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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

## ‘Creepers’ and Supporters: A Qualitative Analysis of the Practices of Beginning Educators in a Virtual Teacher Community Space

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**Abstract:** In addition to contextualized professional learning opportunities, social and emotional support systems are essential for early career educators. Recently, those supports are more and more frequently located in web-based, asynchronous communities. Employing theories of teacher identity discourses (Alsup, 2006) and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how beginning teachers engage in discursive practice and perceive their participation in a virtual teacher community called English Companion Ning (EC Ning). It will describe findings based on interview data and content analyses of participants’ discussion forum posts. In addition, the article will share participants’ perceptions of the value of the EC Ning as a professional community. Study findings show that participants’ use of the EC Ning followed a linear progression according to four practices of virtual teacher discourse: 1) reading posts, 2) seeking support, 3) extending support, and 4) collaborating externally. Implications suggest that access to alternative support communities like virtual teacher communities encourage new teachers to find resources to support their teaching knowledge and engage in the important work of identity exploration.

**Keywords:** teacher identity, teacher induction, virtual teacher communities, English Language Arts teacher



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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

**A**midst a continuing era of reform-based discourse surrounding policies like standardized testing, value-added assessment, and widening opportunity gaps, teacher attrition remains a pervasive crisis (Hannan, Russell, Takahashi, & Park, 2015). In a report supported by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Headden (2014) found that almost 33% of teachers switch careers before their fourth year. When those that decided to leave were interviewed, their main reasons for leaving the profession weren't low pay or difficult students; instead, many attributed their dissatisfaction to a feeling of lack of support, both emotionally or professionally: "The problem takes many forms, including the feeling of being isolated from colleagues, scant feedback on performance, poor professional development, and insufficient emotional backing by administrators" (p. 7). While this sentiment may be old news to education scholars (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003), it is clear that teacher educators still need to find alternative and innovative ways to provide intellectual and emotional support to new teachers as they enter the profession. These types of support are essential, as they allow teachers to focus not only on their pedagogical and content knowledge skills but also on their emerging and evolving teacher identities. When teachers identify as valid members of the profession, they are more able to enact

powerful pedagogical practices that support student learning (Britzman, 1991).

Add to this cumbersome landscape the ongoing expectation to support teachers of all levels in their work with what some have controversially termed 21<sup>st</sup> century learners or "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). Although arguments to train teachers about the technical literacies of digital tools are numerous, a perhaps more salient aspect of the discourse is how teachers' own development may benefit from the usage of digital tools like tablets, social media, and Web 2.0 tools. These innovative digital technologies have the power to support early career teachers' professional growth by providing them with resources like stories and examples of teaching practices made public to pedagogical and content-related knowledge (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). More and more, research has focused on how the understanding of the practice of teaching develops through the use of digital and web-based tools (Krutka, Bergman, Flores, Mason, & Jack, 2014; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008; Risser, 2013). Scholars argue that they have potential for rich teacher learning because they allow for teacher communication and collaboration that wouldn't otherwise be feasible, which could have an impact on brick and mortar school communities. For example, Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2008) state:

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

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this the article, because all of my participants identified as female, I will use "she" to refer to individuals who identify as female, "he" to refer to individuals who identify as male, and "ze" for individuals who identify as gender-neutral. I have selected these pronouns because I believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers and reflect the identities of my participants.

Early examples of online teacher learning spaces include collaborative websites like “Tapped In,” established in 1997, which brought together teachers from early childhood to higher education to interact in chat rooms and discussion boards. With the personal learning network (PLN) craze came educator blogs that offered individuals personalized spaces to share their experiences and invited readers to follow and interact. One example is Karl Fisch’s “Fischbowl,” supplemented by his viral video “Shift Happens.” From blogging platforms came collaborative wikis like “Teachers Desk,” which brought K-12 teachers together to share their recommendations for helpful resources, websites, and even lesson plans. Contemporary versions of these online teacher networks include Edutopia, which provides a virtual domain for teachers to share text, documents, videos of their practice, and chat in real time. In addition, teachers are also leveraging other methods of communicating, like micro blogging through weekly “#educhat” twitter feeds and connecting through Facebook and Pinterest groups. Recent studies (Damico, 2016) demonstrate that these digital teacher networks can aid beginning teachers in developing their evolving identities as educators.

