"We needed support and it was out there:"
Building an Online Learning Community with Cooperating Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of an online discussion forum to support the professional development of cooperating teachers as they mentor student teachers. Nine elementary teachers participated in a four-month web-based discussion forum to share, discuss, and reflect on their experiences as cooperating teachers. This study specifically examined whether this online discussion forum functioned successfully as an online learning community to further the professional development of the cooperating teachers, expanding on a theoretical framework proposed by Riel and Levin (1990) to analyze the online participant structures. The findings include recommendations for the use of and further research on online discussion to support cooperating teachers and build connections between school and university.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the cooperating or mentor teacher is widely recognized as a key factor influencing the success or failure of a student teacher (Guyton, 1989; Ganzer, 2002). Although available research supports the notion that cooperating teachers grow professionally due to assuming this role (Arnold, 2002; Woods & Weasmer, 2003), it is unclear what aspects of this experience enhance their professional development (Landt, 2004). Additionally, there is limited evidence that teacher education institutions are supporting and contributing to the preparation of their mentor teachers (Connor, Killmer, McKay, & Whigham, 1993), as well as a lack of information from cooperating teachers about their work as mentors (Kahn, 2001). Other compounding factors include teacher isolation and lack of time within the instructional day for reflection and collegial activities (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998). Yet as Koskela & Ganzer (1998) conclude, the formidable task of improving contributions of cooperating teachers will positively impact the growth of both the mentor and novice.

Collaborative intellectual exchange can be a powerful tool to support teachers' professional growth (Riel, 1996). Although teachers are often isolated from one another, there is a need for them to engage in inquiry and reflection with colleagues (Barnett, 1998); in fact, Darling-Hammond and Ball (1999) call forums for analysis and reflection central to the development of teachers. One way that teachers may connect with one another in such a way is by building communities in which they communicate, reflect, and collaborate (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Stein, Smith, & Silver, 1999). These types of professional communities can be "structures that break down isolation, that empower teachers with professional tasks, and that provide arenas for thinking through standards of practice" to facilitate professional growth (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 599).

Until recently, the development of these communities among teachers was accomplished only through face-to-face interaction. Now, however, technology can connect teachers separated by distance or in need of flexible meeting times (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005). Asynchronous computer-mediated communication in the form of online discussion forums has been shown to have a positive impact on the professional development of

teachers (Carboni, 2004; DeWert, Babinski, & Jones, 2003). We became interested in how an online discussion forum could electronically connect and enrich cooperating teachers who were mentoring student teachers from the same university in the same semester. Our goal for this project was to provide a facilitated online discussion forum to support these teachers' sharing, discussing, and reflecting on their mentoring experiences. Further, the purpose of this study was to ascertain whether this forum functioned successfully as an online learning community to further the professional development of cooperating teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ELECTRONIC COMMUNITY TO ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

In order to examine the online discussion forum, we began with a theoretical framework defining electronic communities first introduced by Riel and Levin (1990) and Levin, Kim, and Riel (1990), then further elaborated and applied by Stephens and Hartmann (2002). This framework applies participant structure theory for analyzing group interactions (Phillips, 1982) to online interactions, adapting participant structures as characteristics for use in analyzing electronic group networks to determine the viability of an online discussion group. These network characteristics – organization of network, task organization, response opportunities, response obligations, coordination and evaluation – provide an effective beginning for examining the structure of an electronic network and how that structure impacts its success as an electronic community.

The participant structure framework addresses some of the unique characteristics of the online environment in community-building, but it does not address all aspects of the larger concept of professional learning communities in general. In this context, a learning community is a professional community of educators who have shared interests and, many times, do shared work in an atmosphere of caring and mutual support (Carboni, 2004; Hicks, 1997). In examining the literature related to face-to-face learning communities, characteristics emerge that can also help us examine and define a virtual community (see, for example, Carboni, 2004; Kowch & Schwier, 1997; Murphy, 2004). By synthesizing both the structures related to virtual communities and the characteristics of face-to-face learning communities, we have expanded upon the participant structures framework to examine the social/emotional and knowledge-building aspects of online learning communities.

