A WebCT Discussion Forum during a TESL Practicum: Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Learning

Susan Parks
Université Laval

Abstract

Within teacher education programs, the use of discussion forums offers potential for creating learning communities whereby participants can negotiate meaning and engage in knowledge construction (Lock, 2006; Murphy, 2000). To this end, the present article draws on the findings of a larger research project which focused on a discussion forum activity carried out with pre-service English second language (ESL) teachers during a practicum in Francophone schools in the province of Quebec. The specific question addressed in this article is: How do pre-service teachers view the discussion forum activity in relation to the practicum experience? Data were gathered using a survey questionnaire adapted from Arnold and Ducate (2006) and semi-structured interviews. Of particular note with respect to the results is that students who participated in the discussion forum perceived the exchanges as useful in terms of their professional development as teachers. As few studies have focused on the use of discussion forums in conjunction with a practicum, areas for future research have been identified.

Résumé

Dans le cadre des programmes de formation des enseignants, le recours au forum de discussion offre la possibilité de créer des communautés d'apprentissage où les participants peuvent participer à la négociation du sens et à la construction des savoirs (Lock, 2006; Murphy, 2000). Selon cette optique, le présent article se situe par rapport aux résultats découlant d'un projet de recherche plus vaste qui impliquait l'utilisation d'un forum de discussion par des stagiaires d'anglais, langue seconde lors d'un stage dans les écoles francophones au Québec. Plus précisément, cet article répond à la question de recherche suivante : Comment les stagiaires perçoivent-ils l'utilité d'un forum de discussion dans le cadre de leur stage? Les données ont été cueillies au moyen d'un questionnaire adapté d'un outil conçu par Arnold et Ducate (2006) et d'entretiens semi dirigés. En ce qui concerne les résultats, un premier constat a trait au fait que les stagiaires ont perçu leur participation dans le forum de discussion comme étant un moyen utile à leur développement professionnel comme enseignants. Puisque peu d'études à date ont exploré l'utilité du forum de discussion dans le cadre d'un stage, des domaines pour les recherches futures ont été identifiés.

**A WebCT Discussion Forum during a TESL Practicum: Pre-service Teachers'
Perceptions of Learning**

Introduction

Within teacher education, whether mainstream or second language, recent criticisms have centered on the need to better understand how teachers learn their craft (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2006). In this regard, a major issue pertains to the traditional theory/practice dichotomy whereby the assumption is that student teachers who have been exposed to various pedagogical approaches in university courses will be able to transfer them to the school settings where they will eventually teach. As pointed out by Johnson (2006), one of the challenges for teacher education programs is to create conditions which would enable teachers to relate theoretical knowledge to their own experiential knowledge in a process of professional development which, drawing on Freire (1970), is best referred to as *praxis*. With respect to this challenge, the advent of digital technologies, offers potential for creating learning communities whereby participants can negotiate meaning and engage in knowledge construction (Lock, 2006; Mitchell, 2003; Murphy, 2000; Warschauer, 2002). Specifically with respect to the practicum, this option can be particularly attractive as it can bring together participants who are geographically dispersed and not able to meet in face-to-face sessions (Sussex & White, 1996). As well, it opens up the possibility for university instructors who are not normally in charge of students during a practicum, but whose courses are concurrent with one, to become involved.

Although within second language teacher education, a few studies have focused on courses which have integrated computer-mediated communication (CMC) into their coursework (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Kamhi-Stein, 2000a; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003; Potts, 2005; Sengupta, 2001), those which have involved a practicum component are scarce. As it is during the practicum that student teachers confront the realities of the school environment, this moment is of particular interest in terms of exploring issues related to praxis. To this end, the present article draws on the findings of a larger research project which focused on a discussion forum activity carried out with pre-service English second language (ESL) teachers during a practicum in Francophone schools in the province of Quebec. The specific research question to be addressed in this article is: How do pre-service teachers view the discussion forum activity in relation to their practicum experience? Following a brief review of the literature, I will discuss how this study was carried out, report on the results pertaining to the targeted research question, and discuss relevant issues.

Review of the Literature

Within teacher education, studies which involve CMC use are generally concerned with demonstrating the nature of the interaction amongst participants (i.e., the social dimension of the interaction) and whether or not the anticipated benefits with respect to knowledge construction are in evidence (i.e., the cognitive dimension). Determining whether interaction is actually taking place amongst participants is essential as this factor is acknowledged as being particularly important for building community and keeping participants engaged in the task (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). Certain studies have also shown that the number of messages is not necessarily indicative of meaningful interaction as the latter may function as isolated posts (Henri, 1995; Pawan et al., 2003). As with any technological tool it is important not to confuse outcomes with the tool itself, understanding the contextual factors related to how the tool is used are also of interest (Haas, 1996; Huot, Hamers, Lemonnier, & Parks, 2009).

