KNOWLEDGE COLLABORATION IN NON-ORGANIC VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: THE BENEFITS, BARRIERS, AND MOTIVATIONS

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Abstract

In an effort to become more employable in an increasingly competitive market, a growing number of Japanese university English as an international language (EIL) educators are enrolling and participating in non-organic virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) created in distance education graduate studies programs. Likewise, many teachers are both creating and joining organic VCoPs to alleviate their feelings of isolation, share knowledge, and improve their professional skills. This paper reviews pertinent literature behind both types of online learning environments. The researchers report on a qualitative study that explored the benefits and barriers, as well as the perceptions of five EIL instructors towards their non-organic VCoPs. An activity theory analysis was utilized to identify the systemic complexities and tensions that are present in distance education VCoPs. The results indicated that the participants viewed a non-organic VCoP as a powerful site of professional development that could help advance their careers. Most of the participants had a positive experience and received academic and emotional support from the members of their VCoPs. However, the educators also identified several significant obstacles in their respective non-organic VCoPs. They were concerned about a lack of trust, problematic group dynamics, information overload (e.g., 'over-posting'), discussion forum obligations and time delays.

1. Introduction

Teaching English as an international language (EIL) in a Japanese higher education context can be an individualistic and isolating endeavor. Most instructors have long commutes, busy schedules, and are often segregated from colleagues in their own classrooms. In addition, the majority of Japanese university foreign language educators are employed on fixed-term temporary contracts and are considered to be "disposable commodities" by their employers (Brooks, 2015, par. 2). Many contract EIL instructors are concerned that they will be replaced by less expensive dispatch teachers from outsourcing agencies (Hawley-Nagatomo, 2016) or even robots (Hooper, 2018). In an effort to become more employable in an increasingly competitive and unstable job market, a growing number of EIL educators are enrolling and participating in non-organic virtual communities of practice (VCoP) created in distance education learning programs. Likewise, many teachers are both creating and joining organic VCoPs to not only alleviate their feelings of isolation, but to share knowledge and develop their professional competencies. This paper will review pertinent literature behind VCoPs and

illustrate the structural and motivational influences and differences between the organic and non-organic environments. The researchers then report on a qualitative study that explored the benefits and barriers, as well as the perceptions of five EIL instructors towards their respective non-organic VCoPs. An activity theory analysis was utilized to identify the systemic complexities and tensions that are present in non-organic online learning environments.

2. Purpose of the Study

Nowadays, more and more EIL educators are participating in course-based online learning communities. Although the academic literary landscape is awash with studies on communities of practice, there is a notable gap in regard to how EIL teachers conceive non-organic VCoPs. This study hopes to contribute some practical insights to the pool of knowledge and provide instructors with strategies that will help them get the most out of their non-organic online learning environments. The researchers' social constructivist orientation and critical theoretical perspective played a role in the design of the study as well as the analysis of the data. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the potential benefits of non-organic VCoPs?
2. What are the perceived barriers of non-organic VCoPs?
3. What influences the motivation and commitment of members in a non-organic VCoP?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Professional Development: Then and Now

Professional development (PD) in the EIL educational field has traditionally been 'top-down' (Johnson, 2006) and situated in face-to-face workshops, seminars, conferences and pre-packaged training courses. This type of PD approach is often "fragmented, disconnected, and irrelevant" to what goes on inside a classroom (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010, p. 77). Lantz-Andersson et al. (2017) argued that the typical sites of teacher development are problematic because they are devoid of sustained collaborative and collegial learning. Educators require continuous support and must partake in a variety of PD activities to improve their teaching skills (Tsai & Chai, 2013). The advent of Web 2.0 technologies, especially the ability for teachers to learn anytime and anywhere, has opened up an exciting new array of self-initiated PD opportunities. Nowadays, a growing body of EIL educators are utilizing digital platforms to alleviate their isolation, support informal learning, and cultivate their professional competencies.

