EXPLORING DISCOURSE AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN
ONLINE AFFINITY SPACES FOR TEACHERS

A Dissertation in
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by
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The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the ways in which teachers utilize and engage with online spaces as a type of informal learning and to examine the social interactions that take place therein. This study involved members of three online affinity spaces designed for teachers – Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner – and their asynchronous, online discussions (i.e., on a discussion board). It is presented as a case study using content and discourse analysis based upon the theoretical ideas of informal learning, specifically affinity spaces. The main research question guiding this study was: What types of discourse are shared in these online spaces for teachers? The supporting questions guiding this study were: What types of questions do participants pose? What types of responses do participants provide? What patterns of knowledge sharing emerge through the questions and responses? and What are the social interactions in the forum? Discussion postings were coded according to Arvaja’s (2012) framework that distinguished types of discourse as elaboration, sharing, or others as resources for enhancing personal understanding. Discussion participants engaged others by posting questions or soliciting advice that reflected their own professional and personal learning needs in the moment; furthermore, the participants relied on personal experience and examples to support and legitimize their responses. Social comments contributed to the generally positive tone that permeated the discussions.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In a digitized world punctuated and defined by change, educators find themselves in a unique position to leverage cutting edge knowledge and technology with students as they prepare them for life beyond school. Given the dynamic nature of society, educators can no longer merely be satisfied with providing students with the tools they need to be successful in today’s world. Rather, they must be forward-thinking to ensure that students can survive and thrive in tomorrow’s world; teachers themselves must be eager, lifelong learners (Liu, 2012). Teachers must be constantly engaged in learning about the field in order to stay current within the profession.

Similar to other professionals, educators are required to participate in a certain amount of professional learning - termed “professional development” (PD) - to obtain and maintain appropriate credentials, assist in promotion or job changes, and stay current with ever-changing skills and knowledge (Kuhne, 2013). While the precise amount of PD required varies by state, the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported that 98.5% of all public school teachers participated in various types of PD during the 2011-2012 school year. Most often PD occurs in a traditional and formal, face-to-face format as a part of district sponsored workshops and in-service meetings; educators also earn PD credit by taking college courses or attending educational conferences and seminars. However, the main problem teachers cite continuously is that the professional development opportunities districts provide do not meet their needs (Acevedo, 2013; Brown, 2013; Duncan-Howell, 2007; Holmes, 2012; Lieberman & Mace, 2010;
Lom & Sullenger, 2011). While there are certainly issues and topics that are pertinent to all educators, more often than not groups of educators are marginalized out of professional development that does not pertain to them for various reasons.

The idea behind professional development or learning is that educators gain new and different knowledge and ideas, which are pertinent to their personal situations and that enable them to become better at their craft while improving learning for their students. Educators who are continuously subject to irrelevant professional development no longer grow and change as a result; instead they waste precious time that could be better spent engaging in meaningful experiences that would benefit both themselves and their students. As such, teachers and school districts may actively seek alternatives.

School districts have begun to utilize online professional development (OPD) opportunities more frequently as a way to cut costs and expand offerings to staff members. Teachers no longer just consult the web for a quick informational search; online professional learning for teachers is flourishing (Leask, 2001; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Such opportunities may include webinars, streaming video of conferences or esteemed speakers, online training modules, and distance education courses. These options provide viable alternatives to traditional face-to-face learning for educators, and all of these methods can be reduced to quantifiable commodities based upon hours needed for completion. These formal professional development options may prove fruitful as sources of learning dependent upon the individuals’ needs.

When formal professional learning opportunities fail to meet teachers’ needs or simply when they desire new information, they may utilize alternative means of acquiring the knowledge they need in an effort to improve learning as it occurs in their specific classrooms.
This manifests as informal learning in non-traditional, “unofficial” places, such as those found in online spaces. While the ways in which knowledge and insight gleaned from such spaces may not be considered legitimate within the constraints of a definition of formal professional development, the emergent knowledge legitimizes the participation of teachers within the online space. In this study, I have identified Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner as spaces for teachers to engage in discourse about various aspects of teaching; they are not considered to be spaces for formal professional development as per the definition provided through the literature. Through these informal, affinity spaces, participants engage with and discuss knowledge related to the profession.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the ways in which teachers utilize and engage with online spaces for informal learning related to the profession and to examine the social interactions among participants. This study explored the types of knowledge and information shared in Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner online spaces by analyzing discussion threads posted in public forums. These particular spaces were chosen based on a web search for online teacher networks that yielded several results; of the results, these three fit my established criteria: they were not created by corporations, they had active discussion boards, they were designed for teachers, and their scope was general in nature rather than targeting a specific segment of teachers or specific topics (i.e., teachers of advanced placement courses or Common Core subjects). Given the names and purposes of the sites, the likelihood of the participant pool largely being comprised of teachers was high. An initial reading of message posts revealed participants making general references to their districts, their
classrooms, and their students and specific references to their job descriptions, students, and
district and state level educational issues. Subsequent readings confirmed that most participants
are or were teachers.

**Research Questions**

The main research question guiding this study was:

*What types of discourse are shared in these online spaces for teachers?*

The supporting questions guiding this study were:

1. *What types of questions do participants pose?*
2. *What types of responses do participants provide?*
3. *What patterns of knowledge sharing emerge through the questions and responses?*
4. *What are the social interactions in the forum?*

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is based upon the theoretical ideas of informal learning, specifically affinity
spaces, that positions learning as both a social and interactive process. The amalgamation of life
experiences affects the way in which people interact with their environments, which in turn
affects the outcome of learning. Learning does not occur in a vacuum; it is a socially mediated
process that is the result of collaborative activity and inextricable from its social context (Lave &
Wenger, 1991; Murugaiah et al., 2012; Schunk, 2012). *Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher,* and *The Teachers Corner* are online spaces that function as affinity spaces and provide a unique, social
context within which to examine discourse and interactions.
**Informal Learning**

By definition, the term *informal learning* describes learning that is largely self-directed, flexible, independent, unregulated or overseen and that strives to find solutions for problems or simply to advance an individual’s current knowledge base; the main distinctions between formal and informal learning are the learner’s independence and the context of daily life (King, 2010). According to Marsick and Watkins, “Informal learning is usually intentional but not highly structured” (2001, p. 25). Furthermore, it takes place “…wherever people have the need, motivation, and opportunity for learning” (Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p.28). It is distinct from explicit instruction that occurs within formal contexts of educational institutions and can emerge in a variety of settings. Sackey, Nguyen, and Grabill added, “Informal learners often approach learning situations with commitments, relationships, motivations, and tasks that are very different from those present in classrooms” (2015, p. 113).

Technology greatly facilitates this type of learning especially among adults who pursue informal knowledge for various reasons. In the course of daily life, many people consult the Internet and its myriad resources in their quest for knowledge from the mundane to the complex. Technology encourages and enables people to learn anywhere, anytime, and from anyone. It is logical then to extend the concept of informal learning to teachers who access online sources such as these three spaces in an effort to expand knowledge related to their profession.

Callanan, Cervantes, and Loomis (2011) asserted that contrasting formal and informal learning is less productive than assessing the learning that occurs based on multiple dimensions. From the literature, they determined five major dimensions on which to evaluate the effectiveness of informal learning: 1) deliberate focus on teaching and learning, 2) social nature, 3) authenticity of tasks and tools, 4) degree of learner autonomy, and 5) availability of important
consequences to the learner (Callanan, Cervantes, & Loomis, 2011). These dimensions can be applied to various informal contexts that manifest varying degrees of formal and informal learning. It is their argument that formal learning can occur in informal spaces and vice versa.

Teachers who seek additional professional information demonstrate an affective component of learning through personal investment in their students and their practice; voluntary participation implies some level of enthusiasm and commitment to the topics (Smith & Barrett, 2014). Scribner and Cole (1973) noted that informal learning “fuses emotional and cognitive domains” (p.555). The personal desires and emotions of people who visit these spaces manifest through their questions and responses in an effort to reconcile them with cognitive issues; the emotional aspect of knowledge is inseparable from the teacher’s personal identity (Bransford et al, 2006).

**Affinity Spaces**

*Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner* online spaces bring together individuals who wish to share with others about teaching and learning. The emergent knowledge from these spaces is public and usable and created as the result of deliberate effort by people who wish to increase their knowledge and advance the field’s knowledge across various disciplines. These forums serve as drawing boards for ideas that not only allow for continual improvement through discussion and reflection but also preserve them in a way that they remain available to a larger audience. In essence, a forum creates a display of knowledge sharing and functions as an archive of the space’s practices over time (Arvaja, 2012; Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012); the artifact created by the online space serves as a learning resource for its
members. These particular spaces function as affinity spaces (Gee, 2007) for educators and others who share a common interest and endeavor of teaching and learning.

According to Gee (2007), affinity spaces have three essential components: content, generators, and portals. The main topic of a space or the primary reason that people engage with it represents the content; in other words, the content is composed of the substantive information provided by members. All those who participate actively in the space and do not simply lurk produce content by way of their message postings (Machin-Mastromatteo, 2012); interactions and discourse generate content as participants engage with each other. Affinity spaces must also include generators or participants who provide content for the space; the space itself is not considered a generator of content because it does not contribute to the discussions or interactions. The space, however, functions as a portal in that it provides the platform through which participants gain access to the content (Machin-Mastromatteo, 2012); participants utilize the portal to view information posted to message boards, click on hyperlinks, or seek further clarification by posting questions or comments.

In accordance with Gee’s (2007) definition, an affinity space may exhibit any number of the eleven distinct attributes he defines that serve to qualify it as such. The online spaces I have identified show strong evidence of seven of these.

- **A shared endeavor is primary.** In this case, the members of these spaces interact foremost as educational providers or teachers; it is possible that they interact in terms of secondary characteristics (i.e., gender, age, subject area), but teacher is the most salient identity in these forums. Members access the forum because they share the endeavor of the work of a teacher and its myriad components. Collaborative
relationships built around a common endeavor surpass generational, geographical, and social boundaries (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012).

- *The space accommodates novices and experts alike.* No distinction is made among the members’ experience levels or amount of knowledge. All enter the space equally and interact with it in ways that meet their specific needs. In these spaces, members learn from each other’s knowledge, experiences, and advice. Members are not segregated by content area or level of expertise; rather, they mingle in a shared space that reflects various dimensions of knowledge and degrees of participation (Machin-Mastromatteo, 2012).

- *Both intensive and extensive knowledge are promoted.* Intensive or specialized knowledge is revealed in ways such as specific content knowledge applications of technology or technical aspects of devices. Individuals’ intensive knowledge is viewed as a potential resource to others (Gee, 2007). Extensive or broad knowledge manifests as members widely share information and solutions that are applicable to a wide range of contexts and content areas.

- *Knowledge is both distributed and individual.* It is presumed that most people access this forum in order to gain individual knowledge for various reasons such as looking for a solution to a problem or seeking advice. The conversational nature of a forum also encourages people to contribute and subsequently distribute knowledge that allows them to “…know and do more than they could on their own” (Gee, 2007, p.99). Members glean knowledge that encourages and enables them to expand their individual knowledge. No one singular entity is the sole purveyor or creator of the
knowledge; the diversity of contributors becomes a great strength of the space (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012).

- **Dispersed knowledge is utilized.** Users of these sites may make recommendations to consult other websites or resources outside of this particular forum that may extend well beyond the bounds of the initial posting; this dispersed knowledge encourages users to learn more about the larger ideas that relate both directly and indirectly to the knowledge displayed through the forum.

- **Respects and relies on tacit knowledge.** Experience is of paramount importance when offering advice or solutions to those who seek them. Members of this site presumably have practical experience in education or another closely related field that they pass on to others through interaction with their posts and questions. It is through the sharing of experience and surrounding discussion that knowledge is furthered in the community.

- **There are various levels and forms of participation.** Depending upon the topic, users may participate as experts, providing advice and solutions while fielding questions from others. On the other hand, users may offer words of encouragement if they are unable to provide solid responses or simply view material in an effort to gain ideas or monitor pending solutions to problems. Individuals control their participation and interaction in this space (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013).

**Methods**

This study was conceptualized as a qualitative content analysis of message boards located on Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner online spaces. I established criteria for
selecting each site: 1) not created by corporations, 2) had active discussion boards, 3) designed for teachers, and 4) had a general scope rather than targeting a specific segment of teachers or discussion topics. Corporate created sites may or may not have had input from experienced teachers or other educational professionals; therefore, I chose to focus on sites created by educational professionals. Each site also had to provide opportunities for sharing through message boards or forums; these sharing spaces were the data sources for my study, so they were of paramount importance. These spaces encouraged and facilitated sharing through free membership, welcoming messages, and threads dedicated to introductions and friendly greetings. As teachers and closely related others were the target population of this study, the site had to be geared towards educators. Finally, I did not want to focus on a constrained segment of teachers that might have been drawn to rather specific issues/sites, since such constraints would have narrowed the population in a way that would not be conducive to gathering general data.

I initially identified The Teachers Corner as my sole data source. It met the requirements I previously mentioned; however, upon closer examination, the amount of data it provided was insufficient for this study. Thus, I began to search for other online teacher spaces that might be viable data sources. Through an extensive online search, I located thirteen online teacher spaces including ProTeacher and Classroom 2.0, which I ultimately chose to use. I visited each site and noted the creator of the site, sponsors (if any), and a brief description utilizing site provided information in conjunction with my own observations. See Appendix A for a complete listing of all potential data sources.

edWeb is specifically promoted as an online professional learning community which excluded it from being considered an informal space. TeachAde appears to be a failed venture as very little information is available and the most recent information on the site is from 2012. It
also has a fundraising component that teachers can use, which seems out of place for this type of resource. **TeacherSquare** appeared to promote a business-like ambience with its focus on “teacherpreneurs”; I believed this deviated from the essence of education that I hoped to capture. **TappedIn** is now a finite resource as funding has been depleted, and the site no longer operates by accepting new material though it is available as an archive-type resource. It has been the subject of various research studies throughout its time in existence.

The **AP Teacher Communities** attract a very distinct segment of the teaching population - those who are AP certified. This ruled out many teachers based on the fact that AP courses are highly specialized and not available everywhere; it also ruled out elementary and middle school teachers who have no need to be certified in these subject areas. This site excluded too many potential members based on its focus. The title and intent might also drive discussion that may take place on the message boards.

**Teachers.net** is another resource designed by teachers for teachers. I was a member of this site years ago and got updates via e-mail from their Spanish teacher chat board; the updates were sent once there were a certain amount of replies to postings and they became scarce to the point where it lost my interest. While this site may fit logistically with this study, I decided to explore new resources that I had not engaged with previously to avoid potential researcher bias.

**Intel Engage** is a corporate-created and sponsored forum; teachers can create private communities within the site that others cannot view. Again, this prevents complete access to the forums by everyday participants. Similarly, **Teach-nology** excluded people by requiring paid memberships to view premium content; those who have a free membership are limited to certain aspects of the site despite its rich variety of resources. Another site in this realm was **ISTE Commons** – only paid members can create and respond to posts. Free members can only view
them. Based on its parent organization’s purpose, it also may attract teachers who are specifically looking for technology advice and exclude those looking for broader information.

*Education Week Teacher* is the forum dedicated to the *Education Week* magazine publication. The main purpose is to discuss issues presented by the magazine rather than having people introduce their own topics or things they are curious about. These regulations drive the discussion in certain directions, which may discourage or preclude organic discussion.

*The Education Forum* was developed by a teacher from the United Kingdom originally as a resource for his specific classes; it has evolved into a resource for teachers worldwide. However, given the original intent was for one person’s classes, it has not attracted the amount of participants it otherwise might have and deviated from the idea of it being a space for others to share.

Overall, there was not a site that distinguished itself as being supremely active or with a large amount of replies to posts regardless of its other characteristics. The views on posts far exceed the amount of replies on all of these sites. I ultimately chose *Classroom 2.0* and *ProTeacher* to examine along with *The Teachers Corner*. All three have a similar feel to their online environments and are comparable in activity levels. They are free of sponsorship, and membership is also free.

I collected data by accessing the message boards and creating PDF files of the most recent threads that had at least five (5) replies until a total of forty (40) threads was captured for each board. Specific metrics are detailed in Chapter 3. I analyzed the messages using a modified coding scheme based on Arvaja’s (2012) that categorized discourse as “sharing”, “elaboration” or “others as resources for enhancing personal understanding”. Looking more carefully at each thread allowed me to describe the specific topics explored through the threads
and the development of social interaction through postings. In addition, I elicited participation for a user survey that would help to establish participant feelings and attitudes toward this message forum and how they utilized the knowledge they gleaned from it.

**Summary**

Informal learning and affinity spaces formed the framework of this study of online spaces. The three sites on which I focused for this study – Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner - serve as spaces for discourse related to the profession that strongly adhere to Gee’s (2007) conception of an affinity space. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach, unique situations and experiences presented, discussed, and analyzed in these online spaces offer a wealth of expertise from which members may draw upon in their own lives. Despite some underlying commonalities, these spaces cannot be considered professional learning communities because they are not formal spaces nor were they designed in response to a specific, identified need. They also cannot be considered communities of practice because there is no strong evidence in support of the sense of community identified as necessary by Lave and Wenger (1991). Therefore, this study views Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner as affinity spaces in which participants gain professional knowledge informally.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Overview

This study set out to describe the ways in which teachers utilize and engage with online spaces for informal learning related to the profession and to examine the social interactions among participants. In this chapter, I present a review of relevant literature to frame my study. First, I review literature regarding general professional development for teachers, which reveals that teachers perceive traditional professional development to be mostly irrelevant and removed from their actual needs. As a result, teachers begin to look elsewhere for sources of “professional development”, which has led to the rise in popularity of online options. Next, I address the term “Community of Practice” as a potential lens for this study and explain why it was not useful. I continue with current research on affinity spaces and explicate how framing Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner as such is appropriate. Then, I investigate online professional learning networks for teachers and identify the affordances that make them prime sources of learning. Lastly, I conclude this section by using previously cited qualities as justification for viewing online spaces as a legitimate source of informal learning for teachers.

Teacher Professional Development

The premise behind professional development (PD) is that learning does not cease with graduation from an educational institution; individuals entering various professions become lifelong learners as they engage in educational opportunities throughout their careers. This learning can be defined as “a continuous process through which both the learner and the knowledge to be
learned is redefined in relation to one another” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 388). Topics of development are typically driven by current trends, perceived or real deficiencies within the professional entity, and needs assessments. Often, however, topics are not relevant to all the teachers who must participate (Avalos, 2011; Acevedo, 2013; Brown, 2013; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Postholm, 2012). For example, a workshop that addresses Common Core standards does not resonate with teachers whose subjects fall outside that realm. And though it varies by state, teachers are required to participate in a specific amount of PD in order to maintain certification, obtain advanced credentials, and remain current with educational theory, practice, and law whether or not it is pertinent to their specific teaching placement. While many school districts provide teachers with PD during contracted in-service days, teachers largely perceive these programs to be disconnected from their actual needs and a waste of time (Acevedo, 2013; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Liu, 2012; Lock, 2006). Programs often give teachers information regarding practices or strategies they must implement rather than allowing them to make individual pedagogical decisions based on their needs and those of their students (Kale, Brush, & Saye, 2009). Furthermore, learning that occurs during these programs is often not continued or extended into practice for a multitude of reasons. Professional development provides teachers with knowledge they may or may not want or need and without opportunity for practical application, follow-up, or self-reflection.

Research suggests that effective professional development is situated in an authentic context, rooted in the interests of participating teachers, draws upon their practical experiences, affords teachers some autonomy in setting their own learning goals, occurs in the context of social interaction, and continues over an extended period of time allowing for classroom implementation and subsequent evaluation and self-reflection (Acevedo, 2013; Brown, 2013;
Holmes, Signer, & MacLeod, 2010; Kale et al., 2011; Kuhne, 2013; Lu, 2014; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Postholm, 2012; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). Learners who have vested interest in the topic at hand and can relate it to their own personal experiences demonstrate greater commitment to learning and are more “naturally engaged in efforts to accomplish their goals” (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p.86). Moreover, Brown’s (2013) study found that teachers believe that those who seek out professional development are more likely to utilize it in their daily teaching experiences. Members of these online spaces may participate as they seek out personalized knowledge and practices that meets the specific needs of themselves and their students.

Teachers all have unique attitudes, beliefs, values, theories, and experiences that they bring to PD opportunities; incorporating them and encouraging the teachers to share them during PD enriches the experience for all those involved. As Opfer and Pedder noted, “this intersection of experience and belief creates a powerful combination that determines…what they themselves are willing to learn” (2011, p.387). Professional development that considers these factors promotes learning among participants because it resonates as something they want to learn – it now transitions from simply professional development to personalized professional learning. Similarly, as teachers discuss these experiences with others, sharing encourages self-reflection and perspective transformation (Lu, 2014; Mezirow, 1994). Teachers who are able to turn a critical eye on their own practice through planned or unplanned reflective meetings demonstrate increased learning (Postholm, 2012; Webster-Wright, 2009). As Brookfield added, “…in order to do good work we must consistently involve others – particularly learners and colleagues – as commentators on our efforts” (2000, p.47). Feedback, conversation, and self-reflection support personal and professional growth; likewise, they encourage new interpretations of experience,
which is critical for constructing meaning (Mezirow, 1994). Reflective practice is a vital strategy in teacher learning as it encourages them to consider their own experiences and the impact they have on their practices, which often leads to deconstructed and reconstructed beliefs about teaching and learning (Lu, 2014).

Further propagating the debate over relevant and effective professional development are the semantic implications of the term “professional development”. As Webster-Wright noted, “the term PD is part of a discourse that focuses on the professional as deficient and in need of developing and directing” (2009, p.712). People who feel they are viewed as deficient or lacking in some respect are less receptive to constructive ideas; similarly, when they feel as if they are being directed toward what they need to learn to fix the deficiency rather than being allowed to choose their own goals, they become resistant to learning designed to help them. Webster-Wright (2009) argues that re-conceptualizing professional development as continuing professional learning helps to reframe its context and purpose, further reaching its intended audience while affording the learners unique experiences that are relevant and practical. The use of continuing professional learning (CPL) rather than professional development repositions learning as something desired and pursued by participants rather than something that is forced as a means of developing learners into a predetermined ideal. A simple change in terminology encourages a shift away from traditional PD, which purportedly helps teachers to become “better” at their craft (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Similarly, it changes the passive focus from “training”, “development”, or “education” to the active construct of learning. From this point forward, I use the term “continuing professional learning” instead of “professional development” with regard to the learning described in this study as continuing from the formal classroom context into the
informal, online space shared by professionals. However, I do use “professional development” when a cited study utilized the term.

In an effort to remain current and constantly engaged in learning about the profession, teachers may pursue their own continuing professional learning through online networks or professional learning communities. In the next sections, I provide a review of the terms “professional learning communities,” and “communities of practice” and identify how they are different from what appears to occur in the three identified online spaces in this study. I also expand on the notion of affinity spaces to show the match with these contexts.

**Online Professional Learning Communities**

The term “professional learning communities” appears quite frequently throughout the literature with regards to teachers; therefore, I think it is useful to present the concept as a contrast to my identified online spaces. Professional learning communities (PLC) manifest in traditional, face-to-face formats while those that are hosted in online environments are known as online professional learning communities (OPLC). Technology mediates communication and serves as a tool to build and sustain the community (Liu, 2012); it also increases the variety and profundity of experiences available in a face-to-face format (King, 2011; Murugaiah et al., 2012) by expanding membership beyond traditional barriers of space and time. Nevertheless, both traditional and online professional learning communities share the same premise and goals. According to Vescio, Ross, and Adams’ (2008) review of research, PLCs are based on the premise that knowledge and learning are situated in the practical, daily experiences of teachers and are best comprehended as sources of information that have been dissected and analyzed through critical reflection and subsequent discussion. Furthermore, the goal of PLCs is
presumed to be the acquisition of professional knowledge that will enhance and improve both
teaching and student learning (Beach, 2012; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

As previously mentioned, teachers have expressed dissatisfaction with traditional means
of CPL; as a result, many have begun to look elsewhere to fill these perceived gaps and to further
explore other topics of interest. Online spaces and networks are places where teachers can
expand their professional knowledge through participation or simply information gathering.
Teachers who become members of OPLC generally view these activities as being purposeful,
helpful, practical, and valuable (Leask & Younie, 2001; Macià & García, 2016; Vescio, Ross, &
Adams, 2008); this type of learning is intrinsically motivating to teachers because it is relevant
and aids them in reaching their goals. As Leask and Younie noted, online communities that are
viewed as effective “…are those perceived to be of value to teachers and of sufficient value to
ensure that teachers return…whether for their professional development or for purposes directly
related to their classroom practice” (2001, p.224). Teachers improve classroom practice and thus
student achievement by implementing new techniques and ideas formulated with knowledge and
information gleaned from OPLCs. These online spaces afford teachers such benefits as
flexibility with time and scheduling, personal content selection, self-directed study, and the
ability to engage as little or as much as they deem appropriate for learning to be meaningful and
relevant (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Duncan-Howell, 2010; King, 2011; Olofsson & Lindberg,
2011).

Hur and Brush’s (2009) study identified five reasons why teachers want and choose to
participate in online communities: (1) express feelings and emotions, (2) take advantage of the
safety of online environments, (3) combat feelings of school environment isolation, (4) develop
and share ideas, and (5) experience fraternity with others. Teachers especially appreciated
sharing knowledge and feelings (Hur & Brush, 2009); the anonymity and relative safety of the online environment allowed them myriad opportunities to do this without fear of embarrassment or retribution. A similar study by Ranieri, Manca, and Fini (2012) confirmed the desire of participants to experience an emotional dimension of professional learning by connecting with others through information and emotion sharing on topics that were relevant and important to them. The sense of shared feelings and personal connections to both practice and the relationships developed appear to be primary factors in sustaining and improving online communities.

Despite the fact that participants engage with these particular online spaces for a type of professional learning, they cannot be classified as professional learning communities in accordance with the definition established by the literature. Professional Learning Communities (online and face to face) are initiated based on an identified need and intend to improve a specific aspect of teaching and learning; furthermore, the innate goal is to provide a type of standard professional development to those who must participate. Such PLCs have been established for various teacher-related groups including teacher candidates (e.g., Irwin & Hramiak, 2010; Liu, 2012), new teachers (e.g., Hutchison & Colwell, 2011), and in-service teachers (e.g., Liu, 2012; Lock, 2006; Olofsson & Lindberg, 2011; Smith & Siro, 2012; Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2007; Wang & Lu, 2012). Most are organized at a district or state level (e.g., McConnell, et al., 2012) with others at a national or multi-national level (e.g., Leask & Younie, 2007). Membership in many PLCs is decreed by an administrative figure and is not voluntary as it is in these spaces.
Community of Practice

The term community of practice is often used to describe online spaces of individuals seeking new or advanced knowledge; though this framework does not align with my study, it is useful to present its tenets to provide distinction between a community of practice and an affinity space. A community of practice (CoP) refers to a group of people connected in a shared pursuit of knowledge; as Trayner-Wenger described, “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (2013, p.1). The knowledge of the communities is situated within their practices and is inherently social; the members also share beliefs and common understandings that manifest in their interactions and through their practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Though members are united in their pursuit of knowledge, their levels of proficiency vary from novice to expert; members increase their proficiency through their interactions with each other.

Communities of practice reinforce the notion that knowledge is social and are distinguished from other communities by three main characteristics: domain, community, and practice. Domain refers to the collective subject of interest though it may not necessarily be an area of expertise for the members; nevertheless, membership in the community implies that those who participate share a common commitment toward and competence with the topic at hand (Trayner-Wenger, 2013). The domain makes it possible for the community to exist (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Hoadley, 2012); without a shared interest, there is no reason for a community to emerge.