Specifically, as pertains to second language teacher education, a limited number of studies have explored the nature of the interaction in courses which use asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC), i.e., tools such as the discussion forum or email which involve delayed, as opposed to real-time, exchanges (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Kamhi-Stein, 2000a; Pawan et al., 2003; Potts, 2005; Sengupta, 2001). Of these, the study conducted by Kamhi-Stein (2000a) with students enrolled in a TESOL methods course in an American university compared patterns of interaction in a whole-class, face-to-face setting with that of a WebCT discussion forum. The analysis revealed that during the WebCT exchanges students contributed a substantially larger number of turns than did the instructor. Whereas classroom discussions reflected a typical three-part structure of initiation, response and evaluation, in which the instructor played a large role, those online were largely student-student interactions that reflected a high degree of peer support and collaboration. In contrast to the display questions which predominated in the whole class discussions, students in the online exchanges appeared to be engaged in more authentic negotiations of meaning. Within this latter context, the teacher's role was reduced to the point where the comments she posted tended to be largely ignored by students. Interviews also revealed that participation in the discussion forum exposed participants to multiple voices and perspectives, including the views of those who had not expressed themselves in face-to-face discussions.

Another study of particular relevance to the present study is that by Arnold and Ducate (2006) which involved pre-service language teachers enrolled in methodology courses at two different American universities. Analysis of the posts revealed evidence of knowledge construction (referred to as cognitive presence). In contrast to certain studies (Pawan et al., 2003), the research also demonstrated a high degree of interaction amongst participants (referred to as social presence). The textual analysis of the posts concorded with the results of a survey intended to determine how the students perceived their participation in this activity.

Of those rare studies which have examined ACMC in relation to a practicum experience, the research has tended to be descriptive and anecdotal (Kamhi-Stein, 2000b;

Schalgal, Trathen, & Blanton, 1996; Yildirim & Kiraz, 1999). Yildirim and Kiraz's (1999) study was conducted in a context where a lack of familiarity with the technical aspects of the email exchange proved problematic. Schalgal et al.'s (1996) study involved a 1-year case study which investigated how student teachers and their university supervisors used email to exchange ideas. Results of the analysis suggest that these student teachers were engaged in substantive reflection on topics related to their teaching, and learned from their peers' experiences. To date, as far as I can determine, only Kamhi-Stein's study (2002b) involved a practicum experience in conjunction with discussion forum technology, specifically WebCT. Kamhi-Stein focused on five student teachers, two mentor teachers, and a university supervisor. Results revealed that the forum provided the student teachers with the opportunity to discuss their immediate concerns, as well as to give and receive feedback on their practicum experiences.

A review of studies involving students in second language teacher education programs reveals that ACMC tools have potential for fostering reflective and collaborative modes of interaction. However, to date few studies have been carried out, particularly with regard to the use of discussion forums in conjunction with a practicum. As theses latter studies tend to be descriptive and anecdotal, in-depth analyses are needed in order to more precisely gauge the usefulness of such tools with regard to both the cognitive and social dimensions of the interaction.

Method

Participants

The students who participated in the present study were fourth year students enrolled in a four-year undergraduate TESL program in a Francophone university in the province of Quebec. As the official language of Quebec is French, ESL is taught as a school subject in the elementary and secondary grades of the Francophone school system. Within the context of their studies, the TESL students were involved in practicums of varying length during each of the four years of their program. In each of the sessions in which they did a practicum, they were also enrolled in a TESL pedagogy course. The most demanding practicum took place for a period of 12 weeks in the fall session of the fourth year, when students were assigned to teach ESL in the elementary or secondary grades and had to be available at their schools on a full-time basis. Concurrent with this practicum, students were enrolled in a one-credit online TESL seminar of which I was the instructor. This seminar, which included a WebCT discussion forum, was the course targeted for the present research project.

Prior to the online seminar, the TESL students had been involved in other WebCT discussion forums, so the technology was very familiar to them. The online seminar concurrent with their last practicum was intended to enable students who were geographically dispersed, to share their experiences and solicit the help and advice of their peers during the period of their practicum. Although at this time students had the opportunity to interact with other student teachers in the schools to which they had been

assigned, normally the latter would have been in areas other than TESL; students were also being supervised by university personnel who had taught in the mainstream Francophone school system but for the most part had no training as ESL teachers or language teachers in general.

As the instructor of this course, I considered that the discussion forum provided an interesting means to enable the TESL student teachers to touch base with peers in their own discipline as well as to exchange in English on topics relevant to their teaching (particularly as the practicum requirements were completed in French). I also considered that this activity could be useful in helping students bridge what they could at times perceive as a gap between recommended practices in their pedagogy courses and the realities of teaching in school contexts. In this regard I thought that the forum could help sensitize students to the diversity of practices in the school system. In other words, even if some students may not have had the opportunity to observe certain teaching strategies such as cooperative learning, other students who had, would report on them, often in positive terms.