3.2 Communities of Practice

Wenger's (1998) cutting edge concept 'communities of practice' (CoP) has been widely used to study knowledge production and learning in a myriad of different employment contexts such as English language teaching (e.g., Shi & Yang, 2014), architecture (e.g., Morton, 2012), and healthcare (e.g., Portoghese, et al., 2014). A CoP is a group of people who share a common interest or concern and seek to "deepen their knowledge and expertise" by interacting with one another on a regular basis (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). Verburg and Andriessen (2006) claimed that CoPs are ideal places to socialize and develop important professional relationships. Although a CoP was initially established as a learning theory that promoted self-empowerment and PD, Li et al. (2009) argued that this concept has been

misappropriated by administrators and used a device to make an organization more competitive and profitable.

3.3 Organic Virtual Communities of Practice: Definition

Organic VCoPs are self-organized, multifaceted structures that are constantly evolving and changing (Tsiotakis & Jimoyiannis, 2016). In this paper, we use the term 'professional learning network' interchangeably with organic VCoP. This online environment can foster self-directed, and informal learning (Trust, 2012), which McGivney (1999) defined as "learning that takes place outside a dedicated learning environment, which arises from the activities and interests of individuals or groups" (p. 1). Trust, Krutka, and Carpenter (2016) argued that these professional networks are "uniquely personalized, complex systems of interactions consisting of people, resources, and digital tools that support ongoing learning and professional growth" (p. 28). Groups such as the International Teacher Development Institute, Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), and the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) International Association have vibrant online communities that provide educators with a wide range of independent and collegial learning activities.

3.4 Organic Virtual Communities of Practice: Benefits and Barriers

EIL educators can reap significant benefits from participating in an organic VCoP. Lantz-Andersson et al. (2017) reported that social networking sites that host organic VCoPs were considered to be a type of "extended staff room" where teachers could engage in professional discussions and deal with problematic classroom issues (p. 54). Organic VCoPs are the ideal forum to share lesson plans, instructional strategies, and student work (Flanigan, 2011). They can enhance teachers' critical and reflective thinking abilities, engagement, collaborative knowledge, interpersonal relationships and provide them with emotional support (Hillen, 2014; Hou, 2015; Levine & Marcus, 2010; Macià & Gracia, 2016; Thomas, 2011).

Matzat (2013) identified two problematic issues preventing educators from having a successful organic VCoP experience. The first, 'free riding' refers to members withholding information, while at the same time relying on other's contributions. The second is the lack of trust that can impede genuine communication and the sharing of resources. This lack of open participation can often lead to "enthusiastic but inward looking cliques" (Selwyn, 2000, p. 774) where educators are inhibited about debating and criticizing colleagues online out of fear that these actions will have an adverse impact on their future career prospects (Robinson, 2016). These issues can contribute to a 'messy' and often unsatisfactory process (Selwyn, 2016), whereby an organic VCoP does little more than offer pragmatic support (Kelly & Antonio, 2016).

3.5 Non-Organic Virtual Communities of Practice: Definition

Non-organic VCoPs, also known as virtual learning environments (VLEs), have mushroomed in recent years as universities have adopted them to support the online learning practices of distance education students. They have become increasingly popular with EIL instructors who want to advance their formal learning and qualifications. A VLE is a web-based communications platform that can be used anytime and anyplace. It provides students with access to a variety of learning tools, resources, discussion boards, document sharing systems, and teacher assistance (van Raaij & Schepers, 2008). Non-organic VCoPs are spearheaded by

a tutor who controls the course content and pacing, and all students are required to complete the same tasks within a specified time period (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). The students in a distance education non-organic VCoP are focused on achieving a specific goal, namely passing instructional modules and obtaining a degree or certificate. There are three main phases in this type of learning environment: (1) formation of the community, (2) sustaining / maturing, and (3) transformation or disengagement (Lai, Pratt, Anderson, & Stigter, 2006).