This study adds to that growing body of research on virtual teacher communities by exploring teachers’ own perceptions about the value and utility of one such space. In addition, it seeks to fill a gap in existing literature by exploring how those teachers enacted identifying practices through their participation and language use in discussion posts by exploring the following research questions:

1. How did participants perceive and describe their experiences as members of the EC Ning?
2. What discursive and participatory practices did participants employ in the EC

Ning, particularly in the *New Teachers* group?

3. How did membership in the EC Ning work to serve participants’ teacher identities?

### **Teacher Identity Discourses**

The definition of teacher identity is fluid and multiple, and the ways in which teachers identify themselves materialize in numerous ways (Alsup, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Britzman, 1991; Jimenez, 2014; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). Present in most teacher identity research is the notion that professional identity is continually developing and evolving. Beginning teachers’ identities are especially layered and fluid because they are, for the first time, deciding what kind of teachers they want to be. This is often in conflict with what kind of teachers they are being mandated to be by top-down policies. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) cite that new teachers weigh many factors as they construct their teaching identities, including their own socio-economic, cultural, racial, and gender histories, their exposure to dominant messages about teaching and teachers, and of course, their exposure to apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975).

The notion of teacher identity conceptualized within this article focuses on the bridging of beginning teachers’ identities, where they are evolving from student to teacher and transcending the gap from teacher education to in-service teaching. To this end, Alsup’s (2006) notion of borderline discourses is used as a frame through which to view the artifacts of identity formation within participants. Alsup defines borderline discourse as “Discourse in which there is evidence of contact between disparate personal and professional subjectivities and in which this contact appears to be leading toward the ideological integration of multiple senses of self” (p. 36). Borderline discourse applies to the ways that

new teachers have to negotiate the shift in their roles as students to their roles as teachers and suggests a separation between their personal versus professional lives. In addition, it influences the rate at which they fully view themselves as members of the field of education.

### **Legitimate Peripheral Participation**

According to Wenger (1998), “Participation [in a community] shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (p. 4). Beginning educators are continually developing notions about what it means to teach and who they are as teachers. It is within public spaces, Britzman (1991) suggests that new teachers negotiate varying discourses (normative and non-normative) associated with the profession of teaching. This ever-evolving teacher identification requires continued support and mediation (Baker-Doyle, 2011). Zeichner and Liston (2013) point out: “Teachers can support and sustain each other’s growth. If teachers see their individual situations linked to those of their colleagues, the likelihood of structural change is greater than with teachers remaining isolated reflective practitioners” (p. 60). In order to understand how new teachers situate themselves within a professional community of educators (EC Ning, for example), this study also enacts a social theory of learning. Within this theory is the foundational belief that learning happens when individuals are engaged in thinking, participating, and interacting in a community of practice or COP (a group of people that come together with a central purpose, negotiating common interests and agreeing on modes of participation) (Wenger, 1998). More specifically, the process of legitimate peripheral participation guides the analysis of how new teachers take up roles and participation practice in professional communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In this participation frame, newcomers (new teachers) join the community (EC Ning) as apprentices on the periphery and tend to gradually establish more concentrated and increasingly active forms of participation over time, as their mastery of skills associated with that community (teaching English Language Arts) develops. Conversely, old timers (veteran teachers), established members of that same community, serve as mentors to these apprentices, modeling the genres of discourse and the methods of agreed-on participation of the community. Legitimate peripheral participation establishes the social nature of knowledge acquisition and illuminates how new participants within a group gain social capital and negotiate hierarchical levels of membership within a community. This is directly related to the concept of identity. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), “We conceive of identities as long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice. Thus identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another” (p. 53). This symbiotic relationship between identity, knowledge, and membership is not limited to face-to-face communities, but is also observed within web-based and virtual spaces.