Within the online TESL seminar, the discussion forum was part of a broader assignment involving written reports which were completed once the practicum had ended. Specifically, as pertained to the discussion forum, students had to complete a minimum of eight posts which were supposed to be spread out over the practicum period from September through November. Topics of relevance (e.g., classroom management, use of English vs. French, cooperative learning, use of information and communication technologies [ICTs]) were suggested on the WebCT discussion forum. The participants chose from amongst the proposed topics in accordance with their particular interests or concerns. Students who were having problems and wished to solicit a rapid response from colleagues could post in an emergency help line section. Participation in the discussion forum counted for 30% of the final grade for the course and the criteria for evaluating the posts included the content,   language use, references, length of entries, and the ability to ask thought-provoking questions.

Data Collection

Since the researcher had also been the instructor of the online seminar which took place in the fall, data for the research project were collected at the start of the winter session 2008 to avoid conflict of interest. At that time, the marks for the seminar had been submitted and the researcher did not teach these students in any of her courses. The present paper draws on data from two sources: 1) a survey and 2) semi-structured interviews.

   Survey.
   A questionnaire (see Appendix A) was administered in order to determine how students perceived the discussion forum component of the online seminar. The questionnaire was largely adapted from one designed by Arnold and Ducate (2006) for use with students involved in a discussion forum activity in the context of a foreign

language methodology course. The Arnold and Ducate questionnaire consisted of items intended to gather information about the nature of the interaction taking place in the discussion forum in terms of its cognitive and social aspects. With respect to the Likert-scale items, 10 of the 12 were adopted verbatim or with minor changes. However, as in contrast to Arnold and Ducate's research, the present study involved a discussion forum which took place during a practicum, 9 additional items were added to better examine issues particular to this context. These included items pertaining to students' perception of functioning in a discussion forum as opposed to a face-to-face setting, whom students thought should be included as members of the discussion forum community, and the degree to which the discussion forum could be useful for helping them cope with the stress frequently engendered by a practicum. In addition to the latter, two items were included to focus on students' perceptions of the degree to which they had participated in the discussion forum as well as three open-ended questions adapted from the original study. Forty of the 52 students who participated in the online seminar agreed to complete the survey. The anonymous survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Interviews.

Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) were used as a follow-up to the questionnaires in order to explore the students' personal experiences of the WebCT discussion forum in greater detail. Five students agreed to participate in these interviews. All interviews were recorded on a digital tape recorder and subsequently transcribed using Dragon Naturally Speaking software.

Results

For the purpose of the present paper, survey results will be presented. These will be supplemented, as relevant, by interview excerpts. With respect to the questionnaire used for the survey, items have been regrouped so the results can be discussed in terms of the cognitive and social aspects of the online interaction. Although for the survey a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree*) was used, for ease of presentation the results are recombined in function of a 3-point scale: *agree, neutral, disagree*. To ensure anonymity, all names referred to in the interview excerpts are pseudonyms.

Cognitive Aspects

As reflected in Table 1, students generally agreed that the discussion forum promoted learning. In response to question 2, 62.5% confirmed that they had learned things in the discussion forum that they would not have understood on their own. With respect to question 10, an even higher percentage, 70%, agreed that the discussion forum gave them good teaching ideas and that they implemented them during their practicum or planned to do so when they would start teaching. Similarly, 70% agreed that the

discussion forum helped them to look at topics from perspectives they would not have considered on their own (question 6).

Also noteworthy in regard to the cognitive dimension is the fact that a substantial number of students considered the discussion forum to have a facilitating effect in regard to the knowledge construction process. Thus, 52.5% (question 3) confirmed that the discussion forum enabled them to ask more questions and 45% (question 11) that they had participated more than normally would have been the case in face-to-face settings. As well, 50% considered that the process of writing about topics online helped them to better understand them. In other words, half the students perceived writing as a heuristic for learning, a function which has been previously reported on in research pertaining to the cognitive benefits of writing (Emig, 1977; Johnstone, 1994).

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Participation in Discussion Forum: Cognitive Aspects

Questions (Q) related to cognitive aspects	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %
Q2 I learned things in the discussion forum that I would not have figured out on my own.	62.5	22.5	15
Q3 The electronic discussion forum gave me the opportunity to ask questions I would not have asked in class discussions.	52.5	5.0	42.5
Q5 The process of talking/writing through topics in the discussion forum helped me to understand them better.	50.0	22.5	27.5
Q6 Exchanging with other students in the discussion forum helped me to look at topics from perspectives I would not have considered on my own.	70.0	5.0	25.0
Q10 This discussion forum gave me good ideas for teaching that I implemented during my practicum or plan to implement when I start teaching.	70.0	12.5	17.5
Q11 I participated more in the discussion forum than I normally would in a whole class session.	45	22.5	32.5

With respect to the interviews, all five students confirmed they had used ideas taken from the WebCT discussion forum during their practicum and/or had downloaded ideas for activities or projects for their future teaching. As an example, Julia, who at the time of the interview had a contract as a substitute teacher, mentioned that every time she had students move their seats, she thought of the discussions about this she had read on the WebCT discussion forum. For his part, Mike pointed out that in addition to ideas for activities, discussions on the WebCT discussion forum had helped him become more aware of how the latter were relevant to the new ESL teaching program which teachers were being asked to implement. He also stressed that the discussion forum had been particularly useful in helping him understand how he could deal with specific problems he was having with students or aspects of school functioning more generally:

Mike: (…) not just activities but ways of working with the students -- how do you implement certain rules? how do you work with students with learning disabilities and getting a better sense of what the school life is? how do you live in a school? how do you interact with the other teachers? -- so we can exchange on that.
Researcher: and you found that useful?
Mike: yes. more then let's say oh why I did this project and it worked fine, OK, the topics that

were more interesting for me were -- I had this problem and I solved it this way, I had this kid -- well he's been diagnosed with X-Y-Z -- it gives you a sense -- well I have a kid like that, now I understand why he's acting like this, and I can adapt my way of working with them because now I know.