3.6 Non-Organic Virtual Communities of Practice: Benefits and Barriers

In an effort to generate income and add diversity to 'virtual classrooms', university administrators are constantly recruiting students from all over the globe. Thus, non-organic VCoPs are usually heterogeneous structures that can open the door to greater intercultural learning and understanding as the members often have different ethnic backgrounds and professions (Banerjee & Firtell, 2017; Lai et al., 2006). Personal relationships can germinate in distance education VCoPs and students can provide one another with emotional support and academic assistance (Fields et al., 2016). Burhan-Horasanli and Ortaçtepe (2016) believed that the interactions within threaded discussion forums can enhance the students' collaborative reflective practices. A non-organic VCoP can ignite the fires of synergy and the collaborative knowledge generated within the group can be greater than the individual parts (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008).

A number of the obstacles that are present in organic VCoPs can also be found in course-based online learning environments. For example, information hoarding (Ardichvili, 2008), a lack of trust (Thang, Hall, Murugaiah, & Azman, 2011), and an absence of genuine rapport (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). According to Boling et al. (2012), students who feel disconnected from their instructors and classmates will have higher levels of frustration and isolation than individuals who can establish personal connections. Messages in forums can get misconstrued and time lags between original posts and replies can create friction in a non-organic VCoP (Kear, 2010). Technological tools that are not user-friendly or fail to work properly will inhibit members' contributions in a non-organic online learning environment (Thang et al., 2011). Reading and answering questions in a discussion forum can often be compulsory so students may feel pressured because it takes a tremendous amount of time, especially when there is a high volume of posts. Robson (2016) argued that 'over-posting' prevents any "real dialogue" from taking place (p. 131). Technology is never neutral and virtual social spaces are highly structured environments that are influenced by the design and functionality as well as the goals of the administrators (Robson, 2016, 2018).

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Activity Systems Analysis

This study adopted an activity systems analysis as a theoretical framework because it was the ideal tool to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities that are present in EIL instructors' distance education VCoPs. Activity theory (AT) is a cross-disciplinary model that helps researchers examine different types of human interactions and the change process of individuals within their groups (Liaw, Huang, & Chen, 2007; Mak & Lee, 2014). Sam (2012) claimed that it is an effective instrument to comprehend the "nexus of people, technology, and online life" (p. 85). According to Engeström (1987), learning occurs through an individual's interactions

with the various components in an activity system. Engeström (2001) believed that the following five principles can explain the complex interactions within an activity system: (1) The prime unit of analysis focuses on the collective not the individual, (2) Activity systems are multi-voiced and multi-layered, (3) Activity systems are shaped and transformed over time, (4) Contradictions and tensions cannot be avoided and play an essential part of the change process, and (5) Expansive transformations in an activity system are possible (pp. 136-137).

4.2 Non-organic VCoP: Activity System Model

An AT model is especially useful to illustrate the interplay amongst the various elements in a non-organic VCoP (Figure 1).
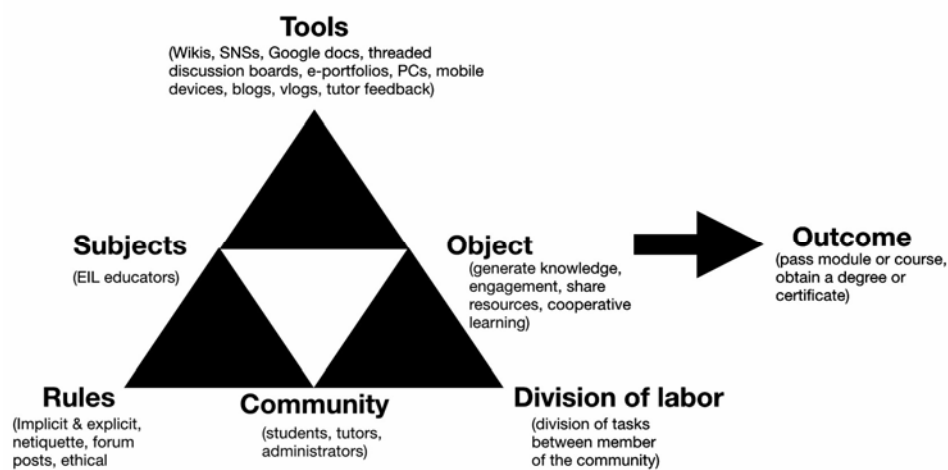