### **Web-based Professional Learning**

Many teachers search outside of their local, brick and mortar communities for professional and identity-affirming connections; more and more, online teacher networks have also become places where teachers can work through notions of what it means to be a teacher. The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has expanded the way in which social learning is conceptualized, because of the affordance of online spaces to embrace the notion of “distributed intelligence,” or shared knowledge of a group (Laferrrière & Chan, 2006; Pea, 1992). The notion of participating in the co-construction of the knowledge of teaching is sometimes difficult for new teachers, as they are often just beginning to gain

access to the modes and norms of their profession beyond their experiences as students. Pringle's (2002) study of online alternatives to professional development demonstrated how using web-based discussion communities helped beginning teachers take on increased ownership in their own professional learning, through co-participation. This co-participation "implies the presence of a shared language that becomes accessed by all as they engage in the activities of the community with a goal of facilitating meaningful learning" (p. 218). When applied to teacher learning, gaining experience in taking up the "shared language" of a professional community of teaching can help beginning teachers gain access to further pedagogical and content knowledge and feel a stronger sense of teaching identity (Chen, Chen & Tsai, 2009). This study explores how four early-career teachers participated in a content-specific virtual teaching community to socially explore the field of teaching and experiment with their growing teacher identities.

### Method

This study investigated four participants' discursive practices within and perceptions of a virtual teacher community and relied upon data sources including interviews, observations, and content analysis of discussion forum postings. In the following sections, the participants, data collection, and data analysis are described in detail.

### Participants

Criteria for participants included that they were in their first three years of teaching English Language Arts and that they were members of the EC Ning

community. As a member of the EC Ning myself, I gathered a list of 30 other members using the criteria and sent out a recruitment script; from that initial inquiry, I received eight responses. From those, I narrowed the list down to four based on willingness and availability. All participants in this study identified as Caucasian, female, and between the ages of 23 and 45. Throughout this article, participants will be referred to by the following pseudonyms: Jolene, Cecilia, Leia, and Roxanne.

All four participants reported that they became members of the EC Ning because they felt varying degrees of isolation and lack of support within their local teaching communities. Cecilia, for example, was a first-year teacher in a suburban Midwestern school district. Although she reported that she felt supported by her colleagues and administration, she sought participation in the EC Ning to investigate the issues and struggles she was dealing with that she didn't feel comfortable admitting to as a newcomer. Leia was a third-year teacher in the rural northwest and was the only teacher of tenth, eleventh, and

twelfth grade English Language Arts in her school; she reported that the closest school district was fifty miles away and she had no local grade level or content peers with which to collaborate. Jolene was a first-year teacher in a northeastern urban charter school. She reported being taken out of her classroom and put in charge of the school's scripted curriculum classroom by her principal for admitting to him that she was having trouble with classroom management. Roxanne was a first-year teacher, a career changer who transitioned from business to education in her mid-thirties, in the urban Midwest.

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She reported dealing with daily physical altercations in her classroom and a lack of the appropriate administrative and paraprofessional support.

### Data Collection

An intersection of digital observation (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012) and qualitative interviewing (Charmaz, 2006) was employed to collect data sources. Because of a particular interest in early-career teachers' identity formation, discussion forum data were primarily collected from a small subset within the larger EC Ning space, a group called *New Teachers*, within which all four of the participants were members. *New Teachers* is a discussion group open to all members of the EC Ning, but as the name suggests, it was created for preservice and early-career teachers. In addition, more experienced teachers also congregate in the group, often providing informal mentorship and meditational support. When accessing the front page of the *New Teachers* area, members are greeted with an introduction and invited to view a list of recommended discussions. All four of the participants shared during the consent process that the *New Teachers* group was their preferred area of the EC Ning, which prompted my focus on the space in particular. This allowed for the observation of discursive practices of participants within the community in addition to the collection of focused participant perspectives and narratives. During the initial observation of the environment, as a participant observer, I visited the *New Teachers* group to observe member interactions and record descriptive field notes. In subsequent observations, using Boellstorff, et al. (2012) as a guide to ethical use of public, online material, I also collected screenshots of discussion forums within the space, particularly where participants engaged in communication with other members.

In addition to observational field notes and discussion forum screenshots, I conducted two

semi-structured interviews per participant over the course of a year. Because of the geographic distance between researcher and participants, interviews were conducted via telephone and an iOS recording device was used to digitally record the conversations. Participant interviews allowed me not only to triangulate my data but also to gain perspective from participants, like background information about each and how she came to join the field of secondary English Language Arts education. The interviews also provided me with initial data on how each participant understood and self-identified as teachers of English Language Arts. In addition, codes and subsequent themes derived from my conversations with participants provided me with a guiding lens through which to conduct iterative observations of the EC Ning community discussion forums.