Table 1 lists the seven characteristics by which we examined and analyzed our online discussion forum as a potential online learning community. We have translated these characteristics into indicators of potential success for a network to become an online learning community through a synthesis of both literature related to electronic communities and learning communities in general (Riel and Levin, 1990; Levin, Kim, and Riel, 1990; Stephens and Hartmann, 2002; Carboni, 2004; Hicks, 1997; and Murphy, 2004).

Not all of these characteristics need to be present to create a successful electronic community; Riel and Levin (1990) assert that successful networks may lack one of the first five characteristics, though networks lacking two or more are likely to be unsuccessful. As for a successful online learning community, we posit that some level of the two additional characteristics, Social/Emotional Connections and Sharing/Constructing Knowledge, are essential.

Table 1: Framework for Examining a Potential Online Learning Community

Characteristics of an Online Learning Community	Indicators of success
Organization of Network	•Participants are physically separated but share an interest or have a need to work together.
Task Organization	•Participants have a shared goal or task. •More specified tasks with set goals, timeline, and end product may promote more participation.
Response Opportunities	•Most participants have reliable, easy, and equal access to technology. •Online communication needs to be more efficient than other means of interaction.
Response Obligations	•Participants have reasonable pressure to access the forum regularly; they feel a responsibility to the group and/or task.
Coordination and Evaluation	•There should be a person facilitating/ coordinating the group interactions. •Final evaluation of the group task can promote participation.
Social/Emotional Connections	•Participants share personal information, express feelings and emotions, and acknowledge a connection to the group. •Exchanges express mutual trust, caring, and respect for other participants.
Sharing/ Constructing Knowledge	•Participants share ideas and expertise and respond to others' questions. •Participants pose questions, ask for clarification/elaboration, and solicit feedback. •Participants challenge each other and/or established routines, consider multiple perspectives, and may engage in debate and disagreement.

METHOD

Context/Participants

Nine elementary teachers (all female; 7 Euro-American, 1 African-American, 1 Asian-American) were selected as cooperating teachers for student teachers from a private university in the Southeastern U.S. Cooperating teachers taught at three different elementary schools in the same small, urban school district and ranged in teaching experience from four to 27 years and in experience as cooperating teachers for the university from zero to seven years. All were selected as cooperating teachers after to applying to the university and receiving recommendations from colleagues and supervisors. During the semester in which

they were mentoring student teachers (August –November), these cooperating teachers participated in an asynchronous, web-based, threaded discussion forum. Before the beginning of the student-teaching semester, cooperating teachers participated in a workshop addressing mentoring skills and use of the online forum, a Blackboard-based, password-protected discussion forum provided by the university. Only one had experience using Blackboard; none had previously participated in an online discussion forum. A former student teaching supervisor from the university (who was also a former elementary teacher) facilitated the online discussion.

Data Sources

Three sources of data were examined to consider whether the discussion forum functioned successfully as an online learning community: the online messages posted to the discussion forum, fieldnotes of the facilitator's observations and interactions with participants, and interviews (see Appendix A) with cooperating teacher participants approximately mid-way through the project and following its conclusion (audiotaped and transcribed). All participants are identified only by pseudonym to preserve anonymity.

Data Analysis

We began by analyzing the online messages, interview transcripts, and fieldnotes, looking for their relationship to the five participant structures first introduced by Riel and Levin (1990): organization of network, task organization, response opportunities, response obligations, and coordination and evaluation. We were able to find data supporting both the presence and, in some cases, the absence of aspects of these characteristics; however, we felt that there were important characteristics of the online forum that were not emerging through this framework. In order to construct a full, rich understanding of the potential online community, we wanted to enhance that framework.

In considering the kinds of messages and comments that did not fit within our framework, but were important to understanding the whole of the forum, we turned to literature surrounding the development of learning communities among groups of educators. Although this literature primarily addresses groups of teachers who meet in person, we felt that some of the rich aspects of these communities might also be applied in an online environment. Many ideas related to learning communities overlapped with the Riel and Levin framework, such as sharing a common purpose, needing ease of access, addressing motivation to participate, and providing facilitation.