Researcher: so that's the part that you found most useful, looking at a certain problem?

Mike: yes, in finding ways -- I can take something from somebody else's experience and put it in mine and see if it works better or I can solve a problem that I'm having because somebody else had it and did X,Y and Z.

In the case of Julia, the discussion forum exchanges helped her realize that the way to teach was "not so cut and dry":

(…) before the forum I basically thought that things were cut and dry and very obvious -- it works like this -- but I realized in this last forum that things just don't work like that (…) it allows you to realize you are not alone in what you are living, that other people are living similar things, different things but you can all help each other, so some of the things that people were talking about I was like geezz, that's strange -- how can that be happening? -- but you go ahead and you see the comments on it and you say OK, OK that can happen to me as well (…) so yes it helped me, it sort of opened up my mind to what teaching could be, what the possibilities were -- positive and negative.

For his part, Paul, too, emphasized that the discussion forum had made him more aware of the diversity of teaching practices and how contextual factors could influence outcomes:

Paul: (…) I find it's insightful to see -- well these guys are doing this but we're doing this but not in the same way, why for that person it worked and for me it didn't -- find the reason, it's not only me the problem, it didn't work for them either, maybe it's because the students are not ready for it, for this type of activity, it gives you a (pause) --

Researcher: it gives you a different perspective?

Paul: yeah. it makes you see what's going on and how different -- not one school is the same -- so even if you are teaching secondary three (Grade 9) regular classes and you have the same book, the same program, and you do the same project, you might not have the same results, it might not work, it might go really great, go just great, see what are the values that makes something work for one person and not for the other one.

Social Aspects

As reflected in Table 2, questions related to the social aspects of the discussion forum activity are reorganized into two subgroups: affective and sense of community.

Table 2: Students' Perceptions of Participation in Discussion Forum: Social Aspects

Affective aspects	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %
Q1 I enjoyed participating in the electronic discussion forum of this course.	42.5	30	27.5
Q4 I would enjoy participating in such a discussion forum again.	35	30	35
Q7 The discussion forum provided less anxiety and a more relaxed environment than classroom discussion.	55	10	35

Q8 I would have like this course better without the discussion forum.	32.5	25	42.5
Q12 I felt my classmates were interested in my posts.	27.5	42.5	30
Q13 I was interested in reading my classmates' posts.	62.5	22.5	15
Sense of community			
Q9 I experienced a sense of community with the other students in my group.	47.5	20	32.5
Q14 I felt I was able to help out classmates who were experiencing problems during their practicum.	47.5	32.5	20
Q15 I would like to see the following people have access to the discussion forum:			
a. cooperating teachers	35	15	50
b. ESL teachers (other than cooperating teachers)	52.5	15	32.5
c. university supervisors	35	17.5	47.5
Q16 I would like the course instructor to participate more in the discussions.	47.5	40	12.5
Q17 I found my practicum stressful.	67.5	5	42.5
If you answered *agree* or *strongly agree*, please answer questions (a) and (b):			
a. The discussion forum helped me deal with the stress.	25.9	14.8	59.3
b. I got help with my problem(s) via the discussion forum.	37	22.2	40.7

Note. Percentages for 17 (a) and (b) were calculated based on the raw figures for those who agreed they had found the practicum stressful.

Affective Aspects

The affective aspects refer to those items intended to gauge the degree to which students were interested in reading the posts or enjoyed taking part in the online discussions. First, with respect to interest level, a substantial number (62.5%) indicated that they were interested in reading their peers' posts (question 13). Nevertheless, as evidenced in question 14, students were much less sure as to whether their classmates were interested in reading the posts they had personally written. In this regard, only 27.5% agreed with this statement whereas 42.5% were neutral. As revealed by an examination of the posts, even though students identified problems and gave advice, those who originally posed the problem did not always thank participants for advice received or report back on whether or not the advice was used. In the interviews, Vicky was one student who stated having made a point of thanking her peers for advice received but said she would have appreciated more feedback with respect to her own suggestions. Another student, Paul, considered that such feedback was less necessary. However, he also noted that he had gotten feedback on his postings from students outside the forum when they met in classes after the practicum.