### Data Analysis

The process of analysis included a constant comparison coding method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that prompted recursive reading of the data and the identification of codes and themes across both participants' interviews (elicited texts) and interactions on the EC Ning (extant texts) (Charmaz, 2006). Utilizing the conceptual framework of borderline discourse (Alsup, 2006) and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), codes and subsequent themes focused on the language the participants used to describe themselves as beginning teachers and how they enacted these identities in participation with other members of the EC Ning. In addition, I completed a content analysis of the discussion posts in the *New Teachers* group, initially by sorting according to topic with a focus on those discussion posts within which participants were involved. In favor of a holistic approach, the purpose in coding data was not to generalize but to identify participants' discursive patterns within these discussions, looking for repeated language moves and even larger units

like commonly used phrases and word connotations. In the end, I created 42 codes from the 90 discussion posts created during the two-year span of the study. For example, I used the code “commiserating” when members used language to empathize with one another (e.g., “I have been there, too”). In addition, a frequency chart was developed to track the number of times a particular code showed up in discussions (See Table 1). I employed member checking (Maxwell, 2012) by sharing both content analysis and interpretation of interview data with participants during the study. After reaching saturation with the 42 initial codes, I then consolidated them into emerging themes by separating the data into four major categories, which will be described fully in the next section.

### Findings

The four main themes that categorized participants’ participation within EC Ning are: 1) Reading posts 2) Seeking support 3) Extending support and 4) Collaborating Externally (See Table 2). In the following sections, the themes will be explored in detail, supported by multiple data sources.

#### Practice #1: Reading Posts

Implicitly referencing the difficult nature in learning to participate, three out of four (Jolene, Leia, and Cecilia) interview participants described how they gradually approached membership in the EC Ning by first consuming or “reading” the posts of others. For example, when asked to categorize the time she spent on the EC Ning, Jolene responded, “I would say that I spend about eighty percent of my time on

EC Ning reading other peoples’ posts.” Leia and Cecilia’s numbers were even greater; they both estimated that they spent 98% of their time reading posts versus creating their own. Data from the interview participants coincide with the virtual observations. Although ascertaining which members of an online space are merely reading is almost impossible solely from participant observation, there are other cues that demonstrate this phenomenon. The most obvious provided by the public statistics shared on the *New Teachers* space is the number of views associated with a post. All of the discussions posted within the time frame of this study contained

more views than comments. For example, although one post, entitled “Miserable First Year Teacher” only had 18 responses, it received a total of 314 views, indicating a measure of reading that far exceeded the rate of responding.

**Participation: Feeling a sense of commiseration.** When asked about the value they gained in the practice of reading others’ posts, participants mentioned that they believed it provided them with teaching

ideas and resources that they could use in their own classroom contexts. For example, Leia shared about how she tried out the Socratic Seminar method in her classroom, which was a hit with her students, after reading another teacher’s post about how it worked for them. All four participants mentioned that a major benefit of the EC Ning community was that it allowed for them to find what they were looking for, to locate resources and advice for topics and issues that were contextual and contingent for them, at any given time.

What participants mentioned even more frequently than the pedagogical benefits of reading was how it

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helped them feel like they could relate to other members and more readily access feelings of belonging to the larger English Language Arts community. Leia said that she learned a lot about what it means to be an English Language Arts teacher from reading about struggles other teachers were tackling: “I think it gives you that that feeling that there’s other people that, you know, if you are struggling with it, chances are there are going to be at least five people that you could run into that are struggling with the exact same thing, but probably more.” Jolene discussed how the *New Teachers* group helped her work through novice insecurities during her first year, especially because she was able to read about others’ experiences and relate:

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

Jolene identified an affordance of online teacher learning spaces, that they provide teachers a safe and comfortable space to share uncertainties and insecurities away from what, at times, can be unsupportive local school cultures. The idea of not having to tell someone “to their face” what a teacher is struggling with resonated with other interview participants as well. The practice of reading, one that she considered made her “a creeper,” is supported by the theoretical frame of legitimate peripheral participation, that new members slowly gain access and learn about the workings of the

community before they engage fully in the practices of the space themselves (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Jolene’s description of reading the EC Ning space as lurking or what she called “creeping,” is also indicative of the quality of her identity as a teacher. In her second interview, she described herself as “stealing” from the other teachers when she sought out resources by reading posts in the community, reinforcing the commonly held idea that because she was a beginning teacher, the knowledge of teaching belonged to others (often, more experienced teachers). According to Alsop’s (2006) description of borderline discourse, Jolene was located between two paradigms, one being that of a novice and the other of being a full-fledged teacher. These paradigms, as described through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation, help to substantiate the important interactions between newcomers and old timers within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The next section will explore how these interactions among roles worked to initiate the participants more fully into the community.