Fig. 1. Non-organic VCoP Activity System Model (adapted from Engeström, 1987)

In the above diagram, an activity is the relation between a subject and object. The tools mediate these two components and help support learning and the achievement of an objective. The learners must abide by the rules and be cognizant of their relationship with the other members of the community. In the division of labor section, various tasks are divided up by the tutors or amongst the students themselves. The different components of a non-organic VCoP are in a constant state of flux with individual members increasing or decreasing their online presence and tasks being intermittently changed which alter the knowledge dynamics of the community. Thus, it is inevitable that friction will be generated and discontinuities will exist.

5. Methodology

5.1 Case Study Approach

A case study methodology was utilized in this investigation to provide the researchers with a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences in their non-organic VCoPs. Yin (2014) tells us that a case study is a "contemporary phenomenon" that exists in a "real world context" (p. 16). Whereas Eisenhardt (1989) asserted that this methodological approach helps researchers understand the "dynamics present within single settings" (p. 534). Flyvbjerg (2006) argued that the practical insights that develop from an individual case study can be transferred to other learning contexts.

5.2 Setting and Participants

This study took place on three different university campuses in the central and southern part of Japan. The five full-time EIL instructors involved with this research project were recruited because they identified themselves as having been members of a course-based online learning community as part of a distance education graduate studies program (i.e., Masters, EdD, PhD). The participants were also active members in different types of organic VCoPs (e.g., TESOL, JALT, 'critical friends' group). Thus, the teachers were familiar with both types of online learning environments. Three of the participants were involved with two different graduate studies non-organic VCoPs. In total, the five instructors were members of eight different non-organic VCoPs. Combined the educators have 12.1 years learning experience (M=2.4 years) in a course-based VCoP. Two of the participants are female, while the other three are male. The individuals in this study were given pseudonyms and their genders randomized.

5.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data for this investigation were collected over a fourteen month period, starting in the spring of 2017, through semi-structured interviews. Creating appropriate interview questions takes time and careful consideration. The researchers' critical reflections on their own non-organic VCoP experiences filtered into the design of the interview instrument. The questions were 'test-piloted' with a colleague who was not part of the research project and several questions were modified.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and no incentives were provided. During the recruitment phase, the objectives of the project were highlighted and a discussion was held to ascertain the EIL educators' experiences in non-organic VCoPs. The participants were emailed information about the study and the questions they would be asked one week before the scheduled interview. The participants' informed consent was obtained at the start of each interview. The interviews were audio recorded and conducted in a comfortable setting. Combined, they lasted 204.2 minutes or 3.4 hours (M=40.8 minutes). Immediately after each session, the lead researcher recorded his impressions on a digital voice recorder. The audio files were transcribed in full and checked for accuracy.

The analysis of the interview transcripts and post-interview reflections generated a significant amount of data. Preliminary codes were established with the theoretical framework in mind and the process of carefully scrutinizing the transcripts generated a number of different themes. These elements were inserted into a thematic mind map, created by the software MindNode 5, to organize and reconceptualize our initial ideas. Open coding (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) was deployed to recast the data into more manageable parts. Axial coding (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) enabled us to see connections between the major concepts and reformulate the first set of codes. Fourteen distinct axial codes were identified and they highlighted the multifaceted nature of the data. Nvivo 11 for Mac, a qualitative data analysis software package, was used to organize and analyze the data.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Research Question One: Non-organic VCoPs Benefits