With respect to whether or not students enjoyed participating in the discussion forum, slightly more than 70% indicated that they either enjoyed the experience or were neutral (question 1). Similar views were also expressed with respect to the desire to have the course continue with a discussion forum component and willingness to participate in

such a forum in future courses (questions 8 and 4, respectively). Of those students who said they did not enjoy the discussion forum (i.e., 11 out of 40), a closer examination of the data suggests they were amongst those who in fact participated only marginally. With respect to question 20 (see Appendix A), all six students who had indicated their participation had been below average were in this group. Similarly, in regard to question 21, which aimed at gauging students' perception of the way they posted in terms of frequency (see Appendix A), almost 70% of those who had stated that they had participated only at the beginning and end (5 out of 9) or only at the end (all 4) were of this number. In terms of understanding this lack of participation, the comments from the open-ended questions of the questionnaire suggest that one reason pertains to the stress and workload related to the practicum.

Community Aspects

As shown in Table 2, almost half the students (47.5%) agreed they had experienced a sense of community with the other students in their group. During the interviews, students were asked to explain how they viewed the notion of community. Although the notion of collaboration appeared to be a common element, metaphors and/or particular emphases as to what was considered as important, tended to vary. For her part, Julia emphasized the fact that what facilitated the exchange within the WebCT community was their shared vision of pedagogy which was the result of being students in the same program:

> (…) for me it has a lot to do with the fact that within that community we've had the same training so when we talk about *scaffolding* we know what it is, if I talk about *scaffolding* to teachers I'm working with right now, they don't know what it is, even if I use the word in French – *échafaudage* -- they don't know what it is, so you are taking the long way around, just the fact that you don't have the same vocabulary can cause a problem (…) because when you are a young teacher and experience-wise and you come up with these words, it really puts a kink in the conversation, but when you're on WebCT, we all have the same vocabulary so it allows us to go further into our discussion and really go to the heart of the matter and look for solutions and it really creates community.

Mike compared community to a *brotherhood* and emphasized the non-judgmental aspect:

> (…) a brotherhood, being able to speak with people, not having the sense of, if I say this I am going to be judged and it also -- not all of them but a lot of them you can count on -- I have this problem -- can you help me out? -- it's the sense of brotherhood like in a family, there's somebody there that you can call on if you need it, for sure it's not everybody but you know there's someone.

As was the case with Mike, Vicky too stressed the non-judgmental aspect of community as particularly relevant to her personal experience in the WebCT discussion forum. Vicky contrasted the sense of freedom to express herself she felt in the forum to the more guarded approach she had to take in the school context, due to fears related to evaluation and competition amongst student teachers:

> (…) when we are in the schools under the supervision of the same teacher, sometimes competitive feelings might hinder sharing all the information that we could share (…) in this forum there was a true sense of community because there was no competitive feeling, just sharing and helping or freely getting information without being hesitant of any negative reaction...the school environment is very sensitive, people judge you for many things and sometimes you are not really yourself because you are afraid of evaluations, but this forum it gives you freedom, freedom of expression (little laugh), true freedom of expression, you are free to ask for answers.

Paul expressed the idea that an important aspect of a successful community pertained to the commitment of the members involved: "I think it's a bunch of people helping each other, as long as everybody pitches in (…) and nobody's free riding (…) and then everybody will learn from that community and I really, really believe in that for sure". For Paul the importance attached to community was also related to his previous work experience where as a manager he had used himself as a model to demonstrate the importance of getting people to work together. Paul also stated that once he was teaching, he might try to set up a discussion forum of his own with six or seven teachers who like him would be interested in exchanging and sharing their ideas. Finally, for Amanda, her point of reference for defining community was the English community, which in the Province of Quebec has minority status: "I'm comparing it to the English community… because I'm from the English community – it's like really tightly knit there -- well that's why I'm saying a sense of community, I look for people who I know, like people I don't know or I don't recognize I'm not really (pause), *je ne suis pas portée* (I'm not inclined) to go see them." Of particular relevance to Amanda was that the discussion forum was carried out with students whom she had gotten to know over the four years of her university studies: "we're a close year -- the fourth year -- we communicate a lot and we go out and stuff like that". Amanda mentioned in this regard that when she went on the discussion forum, she tended to seek out messages written by people she knew well (a practice which contrasted with certain other students who selected in function of the topic).

   As to whether other individuals should be part of the WebCT discussion forum community, over half (52.5%) thought the participation of ESL teachers who were *not* their cooperating teachers could be useful. Approximately half the students rejected the idea that those involved with them in a supervisory capacity (i.e., the cooperating teachers, 50% against; university supervisors, 47.5% against) be given access. Of the students interviewed, Vicky was particularly sensitive to this latter point. According to her, the participation of those in charge of supervising students in the schools would put a damper on the conversation, since they would be less inclined to discuss their problems in depth. She feared that exposure of problems by students could be perceived as weaknesses by supervisors and be used to lower their grades. Finally, with respect to the course instructor's participation in the discussions, although 40% of students were neutral in regard to this statement, almost half (47.5%) stated they would like the instructor to participate more.

