication, November 16, 2013).

For Jolene, the importance of keeping connected to other educators not only drove her to participate in the EC Ning, but also motivated her to develop collegial relationships in face-to-face environments outside of her local school community. This stance of collaboration is one that separated her from other participants.

**Roxanne: Newbie Nourisher**

*I used to be a corporate trainer and I thought to myself, ‘I just had triplets and I need to figure out something where I’m, I’ve got their same schedule because I want to be involved more than if I had been a corporate trainer; I would have been flying all over the world or the country doing training seminars like I used to do. I felt like I couldn’t do that anymore. I was thinking, ’What should I do? What should I do? What should I do? Duh, I’ll be a teacher and just teach little people instead of big people’* (personal communication, January 29, 2014).
When I first spoke with Roxanne, like Cecilia, she also termed herself a career changer. She received her undergraduate degree in hotel and restaurant management and had been employed for a number of years as a corporate trainer for a large national company. She began graduate school to become certified as an English teacher after giving birth to triplets and obtained her degree in secondary English education after eight years of part-time graduate student status. During the time of our first interview together, Roxanne had been a long-term guest teacher at an urban school district in the Midwest while obtaining her additional certification in special education.

Roxanne began using the EC Ning during her pre-student teaching placement in her certification program based on a recommendation from her supervisor. She mined it for advice and resources to help support her evolving teaching portfolio assignment, a requirement for certification. In addition to being the oldest participant, she was 47 years old when we first connected, she was also by far the most prolific participant among the four; for example, she was a member of fourteen different discussion groups on the EC Ning space. In addition to belonging to a large number of discussion groups, Roxanne was the most active participant. She estimated that when she was signed onto the EC Ning space, she read others’ discussion threads about half the time and created her own during the other half:

I never felt self-conscious about posting in the space or giving advice. I am always like, ‘Whatever, they can take it or leave it.’ The only thing that I worry about is the fact that I might have something wrong. You know that
book, *Gotcha Grammar*? It’s a grammar book. One of the Ning people, a new teacher asked about grammar and how to teach it, and I thought of that book and I couldn’t remember the title. I thought, ‘Gosh, I’ve got to get that right.’ Because I am such a fly by the seat of my pants, you know, I would probably put something down and get it wrong. I have to make sure I had my facts before I write them down (personal communication, January 29, 2014).

Roxanne’s nonchalance concerning her contributions to the EC Ning space seemed as if it benefited her in numerous ways. For example, she was one of the interview participants that most showed up numerous times within a particular discussion on the EC Ning space. The practices that she took up spanned from providing advice to checking in and following up with participants. There were even times when she solely responded to a post with a message of commiseration, a “I know how you feel,” for example. These types of practices will be further explored in the next chapter. At the same time, despite expressing more comfort with sharing her ideas with others, she still was concerned with “getting it right” and not “getting it wrong.” These concerns, though typical for any member, especially work in this context to identify her as a beginning teacher, uncertain about her prior knowledge and not wanting that to show publically.

At the time of our second interview, she had begun her first year of full time teaching 8th grade. Roxanne, who had just received her special education certification in addition to her English accreditation, discussed transitioning to her first full-time position as a frustrating process. In addition to having no curriculum
or resources to guide her instruction, she also felt that the support on behalf of her administration and mentor teacher were low:

I feel like I’ve been thrown into a shark’s tank, but I’ve been giving it the old college try. For example there are these standardized tests that we have to take and I was just told in the lunchroom that we had these standardized tests like this three weeks ago or so. I had no idea. I also found out in the lunchroom that report cards were due the next day and I was like, ‘What? Wait a minute. I had no idea.’ They are just not great at communication, but I am giving it the old college try” (personal communication, January 29, 2014).

Roxanne’s type of isolation, as exhibited above in her interview excerpt, was focused on the isolation that came with entering a new profession and a new local school culture within which she had not yet secured full membership. The feeling of being left out and having “no idea” placed Roxanne in a place where she felt like she was struggling. The metaphor of a shark’s tank, unfortunately, seems all too common within the interactions of members of the EC Ning New Teachers group, explored in the next chapter.

In addition to isolation of being a new teacher, Roxanne also experienced physical isolation, a problem at the inner city school she taught at where she regularly had to break up fights. She shared about how she posted on the New Teachers group about how she was not prepared to have to break up fights:

I have an aide, but unfortunately a lot of the time he gets taken away because they need subs so they’ll grab him. What am I going to do, you know? My hands are tied. When I first started, my kids would wrestle in the room and
stuff. It freaked me out and it’s kind of like in their culture, to wrestle, to touch, and to be on each other. But anyway, I do break up at least one fight a day. It’s very tough because I’m like, ‘Hello, is there anyone to help me?’ you know? When my assistant is there its pretty good because he’s a black male, he’s tall. You know, for example, I’ve got this 6’2’ 7th grader, he’s a gentle giant but I’ve seen him get mad a couple of times. I’ve emailed the principal and the assistant principal because I’ve seen him get mad and I don’t have my assistant all of the time. I’m afraid that if he gets really mad at somebody, somebody can really get hurt, because I can’t protect them. A few weeks ago, this kid punched him in the stomach. The other kid took him by the throat and threw him on the ground, just with one hand, and was choking him and I was like, ‘Holy crap!’ It scared the crap out of me (personal communication, January 29, 2014).

Roxanne’s feelings like her hands were tied may be related to the context of her situation, but are also not helped by her positionality as a new teacher. She discussed in our interview how she felt uncomfortable fighting for resources and rights that she knew she should have been privy to, merely because of her position as a new teacher at the school, with no tenure and little colleague backing to support her. This feeling of fear associated with her teaching environment was a main driving force in why Roxanne continued to be involved in the EC Ning, even after her new job positioned her in a way that she identified more with being a special education teacher than an English Language Arts Teacher. Even though the semiotic domain for her was not exactly what she sought when she wanted resources or
strategies for teaching struggling learners, the collegial and social nature of the EC Ning convinced her to remain a member.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a context and snapshot of four unique members of the EC Ning. Based on the information provided by the four participants in the interviews, it is clear that there exist common approaches to membership in the EC Ning among them. Initial findings from the interviews demonstrated that all four participants engaged in membership in EC Ning for various reasons, all arguably relating to the notion of isolation. This ranged from new teacher isolation to geographic isolation to physical isolation. In addition, the patterns in their kind of participation was dependent on their perceived level of support at their local school cultures; the more active participants claimed to be on EC Ning, the less support they felt that they received in the context of their home school cultures (See Figure 1). While the four cases by no means provide adequate material for generalization, they are helpful for understanding some of the context that is not present when conducting a digital ethnography.
Figure 1: Participation/Support Matrix

CODE REFERENCE:
C- Cecilia
L- Leia
J- Jolene
R- Roxanne
Chapter 6

Ethnography of EC Ning: Patterns and Practices

While the previous chapter explored the perceptions of four unique members of the EC Ning, there is an equally beneficial practice in observing and analyzing the interactions among members in the larger scheme of the space. An overall description of the EC Ning was previously presented, but it is important to note that because of my interest in how beginning teachers take up practices in the EC Ning, I focused much of my observation on a specific group within the EC Ning, named “New Teachers.”

General Ethnographic Description

The New Teachers group is open to all members of the EC Ning, but as the name suggests, it was created for beginning teachers. In addition, more experienced teachers also congregate in the group, often providing informal mentorship and meditational support. When accessing the front page of the New Teachers area, members are greeted with an introduction from founder Jim Burke and invited to view a list of the discussions within the space. Members can sort discussions in the group by “Latest Discussions,” “Most Popular,” and “Recently Replied,” which allows them to both stay current with updated postings and also gain access to the more populated, often more contextual discussions. While video, chat, and image sharing capabilities are affordances the EC Ning offers, in the particular New Teachers group, members do not regularly post video or multi-modal artifacts. Many of the interactions on the discussion threads within the group consist of textual
conversations; members also share hyperlinks, PDFs or Word documents resources. Within the group, ideas and opinions are regularly shared surrounding a multitude of topics, anywhere from classroom management to how to balance work and personal life to the best style of earring to wear to a job interview.