The first research question generated a wide range of responses from the conspicuous to the more obscure. All of the participants agreed that a non-organic VCoP is a convenient and flexible learning environment for busy EIL educators. Tom noted: '*I can study anywhere, even on a crowded train*' Likewise, Don commented: '*people are always online ... you don't need to make specific appointments or travel like you do when you meet colleagues face-to-face*'. Amy believed that the asynchronous communications were advantageous because it gave her more time to critically reflect and respond to classmates' comments. She stated: '*there's no great rush. I can think before I need to speak*'. Amy also claimed her public speaking anxiety was reduced: '*I get nervous if I need to debate someone face-to-face ... it's easier doing that online*'. These comments highlighted the flexibility and convenience of a web-based communications platform (van Raaij & Schepers, 2008). On another practical note, Sue stated: '*I expanded my possibilities of getting knowledge ... communicating with other people opened my eyes to different research ideas*'. Similarly, Jim noted: '*whenever I didn't have the right information, the other members helped out*'. Tom pointed out that his classmates regularly '*flagged good articles and interesting webinars*' in the discussion forums. Don claimed that '*most of my learning in the program came from the online discussion boards*'. These comments echoed the fact that the production of knowledge and enhanced learning opportunities are important benefits in collaborative learning environments (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Three out of the five participants established a type of symbiotic relationship or even a genuine friendship with members of their non-organic VCoPs. Jim captured this sentiment best when he said: '*most of us supported each other. It's the old cover my back and I'll cover yours*'. Sue stated: '*I developed a social rapport with several classmates ... now it's mostly on Facebook and Twitter*'. Whereas, Tom reported that he does not keep in contact with any classmates and his cohort's Facebook and WhatApp sites are '*ghost towns*'. Students often establish relationships and provide one another with academic and emotional support in distance education VCoPs (Fields et al., 2016). Sue and Tom's different experiences confirmed the findings of Lai et al. (2006), namely online communities either transform or disengage when they reach the third and final phase of development.

Sue valued the cultural rewards that were part of her non-organic VCoP. She stated: '*I learned to be more tolerant ... not jump to conclusions. I've broadened my mind working with people from different cultures*'. On a similar note, Tom said: '*it was nice communicating with people who were not English teachers ... it was good to get the viewpoints of people in different fields*'. These words echo researchers (e.g., Banerjee & Firtell, 2017; Lai et al., 2006) who claim that non-organic VCoPs are frequently heterogenous environments with students from different countries and professions. Sue also claimed to have enhanced her critical reflective abilities which reiterates the findings of Burhan-Horasanli and Ortaçtepe (2017). While four of the participants felt that intercultural communication was a positive element within their VCoPs, Jim pointed out that cultural miscommunications sometimes generated static. He stated: '*a couple of the Brits were sarcastic and some of the L2 English speakers were a bit too direct and demanding, especially during the group projects*'. While this was not anticipated, it was not surprising as online learning environments are often 'messy' sites of engagement where

messages can be misconstrued and members are hesitant to communicate their actual feelings (Kear, 2010; Probst & Borzillo, 2008; Selwyn, 2016).

6.2 Research Question Two: Non-organic VCoPs Barriers

All of the participants reported that time-related issues were a significant barrier in their non-organic VCoPs. Tom and Don pointed out the difficulties that time zones can have on an online community. Tom commented: '*the British participants interacted faster … if you were out of that time zone you often completely fell out of the threads*'. Don noted that one of his colleagues who is studying at an American university had to '*get up in the middle of the night*' to participate in synchronous video discussions and '*those chats were a huge problem for him*'. On a similar note, Amy commented: '*there's a big time lag on the discussion boards if you need information quickly*'. Jim stated: '*everyone has their own stuff going on … my job is really busy so I couldn't spend much time on the forums during the week*'. Problematic time issues were expected as time lags between posts and replies can cause friction in a non-organic VCoP (Kear, 2010).