   As shown in Table 2 (question 17), a majority of students (67.5%) stated that they had found the practicum stressful. Of these, approximately 25% agreed that the

discussion forum was useful in helping them cope with the stress whereas more than a third (37%) confirmed that they had gotten help with their problems. This figure also lends support to those students (47.5%) who felt that they could help their classmates who were experiencing problems during their practicum (question 14). The interviews revealed that students who were experiencing stress dealt with it in different ways. Although both Amanda and Julia were in this category, Amanda confirmed that she had sought solace by talking with her friends and parents. By contrast, Julia who had had nobody to talk to considered the discussion forum to be very useful in this regard.

Discussion

In the section below, results pertaining to the survey and interview data are discussed in terms of the cognitive, community and affective aspects.

Cognitive Aspects

The survey results and interview data support those studies which in various ways have shown that activities involving discussion forums can serve to promote learning (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Kamhi-Stein, 2000a, 2000b; Pawan et al., 2003; Sengupta, 2001). More specifically with respect to ACMC practicum-related research (Kamhi-Stein, 2000a; Schalgal, Trathen, & Blanton, 1996; Yildirim & Kiraz, 1999), the results support earlier observations that such tools enable students to share ideas on teaching, discuss problems relevant to their immediate teaching contexts, and help them become more aware of different perspectives. As the only other previous study involving a TESL practicum and WebCT technology, Kamhi-Stein (2000a), was limited to a small group of which five were students, the present study provides evidence of how such tools can be used with large groups of students. Indeed, larger numbers can be viewed as an asset as the discussion of activities and problems draws on a wider range of experiences. From an organizational perspective, the identification of general discussion topics at the onset of the activity is an important strategy to help students identify relevant interlocutors.

The present study also contributes to those ACMC studies conducted in a variety of contexts (Kamhi-Stein, 2000a; Warschauer, 1997), which report that the online environment can foster greater equality in participation than the traditional classroom. More specifically, in the present research, over half the students reported that they had asked questions they would not have asked in face-to-face class sessions and 45% reported greater participation.

Community Aspects

As previously indicated, almost half the students (47.5%) stated that they felt a sense of community with the other students in their group. Although in answer to a similar question Arnold and Ducate (2006) reported a figure of 57%, it is important to note that the contexts for the interaction were quite different. In this latter study,

involving discussions related to coursework, students exchanged within small groups composed of five students and the groups remained stable for four of the five sessions. By contrast, within the present study, although students knew each other quite well due to previous years of study together, they were free to post and interact as they wished, based on their interests. In contrast to previous studies, this study, via interviews, also sought to elucidate how students themselves perceived the notion of community. Although all the students' definitions appeared to acknowledge the role of collaboration, the metaphors evoked brought to light varied points of view in terms of what they valued. As students' conception of community could have implications for the way they participate (or fail to participate) in online discussions, this notion merits attention in future research.

        Although previous practicum-related studies involved university supervisors (Kamhi-Stein, 2000a; Schalgal, Trathen, & Blanton, 1996; Yildirim & Kiraz, 1999), the present study offers an instance where the instructor was not involved in this role. As suggested herein, the use of ICT technologies opens up new possibilities in terms of who might be involved in practicum-related work, and how those communities might be constituted (Lock, 2006). In the present context, this option enabled interaction amongst ESL specialists within an institutional context where this was not otherwise possible due to the way the practicums were organized. An inquiry into who might be invited to participate in the discussion forum revealed a reticence amongst students to include those who were involved in the practicum in a supervisory capacity (i.e., cooperating teachers and university supervisors) due to fears related to evaluation and the subsequent need to speak less freely about problems. This viewpoint serves to underscore how interactivity or reflexivity (Hammersley, 1983) is mediated by power relations and how the inclusion or exclusion of individuals is instrumental to the form the community might take and how it might be perceived by its members.

        With respect to the instructor's role, it is noteworthy that instructors have frequently preferred to limit their participation in discussion forum conversations (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Kamhi-Stein, 2000a; Potts, 2005), ostensibly to better enable students to voice their concerns and gain confidence in their ability to express themselves. This, too, has been my position. Having been involved in discussion forums for several years, I have noticed, like Kamhi-Stein (2000a) that students also tend to ignore the instructor's postings. As well, I have often been personally impressed by the relevance of the advice offered, which unlike that which the instructor can offer, is grounded in students' immediate experiences of their teaching contexts. However, as shown by the survey results almost half the students would have liked the instructor to participate more in the discussions. As certain researchers have suggested that the instructor be more actively involved in course-related discussion forums (Anderson et al., 2001; Pawan et al., 2003; Arnold & Ducate, 2006), further research is required to more thoroughly determine how the instructor might be optimally involved in practicum-related contexts as well as how students might perceive the instructor role as well as their own role as learners (Murphy, 2000).

        As observed in other studies (e.g., MacDonald, 1993; Paulus & Scherff, 2008), a majority of students in this study found their practicum stressful. As one resource

amongst others (e.g., university supervisors, school staff), the present study suggests that the WebCT discussions can be somewhat effective in helping students deal with their stress and find solutions to their problems. However, it would also appear that a more successful resolution of such problems would require a concerted approach by all the stakeholders involved in the practicum.