### **Practice #2: Seeking Support**

In many instances of organized teacher learning, especially more contrived professional development communities, experienced others, mentors, or trainers guide member participation. However, according to participants’ interviews, the *New Teachers* group varied from that model; it was, indeed, new teachers that had the most control over the discussions and topics addressed. An implicit rule that members of the group followed was that those who self-identified as “new teachers” (including both preservice and early-career teachers) were in charge of initiating discussion threads. During the course of this study, there were 90 overall discussion posts created in the *New Teachers* group; every single discussion thread was initiated by a self-identified beginning teacher. Most of those posts centered around the theme of seeking



assistance from other, more experienced members of the community and ended with phrases like “Any advice would be great,” “What have others done to deal with this?” or just plain “Help!?”

Overall, participants discussed how reading the narratives of others, over time, encouraged them to create their own posts. Leia, for example, said, “I mostly just read what others were saying. After a few weeks, though, I got a sense that other teachers were using the [EC Ning] to post questions and it made me feel okay about doing the same.” In this way, the *New Teachers* group functioned as a self-directed teacher learning space; the very members that benefited most from the interactions were the ones to dictate what topics and themes were discussed in the first place. Jolene, Cecilia, and Leia all mentioned that in their transitions from reading posts to seeking support, it took them a while to become confident enough with the types of interactions on the space to share about their own practices. In addition, participants cited varying reasons why they began creating posts of their own. For example, Jolene shared that her first post to the *New Teachers* group was due to advice she received from a mentor:

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

When viewed through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), what drove Jolene to initiate a post in the *New Teachers* group was at the behest of a more experienced other and because of a need for advice on an important interaction concerning a student and parent.

Although she was reluctant to take up a more active role in the community at first, she found that the feedback and responses she received were valuable, ranging from recommendations for alternative texts to suggestions about how she might positively interact with the concerned parents. She reflected on this experience as the one that inspired her to continue posting and likened her transition of going from reading posts to seeking support to “ripping off a Band-Aid, because doing it once made it easier to do again.”

It was also evident from observation of the general community that self-identified old timers or experienced teachers were salient in the “seeking support” practices that unfolded. Topics and issues that they wrote about varied (from contextualized grammar instruction to strategies for classroom organization to how to deal with conflict in the classroom) and beginning teachers’ posts invited a variety of responses from experienced teachers. Many took up more directive mentoring roles, for example, providing beginning teachers with checklists to complete. Others shared narratives from their own practice. These narratives prove to be essential in supporting legitimate peripheral participants, because narrative and talk are main forms of change and growth in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

When asked about the mentorship provided by other EC Ning members, participants mentioned words like “trust” and “safe” in describing the responses they received. At one point, for example, Leia said, “It sucks to be a newbie,” but described how that feeling was mitigated by the support she felt by the old timers, void of criticality or “judgment.” Much of the analysis of discussion excerpts from the *New Teacher* group revealed similar findings. The practice of providing emotional support was demonstrated through the use of language like, “don’t beat yourself up,” and the offering of positive reinforcement or a message of

care on behalf of the community as a whole. Participants often positioned this level of social and emotional support in stark contrast to their own local school communities. Jolene described how the experienced teacher members of the EC Ning were more excited and positive about the field of teaching than her senior colleagues in her school district:

There's definitely this voice that kind of says 'Your [local school colleagues] are going to think you're not a good teacher.' I think that's why it's so comforting to see brand new teachers on (EC Ning) that go through what I went through. I really want to help them because it can be isolating being a brand new teacher. You know, it really depends on where you are, but I find, specifically, inner city schools where like, there's a lot of people that are jaded. I don't want that to be true, but it is true. They make it more isolating for new teachers that want to do their best and want to, I don't know, make a difference really. [New teachers] need the fire flamed, you know? They don't need the fire fanned. I don't know, maybe I'm just on the other side of it where I see a desire to, I don't know. Maybe ten years from now I'll feel differently like, 'Oh that's what I looked like as a newbie.'