Community refers to the relationships that members build with one another through collaborative discussions, activities, and ventures; members work together and share knowledge with the common goal of supporting one another. Though working together may not be a daily
occurrence (Trayner-Wenger, 2013), members maintain the community through interactions and the relationships they have built. The interactions and relationships comprise the basis for a system that is interdependent based upon the members’ collaborative efforts (Barab & Duffy, 2000) and that flourishes as members both contribute and take away information. In this way, information continually cycles through the community and becomes part of its shared repository of knowledge. The sense of community is significant in the learning that occurs because of knowledge’s social nature; members learn from one another’s experiences and expertise by focusing on problems and issues directly related to practice (Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008). It is the interpersonal nature of information sharing that leads to the construction of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Finally, practice implies that those who engage in a CoP are actually living the experiences of the community on a regular basis; that is, they are practitioners of the topic at hand. As Trayner-Wenger noted, the community works as a whole to “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short a shared practice” (2013, p.2). Through members’ synchronous and asynchronous communications, shared practice emerges from a space of collaborative knowledge construction. Individuals develop, expand, and refine their knowledge within the context of these practices, which are all influenced inextricably by culture (Hoadley, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; National Research Council, 2009). While each individual may engage in separate practice, the community knowledge construction in itself constitutes an act of practice shared amongst all members; indeed, it is this type of practice that - when extended into learning settings - resonates with learners because it is useful and an actual practice utilized by members of the community (Bruckman, 2006; National Research Council, 2009). While there are no constraints on size,
location, demographics or other such variables, communities of practice must all manifest three vital elements: domain, community, and practice.

For this study, I choose to use affinity spaces as an alternative lens to a Community of Practice; by definition, this particular online space does not necessarily conform to the notions set forth by Lave and Wenger (1991) and previously described. The main distinction here as noted by Machin-Mastromatteo is that an affinity space is based on a space “…for interaction, regardless of the fact that the people interacting have or not a membership within a community [of practice]” (2012, p.579). Membership and interaction with this online space do not presuppose a notion of community shared among participants; interaction with and contribution to a community of practice should be high and sustained (Macià & García, 2016) whereas they may be intermittent in networks or affinity spaces. Furthermore, members may or may not share the common practice of teaching despite their participation on a forum designed with teachers in mind.

**Affinity Spaces**

As affinity space is a relatively new term and as the term typically encompasses online spaces dedicated to leisurely activities or pastimes (e.g., reading, writing, gaming), there has not been a significant amount of research conducted in this realm. The majority of this research has focused on affinity spaces that are based on popular culture items such as movies, books, and digital games (e.g., *Harry Potter fans, The Hunger Games, The Sims*). However, there are studies that examine the connections between popular culture and educational issues within affinity spaces such as digital gaming to improve language learning (e.g., Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2015; Henry, 2013; Ryu, 2013), digital literacy (e.g. Hayes & Duncan, 2012; Meyers, Erickson,
& Small, 2013), increasing student participation and engagement (e.g., Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013; Peck, 2012), and improving writing practices (Barton, 2012; Curwood & Fink, 2013). Machin-Mastromatteo (2012) utilized the theory of affinity spaces as a lens through which to view his study on teaching and learning processes mediated by technology in higher education. In his perspective, “The theory of affinity spaces seeks to account for both content and interactions…and typical features of devices such as blogs, SM (social media) sites, and other technologies that may be used for learning purposes” (Machin-Mastromatteo, 2012, p.579). He created his own affinity space methodology through which to view his study as an alternative perspective to communities of practice; he cited the distinction of affinity spaces as being “a space for interaction regardless of the fact that the people interacting have or not a membership within the community” (Machin-Mastromatteo, 2012, p.579). Similarly, Lammers, Curwood, and Magnifico (2012), proposed their own variety of affinity space ethnography to study the culture and practices of those involved in online spaces related to adolescent literacies. They posit that in order to study affinity spaces, researchers must consider the following features: a common endeavor, self-directed participation, multimodal participation, a public audience for content, the role of socializing, leadership roles among participants, knowledge distributed across the space, the high value of documenting content and practices, and the variety of portals associated with the affinity space.

Lammers (2013) studied an online fan site for the popular computer game The Sims through the aforementioned affinity space ethnography (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012) in addition to a type of discourse analysis proposed by Gee (2014). Utilizing these methods, Lammers (2013) analyzed the messages posted in an online forum as conversations
between among participants despite the lack of spoken words. She focused on the pedagogy of the conversations and how the exchanges engaged various ways of teaching among participants. Affinity spaces - informal in nature and mostly dealing with social topics - have been studied minimally as sources of learning for professional reasons to the best of my knowledge. One such study investigated how a particular online teacher affinity space provided professional and emotional support for beginning teachers; Olcese created two online affinity spaces for students whom she instructed in a collegiate teaching methods course as a “…means for reflection and discussion before, during, and after their field experience” (2014, p.49). Though her study focused on pre-service and beginning teachers, it acknowledged the benefits and potential for affinity spaces as sources of informal learning for professional reasons. Nevertheless, this study still examined online spaces that the researcher created specifically for a research purpose as opposed to spaces created for the purpose of bringing together people with a shared endeavor.

*Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner as Affinity Spaces*

All members of these sites are geographically separated in the sense that interactions occur online and not through face-to-face communication; while it is possible there are members who live geographically close to one another, this is not apparent nor pertinent to the interactions taking place online. The members function as both teachers and learners as they post questions and comments and engage in dialogue; members go to the forum seeking answers, support, advice, and encouragement while also providing the same to others. Communication relevant to the learning occurs entirely through technology-mediated means including discussion threads and private e-mail messages. There are no set standards or learning objectives in this forum;
participants engage in informal learning through their questions and replies. In addition, there are no designated “teachers” or “learners” as members transition between roles based on their expertise and level of engagement with various topics. At any given time, expertise is distributed across the network among the members, but it is also accessible by them through the online space. Even though participants are more likely to be similar in levels of expertise than in a community of practice, there remains distinction among the depth and breadth of participants’ knowledge.

Online networks encourage and facilitate connections among people united in practice that transcend geography and demography; these networks provide spaces for collaboration that supports the learning of everyone involved (Bruckman, 2006). Technology supports links between people who share common practices, provides the platform for a shared repository of knowledge, and facilitates communication among the members (Booth, 2012; Hoadley, 2012; Wang & Lu, 2012). Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner provide the platforms for interested participants to gather and share knowledge through technologically-mediated communication.

**Online Spaces for Informal, Continuing Professional Learning**

As previously stated, effective continuing professional learning has six basic characteristics: (1) it is situated in an authentic context, (2) it is rooted in the interests of participating teachers, (3) it draws upon their practical experiences, (4) it affords teachers some goal-setting autonomy, (5) it occurs in the context of social interaction, and (6) it continues over an extended period of time. Online spaces can fulfill all of these requirements as potential sources of effective informal, continuing professional learning while providing educators with
ubiquitous access to resources replete with expertise that enable them to be highly effective (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

**Authentic context.** Authentic or situated professional learning “is thought to be a successful approach because it addresses teachers’ specific needs within their specific environments…teachers gain new knowledge that can be applied directly within their classrooms” (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010, p.273). Because members can address context and content specific questions and comments in online spaces, they gain the knowledge they desire that can then be directly applied into their own specific scenarios. Learning is inextricable from context and does not occur in a vacuum; to make sense to learners and become more meaningful, it must be connected to everyday life in the real world (Booth, 2012; Westera, 2011). The increase in online learning opportunities has expanded context to include the virtual spaces in which people interact with others and with content and has removed the stigma that learning must occur in a fixed, traditional location. Never before has learning context become so personalized and dependent upon individual factors such as the choice of digital devices used for access, locations from which to access content, and technologically mediated communication (Westera, 2011) through various digital representations such as avatars, screen names, and images. Individuals’ choices allow them to create the context that is most appropriate for them and to alter it as necessary. The self-created authentic context becomes even more meaningful as users interact with the content and other users.

Online spaces encourage authentic social interaction that includes in-depth discussion, peer feedback, and self-reflection; they offer enhanced communication capabilities that incite transformative learning and serve as platforms for knowledge construction (Rowe, Bozalek, &
Frantz, 2013). Ruan and Griffith (2011) studied four elementary teachers in a graduate course who participated in weekly online discussions about class readings and found that the text-based nature of online discussion allowed for more in-depth and thoughtful reflection among participants. Online spaces afford members opportunities for collaboration, individual and collective self-reflection, multiple interpretations of experiences, and diversity of feedback (Rowe, Bozalek, & Frantz, 2013). These spaces also leverage the power of technology to garner support and advice from a variety of perspectives ranging from novice to expert (Lock, 2006). All of these converging factors contribute to a context that is authentic according to each individual’s specific preferences and needs.

**Interest-driven.** Teachers become members of online spaces because they have vested interest in the topics and premise upon which the space was developed. Membership alone demonstrates teachers’ interest, which in turn drives the membership forward; members post questions and responses that are aligned with the interests of the larger group. These factors work in tandem to propel online groups forward and to encourage growth; when one of these factors flags, the space begins to stagnate or even shrink. Online spaces often include threaded discussion forums through which members offer and request advice as well as share personal experiences. Those who are interested in the various topics under discussion may choose to follow those specific threads and even contribute to them while disregarding those of lesser personal importance. Success depends on the members’ willingness to continue to participate in these spaces (Smith & Sivo, 2012).

Duncan-Howell’s (2010) study of three online teacher communities revealed that members spent 1-3 hours per week in the online environment thus resulting in an extra 60-80
hours of professional learning each year. While the amount and type of interaction that occurs varies according to participants, online forums provide equal opportunity for members to contour and steer the discussions in ways that promote and supplement their own interests (Lee & Tsai, 2011). Furthermore, diverse membership in online spaces affords participants the benefit of easily and quickly accessing a wide range of expertise surrounding myriad topics (King, 2011; Toral et al., 2009). Members do not need to establish direct connections to every other member, but rather they can choose the connections that will satisfy their personal interests and needs. Connecting those who have shared interests is beneficial to both parties and improves learning (Schlager et al., 2009). Zuidema’s study of pre-service teachers’ activity in an online, informal network concluded that informal conversations matter and are worth supporting as opportunities for collaborative inquiry and reflection (2012).

This type of interest-driven, informal learning encourages learners to invoke their prior knowledge as a basis for subsequent exploration as well as for sharing with other members. Understanding what learners already know about the world factors into the way they perceive learning, engage with existing and new knowledge building experiences, and interact with others in the space (National Research Council, 2009).

**Draws on practical experiences.** Online spaces encourage members to draw on practical experience to provide answers and advice to others. In my personal experience, teachers want to know what works in a real life classroom not what should work based on someone’s theory; they want advice from those who have lived experience not those who conjecture about hypothetical scenarios. Lee and Tsai (2011) analyzed the collaborative knowledge patterns of eleven graduate students and three professors through online
asynchronous discussions; their findings revealed that more of the identified knowledge patterns were experience-based than based on authoritative resources. Coupled with other findings from the same study, Lee and Tsai argue that experience sharing is a vital resource for learning (2011). Teachers may desire to try new techniques but may be unable to because they lack an example of what they look like in practice; sharing and learning by example are vital strategies to improve knowledge and incite change (Zhao & Cziko, 2001; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Lieberman & Mace, 2010). Furthermore, research supports the idea that professionals learn from experience (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Not only do teachers learn from each other’s experiences, but subsequent reflection on these experiences helps them to connect practical application with pedagogical knowledge and apply this knowledge to their own practice (Brown, 2013; Kale, Brush, & Saye, 2009; Wang & Lu, 2012). This connection between pedagogy and practice has the potential to improve both teaching and learning. A study of four public school teachers and their mentors interacting in an online forum regarding curriculum design and problem-based inquiry activities revealed that reflective assistance elicited high levels of thinking among the teachers (Kale, Brush, & Saye, 2009). Researchers attributed this to reflective assistance encouraging responses from teachers that require answers to questions, input to discussion, or reflection on their own practices. Mentors encouraged the teachers to take ideas gleaned from these forums and incorporate them into their practice thus allowing them to make their own pedagogical decisions that consider practical experience (Kale, Brush, & Saye, 2009).

This notion connects with a central tenet of adult education theory derived from John Dewey, Malcolm Knowles, and Eduard Lindeman’s ideas – the vital role of life experience in the learning of adults (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010). Adults’ experiences both individually and
collectively influence the way they learn and contribute to their success or failure. It is through experience and interpretation of experience that adults develop their beliefs, values, and perspectives, which influence and shape their learning and practice. Boucouvalas and Lawrence further suggest that adults learn by “…connect[ing] new concepts and theories with something they already know, critically reflecting upon prior experiences in order to make sense of them” (2010, p.39). All individuals experience life in unique ways, contributing differently to their perspectives on and perceptions of learning. Effective continuing professional learning encourages participants to share these experiences as a way to deconstruct them in an effort to make connections with new knowledge.

**Goal-setting autonomy.** Learner choice and personal autonomy are central aspects of adult learning (Anderson, 2013; Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010; Brown, 2013). OPLC afford members opportunity to exercise both of these freedoms through choice of membership, engagement with content, interaction with others, and pursuit of knowledge and goals; members choose the roles they assume within the space (Lom & Sullenger, 2011). As members peruse content, they have the ability to contribute to the group as well as learn from it; they make individual decisions along the path toward achieving the goals they have set by entering the online space. In addition to independence, members also benefit from the interdependence found within the community. As Anderson noted, “autonomy relates to control and includes the ability to choose to cede control” (2013, p. 93). When members cede control to others in the community, they are making the choice to rely on the interdependence of the community to guide and shape their learning. Making sound decisions that affect learning is a skill that learners must develop (Anderson, 2013); truly autonomous learners are confident in their
decision-making skills and know when to take and cede control. These choices in turn help to shape and re-shape goals in ways that benefit learning and signal metacognitive development. There are no authoritative or outside directives that force specific learning goals upon members of online spaces; they simply provide resources and means to help learners achieve those goals.

**Social interaction.** The Internet and communication technology make connections and opportunities possible that might otherwise never occur. People from across the globe transcend time and space online; technology is the tool that enables social interaction and community building. Collaboration is the goal in online spaces; participants enter and become members of the communities in search of advice, answers, and a sense of fellowship among like-minded individuals. Without collaboration none of these goals can be realized. Collaborative culture as a product of social interaction has been identified as a supporting factor for the sustenance of online communities (Garrison & Akyol, 2013; Liu, 2012); furthermore, this culture of open communication supports individuals to think more critically about their own beliefs and practices. Peer collaboration and support also encourage expanded thinking about how technology might be used to improve learning (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010).

Online spaces provide individuals access to a source for expertise about various topics; they may choose to simply glean information from threads and discussion without social interaction. Conversely, individuals who interact with others benefit from the social interaction and become part of a shared social culture of the space; moreover, members have control over the frequency and depth of interaction they invest in the space as it meets their personal needs (Leask & Younie, 2001). Members who participate actively create their own curricula, improve their expertise, experience a network of support, and benefit from the interpersonal dialogue
The social interactions involve collaboration through which members provide and receive individualized feedback regarding their teaching practices.

**Sustained time frame.** In an effort to maintain CPL over a period of time, it must fit into teachers’ already full schedules in a way that does not disrupt their daily routines. When teachers view CPL as an intrusion on their time or previously established patterns of living, their tainted attitudes preclude them from attaining the maximum benefit. As Duncan-Howell noted, “the mode of delivery needs to suit teacher conditions and be sympathetic to their specific needs as learners” (2009, p.325). The Internet provides teachers with such a mode of delivery that offers convenience, flexibility, and ubiquity; online spaces are always on, always there and accessible at any time and from anywhere with an internet connection. Members can access online spaces at any time of day or night and can be as active as time and interest permit. Depending upon a particular day, members might choose to spend several hours online while they may be unable to log in at all on others. Even during periods of inactivity, members may maintain contact with one another and connections through group emails (Duncan-Howell, 2009).

An extended time frame that does not place limitations on conversations and responses also encourages members to think more deeply and critically about topics posted; they are able to read and reflect and subsequently post more complete, thoughtful, and articulate responses to others (Kale et al., 2011; Kuhne, 2013). Replying to a threaded discussion requires complex cognitive thought processes that take into account earlier postings and replies (Toral et al., 2009), which necessitates the extended amount of time online spaces provide. The sustained time frame
encourages members to construct personal meaning through interaction and self-reflection (Garrison & Akyol, 2013; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Lock, 2006; Lom & Sullenger, 2011). Critical thinking requires participants to engage connections between prior and new knowledge while reconciling the two through a process of critical reflection (Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow, 1994). Participants inquire into others’ and their own practices to identify contradictions of which they may not be aware; conceptual change occurs as they reconcile the contradictions. Short-term professional learning opportunities are not nearly as conducive to this type of learning as are long-term.

**Summary**

This review of literature establishes the foundation for the knowledge upon which this study’s research questions are based. Through professional development literature, I presented a basic overview of traditional professional development, the need for alternatives based on teacher dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, and the reframing of professional development as continuing professional learning. The literature regarding online spaces for teachers revealed that teachers become members because they want to expand and enhance their professional knowledge beyond that which is provided during professional development. They utilize online spaces as extensions of informal, professional learning networks in an effort to supplement their desire for knowledge and collaboration. To conclude, I reviewed the literature of five facets of effective professional development – authentic context, interest driven, draws on practical experience, goal-setting autonomy, social interaction, and sustained time frame – and established how these qualities can be reflected in online spaces thus providing the rationale for the premise of this study.
Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe the ways in which teachers utilize and engage with online spaces for informal learning related to the profession and to examine the social interactions among participants. The main question guiding this study was: What types of discourse are shared in online spaces for teachers? The supporting questions guiding this study were: What types of questions are posed by participants? What types of responses are provided? What patterns of knowledge sharing emerge through the questions and responses? What are the social interactions in the forum and do they contribute to knowledge and information sharing? and How do participant teachers perceive that this knowledge affects practice in their classrooms? In this chapter, I describe the methods used to examine these phenomena, which includes the study context, description of participants, procedures, and data analysis as well as address researcher bias.

Context of the Study

As teachers strive to expand their professional knowledge beyond what their formal professional development opportunities have provided them, they may turn to the Web for answers. As a result, teachers have begun to join online networks and spaces to find answers to their questions, receive support from others who empathize with them, and to offer suggestions and advice based on their own experiences. I have identified three online spaces for exploration - Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner - as online spaces comprised of those interested in teaching.
**Classroom 2.0.** Created by Steve Hargadon in 2007, *Classroom 2.0* is “the social network for those interested in Web 2.0, Social Media, and Participative Technologies” that boasts over 80,000 members from 200 countries (Hargadon, 2016). *Classroom 2.0* encourages new members to actively participate in this space by joining its groups, posting on its message forums, engaging with the repository of materials and resources, and even contributing to a book writing project. Non-members can access informational videos and webinars, blogs, photos, open groups, and message boards; however, you must become an approved member in order to create and post content to the site and subscribe to various channels within the network.

**ProTeacher.** Established in 1999, *ProTeacher* is a space for professional school teachers and staff including a special invitation to beginning and future teachers as well as former and retired teachers (ProTeacher, 2016). Membership is free though not required to access the site; benefits to membership include bookmarking threads and boards of interest, joining special interest groups, participating in live chat, and sending and receiving private messages with other users. Non-members can post to the message boards as guests without a registered user name. This site is almost exclusively comprised of message boards dedicated to varied and specialized topics within education and teaching; there is also an area for job searching, live chat, and groups. From this site, I will use messages posted to the “BusyBoard”, which is a general forum.

**The Teachers Corner.** This site was first established in 1996 as a hobby website, which grew into a repository of completely free information and resources for teachers by 1998 (Jensen, 2014). In addition to message boards, *The Teachers Corner* offers printable worksheets, lesson plans, seasonal items, bulletin boards, collaboration projects, teacher resources, and thematic units. It is not necessary to register with the site if you only wish to view the content; however, you must register to be able to post content or reply to messages on the discussion
boards. Once a new account has been activated via the secure e-mail link, new users are granted probationary member status which provides access to additional features of the forum not available to those who do not register such as the ability to post content, reply to messages, send e-mails to other members, and create subscriptions to the postings. From this site, I will use messages posted to the “General Discussion” forum.

Participants

The participants in this study were all members of at least one of the three online spaces, which I previously described. Because of the website names, the nature of the content, and the purpose of the spaces, it was reasonable to assume that most members are teachers in some capacity whether in the traditional sense of schooling (e.g., pre-service teacher, K-12 teacher, college professor) or non-traditional sense (e.g., homeschooler, day care provider, parent). As such, members are likely to be at least 18 years of age. Moreover, it was reasonable to accept that members have an interest in contributing content to the forum because they have registered with the site or created postings as a “guest”.

Members who post in these spaces share a common pursuit or affinity that binds them together within the domain of teaching; they are seeking information regarding various aspects of teaching and education. They create ties with each other as they pose questions, respond to one another, and offer advice and encouragement. Knowledge is both intensive and extensive, distributed and individualized (Gee, 2007); these sites represent spaces in which participants can access others’ ideas and transform them while simultaneously gathering authentic feedback from others (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013).
Data Collection

The sources of data collected for this study were publicly available message postings from three message boards – one board from each site. Message postings were saved by creating PDFs of the original posting and subsequent replies; these files were stored on a flash drive and also a password-protected personal computer as back up. This was an adequate level of participant protection because these messages are available freely online and are not protected in the online environment where they originate. However, to protect the participants, I assigned pseudonyms to present examples.

There were no instances of sensitive or embarrassing information revealed on the message boards; therefore, I did not need to incorporate Bruckman’s suggestion of “splitting” the participant’s identity into two in the final reporting of data – one to whom the public content is attributed and one to whom the private is attributed (2006). As research progressed, I continued to evaluate participant anonymity and protection. As Markham and Buchanan noted, “…Internet research involves a number of dialectical tensions that are best addressed and resolved at the stages they arise in the course of a research study” (2012, p. 7). I encountered no situations that may be deemed potentially harmful to participants.

I invited members of all three online spaces to participate in an electronic survey hosted by Qualtrics Software. I posted a message on each of the sites to elicit participation in this survey; however, I received only three responses. This was not sufficient data to substantiate any conclusions, so the survey data was not included. The survey invitation and questions are included as Appendices B and C.
Table 3-1: Data Sources Aligned to Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What types of discourse are shared in online spaces for teachers?</td>
<td>● Online message postings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What types of questions do participants pose?</td>
<td>● Online message postings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What types of responses do participants provide?</td>
<td>● Online message postings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What patterns of knowledge sharing emerge through the questions and responses?</td>
<td>● Online message postings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the social interactions in the forum?</td>
<td>● Online message postings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Online message postings provided a plethora of information that contributed to the identification of the types of questions and responses posed in these spaces; through content analysis of these postings, I determined the types of knowledge and information that were shared among members. Online message postings also provided insight into the social interactions in the forum based on the use of language and emoticons.

Procedures

To collect data, I determined the most recent threads from each of the three sites that have at least five (5) replies until a total of forty (40) threads was reached. I excluded the following types of threads: 1) those posted by administrators, 2) advertisements for products, 3) introductions of new members, 4) those with attachments, 5) members soliciting non-education related advice, and 6) posts looking for research participants. Administrative posts were typically
procedural in nature and deviated from the idea of looking at what participants talk about informally. Advertisements were not conversational in nature, so they were excluded. Introductions of new members typically garnered a great deal of replies, but these posts were not indicative of types of issues participants discussed. I excluded those with attachments because the attachments are viewable only to members. For ProTeacher, you do not have to be a member to post content, so there may be participants that were unable to view the attachment content thus limiting discussion potential. I eliminated posts that solicited advice about non-education related topics. Finally, I did not include posts searching for research participants or looking for help with college assignments as these were not representative of the types of conversations relevant to this study.

For Classroom 2.0, the aforementioned data segment spanned the time frame of January 2012 through October 2015; the forty (40) threads analyzed provided 449 messages. For ProTeacher, the data segment was from October 2015; the forty (40) threads provided 313 messages; The Teachers Corner spanned August 2012 to October 2015 with 329 messages. The entire corpus of data included 1,091 messages across three discussion forums. Not only did these threads provide a plethora of data, they afford me the ability to conduct an in-depth, longitudinal study of the message board interactions.

As I intended to study these spaces as an outsider, I did not post content or interact with others in this space; my role was simply that of observer. Creating a screen name was necessary to be able to post my survey requests on Classroom 2.0 and The Teachers Corner but was not used in any other way. On each site, I posted a message on the appropriate board in an effort to solicit participants to take a short survey (Appendix B). The primary purpose of the survey was
to determine basic demographic and site usage information about the members (Appendix C). I did not successfully recruit enough participation to warrant analysis of this data.

**Data Analysis**

This research was envisioned as a multiple case study using thematic content and discourse analysis. These types of analysis allowed me to focus on the content themes while examining what purposes the “conversations” accomplish (Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014) and deconstructing how the “conversations” developed within this affinity space. The conversations were initiated, directed, and sustained by the members, which enabled analysis of discourse as it occurred rather than collecting self-reported data ex post facto (Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014). By examining the data as a series of interactions among participants, it created a conversation-like structure, which lent itself to analysis through the aforementioned means. As Riessman noted, “…meaning in the dialogic approach does not reside in a speaker’s narrative, but in the dialogue between…investigator and transcript, and text and reader” (2008, p.139). Since the forum is designed to host conversational-type exchanges, a discourse analysis fit well despite the fact that there were no spoken words. As Gee added, “Discourse analysis is the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things, but also to do things” (2014, p.1). Discourse analysis moves beyond spoken words and traditional conversation in this forum as it provides a way to show how written exchanges “do things” in context.

In this study, the case was defined as the individual discussion boards. This approach allowed me to “focus on the complexity within the [intrinsic] case, on its uniqueness, and its linkages to the social context of which it is a part” (Glesne, 2011, p.22). The structure of the message boards allows users to select the time frame of postings they wish to view. In this way,
I was able to examine the data longitudinally and in-depth (Glesne, 2011). In order to analyze the data, I utilized a modified framework originally established by Arvaja (2012) through her study on meaning making in an online environment.

As I began to collect data from the message boards, I carefully and thoroughly read the information to familiarize myself with the entire corpus. Given that the focus of this study is on the content of the message postings, I utilized thematic content analysis and discourse analysis to deconstruct the data. First, I coded the data utilizing a modified framework initially created by Arvaja (2012), which initiated a phase of analysis that helped to classify the myriad components into more general groups. The codes also served to reduce the data to make it more manageable for analysis and help to define what it is about (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009).

Studying students participating in an online philosophy of science course, Arvaja (2012) utilized a thematic discourse analysis of dialogic postings on a message board to examine how students created meaning from personal and shared experiences. Through this study, she derived a set of codes by which she categorized the discourse: elaboration discourse, sharing discourse, and others as resources for enhancing one’s personal understanding (Arvaja, 2012). Within these three broad categories, she also identified epistemic activities that serve as “...a means of representing the different ways of making sense through connecting resources” (Arvaja, 2012, p.92).

*Elaboration discourse* serves to further develop the topic or general theme of the discussion. Within this broader categorization, Arvaja (2012) identified six epistemic activities that comprise elaboration discourse: *asking for clarification or presenting a thought-provoking question to develop the theme, answering clarification or thought provoking question, gave a new perspective, reasoned further, new theoretical knowledge, and challenging others’ ideas.*
These activities demonstrate ways in which participants expanded or deepened their own knowledge through interaction with others through such methods as questions, critiques, or offering a unique perspective.

Participants utilized what Arvaja (2012) conceived of as sharing discourse when they “…shared experiences or conceptions on some phenomena…” (p.99). Sharing discourse presented in three distinct activities that served to build agreement on themes or share similar ideas and experiences: giving one’s own example, agreeing, and sharing criticism. Through these expressions, participants discussed their personal experiences and thoughts while also concurring or dissenting with those provided by others. In these ways, sharing encouraged participants to build upon their thoughts as well as the thoughts of others (Arvaja, 2012).