Two of the participants felt disconnected from their classmates and instructors. Tom stated: '*it was a stressful experience … discussions were forced and dominated by certain people … it was a cliquey group … a couple of the tutors were completely invisible or 'hands-off' … I wondered who was in charge*'. Similarly, Amy noted: '*if a teacher does not participate in a discussion … how do I know if it's going in the right way*'. Sue reported that the '*slackers and lurkers*' caused '*some members to get really upset … the lazy students got blasted in the discussion forums*'. At the other end of the production continuum, Jim stated: '*a couple of guys in my* [VCoP] *would often take a stream of consciousness virtual dump at 2:00 am … I usually ignored these rambling, incoherent posts*'. Sue also had several '*prolific posters*' in her online community who were usually '*spouting off nonsense*'. 'Free-riders' (Matzat, 2013) and information hoarders (Ardichvilli, 2008) are not usually the most popular members of a non-organic VCoP and the participants' views confirmed this reality. Likewise, over-posting, the presence of cliques, a lack of trust and a disconnect amongst members are barriers that impede effective communication and harmony in an online learning group (Boling et al., 2012; Mazat, 2013; Robinson, 2016; Selwyn, 2000).

Don and Jim identified problematic technical issues as an impediment in their non-organic VCoPs. Don noted that one of his courses required to students to use a voice chat application. He stated: '*it was very difficult from a technology standpoint. You had to set your PC a certain way and many students gave up*'. Jim passionately stated: '*everything is different! A discussion forum is different from a Skype session … different from an email, different from SNSs. They all have their own unique problems*'. Tom commented: '*we had to do a group video chat … four people were talking at the same time … one person couldn't get her microphone going and the sound quality was not the greatest*'. These comments are not surprising because technological tools that fail to work properly will hinder members' contributions in an online learning environment (Thang et al., 2011).

The participants in this study reported different types of tensions and discontinuities that existed in their non-organic VCoPs. Engeström (2001) argued that these problematic elements cannot be circumvented in an activity system and they are an essential part of the change process. A case in point concerns Sue who found working with some of her classmates on a group project to be '*discouraging and frustrating*'. The friction that was generated provided her with an

opportunity to critically reflect on the situation and eventually transform into a more critically reflective practitioner. Similarly, Jim indicated that he developed '*more patience and listening skills*' even though the video chat sessions were '*extremely painful*'. Engeström's (1987, 2001) AT model is a valuable tool to study non-organic VCoPs as it not only identifies sources of tension, but it also recognizes that expansive transformations are possible.

6.3 Research Question Three: Motivation and Commitment in Non-organic VCoPs

The final research question explored the elements that influence the motivation and commitment of members in a non-organic VCoP. The participants were in full agreement that a distance education graduate studies degree would expand their career prospects. Jim stated: '*it would be a nice feather in my cap … Japanese universities are closing down, student enrolments are down and ECC eikaiwa* [private language school] *guys are working in unis … I might need to work in another country or even go back to the States*'. Sue felt that she was able to '*expand my research opportunities*' and make connections with researchers in other countries. Amy was able to connect with other EIL teachers in her VCoP and they ended up sharing teaching strategies. She stated: '*one of my classmates gave me some good ideas for an ER* [extensive reading] *class*'. These comments reiterate the fact that a growing number of Japanese university EIL instructors are concerned about their future job prospects (Hawley-Nagatomo, 2016; Hooper, 2018) and believe online learning communities can help them develop important professional relationships and skills (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2017; Verburg & Andriessen, 2006).

Tom felt that trust and genuine rapport were essential qualities that impact a person's motivation to participate in an organic VCoP. He stated: '*I never completed trusted everyone in my group … some of the supportive words were obviously fake … certain people seemed to be trying to curry favor*'. Tom also commented: '*the peer editing thing was helpful but it really depended on who you got … a couple of my classmates just gave my work a quick glance*'. Whereas, Don felt that his VCoP was a '*safe environment*' where students were '*free to make mistakes and didn't need to worry about being criticized*'. Jim believed that '*more video discussions would have helped people create a better bond*'. He also noted the following: '*a couple of tutors made vlogs that were really popular … I preferred them to reading long posts*'. These comments reflect the fact that students who trusted the members of their community and felt like the communication was genuine were less isolated and more motivated to participate in a non-organic VCoP (Matzat, 2013; Thang et al., 2011).