In addition to the sense of responsibility to other new teachers that Jolene hinted at in the excerpt above, the act of participating by seeking support aided participants in feeling like valued and credible members of the larger teaching community, and, in turn, prompted them to feel comfortable sharing their own ideas and resources with other teachers in the EC Ning.

### Practice #3: Extending Support

Oftentimes, participants described the act of sharing ideas and resources with others in the EC Ning community as both identity affirming and community building. They used terms like “giving back” and “supporting others” in describing their choice to move from reading and asking for help to actually providing help to others. Leia mentioned that she felt compelled to respond to other members as a way to reciprocate for the help that she herself received from other members:

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

**“Oftentimes, participants described the act of sharing ideas and resources with others in the EC Ning community as both identity affirming and community building.”**

This conversational practice of sharing successes is a new discursive practice taken up in the theme of extending support, and the trend toward commiseration that Leia described above was a commonly noted practice among the other participants. Not only did she outline the discussion topics that she preferred, but she also talked about sharing her successes with other teachers, even if in a nuanced way by saying, “I might as well give it a shot.” Leia, although not confident in asserting her skills, called upon those skills when others needed help. Through the lens of borderline discourse (Alsop, 2006), she was able to experiment with her

emerging teacher identity by taking a stance and making claims about the type of teaching she aligned with through the act of providing advice to others.

Roxanne shared that she also sought out specific discussion topics when connecting with other teachers. She felt most confident providing advice on classroom management. For example, she told a story about how a new teacher shared that she was struggling with conflict in her classroom and was observed by her principal the day that a student-led discussion failed. Roxanne was the first EC Ning member to respond:

You are not alone, I have to say first. My principal came in on one of my lessons, and, of course, pointed out all that I was doing wrong. That being said, I think you should work your students up to something as cataclysmic as the Holocaust. Ask them how they would handle more real-life situations, and ask them specifics. Instead of asking, "How would you help someone in a dangerous situation," ask them about a specific situation - "How would you help someone who just got robbed and came up to you?" That kind of thing. The more specific you get with your students, especially the special education (which I teach) kids, the better. It's really hard for them to grasp those abstract thinking questions. I mean, REALLY hard. As you get answers to these kinds of questions, you can morph into the more high-level thinking questions your unit requires. Hope this helps!

In addition to providing solace in the form of commiseration, by replying, "You are not alone," Roxanne also provided the new teacher with concrete advice and suggested a course of action for next time. She called upon knowledge that she

gained in her first years of teaching by connecting the initial post to her own experiences, both with her principal and her students. Through the practice of extending support to another teacher, she transcended the initial stage of passive participant in the community and demonstrated that she identified enough in the field of English Language Arts teaching to contribute to the knowledge of another member of the community.

**Identification: Breaking Down the Barrier Between Experienced and Novice Teachers.** In addition to beginning teachers serving as support systems for each other, the EC Ning community also functioned for participants as a way to access known scholars in the field of English Education that they had either studied or recognized from their work in national organizations. For example, very early in her membership, Roxanne recounted how she was surprised to get a response from EC Ning founder, Jim Burke:

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

Although beginning teachers did initiate the discussion threads in the *New Teachers* group, this instance is an example of how the barriers between "newcomers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and experienced

teachers of the group often interacted. The interactions that resulted were often a mix of teachers from different levels and different contexts sharing ideas, disrupting ideological notions that more experienced teachers are the only members that have access to the knowledge of teaching. Jolene reflected on how her interactions with other members, both newcomers and experienced teachers, in the EC Ning helped her to view herself more fully as a legitimate teacher:

Just hearing people's responses and seeing that, like, I don't know, that they saw me as a professional just like them, even though I'm in my first year, you know, it felt really good. So it wasn't necessarily in the feedback that I received, but it made me feel part of a professional discourse.