Arvaja’s code labeled others as resources for enhancing personal understanding is the third type of discourse identified by her study; it manifested as “…students explicitly stated that reading others’ writings or postings had helped them better understand…” (2012, p.102). The statements coded under this term clearly demonstrate the participants’ perceptions of how others’ contributions improved their understanding of various topics through clarification, offering examples, or encouraging a different perspective. Figure 3-1 provides a graphic representation of this coding scheme. Individuals visited online spaces in an effort to solve problems, ask questions, gather information, and essentially connect their personal resources with others in an effort to emerge with knowledge about their practice as teachers greater than when they accessed the space. For these reasons, Arvaja’s coding scheme provided a valuable framework with which to analyze this space.

I made an initial pass through of The Teachers Corner message board threads to get a general idea of how Arvaja’s (2012) coding scheme might apply to my data. As I began to code,
I noticed there were issues that would require revisiting the existing scheme and modifying it to better fit my goals and data set. The original scheme categorized discussion discourse in three areas: elaboration, sharing, and others as resources for enhancing personal understanding.

**Figure 3-1:** Arvaja’s Original Coding Scheme

These areas were sufficient to categorize the types of interactions within the data; however, they did not account for social commentary that would provide evidence for or against the social cohesiveness among members of the sites included in this study. This led me to a fourth categorization, which I have named “social cohesion”. Within this type of discourse, members made social or colloquial comments toward others such as compliments or displays of empathy that were informal in nature and may or may not relate to the initial focus of the discussion. Similarly, the original coding scheme as it relates to discussion postings did not include a code to correctly categorize the thread-starting post. As a result, I returned to Arvaja’s (2012) coding scheme which also included individual writings that became the basis for discussion postings. In her study, it was these individual writings that initiated the discourse subsequently categorized within the discussion postings. Arvaja (2012) categorized these posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elaboration</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Asking for clarification or presenting thought-provoking questions to develop the theme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Answering clarification or thought-provoking question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gave a new perspective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reasoned further</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New theoretical knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Challenged further</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sharing</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Giving one's own example</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Agreeing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sharing criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Others as Resources for Enhancing Personal Understanding</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
as forming or stating conception, and I felt this was an appropriate classification of initial posts for this study as well.

As I continued my initial pass through of the data, I began to notice distinctions among the types of questions and answers within the discussion threads. It became too vague to simply code discourse as “asking” or “answering” a question without reference to its origination point or type of question. This same situation presented itself through the responses; members responded to the initial question and also subsequent related and unrelated questions. It was clear that I needed to distinguish among the questions posed and answers provided. As a result, I subdivided the first two epistemic activities within elaboration discourse: asking for clarification or presenting a thought-provoking situation and answering clarification or thought-provoking question. I separated the first epistemic activity of “asking” into two specific types of “asking”: 1) the initial question or thought-provoking situation posed by the member who initiated the thread and 2) a subsequent question looking for clarification related to the initial post. These subdivisions allowed me to be more specific with the codes so that it was obvious as to whether the sections coded as “asking” were referring to the initial question or a subsequent question. The same is true of data coded as “answering” – the new divisions clarified whether the response relates to the initial question or a subsequent question.

A distinction also emerged in “others as resources for enhancing personal understanding”. In some cases, respondents offered resources such as hyperlinks or personal advice through private messages without someone’s acknowledgment to utilize the information. This type of resource did not fit Arvaja’s (2012) description of this code because it lacked the follow through of someone actually stating they had used or intended to use it. Therefore, I
created a sub-division of this code titled “offering resources”; no one explicitly acknowledged the use or intent to use these resources, but they were offered.

Furthermore, I added language to the definitions of some of the epistemic activities to make them more applicable and specific to this context. For example, in several initial postings, the member did not explicitly ask a question in the sense of an interrogative sentence but rather sought advice by presenting a situation. By refining the language, I included these scenarios as “asking” without needing to create a separate category. Similarly, I eliminated the epistemic activity called “gave a new perspective” because each response provided gave a new perspective in the sense that it was not exactly the same as any previous response. In this way, coding data as “gave a new perspective” became redundant and unnecessary. This code did not provide evidence or further information to answer any of my research questions. Figure 3-2 exhibits the revised coding scheme for this study.

**Methodological justification.** Upon examination of the literature concerning studies of affinity spaces, the methods I chose align with prior research in this area. Qualitative content analysis of online learning spaces, message boards, blogs, and other text-based data have proven insightful in this arena. In his study of pre-service teachers, Yeh (2010) analyzed online group discussions in order to identify discussion behaviors. According to Ke and Hoadley’s review of evaluation studies of online learning communities, 11 of 12 qualitative studies “examined knowledge construction as a process and product of online interaction by conducting content…analysis of transcripts of online interactions” (2009, p.498). These studies utilized
various methods to code the learning events and phenomena of interest. Moreover, 19 of 21 mixed method studies also utilized thematic analysis with interview or online observation data (Ke & Hoadley, 2009).

Murugaiah, Azman, Thang, and Krish’s (2012) study of Malaysian teachers participating in online learning communities as a professional development supplement employed the use of content analysis as applied to blog discussion transcripts; similarly, King (2011) identified common themes through a constant comparative analysis of the content of journal entries, Twitter transcripts, and messages between community members. Vavasseur and MacGregor (2008) used the constant comparative method of content analysis with discussion board threads in their study of middle school teachers’ professional development through participation in
online communities. In her study of online learning communities for K-12 educators, Booth (2012) utilized an a priori coding scheme which she refined and expanded to better understand practices and behaviors she had witnessed online. In a study of perhaps one of the earliest online communities designed for teachers, Leask and Younie (2007) also coded their data using a thematic analysis that ultimately concluded with several ways in which professional development could be supported by an online space.

Kushner-Benson and Ward (2013) utilized a pre-established framework to analyze teaching expertise through participant interviews and thematic content analysis of discussion prompts and message board postings. Graham, Borup, and Smith (2012) conducted their study of teacher candidates using technology through open coding that was subsequently compared to an established construct. Similarly, Holmes (2012) studied discussion forum messages of an online space by coding them according to the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000); he also incorporated a questionnaire alongside this analysis to provide a more comprehensive picture of the learning occurring in a particular online space.

Thematic content analysis, coding, and subsequent emergence of patterns as methodological choices are abundant in the sparse literature regarding the study of online communities. A socio-cultural perspective is a common lens through which to view this type of phenomena (Macià & García, 2016). However, it is worth noting that there are few studies that utilize an informal learning perspective to analyze online discussions (Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2014) as this is an emerging area for further research. In addition, Leask and Younie (2001) concluded that continued and expanded research in this area is warranted based on their findings regarding professional gains through the use of teacher networks.
**Researcher bias.** This study grew not only out of a research gap in the literature but also due to my personal interest in the topic. As an educator for the past 11 years, I have participated in many types of both voluntary and involuntary continuing professional learning, which offered me unique insight into this topic. More specifically, as a language teacher, I have often been one of the educators “pushed aside” when considering options for continuing professional learning as my subject is often deemed an elective, not included with standardized testing, and not part of the Common Core Initiative. It is my hope that further research of affinity spaces, online communities, and online networks will contribute to expand continuing professional learning opportunities and to improve the relevancy of these offerings so that they apply to all teachers. Despite my desire to see this social change within education, throughout the course of the study, I maintained a neutral stance towards what I found in the forums. I was conscious not to project what I hoped to find onto data that did not support it. While I could relate professionally and personally to many of the discussions that I analyzed, I upheld my position as an outside observer by reporting the data and not imposing value judgments upon it.
Chapter 4

Discussion of Findings

The goal of this research study was to describe the ways in which teachers utilized and engaged with online spaces for informal learning and to examine the social interactions among participants. In this chapter, I will first discuss the general characteristics of the findings by answering the research question: What types of discourse are shared in online spaces for teachers? Following the general characteristics, I will break down the components of the discourse into questions and responses to answer two of the supporting questions: What types of questions do participants pose? and What types of responses do participants provide? Then, I will present a brief discussion of observed patterns as a response to my third supporting question: What patterns of knowledge sharing emerge through the questions and responses? Finally, I will conclude with a description of the social aspects of participant interaction within the forums to answer the final supporting question: What are the social interactions in the forum? In each section, I will describe the data in aggregate by referring to characteristics that are shared among the forums; I will also detail any pertinent findings that differentiate the forums.

The three forums included in the reporting of this data are Classroom 2.0 (C2), ProTeacher (PT), and The Teachers Corner (TC). After the initial mention of the specific name, I will refer to each by its abbreviation. Examples utilized preserve the original language and punctuation used by the participant and are unedited; I have changed the usernames to protect participant identity. From each forum, I collected forty (40) discussion threads of at least five (5) replies each by starting with the most recent as of October 2015 and working backwards chronologically until I reached forty (40) threads. I excluded the following types of threads: 1) those posted by administrators, 2) advertisements for products, 3) introductions of new members, 4) those with attachments, 5) members soliciting non-education related
advice, and 6) posts looking for research participants. *For Classroom 2.0*, the aforementioned data segment spanned the period of January 2012 through October 2015; the forty (40) threads provided 449 messages. For *ProTeacher*, the data segment was from October 2015; the forty (40) threads provided 313 messages; *The Teachers Corner* spanned August 2012 to October 2015 with 329 messages. The entire corpus of data included 1,091 messages across three discussion forums.

In order to compile the data, I saved each separate discussion thread as a PDF file and then uploaded it into *Dedoose*, a qualitative analysis software tool. In an effort to achieve the broad analysis as applicable to my main research question, I began an analysis of 120 discussion threads with 40 from each of the three aforementioned forums. For each thread, I analyzed the initial post and all replies in order to apply my coding scheme, which I based on Arvaja’s (2012) coding scheme, but which I refined to fit the context and my specific research goals. The coding scheme served to characterize the types of discourse across these forums: *forming or stating the initial conception, elaboration, sharing, others as resources for enhancing personal understanding,* and *challenging others’ ideas*.

In addition, it facilitated further analysis of the threads through more specific coding within the types of discourse. Six components comprise elaboration discourse: *answering initial question, asking clarification question, answering clarification question, reasoned further, theoretical knowledge,* and *challenging others’ ideas* – while three components further delineate sharing discourse– *giving one’s own example, agreeing,* and *sharing criticism*. *Others as resources for enhancing personal understanding* had one sub-code – *offering resources* – which I used to differentiate between resources offered in contrast to resources utilized. *Forming or stating the initial conception* and *social cohesion* had no further subdivisions. Table 4-1 displays all codes utilized in this study with a brief description of each. For a complete matrix of all codes with additional examples from each forum, see Appendix D.
Table 4-1: List of Codes and Brief Descriptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Type</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forming or Stating Conception</td>
<td>Forming or Stating the Initial Conception</td>
<td>Members pose the initial thought-provoking question or situation that serves as the basis for starting the message thread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asking clarification question</td>
<td>Members ask for clarification or presents an alternative, related example that builds upon the original question or situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answering initial question</td>
<td>Members answer or responds to the initial question or situation presented as a continuation of the discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answering clarification question</td>
<td>Members answer or responds to a clarification question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasoned further</td>
<td>Members provide additional support or information for a question or response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theoretical knowledge</td>
<td>Members offer advice or knowledge with a theoretical basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging others’ ideas</td>
<td>Members disagree directly with advice provided by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td>Giving one’s own example</td>
<td>Members use personal evidence to support their position or provide further information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeing</td>
<td>Members agree with a previously stated position or comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing criticism</td>
<td>Members share criticism of a posed situation or view presented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>Others as resources</td>
<td>Members state or imply they have used or will use a resource suggested by another post; in order for this code to be used, a resource must have been offered first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others as Resources for Enhancing Personal Understanding</td>
<td>Offering resources</td>
<td>Members offer resources such as hyperlinks or private advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Cohesion</td>
<td>Social Cohesion</td>
<td>Members make positive social comments toward each other that are informal in nature and display a sense of camaraderie.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In each thread, the first code I applied was always *forming or stating the initial conception*; in order for a thread to develop, there had to be an initial post. Within that post, it was possible to apply other codes as well. I coded an initial post that included a personal example as *forming or stating the initial conception* and *giving one’s own example* (distinguished by italics).

I’m looking for tried-and-true ways to manage widely different student work paces. *I’ve always had early finishers; our students are required to keep a book at their desks, so early finishers*
This year, I have a couple of extremely slow students who just plod through work. Everyone is stuck waiting for them so we can check the work together. Ideas? (Sample from PT)

In this example, the entire message serves as the initial post, which I coded as forming or stating the initial conception as it set the stage for discussion to develop. However, within the post, mentioning that students keep a book at their desks for when they finish early and a direct reference to current students expressed a personal example. Therefore, I coded this post as both the initial conception and a personal example.

After coding the initial post, I analyzed each subsequent reply for discourse type as well as further subdivision. Following analysis of the thread discourse, I engaged in a broader analysis in an effort to extract common themes among the content of the discussions. Analyzing the topics of discussion enabled me to identify ten thematic categorizations that encompassed 115 of the 120 discussions; five outlier threads did not fit into these categories. With these two levels of analysis complete, I engaged in three microanalyses of discussions with shared topics to compare how similar topics developed on different forums.

Types of Discourse

Five types of discourse characterized each of the forums: 1) forming or stating the initial conception, 2) elaboration, 3) sharing, 4) using others as resources, and 5) social cohesion. The first four of these characterizations are based upon definitions established by Arvaja (2012) with context-specific modifications. The fifth distinction – social cohesion – was created in response to discourse within the forums as it proved relevant to this study. Though Arvaja (2012) did not distinguish social comments in her study, she acknowledged a sense of “togetherness” that served to establish and maintain a positive social climate within the discussions. Social cohesion
is akin to the “togetherness” noted in the original study. Figure 4-1 displays the distribution of discourse types across the 3,584 codes assigned among the data gathered from all three forums. In the following sections, I define each type of discourse separately and present how it manifested.

**Figure 4-1.** Distribution of Discourse Types across Forums.

**Forming or Stating the Initial Conception**

In this section, I first present the general code characteristics. Then, I describe how I categorized the thread topics or initial conceptions according to ten unique themes that emerged from the data. I present each thematic category with examples.

I applied this code to the initial thought-provoking question or situation that served as the basis for starting the message thread. This may have included background information, personal
examples, and/or solutions previously implemented. Due to the nature of this code, each thread had one application. Arguably, this code may be considered unnecessary because without an initial posting there would be no discussion. However, it is relevant to distinguish an initial posting as a type of discourse because it is the basis for the thread and not considered part of the other four types of discourse.

Generally, the discussions followed the theme or topic set forth by the initial posting throughout the entire discussion. However, messages posted in seven of the threads deviated significantly from the initial posting. Three of these threads were from Classroom 2.0 and four were from The Teachers Corner; there were none in the ProTeacher sample.

Table 4-2: Deviating Message Example from C2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Post</th>
<th>SherryI: I'm currently moving from classroom teaching to online delivery and am particularly interested in web 2.0 techniques, apps that support/enable learners with dyslexia.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answering Initial Question</td>
<td>Evan99: There is a free home version to download the dyslexie font: <a href="http://www.dyslexiefont.com/">http://www.dyslexiefont.com/</a> It will work w/ MS Word, etc. Also, your student can use the free site Readability: <a href="https://www.readability.com/">https://www.readability.com/</a> when reading to make websites easier to navigate &amp; read. For writing, there are supports w/in Google Chrome that your student may want to try. <a href="http://setsig.iste.wikispaces.net/Professional+Development">http://setsig.iste.wikispaces.net/Professional+Development</a> Follow this link and look for the Chrome Supports Webinar by Mike Marotta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviating Message</td>
<td>ChinaTeacher: We are a online teaching company located in china. Now we need to recruit English teachers. If you are interested in teaching Chinese students English, please contact me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this example, the initial post intended to gather resources to support online instruction for students with dyslexia. The off-topic post attempted to divert the theme of online instruction to recruit English teachers for an online teaching company based in China. As the thread developed, respondents ignored the deviating post and brought the initial discussion topic back into focus by continuing to respond to it rather than acknowledging the new topic.
**Table 4-3**: Deviating Message Example from *PT*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Post</th>
<th>LovesCoffee: How neat is your handwriting? Do folks still write on the board or use technology for everything? Can your students read it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answering</td>
<td>MrZ: My handwriting is horrific on paper (printing or cursive). Give me a dry erase marker and a board, I'm good. :) It's sad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviating</td>
<td>IrishLady: I made a special trip into town to get my favorite creamer ...stupid store was out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A member presented a less specific question and intended to get a sampling of responses with which to evaluate her own handwriting. In this case, the member that diverted the thread had previously provided a relevant response to the question and subsequently changed the topic of the thread with her social comment regarding coffee creamer. In contrast to the C2 example, members continued to follow the diverted portion of the thread to learn more information about the type of coffee creamer and to share likes and dislikes of specific flavors; the initial question received no further responses after the deviating message.

**Categorizing initial questions.** The main goal of starting a thread on a discussion forum was to solicit answers to a question or to solicit others’ opinions on a topic or situation. By examining the questions posed across these three forums, ten distinct categorizations emerged; each category contained at least three discussions. Only five outlier threads did not fit within any of the following categories. I discuss the categories in order of most to least occurrences. See Appendix E for a complete list of categories, definitions, and amount of discussions in each category according to forum. Table 4-4 shows the thread distribution by forum across the categories.
Table 4-4: Distribution of Discussion Threads by Category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number in C2</th>
<th>Number in PT</th>
<th>Number in TC</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Educational Issues</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Tools and Support</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular Enhancement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Policy and Procedures</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Issues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outliers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Issues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Classroom Management</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share a Story</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Holidays and Special Occasions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**General educational issues.** Among the data set, 31% of the discussions (37 total) dealt with educational topics that were not contextually specific and provided general advice or viewpoints that have applicability to various contexts. Furthermore, these broad topics were not content nor grade-level specific; these types of initial posts did not have a right or wrong answer but rather sought to look at various facets of the topic. TC had the most discussions within this category (21) while C2 and PT had 13 and 3, respectively. Examples of the topics from C2 included bring your own device, flipped classrooms, starting the school day earlier, and mobile phone usage in schools. From TC, there was a similar discussion of mobile phone usage in schools; other topics included advice for substitutes, debating the merits of compulsory education, and what it means to be a good teacher. Some topics from PT were gifts for student teachers, an active killer drill, and poor grammar when speaking. None of the discussions in this category was context or situation specific though two originated from a secondary rather than elementary perspective; nevertheless, anyone interested in these topics could potentially glean
information and apply it in useful and relevant ways without losing its essence.

I don't know about anyone else, but the height of my concentration is in the morning! I am much happier to get up as early as possible, if it means I'm done by lunch time. As soon as a morsel of food hits my belly - THAT'S IT!! Concentration is out the window. Have the German's got it right? An earlier start in the morning, around 8am, and then you're home and done by 1.30pm. This sounds like a great idea to me, but what are your thoughts? (Sample from C2)

This is related to a post earlier about teaching grammar in writing/language arts. In the past there are always some kids who use poor grammar, but for some reason this year it's many! I have several students who consistently use "I seen my friend at the mall" or "We ain't got pencils at home." These kids speak as their families do. How do you handle this? What are the best strategies to break this in school? (Sample from PT)

As you all might be aware of, the Internet is not only fun, there are many dangers hiding behind the computer screens; think of cyber bullying, peadophiles etc. Of course, children need to be taught about how to behave online. Do you agree that schools should be most responsible for teaching the children about safety in the Online world? (Sample from TC)

**Technology tools or support.** The second most prominent topic (21 discussions or 17.5%) was technology tools for the classroom or members looking for technology related support. Each of these discussions pertained to a specific tool such as Google+, Pinterest, or class websites or sought advice regarding technical support such as projecting an iPad screen, accessing YouTube through a filter, or troubleshooting an online grading program. Technology-related discussions that did not pertain to a specific tool but rather a more broad conversation were categorized under general educational issues (e.g., BYOD, mobile phone use in classrooms). The focus was on current or future use of technology tools with students or for student benefit in a classroom setting. None of the threads in this category was from TC, and not surprisingly, the vast majority (18 of 21) were from C2, which is a site predisposed to technology talk. Some of the discussions were contextually specific while others were looking for generalizable advice. Topics from C2 included user-friendly learning management systems,
class websites and blogs, and using Google+ in the classroom; the *PT* topics were accessing YouTube at school, ways to message parents, and looking for help with a grading program. Of the discussions categorized as *technology tools or support*, only three of them pertained to a secondary setting; the remainder was relevant to elementary classrooms only.

I'm a big fan of using Facebook groups and pages to support learning but I haven't used Google+ for this purpose. I'm wondering how people are using Google+ to support learning. I look forward to learning if this is another good option as well as the advantages and limitations. (Sample from *C2*)

Does anyone here use Power School's grading program, Power Grade? I need help! LOL Have been all over the help topics and and the district Power School person is unable/unwilling to help me. I need a way to show an assignment as collected with the checkmark. When I mark it with the checkmark as collected, it is still showing as a blank on the student report. For instance; I want to add in collection of a permission slip. I mark it with a checkmark showing the student turned it in. However, it still shows a point value of zero and does not show a checkmark as collected. (Sample from *PT*)

**Curricular enhancement.** Looking for ways to improve and enhance curriculum of various areas was the third most popular theme among the data (18 discussions or 15%). For this category, members presented rather specific scenarios looking for recommendations to improve existing lessons, provide better learning experiences for students, acquire further resources for classroom use, and remedy problems with new approaches. *PT* had the highest number of discussions in this area (12) with topics such as English language development activities, current events for fifth graders, and looking for new reading strategies. Reading comprehension strategies also appeared on the *C2* board; the idea of a technology club appeared twice, approximately six months apart. Furthermore, all of these topics were relevant only to elementary settings; none of the discussions was applicable to secondary. Teachers on these discussion forums appeared to be looking for ways to improve learning experiences for students in various ways rather than keeping the status quo; methods of improvement included searching
for new activities and lesson materials, remediating content for better comprehension,
incorporating current topics into lessons, and adding resources to classroom libraries.

I teach elementary keyboarding and the program I have is kinda boring. I would like to
find something new that goes from K-6 grade. I would be willing to purchase books or
materials if it is a great program. Can anyone help me out with ideas? (Sample from C2)

I teach 5th grade special needs students and I'd like to have them do some kind of current
events work at least once a month. Does anyone have suggestions of websites with
current articles on lower reading levels? (About 2nd-3rd grade level) I've used Time for
Kids and Scholastic News in the past but am hoping to find something free. Also, any
ideas of simple reports or templates that you use for current events would be great!
(Sample from PT)

School has just begun and I'm terrified! Ok school has just begun and I'm very worried. I
was greeted with an applause as I entered the classroom - which was great - but the truth
is I'm terrified. I have used up all my ideas with these kids last year, we have 133 hours
ahead of us and I have no idea what to do. :( The subject is called Correspondence and
Archive Techniques. The other class is not so problematic, even though it's an entirely
new subject to me - stocks and merchandising. Again, any tips on school activities are
more than welcome. Wish me luck! :) (Sample from TC)

Classroom policy and procedures. Of the 120 discussions, only 8% (10 threads) related
to classroom policies or procedures; 6 discussions appeared in PT, and C2 and TC both had 2
each. These types of discussions did not include specific student-related issues but all were
generalizable to various contexts. Examples included late work policies, homework policies, a
classroom reward system, and managing different work paces. All of these topics were also
directed towards elementary aged students; though the advice may be applicable to secondary
settings, none of the discussions was initiated from a secondary perspective.

I am currently working with a group of eighth grade students teaching Math and Science.
Although the school year has only just begin, I can already tell that missing work is going
to be an issue. I was hoping to develop a system to reduce the amount of missing work in
my classroom before it gets out of hand. I was wondering what strategies or systems that
other teachers had in place that have been effective. Any suggestions? (Sample from C2)

I'm looking for tried-and-true ways to manage widely different student work paces. I've
always had early finishers; our students are required to keep a book at their desks, so
early finishers read. This year, I have a couple of extremely slow students who just plod through work. Everyone is stuck waiting for them so we can check the work together. Ideas? (Sample from PT)

I need ideas for a award or reward system for my 4th grade self contained class. Something easy that they will enjoy, (Sample from TC)

**Administrative issues.** While they comprised only 7% of the corpus (8 discussions), all of the threads except one were from TC. There were no administrative issues threads from C2. Topics regarded employment issues such as teachers facing non-renewal, getting called into the principal’s office, and a teacher being fired after a student discipline problem. The discussions in this category tended to include lengthy explanations of the initial issue with more clarification questions and more in-depth replies. In all cases, the responses were supportive of the OP and displayed a strong sense of solidarity.

I'm working on an email to my special ed director (someone I don't see daily or even on a predictable basis, so this has to be done through email) and wanted another opinion-or multiple. I want to email the sped director and ask if the meeting location can be changed to another room in the building (and it has to be done ASAP, we meet again next week...). Here's what I'm thinking, I'd appreciate any input: [text of proposed e-mail] (Sample from PT)

Last week I submitted my resignation and quit my job as a school librarian… I apologized that I was quitting so close to the beginning of the school year (I gave exactly 2 weeks notice), but that I would appreciate being released as soon as possible as my new job starts next week. The initial responses I got (from my principal and co-workers) simply said they were sad to see me go but congratulations and good luck. But then I got an email from my supervisor saying "we will need to keep you for your 30 days until we find a replacement." I looked all through my contract and teachers’ handbook and I could find nothing stating how much notice needs to be given before resigning. Can they really make me stay for the first two weeks of the school year? (Sample from TC)

**Special education.** There were five discussions related to special education, and all were student-centered; in each case, the member who initiated the thread wanted advice and support for students with special needs. None of these threads was from TC. Topics from this category.
included standing desks for students with ADHD, dyslexia, and bipolar disorder.

within one of my classes I have a young girl with Bipolar disorder which I find somewhat challenging at times, and the extent of her learning really depends on her condition, I just wondered if anyone else has students with Bipolar or any other condition or disorder, how you deal with it but also how you ensure keeping the lesson inclusive? (Sample from C2)

I saw these on the news last night. They seemed to work well in the classroom featured. The fidget bars seemed to make them perfect for my ADHD students. Does anyone have experience with these? (Sample from PT)

**Share a story.** In these four discussions, the motivation in posting was not to ask for advice or solutions to a problem but simply to share a story of success or failure; the initial poster used the forum as a space in which to express a personal success or failure related to his teaching experiences. Three of the four discussions in this category related to successes – a musical presentation, an exemplary pencil sharpener, and why I love teaching – while only one highlighted a failure in which a teacher expressed regret over having to hold several students back from advancing on to the next grade. This type of discussion represented only 3% of the data lending support to the idea that members utilize the forums in search of advice and to answer questions rather than simply to express their feelings about day-to-day events.

Yesterday several things happened to restore my love for teaching, the real job (not the idealized version): *2 grade levels of teachers (6 of us) planned a pot luck lunch to surprise 1 for her birthday. It was fabulous, friendly, and fun…*my principal came to me after school to admit sheepishly that she'd lost her temper at one of my kids who had been sent to the office during lunch. Reality! *During a turn-and-talk, one of my kids said (as I've taught them), "Billybob and I talked and he thought ____, but I disagreed. I thought..." and then he got that look on his face--I have no clue. He turned to Billybob and asked, "What did I say?" Billybob reminded him and off we went. Authenticity! (Sample from PT)

In Indonesia, we have a grade system that seems to be similar to the American version. Basically, if you fail too many subjects, you repeat the year. This year will be the first time I've failed anyone but it looks like four kids are going to be unhappy. I know all four are failing other subjects so they'll all either leave school or repeat the year. I don't feel good about doing this. (Sample from TC)
Student classroom management issues. Student classroom management issues referred to specific situations or students about which a member posts in search of advice regarding student behavior in classrooms. These discussions differed from classroom policy and procedural issues because they directly involved student problems that have already occurred in the classroom and were not simply rhetorical or anticipated. Of these four discussions, two came from both PT and TC; the topics were behavioral issues with young children, an attention getting strategy, and two that addressed constant student talking. The responses to these posts consisted primarily of personal examples and empathetic, socially cohesive responses; those who responded tended to be ones who could share the feelings expressed in the initial post because they had also experienced a similar situation.