As members negotiate shared problems of practice, they do tend to take up some roles of participation based on their relative self-identifications, based mainly on years of teaching experience. In many online settings, especially more contrived professional development communities, experienced others or trainers initiate or guide member participation. The New Teachers group varies from this pervasive model. As dictated by the notion of participation in affinity spaces being non-hierarchical (Gee, 2007), the beginning teachers actually have the most control and power over the discussions and topics addressed in the New Teachers group. An implicit rule that the group seems to follow is that those who self-identify as “new teachers” (this includes both pre service and induction phase teachers even though the study focuses on the induction phase teachers) are the main members to pose questions and initiate discussion threads. During the course of my two-year participant observation, there were 90 overall discussion posts created in the New Teachers group; every single one was initiated by self-identified “beginning teachers”. In turn, self-identified “experienced teachers” participate by answering questions or offering advice once an inquiry or issue was posted. In this way, the New Teachers group can be perceived as a self-directed teacher learning space; the very members that benefit most from the interactions are the ones to dictate what topics and themes are discussed in the first place.
This implicit practice coincides with the group’s purpose statement: “A place for pre service and new teachers to ask questions, let off steam, tell stories, celebrate”\(^{18}\). The longer description on the main page of the New Teachers forum speaks to this as it positions new teachers as ones to initiate interaction:

![New Teachers Forum Description](http://englishcompanion.ning.com/group/newteachers)

When applying notions of discourse analysis (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2006; Strauss & Feiz, 2014), a fundamentally beneficial unit of analysis tends to be pronouns used in conversation. The use of pronouns can signal a code switch or a move to distance certain individuals from others, to the very first message that members encounter while viewing the main page of the New Teacher space. For example, written by site founder Burke as an introduction to the group, the previous statement uses the pronoun “we,” and works to separate out the new teacher members from others of the group. Burke also explicitly uses the phrase, “You new teachers” and subsequently positions them as responsible for making the posts on

\(^{18}\) Retrieved from http://englishcompanion.ning.com/group/newteachers
the site. The “we,” then, works to represent the other, experienced (and perhaps also other beginning) teachers that are also members of the New Teachers group. This supports the practice of initiating and responding to posts that placed beginning teachers at the center of the group. The use of pronouns in this way functions to help members identify themselves through the posting and responding practices they chose to enact. This is just one example of the ways in which teacher identity and positioning informed the practices that took place on the New Teachers space.

**Major Topics**

In addition to language moves, it is important to note that several common topics are frequently discussed on the EC Ning space in general. They include: curriculum, classroom management, balancing life and teaching, and employment.

**Curriculum**

Discussions around curriculum were the most frequent and often produced the lengthiest conversations. New teachers asked questions about units they were planning and sought feedback on strategies they were using in their classrooms. It also gave veteran teachers a chance to share their knowledge of practice and bits of wisdom they had picked up in their years on the job. While what the new teachers on the site focused on within each category varied, most of their posts ended with “any advice would be great” or “what have others done to deal with this?” or just plain “help!” The conversations that happened within that space were vehicles for that growth to happen within what appeared to be a trusting and supportive community. It is within these types of communities, Britzman (1991) offered, that
new teachers negotiate varying discourses (normative and non normative) associated with the profession of teaching. The following is an excerpt from a new teacher named Maddy titled: “Do You Ever Feel Like You Don’t Know What You’re Doing?”

Do you ever feel like you don’t know what you're doing? I do. A lot lately, I'm not sure why... My school never gave me a set ‘curriculum’ or anything so I feel like I'm just trying to remember what my teachers taught me in middle school. I don’t think that’s the right way to go about it at all though... In college we never really learned how to develop curriculum so I feel like I have no clue what I’m doing here. I’ve done a thematic unit on identity, a poetry unit, and attempted writing workshop (which did not go as well as I’d hoped!) I don’t have regular collaboration time with anyone and am the only 6th and 7th grade language arts teacher. Sometimes I just feel clueless. Is this normal? Any ways to battle this feeling? Or to become a better teacher????

(retrieved from: EC Ning New Teachers Group).

Maddy alluded to several factors within her teaching environment that highlight her limited power within the classroom. The fact that “her school” never gave her a set curriculum is problematic to her and this lack of support seems to be a roadblock for her. Members of the New Teachers group offered her the outlet for support that she was lacking in her professional life.

**Classroom Management**

EC Ning teachers were also regularly interested in gaining insight into how to deal with disruptions in the classroom and problems with students. One teacher,
Lana, relayed her struggles as a “career changer” in her post “Struggling with Classroom Environment while Student Teaching”:

I am doing my student teaching and am really struggling with classroom management. My one class of 8th graders is full of personality AND kids who want to make the class a social hour. I went super aggressive on discipline for 2 days and am struggling to hold the line. My co-op supported me in this b/c they were just being down right disrespectful - talking non-stop while I was trying to teach...My co-op is very supportive and says everyday that I'm getting better. This is good, but scares me in a way. I'm a career changer, 38 years old with 2 very well behaved kids, I did not expect to have trouble in the classroom. Perhaps I had unrealistic expectations? I'm over being concerned on whether or not they like me. Now I want the great the positive classroom environment I envisioned, where kids learn and feel good about coming to my class. I don't think that's happening right now which distresses me. I would appreciate some advice. Thank you in advance for your time in thinking and responding to my post.

Feedback for Lana ranged from “keep on at it” to “kids these days” comments. Other teachers also provided stories and narratives. For example, Desiree wrote:

I don't know if this will work for you, but a student teacher told me that she had a situation like this, with one girl who was just difficult every day. The student teacher said that one day she asked the young woman to go out into the hall and wait for her. When she went out, she looked the student in the eye and said in a fairly stern voice, "You know, I like you. I really do like you."
Then she went on to mention a couple of things she liked about the student. That was all. The student was, of course, surprised, but as the teacher continued to demonstrate fairness and firmness in the classroom, the student responded and there were few further problems.

These types of shared narratives were present throughout the New Teacher group’s forums. This sharing of experience worked to set up a space where the dialogue continued, representing the social benefits of the EC Ning.

**Balancing Life and Teaching**

Teachers in the group often requested advice for outside of the classroom, on how to make the transition to the life of a teacher and to reconcile social and professional lives that sometimes clashed. One member, Stan, talked openly about how the death of a friend was affecting his teaching in “Dealing with Tough Times”:

A recent roadblock I've recently encountered in my teaching career is something that's not in the classroom. I recently lost a friend in car accident a little over three months ago and I've had really good efforts in not letting it get involved with my teaching. But of course, it always happens to insert itself in very strange and funny times. When I was in my college class, I actually found an essay written by my friend. Totally caught me off guard, but I kept my composure. At the same time, I felt the wind was knocked out. I know over time, emotional maturity will make this loss a little less biting, but I was wondering what do you all do when your personal life suffers a hit? Do you try to hide it or do you let your students in on what's going on?
Stan explored a struggle that many teachers have, the question of how much of ourselves we share with our students. What is really striking about this post is the massive number of responses that he received. With one hundred and ninety seven views, the responses to Stan's post ranged from supportive words of encouragement to other members sharing their own stories of grief and struggle. A few members shared their own stories of loss of spouses and friends. While one member offered condolences, she also wrote:

I have to disagree with your comment "I know over time, emotional maturity will make this loss a little less biting,..." I think that it's not really about emotional maturity. People need to feel, and to grieve. I think that these uncomposed moments provide teachable lessons for our students.

The fact that despite sharing her support, she was also able to “disagree” with Stan is representative of other discussion threads in the group, as disagreement and the exchange of contradictory or conflicting ideas also happen often in the space.

**Employment**

The topic of employment was also a frequently addressed one. New teachers that were worried about the security of temporary contracts asked about what to do and student teachers asked for practicing teachers to provide insight into the job search and interview process. Kara posted:

I was recently hired for a leave replacement position for the end of the school year. I’ll be teaching freshmen and senior English. I’m thrilled about the opportunity, as it will be my first time back in the classroom since I finished student teaching in November. However, I’m a little anxious about making it a
smooth transition for the students (and for myself!)... Does anyone have any tips for how I can make the transition as smooth as possible? I’m especially concerned with this since it is close to the end of the school year, and the students are likely very accustomed to their "regular" teacher. How can I acquaint myself with the students and show them my teaching style/how I run a classroom without making them feel like they are having to backtrack to the beginning of the year? Any advice/suggestions would be appreciated!

Responses to Kara’s post relayed similar situations and even provided her with tips for work in other school districts. One member, Lisa, bemoaned the fact that she was in the same situation. Kara’s reply to her response illustrates the community aspect of the group:

Thanks for sharing your experience! I’m sorry that you haven’t had much support from the previous teacher -- but it sounds like you have a positive attitude and a confident, focused outlook...Feel free to keep in touch as your leave replacement position continues! Maybe we can bounce ideas off each other, vent, etc. Good luck! And thanks!