Being seen as a professional, as Jolene described it, worked to help bolster her identification as a "real teacher." Through her membership in EC Ning, she began to feel more of a part of the "professional discourse" of teaching English Language Arts. This directly relates to the ways in which informal support systems can encourage identity growth, because, as Alsup (2006) mentions, new teachers "must have the opportunity to speak as teachers and discuss their developing professional identities with informed and interested others" (p. 187). Through extending support to others in the community, participants were able to view themselves as owners of important knowledge of teaching instead of just passive consumers of others' knowledge.

#### **Practice #4: Externally Collaborating**

Although the patterns of participation within the *New Teachers* space did not always necessarily evolve in a linear fashion (e.g., unlike the other three, Roxanne shared that she never felt intimidated to post on the EC Ning), the practice of externally collaborating was the one that

participants described as originating from their more active involvement in the other practices. For the purposes of this study, collaborating is defined simply as the act of communicating or working with other teachers from the EC Ning outside of the online space. Evidence of external collaboration presented itself in the form of posts about meeting up at conferences, like NCTE.

Participants shared how members went further to connect outside of the EC Ning by sending private messages, emails, or even connecting via other online networks like Facebook or LinkedIn. For example, one teacher invited Cecilia to email her for more personal interaction and to gather other resources. Another teacher, newly retired, sent Jolene books in the mail. Overall, when participants described the practice of externally collaborating, their language referenced a more active form of participation, denoting a forward movement through the social organization of the EC Ning community. For example, Cecilia said, "I sought out this one teacher who seemed to know a lot about young adult fiction and took it upon myself to email her for resources." The reference of seeking out another for advice is in contrast with the first practice, reading posts, where participants described passively reading content from the community. Lave and Wenger (1991) recognize this type of movement as a part of the situated learning that occurs as legitimate peripheral participants gain knowledge and understanding of what it means to hold membership in a community.

#### **Discussion and Conclusion**

For participants, the EC Ning functioned as a platform for the distributed and shared knowledge that afforded them the opportunity to continue to learn and develop ideas about the field of teaching English Language Arts. This was especially important because all of them cited a feeling of isolation in their brick and mortar school

communities and a desire to seek out mentors and colleagues. In addition, the socially mediated nature of the virtual teacher community allowed participants to try on and embrace different practices (reading posts, seeking support, extending support, and externally collaborating) as they grappled with their evolving teacher identities. In this way, their positionality as legitimate peripheral participants within the larger community of teachers of English Language Arts presented itself as an “evolving form of membership” (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The ways in which the participants shared and reflected upon their pedagogical experiences in interactions with others in the EC Ning community also revealed that it functioned as a catalyst to explore, or at least try on, the language of their evolving teacher identities. The EC Ning afforded the participants space to try on different subject positions through language, as seen in the shifts from the Seeking Support to the Externally Collaborating practices. Overall, through their membership in the EC Ning and their participation in the *New Teachers* group, the participants learned about what it meant to be a part of the professional discourse of English Language Arts teachers, as newcomers of varying degrees interacting with old timers, and how they might fit themselves into it despite the borderline discourse (Alsup, 2006) from which they were operating.

Virtual teacher communities like EC Ning can provide the platform for that continual reflection in a way that teachers can call upon based on their readiness and teaching contexts. For example, Jolene pointed out that though her participation level in the EC Ning waned as she began to feel more comfortable in the classroom, she felt like she could

always “go back” when she needed. It is exactly these types of supplemental systems that teachers need to feel supported as they navigate the often-murky waters of their first years of teaching. It is also within these supplemental support systems that continual and guided catalysts for reflection can unfold (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005).

Alsup (2006) asserts: “Teacher identity is indeed holistic. It incorporates the cognitive, the emotional, the bodily, and the creative” (p. 14). It is up to teacher educators to find ways that preservice and beginning teachers can tap into that holistic nature of identity. The four practices of participation constructed based on observations and analysis

**“It is exactly these types of supplemental systems that teachers need to feel supported as they navigate the often-murky waters of their first years of teaching.”**

within this study can serve as a framework in understanding how beginning teachers not only access and perceive supplemental support, but also negotiate their own identities within the field of education. By providing teachers the opportunity to come together in spite of geographic and temporal constraints to support

one another and take up their own professional learning with a level of agency not often afforded by traditional professional development structures (Easton, 2008), communities like EC Ning offer beneficial resources for teacher education.