My class does not stop talking- I have great classroom management, but this group has been know to have verbal diarrhea! and hard to control. Any suggestions? (Sample from PT)

In my class there is boy age 4 and a half who refuses to obey the teacher and disrupts the class every time an activity is being done. When spoken to about his beahaviour he ignores the teacher and continues to misbehave. What should I do ? (Sample from TC)

Parents. In each of these three discussions, the topics were negative in nature because of parental involvement or lack thereof. One of the discussions from TC actually presented three lengthy and distinct scenarios that could have been posted as three separate threads. Responses among these threads were all supportive towards the teacher who posted the initial message.

Yesterday I was teaching a lesson to my 5th graders. They were all sitting on the carpet. I looked up to see one student playing with Legos. I said (something like) "No toys. 5th graders don't bring toys to school. Go put them in your backpack right now and take them home." The boy, his mom, and I met this morning (at the mom's insistence). Her engines were lit! She said that I had "humiliated and degraded" her child. I brought him into the conversation; when it became clear that his accounting made me look reasonable, she said to him, "Don't say anything. I'll do the talking here." (Sample from PT)
A grade 4 kid gave me the finger. I kicked the little sod out of class, gave him 'minus points' (behaviour indicators) and lines. "I must not stick my middle finger up at a teacher", to be copied 50 times. His idiot mother told him not to do the punishment. This is an old problem but the first time it has directly effected me. His mother's stupidity leaves me in a difficult situation. His home room teacher is also pissed off, as is the principal. Suggestions (that don't involve a shotgun and/or the third floor balcony and a lesson about Sir Isaac Newton) would be welcome. (Sample from TC)

**Classroom celebrations and special occasions.** The final categorization also only encompassed three discussions (2.5%); these discussions were all from PT and relate to how teachers celebrate holidays or special occasions in the classroom. In the case of this data set, two of the discussions related to how teachers celebrated Halloween in their classrooms; the third searched for suggestions on book characters to use as inspiration for dressing-up as a special experience for the students.

Do you give your students goodie bags for Halloween? What do you put in them? (Sample from PT)

For Halloween this year, all of the teachers are dressing up as characters from books. Our school owns a few costumes (Clifford, Curious George, Cat in the Hat), and those were quickly snatched up. It's just as well, I would be way too hot in a furry costume all day. I teach Pre-Kindergarten....and I want my students to know who my character is. Any suggestions? (Sample from PT)

**Outliers.** In addition to the ten aforementioned categories, there were five discussions identified as outliers (4%). They did not fit into any of the categories nor did they closely relate to each other. Of these discussions, one from TC stands out – a member posted a message asking where everyone on the forum had gone, lamenting the fact that the board had become less active over time. Responses were positive and all included socially cohesive comments. The responses indicated that members were still lurking around the site but that they had perhaps become too busy personally or professionally to provide the number of responses they had typically
proffered. Interestingly, most of the comments also included a social remark that evidenced the notion of community provided by the discussion board noting the great advice and support that members provide to each other.

I submitted a project to DC a month or so ago. I'm about $160 away from being funded and I REALLY want to get funded. I've posted it on FB and I've checked to see if there are any offers that I'd qualify for (there aren't). And I'm going to check again in November to see if something new pops up. So, does anyone have any other ideas for how I can get funded? I'm thinking about calling local businesses. (Sample from PT)

I miss how active these forums used to be. I was around for a couple of years before I actually joined and started posting and I can remember getting on a couple of times a day just to keep up. Now even if I miss a couple of days, I can read everything I've missed in just a few minutes. I miss it! (Sample from TC)

**Elaboration**

Elaboration discourse served to advance and develop the ideas or questions posed in the initial posting by “offering a different perspective, critique, or new knowledge” (Arvaja, 2012, p.97). Elaboration was the parent code to six sub-codes, which further specified how the elaboration took place: 1) asking for clarification, 2) answering the initial question, 3) answering a clarification question, 4) reasoned further, 5) theoretical knowledge, and 6) challenging other’s ideas. Among the threads analyzed, there were 2,112 instances of elaboration codes; the majority of these codes was divided between answering the initial question (988) and reasoned further (738). The least identified elaboration code was theoretical knowledge with only 18 instances. Table 4-5 displays the distribution of elaboration codes both across the dataset and for each specific forum.

**Asking for clarification.** In these excerpts, a member asked for clarification or presented an alternative, related example that built upon the original question or situation in an effort to identify similarities or differences. Clarification questions requested further information
regarding the situation in an effort to provide contextually appropriate advice. Among the data, I identified four types of clarification questions: suggestion posed as question, reflection, yes/no, and factual. Following are examples of each type.

Table 4-5. Elaboration Discourse Separated by Code.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Type</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Classroom 2.0</th>
<th>ProTeacher</th>
<th>The Teachers Corner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td>Asking clarification question</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answering initial question</td>
<td>988</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answering clarification question</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reasoned further</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theoretical knowledge</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging other’s ideas</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals:</td>
<td></td>
<td>2112</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 1

**4thgradeteacher:** I am looking at several apps to message parents while protecting my cell number. I have looked at Bloomz, class 123 and Remind. For those of you using these apps, do any of them have a way to be certain the messages have been received? Does anyone have any other apps to suggest? (Initial Post)

**LarryG:** But why don't you send emails? Is there a reason it has to come from your phone? (Clarification Question - suggestion posed as question)

This type of clarification question asked for more information to clarify the precise needs of the initial poster; furthermore, the question offered a suggestion for a solution while also helping the original poster to articulate why the seemingly simpler solution of sending an e-mail
was not implemented.

Example 2

**vitaminsea:** Our district is considering a 1:1 initiative and we are trying to decide what type of device we should use. I think we would experience fewer limitations with laptops, but I'm certain our students would prefer tablets. Anyone have a strong opinion either way? (Initial Post)

**TechGuy2:** what do you want the students to do/accomplish with the 1:1 program? (Clarification Question – reflection question)

As in all instances, the clarification question attempted to elicit further information about the initial post. This reflection question also functioned to encourage the original poster to think more fundamentally about what the program goals were rather than choosing one based on student preference. This type of clarification question seemed to focus on inciting critical reflection and further self-examination from discussion participants rather than providing precise responses.

Example 3

**librarian99:** Last week I submitted my resignation and quit my job as a school librarian…But then I got an email from my supervisor saying “we will need to keep you for your 30 days until we find a replacement.” I looked all through my contract and teachers’ handbook and I could find nothing stating how much notice needs to be given before resigning. Can they really make me stay for the first two weeks of the school year? (Initial Post)

**flamenco:** First, are you in a union? (Clarification Question – yes/no)

In this discussion, a member requested a simple yes or no response from this straightforward clarification question he posed. The original poster usually responded with an equally succinct response that directly answered the question.

Example 4

**jesuis:** I am training to become a primary school teacher in UK…I came to the USA for a year with a J-1 Visa through the au pair programme. I really loved it in US…Will it be
possible for me to get a job/visa/green card to come and teach in USA as an elementary teacher with my British qualifications and bilingualism? (Initial Post)

**chopsticks:** You may want to consider a secondary school qualification. I believe that very few US schools teacher French at the primary level, apart perhaps from a few bordering eastern Canada. (Answering Initial Question)

**jesuis:** But I also teach numeracy, science, literacy, history, geography, citizenship, and ICT. Is it the same in US or do you only have subjects specialists? But I am definitely not interested to teach secondary, I tried before, and I don’t find it as enjoyable…(Clarification Question – factual response)

In this example, a response incited clarification questions from the original poster who wanted further information regarding comments within a response. This clarification question requested facts regarding the school system in the United States and teachers’ subject specialization.

**Answering the initial question.** A member answered or responded to the original question or situation presented as a continuation of the discussion. Though the response may or may not have directly answered the question, it directly related to some aspect of the topic established by the initial post. The majority of responses mimicked the tone set forth by the original poster unless the response was contradictory to the initial post.

Within this code, I identified four response types: response that provides a resource, response that reasons with personal experience, response that reasons with personal opinion, and response with no reasoning. Following are examples of each.

**Example 1**

**vitaminsea:** Our district is considering a 1:1 initiative and we are trying to decide what type of device we should use. I think we would experience fewer limitations with laptops, but I'm certain our students would prefer tablets. Anyone have a strong opinion either way? (Initial Post)

**Tech4life:** I'm on my districts "iPad" committee - the quotes are because we recently
decided that we should got BYOT to meet our goal of 1:1. Below is a link to a blog post indicating why we made the decision. (Answering Initial Question – response that provides a resource)

The response provided in this case gives an answer that circumvents the precise question yet responds to the general topic. It is not clear whether Tech4life was for or against the decision to purchase tablets, but he provided a resource for the initial poster to understand better the reasoning behind this decision and to inform the upcoming decisions in the original poster’s own district.

Example 2

johnE: We are starting to switch for English Language Development (ELD) on Tuesday. We have no curriculum. I am working with grades 3-4 and their level is proficient/advanced. [Further details and explanation]. Any ideas would be great. (Initial Post)

chicabonita: in CA it is mandatory to include an eld component. Our district strongly encourages us to implement some of these strategies into our eld lessons. Before preschool I taught eld for over 15 years and vocabulary development was always at the center of our lessons. (Answering Initial Question – response with personal example)

While the post began with a factual statement, the respondent provided an answer to the initial post using a personal example as support. The poster provided both personal experience and examples in an attempt to clarify her expertise and bolster her suggestion.

Example 3

Librarian99: Last week I submitted my resignation and quit my job as a school librarian...But then I got an email from my supervisor saying "we will need to keep you for your 30 days until we find a replacement." I looked all through my contract and teachers' handbook and I could find nothing stating how much notice needs to be given before resigning. Can they really make me stay for the first two weeks of the school year? (Initial Post)

TamF: If you are considered "under contract" for the school year, I would think that they could refuse to release you at all if they chose. (Answering Initial Question –
The response provided in this situation is purely opinion-based; there is no reference to established procedure or policy nor is there an element of personal experience to support the response. The use of the word “would” suggests that this poster has no concrete experience with the topic.

Example 4

**stumped:** I have a first grade student who has stumped me on how I can help her. I gave the beginning words of the primary spelling inventory today to see what my first graders needed to work on. One of the words was wait, and the student spelled it something like qup. She doesn't seem to match any of the letters correctly on ANY of the words! She got some initial consonants correctly but everything else was a no-go. She has the same issue when reading. Can tap sounds out individually, but when it's time to blend, she makes completely different sounds. Any thoughts on what I can do to help her? (Initial Post)

**Lisahoy:** One thing you could try with her is using mirrors and having her feel her face to compare how the sounds are made. (Answering Initial Question – *response with no reasoning*)

In contrast to the other three examples, this response provides a direct, succinct solution to the problem at hand that demonstrates no personal connection to that response. It is unclear whether the suggestion was based on personal experience with the technique or simply something the responder thought to recommend.

**Answering a clarification question.** A member answered or responded to a clarification question by providing additional information in an effort to make the discussion more clearly understood. The respondents only answered approximately 75% of the clarification questions, encompassing two types of responses: factual and yes/no.

Example 1

**DLM2:** My principal wants to start a data wall of every student in our school. Is there an
effective way to do this using Web 2.0 tools? (Initial Post)

**Newbie85**: Can you be more specific about what you mean by a "data wall"? Are you looking for pure metrics such as attendance, grades, test scores, etc that will only be used by teachers/administrators? (Asking Clarification Questions)

**DLM2**: It is literally a wall with student data on it like test scores. The idea is to be able to visualize students’ academic needs and chart their progress as each student is remediated. (Answering Clarification Question – factual answer)

The clarification questions sought to elucidate a definition of a term and to gather more information about the concept; the original poster responded directly to the first clarification question with a factual description of the term. The respondent did not answer the second clarification question precisely in accordance with the way the OP asked it, but the responder did provide further information in a way that was not specifically tied to the question.

**Example 2**

**librarian99**: Last week I submitted my resignation and quit my job as a school librarian...But then I got an email from my supervisor saying "we will need to keep you for your 30 days until we find a replacement." I looked all through my contract and teachers' handbook and I could find nothing stating how much notice needs to be given before resigning. Can they really make me stay for the first two weeks of the school year? (Initial Post)

**flamenco**: First, are you in a union? (Asking Clarification Question)

**librarian99**: I am a member of the teachers union (Answering Clarification Question – yes/no)

In this example, the clarification question was rather precise – it required a simple yes or no answer, which the original poster provided.

**Reasoned further**: When reasoning further, a member provided additional support or information for a question or response, which may or may not have directly related to the initial
post. Four types of further reasoning emerged from the data: reasoned with personal opinion, reasoned with personal example or experience, reasoned with second-hand example, and reasoned with factual details. The portion of the response coded as reasoned further is distinguished by italics.

Example 1

**canadadry:** I'm a new teacher in British Columbia, where it is technically illegal to dock marks for late work (the argument is that the marks should reflect academic ability, not work ethic). This policy combined with the low demographic of my school results in students taking deadlines as suggestions, and I find myself marking work months past its due date. How can I bend the rules without breaking them and encourage students to submit their work on time? (Initial Post)

**steelersfan:** It seems to make sense that students should be responsible at turning in work on time. Kind of like in real life, you don't get paid for the hours you work especially when you arrive late to work. (Answering Initial Question and Reasoned Further – personal opinion)

While the response did not answer how to bend the rules as requested by the original poster, it did offer an opinion on the topic and suggested a reason why work should be turned in on time. The provided example was not clearly based on personal or second-hand experience but rather was generic and widely applicable.

Example 2

**Librarian99:** Last week I submitted my resignation and quit my job as a school librarian...But then I got an email from my supervisor saying "we will need to keep you for your 30 days until we find a replacement." I looked all through my contract and teachers' handbook and I could find nothing stating how much notice needs to be given before resigning. Can they really make me stay for the first two weeks of the school year? (Initial Post)

**TamF:** If you are considered "under contract" for the school year, I would think that they could refuse to release you at all if they chose. *In my district, if I were to decide to take another job close to the beginning of the new year, they (central office staff/supervisors) would release me to go even if it meant they started the school year with a sub to fill my position.* (Answering Initial Question and Reasoned Further – personal example or experience)
In this example the further reasoning did not provide a direct answer to the question, but it did give a hypothetical example of what may occur given a similar situation in a different district. In this example, the responder emphasized the authority of a school’s central staff—whether they chose to release or hold an employee was their decision alone.

Example 3

practicemakesperfect: Homework provides students the opportunity to extend their learning outside the classroom. However, there is much controversy surrounding the amount of homework assigned at the various grade levels. I would like your input on homework and practice, and how you incorporate technology into homework completion. Any and all feedback is much appreciated! (Initial Post)

shrinkydink: in my practice, I see a number of kids (and have talked to adults about what it was like when they were kids), for whom homework was a personal nightmare for them (Answering Initial Question and Reasoned Further – second-hand example)

This statement provided a response with further reasoning in one succinct sentence. In this instance, the poster seems to be sharing information recounted to him by other parents, thus he reasoned with a second-hand example.

Example 4

DLM2: My principal wants to start a data wall of every student in our school. Is there an effective way to do this using Web 2.0 tools? (Initial Post)

klzjmz: We are currently using Google Docs (spreadsheet) as our data wall for freshmen students. All students’ names and various test scores are entered into different columns and/or tabs. You can set values for different columns so that if a student’s score lands in a certain value range, that box will change to an appointed color. (Answering Initial Question and Reasoned Further – factual details)

The response provided a direct answer to the question as it offered Google Docs (a Web 2.0 tool) as a potential way to create a data wall. The responder further reasoned the response by giving greater factual detail about the tool.
Theoretical knowledge. In the case of this infrequent code, a member offered advice or knowledge with a theoretical basis rather than common knowledge or personal experience, which may or may not have answered the initial question; the member made an explicit reference to research, theory or research-based techniques. Because this code was not prevalent among the data, there was not sufficient evidence to support concrete variation within these excerpts.

Following are examples from each forum of excerpts coded as theoretical knowledge.

Example 1

gEEKYGUY: The school at which I work will be applying for a technology grant. The grant seems pretty open ended. What is purchased must align with our curricular goals (language arts, math), and be hardware. What would you purchase? What would give us the most bang for the buck? (Initial Post)

JANELLEAN: EdTech advisors use Bates and Poole's "SECTIONS" model to help them make decisions about technology. (Answering Initial Question and Theoretical Knowledge)

Rather than answer the initial question with a direct response, this response pointed the original poster to a theoretical model to assist him in making technology purchases. In this case, the response provided did not answer the initial question but utilized theoretical knowledge to guide the original poster to find his own answer.

Example 2

MATHSUB: I've seen teachers use the "class, class.....yes, yes" responses to get class attention. I am not familiar with where this strategy came from and would like to learn more about it. Can anyone tell me where to go to research more about this? Where did it come from? Is there research behind it? Who is its originator? (Initial Question)

IRVMAINE: Whole Brain Teaching from Chris Biffle. (Answering Initial Question and Theoretical Knowledge)

The initial post gave a concrete example of a technique with which she was not familiar
in an effort to learn its origin and other details; the original posted four specific questions four specific questions. In this response, the *theoretical knowledge* also answered two of the initial questions: where the technique came from (Whole Brain Teaching) and who its originator was (Chris Biffle).

**Example 3**

**generationnext:** I'm trying to transition from brick and mortar classrooms to teaching kids (elem and/or secondary) online or in a blended learning environment. Just getting my feet wet and am unsure about qualifications or securing employment. Lots of opportunities in CO where I reside. Any ideas or experience? (Initial Question)

**E.Jfan:** I think you will achieve your goal if you apply blended learning theory. (Answering Initial Question and Theoretical Knowledge)

The initial question requested both factual (qualifications for teaching online and securing employment) and anecdotal (asking for experiences) information; the response provided neither. However, the *theoretical knowledge* related directly to the conception presented in which the original poster mentioned transitioning from a traditional classroom to online or hybrid learning. The *theoretical knowledge* manifested as a general comment regarding this transition rather than an explicit answer to a question.

**Challenging others’ ideas.** Like *theoretical knowledge*, this code occurred infrequently; when it did, a member disagreed directly with advice provided by others or challenged group norms. *Challenging others’ ideas* may have presented as a critical reflection or a dissonant viewpoint than those presented previously; the challenge may have also offered advice that was in stark contrast to other advice provided. Despite the fact that these excerpts challenged others’ ideas, none of them garnered subsequent negative comments or criticism. In some cases, the challenge of ideas occurred as part of the response and was a challenge to the initial post. In
other cases, the challenge of ideas was a result of a response to the initial question. I provide an example from each forum to show how this code manifested, but given the small number of instances across the data, I did not believe conclusions regarding subdivisions of this code were warranted.

Example 1

**ProMobile:** Students are not allowed to use cellphones in schools in my country. I have just read this article: "Four Ways to Use Cell Phones in the Classroom". Any suggestions on how to convince the Ministry of Education in my country of the positive effect that its use can have on teaching and learning? (Initial Post)

**oldschool66:** I would be cautious to incorporate cell phones in the classroom. Students need technology skills but, let them learn how to use a cell phone on their own time. I would worry that it would encourage texting and class and playing games rather than encourage learning. (Answering Initial Question and Challenging Others’ Ideas)

This response challenged the OP’s ideas without explicitly answering the question. At first, the response gave a general opinion contrary to the original ideas presented but also acknowledged the need for technology skills among students. The latter part of the response exposed the supportive reasoning, which was in direct challenge to the positive effects the original poster saw.

Example 2

**SunnyD:** Do you give your students goodie bags for Halloween? What do you put in them? (Initial Post)

**love2learn:** School really isn't for this kind of thing. We don't much of anything that isn't for an educational purpose. (Answering Initial Question and Challenging Others’ Ideas)

In this example, the challenge was a reaction to the initial question as well as a response. The implication in the initial post was that other teachers provide goodie bags to students, and the original poster would like to know what they include. The response provided challenged the
common practice of teachers providing treats to their students for holidays and implied that it has no educational purpose.

Example 3

darkhorse: Should education be compulsory? Currently it's against the law for kids not to go to school…What do you think? (Initial Post)

kjz: I fail to see what would be drastic to a country's economy to take young people who are learning nothing at school and disrupting others from learning, and putting them into the workforce earlier. (Answering Initial Question)

dialedin: I am just not sure an uneducated work force is the best work force. I agree that all are not destined to go to college but I think a high school degree should be the minimum so we have educated voters. (Answering Initial Question and Challenging Others’ Ideas)

In this situation, the OP posed this topic neutrally with factual support to establish the discussion’s legitimacy. The first response suggested that removing disruptive students from school and sending them to work was a viable solution whereas the second response challenged this notion by stating “I am just not sure an uneducated work force is the best work force”. Unlike the first two examples, this demonstrates how a response challenged others’ ideas that were not part of the initial conception.

Sharing

Sharing discourse may or may not advance the discussion but serves to build consensus around the presented topics and to offer similar experiences and ideas; someone providing an example may serve to move the discussion forward by stimulating subsequent commentary while a response that simply affirms a previous post may not give the discussion any forward momentum. Sharing discourse manifested specifically through three sub-codes: 1) giving one’s own example, 2) agreeing, and 3) sharing criticism. As Arvaja noted, “…sharing discourse
served as a resource for confirming, strengthening, and supporting conceptualizations” (2012, p.101). There were 842 instances of sharing codes with *giving one’s own example* as the dominant sub-code (667); there were 160 *agreeing* excerpts and only 15 excerpts coded as *sharing criticism*. Table 4-6 displays the distribution of *sharing* codes. Participants were much more likely to utilize personal examples to solidify their responses and build support for their arguments than to advance a more negative tone by sharing criticism with others.

**Table 4-6: Sharing Discourse Separated by Code in Aggregate and for each Forum.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Type</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Classroom 2.0</th>
<th>ProTeacher</th>
<th>The Teachers Corner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>Giving one’s own example</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>Agreeing</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>Sharing Criticism</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>842</strong></td>
<td><strong>271</strong></td>
<td><strong>272</strong></td>
<td><strong>299</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Giving one’s own example.** Often times, participants relied on personal experience and examples to answer the initial post, provide support for their answers, and further reason their answers. *Answering the initial question* and *giving one’s own example* occurred in tandem 238 times among the data, which means that 24% of answers to the initial post contained a personal example. Two types of personal examples emerged from the data: successful personal example and second-hand example.

**Example 1**

**MsSmith:** I teach elementary keyboarding and the program I have is kinda boring. I would like to find something new that goes from K-6 grade. I would be willing to purchase books or materials if it is a great program. Can anyone help me out with ideas? (Initial Post)
DaveyT: I have used keyboarding for kids (www.keyboardingonline.com) for 4 years but they became too costly. (Answering Initial Question and Personal Example – successful personal example)

The member responded to this initial question with a successful personal example demonstrated by its length of use and its corresponding hyperlink as a resource.

Example 2

BigApple: I need ideas for a award or reward system for my 4th grade self contained class. Something easy that they will enjoy. (Initial Post)

KarenG: Something I've seen workork very well with 5th graders in my school is getting to eat lunch with the teacher. (Answering Initial Question and Personal Example – second-hand example)

The initial conception presented a simple request for award and reward ideas for 4th graders. Despite the fact that the response referenced 5th graders, it offered an answer to the question that worked well in another person’s classroom. However, it remains a second-hand example rather than personal because KarenG did not actually use this in her experience but rather reports about another teacher’s success. Even though it is not an exact match for the initial situation nor does it originate directly with the responder, the second-hand example lends credence to the suggestion.

Agreeing. Excerpts coded as agreeing acknowledged or supported the validity of another’s assertion, suggestion, response, or comment. Agreeing coincided with social cohesion in 52 excerpts or 33% of all agreeing occurrences. The word “agree” was not a necessary condition for coding excerpts as agreeing but may have been explicitly used; comments that expressed accord with a previous suggestion or sentiment were coded as agreeing. Two types of agreeing emerged from the data: agreeing with advice and agreeing with sentiment.
Example 1

**vitaminsea:** Our district is considering a 1:1 initiative and we are trying to decide what type of device we should use. I think we would experience fewer limitations with laptops, but I'm certain our students would prefer tablets. Anyone have a strong opinion either way? (Initial Post)

**TechGuy2:** what do you want the students to do/accomplish with the 1:1 program?...Basically let your goals dictate the device, don’t let the device dictate your goals. (Answering Initial Question)

**Unionprez:** That is excellent advice. It may also be wise to allow students to use their own devices if they are more comfortable using them. (Answering Initial Question and Agreeing – agreeing with advice)

**Cupcakelady:** I agree with some of the other replies here- it really has to come back to purpose (Answering Initial Question and Agreeing – agreeing with advice)

In both these cases, the respondents expressed agreement with a strategy or suggestion posted by a previous responder. In the first case, the respondent elaborated by providing further reasoning around the topic, while in the second case the respondent reiterated a question proposed by an earlier respondent.

Example 2

**Surferchick:** My class does not stop talking- I have great classroom management, but this group has been known to have verbal diarrhea! And hard to control. [Detailed explanation]. Any suggestions? (Initial Post)

**Jmz73:** Is this a new disease this year? We have the same problem. (Answering Initial Question and Agreeing – agreeing with sentiment)

In this situation, the excerpt coded as agreeing did not agree with particular advice but rather with the sentiment expressed in the original post that the situation was not unique and that it is most certainly a problem. The responder indicated familiarity with the topic and affirmation that he has experienced the same situation while acknowledging it as a shared “problem”.

Without explicitly using the word “agree”, it is apparent that the responder shares the original poster’s feelings towards this situation.

**Sharing criticism.** There were few instances of sharing criticism throughout the discussions. I employed *sharing criticism* as a code when a participant agreed with a critique made by a previous poster. This may have included repeating, rephrasing, or summarizing another’s comment (Arvaja, 2012) or offering a similar sentiment to that previously stated. There were no significant emergent variations of this code.

**Example 1**

**ProMobile:** Students are not allowed to use cellphones in schools in my country. I have just read this article: "Four Ways to Use Cell Phones in the Classroom". Any suggestions on how to convince the Ministry of Education in my country of the positive effect that its use can have on teaching and learning? (Initial Post)

**peppermintpatty:** Just like anything else there are pros and cons to using the cell phones in the classroom. Our students aren’t allowed to have their cell phones out – they have to be off and out of sight. Incorporating them into the classroom could be difficult simply because you have no way of monitoring what they are actually doing. (Answering Initial Question)

**JenZ:** Patty, your thoughts have crossed my mind too. It's a pity that the students can't see the benefits that can be had with the use of the cellphones in the classroom. (Answering Initial Question and Sharing Criticism)

The example presented the use of cell phones in classrooms as problematic because of the difficulty of monitoring student activity; of course, the implication was that students would not necessarily be using the devices for educational purposes. The follow-up post shared this criticism that students do not see the educational benefits of cell phones because they are too busy using them for other purposes.
**Example 2**

**purplepeopleeater:** In Indonesia, we have a grade system that seems to be similar to the American version. Basically, if you fail too many subjects, you repeat the year. This year will be the first time I've failed anyone but it looks like four kids are going to be unhappy. I know all four are failing other subjects so they'll all either leave school or repeat the year. I don't feel good about doing this. I failed one but all the other subject teachers have done the same. That leaves him three options: Parents bribe the school/headmaster (Yes, it happens) He leaves. He retakes grade eight. It's a toss up as to which option he takes/is forced to do. (Initial Post)

**purplepeopleeater:** The parents bribed the school so he's in grade 9 next term. (Reasoned Further)

**Luvmykidz:** It's a real pity, but a rich student can go all the way through school, learn nothing but still get passing grades (Answering Initial Question and Sharing Criticism)

**vivalavida:** Such a shame if money is deemed more important than the development of a child. (Answering Initial Question and Sharing Criticism)

In this discussion of fundamental educational philosophy, the original poster shared his feelings about failing students and followed up with the result of the scenario initially presented. The initial post expressed disdain and criticism over the practice of bribing the school to promote students. Two subsequent responses shared this criticism through their comments about the worth of money versus the value of a child’s education. The criticism transcended the specifics of the discussion to address a more widespread sensitive issue.