Affective Aspects

Although over 70% of students stated they either enjoyed the discussion forum activity or were neutral, almost a third said they had not enjoyed it and appeared to participate only marginally. As the careful structuring of assignments can influence participation (Pawan et al., 2003), more attention might be given as how requirements are stipulated. Although for the assignment of the present study, dates for the first and last posts were stipulated, it was left up to students to decide when to post the remaining items. To provide more structure, deadlines might be given for each of the required posts (e.g., obligatory posts on a weekly basis); the dates for posts could be identified on the WebCT calendar page and, if considered necessary, reminders sent out to all students via a ListServ. As one of the technical features of the WebCT platform makes it possible to keep track of how many posts have been done by each participant, the instructor could check this out and, as necessary, send reminders and/or messages of encouragement to specific individuals.

Although a substantive number of students stated they enjoyed reading their peers' posts (62.5%), they were much less sure as to whether this was the case of peers who had read what they had personally posted (27.5%). In order to attempt to counter this, the instructor might point out in the assignment that peers appreciate receiving feedback. Indeed, such reporting back might be viewed as basic politeness and presented as an aspect of Netiquette, which, within the virtual environment, it might be necessary to explicitly draw students' attention to. As a further incentive, reporting back on problems might be tied in more closely with the evaluation criteria. In addition, as the perceived usefulness of digital technology may also be related to participants' beliefs about learning (Murphy, 2000), more attention in future studies needs to be given as to how such beliefs might influence the degree and nature of the online participation.

Conclusion

This study has focused on an analysis of how pre-service teachers viewed a WebCT discussion forum activity in relation to a practicum experience. Of particular note is the pre-service teachers' favourable response to the use of this activity as a means to promote learning (i.e., aspects related to the cognitive dimension). As few studies within second language teacher education have involved the use of practicum-related discussion forums, additional research is needed to explore how this tool might be best used, and how pre-service teachers might perceive its usefulness in a variety of contexts. Based on

this study, a number of areas need to be given more careful scrutiny: how pre-service teachers construe the notion of community, how their views on learning may affect their participation in a discussion forum, how they perceive the role of the course instructor, and how contextual aspects related to the practicum (who is involved, tasks, structure of the program, etc.) may mediate issues related to power, learning and general satisfaction with the activity. Finally, to better appreciate the cognitive and social aspects of practicum-related discussion forums, an analysis of the posts is also imperative. Within the context of the present broader research project, such an analysis will be the object of a future report.

References

Anderson, T., Rourke, L., Garrison, D.R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in a computer conferencing context. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5(2), 2-17.

Arnold, N., & Ducate, L. (2006). Future foreign language teachers: Social and cognitive collaboration in an online environment. *Language Learning & Technology*, 10(1), 42-66. Retrieved from http://llt.msu.edu/vol10num1/arnoldducate/

Emig, J. (1977). Writing as a mode of learning. *College Composition and Communication*, *28*, 122-128.

Freeman, D., & Johnson, K.E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, *32*, 397-417.

Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2001). Critical thinking, cognitive presence and computer conferencing in distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *15*, 7-23.

Haas, C. (1996). *Writing technology: Studies on the materiality of literacy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hammersley, M. (1983). *The ethnography of schooling: Methodological issues*. Driffield, UK: Nafferton Books.

Henri, F. (1995). Distance learning and a computer-mediated communication: Interactive, quasi-interactive or monologue? In C. O'Malley (Ed.), *Computer supported collaborative learning* (pp. 145-161). Berlin: Springer Verlag.

Huot, D., Hamers, Lemonnier, F.H., & Parks, S. (2009). *Les technologies de l'information et de la communication (TIC) à l'école secondaire: Une étude longitudinale*. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval.

Johnson, K.E. (2006). The sociocultural turn and its challenges for second language teacher education. TESOL Quarterly, *40*, 235-257.

Johnstone, A.C. (1994). *Uses for journal keeping*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Kamhi-Stein, L.D. (2000a). Looking to the future of TESOL teacher education: Web-based bulletin board discussion in a methods course. *TESOL Quarterly*, *34*, 423-455.

Kamhi-Stein. L.D. (2000b). Integrating computer-mediated communication tools into the practicum. In K. E. Johnson (Ed.), *Teacher education* (pp. 119-135). Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Lock, J.V. (2006). A new image: Online communities to facilitate teacher professional development. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, *14*, 663-678.

MacDonald, C.J. (1993). Coping with stress during the teaching practicum: The student teacher's perspective. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 39, 407-418.

Mitchell, J. (2003). On-line writing: A link to learning in a teacher education program. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19(1), 127-143.

Murphy, E. (2000). Strangers in a strange land: Teachers' beliefs about teaching French as a second or foreign language in online learning environments. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Université Laval, Quebec City. Retrieved from www.ucs.mun.ca/ ~emurphy/strangers/toc.html

Paulus, T., & Scherff, L. (2008). "Can anyone offer any words of encouragement?" Online dialogue as a support mechanism for preservice teachers. Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, 16(1), 113-136.