One aspect that was missing from our original framework was an attention to the strong social and emotional support aspects of being a part of a community, be it electronic or not. In a learning community, not only do participants address the task at hand, but they also share personal information and express feelings and emotions in an atmosphere of mutual trust, caring, and respect (Hicks, 1997). In addition, an important aspect of a learning community is both the sharing of knowledge among the group, as well as the construction of new knowledge as a group. In considering these aspects of learning communities, we added two characteristics to our original framework, Social/Emotional Connections and Sharing/Constructing Knowledge, providing a revised framework of seven characteristics of an online learning community.

These seven characteristics of an online learning community, synthesized from the literature on both electronic communities and learning communities, provided a framework

for analysis. Through a cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990) of the online messages, interview transcripts, and fieldnotes, we examined these data sources for both examples and non-examples of these characteristics. Through repeated examinations of online messages, interview transcripts, and fieldnotes, a picture emerged of the relationship between the structure and interactions of this discussion forum and the development of an online learning community as defined by these seven characteristics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Over the four months of the online discussion forum, the cooperating teachers and facilitator posted a total of 199 messages. Teachers posted an average of 18.1 messages each during the four months, with a range from 9 to 42 messages per teacher. The facilitator posted 36 messages over the four months, averaging 18.5% of the total messages. When compared with the 25% and 40% staff messages reported in similar discussion forums (Author, 2003, Lehman, 1999), this percentage is considerably lower, which seems to indicate that the bulk of the discussion was contributed by the cooperating teachers.

The online discussion forum possessed most of the characteristics of a successful online learning community (see Table 1 for more about each characteristic). A summary of findings for each characteristic are described below.

Organization of Network

It has long been established that teachers are often isolated in their work; so, too, are cooperating teachers (Little, 1990). Interviews indicated that even cooperating teachers who worked in the same school had little opportunity to interact and discuss their roles as cooperating teachers. Because these teachers were spread across three schools, they had even less opportunity for face-to-face interaction. One teacher noted: "The biggest thing I think was that I felt connected with the teachers at the other schools, which is something, definitely, I've not felt before because of the distance and the physical separateness" (Sandy, interview 2). The asynchronous nature of the online forum allowed participants to read and respond to discussions at the time and in the location that were most accessible, making participation more convenient than a face-to-face meeting. Although many indicated that they did not recognize the need to talk to other cooperating teachers before this experience, once they began the forum, they reported that it met their needs for support and sharing of ideas, for example: "I don't talk to the people who have student teachers, and they're across the hall…I think [the discussion forum] was definitely a positive experience…I think it may have changed how I worked with [my student teacher]…it helped me find out information that I previously didn't know" (Shari, interview 2). In this forum, the characteristic of "Organization of Network" possessed the necessary indicators for success.

Task Organization

At the training session, participants determined that their purposes for the forum were to offer support and request and offer advice during their time as cooperating teachers. The timeline for the use of the forum was set for a specific four-month period, so it was a focused time frame. Periodically the facilitator attempted to guide discussion by asking for responses to specific questions, but did not suggest specific tasks or end products. Only an average of 50% of participants responded to these postings; however, many, such as Shari (Interview 2)

commented that "[the facilitator] could ask us more questions…each week," suggesting that they felt the need for more directed tasks. The cooperating teachers themselves actually raised more topics for discussion than the facilitator, contributing 67% of all new threads of discussion. When examining threads specifically related to teaching and/or student teaching (as opposed to informational or technical topics), cooperating teachers began 81% of the new threads, supporting the goals set by the participants at the beginning of the project. Although there was not a set end product established, participants seemed to take initiative to shape the discussion to suit their purposes, and one participant noted: "I think it served the purpose…what we started out to do" (Carol, interview 1). At the end of the semester, another participant summed up the experience: "It was an open forum for all cooperating teachers to share ideas and concerns and just discuss any issues that were relevant to our experiences and to gain support from each other" (Andrea, interview 2), echoing the original goals that the participants set for themselves. The characteristic of "Task Organization" possessed most of the necessary indicators for success, although more specific goals leading to an end product of some type might have increased participation and/or satisfaction with the experience.