Kara’s invitation to remain “in touch” was not an isolated event on the EC Ning forum. In addition to members keeping in touch, some members frequented the site regularly and seem to become “regulars,” posting on various forums and even referring to other discussions within the New Teachers group.

While becoming acquainted with common topics discussed within the New Teachers group are important in presenting an overview of the environment, during the course of the ethnographic observation, I focused on not just what they were
talking about but how they were talking with one another. This yielded two main findings concerning the methods of participation. The first finding was that there existed varying degrees of participation that members in the group demonstrated. The second finding was that there were clear conversational patterns that teachers engaged in, working in coordination with their teacher self-identifications. The following portion of this chapter will be organized according to the degrees of participation. Because often, the degree of participation dictated the pattern of interaction, discussion concerning the conversational patterns will be embedded within each section.

**Degrees of Participation**

As stated above, a main finding of my ethnographic observations within the EC Ning space was that participants’ degree of participation varied greatly, it is important to note that while some members might move through the degrees in a linear fashion, not all must. In fact, some members may never participate beyond the scope of one or two of the degrees. That said, four distinct degrees of participation that revealed themselves through data analysis are: 1) **Reading posts** 2) **Seeking support** 3) **Extending support** 4) **Externally collaborating.** These four categories will be explored below, with data excerpts from both the New Teachers group and interview participants’ accounts.

Table #5 provides a breakdown of the codes within each degree and the frequency that each code was detected within the 90 discussion threads surveyed for this study. To come up with the codes, I reviewed the 90 discussions threads and hand-coded the content for language moves associated with interactions between
initial posts and responses. For example, responses like “Sounds like you’re doing a great job” were coded under the “offering encouragement” heading. In addition to coding the discussion threads, I also went back after compiling the codes and counted the frequency that each code showed up in the conversations. Those numbers are reflected in Table #5.

Main findings that are reflected in this count of themes and codes are explored additionally in the following chapter, but it is important to note that utilizing the codes provide me with a framework to understand the differences between the four degrees. For example, in “seeking support,” there existed zero incidents of sharing successes with practice. This illustrates that the new teachers initiating the discussions focused more on their doubts and fears when beginning conversations. This practice shifted when members moved to the “extending support” category - it was here that even self identified new teachers began to identify and isolate positive experiences they had with curriculum, administration and students.
Themes and Codes Illustrated by the Four Degrees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes/# out of 90 discussions</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consuming Posts</td>
<td>Citing other discussions - 45</td>
<td>Referencing other discussions on the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Support(^{19})</td>
<td>Identifying oneself - 90</td>
<td>Talking about what kind or type of teacher one is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describing school culture - 68</td>
<td>Telling about home school</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking advice - 47</td>
<td>Asking for guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking resources - 35</td>
<td>Asking for resources that could be incorporated into practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking feedback on practice - 21</td>
<td>Asking what other members think about what they are doing or planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking opinions - 23</td>
<td>Asking what other members think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing fears - 59</td>
<td>Sharing fears about the practice of teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing doubts - 36</td>
<td>Sharing doubts about the practice of teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing narratives - 71</td>
<td>Sharing stories about teaching or practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing details about own practice - 82</td>
<td>Sharing stories from own classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing successes with practice - 0</td>
<td>Describing positive experiences in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing perceived failures with practice - 66</td>
<td>Describing negative experiences in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on prior learning - 32</td>
<td>Questioning and deliberating decisions and actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on choices and actions - 45</td>
<td>Deconstructing what has been done in practice already</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citing other discussions - 15</td>
<td>Referencing other discussions on the space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Following up - expressing thanks - 77</td>
<td>Thanking others for support after a discussion has developed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Following up - providing updates - 20</td>
<td>Referring to changes or updates in practice/approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Following up - asking additional questions - 18</td>
<td>Asking questions not directly related to original post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing support</td>
<td>Offering positive reinforcement - 199</td>
<td>Providing positive comments regarding another’s comments or post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offering encouragement - 225</td>
<td>Providing positive comments to support</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offering support on behalf of the community - 106</td>
<td>Addressing teacher on behalf of other EC Ning members</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comisserating - 202</td>
<td>Empathizing with another teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing own practice - 225</td>
<td>Providing examples from own classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentoring – Directive - 118</td>
<td>Providing commanding advice to a less seasoned teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentoring – emotionally supportive - 167</td>
<td>Providing supportive advice to a less seasoned teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggesting resources - 158</td>
<td>Telling about outside resources teacher should look into</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Suggesting action - 190</td>
<td>Pointing out specific actions/strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing tangible resources - 145</td>
<td>Posting links or documents with another</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing disagreement - 49</td>
<td>Disagreeing or extending line of thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing opinions - 177</td>
<td>Telling others what they think</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing agreement - 134</td>
<td>Agreeing with another member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citing other sources - 129</td>
<td>Referencing books or scholars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citing other members - 164</td>
<td>Referencing other members of the EC Ning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citing other discussions - 45</td>
<td>Referencing other discussions on the space</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Following up – checking in - 15</td>
<td>Checking to see how another is doing after a discussion has developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asking for follow up - 34</td>
<td>Asking a member to check base or update</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting collaboration</td>
<td>Connecting outside of EC Ning - 13</td>
<td>Asking to connect beyond realms of the space</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{19}\) While members sought support within others’ discussions, this theme represents original discussion posts that created threads of discussion themselves.
**Degree #1: Reading Posts**

It is no secret that being a teacher can be an isolating endeavor (Lortie, 1975). Lieberman & Pointer Mace (2009) found that this isolation can affect the ways in which beginners join and take up roles in the teaching profession: “In solitary professions, such as teaching, where most of the practice is done singly, it is difficult for pre service or new members to learn to participate in the community” (p. 92). Implicitly referencing the difficult nature in learning to participate, three out of four interview participants described how they gradually approached membership in the EC Ning by first reading and consuming the posts of others. For example, when asked to estimate the time she spent on the EC Ning reading versus posting, Jolene responded, “I would say that I spend about 80 percent of my time on EC Ning reading other peoples’ posts” (personal communication, November 16, 2013). Leia and Cecilia’s numbers were even greater; they both estimated that they spent 98% of their time reading posts (personal communication, November, 2013). This data from the interview participants coincides with the ethnographic observations. While ascertaining which members of an online space are merely reading is almost impossible solely from participant observation, there are other cues that demonstrate this phenomenon. The most obvious provided by the public statistics shared on the New Teachers space is the number of views associated with a post. All of the discussions posted within the time frame of this study contained more views than comments. For example, while the following post, titled “Miserable First Year Teacher” only had 18 responses, it received a total of 314 views, indicating a measure of reading that far exceeded the rate of responding:
It is useful to note that this observation is also supported by other research on online social networks. For example, McConnell & Huba (2006) coined the 1% rule that estimates that only one percent of members in an online social network actually are in charge of creating the content. The other 98 percent are what this study terms readers.

*Feeling a sense of commiseration*

While reading others’ posts helped beginning teachers feel like they could more readily access the larger community, the interview participants also described the benefits of being able to relate to others. Jolene discussed how utilizing the New Teachers group to work through novice insecurities was helpful during her first year, especially when she was able to read about others’ experiences and relate:

It’s nice to be able to go somewhere where you can, you know, be that creeper in the background. You can read what people post and not
necessarily even tell people that you’re having a hard time, or tell people that you are having a hard time but not necessarily have to say it to their faces. So, uhm, I just think it’s really valuable to have, and everybody there takes, takes it so seriously, which I think is awesome because also you can find veteran teachers at the school you work at that are jaded or don’t really have new or interesting ideas. So that’s also, like, you know, a passion kill, if you will (personal communication, October 15, 2013).

What Jolene considers being “a creeper” is really just the beginning stages of legitimate peripheral participation, and while affinity spaces typically don’t conform to hierarchical structures as demonstrated by the fact that new teachers create 100 percent of the discussion posts, new members of a space gain access and learn about the workings and practices of the space before they engage fully in the practices of the space themselves. She also hits upon a major consideration of online teacher learning spaces, that they provide teachers a safe and comfortable space to share uncertainties and insecurities away from what can be at times unsupportive local school cultures. The idea of not having to tell someone “to their face” what a teacher is struggling with seemed to resonate with other interview participants as well.