**Others as Resources for Enhancing Personal Understanding**

Discourse identified as *others as resources for enhancing personal understanding* stated or implied that a member has used or will use a resource suggested by another post. When members stated that they had used or intended to use an offered resource, it showed that they had used another member as a resource to augment their personal understanding. If there was no
explicit statement of use or intent to use, it is unclear as to whether or not resources offered were actually utilized. Categorizing discourse in this way demonstrates that members utilizing these forums find information that they deem relevant and useful to them and that they intend to use. It also shows the willingness of others to provide support and resources for colleagues. I identified 61 excerpts of this code across the entire dataset, with 2/3 of these instances attributed to C2; PT and TC displayed markedly fewer examples of using others as resources with 10 and 11 occurrences respectively. A sub-code of this type of discourse emerged as participants offered resources for further exploration in the form of hyperlinks and personal advice. The distinction with this code was that it was possible that resources were offered yet a member may not have explicitly stated that he had used or would use said resource. This code accounted for the act of offering a resource such as providing a hyperlink but did not assume the use of the resource. I coded excerpts with this characteristic as offering resources; of the 17 excerpts, there were 10 from C2, 5 from TC, and 2 from PT. Responders offered two different types of resources: factual resources and personal advice.

**Example 1**

**Shira:** We are going to block scheduling next year in our middle school, and many teachers will not be able to be present at a team meeting because of the new schedule. How do you folks communicate about students if all teachers cannot be present? What tools are used? (Initial Post)

**Darin:** Here are several web 2.0 tools you can use to create a place where you can all communicate in real time. [hyperlink] [hyperlink] [hyperlink] (Answering Initial Question and Others as Resources for Enhancing Personal Understanding – factual resources)

The response answered the initial question and offered factual resources in the form of hyperlinks.
Example 2

Shira: We are going to block scheduling next year in our middle school, and many teachers will not be able to be present at a team meeting because of the new schedule. How do you folks communicate about students if all teachers cannot be present? What tools are used? (Initial Post)

Darin: Here are several web 2.0 tools you can use to create a place where you can all communicate in real time. [hyperlink] [hyperlink] [hyperlink] Answering Initial Question and Offering Resources - factual resources

Shira: Thank you, Darin, for your thoughts. I will definitely look into these and discuss them with our admin as options! (Others as Resources for Enhancing Personal Understanding)

To continue with the example presented above, the original poster followed up on the hyperlink resources offered by stating that she would look into them and discuss them further. The indication that the resources offered would be utilized classified this post as others as resources for enhancing personal understanding. By acknowledging that offered resources would be utilized, Shira’s statement shows the use of another as a resource for enhancing her personal understanding.

Example 3

farfromhome: I need advice! ASAP! I recently took a new position and moved my family more than 1000 miles. After I got to the new school, they informed me that I would be signing a temporary service contract and would be on a one-year probation. I would not have accepted the job to begin with had I have known that. However, that is not the big problem. A week ago, I disciplined a very difficult student in my classroom (he had already received at least 2 or 3 office referrals that week) [lengthy details of situation]... I was told that I was being dismissed...[lengthy details]...There have been several parents and teachers who have communicated to administration on my behalf, but as of now, I still have not heard anything from the school. What do I do now? Is my career over? (Initial Post)

irishlad: If you want, you can PM me and give me some more detail if you believe that will help and you do not want to post it here publically. I think that is OK. It's your call. I am comfortable with whatever you wish to do. (Offering Resources – personal advice)

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, the responder offered personal advice as a
resource to the original poster by telling her “you can PM [private message] me”. The original poster did not respond to this comment, so no further information regarding the resource was available.

**Social Cohesion**

In order to account for the social nuances of these discussions, I employed the use of the term *social cohesion* to identify discourse through which members made positive social comments toward each other that were informal in nature and displayed a sense of camaraderie; the comments may or may not have related to the focus of the discussion. Figure 4-2 displays the distribution of *social cohesion* codes across the forums.

![Pie Chart](image)

**Figure 4-2.** Distribution of Social Cohesion Codes across Forums.

All *social cohesion* excerpts were supportive, encouraging, and respectful in nature. Four different types of remarks classified as *social cohesion* were evident among the data: provide encouragement or support, praise ideas or suggestions, thank members for contributions, and share others’ feelings or opinions.
Example 1

**Mr David:** I’m working on an e-mail to my special ed director (someone I don’t see daily or even on a predictable basis so this has to be done through email) and wanted another opinion—or multiple! [Backstory and precise wording of e-mail presented]. Thoughts? (Initial Post)

**Spartan16:** I think what you wrote is perfect! Wouldn't change a thing. (Answering Initial Question and Social Cohesion – *provide encouragement or support*)

This example of *social cohesion* was also a response to the initial question regarding thoughts on the wording of an e-mail. The responder answered the question affirmatively with a compliment by calling the wording “perfect” and further stated that he would not change anything. The comment provided encouragement and support to the original poster that what he had written was solid and appropriate.

Example 2

**DLM2:** My principal wants to start a data wall of every student in our school. Is there an effective way to do this using Web 2.0 tools? (Initial Post)

**JKSmith:** We are currently using Google Docs (spreadsheet) as our data wall for freshmen students. All students' names and various test scores are entered into different columns and/or tabs. You can set values for different columns so that if a student's score lands in a certain value range, that box will change to an appointed color. It gives us a nice visual to look at when discussing and organizing data. (Answering Initial Question)

**DLM2:** That’s a great idea and thank you for sharing. (Social Cohesion – *praise ideas and thank members*)

This example of *social cohesion* occurred as the original poster returned to the discussion; the purpose of this post was to thank the member for her response and to compliment the idea she shared. The use of the word “great” as well as the pleasantry of saying “thank you” served to promote a sense of camaraderie between the original poster and the member responsible for the idea.
Example 3

**kindyk:** please give me another word/phrase to use instead of "struggles with..." (Initial Post)

**CptAmerica:** needs extra support... we will continue working on... an area of need/improvement is... (Answering Initial Question)

**Nittany16:** Needs additional support in.... (Answering Initial Question)

**kindyk:** thank you for the different wordings. ;) (Social Cohesion – thanks members)

While there were several more responses than those presented in this example, the original poster made a blanket thank you statement to members without specific reference to particular responses. The sense of social cohesion was still apparent through the appreciation expressed and the smiley face.

Example 4

**GrammarGoddess:** Introduced these two relative pronouns yesterday, and they just aren't getting it. Any suggestions for really making it stick? Tried to teach them to replace it with a subject or object pronoun to decide if who or whom was correct and that just confused them more. These are 4th graders. Any help appreciated! (Initial Post)

**MissJenn:** I teach 4th grade. The struggle is real!!! (Social Cohesion – share others’ feelings or opinions)

This example demonstrated how a member contributed to the discussion without providing a response to the initial question but through social cohesion. She established legitimacy for her post by stating she also was a 4th grade teacher and shared the original posters’ feelings regarding the difficulty of teaching a specific topic. While the post offered no advice or support, it did provide social cohesion with the original poster through shared feelings.
Microanalyses of Selected Discussions

In an effort to examine how similar discussion topics developed, I identified threads from different forums with similar topics; this resulted in six different groups. There were three pairs and three triads of similar topics for a total of 15 threads; of this data subset, four were from C2, six were from PT, and five were from TC. Table 4-7 shows the distribution of shared topics across the forums. There were similar discussion topics within each forum, but the purpose of these microanalyses was to study how the topics developed in unique contexts with different participants. I first present the message coded as forming or stating the initial conception to provide context for the subsequent discussion. Following, I intersperse relevant messages with their codes as examples to illustrate and support the textual analysis. See Appendix F for a complete code distribution of the discussions highlighted in the following section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Forums</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant Talking</td>
<td>PT, TC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Parental Involvement</td>
<td>PT, TC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Phones</td>
<td>C2, TC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Strategies</td>
<td>C2, PT, PT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homework Policy</td>
<td>C2, PT, TC</td>
</tr>
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<td>Keyboarding</td>
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Mobile Phone Use in Classrooms

**Forming or Stating the Initial Conception (C2)**
Students are not allowed to use cellphones in schools in my country. I have just read this article: "Four Ways to Use Cell Phones in the Classroom" on this link [hyperlink removed] Any suggestions on how to convince the Ministry of Education in my country of the positive effect that its use can have on teaching and learning?

Users from both C2 and TC initiated discussions regarding mobile phone use in classrooms. The C2 original poster (OP) began with a statement that describes a situation in
which cell phones are banned in schools and asks for sources to support the positive effects they can have in classrooms. She hoped to convince the Ministry of Education of mobiles’ merits for teaching and learning through information gathered from C2 members. The OP clearly elicited positive support for mobile use in classrooms with the phrasing of her question. The eight responses received were of three distinct types as presented in the examples below

**Answering Initial Question – Example 1 (C2)**
Hi Lindsay. Cell phones can be used to get instant feedback from your students like senteos. You can use a survey website like http://www.polleverywhere.com/. You could use it for exit tickets, opinions, etc. We aren't allowed to use cell phones in our schools as well but we have used this at professional development sessions. Good luck!

In C2 example 1, the respondent offered suggestions for how mobiles could be used in the classroom but only briefly mentioned the superficial benefits of the physical devices rather than technology’s positive effects on teaching and learning. The respondent mentioned his students could not use mobiles in the classroom either, so this response would do little to support a pro-mobile policy as requested in the initial post. He concluded with “Good luck!” – a display of social cohesion that showed support for the OP’s endeavor.

**Answering Initial Question – Example 2 (C2)**
Here are some blogs that I have followed in regards to cell phones in the classroom. You can find a lot of research to support the use of cell phones from these authors. [hyperlink 1] [hyperlink 2] [hyperlink 3] Good luck!

In C2 example 2, the respondent gave no indication as to whether or not she had experience with mobiles in the classroom, but she did provide three resources that may contain potentially useful research to support the OP’s cause, which would directly answer the initial question. Like C2 example 1, this response ended with “good luck” as a display of encouragement and social cohesion.

**Answering Initial Question – Example 3 (C2)**
Just like anything else there are pros and cons to using the cell phones in the classroom. Our students aren't allowed to have their cell phones out- they have to be off and out of
sight. Incorporating them into the classroom could be difficult simply because you have no way to monitor what they are actually doing.

In the third C2 example, the respondent did not answer the initial question. Instead, she began with a neutral statement toward mobile use despite the OP’s obvious search for positive information. As the response continued, the responder appeared to encourage the OP to consider both sides of the debate over mobile phone use. Using a personal opinion, the responder offered the OP a scenario to consider in which mobile use may be disruptive rather than productive.

**Forming or Stating the Initial Conception (TC)**

Hi, I am just wondering on your opinions regarding mobile phone usage in the classrooms? Would be grateful if you could answer few questions: 1. Does your school ban the usage throughout the classroom? If the answer to above is no 2. Do you find constantly telling students to get off the phone? 3. Is it a hindrance to teaching? 4. Do you think this can be used in a pro-active manner? i.e., create an app/mobile site that can help students learn or do you think creating such will give them excuse to surf the net and not do any work? The reason I ask is that as a teacher (IT) I think I have found a good idea for an app but I am debating if it is practical hence the questions above..

The initial tone of discussion from TC had a more neutral stance than that of C2 and paved the way for both pro- and anti-mobile responses. The OP eased into the topic by greeting members with a socially cohesive “hi”. He posed several different questions that could elicit opinions, factual responses, and perhaps personal examples. Following the questions, the OP provided further context for his questions by stating his desire to pursue the creation of an app he believed to be useful in classrooms. By numbering the questions, he provided respondents a template for their answers that several utilized.

**Answering Initial Question – Example 1 (TC)**

1. Yes If we didn't the answers would be: 2. Yes 3. Yes 4. No

In the first TC example, the respondent presented the answer in direct correlation to the way the OP posed the question – with numbers to separate the yes/no answers. The respondent provided no further information other than to solidify his opinion that cell phones are a hindrance
to teaching and cannot be used proactively. This response provided facts and her opinion that she did not believe cell phones could be used in a pro-active manner.

**Answering Initial Question – Example 2 (TC)**

1. Yes, I agree the other answers would be Yes, Yes, No. although I am hearing a lot about BYOD (bring your own device) lessons. You incorporate their smart phone, pad or whatever into your lesson plan.

The response presented in *TC* example 2 mimicked the format and content of *TC* example 1 but with a caveat: the potential of BYOD. She has heard about lessons that incorporate students’ personal devices but has not experienced them personally. Despite her feelings towards mobile use in classrooms, it appeared she may be willing to change her mind if she were to learn more about BYOD. This response included facts and personal opinion; she extended the factual portion of her response by providing further information regarding the promise of BYOD.

**Answering Initial Question – Example 3 (TC)**

Students may bring their mobiles to school but the things are collected and kept in the Headmaster’s room until the kids go home.

In *TC* example 3, the tone was decidedly negative as the respondent referred to mobiles as “things”. The use of this terminology implies – without explicitly answering the OP’s questions – that the respondent does not agree with mobile use in classrooms even though students are technically allowed to bring them to school. The statement provided insight into the respondent’s opinion without explicitly stating it. In this example, the respondent offered facts as well as a personal example.

In each of the discussions, a member offered a response that contrasted with either that of the OP or other responses. These represent excerpts of the sparsely coded *challenging others’ ideas*.

**Answering Initial Question – Contrasting Response Example 4 (C2)**

I would be cautious to incorporate cell phones in the classroom. Students need technology skills but, let them learn how to use a cell phone on their own time. I would
worry that it would encourage texting and class and playing games rather than encourage learning.

In C2 example 4, a member of C2 stated his opinion against mobile use in classrooms despite the OP’s request for positive information. He did not outright say mobiles should not be used in classrooms, but he presented a cautionary statement with examples the OP may not have considered based on the article she read. While his statement implies he may be open-minded towards this issue, he dwells on negative aspects. Contrary to the request for materials to support a pro-mobile position, this respondent challenged the OP’s ideas by asserting negative aspects of mobile use in classrooms.

Answering Initial Question – Incorporating Information from Previous Response Example 5 (C2)

What works well is bringing students into the conversation of appropriate use. Many teachers also empower students to be responsible for consequences. As far as students texting or playing games, that can be addressed via appropriate use and also making learning relevant and engaging enough that they'll be interested in staying on task.

In C2 example 5, a user offered a response to the initial question that also addressed the negative issue introduced in C2 example 4. Without overtly disagreeing with C2 example 4, the respondent addressed his concerns by taking a seemingly negative situation and turning it into a teachable moment. This respondent acknowledged the potential difficulties presented in C2 example 4 by attributing responsibility for acceptable use and logical consequences to both students and teachers. The response also challenged teachers to make learning “relevant and engaging” to avoid misuse of devices during instructional time.

Answering Initial Question – Contrasting Response Example 4 (TC)
I don't know of any schools that allow students to use their phones during class. However, if you are looking to develop apps, many elementary schools have iPads and iPod Touches for classroom use. (If you imagine the laptops on a cart that are shared between classrooms, the iPads are often used in a similar way--there might be a shared
class set. There might also be four or five per classroom--enough for a group of students to use during a math group activity or a reading activity, for example.)

On the other hand, the TC example 4 respondent answered the initial question negatively but offered a positive aspect. While she was unaware of any school allowing mobile use during class, she did offer information that could influence the OP’s decision to develop his app. She suggested using an iPad or iPod touch as a platform for developing apps rather than a mobile phone as these devices may be more widely available and utilized in school settings. Unlike the other responses, TC example 4 went beyond the superficial questions to provide a more useful answer. It is unclear whether the provided information was a personal example, but it was certainly factual.

**Answering Initial Question – Incorporating Information from Previous Response Example 5 (TC)**

I worked at one, though I'd be hesitant to call it a "school". Student phone policy has now become a litmus test for me of whether I'd consider working at a school. If school policy is that students are allowed to have phones on them in class you can be sure there's lots and lots of other BS you won't like.

In TC example 5, the respondent addressed the first comment in TC example 4 by stating he worked at a “school” that allowed students to have mobile phones in class. The use of quotations implies he does not regard this particular place as a bonafide school but perhaps as an imitator due to various policies including one regarding mobile phones. The respondent’s gentle wording betrayed his blatant dislike for mobile use in classrooms stating that a school with such a policy likely has other policies that are just as offensive. The respondent draws an unfair connection between a pro-mobile policy and other ambiguous policies without evidence to support his assertion.

The C2 discussion continued with ten more messages that responded to the initial question interspersed with responses from the OP thanking each for his contribution and
occasionally including a statement of agreement or clarification question. Responses offered mixed opinions on the topic, and there was no clear consensus as to whether mobile phone use in classrooms was positive or negative. The discussion manifested as a respectful conversation among participants who had differing ideas on a well-contested topic; despite differing opinions, the tone was decidedly positive with no socially negative remarks exchanged. The OP served to maintain this positive atmosphere through her multiple socially cohesive comments.

The TC discussion only garnered one additional reply that was not presented here as an example which concurred with the others that his school banned mobile phone usage. There was general consensus that most schools do not allow students to use mobile phones and moreover, that it was not possible to use them in a pro-active manner. The discussion was not balanced in the way the C2 discussion presented and was much more abbreviated. Respondents were not likely to offer information beyond what the OP requested through yes/no type questions. However, like the OP from C2, the TC original poster did return to thank the members collectively for their contributions and praise their ideas.

**Negative Parental Involvement**

**Forming or Stating Initial Conception (PT)**

Yesterday I was teaching a lesson to my 5th graders. They were all sitting on the carpet. I looked up to see one student playing with Legos. I said (something like) "No toys. 5th graders don't bring toys to school. Go put them in your backpack right now and take them home." The boy, his mom, and I met this morning (at the mom's insistence). Her engines were lit! She said that I had "humiliated and degraded" her child. I brought him into the conversation; when it became clear that his accounting made me look reasonable, she said to him, "Don't say anything. I'll do the talking here."

Negative parental involvement was the common topic of these two discussions. The original poster (OP) from each presented a detailed scenario that focused on negative parental involvement in schools. The OP from PT emphasized the negative parental involvement rather
than the parents’ character while maintaining a neutral perspective on the teacher’s role. It is clear that the mother was upset by the teacher’s comments, but the student’s account of the situation made her look “reasonable”; therefore, at this point, the presentation of the situation remains rather neutral. While she does not explicitly state it, the OP obviously felt comfortable with how she addressed the student because she simply reported the situation without adding personal feelings or opinions.

**Forming or Stating Initial Conception (TC)**

How and what can a teacher do about domineering parents? I will give you some situations and please feel free to offer some ideas on how to deal with these people.

**Situation #1:** A student of a certain teacher distorted something she did and thought that she pointed her finger at her while she was only stressing a rule to not throw objects at others in case they hurt a person in some way. The student got scared and misunderstood the teacher's intentions. The mother was upset. The sad teacher offered to meet with the mother in order to clarify the misunderstanding, but she refused to see the teacher. Instead, she wanted another solution. The teacher's "sorry" wasn't good enough. The teacher even offered to meet with the parent to sort the problem out, but the parent refused to go to the school. Finally, the teacher asked had a co-worker to take over his/her class because the mother wasn't forgiving or willing to discuss with that teacher. What can be done with a parent like that?

In contrast, the OP from TC set the negative tone by using the word “domineering” to describe the parents in her scenario. She continued by portraying the “sad teacher” as the victim who tried to “clarify the misunderstanding” by meeting with the mother who refused. The outcome of this seemingly “distorted” situation was that the teacher had to have a colleague assume her responsibility for the class because of the unforgiving mother. In this situation, the OP placed the negative onus completely on the mother’s character and presented the teacher in a positive light.

**Answering Initial Question Example 1 (PT)**

I would have loved to show the parent the section in the student handbook that all parents sign stating they have read and understand what is mentioned in the handbook. In our district, we actually have a section where it states, that toys are not allowed at school.
Even though it was clear that neither OP was happy with their situations, the way in which they presented the initial conceptions affected the responses. In PT example 1, the respondent makes no comment regarding the teacher or the parent’s actions but instead refers to factual information that would neutralize the situation. This response shows subtle support for the teacher by citing a school policy that would might mitigate the situation.

**Answering Initial Question Example 2 (PT)**

Don't you love it when the kid gets yelled at for telling the truth? I feel so bad for that child - you only have his mother for the year, but he has her forever.

In the second PT example, again there was no strongly worded negativity expressed toward the parent. In contrast to the first example, this respondent demonstrated empathy towards the student in question who tried to do the right thing by telling the truth and instead was scolded by his mother. The respondent attempted to diffuse the incident by helping the teacher to realize she has limited time with this mother while the student “has her forever”.

**Answering Initial Question Example 1 (TC)**

When I am teaching, the last thing on my radar is whether or not parents are happy. It isn't my job to make parents happy. It is my job to educate children. My supervisors know that I do a good job...it really doesn’t matter what a few grumbling parents think. They are not going to discipline me (or fire me) over a situation that is beyond my control (such as the parent that was apologized to, but still was not willing to keep a line of communication open). A decent school administrator will stand up to parents who want to dictate how to run the school in support of the teachers in that building.

In TC example 1, the respondent continued the “teacher as victim perspective” by writing “it isn’t my job to make parents happy” and “it really doesn’t matter what a few grumbling parents think”. The emphasis was on the negative qualities of parents that interfere with a teacher’s job of educating children.
**Answering Initial Question Example 2 (TC)**

Those parents do not deserve a minute of your time. Don’t worry about them, they are simply stupid.

In the second TC example, though the response was much shorter, the negative sentiment expressed about the parents is apparent. He supported the teacher by telling her not to let it bother her and further described the parents as “stupid”. Until a comment changed the direction of the discussion, the PT responses shared the sentiment expressed by the OP but did not degrade the mother’s character. The responses from TC mimicked the negative tone towards the parents that the OP introduced.

Both of these discussions had an answer to the initial question that distinguished itself by contrasting with the tone or sentiment of the others.

**Answering Initial Question – Contrasting Response with Personal Opinion Reasoning Example 3 (PT)**

I am not even going to justify the mom being as upset as she is because two wrongs don't make a right, but I do want to note that the comment "5th graders don't bring toys to school" is a comment meant to degrade and humiliate. So, the parent was right. The only way she wasn't right about that comment being anything other than degrading and humiliating is if your school policy is that some grades can bring toys to school and other grades cannot.

Amidst the wave of support for the PT poster and how she handled a student, there was a response that disagreed with the majority, overtly denouncing the OP’s actions. This reply shifted the onus from the parent to the teacher and incited a heated conversation with the insinuation that the teacher’s comments were inappropriate. All further reasoning that accompanied responses was based on personal opinion rather than personal examples. In PT example 3, the poster began by putting aside the emotional aspect and instead chose to focus on
the events. She proposed a perspective that was different from those offered previously and then directed the attention of the OP to a seeming inconsistency in school policy and how that might have affected the parent’s reaction. She asserted her opinion that the teacher’s comment was “meant to degrade and humiliate” and further established her position by stating “the parent was right”.

**Answering Initial Question – Contrasting Response with Personal Opinion Reasoning Example 3 (TC)**

But it can happen - and it’s a shame when it does - that a parent remains upset with a teacher. I would bend over backwards to not have that happen - I have a strong commitment to building positive relationships with parents. But there are times that a teacher and a parent can leave a moment with different points of view on the matter. It's unrealistic for any teacher to think that every parent will love you, like you or like one's teaching.

The TC example was less harsh in its approach; rather than directly address the OP or specific situation, the respondent invokes a personal belief about building strong relationships with parents. The respondent subtly suggests that the teacher might do more to build strong relationships with parents while interspersing neutral remarks such as “but it can happen – and it’s a shame when it does” and “it’s unrealistic for any teacher to think that every parent will love you”. The support for the teacher remains yet the undertone shifts some of the blame in the situation to the teacher, which is in direct contrast to the previous replies. As seen in the PT discussion, personal opinion rather than examples was the source of further reasoning. The TC poster offered an opinion about how building strong parent relationship may help to alleviate future problems. She ended by providing advice on how to view the interaction rather than how to address the problem while maintaining a neutral stance; she did not obviously denounce the parent nor praise the teacher.
**Social Cohesion Example 1 (PT)**
Sorry this happened to you.

**Social Cohesion Example 2 (PT)**
You did the right thing. Don't worry over one post...we are all here to support each other. Good luck!!

The responses from *PT* displayed a level of social cohesion in support of the OP, which increased following the reply that challenged how she handled the situation. Polite comments - such as in *PT* example 1 - escalated into solidarity against the person who denounced her treatment of a student as in *PT* example 2.

**Social Cohesion Example 1 (TC)**
Don't worry about them, they are simply stupid.

**Social Cohesion Example 2 (TC)**
Thanks for all of your great ideas.....very inspirational

On the other hand, the *TC* responses displayed minimal social cohesion despite the OP’s portrayal of herself as a victim and focused on providing advice towards the situation – as in *TC* example 1 - rather than responding to the OP’s personal feelings. The most social cohesion in this discussion came from the OP when she thanked others for their input as shown in *TC* example 2.

**Student Behavior Problems**

**Forming or Stating Initial Conception (PT)**
My class does not stop talking - I have great classroom management, but this group has been know to have verbal diarrhea! <wink> and hard to control. Any suggestions? There are other teachers at my grade level saying the same thing. They don't know what to do either. I take away recess- tried Beat the Teacher, have tried to single out the culprits, but sometimes hard to tell who is talking. They all blend in. Transition is the worst. I do a countdown- say they have 30 secs. countdown from 10. This is the worst in 35 yrs of teaching. There are some kids getting frustrated with their classmates and I tell them to do something about it. Any suggestions? Thanks!
Student behavior problems was the topic shared between these particular discussions from PT and TC. From the outset of the PT discussion, the use of a humorous term and an emoticon established a more relaxed and lighthearted approach to an otherwise frustrating issue. The original poster (OP) bluntly stated the problem and promptly absolved herself from any potential wrongdoing by stating “I have great classroom management”. She continued to assert the fact that the students were to blame by referencing other teachers’ similar experiences with these students and stating all of the solutions she had tried unsuccessfully. Mentioning her 35 years of teaching appears to function as support for her opinion that she has great classroom management solely based on that extended time frame rather than examples or other evidence. It is clear the teacher was frustrated with this problem but focused only on how it affected her. It was not until the end of the initial post when she noted how this problem affected the students and that she encouraged the students to self-regulate as a solution.

**Answering Initial Question Example 1 (PT)**

My class is like that, too! Specials teachers really dislike my class because of this. They blame me. :( I did hold a class meeting and made THEM come up with a solution/solutions. It has only helped slightly. They came up with I can only clap 2x (I do the clap pattern where they have to join in), and they MUST be quiet by the end of the 2nd clap pattern. So far, they have actually been successful. I will also tell them to count to 50 in their heads. They can't talk and count at the same time. I also make them give themselves a consequence, rather than me giving it to them. Having said that, they talk pretty much every other minute of every day!!! However, at least I can now quiet them when needed!