The obligations and organization of distance education discussion forums were other elements that factored into the participants' motivation and commitment to their online groups. Don stated: '*many people were just trying to hit their quotas* [posts & replies] *and not saying very much … it would have been better if students had more freedom*'. Jim said: '*the first few months were horrible … it was impossible to really communicate with anyone … twenty-five complete strangers*'. On a similar note, Sue felt that her group '*should have been smaller … around ten people … it's hard to control thirty* [students] *… people kept repeating the same things*'. Three of the participants met members of their VCoPs face-to-face at academic conferences or during mandatory residential sessions. Don felt that a '*blended approach is the way to go… students will be a lot more engaged*'. Tom captured this sentiment with these words: '*the residentials were great! … you got a feeling for who's who … some people's online personas were completely different from who they are in real life*'.

7. Recommendations

Actively participating in a distance education non-organic VCoP is something that requires vigilance and constant effort. Several recommendations and strategies on how to approach interaction and collaboration within a VCoP follow. These are based on the qualitative interviews and the researchers' own experiences in this type of online learning environment.

7.1 Be Present

Even if you don't have knowledge to share or can't answer a question, post something related to the topic to establish a presence. This will give others in a similar situation confidence to contribute to the discussion. As soon as you have something to say, make a post. If you wait too long, the discussion will pass you by. Let the other members of the community know if you are temporarily unavailable and when they might expect you back.

7.2 Communicate Clearly and Concisely

Avoid idiomatic expressions and cultural references. These items can create misunderstandings and often require L2 English speakers to put in extra time to fill in the communication gaps. They can also lead to similar language users forming cliques within an online community. Initiate communication, keep your posts succinct, don't over-post, and keep replies on topic. Everyone in a non-organic VCoP is busy and will not appreciate reading a plethora of long-winded, rambling posts.

7.3 Be Flexible and Open-minded

You may be required to work on collaborative learning tasks with members from your community. This requires patience and flexibility to other students' learning styles, cultural knowledge, and time commitments. Embrace the opportunity to develop your intercultural communication skills.

7.4 Expect Problematic Time and Technological Issues

There will be an unavoidable time delay whenever students living in different parts of the world communicate with one another in an asynchronous online setting. There will also be occasional hiccups with the technological tools within a non-organic VCoP activity system.

7.5 Be Genuine and Grateful

Be open, transparent and honest with your online personality. Holding back will set a precedence for hesitation to take part. Be enthusiastic and show gratitude if someone highlights a useful resource or provides you with helpful feedback.

7.6 Create an 'Unofficial' Social Space

Tutors and program overseers can closely follow all of the communications within a distance education online forum. Therefore, students should set up a separate online space to discuss any problematic issues that they may experience with a course or instructor. This 'unofficial'

site can provide students with emotional support as well as help them to foster and maintain social relationships with their classmates.

8. Limitations

There were notable limitations to this study. First, the sample size was small and it relied predominantly on data from six semi-structured interviews. Other researchers may want to expand the sample size and include EIL instructors from other countries. They should also consider utilizing focus group interviews so that the participants can cross-check and validate their own experiences. Finally, a mixed-methods approach that merged qualitative interview data with quantitative data from an online survey instrument would have enhanced the rigor of this investigation.

9. Conclusions

The findings from this study indicate that most of the participants generally held positive views about non-organic VCoPs and saw them as effective forums to share knowledge, improve their professional skills, and become more employable in a competitive job market. At the other end of the learning spectrum, they also identified a number of issues such as a lack of trust, problematic group dynamics, information overload, discussion forum obligations, and time delays that can hinder distance education graduate studies students from fully participating in an online group. Without question, a non-organic VCoP is a highly complex learning environment that can generate a certain amount of discomforting tension. It is hoped that this small-scale research project will help EIL instructors become more cognizant of the challenges and rewards that exist in a non-organic VCoP.

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