Leia also discussed that she realized benefits from reading about what other were struggling with or tackling, “I think it gives you that that feeling that there’s other people that, you know, if you are struggling with it chances are there are going to be at least five people that you could run into that are struggling with the exact same thing, but probably more.” (personal communication, December 13, 2013).”
She also cautioned how new members to the New Teachers group might get distracted by the resources that both it and the other areas of EC Ning afforded:

> When people ask me about it or when I tell them about it, I tell them to make sure that the first time they go on there to, you know, block off at least an hour because they are going to playing around for a while (laughs) because basically what I tell people about it in general is that if you want to find something, you will find something on there, no matter what your situation is. And even if you don't find what you're looking for, and you can post a question, chances are people are going to answer it. I would advise new teachers to use it like that because it does make things a lot easier (personal communication, December 13, 2013).

The notion of the space as one that allows for teachers to “find” what they are looking for was one that other interview participants described as beneficial. This knowledge that they could get support for topics and issues that might not have already been touched upon helped them to transition to the next degree of participation within the space.

**Degree #2 : Seeking Support**

While membership in EC Ning can assist beginning teachers in bridging the gap between the university and their K-12 placements just by providing them with stories and examples of others’ practice, their own contributions in the spaces are equally important. For example, Chen, Chen, and Tsai (2009) found that teachers felt more comfortable sharing and being social in an online forum and that the amount
of time for reflection in the asynchronous (across time and geography) space was a benefit. This was supported by both the interview participants’ accounts of their own practices and observations of the EC Ning space. Many of the interview participants talked about initiating their own discussion threads. Themes for their content creation spanned topics, including content-based, philosophical/political, employment related, and personal. 20

In addition to initiating discussions to fill a gap, Jolene described how an unexpected challenge during her student teaching instigated a post:

The first time that I ever posted on there, my professor told me to do it because I was panicking because a parent was saying that they were really religious and they didn't want their child to read the text that was in our prescribed curriculum. I didn't really know what to do for an alternative; it was for Sherman Alexie's Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian. So I posted about it (on EC Ning) and it was reassuring (personal communication, December 13, 2013).

Jolene's notion of reading the EC Ning space as silent snooping is indicative of identity in some sense. In a later interview, she described herself as “stealing” from the other teachers when she sought out resources in the space. At the same time, what drove Jolene to initially participate in the New Teachers group was not of her own violation, but because of a need for advice on an important interaction

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20 As many might suspect, discussions around curriculum and classroom management were the most frequent and often produced the lengthiest conversations. However, these themes will not be explored in the context of this study, as the aim is to understand the patterns of participation that members take up. The topics covered on the site did not stay static. In fact, many times, the topical focus on the conversation seemed to have little affect on how members participated.
concerning a student and a parent. This insistence on the behalf of her supervisor, while not mandatory, prompted her to turn to the space for guidance. In addition, she found that the interactions that ensured were valuable, ranging from recommendations for alternative texts to engaging in alternative perspectives on the issue, like how she might positively interact with concerned parents. She likened the transition of going from reading to posting to ripping off a Band-Aid; doing it once made it easier to do again.

Cecilia also talked about there being a transition from reading to posting participation, and that it took her a while to become confident enough with the types of interactions on the space to feel comfortable sharing about her own practices. This degree of participation, for both women, also invited self-identified experienced teachers into the group and gave them a chance to share their knowledge of practice and bits of wisdom they had picked up in their years on the job. While what the new teachers on the site focused on within each category varied, new teachers’ posts invited a variety of practices from experienced teachers. Many shared narratives from their own practice. Others took up more directive mentoring roles, providing beginners even with checklists to complete. Most of their posts ended with “any advice would be great” or “what have others done to deal with this?” or just plain “help!” The new teachers on the site seem to want to work through what it means to be a teacher and the experienced teacher members seem to want to help them through the process; the conversations that happened within that space were vehicles for that growth to happen within what appeared to be a trusting and supportive community.
Sharing struggles and discussing local school culture

Two of the most common practices that materialized on the New Teachers group were when teachers sought support, shared their struggles or insecurities and discussed their local school cultures, among a host of others that would fall under the heading of seeking advice. Of all 90 discussions posted in the New Teachers group between October 2012 and May 2014, not one of the members in the New Teachers space initiated new discussion threads that discussed their perceived successes in the classroom. Rather, they focused on their fears, doubts, struggles, insecurities and uncertainties.

Below is a second look at Maddy's post titled, “Do You Ever Feel Like You Don’t Know What You’re Doing?” Instead of analyzing for content, this selection provides an example of a large representation of the practices taken up by beginning teachers as they participated on the space. The bolded language represents codes that can be attributed to Maddy’s language moves:

Do you ever feel like you don’t know what you’re doing? I do. (doubt) A lot lately, I’m not sure why... My school never gave me a set ‘curriculum’ or anything (school culture) so I feel like I’m just trying to remember what my teachers taught me in middle school. I don’t think that’s the right way to go about it at all though... In college we never really learned how to develop curriculum so I feel like I have no clue what I’m doing here. (teacher education). I’ve done a thematic unit on identity, a poetry unit, and attempted writing workshop (which did not go as well as I’d hoped!)

21 Bolded terms in data excerpts represent codes applied by researcher
(sharing perceived failures) I don't have regular collaboration time with anyone (school culture) and am the only 6th and 7th grade language arts teacher. Sometimes I just feel clueless. Is this normal? Any ways to battle this feeling? Or to become a better teacher??? (asking for advice and opinion) (retrieved from: EC Ning New Teachers Group).

While introduced earlier during the topical description of EC Ning, when observing this post through the lens of bricolage analysis, Maddy references remembering what her teachers did in middle school directly relates to the phenomenon that scholars (Hammerness et al, 2005; Lortie, 1975) discuss as a problem that new teachers face when they journey from their teacher education programs to their first full-time positions, where knowledge transfer is unfortunately halted and they default to their own apprenticeship of observation. Here, she seems to suggest that because of a lack of opportunity to plan with other teachers in her local school, the New Teachers group offered this her the outlet for support that she was lacking in her professional life.

Perhaps due to the provocative title and the obvious reference to new teacher burnout, this forum received nine replies within six hours of being posted, a large amount for the predominantly asynchronous space. Responses ranged from the affirming “It will be okay” from seasoned teachers to the collegial and commiserative “I feel the same way!” of other beginning teachers. Another teacher also a self-identified new teacher, explicitly referred to the EC Ning as a place of support, likening teaching to an art form:
Developing curriculum is an art, and like most arts, the work is not perfectible. Whenever I thought I’d designed the ideal lesson (commiseration), a new group of teenagers arrived to bring me to my knees and teach me that I needed to think again. Writing workshop is a complex scenario. Don’t beat yourself up for not getting it right the first time out.

(encouragement) There are lots of folks here on the EC Ning who can help (community) (retrieved from: EC Ning New Teachers Group).

While this response might not be an explicit resolution to the original problem, it is representative of how the New Teachers group acts as a safe place where the desperation or not feeling confident can be expressed. Trust seems to be created, as shown in other similar examples and through the interview data provided by the four participants, because of the responses these teachers receive, which is supportive and void of criticality or judgment. Much of the coding done with the New Teacher excerpts revealed similar, emotional support, like offering positive reinforcement or just a sense of community care. This is shown in the use of words like, “don’t beat yourself up” and the reminder of the support of the EC Ning community. Her offer of encouragement and commiseration is representative of many of the interactions in the environment.

Utilizing narrative to elicit advice

An additional emergent practice of new teachers on the site was seeking support by offering detailed and personal stories about their experiences both inside and outside of school. These narratives were often the most frequented (most viewed and most responded to). Again, we revisit a post from Stan, who sought
advice on how to reconcile his social and professional lives. In setting up the conversation, he talked openly about how the death of a friend was affecting his teaching:

A recent roadblock I've recently encountered in my teaching career is something that’s not in the classroom. I recently lost a friend in car accident a little over three months ago and I've had really good efforts in not letting it get involved with my teaching. **(sharing narrative)** But of course, it always happens to insert itself in very strange and funny times. When I was in my college class, I actually found an essay written by my friend. Totally caught me off guard, but I kept my composure. At the same time, I felt the wind was knocked out. I know over time, emotional maturity **(identification)** will make this loss a little less biting, but I was wondering what do you all do when your personal life suffers a hit? Do you try to hide it or do you let your students in on what’s going on? **(seeking advice)** (retrieved from: EC Ning New Teachers Group).