In PT example 1, the respondent concurred with the initial post and immediately established social cohesion with the OP through the shared experience of talkative students. He offered two specific, teacher-centered strategies that the OP could try – using a clap pattern and telling the students to count to 50 silently. In addition, he presented two student-centered strategies to encourage them to assume ownership of their actions. In contrast to the OP’s
seemingly off-handed comment telling students “to do something about it”, the respondent in example 1 offered specific ways to involve students through a class meeting and assigning their own consequences. The OP’s comment suggests that she reactively involved students in this problem’s solution whereas the respondent’s ideas involved students proactively and in a way that encouraged responsibility. The respondent confirmed the success of these strategies despite the continued excessive talking.

**Answering Initial Question Example 2 (PT)**
Class Dojo and teacher vs. class have helped me in the past. I have also (when I get desperate and ticked enough) to stand and let them talk, set the timer and let the few who aren't talking leave for lunch. The rest keep talking and owe me the time on their recess.

In PT example 2, the respondent gave three different solutions that were successful in his classroom. Though it is clear he had the same problem as the OP, he did not establish social cohesion as in PT example 1. The situation evoked similar negative feelings for this respondent as evidenced by his use of the words “desperate” and “ticked”, but he did not establish that social connection with the OP. Both responses employed personal examples that worked in actual classrooms as support.

**Forming or Stating Initial Conception (TC)**
I am not a new teacher. This will be year 13. However, since day 1 I have not been the strongest on managing behavior. 5 years ago, I switched from being a classroom teacher to being a "prep" teacher - all students come to me for an hour a week with their class for science. The behavior management is much better in this situation, but still not as strong as it could be. Last year, I did science 4 days, but took on a job share of a 2/3 combo for 1 day a week and it was an absolute nightmare!!The kids did NOT listen to me AT ALL... My principal has always been REALLY supportive of me, but I think that last year "opened her eyes" to some of my discipline issues - which don't really apply when I am teaching science. I think the major issues with that class, was that (a) they were a really difficult class in the first place, (b) my job share partner was completely opposite to my personality (militaristic), and (c) the kids were used to me as a science teacher and did not make a good transition to me as a regular classroom teacher. So now, after returning from summer, the principal is coming down harder on me and I am concerned. She says I am creative, talented, and focus so much on my enthusiasm and lesson that I don't always notice when something is going on I should address. She also says I "give up my power" but I am not sure what she means exactly - sending kids to the office and not making
phone calls home? I don't send kids to the office that much, only if there is a really
blatant, physical or bullying type situation. I don't send them down for being funny or not
listening. To be honest, (1) I notice that I do not handle the class the same when someone
is observing, sometimes to my detriment rather than my benefit (2) teaching 400 students
a day and coming up with a behavior plan where I am not missing my recess to babysit
misbehaving children has been difficult (3) I am not able to evaluate myself objectively -
to me I am not doing anything different than other teachers. My biggest fault may be that
I am just too nice or I talk too much about it. HELP!!! I need a discipline/behavior plan
that works with having 5 classes coming to me a day. The K-1 teachers LIKE to have a
classroom report that tells them how the class was, while upper grade teachers think I am
trying to get them to handle the behavior issues by giving them - which is not true. I just
give the report for informational purposes only and it is up to them if they want to do
anything additional. Last year, I tried to use a reward system of classes earning 15
minutes of free time after they reached so many points. Upper grade teachers frowned on
that because they were losing class time (15 minutes every 6-8 weeks??), yet I know
they earn rewards in their own classroom. Somehow, now, I am not allowed to do that. I
could do table points, but what would be the reward if they get the most points?

The OP from TC shared the frustration of dealing with student behavior issues but on a
broader scale and from a different, more serious perspective. Rather than present herself in a
positive light, the OP directly admitted that she was not “the strongest on managing behavior”.
The amount of experience she had was less than that of the PT OP, but she certainly would not
be considered a rookie teacher. Through the lengthy initial post, she elaborated the background
details relevant to her current predicament and presented her own critical reflection. Overall, the
presentation appears neutral as she highlighted both positive and negative aspects of herself as a
teacher. Her final paragraphs’ description of last year’s reward system coupled with a question
to help refine it seems to diminish the actual motivation for the post, which was to elicit a
discipline plan to help her improve her management skills.

**Answering Initial Question Example 1 (TC)**

We all have discipline problems these days and you're probably being too harsh on
yourself. I use a technique that always works but I have to admit it’s not exactly great
teaching: I send one of the kids to the blackboard and dictate my notes while everyone
else copies those notes. You obviously can't use this all the time but that's what I do when I
run out of ideas.
In TC example 1, the respondent immediately established rapport with the OP sharing her sentiment and offering encouragement to not be too hard on herself. This respondent followed the vulnerability expressed by the OP when he admitted that his successful solution was not “exactly great teaching”. Both the OP and the respondent openly expressed weaknesses and shared a sentiment of frustration through such statements as “HELP!!!(OP) and “…when I run out of ideas” (example 1). In this case, there is both overt and covert social cohesion between the OP and the TC example 1 respondent.

Answering Initial Question Example 2 (TC)
I am a visiting staff instructor (my euphemism for substitute teacher) and as such have nearly seen it all. I "teach" high school and middle school. I used to get really upset when the kids did not obey or listen. That was a few years ago. Now I generally tell the disruptive students that they are disrespecting their classmates and their parents. I will also tell High school students that I do not really care if they listen or not or if they do any of the assigned work. However, I do tell them that interfering with another student’s ability to do his or her work will not be tolerated. I generally do not say it again - I ask (or tell) the disruptive one(s) to go bother his or her administrator (principal or assistant principal). I have found that eventually the students understand what I require and generally keep themselves under control. I have learned that honors students are especially noisy but they do get their work done. I have also relearned that socioeconomic status and parental involvement and the parents' attitude toward education has a lot to do with student behavior.

In TC example 2, a substitute teacher offered anecdotal advice about student behavior problems but did not actually give a relevant answer to the initial question. Rather than attributing responsibility to the teacher, the respondent shifted responsibility to the students to be respectful and cooperative in an effort to create a conducive learning environment for all students. By assuming an attitude of nonchalance – “I do not really care if they listen or not or they do any of the assigned work” -, the respondent claims that eventually the students will self-regulate their behavior. He furthered this with his opinion regarding reasons that affect student behavior thus attending to the profound underlying issues that manifest superficially through misbehavior. This response did not give an answer to the question but rather provided something
further for the OP to consider. Both TC examples 1 and 2 maintained the more serious tone the OP established.

Social Cohesion Example 3 (PT)
Verbal Diarrhea! I love it!!

Social Cohesion Example 4 (PT): Changed it to….Explosive Verbal Diarrhea…. <!——giggle-->LOL

Social Cohesion Example 5 (PT): So funny…yet not LOL! LOL

The lighthearted tone that the PT OP set permeated the discussion through comments coded as social cohesion. PT examples 3, 4 and 5 all linked to the term “verbal diarrhea”; using emoticons and shorthand laughter, the respondents maintained a less serious demeanor despite a serious subject.

Social Cohesion Example 3 (TC)
I feel for you. I have seen some combinations that are simply more challenging than the average class. Those exploding chemistry groups are tricky!

Social Cohesion Example 4 (TC)
I know that most of the comments are ripe. And I’m eating them all up as well.

On the other hand, while TC respondents displayed social cohesion, the tone was much more reserved. The comments were less colloquial and more relevant to the content of the discussion as opposed to an unusual way to describe a common problem. The PT discussion demonstrated more instances of social cohesion than the TC discussion; more comments supported the teacher who presented herself as a great classroom manager with a difficult group of students than the teacher who admitted a weakness and looked for support.

In an effort to elucidate differences across the three forums, I conducted another microanalysis of discussions that included one from each site regarding a similar topic. Since no unique information emerged, see Appendix F for the detailed analysis.
Patterns of Knowledge Sharing

There were two major patterns shared across the data. The most definitive pattern common to all of these forums was the use of personal examples as responders answered the initial question and reasoned their responses; 237 of 988 answers to the initial questions (24%) contained personal examples while 103 of 738 reasoned further excerpts (14%) also contained personal examples. Respondents were less likely to utilize personal examples as responses to clarification questions (7% co-occurrence). The second pattern was the appearance of social cohesion in excerpts coded as others as resources for enhancing understanding. Nearly two-thirds of all others as resources excerpts also expressed social cohesion. In the following sections, I describe attributes unique to each forum.

Classroom 2.0 Patterns

Of the three forums analyzed in this study, Classroom 2.0 provided the most consistency in several aspects; evidence from this forum was more uniform than that gleaned from either ProTeacher or The Teachers Corner. See Figure 4-3 for a complete distribution of codes for this forum.
As evidenced by the data, C2 members were more likely to offer a lengthy response. For this study, I define “lengthy” as a response greater than 683 characters, which represented a distinct break between the majority of excerpts and the few distinguished as much longer than most. Within the 40 lengthy excerpts coded as elaboration discourse 17 of those were from C2. More specifically, C2 members were more than twice as likely to provide an extended reply to the initial question than on the other two forums. Of the 15 lengthy excerpts coded as answering the initial question, C2 members posted 7 (55%) of them. Participants in these discussions provided more than one or two word simplistic answers. In contrast, within the 38 lengthy excerpts coded as sharing discourse, only 9 (23%) of them were from C2. Members’ sharing episodes were shorter than their elaboration episodes. Table 4-8 displays the metrics for all forums according to these observations.

Figure 4-3: Distribution of Codes in Classroom 2.0.
Of the 40 discussions analyzed, 31 of them were classified as *technology tools or support* or *general educational issues*, which demonstrates consistency with regards to discussion topics originating from this forum. The extensive knowledge represented through these topics lends itself to greater elaboration and discussion because of the lack of specialized knowledge required to make a significant contribution, which encourages a more in-depth conversation. This structure also elicits greater participation and subsequent posting to replies.

The initial poster followed up within 33 of the 40 discussions (82.5% of the time), which is the highest rate of all three forums. See Figure 4-4 for all forums’ rates of follow-up. Within these 33 re-posts to the forum, 19 (58%) of the initial posters replied between one and three times while the remaining 14 replied between 4 and 15 times. The fact that initial posters returned to the forum multiple times helped to create a more conversation-like structure than simply a series of replies; the style of discourse from this forum was decidedly more conversational in nature than in either *PT* or *TC*.

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**Table 4-8. Complete Metrics for Observations Regarding Forum-Specific Patterns.**

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<th>ProTeacher</th>
<th>The Teachers Corner</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>88</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>237</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Example in <em>Reasoned Further</em></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>102</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elaboration Excerpts &gt;683 Characters</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering Initial Question Excerpts &gt;683 Characters</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Excerpts &gt;683 Characters</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4-4: Rate of Follow-up by Original Poster.

ProTeacher Patterns

With regards to specific characteristics, PT was the least distinctive of the three forums. See Figure 4-5 for a complete distribution of codes for this forum. Members from PT were the most likely to include a personal example while answering the initial question – it boasted 43% of the overall total co-occurrences of answering the initial question and giving one’s own example – while also least likely to provide a lengthy response (25% of the total amount of lengthy responses). On the other hand, PT members were least likely to further reason a response with a personal example (20% of co-occurrences).

Members discussed a wider variety of topics than on the other forums; the greatest number of discussions (18 of 40) was classified as either curricular enhancement or classroom policy and procedures. While the curricular topics are more student-centered, the policy and procedural topics relate more to teachers and how they configure their classrooms regarding themes such as homework, grading, and report cards. In direct contrast to C2 where the largest
number of discussions was categorized as technology support or tools and general educational issues, the smallest number of discussions from PT fell into these categories. Given the nature of the categories, the discussions from PT may be viewed as more superficial than those from C2; the intensive knowledge required to respond to these types of topics may discourage the more widespread participation that resulted with more general topics.

![ProTeacher](image)

**Figure 4-5:** Distribution of Codes in ProTeacher.

More than half of the initial posters (21 of 40) reposted in the discussions that they started; however, none reposted in the discussion more than three times. The superficial or finite nature of the discussion topics was likely a factor as the initial poster may not have felt it necessary to respond once an answer or solution had been reached; the latitude in responses may have been limited by the discussion topics thus limiting the necessity of subsequent reposts.
The Teachers Corner

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of TC was that 15 of the 40 discussions were complaints about some aspect of education or negative in nature. All but one of the discussions categorized as administrative issues was from this forum, and all but one of those presented a negative scenario such as a teacher being fired; other discussions pertained negatively to parental support and involvement. Negativity also manifested through the application of the sharing criticism code that was applied nine times on this forum while only five times on C2 and once on PT.

Also noteworthy was the complete absence of technology-related discussions, while only two pertained to curricular enhancement. The majority of the discussions were split between general educational issues and administrative issues while all discussions seeking factual answers came from this forum. Very specific situations that required specialized, intensive knowledge for responses manifested in one-quarter of the discussions.

Across the data set, there were five non-technological discussions that were deeply philosophical in nature; four of these were from TC. The conversations broached topics such as the culture of fear in schools, what it means to be a good teacher, school safety, and compulsory education; furthermore, the discussion about compulsory education garnered the most replies from any of the 120 discussions analyzed (29 responses). See Figure 4-6 for a complete distribution of codes for this forum.

As a direct opposite to PT, the members of TC were least likely to answer the initial question with an example yet most likely to incorporate a personal example into further reasoning. Of 38 lengthy sharing episodes, TC accounted for exactly half while C2 and PT shared the others nearly equally. Lengthy messages from TC members occurred more often within sharing discourse than within elaboration discourse.
Like the other forums, more than half of the initial posters returned to post again within the discussions they had started (26 instances). The majority of those who revisited replied between one and three times; only four initial posters responded more than three times with a maximum of seven times.

**Social Interactions**

Social interaction was present across all three forums though in varying degrees; there were 443 instances of the code *social cohesion*, which accounts for approximately 13% of the total codes applied. Nearly half (207 of 443) of the instances were attributed to the discussions of C2 members. This connects directly to the conversational style noted that was unique to this forum and to the extended replies that users posted to one another. Of the three forums in this study, C2 was the most social in nature as evidenced by the amount of *social cohesion* codes as well as the length of these codes. The length of social cohesion excerpts in general was much shorter than other types; for social cohesion
excerpts, I define “lengthy” as greater than 100 characters. There were 50 lengthy excerpts coded as social cohesion; of these 50, half of them were gleaned from the C2 forum. Not only did members provide a great deal of social support to one another, their comments went beyond simple pleasantries such as “thank you” or “great idea”. The social comments demonstrated thoughtful replies that pertain to not only what someone has posted but also to personal details revealed as well.

Example 1

Pb2: I know they have a lot of great apps for students with autism. I have been an Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapist for 10 years and found a great joy working with the iPad and these apps, plus my students love working with technology. (Answering Initial Question)

Misty: Hello David, that's excellent. An Applied Behavioral Analysis therapist sounds challenging, but I'm sure it would be an extremely rewarding career path. I'm glad you have enjoyed positive experiences with the iPad apps! (Social Cohesion)

Not only did the social cohesion excerpt refer to the author of the response by name, he also praised him for his choice of a “challenging” and “rewarding” career. He further showed camaraderie by displaying his happiness that he has had positive experiences with iPad apps. The socially cohesive remarks make direct reference to precise things that the previous poster mentioned thus expressing a sense of personal investment in this individual and his comment.

On the other hand, the social comments attributed to PT and TC were less frequent and often more general and superficial in nature. TC accounted for 19 of the 50 (38%) longest social cohesion posts while PT had only six (12%).

Example 2

Southerngal: Thank you all for your advice and suggestions! I've loved reading this message board for many years because I've gotten so many ideas and helpful teaching tips. (Social Cohesion)

While the response certainly displayed social cohesion, it did not make reference to specific individuals nor precise ideas that the poster has gleaned from the message board. It is a
general comment that could apply universally to anyone who has ever posted an idea or teaching tip on this forum.

Overall, members were positive in nature and supportive of each other. This is further evidenced by the co-occurrence of social cohesion codes with agreeing, which occurred 52 times of 160 agreeing code applications. The positive connotation of agreeing lends support to the generally upbeat nature of the social comments across the forums. There was only one thread across the entire corpus of data that included negative social interactions, which was previously described. Interesting to note, however, was that the initial poster mentioned that she had wanted to privately message the anonymous poster about the comments but was unable to because the person had posted anonymously rather than signing in as a registered user. Despite this one outlier thread, all other social comments within the discussions were positive in nature and ranged from short statements to longer, more extensive replies.

**Summary of Findings**

In this chapter, I have presented an analysis of 120 online discussions that spanned three distinct forums – Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner. Five types of discourse were identified and present among all three forums: forming or stating the initial conception, elaboration, sharing, others as resources to enhance one’s understanding, and social cohesion. Each type of discourse was analyzed for general patterns as well as patterns specific to each forum. Elaboration discourse was most prominent across the forums with answering the initial question the most applied sub-code that also co-occurred with giving one’s one example 24% of the time; members access these forums with the goal of answering questions posed by their peers and often use a personal example as part of their responses. The questions and responses found in the discussions were categorized thematically into 11 categories: general educational issues, technology tools or support, curricular enhancement, administrative issues,
classroom policies and procedures, special education, looking for factual answers, student classroom management issues, parents, share success or failure, and classroom celebrations and special occasions. I discussed general patterns of discourse across the forums and further analyzed patterns that were specific to each of the forums. To conclude, I presented a description of the largely positive and prevalent social interactions that occurred within these forums while highlighting the only instance of negativity found among the social comments.
Chapter 5
Discussion of Findings

This qualitative study set out to describe the ways in which teachers utilize and engage with online spaces for informal learning related to the profession and to examine the social interactions among participants. The main question guiding this study was: *What types of discourse are shared in online spaces for teachers?* The four supporting questions guiding this study to provide evidence for the main question were: *What types of questions do participants pose? What types of responses do participants provide? What patterns of knowledge sharing emerge through the questions and responses? What are the social interactions in the forum?* In the following sections, I first present the research questions and answers. Then, I describe how the study aligns with and informs current research. I continue with implications for practice and conclude with future research directions in this area.

Types of Discourse Shared

Five types of discourse were shared in *Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher*, and *The Teachers Corner*: forming or stating the initial conception, elaboration, sharing, others as resources for enhancing personal understanding, and social cohesion. Other studies of online discussions have identified similar types of discourse though labeled with distinct terminology. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) used the Practical Inquiry Model to assess discourse in an online environment in which the first phase known as the “triggering event” serves the same purpose as “forming or stating the initial conception”. Through a triggering event, a participant identified
an issue or a problem for further discussion. The second phase of this model is called “exploration” through which participants offer relevant information to further understand the situation (2001). Similarly, Lee and Tsai (2011) studied patterns of collaborative knowledge construction in asynchronous online discussions. They identified a pattern termed “elaborating”, which encompassed the presentation of an issue for discussion as well as a further pattern called “challenging”, which included the negotiation of meaning through questions and responses. Similarly, Yeh (2010) analyzed pre-service teachers’ contributions to a discussion board in an effort to analyze online behaviors. Findings included the identification of 13 online behaviors including “sharing information”, “clarifying concepts”, “constructing a positive atmosphere”, and “answering questions” (Yeh, 2010).

Elaboration discourse was by far the most prevalent (59% of all codes); this aligned with Arvaja’s (2012) finding that students most frequently engaged in elaboration discourse as a way to develop others’ ideas. A study of teacher learning in communities of practice also categorized the majority of messages posted as “exploration,” a term used to describe offering ideas and experiences (Murugaiah et al., 2012). Furthermore, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s study also attributed the highest frequency of codes to “exploration” (2001). The elaboration discourse sub-code answering the initial question accounted for 47% of all elaboration discourse.

Sharing discourse represented 24% of the data; its sub-code giving one’s own example manifested in 79% of all sharing discourse. Arvaja noted in her study as well that participants shared knowledge and ideas most often through personal examples and that sharing discourse served to strengthen and solidify conceptions (2012). Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, and Bolhuis (2009) studied secondary school teachers participating in a peer-coaching program within their school district; this study confirmed that teachers learn most through discussion and subsequent
feedback regarding their personal experiences. Though members of the forums do not have assigned peer coaches as in this study, the other members act as such through their comments and feedback to help others learn from their personal experiences.

A noteworthy intersection of elaboration and sharing discourse occurred between answering the initial question and giving one’s own example; these two codes co-occurred nearly 25% of the time (238 instances). Participants relied much more on their personal experiences than theoretical or research-based knowledge to respond to questions or situations posed; of the 3,497 codes applied across the data set, only 18 manifested as theoretical knowledge (0.5%) while 667 represented personal examples (19%). Lee and Tsai’s study of online asynchronous discussions provided a similar finding that knowledge exploration patterns focused more on experience than authoritative resources (2010). In contrast, Arvaja (2012)’s study revealed a more prominent role of theoretical knowledge, which was likely due to the philosophical nature of the elicited discussion postings she analyzed as well as the nature of the course, which focused on philosophy of learning. The nature of the topics discussed on forums is likely to influence the way in which respondents frame responses.

The abundance of personal examples directly supports the respect for and reliance on tacit knowledge (Gee, 2007) as a characteristic of affinity spaces. Furthermore, it aligns with Macià and García’s (2016) meta-analysis of informal online communities for teacher professional development that found teachers use these spaces to share resources, knowledge, and experiences. The personal experiences and examples presented in the discussions legitimize and further the knowledge of the community as a whole. Hur and Brush’s study also confirmed that teachers liked to participate within these spaces because of the presented ideas that already had achieved success in the classroom (2009). This reliance on lived examples circumvents the
often cited “research-practice gap” (e.g., El-Hani & Greca, 2013) in that members learn from the reality of examples based in today’s classrooms rather than abstract conceptualizations.

Lieberman and Mace further added that the notion of participants expressing work publicly incites learning not only from the participants’ own practices but also from others’ practice that in turn expands knowledge (2010). Responses that include others’ experiences provide learning opportunities for both the original poster and anyone who views or participates in the discussion.

**Types of Questions Posed**

Participants posed two main types of questions - initial questions that began the threads and clarification questions within the discussions that elicited further information. The majority of the initial questions dealt with general educational topics, technology tools and support, and curricular enhancement. Degrees of specialization varied among the threads. Less frequent topics included classroom policy and procedures, administrative issues, special education, sharing a story, classroom management, and holidays or special celebrations. Of the discussions, there were only five outliers that did not fit into any of these categories. The topics revealed the interests and priorities of teachers who visit the discussion boards.

There were four distinct types of clarification questions: suggestions posed as questions, yes or no, reflection, and factual. These questions served to elaborate the initial posting and to provide answers, examples, and further reasoning that added depth and breadth to the issues raised. For example, a *PT* member asked for advice regarding a cell phone application to message parents that would protect her phone number. Another member offered a suggestion posed as a question when he asked, “But why don't you send emails? Is there a reason it has to come from your phone?” The questions as suggestions recommended that e-mail may be a
fruitful solution and that the communication may not necessarily need to come from a cell phone if there were a better option. Furthermore, reflection questions prompted deeper thought regarding fundamental rather than superficial aspects of issues. For example, a C2 member whose district initiated a 1:1 program requested information to decide between laptops and tablets. A follow-up question from a respondent – “What do you want the students to do/accomplish with the program?” – reframed the originally dichotomous question into an inquiry of the initiative’s essential learning goals, which would expand the breadth of potential responses.

Reflection questions encourage participants to think more critically and in turn integrate this practical knowledge with existing pedagogical knowledge for personalized application. This respondent encouraged the original poster to think more critically about the situation so that when integrating it with practical knowledge such as budget constraints, it would be most applicable to his personal context. These reflection questions are akin to what Kale, Brush, & Saye (2009) termed “reflective assistance” in their study of mentor-mentee teachers utilizing an online forum as part of a professional development program. Mentor teachers employed reflective assistance to “request or encourage teachers to respond to questions, reflect on their teaching practices, or simply provide their input to the discussion” (Kale, Brush, & Saye, 2009, p. 294). Their study found that reflective assistance elicited high thinking levels among teachers. Similarly, in a study of secondary teachers, Bakkenes, Vermunt, and Wubbels (2010) conducted a content analysis of digital logs of learning experiences that revealed teachers learned mostly through reflection on their own teaching practices and experimentation. Within the current study, reflection questions within the discussions similarly encouraged the posters to engage in self-reflection focused either on their own practice or goals and served to engage them in deeper
levels of analysis of the issue.

The members who utilized clarification questions demonstrated a sense of involvement and vested interest in the discussion as they sought to encourage, extend, and elaborate the dialogue. Inquiry into their own and others’ practices that takes into account earlier questions and responses encourages participants to construct personal meaning and knowledge that have practical applications in their particular contexts. The use of clarification questions demonstrates members’ interest in certain topics as they elicit further information through questions such as “Is there a textbook for your new class?” “Will you continue to sub while you’re taking your certification classes?”, or “Why don’t they put fidget bars on sitting desks?” Each clarification question takes the discussion in a slightly different direction dependent upon the interests and curiosities of those who pose them. Clarification questions enabled members to personalize learning, which led to increased engagement (Arvaja, 2012).

The data implies that PT members may not be quite as interest-driven as TC or C2 users or perhaps they consciously choose less engagement with the discussions. Of the 172 excerpts coded as asking clarification question, 41% and 40% were from TC and C2 respectively whereas PT accounted for only 19%. The fact that the amount of further reasoning exhibited by PT users as compared to the other forums was much less (18% for PT and 37% for both C2 and TC) additionally supports this assertion as additional reasoning implies greater interest and involvement than simply a response to a question.

Online spaces such as these also enable members to exercise autonomy over their levels of engagement with the material and the discussion. Members with specific goals to learn more about a topic may first choose to participate in a discussion and then choose participation levels that directly correlate to interest levels. Duncan-Howell surveyed teachers who were members
of online communities and found that participation rates depended on the topic of discussion and members’ level of interest (2009). Participants noted that they participated more if they were interested in the topic. Members’ learning goals and personal schedules influence their decisions to initiate as well as respond to discussions. The open-ended nature of a discussion forum affords members the opportunity to construct, refine, and revisit knowledge gleaned over a sustained time frame. Technology affords users access to this knowledge in ways that suit their particular learning needs at any moment, which teachers in Duncan-Howell’s study also identified as an advantage to online communities (2009).

Types of Responses Provided

Participants offered responses to the initial questions or conceptions as well as the clarification questions. Four types of responses to the initial questions emerged from the data: response that provides a resource, response that reasons with personal experience, response that reasons with personal opinion, and response with no reasoning. Among responses to the initial question, 24% of them contained a personal example. Similarly, personal examples also manifested in 14% of excerpts coded as reasoned further, which often accompanied a response to the initial question. In these excerpts, participants further developed the topic of discussion. They offered responses such as “I teach high school health, so I don’t assign homework as regularly as a core subject teacher would assign. However, I find that when I incorporate technology into the homework, the quality of work often increases” and “We have iTouches at our school, which are fine for the apps, but they are really hard to read a book off of because of the small screen size (even for the middle schoolers)”. These lived experiences offer valuable contributions to the discussion; the role of practical and lived experiences is vital to adult
learning (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010).

Furthermore, two types of clarification responses emerged: factual and yes/no. Few personal examples were presented in either clarification questions or responses suggesting a different level of engagement with the discussion as the conversation shifted perhaps to a slightly more nuanced topic with which not as many respondents were familiar. For example, a C2 member initiated a discussion about using Web 2.0 tools to build student data walls. While potential respondents are likely to be familiar with a generalized concept such as Web 2.0, the more specialized topic of “data walls” might not be as widely known. For clarification, a responder inquired: “Can you be more specific about what you mean by a ‘data wall’?” A TC member asked for advice regarding employability and various certification types and experience. A respondent suggested that he might look for a job as a paraprofessional at first. This response steered the discussion in a narrower direction and elicited the original poster to ask, “Do you have any opinion on weather [sic] para jobs are better for advancement than subbing?”

Clarification questions such as these limited the respondent pool due to their constrained, contextually dependent, specialized answers. At this point, learning shifted from practical or lived experience to new knowledge that may be subsequently applied in practice and eventually become part of the participants’ practical or lived experiences. Clarification questions and responses such as these limited the level of engagement due to specificity, which may account for the lack of personal examples expressed in both.