Supportive teacher interactions can happen when new teachers make choices about how and when their learning occurs (Fullan, 2006; Lampert & Ball, 1998); this study also highlights one example of a resource for new teachers that has potential to support them during the difficult transition time between their teacher education programs and initial, full time teaching positions. Because the cognitive load of the first years of teaching is heavy, taking advantage of the distributed intelligence of a



virtual teacher community has potential to aid in not only teacher learning, but also teacher identity development. Through the practice of making their ideas about teaching public via online discourse

with others, teachers have the potential to gain valuable insight into their own beliefs and dynamic teaching identities.

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Table 1

*Codes and Subsequent Themes on Teacher Practices*

<b>Codes/# out of 90 discussions</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Citing other discussions - 45	Referencing other discussions on the space	Reading Posts
Identifying oneself -90	Talking about what kind or type of teacher one is	Seeking Support
Describing school culture -68	Telling about home school	
Seeking advice - 47	Asking for guidance	
Seeking resources - 35	Asking for resources that could be incorporated into practice	
Seeking feedback on practice - 21	Asking what other members think about what they are doing or planning	
Seeking opinions - 23	Asking what other members think	
Expressing fears - 59	Sharing fears about the practice of teaching	
Expressing doubts - 36	Sharing doubts about the practice of teaching	
Sharing narratives - 71	Sharing stories about teaching or practice	
Sharing details about own practice - 82	Sharing stories from own classroom	
Sharing successes with practice - 0	Describing positive experiences in the classroom	
Sharing perceived failures with practice - 66	Describing negative experiences in the classroom	
Reflecting on prior learning - 32	Questioning and deliberating decisions and actions	
Reflecting on choices and actions - 45	Deconstructing what has been done in practice already	



Citing other discussions - 15	Referencing other discussions on the space	
Following up – expressing thanks - 77	Thanking others for support after a discussion has developed	
Following up – providing updates - 20	Referring to changes or updates in practice/ approach	
Following up – asking additional questions - 18	Asking questions not directly related to original post	
Offering positive reinforcement - 199	Providing positive comments regarding another’s comments or post	Extending Support
Offering encouragement - 225	Providing positive comments to support	
Offering support on behalf of the community - 106	Addressing teacher on behalf of other EC Ning members	
Commiserating - 202	Empathizing with another teacher	
Sharing own practice - 225	Providing examples from own classroom	
Mentoring – Directive - 118	Providing commanding advice to a less seasoned teacher	
Mentoring – Emotionally supportive - 167	Providing supportive advice to a less seasoned teacher	
Suggesting resources - 158	Telling about outside resources teacher should investigate	
Suggesting action - 190	Pointing out specific actions/strategies	
Sharing tangible resources - 145	Posting links or documents with another	
Expressing disagreement - 49	Disagreeing or extending line of thinking	
Expressing opinions - 177	Telling others what they think	
Expressing agreement - 134	Agreeing with another member	
Citing other sources - 129	Referencing books or scholars	

Citing other members - 164	Referencing other members of the EC Ning	
Citing other discussions - 45	Referencing other discussions on the space	
Following up -checking in - 15	Checking to see how another is doing after a discussion has developed	
Asking for follow up - 34	Asking a member to check base or update	
Connecting outside of EC Ning - 13	Asking to connect beyond realms of the space	Collaborating Externally

Table 2.  
*Four Themes and Examples*

THEME	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
READING POSTS	Participants read others' discussion posts	N/A
SEEKING SUPPORT	Participants sought support in the form of advice and guidance from other teachers	“Help! I feel like a deer caught in the headlights. I am struggling with classroom management in my 5 <sup>th</sup> period English class... Can anyone offer advice on what they would do in my situation?”
EXTENDING SUPPORT	Participants extended support to other members	“You are not alone, I have to say first. My principal came in on one of my lessons and, of course, pointed out all that I was doing wrong. That being said, I think you should work your students up to something as cataclysmic as the Holocaust. Ask them how they would handle more real-life situations, and ask them specifics.”
COLLABORATING EXTERNALLY	Participants collaborated externally with other members	“Where are you going to be staying for NCTE this year? Let’s plan to meet up. It would be nice to put a face with a name”