Stan seems to explore an essential identity struggle that many teachers have, the question of how much to share with students and how much to leave at the classroom door. He makes common language moves like sharing narrative by providing details about his struggle, specifically relating to the tragic death of his friend and by identifying himself by describing his “emotional maturity.” These moves both invited and elicited a wide range of responses from other members, which ranged from supportive words of encouragement to other members sharing their own stories of grief and struggle. This demonstrates multiple examples of the
practice of commiserating (see Appendix C) that many teachers employed when responding to one another. One experienced teacher wrote the following reply:

I've been teaching for almost 20 years (God, has it really been that long???)

*(identification)* and I have to say that I am first a human, then I am a teacher. I am always human first. *(identification)*. Look at this from a kids’ perspective. I’m a kid in your class. You’ve been joking with me and smiling at me in the hallway with a "Hey!" for the first few weeks of school. You welcome me at the door of the classroom every day. Suddenly, you don't do those things anymore. You aren’t smiling as much as you used to. You snap at the class for no reason, and you yelled at us yesterday for being loud.

I am at the developmental level where EVERYTHING is about me. I can’t understand that you have a life. It's all about me, me, me. So of course I assume that I’ve done something wrong, you hate me, and I now hate your class, your subject, and that stupid tie you wore today. I am NOT answering that question you asked in class, even though I know the answer. *(offering alternative view)*

So......While we tell kids to leave their problems at the door, we also need to show them what it's like to be human *(identification)* and to overcome life's insurmountable difficulties. I have a brother who died of leukemia -- I tell them about it when we discuss a particular novel. I tell them how painful it was for me when my friends didn’t come to his funeral,

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22 In addition to alternative perspectives, debate and disagreements were present within the New Teachers discussion groups, but are explored in depth here.
and when they ignored the whole thing because they didn't know what to say. It's a huge relief to some of them that 1) I survived the death of a sibling and 2) I can talk about it openly. *(sharing narrative and practice)*

Do what feels right. But in all of it, spend a few minutes in your students’ seats and imagine what they are seeing. What do THEY need? Just go from there, and you will be fine. *(providing advice and encouragement)*

(retrieved from: EC Ning New Teachers Group).

This response to Stan’s discussion post is especially telling for the interactions that take place between beginning and experienced teachers in the space, supporting the notion that members in an affinity space are not restricted to linear hierarchies based on experience. While the member provided the advice and encouragement that Stan was asking for in his initial post, she also shared a narrative from her own life. Her reply also suggests that Stan thinks alternatively about his situation putting his own students’ perspectives first, something that is especially hard for new teachers to remember and enact. This type of mentorship practice emerges quite often in the teacher-to-teacher interactions. In addition, she utilized the pronouns “we” when referring to teachers, including Stan in on this identification process. Not only can her response be analyzed as a supportive response, but it also works to help position herself and Stan as colleagues.

Jolene commented that this supportive nature of both the experienced teachers and the beginning teachers in the New Teachers group was a stark contrast to the school culture of her first teaching assignment:
There’s definitely this voice that kind of says ‘They’re going to think you’re not a good teacher’. I think that’s why it’s so comforting to see a brand new teachers on (EC Ning) that go through what I went through. I really want to help them because it can be isolating being a brand new teacher. You know, it really depends of where you are, but I find, specifically, inner city schools where like, there’s a lot of people that are jaded. I don’t want that to be true but it is true. They make it more isolating for new teachers that want to do their best and want to, I don’t know, make a difference really. They need the fire flamed, you know? They don’t need the fire fanned, they don’t need, I don’t know, maybe I’m just on the other side of it where I see a desire to I don’t know. Maybe ten years from now ill feel differently like oh that’s what I looked like as a newbie (personal communication, December 13, 2013).

These types of interactions that aided beginning teachers in feeling like valued and credible members of the larger teaching community, as reported by interview participants, helped them to feel comfortable sharing their own ideas and resources with others in the group, which is the next degree of participation: “Extending Support”.

**Degree #3: Extending Support**

Oftentimes, interview participants described the act of sharing ideas and resources with others on the EC Ning space as both identity affirming and community building. A few of them even used terms like “giving back” and “supporting others” in describing their choice to move from reading and asking for
help to actually providing help to others. Similar to how Jolene expressed the desire to help other new teachers in the previous section, Leia feels compelled to provide feedback to other members because of the help that she’s gotten from others in similar situations:

If somebody’s struggling with a book that I’ve been teaching and having success *(sharing success)* with, you know, I like to share with them what works for me, whether it works for them or not, you know, might as well give it a shot to help somebody out. And then also anytime anyone is struggling with behavioral issues. I always perk up when I see those because I think in a lot of cases we all struggle with the same types of situations *(commiseration)*, you know? (personal communication, December 13, 2013).

This type of trend toward commiseration is a typical practice among the other members of the New Teachers group. Not only does Leia describe the topics that she prefers to respond to, but she also talks about sharing her successes with other teachers. As mentioned previously, this conversational practice of sharing successes is absent in the previous stage of seeking advice and guidance. It wasn't until other new teachers were coming to the aid of peers that they shared these positive experiences. This has important implications for identification, perhaps even indicating that new members, while not confident in asserting their skills, will employ those skills when others need it. It provides beginning teachers with a way to try on their emerging teacher identities, by taking a stance and making claims about the type of teaching they prefer or do through the act of providing advice to
others. Beach and Myers (2001) discuss how computer-based platforms not only foster discussion, but become a space for this type of meaning making:

In these virtual worlds, they also can experiment with different rules and stances by using alternative forms of language without concern for the constraints of physical gender, class, race, age, or disability markers that inhibit their participation in lived-world, face-to-face interaction (p. 167).

Interview participants specifically attended to the constraints of face-to-face interactions Beach & Myers outline and the idea of being able to be “invisible” to members of their local school communities while also seeking guidance (Jolene, 2013). This is also affirmed in the observations conducted in the New Teachers group, as some beginning teachers engaged in the practice of reaching out to others. For example, a new teacher named Stacy, who was struggling with attending to conflict in her classroom, started a discussion. She told the story of how her principal had observed her that day and how she knew that she could have improved upon the way in which she led class discussion. Stacy’s discussion post was saturated with places where she reflects on the lesson and alludes to considering alternative approaches; finally, she asks the New Teacher members for resources for next time. The amount of responses that she got, from both self-identified beginning and experienced teachers, represented a combination of peer commiseration and mentoring. The first response from was from one of the interview participants, Roxanne:

23 See coding guide in Appendix C for definitions and examples
You are not alone, I have to say first. My principal came in on one of my lessons and, of course, pointed out all that I was doing wrong.

(commiseration) That being said, I think you should work your students up to something as cataclysmic as the Holocaust. Ask them how they would handle more real-life situations, and ask them specifics. (giving advice) Instead of asking, "How would you help someone in a dangerous situation," ask them about a specific situation - "How would you help someone who just got robbed and came up to you?" That kind of thing. The more specific you get with your students, especially the special ed (which I teach)

(connecting to her own practice) kids, the better. It's really hard for them to grasp those abstract thinking questions. I mean, REALLY hard. As you get answers to these kinds of questions, you can morph into the more high-level thinking questions your unit requires. Hope this helps!

(encouragement) (retrieved from: EC Ning New Teachers Group).

In addition to providing solace in the form of commiseration, Roxanne also provided Stacy with concrete advice and suggestion a course of action for next time. This response to another's post shows that Roxanne is providing insight on knowledge that she has gained in her experience teaching, which she does by connecting the initial post to her own experiences, both with her principal and her students. Stacy, the creator of the initial post, was the next to respond:

Doh! Thanks! (offering thanks) We have definitely had conversations about smaller conflicts before. The last book they read was about a bully faced with the choice of using a gun to exact revenge or learning to talk about his
feelings. **(sharing practice)** We spent an entire week familiarizing the class with the Holocaust but you’re right. The more concrete, the better. (retrieved from: EC Ning New Teachers Group).

Stacy’s response not only directly attended to the suggestions posed by Roxanne, but also shared additional, contextual slices of her own classroom. This represents many of the follow-up responses that teachers presented within discussions on the New Teachers space, as teachers attempted to share the necessary context that is inherently missing from these online spaces. Another response that Stacy received was from an experienced teacher, Becca:

> Sounds like you’re on your want to becoming a fine teacher.

**(encouragement)** First, you’re reflective of your own practice. You’re willing to ask for help. You’ve the courage to try something new. Each of these skills will help you develop in to an effective educator, satisfied with her choice to become a teacher. The Think, Pair, Share strategy and the Jig-Saw discussions are worth pursuing. It’ll take several times doing them before you and your students figure out what works best in your setting. Give yourself time to refine the practices. **(mentoring)** You may wish to throw into the mix opportunities for students draw or diagram what they’re thinking about the reading or topic under consideration. Perhaps offer them the opportunity to sketch a storyboard of three to five frames and then share these sketches with a partner, triad or small group **(suggesting practice)**. Please know it takes time to be able to adapt on the run.
(encouragement) You’re getting lots of ideas and you will have a trove from which to select and implement those that fit the situation.