Pawan, F., Paulus, T.M., Yalcin, S., & Chang, C.-F. (2003). Online learning: Patterns of engagement and interaction among in-service teachers. *Language Learning & Technology*, *7*(3), 119-140. Retrieved from http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num3/pawan/

Potts, D. (2005). Pedagogy, purpose, and the second language learner in on-line communities. *The Canadian Modern Language Review/ La revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, *62*, 137-160.

Sengupta, S. 2001. Exchanging ideas with peers in network-based classrooms: An aid or a pain? *Language Learning & Technology*, 5(1), 103-134. Retrieved from http:// llt.msu.edu/vol5num1/sengupta/

Schlagal, B., Trathen, W., & Blanton, W. (1996). Structuring telecommunications to create instructional conversations about student teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *47*, 175-183.

Sussex, R., & White, P. (1996). Electronic networking. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 16*, 200-225.

Yildirim, S., & Kiraz, E. (1999). Obstacles in integrating online communications tools into preservice teacher education: A case study. *Journal of Computing in Teacher Education*, *15*(3), 23-28.

Warschauer, M. (2002). A developmental perspective on technology in language education. *TESOL Quarterly*, *36*, 453-475.

Warschauer, M. (1997). Computer-mediated collaborative learning: Theory and practice. *Modern Language Journal*, 81, 470-481.

APPENDIX A

Survey Questionnaire

Survey on Discussion Forum Activity
A. Please check off the following as appropriate:

a. Gender: __ male ___ female
b. I completed my practicum in:
   __ the elementary grades: __ 1st cycle __ 2nd cycle __ 3rd cycle
                             ___ core students ___ intensive group
   __ the secondary grades: ___ 1st cycle ___ 2nd cycle
                             ___ core students __enriched students

B. Please check the answer that best fits your opinion about the electronic discussion forum that you participated in last session in the *Online TESL Seminar*.

1. I enjoyed participating in the electronic discussion forum of this course.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

2. I learned things in the discussion forum that I would not have figured out on my own.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

3. The electronic discussion forum gave me the opportunity to ask questions I would not have asked in class discussions.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

4. I would enjoy participating in such a discussion again.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

5. The process of talking/writing through topics in the discussion forum helped me to understand them better.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

6. Exchanging with other students in the discussion forum helped me to look at topics from perspectives I would not have considered on my own.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

7. The discussion forum provided less anxiety and a more relaxed environment than classroom discussion.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

8. I would have liked this course better without the discussion forum.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

9. I experienced a sense of community with the other students in my group.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

10. This discussion forum gave me good ideas for teaching that I implemented during my practicum or plan to implement when I start teaching.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

11. I participated more in the discussion forum than I normally would in a whole class session.
    __strongly agree ___agree ___neutral ___disagree ___strongly disagree

12. I felt my classmates were interested in my posts.

__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

13. I was interested in reading my classmates' posts.
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

14. I felt I was able to help out classmates who were experiencing problems during their practicum.
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

15. I would like to see the following people have access to the discussion forum so they could participate in it:

a. cooperating teachers
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

b. ESL teachers (other than cooperating teachers)
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

c. university supervisors
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

16. I would like the course instructor to participate more in the discusssions.
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

17. I found my practicum stressful.
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

If you answered *agree* or *strongly agree*, please answer questions (a) and (b):

a. The discussion forum helped me deal with the stress.
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

b. I got help with my problem(s) via the discussion forum.
__strongly agree   ___agree   ___neutral   ___disagree   ___strongly disagree

18. In function of the course assignment, I would describe my participation in the discussion forum as (check one):
__ above average   ___ average   ___ below average

19. I participated in the discussion forum:
__ on an ongoing basis   __ from time to time   __ just at the beginning and the end
__ just at the end   __ not at all

20. Please describe how you felt about the electronic discussion forum both from an affective and a cognitive perspective. Did it help you to learn or understand any aspects of teaching more fully? Did it help you with any stressful situations you may have been experiencing during the practicum? Did you enjoy sharing? Please be specific.

21. What suggestions do you have for improving this exchange?

22. After having participated in this discussion forum, would you be more or less inclined to implement this type of exchange in a class you would teach? Why or why not?

*****************************THANK YOU*****************************

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. Please explain in your own words how you felt about the discussion forum you participated in last term.

2. What themes did you participate in on the discussion forum? Why? What factors influenced your decision to post on a given topic?

3. Did you enjoy reading /find it useful to read the posts? What attracted your attention? Why?

4. Was the discussion forum relevant to you in any way during your practicum? Why / why not? How?
    a. cognitive aspects (tool for learning, e.g. get ideas for teaching - examples)
    b. social aspects (interest/ enjoyment/ sharing with others – helping with stress of practicum)

5. Did you feel a sense of community with other participants involved in the discussion forum? If so, how would you define *community*? What does this mean to you?