Participants also provided responses with further reasoning as support for a specific viewpoint or suggestion. Types of reasoning included personal examples, opinions, second-hand examples, and factual details. Through reasoning, members shared personal interpretations of their own and others’ experiences to increase their credibility and legitimacy while also offering
multiple perspectives and inciting diverse feedback. Meaningful, contextually-relevant knowledge is useful; without personal applicability, new knowledge may not be fully integrated into one’s practice and eventually will be lost.

According to the interactive model of professional development, external sources of information such as others’ questions, responses, and interpretations may lead to new classroom experiences, which when implemented become lived experiences that change the way a member thinks, thus resulting in professional learning (Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996). Excerpts coded as others as resources for enhancing personal understanding evidence how external sources of information gleaned from the discussions can become lived experiences. Examples included “Thanks for the advice I'm going to relay the information to my Principal”, “I've loved reading this message board for many years because I've gotten so many ideas and helpful teaching tips”, and “Thanks! These look interesting. I've ordered several of them tonight!” These types of messages affirm that participants intend to utilize new information in some way, which may change the way they think and hence result in professional learning. Participants may derive information from others’ experience that may then become their own lived experiences; in this way, informal learning manifests as professional development (Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996). Arvaja’s original findings also indicated that students “had become cognitive, social, and emotional resources for one another…and shared personal, social, and cultural knowledge and experiences” (2012, p.103). In contrast, she found that sometimes participants utilized these types of statements to further elaborate the topics, which was not present in this study.
Patterns of Knowledge Sharing

The two main patterns that emerged from this study were the reliance on personal examples in responses to the initial question and the co-occurrence of social cohesion and others as resources for enhancing personal understanding. As previously explicated, the reliance on examples supports and confirms a central tenet of adult education theory that demonstrates the paramount importance of lived experience to adult learning (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010). Individuals bring their experiences to the discussions that they share with others who learn from them; similarly, discussing lived experiences may also help individuals to learn more about themselves as they receive feedback. Participants experience life in unique ways from various perspectives that when expressed in a public forum such as a discussion board contribute to the group’s collective knowledge. Ruan and Griffith studied graduate students’ online discussions regarding literacy instructional strategies and found a reliance on participants’ practical experiences in an effort to process and present what they had read (2011). They also noted the positive effects of a supportive, social environment (Ruan & Griffith, 2011). Social interaction helps to build and sustain online communities (Garrison & Akyol, 2013; Liu, 2012); it also factors into the overall climate. The social interaction across the forums was inherently and decidedly positive; there were few negative remarks or statements identified as sharing criticism or challenging others’ ideas. Participants created social connections with others through various types of comments but most especially those that linked them with another participant by way of a shared resource. The expression of intent to use or the affirmation of use of a resource provided by a member creates a social connection between participants otherwise separated by time and space.

Classroom 2.0 members offered more lengthy elaboration messages though
Teachers Corner members offered extended sharing messages. While examples played an important role across the forums, nearly half of all responses to the initial questions that included personal examples came from ProTeacher members even though they were least likely to include a personal example when they further reasoned a response. PT members discussed a broader variety of topics while C2 members largely focused on technology-related topics.

In all three forums, more than half of all the original posters returned to the discussions and posted at least one subsequent message. The majority of them posted three or fewer messages to the discussion after the initial posting; however, there was a notable segment from C2 that maintained a strong presence in the discussions by replying between 4 and 15 times. The re-posts also contributed to the creation of a more conversation-like structure to the C2 dialogue than was noted in either PT or TC.

Social Interactions

Teachers often work isolated from one another despite sharing a physical space with many; informal interaction and collaboration occur in unlikely places such as the hallway or the faculty room. Online spaces such as these are environments that promote social interaction and collaboration as members visit to pose questions, offer advice, and show support to one another. As teachers are expected to know and learn more about increasingly complex topics, peer support and cooperation are of paramount importance. A study of a community of computer science teachers revealed that supporting dialogue and interaction among peers was critical for success of this community (Tsiotakis & Jimoyiannis, 2016). The members who participate determine the social climate within each discussion that may contribute positively or negatively to group cognitive, socio-emotional, and social processes (Hillen, 2014). Hillen’s (2014) study
of a discussion board’s role in computer supported collaborative learning revealed that members offered social support such as messages thanking others for help, offering help, wishing good luck, and celebrating special days.

An overall positive climate emerged through messages of social cohesion classified as thanking others for their contributions, praising ideas and suggestions, providing encouragement or support, and sharing others’ feelings or opinions. Across these forums, all social cohesion excerpts were positive and uplifting in nature ranging from a simple acknowledgment of thanks (“thank you for your great ideas”) to a more elaborate statement of praise (“I've loved reading this message board for many years because I've gotten so many ideas and helpful teaching tips”) to a heartfelt display of support for a difficult situation (What you are going through IS very emotionally draining and at times, you have to put it aside in your mind someplace or it will eat you up! YOUR CAREER IS NOT OVER!”).

Social cohesion was evident in all three forums though most prevalent in Classroom 2.0, which represented nearly half of all social cohesion excerpts. ProTeacher and The Teachers Corner were similar in levels of social cohesion. Though Arvaja (2012) did not specifically attend to social interactions in her study, she described a sense of “togetherness” that established and maintained a positive atmosphere. Similarly, the lack of challenging others’ ideas excerpts evidences a positive social climate that was relatively undisturbed by potentially negative messages; Arvaja found a similar absence of challenging others’ ideas (2012). Rourke (2007) and Kanuka’s study examined students enrolled in an online, graduate-level humanities course including online discussions that revealed a comparable lack of critical discourse. They identified two main reasons for this: critiques were often interpreted as attacks and students viewed the discussion as a place for social interaction rather than mutual critique (Rourke &
Kanuka, 2007). Furthermore, a study of 14 text-based discussions among students in a health and social care course revealed that disagreement was more prevalent among personal rather than professional points of view (Dalley-Hewer, et al., 2012). Researchers in this study identified the need to find pedagogical approaches that would foster rather than stifle “meaningful disagreement” among participants (Dalley-Hewer, et al., 2012). In Ruan and Griffith’s (2011) study of elementary teachers in a graduate class, participants challenged expert ideas but not those of other participants. Similarly, Rourke and Kanuka’s (2007) study of graduate students in an online course found few instances of challenging in their analysis. Lack of “challenging” discourse within these discussions is consistent with findings from other studies.

The number of social cohesion excerpts (443) equates to only 12% of all applied codes, which suggests that the social aspect - characteristic of affinity spaces – may not be a prime factor for those who participate in these three spaces. While the social aspect may be an unexpected benefit, the data suggests that most members’ primary goals are to request and offer information rather than interact socially with others. Given that the majority of educational research on affinity spaces has focused on educational ties to popular culture (e.g., Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013; Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2015; Henry, 2013; Ryu, 2013), it is difficult to determine how this level of social interaction compares to that of other affinity spaces with similar characteristics.

Across the three sites examined there was similarity in the types of interactions that occurred and topics discussed. The vast majority of social interactions were positive with few instances of sharing criticism or challenging others’ ideas. Participants relied on their tacit knowledge and lived experience to answer each others’ questions rather than on theoretical
knowledge. The notion that three distinct sites had no noteworthy differences suggests that teachers might be well-served participating in any education-related affinity space. Teachers’ selection of spaces would be something to examine further as it appears that similar interactions take place. Identifying the reasons why teachers choose to become members of various sites may be useful to determine factors that attract membership. These factors could be used to refine existing spaces and also contribute to the design of new ones.

**Implications for Research**

The current phenomenon concerning the potential of legitimate professional development through online spaces has focused mainly on online communities and networks. In their meta-analysis of studies related to informal, online spaces for teachers, Macià and García (2016) identified 15 studies of online communities, 4 network studies, and 4 studies that used the terms “community” and “network” interchangeably. Duncan-Howell (2010) examined three established online communities of teachers to ascertain information regarding participants’ professional development experiences while Tsiotakis and Jimoyiannis (2016) constructed an online community to determine the usability and functionality of a single platform that integrated various technology tools. Holmes (2013) studied a particular learning event of a successful online community for teachers while Booth (2012) attempted to better understand what makes online communities successful through a multiple-case study. Brown and Munger (2010) analyzed e-mail messages sent through a network of users in an effort to categorize the types of discussion and learning that occurred. Considering the academic nature of Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner - which arguably attract mostly educational professionals - it might seem logical to classify these spaces as online professional learning communities or
online communities of practice or even simply networks. As Macià and García (2016) found, these terms are too frequently used interchangeably without attention to the nuances of each. While researchers claim they have studied online “communities” or “networks”, it is possible that they have not actually identified the term that most accurately describes the online spaces studied and have misidentified them. The term “affinity spaces” has typically been associated with social networks related to popular culture topics such as fan fiction (e.g., *Harry Potter fans*), rant communities (e.g., *Reddit*), and online games (e.g., *The Sims*). However, this study confirms that there is legitimate applicability of the term “affinity space” to topics that have no connection to popular culture and that these affinity spaces may indeed be sources of legitimate continuing professional learning. Online learning has begun to flourish as an alternative mode to traditional format continuing professional learning for educators. Online opportunities are appealing because of their innate flexibility of time and space, allowing learners to participate whenever and wherever they want effectively personalizing the experience. Since communication and information seeking through discussion boards are relatively young phenomena, there has not been a significant amount of research that investigates how online spaces contribute to informal learning that is related to the profession of teaching.

**Classroom 2.0, ProTeacher, and The Teachers Corner as Affinity Spaces**

Affinity spaces as defined by Gee (2007) have eleven distinct attributes that appear in varying degrees. These three online spaces clearly exhibit seven of these attributes that serve to distinguish them as affinity spaces: (1) the space accommodates novices and experts, (2) various levels and forms of participation, (3) a shared endeavor is primary, (4) intensive and extensive knowledge are shared, (5) respects and relies on tacit knowledge, (6) knowledge is distributed
and individual, and (7) dispersed knowledge is utilized.

All three online spaces accommodated novices and experts alike who participated at varied levels and depths. It is clear by the postings that there are many veteran teachers who reference their years of experience directly or whose pseudonyms display their long tenure as educators (i.e., “VeteranTeacher”) who contributed to the discussion alongside those who were beginning or newly hired teachers, teacher education students, and others merely entertaining the possibility of becoming a teacher. Depending upon the topic or expertise required, members may interact with the content differently. For example, topics that required breadth of expertise seemed to show more activity than those that required specific expertise suggesting that members participate when they are able to contribute to the discussion.

At times when participants’ expertise may not align with the discussion, they may simply have offered words of encouragement or social cohesion. There was a noteworthy amount of encouragement among those who engaged in these discussions that was spread among many different participants, especially in the C2 forum. The positive comments expressed among members also evidenced the idea that a shared endeavor was primary (Gee, 2007). While members may connect on a secondary level, their primary connection was through their interest in teaching and learning as evidenced by the themes present among the discussions. Even the five outlier threads were associated with educational topics. Two of these threads related to books for the classroom while another searched for ways to fund a classroom project; the fourth outlier lamented the fact that not as many members were providing advice as they had been while the fifth expressed an individual’s lengthy monologue on whether or not teaching was a good fit for her lifestyle. A shared endeavor was primary across the forums in this study and is supported by the themes identified among them.
Both intensive and extensive knowledge were shared among participants. Intensive or specialized knowledge is reflected in the discussions categorized as technology tools or support, curricular enhancement, and special education. These topics showcase applications of specialized knowledge within a particular context. For example, a C2 member sought advice to help select a mobile device for use with elementary children for use as an e-reader and also to access the web; a third grade teacher on PT asked for suggestions to help students stop reversing the letters b and d. The responses provided to these types of discussions are not likely to be applicable outside of these and similar contexts. On the other hand, discussions categorized as general educational issues and student classroom management issues evidence extensive knowledge. The topics elaborated in these categories are more generalizable as the topics were broader and not likely to be context specific. For example, discussions regarding constant talking among elementary aged children proffered solutions that could be applied to elementary aged students and possibly among secondary students as well. Similarly, a common topic of using mobile devices in schools is a conversation with wide applicability, as it is a trending topic in education across all levels. Both extensive and intensive knowledge manifested in other thematic categorizations, though they coexisted within the themes dependent upon the nature of the initial post.

The diversity of the contributors adds value to all of these spaces; though it is impossible to discern precise details about all members, the use of language and explicit statements by members enable reasonable conclusions. The contributors are both male and female with varied levels of experience and areas of expertise; they come from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. The reasons they visit these forums may not align exactly, but they share the primary endeavor of teaching and learning. As contributors they bring knowledge and
experience that becomes distributed as they post it publicly on these forums; by consuming knowledge presented by others, members expand their individual knowledge such that they can learn and do more than they could on their own (Gee, 2007). It is the strength of the group’s collective knowledge that enhances individual knowledge. This collective knowledge is built upon the experiences and tacit knowledge that participants contribute to the discussions; the proliferation of personal examples supports the assertion that there is respect and reliance on tacit knowledge (Gee, 2007).

Dispersed knowledge also manifested in all three forums as evidenced by excerpts coded as *others as resources for enhancing personal understanding*. These excerpts explicitly show that members are using resources external to the forum to improve their individual knowledge. Dispersed knowledge was most prominent on C2, which accounted for 67% of the occurrences; nevertheless, it was also present on both PT and TC though less widespread (17% and 16% of the occurrences respectively).

**Affinity Spaces for Continuing Professional Learning**

As supported by the literature, effective continuing professional learning exhibits six characteristics: (1) positioned in an authentic context (e.g., Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009), (2) interest-driven (e.g., Lee & Tsai, 2011; Schlager et al., 2009), (3) utilizes practical experience (e.g., Brown & Munger, 2010; Kale et al., 2011), (4) encourages learning autonomy (e.g., Brown, 2013; Postholm, 2012), (5) has a social aspect (e.g., Duncan-Howell, 2010; Holmes, Signer, & MacLeod, 2010), and (6) has an extended duration (e.g., Lom & Sullenger, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). The affinity spaces in this study possess all of these qualities.
Affinity spaces provide an authentic context for informal learning as participants pose questions and responses that reflect real life, everyday situations and issues that pervade today’s classrooms such as special education support, classroom management issues, and integrating technology. Context and content-specific questions are addressed through individual responses and clarification questions supported and reasoned with lived experiences. Teachers share what they have learned through their practice while also consuming what others have learned and then may subsequently apply that learning to their practice (Holmes, 2013). Technology affords participants the luxury of engaging with these spaces whenever and wherever they wish and provides opportunities for collaboration that may not otherwise be possible. The variety and uniqueness of discussion topics further support the notion that affinity spaces are interest-driven.

Of the 120 discussions in this study, there were few instances of repeated topics, and even within the common categorizations, each discussion topic developed uniquely as a result of the participants’ interactions with the content and with each other. Factors such as the tone set by the initial poster and the expertise of the members weighing in all affected the discussion’s direction. The context becomes meaningful to participants through the interactions they have with it (Westera, 2011).

Participants access these forums for various reasons that involve some level of interest related to educational topics. Participants demonstrate their levels of interest by the amount of engagement with the discussions; they may initiate discussions, offer responses, pose clarification questions, answer clarification questions or any combination thereof. More than half of all the original posters tangibly returned to the discussions; it is possible the amount could be higher if they returned but did not post messages. Similarly, the participants’ interests drive the topics of discussion and the direction of the conversation within each thread. For example, a
discussion regarding cell phone use in the classroom began by eliciting positive effects and developed into a more balanced conversation regarding the pros and cons as a result of participants’ opinions and experiences. As Vescio, Ross, and Adams found in their review of research, “Participation in learning communities facilitates professional development that is driven by the needs of teachers as they are naturally engaged in efforts to accomplish their goals” (2008, p.86). The interest-driven nature of the spaces assists in creating a context that is personally authentic for each participant.

Personal examples account for a great deal of the social capital emerging from the discussions which aligns with the vital role experience plays in adult learning (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010). Practical experience and personal examples emerged as common themes among the questions and responses posted within the discussions. Participants relied on their own knowledge to answer others’ inquiries rather than on theoretical knowledge, which participants invoked in only 18 instances across the data set as opposed to the 667 instances of giving one’s own example. These included lived, successful examples as well as second-hand examples from colleagues. Brown and Munger’s (2010) study of an e-mail group of teachers revealed a strong reliance on sharing personal, professional experiences as part of discussions. Similarly, a study of an online forum as part of a professional development program concluded that teachers should be encouraged to draw from personal experience and expertise to help solve problems presented by others (Kale et al., 2011).

The self-directed and regulated nature of asynchronous online spaces requires a great deal of learner autonomy; learners have no one controlling their actions or interactions within these spaces. Participants have already exercised learner autonomy by simply entering the forums as they have made a decision to access knowledge already located there or to acquire knowledge by
posting a question. Participants exhibit learner autonomy as they decide when, where, why, and how they interact with the forum content. Postholm’s review of literature confirmed that teachers “want to stipulate their own learning goals, thus being autonomous in the development of their own practice” (2012, p.424). Based on observation, some members of these spaces were much more active than others and some may have only posted once within the data sample. Learner autonomy drives participation in online spaces and may be influenced by a variety of factors such as interest, relevance, time, and necessity.

Furthermore, the social aspect as it contributes to effective continuing professional learning (CPL) as defined in Chapter 2 of this document is evident among the data through excerpts coded as *social cohesion*. Participants offered each other positive support in the form of thanks, praising ideas and suggestions, sharing sentiment, and offering encouragement and support. Not only do the comments add a social aspect, but the simple actions of posting questions and responses presuppose interaction of a social nature that develops as the discussion progresses. A question that receives a response demonstrates a social interaction though not in the sense of a traditional, face-to-face conversation; technology mediates this social interaction between the original poster and respondents. Duncan-Howell (2010) found two main reasons that teachers maintain membership in online spaces: professional requirements and emotional support. Hillen (2014) also identified the importance of social interaction to support cognitive processes that improve learning. The upbeat social climate evident among these spaces contributes constructively to the discussions that take place.

Finally, such online discussion boards can preserve threads from the inception of the site and thus afford participants the ability to continue conversations over a sustained and indefinite period of time. In each of these three spaces, there is the option to read archived discussions or
to access even the earliest of discussions and to search discussions. The spaces serve as repositories of user-created information from which new users can glean information. An area of great potential for online spaces is that they create “…a sustainable environment for teacher collaboration and collaborative development” (Tsiotakis & Jimoyiannis, 2016, p. 47). The fact that participants can access and further any discussion on the site and that the threads cannot be closed to further comment aligns with the fact that CPL with an extended duration is effective. Lom and Sullenger’s (2011) study of teacher-advisors found that interaction with others over a long period of time was the most significant benefit of a particular continuing professional learning opportunity. The three affinity spaces examined in this study exhibit all six qualities of effective continuing professional learning.

**Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations of this study is the lack of personal data from the participants. Since there was little response to the survey that I posted, there was no way to determine the true demographics and background experience of the participants. This information would have helped to better identify the characteristics of typical participants in these online spaces to determine patterns among users. Interviews would have provided insight into the various aspects of participation in these online spaces such as why, how, when, and the perceived benefit of doing so. This information would be useful to determine how membership in online spaces does or does not affect teaching and learning in actual classrooms. Another limitation of the data emerged with the comparison of three sites in that there were no major differences that illuminated design flaws or best practices in the creation of online spaces for teachers. None of the spaces stood out for a particularly unique reason that served to differentiate it from the
others. The selection of spaces limited the participant pool as well; if the study had included corporate- or institution-created sites, the types of conversations may have offered different insight into the nature of learning. Furthermore, it is difficult to know whether or not participants actually follow the discussions to which they reply or if they simply respond and never revisit. Without a posting that confirms a member has revisited, it is impossible to know if a member returns to read subsequent replies or if interaction with that discussion ends at that point. Finally, while not uncommon among the literature, the lack of challenging others’ ideas suggests that conversations may not facilitate higher-order learning. That is not to say all learning resulting from informal spaces must be higher-order, but these spaces may exhibit less than other continuing professional learning opportunities.

**Implications for Practice**

This study adds evidence to the argument that informal online learning may function as a legitimate source of continuing professional learning (CPL) among educators. Educators would be able to engage with online networks, communities, or affinity spaces of personal relevance that pertain to individual learning needs. Allowing educators to pursue this type of continuing professional learning not only increases its relevancy and applicability to individual needs and contexts, it encourages teachers to collaborate with others on a continual basis over a sustained period of time rather than simply during an allocated block of time on a designated professional development day. As demonstrated with online communities and networks (e.g., El-Hani & Greca, 2012; Holmes, 2013; Macià & García, 2016; Tsiotakis & Jimoyiannis, 2016; Zuidema, 2012), affinity spaces may provide a promising new alternative to traditional CPL given attention to the aforementioned characteristics that makes it effective. All 23 online teacher groups in
Macià and García’s (2016) meta-analysis demonstrated value of professional development through participation in online communities and networks. El-Hani and Greca’s (2012) study of a biology teachers’ virtual community of practice showed positive impact on teacher practice. Similarly, through his study of an eTwinning Learning Event, Holmes noted the value of online communities to offer “opportunities for authentic and personalized learning, informal exchange of good practice and peer learning” (2013, p.107). Tsiotakis and Jimoyiannis (2016) proposed an integrated design framework to guide analysis and implementation of online communities of teachers to support professional learning while Zuidema’s study of an online network of beginning teachers concluded that “informal inquiry conversations matter and that they are worth supporting” (2012, p.143).

Changing the way CPL is perceived and administered would benefit both students and teachers. While online CPL in a formal sense – webinars, online courses, virtual attendance at conferences, etc. – has become more widely accepted, informal learning has not garnered such support. Rather than narrowing CPL participation to traditional face-to-face or formal online spaces, opportunities should be expanded to include informal online sources such as affinity spaces. In her survey of 98 teachers, Duncan-Howell (2010) found that 86.7% of participants considered membership in online groups to be a meaningful form of CPL. If these experiences would be accepted toward district or state requirements, teachers may be more likely to engage. Teachers who feel that professional development opportunities provided by their district are disconnected from real life are less likely to engage with the content and carry the new knowledge back to their practice. As Webster-Wright noted, “…the value of CPL to an organization is seen in terms of the professional’s ability to apply knowledge to produce outcomes contributing to organizational goals” (2009, p.717). If the professional is unable to
apply knowledge because it is not applicable, the outcome will not positively contribute to the
goals of that professional development. By meeting educators’ needs where they are and
whenever they want, online spaces can be legitimate, authentic sources of professional
knowledge. Educators can choose and regulate their involvement with online spaces in ways
that are personalized and relevant to their specific context; since they are not forced into these
scenarios, it is much more likely that this type of learning will be fruitful and meaningful. When
learning is perceived in this light, educators have a personal investment in knowledge because it
can directly translate into practical classroom applications.

Evidence from this study suggests that teachers perceive benefit from others’ experiences
and offering their own experiences for comment and scrutiny; affinity spaces and online
communities afford participants this type of learning. Allowing teachers to initiate and drive
discussions based on their interests is invaluable. Similarly, researchers looking for inspiration
to derive new CPL content might look to these spaces to see what teachers discuss and what
types of support they desire. This would improve alignment to teachers’ actual needs versus
perceived needs.

**Future Research**

This study suggests that affinity spaces may provide an alternative to traditional
continuing professional learning. These spaces were not developed in response to particular
needs and membership is voluntary unlike professional learning communities; little research has
examined the potential for continuing professional learning within spaces that were not created
for research purposes (Macià & García, 2016). Comparative studies of affinity spaces and
continuing professional learning communities (e.g., edWeb, The Educator’s PLN, Learn NC)
might analyze the types of knowledge that manifest and how knowledge construction occurs with attention to the distinct purposes of each space. This type of study would offer insight into the potential efficacy of continuing professional learning that is self-directed as opposed to institutionally imposed. A further component of this research may be to evaluate how teachers use and reflect on the utility of professional and/or informal learning from online spaces, how that manifests in practice, and whether it contributes to improved teaching and learning.

While this study did not track participation rates or analyze patterns of participation, another direction for this research may be to determine the factors that influence how and why individuals interact or – in the case of lurkers – do not interact with these spaces. Examining the reasons for participation may help researchers to design future online communities and affinity spaces that further facilitate communication, collaboration, and learning.

Future research in the area of continuing professional learning and affinity spaces is promising as online opportunities entice different participants for myriad reasons. This can apply to pre-service and in-service continuing professional learning as well as extending to teacher preparation programs in an effort to engender a sense a lifelong learning in figure educators. Expanding research pertinent to traditional continuing professional learning to the new context of affinity spaces will provide unique insight into the newly emergent field of online continuing professional learning as legitimate and effective. Technology to support meaningful learning for students is a widely researched topic; why not extend this to study how technology can support meaningful learning for teachers? As tech savvy digital natives enter the educational workforce, they expect to learn with technology as educators just as they did as students.

Looking beyond affinity spaces that specifically attract teachers to those that are more content-focused could be a direction for research as well. While members may address general
questions on forums such as these, they may seek experts through other means. For example, an anatomy teacher who wants to incorporate relevant instruction regarding current medical practices or future trends may look to medical professionals for knowledge rather than a group of teachers. Do teachers look beyond “educational” websites? Why or why not? Where do they find the information they need?

There are several current initiatives that have begun to address online continuing professional learning needs for teachers. The European Commission’s eLearning Programme launched *eTwinning* in 2005 as a resource for European school teachers “to find partners, set up projects, share ideas, exchange best practice and start working together” (Grochowski, 2016, p.1). It boasts a membership of more than 370,000 and also has 44,449 active collaborative projects across Europe. Obviously, this large-scale program has a great deal of support to help sustain the community, expand its offerings, and evolve to meet current needs. It purports to be an excellent resource, but its website explicitly states that it is for use by “staff (teachers, head teachers, librarians, etc.), working in a school in one of the European countries involved” (Grochowski, 2016, p.1). Though it limits the potential user base, it certainly provides an exemplar on which others might model similar initiatives or communities.

A redesign of advanced placement science curricula incited the creation of a more specialized professional development program. After the College Board redesigned the advanced placement biology, chemistry, and physics courses, a need emerged to support teachers of these courses transition to the new curricula. As a result, the National Science Foundation funded a collaborative research project among five prominent universities including Harvard to identify the best types of professional development that would help teachers adjust to the changes (Dede, 2014). The study found the AP Teacher Online Community had the most
positive direct effect on teacher practice and student learning (Dede, 2014). The project identified the concept of “mirroring” – teachers learning from master AP teachers and taking those ideas back to their own practice – as a highly effective strategy. Mirroring includes answering questions and posting information about successful practices – both of which were evident among the forums in this study.

A final current educational initiative is a professional resource for novice and veteran teachers alike. TeachersFirst offers lessons, units, and reviewed web resources that have been created and edited by experienced, educational professionals; unlike the other sites, all of the content is determined by the writers in consultation with practicing teachers (The Source for Learning, Inc., 2016). The main distinction from the aforementioned site is that it lacks an interactive and social component. It undoubtedly provides extensive online professional development opportunities for teachers that are relevant given the consultations with practicing teachers; however, it does not allow for the organic emergence of knowledge through collaboration that other sites may provide.

**Conclusions**

This study examined three online affinity spaces for teachers in an effort to determine the types of discourse that developed in the forms of questions and answers as well as the social interactions that contributed to these discussions. While the educational nature of the forum topics is not traditionally associated with affinity spaces, these particular spaces exhibit many affinity space characteristics provided by Gee’s (2007) definition. They also align with how the literature defines effective continuing professional learning for teachers. Therefore, it is reasonable to state that informal learning in affinity spaces is a legitimate source of effective continuing professional learning for teachers. The study provides evidence to support further
research into the use of affinity spaces as an option to traditional continuing professional learning.