We look forward to hearing of your progress. (supporting on behalf of community) (retrieved from: EC Ning New Teachers Group).

Becca’s response above displays an example of when an experienced teacher takes up a mentoring role within the space. When teachers mentor others, it looks and sounds different than when peers commiserate. While some degree of commiseration is present, experienced teachers utilize their responses to both encourage and bolster others by letting new teachers know that they are not alone or wrong in feeling insecure and by sharing their own lessons learned on their journey of being and becoming teachers. This leads to an interesting dynamic between newcomers and others.

**Breaking Down the Barrier Between Expert and Novice**

While experience teachers took up mentoring and the new teachers commiseration, an unexpected finding of the study were the interactions between experts and novices. Observing interactions in the space also offered a fresh look at how beginners and “old timers” interact. There are numerous instances where seasoned and new teachers come together. For example, very early in her membership, Roxanne was surprised to get a response from Jim Burke:

You know, it’s funny, because one time I emailed a question. Before I graduated I needed, uhm, I needed to do a portfolio and go through discussion with teachers about my own experiences as a grad student. I had
questions about, uhm, they emailed me the questions beforehand and then I had a question about one of the questions, and, uhm, I emailed them. I thought I emailed the New Teachers group but I ended up emailing Jim Burke (laughs) and he responded and said, ‘Oh, you emailed me instead of the group, but this is the information you needed, you know, you can look at the back of my book, and his book helped me, just like this little chart he had and I couldn't find this information anywhere else. (personal communication, January 5, 2014).

Jolene elaborated on Roxanne’s tale but unpacking what it meant to be approached by others that might be deemed experts. “Just hearing people’s responses and seeing that like, I don't know, that they saw me as a professional just like them, even though I’m in my first year, you know, it felt really good. So it wasn’t necessarily in the feedback that I received, but it made me feel part of a professional discourse” (personal communication, October 16, 2013). Being “seen” as a professional, as Jolene points out, works to help bolster her own identification. Through her interactions in the space, she identifies that she began to feel more of a part of the “professional discourse” of teaching English Language Arts.

**Degree #4: Externally Collaborating**

Although the patterns of participation within the New Teachers space do not necessarily evolve in a linear fashion (For example, unlike the other three, Roxanne shared that she never felt intimidated to post on the EC Ning site) the degree of developing collaboratively seems to take some time. While in the larger space, evidence of external collaboration can be seen more frequently, for example, in
posts about meeting up at conferences like NCTE, for many members in the New Teachers space, indication of collaboration is never seen through participant observation. For the purposes of this exploration, collaborating is the act of communicating or working with other teachers from the EC Ning outside of the EC Ning online space. While many teachers share documents and other resources with one another in the exchanges, some also go further to connect outside of the EC Ning space, by sending private messages, emails or even connecting via other online networks like Facebook or LinkedIn. One seasoned teacher, Carly, invited a New Teachers member to email her for more personal interaction and to gather other resources. Jolene, in one of her interviews, even discussed a time when another teacher, newly retired, sent her books in the mail.

There were many instances that displayed the potential for this external interaction. In addition to members keeping in touch, some members frequented the site regularly and seem to become “regulars,” posting on various forums and even referring to other discussions within the New Teachers group.

**Conclusion**

This data showed that instead of being a linear process, the patterns that teachers took up seemed to be recursive. For example, at times, participants would “extend support” for others without ever “seeking support” for themselves. Interview participants discussed how they took up different practices on the space depending on their perceived need at the time, a hallmark of effective teacher learning explored earlier. Jolene attended to this in our third interview, “I use the Ning less now, however, because I am able to come up with my own ideas more
frequently, but I imagine I will be using it again in the summer (as she prepared for the next year)” (personal communication, May 22, 2014).

Based on observations, the two middle degrees “seeking support” and “extending support” were the easiest to study; they were the more “public” ways to interact. “Reading posts” and “externally collaborating” can be termed the more private ways to participate in the New Teachers group, since they are less easy to observe or understand from textual interactions.

\[24\] Except in cases where teachers communicated via other social networks, which was not a focus of this study
Chapter 7

Discussion, Implications, and Future Study

Discussion

This study works to reframe current conversations about membership in online teacher learning communities by negotiating issues of self-directed learning and the exploration of teaching identity in the context of a community-centered environment. It demonstrates evidence of how these types of spaces have the potential to enable educators to interact beyond the realm of a traditional classroom, above the constraints of traditional professional development and the sometimes unforgiving atmospheres of local school culture. This is especially important, as seen in the findings of this study, when teachers have low levels of support at their local school communities. Many times, when this is the case, they are able to find solace and growth through participation in an external online teacher learning community like EC Ning. This provides new teachers with a freedom to experiment with a multiplicity of roles, positioning themselves as novice and expert even simultaneously at times, in a way that many do not experience in their local school communities.

The degrees of participation that were revealed through data analysis support the idea that an important type of teacher learning can happen when new teachers are able to make choices about how and when that learning occurs. For the teachers that participated in this study, that learning encompasses how to become a part of a teaching community and how to participate to varying degrees as a member of that community. The types of participation can be utilized by beginning
practicing teachers not only for support in their day-to-day endeavors, but also by offering a space for a rich community of teacher researchers, coming together across geographic and temporal constraints, to support one another and take up their own professional learning with a level of agency not often afforded by traditional professional development structures (Easton, 2008).

**Impact on Teacher Learning and Retention**

This study provides a possible alternative to how both teacher education programs and K-12 stakeholders can help support new teachers during the difficult transition time between their teacher education programs and beginning full time teaching positions, possibly even lessening the threat of teacher attrition. Because the cognitive load of the first years of teaching is heavy, taking advantage of the distributed intelligence of the online affinity space has potential to aid in teacher learning. Mason and Rennie (2008) point out, “Social networking encourages collective contribution, not individual ownership” (p. 14). This notion of community over the individual, if fostered in online social networks, impacts teacher education in important ways. One includes the notion of collaborative collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994) where educators work together toward shared goals under their own volition and for their own purposes. Online teacher networks provide a rich platform for these types of groups to develop, situated in concepts of practice. According to Putnam and Borko (2000), these influences create strong mini discourse communities that can be long lasting. A defining aspect of research with beginning teachers is that they need sustained, supported professional development, especially in the years after their connection to their teacher education programs.
and universities is discontinued. Ball and Cohen (1999) also point out that often, professional development for all teachers can fall short of this goal:

Teachers are thought to need updating rather than opportunities for serious and sustained learning of curriculum, students, and teaching. Instead they are offered one-shot workshops with advice and tips of things to try, catalogues filled with blackline master activities for the latest educational ideas (cooperative learning, problem solving, literary analysis, or something else), six-step plans for a host of teaching challenges, and much more (p.4).

In addition to the pressures experienced by new teachers to continue inquiring and learning about what it means to be and become teachers, Fullan (2006) describes an implementation dip concerning teacher professional development where there is often a concentrated amount of professional development up front and at once that eventually diminishes, thus decreasing its effectiveness over time. Online teacher communities can negate this phenomenon because they provide semi-permanent spaces where teachers can interact with one another in meditational and mentoring relationships, share in the knowledge of teaching and work on their developing sense of their professional identities.

Because the focus of this study was a content-specific site, there is some evidence that such an element capitalized on an already functioning semiotic domain (Gee, 2007), the practice of teaching English Language Arts. Sharing the same language and Discourse patterns seemed to allow members to more easily interact and share knowledge. As shown by the data, participation in the EC Ning New Teachers space fostered teacher identification language practices and allowed
them to move through varying degrees of participation in a teacher learning community. While there are multiple, repeated interactions between certain New Teachers group members, they do not necessarily engage with the same people interacting over long-term situations, another element of an affinity space supported by the theoretical framework (Gee, 2007). This seems to be part of what might make the space beneficial to members, since they don't have to wait for a specific mentor or peer to interact with them because there are others willing to do so. Jolene addressed that though there are not people that she personally repeatedly connects with, there are people that post frequently on the EC Ning that she recognizes and says that she “respects” – she did name one member, Beth, for example, another beginning teacher. Roxanne had a similar take on the situation; she recalled a specific member, a seasoned teacher that she found to be especially helpful:

And then another lady on the new teachers group. I don’t know if she’s a mentor, but she’s been working a while with new teachers and she’s been posting ever since I’ve been on it and that’s really cool, I think, that she gives very common sense good advice, I think. She’s always on the new teacher Ning and I think, you know, I wonder if she’s just there out of the kindness of her heart, to mentor the new teachers or they assigned her that? (personal communication, January 5, 2014).

The idea of recognition between both beginning and experienced teachers supports the notion that traditional hierarchies of experience can be broken down in an informal teacher learning space like the New Teachers group, which also
functions as an affinity space because members come and go within and beyond the space and are less tethered to one another. Because participation in the EC Ning New Teachers group allows members to move fluidly among the different degrees of participation uncovered by this study, it may also motivate members to continue membership in the space, despite occasional disagreements or tensions. As Jolene pointed out, while her active participation level waned as she began to feel more comfortable in the classroom, she feels like she can always “go back” when she need support again. Again, this reinforces the focus on the space, not the community members, a defining feature of an affinity space (Gee, 2007).

Teacher Identity Formation

Beginning educators are continually developing notions about what it means to teach and who they are as teachers. It is within teacher affinity spaces like EC Ning, Britzman (1991) offered, that new teachers negotiate varying discourses (normative and non normative) associated with the profession of teaching. Zeichner and Liston (2014) also point out: “teachers can support and sustain each other’s growth. If teachers see their individual situations linked to those of their colleagues, the likelihood of structural change is greater than with teachers remaining isolated reflective practitioners” (p. 60). Recognition aside, identity is not static. In some sense, beginning teachers experiment with pedagogical terms and concepts much like trying on clothes with friends at a mall. This ever-evolving teacher identification requires continued support and mediation (Baker-Doyle, 2011). While many beginning teachers receive backing in some way, either from their university settings or their K-12 institutions, more and more, online teacher networks have
also become places where teachers can work through notions of what it means to be a teacher.

In addition to support systems, the ways in which beginning teachers share and reflect upon their pedagogical experiences can also influence their evolving identities. When they have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with others about their uncertainties or their triumphs, as the beginning teachers of this study prove are able, they tend to display more reflective stances and make positive changes to their teaching practice (Pringle, 2002). While methods courses and induction programs work to this end, digital tools like online teacher learning spaces provide additional arenas for the collaboration and sharing of pedagogical knowledge. Through the practice of making their ideas about teaching public via discourse with others, teachers can gain valuable insight into their own beliefs and dynamic teaching identities. The social nature of these digital platforms affords beginning teachers with space to take up practices, express themselves or try on different subject positions through language as seen in the shifts that happen in data from the Seeking to the Extending degrees of participation.

**Additional Considerations**

**Scaffolding and Digital Criticality**

As is often the case with K-12 students, we do teachers a disservice when we send them off from teacher education programs thinking that they are done learning and growing: “We misrepresent the process of learning to teach when we consider new teachers as finished products” (Feiman-Nemser, 2003, 26). The point here is that as we continually refine and revise our ELA teacher preparation programs, we
might be well served to reconceptualize our understanding of where our responsibilities for our ELA candidates end and how our programs might best support our candidates so that both they and their students are best served. This may include attention to the digital practices with which they take up.

One consideration is that as English Language Arts teachers, we also have a responsibility to teach our own students the rules and literacy practices of the world around them. On the same token, it is also our responsibility as educators to enact and model these practices. Participation in online teacher networks can arguably challenge identity formation and development, requiring beginning teachers to take stances on issues and think about how they represent themselves to peers in their teaching community in positive ways, furthering them on their path to teacherness. However, it would be remiss to assume that beginning teachers know how to take up critical literacy practices in online spaces. From the data produced and analyzed in this study, there is not enough evidence to confidently assert that new teachers within the space were critical about the posts that they were reading. A discussion with beginning teachers about how they might approach content they read in an online teacher learning community is essential, but not yet clearly facilitated in any of the studies based around beginning teachers and their use of online digital tools.

While the benefits can be numerous, it is important to note that online teacher learning networks like EC Ning are not inherently supportive of induction phase teacher development. Practices that beginning teachers take up in these spaces and the meaning making that ensues is the deciding factor in how helpful membership in an online teacher network will be for them. They must critically
examine both their own and others’ contributions to the spaces within which they are sharing and gathering information. Luehmann and Fink (2009) put it simply when addressing a similar issue with the use of blogs in K-12 classrooms: “While the tool controls the means, the students and teacher construct the meaning” (p. 3). Since online communities often rely on the contributions of members, there is no guarantee that members will utilize the space in professional manners or for pedagogical growth. It is up to teacher educators, and, later, K-12 school districts, to assist beginning teachers in developing practices and habits that lead to ongoing and continued professional development and community building. This includes critically analyzing the information and interactions they encounter as members of online teacher networks.

**Time and Access**

Time and access are commodities when discussing any teacher learning. All four of the interview participants named elements like time and access as barriers to their use of the EC Ning for support. Both teacher education programs and school districts that hire new teachers need to take up the onus for providing teachers with the resources they need, teaching them habits and ways of professional being that they can carry with them throughout their teaching careers. Participation in national, regional and local conferences and groups of teachers is one way, but expanding that support to the digital realm is important, too. In addition to offering time to entertain membership in online communities, teachers also should have their learning be part of their workday (Hirsh, 2009). Though difficult, scholars
show that planned professional learning that allows teachers to learn from each other is important:

We believe that districts and states can support professional learning communities by providing teachers with continuous blocks of time devoted to a variety of ways for teachers to teach teachers the strategies that have been successful with their own students, using technology to illustrate good teaching, and building networks of teacher communities where teacher leaders can provide such professional development with their colleagues” (Lieberman & Mace, 2008, p. 227).

Whether web-based or not, it is clear that teachers need a place to learn and grow together. While the notion of affinity spaces can assist teacher educators in thinking about the application of online teacher networks, it is helpful to remember that the communal aspect of any online learning network is not inherent to the tool. For an online community to develop, the members must work to establish and sustain one. Barab, MaKinster, & Moore (2001) suggest that to fully capitalize on an online networking space, members must leverage already an existing community.

The English Companion Ning’s historical grounding in the professional organization, NCTE, is one example where an online teacher network does just that; its members, part of an existing community of educators, continued their organization’s conversations and interactions on the online forum and extended this community to others in the larger discourse of teaching English Language Arts.

Chen, Y., Chen, N., & Tsai, C. (2009) also point out two additional concerns with online teacher networks as professional development: 1) there is an
assumption that teachers have the time to spend completing professional
development outside of the context of the school day because of the asynchronous
nature. 2) It can be daunting for teachers that are not comfortable with online
interfaces and digital platforms, which can diminish the effectiveness and can affect
teachers’ choices in taking advantage of digital professional development
opportunities. Not all teachers feel comfortable or even find benefits from utilizing
online teacher networks; it is important to note that they can (and should) be
supplements to an already well-organized teacher education program. As Boling and
Martin (2005) point out, “Teachers need the opportunity to discuss philosophies,
experiment with new techniques in their classroom, and evaluate its effectiveness.
The development of a learning community ensures successful change among
participants” (p. 11). Online teacher networks are no substitute for a supportive,
collegial school culture, but they can effectively complement a professional
development community where teacher growth and change are valued and
privileged.

School Culture
School culture is an essential part of professional development of teachers,
yet online teacher spaces like EC Ning do not provide a strong connection to
members’ local school contexts. If a positive school culture exists, this can be
overcome in the online space by adding and adapting a private group for a specific
community of people, at a specific school location. While models like study groups,
critical friends groups, and lesson studies (Easton, 2008; Nolan & Hoover, 2007,
VanDeweghe, 2006) are gaining popularity for their ability to attend to various
teacher needs and skills and leveraging local school context, they aren’t always available to teachers when the school culture doesn’t support or provide them. As McCann, Johannessen & Ricca (2005) point out, “In schools with small faculties and more limited resources, or in schools where the culture does not elevate the importance of professional involvement, it is all the more critical that new teachers establish professional links outside of school” (p. 127).

In addition, while scholars of teacher learning favor job-embedded efforts (Easton, 2008), the fact that online teacher networks are separate from induction phase teachers’ work environments can actually be beneficial. In the space of online teacher networks, they can decompress and express inquisitiveness about teaching without looking unprofessional to those that are supervising and evaluating them. They can dialogue with others that might be having similar struggles or conflicts and cohort with other educators from other contexts, geographically, economically and philosophically.