I believe the impact for current and future educators is promising; affinity spaces alleviate limitations imposed by traditional continuing professional learning and offer new, promising avenues for autonomous learning that is personally relevant and applicable. With improved teaching and learning as the ultimate goal of education, informal learning in affinity spaces has the potential to alter the current landscape of continuing professional learning opportunities.
References


Appendix A
Matrix of Potential Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Creator</th>
<th>Sponsors</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>edWeb</td>
<td>edWeb LLC</td>
<td>List of Sponsors</td>
<td>Professional social and learning network designed to help members create their own personal learning networks; promotes itself as a professional learning community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TeachAde</td>
<td>Ed Tech Ventures</td>
<td>Adopt-A-Classroom</td>
<td>First social networking site designed for educators; has a fundraising component.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom 2.0</td>
<td>Steve Hargadon</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Message board designed for teachers to discuss educational technology topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TeacherSquare</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>edShelf</td>
<td>Create an online community of practice of “teacherpreneurs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProTeacher</td>
<td>ProTeacher</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Community for “professional school teachers” since 1999; not for parenting or home schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Teacher Communities</td>
<td>College Board</td>
<td>College Board</td>
<td>Designed specifically for teachers of AP courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers.net</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>partner with Education in America</td>
<td>Online tool for teachers to use as a resource for lesson plans, advice, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tapped In</td>
<td>NSF</td>
<td>NSF funded project</td>
<td>Community from 1997-2013 that is now closed due to lack of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intel Engage</td>
<td>Intel Education</td>
<td>Intel</td>
<td>Created by Intel Education; teachers can create private groups within the main groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachnology</td>
<td>Teachnology Inc.</td>
<td>Teachnology</td>
<td>Resource of lesson plans, printables, discussion boards and more; requires paid membership to view premium content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Week Teacher</td>
<td>Editorial Projects in Education</td>
<td>Philanthropies like Bill Gates Foundation, etc.</td>
<td>A space for readers of the magazine to ask questions and discuss topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISTE Commons</td>
<td>ISTE</td>
<td>Microsoft, Samsung, Smart, etc.</td>
<td>Discussion boards for various tech topics; you cannot post without a paid membership,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Forum</td>
<td>Andy Walker</td>
<td>Spartacus, e-Help, others.</td>
<td>To promote friendly discussion and sharing for educators around the world; designed by a teacher for his specific classes but has expanded.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Message Posted with Survey Link

Dear Members,

I am a high school teacher and also a PhD candidate in Learning, Design, and Technology. I am currently working on my dissertation regarding online spaces of teachers and would like your input. This survey should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete and is anonymous. The responses will be included as part of a larger study. I truly appreciate your responses as we work together as educators to improve learning for our students.

If you have further questions about this study, you may also contact me via e-mail at klt5203@psu.edu.

With sincere thanks,

Kimberly Tohill
Appendix C
Survey Questions for Members

The purpose of this survey is to collect more detailed information about the members of three online spaces for use in a dissertation research study. Completion of this survey will take approximately 5-10 minutes and is voluntary. You may discontinue the survey at any time with no consequence. The survey is anonymous and responses will be kept strictly confidential. Submission of this form indicates consent to participate in this research study and to have your responses utilized in reports of this research. Thank you for your time and participation.

1. How long have you been a member of (site name)?
   a. Less than 6 months
   b. 6 months to 1 year
   c. 1 – 3 years
   d. 3 – 5 years
   e. More than 5 years

2. How often do you visit the site to view content? (i.e., look for information, read discussion threads but not post content)
   a. Once a day or more
   b. 2 – 3 times per week
   c. Once per week
   d. Once every 2 weeks
   e. Once per month
   f. Less than once per month
   g. Never

3. How often do you post messages on the site? (i.e., pose a question to the community, reply to others’ questions)
   a. Once a day or more
   b. 2 – 3 times per week
   c. Once per week
   d. Once every 2 weeks
   e. Once per month
   f. Less than once per month
   g. Never
4. Which forums on this site have you visited? (i.e., General Discussion, Technology, etc.)

5. Of the forums you have visited, on which one(s) have you posted messages? If none, please type “none”.

6. When posting messages, have you… (Check all that apply)
   a. Started a new thread looking for answers or advice?
   b. Answered another member’s question?
   c. Shared an experience from your classroom?
   d. Shared an experience from your personal life?
   e. Provided support or encouragement to another member?
   f. Disagreed with advice provided by another member?

7. When you visit this site, how much time do you typically spend on the forums?
   a. Less than 15 minutes
   b. 15 – 30 minutes
   c. 30 – 45 minutes
   d. 45 minutes – 1 hour
   e. More than 1 hour

8. Have you ever sent a private message to another member?
   a. Yes.
   b. No.

9. Why did you send a private message to another member? (Check all that apply)
   a. I wanted to ask a question privately.
   b. I provided extra information that I did not think others on the forum would want.
   c. I disagreed with advice provided on the forum and wanted to offer advice but not publicly.
   d. I sent attachments to the member.
   e. I wanted advice from a specific member.
   f. Other
   g. I have never sent a private message.

10. Why did you become a member of this site?

11. What other online teacher sites are you a member of?

12. I am a(n)...(please select your primary role as it relates to visiting this site)
   a. pre-service educator (university student)
   b. in-service educator (pre-K, primary, secondary)
   c. post-secondary educator
   d. homeschool educator
   e. retired educator
   f. child care provider (i.e., day care)
g. administrator
h. classroom aide or paraprofessional
i. parent
j. other (please specify)

13. For in-service educators, please select the area of your current position:
   a. Pre-K/early childhood
   b. K-6 Public School
   c. K-6 Private School
   d. K-6 Charter School
   e. K-6 Cyber School
   f. 7-12 Public School
   g. 7-12 Private School
   h. 7-12 Charter School
   i. 7-12 Cyber School
   j. higher education institution

14. For secondary educators, what subject do you primarily teach?
   a. English
   b. Math
   c. Science
   d. Social Studies
   e. World Languages
   f. Art
   g. Music
   h. Business
   i. Technology
   j. Family & Consumer Sciences
   k. Physical Education/Health
   l. ESL / TESOL
   m. Other (please specify)

15. Are you certified in special education?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. I am a pre-service teacher but will be certified when I graduate.

16. How long have you been teaching?
   a. I am a pre-service teacher.
   b. Less than 1 year
   c. 1-3 years
   d. 4-5 years
   e. 6-10 years
   f. 11-15 years
   g. 16-20 years
   h. 21-25 years
i. 25+ years
j. I am retired.
k. I am not a teacher.

17. Please indicate your gender.
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Prefer not to answer

18. Please enter your age.
   a. [Input age]
   b. Prefer not to answer
## Appendix D

### Matrix of Codes with Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Type</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Forming or Stating Conception |                | Member poses the initial thought-provoking question or situation that serves as the basis for starting the message thread. This may include background information, personal examples, and/or solutions previously implemented. | C2: *I'm currently moving from classroom teaching to online delivery and am particularly interested in web 2.0 techniques, apps that support/enable learners with dyslexia. Is anyone in the Classroom 2.0 community able to provide me with any relevant references?*  
*I was hoping to get some insight on whether you think flipping a classroom could be a beneficial way to teach.*  
PT: *My students are studying graphic novels...Has anyone done this? I’m trying to create a chart so the students can keep track of the similarities and differences of the graphics in the books.*  
*I saw these on the news last night. They seemed to work well in the classroom featured. The fidget bars seemed to make them perfect for my ADHD students. Does anyone have any experience with these?*  
TC: *I am compiling what people think it means to be a good teacher. Please leave me a sentence or two about your opinions as a teacher!*  
*I am a parent who has lost touch with his child because of the amount of time he is spending on homework every night...Has a school board ever been sued for excessive homework?* |
| Elaboration             |                 | Member asks for clarification or presents an alternative, related example that builds upon the original question or situation. Clarification | C2: *What device is the student using?*  
*Are you able to provide me with an example of how you might implement this in the classroom?*  
PT: *What grade do you teach? What are some graphic novels that the kids like?*  
*Why don’t they put fidget bars on sitting desks?*  
TC: *Do you have any opinion on whether para jobs are better for advancement than subbing?* |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elaboration</th>
<th>questions request further information regarding the situation in an effort to provide contextually appropriate advice.</th>
<th>Can schools make signs that offer anything other than the teacher’s name and their job title underneath it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Answering thought-provoking question or providing advice for situation presented by the initial thread. | Member answers or responds to the initial question or situation presented as a continuation of the discussion. The response may or may not directly answer the question but is directly related to the theme established by the initial post. | C2: The built in accessibility features of your device(s) can be a big help.  
I personally think the flipped classroom is good in theory, but I think we would encounter many issues if we were to try and implement the flipped classroom into schools.  
PT: Have your students read: the Amulet series, El Deafo, Sunny Side Up, Drama, The Babysitters Club?  
I got 3 through a donorschoose grant. They are great for kids who just need to move.  
TC: A few essentials are there for good teachers: knowledge Patience Openness to change  
School should have a policy of the time a child spends on doing homework according to grade level. |
| Answering clarification question with additional information to illuminate the discussion that | Member answers or responds to a clarification question by providing additional information in an effort to make the | C2: I'm teaching high school at the moment and most of the students have smart phones  
Alot of times I conference with individual students to set up the list and generate the verbal portion of the word a lot of times this is during computer lab time when the whole group is working on programs.  
PT: About two years ago I put together a collection I like. A Wrinkle in Time, Call of the Wild, Black Beauty…  
In the video I saw, a student had the choice of sitting on a tall stool at the standing desk and was |
continues the initial thread. discussion more clearly understood.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continues the initial thread.</th>
<th>Using the fidget bar while sitting.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TC: I think whenever you have the chance to establish yourself as an effective educator in the eyes of would-be employers, you’re good.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh they sure can at our school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reasoned further**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasoned further</th>
<th>Member provides additional support or information for a question or response which may or may not be directly related to the initial post.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2: The books can be read to them and then they have an opportunity to read them afterwards.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know it is rare for students not to have access to technology, but some students don’t and therefore would be unavailable to watch the lecture at home.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT: My students LOVE graphic novels and I can’t buy enough of them. It would be interesting to try this with them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would be a good test to see if it works for a standing desk for younger kids.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC: In other words, either way is a good way to be noticed as a reliable, enthusiastic, effective employee.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They’re renovating the school and putting signs on everything.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Elaboration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elaboration</th>
<th>Member offers advice or knowledge with a theoretical basis rather than common knowledge or personal experience; member makes explicit reference to research, theory or research-based techniques.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2: EdTEch advisors use Bates and Poole’s “SECTIONS” model to help them make decisions about technology.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would go for a needs analysis approach.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT: Whole Brain Teaching has some great writing ideas.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The G.L.A.D. strategies are excellent tools to assist in understanding word concepts and making them more comprehensible.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC: I think you will achieve your goal if you apply blended learning theory.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From all the theorists I researched about, the one I feel the closest so far is Maria Montessori and I also like the principles of the forest schools.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>*Member disagrees directly with advice provided by others or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others’ ideas</td>
<td>challenge societal norms.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>You are mistaken.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>I’m not sure my advice would be the same as others.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>*Members use personal evidence to support their position or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>provide further information.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*This also includes providing background details that are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>personally specific to the question or situation posed.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*TC: <em>In my scenario, kindergarten students spend 15 to 20 minutes of their time for homework.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeing</td>
<td>*Members agree with a previously stated position or comment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>may or may not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|  | use the word “agree”. | PT: I second the recommendation for The Daily 5 and CAFÉ books.  
But you are right Yikes that parent is a helicopter parent.  
TC: It is, indeed, a very difficult question. Though, you sure are right that the teaching part IS your responsibility as teachers…  
Yes Sameen you are right and I am agree with your thought.  

Sharing | Sharing Criticism | Members share criticism of a posed situation or view presented.  
C2: You are right Wesley, at times it becomes difficult to implement ICT due to school policies and limitations.  
Numerous school I work with have blocked Pinterest. I don't think they understand what a huge resource it can be.  
PT: I went through two of these until I finally gave up.  
No second example.  
TC: Such a shame if money is deemed more important than the development of a child.  
Schools and teachers respond to that by taking it up some notches – they don’t necessarily do it much better – they just assign more homework.  

Others as Resources for Enhancing Personal Understanding | Others as resources | Members state or imply they have used or will use a resource suggested by another post.  
C2: Thanks for the Raz-kids recommendation, I’ll definitely be trying that one out.  
I explored the above mentioned online quiz and I will definitely use it with my own learners  
PT: I will have to try some of this.  
TC: Thanks for the advice, I’m going to relay the information to my principal.  

Offering resources |  | Members offer resources such as hyperlinks or private advice to members; there is no affirmation  
C2:  
PT: I will see if I can find the 4-H guide.  
TC: If you want, you can PM me.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Cohesion</th>
<th>Social Cohesion</th>
<th>Members make positive social comments toward each other that are informal in nature and display a sense of camaraderie; they may or may not relate to the focus of the discussion.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>C2: Best of luck, Ian!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Good to see you around. I am very pleased to know that you have been trying different soft wares and quizzes to assess students learning.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PT: I hope you can find them!</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>I love this idea.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>TC: I am very hopeful that your idea will help in achieving your goal.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Good luck, let us know how it’s going!</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix E

### Detailed Thematic Categorizations of Discussion Threads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number in C2</th>
<th>Number in PT</th>
<th>Number in TC</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Policy and Procedures</td>
<td>Logistics of running a classroom such as a homework policy, reward system, report cards, and late/missing work.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Classroom Management</td>
<td>Student behavior issues such as excessive talking and attention getting strategies.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Issues</td>
<td>Employment topics (hiring and firing) and interactions with administrators</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Accommodations for special education students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curricular Enhancement</td>
<td>Looking for ways to improve curriculum through new activities, ways of teaching, and resources (books, websites, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Issues</td>
<td>Situations involving difficult parents.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Tools and Support</td>
<td>General questions about using technology in the classroom and technical questions about specific programs, tools, and devices.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Holidays and Special Occasions</td>
<td>Sharing ideas for celebrating holidays and special occasions.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share Success or Failure</td>
<td>Stories to share success or failure that do not ask questions or request comment.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Educational Issues</td>
<td>General topic with wide applicability that are not context specific; topics range from superficial (teaching wardrobe, student teacher gift) to controversial (compulsory education, mobile use in school) to sensitive (active killer drill, culture of fear in schools)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outliers</td>
<td>Discussions that did not fit into any of the other categories (selling books, fundraising)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Microanalysis across Three Forums

New Activities
While the content areas were distinct and unrelated, each of these original posters requested new ideas to enhance both new and existing courses. The nature of the initial conceptions limited the respondent pool due to the specialized knowledge required.

Forming or Stating Initial Conception (C2)
I teach elementary keyboarding and the program I have is kinda boring. I would like to find something new that goes from K-6 grade. I would be willing to purchase books or materials if it is a great program. Can anyone help me out with ideas?
In the C2 discussion, an elementary teacher solicited ideas for a new keyboarding program because he felt that his current program was “kinda boring”. The request remained somewhat open-ended as the original poster (OP) expressed willingness to pay for something that would be useful rather than limiting options to free resources. The fact that the OP desired to transition from something “kinda boring” to something “great” demonstrated a commitment to his students and their learning needs. The rather narrow scope of this request – a keyboarding program for elementary aged students – required familiarity with the content area and the student age group. In this case, the OP had a program that he could use even if he received no responses or responses that did not meet his needs. Furthermore, the OP did not give the name of the program he currently used, so it was possible that respondents might offer that as a suggestion.

Forming or Stating Initial Conception (PT)
We are starting to switch for English Language Development (ELD) on Tuesday. We have no curriculum. I am working with grades 3-4 and their level is proficient/advanced (right before they are considered to be the same level as those born in the U.S. /without another language). We have no curriculum and are focusing on Listening and Speaking. We are to meet with them for 30 minutes a day-right after recess. So my theory is it will be closer to 20-25 minutes. I have two days this week, so I figured do get to know you activities. Then the week after I figured for one day they could do a Halloween Sticker Story and then a second day read them? Any ideas would be great.
The original poster presented a similarly narrow request of curricular and activity ideas for English Language Learners in grades 3-4, focusing on listening and speaking at a proficient/advanced level that could be completed in 20-25 minutes. Perhaps even more than the C2 request, the response requested specialized knowledge in order to provide a relevant, useful answer. This initial post differed from C2 in that the OP presented her ideas for evaluation along with the request for ideas.

**Forming or Stating Initial Conception (TC)**
Ok school has just begun and I'm very worried. I was greeted with an applause as I entered the classroom - which was great - but the truth is I'm terrified. I have used up all my ideas with these kids last year, we have 133 hours ahead of us and I have no idea what to do. :( The subject is called Correspondence and Archive Techniques. The other class is not so problematic, even though it's an entirely new subject to me - stocks and merchandising. Again, any tips on school activities are more than welcome. Wish me luck! :)

Like the other two initial posts, the OP from TC hoped to find resources for rather specialized requirements; in this case, the OP wanted ideas and activities for “Correspondence and Archive Techniques” and “stocks and merchandising” classes. Unlike the others, it was unclear what level the target students were though the course titles implied advanced subject matter. Furthermore, the OP expressed feelings of being “worried” and “terrified” about not having adequate ideas, which was different from the other two initial posts. The TC OP ends his initial conception with a request for social support through this statement “Wish me luck!” Through this initial posting, the OP requested not only ideas but also encouragement for his upcoming endeavor.

**Answering Initial Question and Offering Resources - Example 1 (C2)**
I taught for five years in a computer lab and used several different websites for kids to practice keyboarding. I also like the Dance Mat Typing site mentioned by Joe. I also have a few other sites that I used. You can find links to them on this page I created for keyboarding sites:[hyperlink]

In this example, the respondent established her experience upfront when she stated her years of experience with children in a computer lab. She demonstrated her agreement with and
support for a previous response in addition to her offer of a resource - a compilation of keyboarding sites. The offered resource enabled others to peruse various sites and evaluate their individualized contextual applicability. Anyone who viewed or participated in this discussion could utilize this offered resource.

**Answering Initial Question and Offering Resources - Example 2 (C2)**

Hi! At my school we use typing master online. Each grade consists of 14 lessons, with each lesson taking about 20 minutes. Students can practice at home or school with the account. Words per minute vary from grade to grade. The kids like it and you have access to their accounts so you can see their growth. If you want more information, please feel free to email me here or at my school address. Good luck

While this respondent appeared to have experience in elementary keyboarding programs, it was unclear as to her expertise. The phrase “at my school” was ambiguous in that it might represent a practice the respondent was aware of but had not actually utilized herself. She provided details about the program unlike C2 example 1, but again, it was unclear whether or not she actually instructed students in this area. Like C2 example 1, this respondent offered a resource, but only to the OP. Rather than a public resource, the offer of personal advice through private message was a resource that the general membership could not access.

**Others as Resources for Enhancing Personal Understanding and Social Cohesion - Example 3 (C2)**

Thank you for the sites to use. I will try them out when I get a chance.

The OP returned to the discussion to thank members for the sites provided and to acknowledge that he intended to explore them, demonstrating that they would be resources to enhance his own understanding. It was unclear whether he accepted the offer of personal advice from another member as that would have occurred privately.

**Answering Initial Question, Offering Resources, Asking Clarification Question and Theoretical Knowledge - Example 1 (PT)**

Does your district have a state adopted LA program? In CA it is mandatory to include an eld component. Our district strongly encourages us to implement some of these strategies into our eld lessons. Before preschool I taught eld for over 15 years and vocabulary development was always at the center of our lessons. The G.L.A.D. strategies are
excellent tools to assist in understanding word concepts and making them more comprehensible. [hyperlink] [hyperlink]

In *PT* example 1, this respondent packed many different elements into her answer. She began with a yes/no clarification question directed to the OP and continued by explaining why the answer to that question was pertinent in the situation. If the OP’s home state or district had a language arts program, she would be required to adhere to its requirements. The requirements would direct her into a certain curriculum or course of study that would negate the need for her to generate completely original content. Rather than finish the response and wait for an answer to the clarification question, the respondent offered an answer to the initial question while establishing her legitimacy as a respondent by citing her 15 years of content area experience. In a rarely coded excerpt, this respondent also utilized theoretical knowledge when she directed the OP to the “G.L.A.D.” strategies with hyperlinks for further exploration. As in *C2* example 1, the hyperlinks represented resources freely available to anyone who accessed the discussion.

**Answering Initial Question and Offering Resources - Example 2 (*PT*)**
Check out the haunted house I posted on this link. It would be good for vocabulary. In addition to writing the GLAD 'poem' you could identify with clip art different spooky things to decorate their haunted houses.
Unlike *PT* example 2, this respondent does not confirm his experience or familiarity with the original topic. Despite the affirmation of the “G.L.A.D.” strategies, it is unclear whether or not this is a strategy that has worked for the respondent or simply one with which she was familiar. However, the mention of “G.L.A.D” demonstrated a sense of agreement with the previous post. The respondent did offer an answer to the original request for Halloween activities and offered a publicly available resource through her hyperlink.

**Answering Initial Question and Clarification Questions - Example 3 (*PT*)**
I must be mistaken--I thought you were in California. We have a whole set of standards for ELs. Why don't you use those as your curriculum?
This respondent expressed a sense of discord between what she gleaned from previous posts and the discourse that had developed. If indeed the OP was in California, the answer to the original posted could easily be resolved by turning to the standards. In this way, she affirmed the suggestion of a previous respondent. She then answered the initial post through a question posed as a suggestion, which mirrored the response offered in \( PT \) example 1.

**Answering Clarification Questions and Social Cohesion - Example 4 (PT)**

Thanks for the great links. For right now all we are supposed to be concentrating on is Listening and Speaking, but I think my group should be high enough that I can do some writing if I incorporate some Speaking with it. LOL Right now I won't do any "formal" writing lessons. I believe the district adopted, Houghtin Mifflin. However, I don't have any textbooks or teacher's manuals. Our school does Reader's Workshop. This is my first year and it has been quite the adjustment. LOL When it was determined that we were out of compliance at my old district they adopted a curriculum (not that it great, but it was something). Chica, I am in CA and looking for ways to implement the standards. Right now I am very overwhelmed with implementing everything that is brand new to me. In this case, the OP returned to the discussion with a lengthy post to address clarification questions and suggestions presented. First, she established a positive social connection by thanking respondents for the offered resources. She continued by providing further details regarding her specific situation and constraints she faced including programs her district had adopted though she lacked textbooks and teacher manuals. The OP’s mention of her “old district” and a “not great” curriculum she had used implies her desire to improve upon what she had done previously for her current students. She continued by answering the clarification question regarding her location and affirmed she was already actively involved with the standards. The response concluded with an expression of emotion that was not present in the original post nor the C2 example. Further development of the discussion led the OP to express feelings of being overwhelmed that she did not offer initially.

**Answering Initial Question and Social Cohesion – Example 1 (TC)**

Good luck to you. You received applause because probably because these students have had you before and are happy to have you again? If that is the case, they liked the ideas
you had last year. You can still use those same ideas and improve on them or enhance them. Ideas will hit you when they hit you. They don't arrive at all if there is too much personal pressure. Don't put too much pressure on yourself. The fact that you care to want to be more creative is a good thing for you and your students, and ideas will come along. Revisit your previous lessons. Sometimes ideas just pop up in the reflection.

This respondent established a high level of social cohesion with the OP through her positive comments, encouragement, and support that permeated the entire response. She attempted to assuage the OP’s insecurities by instilling confidence for his previous ideas and assurance for his ability to think of new ideas. She answered the initial question through her suggestion of utilizing previously successful ideas and lessons and improving upon them through self-reflection. Her statements provided advice to alleviate the OP’s negative feelings – “Don’t put too much pressure on yourself” – while building up his confidence – “The fact that you care to want to be more creative is a good thing”. This response focused mainly on the emotional aspect set forth by the OP while still answering the initial question.

**Answering Initial Question – Example 2 (TC)**

There are tons of topics and ideas out there all you need to do is connect to them and discover them...

This response was a stark contrast to the one presented in TC example 1. This respondent focused on answering the initial question. Rather than provide specific resources, he simply encouraged the OP to search for resources without further information. The response did not indicate familiarity with the subject matter and could have been posted as a generic response to many different original posts.

**Answering Initial Question and Social Cohesion – Example 3 (TC)**

Thank you for your kind words, you're always so helpful. Yes, I had them last year and apparently they were happy to see me. They're really sweet kids. :) The other class, however, is going to be tough. It's our first year together but I can smell trouble already. Anyway, I had a great idea for an activity: I’m going to bring some iPods to class and the kids will have to make a music archive. :) And they're also going to simulate the stock exchange: each will have 1,000€ to invest in a company of their choice. Throughout the year, they're going to calculate their income and the value of their shares - another great tip from a TeachersCorner friend! :)
In *TC* example 3, the OP returned to the discussion to address the response presented in *TC* example 1. He expressed appreciation for the “kind words,” which he furthered furthered by stating “you’re always so helpful”. This statement implied previous contact between these two members and the OP praised the respondent for her ideas. He responded to her inquiry regarding the students’ reception of him as a teacher and added information regarding the other class mentioned in the OP. This response was interesting in that the OP gave an answer to his own initial question through an activity he had devised based on a tip from another *TC* member. The tip was not presented as part of this particular discussion, which demonstrated the OP’s involvement in or perusal of other discussion threads.

**Asking Clarification Question, Answering Initial Question, and Reasoned Further–Example 4 (TC)**

Is there a textbook for your new class? Teacher resources usually come along with them. It is a place to start. If there are no teacher resources, you can always add a creative technology project like a brochure, advertisement, newsletter, etc. that includes the content to be studied in class. Similar to *TC* example 2, this respondent did not attend to the emotional aspect of the original post but did provide a suggestion through a clarification question. The respondent further reasoned the response to address both a yes and a no potential answer to the question. The inclusion of the further reasoning provided a more complete response rather than simply posing the clarification question as a suggestion.

**Answering Clarification Question – Example 5 (TC)**

Believe it or not, we have no resources. I live and work in Africa, a small island south of Morocco. It's a poor region and now it's even poorer because of the recession. Our working conditions are terrible, we barely have any textbooks and I have to pay for EVERYTHING I use in class. As in *TC* example 3, the OP returned to respond to the clarification question. In addition, he offered personal details not present in the initial posting that might have helped elicit more relevant responses. On the other hand, it may have further limited the respondent pool by eliminating options due to cost or availability.
All three of these discussions had very specific foci that narrowed the response potential. Only the TC original poster expressed emotion in the initial post, which garnered support in some instances. Both the C2 and PT discussions resulted in information gathering through resources offered; these initial posts received concrete answers. In contrast, the TC discussion served more of a social purpose in providing reassurance to the OP that did not necessarily result in a concrete answer to the initial problem.
EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Ph.D. in Learning, Design, and Technology
   Dissertation: Exploring Discourse and Knowledge Sharing in Online Affinity Spaces for Teachers
Distance Education Certificate
Minor in Adult Education

Bloomsburg University, Bloomsburg, PA
M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction
Graduated Suma Cum Laude

Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, PA
B.A. in International Studies with Departmental Honors
B.A. in Spanish
Graduated Magna Cum Laude

PROFESSIONAL/TEACHING EXPERIENCE

SPANISH TEACHER
Blue Mountain High School, Schuylkill Haven, PA
Teach 6 sections of Spanish I, II, and III; adviser to the International Club and World Language Honor Society; conducted in-service workshops.
Member of the Data Team and Comprehensive Planning Team

TEACHING ASSISTANT
The Pennsylvania State University World Campus, University Park, PA
Instructional Design for Teachers INSYS 415
Moderated discussion forums, assessed class participation, provided detailed feedback on all assignments

GRADUATE ASSISTANT
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Conducted two major research studies that have both been presented at conferences and published; engaged in qualitative research on pre-service teachers, technology, and intercultural competence