**Future Studies**

This study was largely based on the participation of beginning teachers within the space. There are quite a few experienced teachers that frequent the space as well. Interviewing and observing the veteran teachers that take up practices on the EC Ning is a potential future exercise in understanding why they devote their time and energy to the development of other, newer teachers. In addition, based on the massive amount of data, it was difficult to pare down the analytic process. In a second iteration, engaging in more involved content analysis concerning the topical foci of the teachers’ interactions could yield interesting results and insights that may
inform teacher education or teacher learning efforts.

In addition, although the EC Ning and the practices within can best be identified as an affinity space, larger questions remain about the implications for the space (and those like it) for designing teacher education. What does this lens of affinity space do for rethinking the development and learning of teachers? How might we negotiate physical communities with the notion of virtual affinity spaces in the development of teaching professionals? What exactly do affinity spaces do for teachers in transforming their educational philosophies or practice? These questions, and more, provide important next steps in thinking about the ways in which online teacher learning spaces support ever-developing teachers.
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University of Chicago Press.


National Council for Teachers of English.


APPENDIX A: Recruitment Script

Greetings!

I hope this message finds you well as we greet the first hints of springtime!

My name is Nicole Olcese, and I’m a member of the EC Ning and a doctoral student at Penn State studying online teacher social networking. I’m an English teacher that’s been a member of Ning the past four years and I’m excited about the ways in which my colleagues and beginning teachers are using the EC Ning space as a source for support, reflection, and collaboration.

I’m looking for teachers in their first few years that are members of Ning to interview as a part of my dissertation, and I’ve noticed your contributions in the New Teachers forum. I know that you’re busy, but if you’d be willing talk about your membership in the EC Ning, I’d love to interview you about how you use the space. If you are willing, it’s a minimal time commitment, including an initial interview and possible follow up, upon your availability. If this sounds like something you’d be interested in, please contact me: nolcese@psu.edu and I can send you more information.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Nicole Olcese
APPENDIX B: Initial Interview Question Guide

1) What is your full name?
2) Where do you teach?
3) Which grade do you teach?
4) How long have you been teaching full time?
5) When did you get certified to teach? Which grades/age levels are you certified to teach?
6) Which institution did you attend or from where did you get your certification?
7) What would you say is the greatest source of support you’ve received since graduating or becoming certified to teach?
8) What outlets for professional development do you currently have?
9) When did you join English Companion Ning?
10) How did you hear about English Companion Ning?
11) What prompted you to join/become a member of the English Companion Ning? What prompted you to join/become a member of the New Teachers discussion group?
12) How would you characterize your method of participation on the EC Ning site? Are there certain topics that you like to read about? Are there certain topics that you like to comment on?
13) What do you think it does for new teachers? What about veteran teachers?
14) Can you give an example of a discussion forum or thread that you thought was influential (good or bad) to your teaching? Why do you think this was so?
15) What other outlets do you have for professional development or talking to other teachers about practice?
16) Do you belong to any other online teacher networks? If so, which ones?
17) If you answered yes to #16, why are you a member of that/those?
18) What advice would you have for a new teacher that has just graduated from his/her undergraduate or certification program?
19) Is there anything else you’d like me to know or you would like to say about the English Companion Ning?
APPENDIX C: Expanded Ethnographic Coding Manual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consuming Posts</td>
<td>Citing other discussions</td>
<td>Referencing other discussions on the space</td>
<td>&quot;I read one post in which a person suggested using a timer and having students make up time off task after each class period&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Support</td>
<td>Identifying oneself</td>
<td>Talking about what kind or type of teacher one is</td>
<td>&quot;How the heck are new teachers going to stay in the business when we get treated this way?&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Describing school culture</td>
<td>Telling about home school</td>
<td>&quot;My district is really behind with the common core and our curriculum isn’t helpful. Our department head just quit and a lot of my colleagues keep to themselves and are too busy themselves to be much help&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking advice</td>
<td>Asking for guidance</td>
<td>&quot;I would love to hear any advice on chilling out my classes and beating new teacher exhaustion.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeking resources</td>
<td>Asking for resources that could be incorporated into practice</td>
<td>&quot;I would like to start using quotes on assessments just to make students take a deep breath before they begin...Does anyone have any other quotes that I could use?&quot;</td>
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While members sought support within others’ discussions, this theme represents original discussion posts that created threads of discussion themselves.
| Seeking Support | Seeking feedback on practice | Asking what other members think about what they are doing or planning | "I have tried the method of being very quiet and patiently waiting for students to get on task while giving them "the look" I've tried raising my voice and I hate doing it. I'm at a loss. I would love to hear any advice on chilling out my classes and beating new teacher exhaustion"

| Seeking opinions | Asking what other members think | "Please leave your suggestions and let me know what you think about playing music for students while writing"

| Expressing fears | Sharing fears about the practice of teaching | "Today was the kind of day that made me wonder if I want to continue teaching"

| Expressing doubts | Sharing doubts about the practice of teaching | "I'm slated to teach "To Kill A Mockingbird" to a group of 9th graders next semester and am unsure of how to handle some of the book's more sensitive issues"

| Sharing narratives | Sharing stories about teaching or practice | "The reason I'm particularly worried is I had a friend, also a new teacher, lose his job for discussing sensitive issues with students."

| Sharing details about own practice | Sharing stories from own classroom | "So far my strategy has been to create word associations and encourage students to think of words that look and sound like new vocabulary words they're struggling with"

| Sharing successes with practice | Describing positive experiences in the classroom | 26

| Sharing perceived failures with practice | Describing negative experiences in the classroom | "I do know there were a few things I could have done better from a management angle"

| Reflecting on prior learning | Questioning and deliberating decisions and actions | "I am subbing and reflecting on how I would improve my teaching based on what I learned when I

26 Of all 90 posts on the EC Ning, there were no examples of this from a new teacher initiating posts
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seeking Support</th>
<th>Reflecting on choices and actions</th>
<th>Deconstructing what has been done in practice already</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I’m doing a novel study with two classes and none of them feel like they understand the book. Honestly, I think a lot of them are just not reading it... I’m considering taking significant passages out and just saying lets focus on that and move on but I feel like that compromises the whole point of a novel study&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citing other discussions</td>
<td>Referencing other discussions on the space</td>
<td>&quot;I read one post in which a person suggested using a timer and having students make up time off task after each class period&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following up – expressing thanks</td>
<td>Thanking others for support after a discussion has developed</td>
<td>&quot;This is very helpful! Thank you, Elizabeth. I will let you know how it goes&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following up – providing updates</td>
<td>Referring to changes or updates in practice/approach</td>
<td>Thank you everyone for your ideas. I’ve been documenting the behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following up – asking additional questions</td>
<td>Asking questions not directly related to original post</td>
<td>&quot;Thank you! I love these suggestions. Another question: while I was student teaching, students repeatedly wanted to use the restroom right at the start of class (we were right next the boy and girl restrooms). Is there a way to deter this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing support</td>
<td>Offering positive reinforcement</td>
<td>&quot;Great suggestions!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing positive comments regarding another’s comments or post</td>
<td>&quot;Good luck and I hope you find something that works for your students 😊&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offering encouragement</td>
<td>&quot;You have a whole wonderful crew here on this website who are rooting for you! Good karma!&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Offering support on behalf of the community</td>
<td>&quot;I feel for you. I was in this same situation last year with my student teaching&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commiserating</td>
<td>&quot;I tend to say, 'Now is not the time or place to discuss this, you need to continue working&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing own practice</td>
<td>&quot;I tend to say, 'Now is not the time or place to discuss this, you need to continue working&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing support</td>
<td>Mentoring - Directive</td>
<td>Providing commanding advice to a less seasoned teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentoring – emotionally supportive</td>
<td>Providing supportive advice to a less seasoned teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggesting resources</td>
<td>Telling about outside resources teacher should look into</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggesting action</td>
<td>Pointing out specific actions/strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing tangible resources</td>
<td>Posting links or documents with another</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing disagreement</td>
<td>Disagreeing or extending line of thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing opinions</td>
<td>Telling others what they think</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing agreement</td>
<td>Agreeing with another member</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citing other sources</td>
<td>Referencing books or scholars</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citing other members</td>
<td>Referencing other members on the EC Ning space</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Following up – checking in</td>
<td>Checking to see how another is doing after a discussion has developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asking for follow up</td>
<td>Asking a member to check base or update</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting collaboration</td>
<td>Connecting outside of EC Ning</td>
<td>Asking to connect beyond realms of the space</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VITA

NICOLE ROSE OLCESE

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