Response Opportunities

All participants had a computer with Internet access at their home and school, although access was not always easy. One participant found: "The problem for me is…I have to do it at home because my computers are messed up at school" (Holly, interview 1), while another found: "I wanted to do it at home, but I have dial up and it takes a lot longer. It just kind of got frustrating" (Rebecca, interview 2). These two participants, however, were the only teachers who complained of access issues.

According to participant surveys, they rated themselves an average of 7.6 out of 10 (10 being very proficient) on basic telecommunications skills. However, they rated their proficiency with online discussion as 3.3 out of 10. To address the technical skills necessary to utilize the forum, they participated in a training session and received a manual with detailed instructions for forum use. 100% of the teachers participated in the forum throughout the semester, indicating that they could apply skills taught in the training session to use the forum. Throughout the forum, only three technical questions/concerns were raised and promptly addressed by the facilitator.

Participants seemed to agree that the online environment was more convenient than face-to-face meetings would be, for example: "I think it was a great idea, better than 'let's have a meeting every Wednesday at five o'clock'…it's so much easier to do it whenever you could get to it…seven o'clock or eleven o'clock or on the weekend…I like that flexibility" (Shari, interview 1).

The characteristic of "Response Opportunities" possessed the necessary indicators for success.

Response Obligations

At the training session, participation obligations were outlined in the training manual, including spending a minimum of one hour per week reading/posting on the discussion forum and posting a minimum of two messages per week. Participants received a stipend from the university and continuing education credit from the school system for participation. Even with these incentives, only 17 % of the participants actually met the stated response

obligations of two postings per week. One participant noted, "I feel like not everybody participated as much as they could have. Maybe some more commitment from everybody would have given us a better picture; that would have been helpful" (Shari, interview 2).

In interviews, however, participants reported that they frequently spent more time reading and reflecting on others' messages than posting messages. Although we cannot accurately measure the amount of time participants spent in passive participation, their reports indicate that most did meet the response obligation of one hour per week. Because of the satisfaction expressed by the majority of participants, including the facilitator, perhaps two postings per week was not a necessary requirement. When examining the percentage of participants posting at least once a week, it increased to 56%. One participant explained, "I tried to incorporate it into my weekly routine. So once a week whenever I would check my email, I would also check the discussion board" (Andrea, interview 1). Additionally, all participants contributed at least some messages to the forum. The characteristic of "Response Obligations" possessed most of the necessary indicators for success.

Coordination and Evaluation

Extensive efforts were made to provide an easily-accessible website for the forum as well as to prepare user-friendly training materials and relevant training prior to the beginning of the forum. Participants seemed to appreciate the training, for example, "I think the training there in the computer lab, getting on and signing on, doing that right away was very powerful because we didn't have to sit there later and try to follow directions" (Sandy, interview 1). Once the forum was introduced to participants, an experienced online facilitator participated throughout the duration. The facilitator's role included encouraging participants, providing technology support, sharing personal news, providing information, raising questions, and asking for responses. One participant remarked, "[The facilitator] allowed us that room to really make it what we wanted it to be and what we needed it to be…it wasn't something that [the facilitator] drove all the time" (Sandy, interview 2). Although the facilitator tried to allow the teachers to drive the discussion, some wanted more direct guidance, for example, "I would like more questions from [the facilitator], just to get direction. Sometimes I felt like what I had to say didn't really offer much, so I wouldn't respond" (Betsy, interview 1). Because of the flexible and support-focused nature of this forum, no formal evaluation of participation was planned or provided, possibly limiting the accountability participants felt. The characteristic of "Coordination and Evaluation" possessed the necessary indicators for success related to coordination, but not evaluation.

Social/Emotional Connections

Especially at the beginning of the forum, interpersonal connections and friendly interactions seemed to be important to these teachers. Teachers began with messages introducing themselves, and began to "chat" with others that they had met previously: "Sandy, too bad I'm not teaching second grade this year! Update me about [your school]!" (Holly, 8/7 post). Sandy replied, "I know!! I really miss having you over here! Never quite the same. It'll be good to keep in contact with you, though:-)" (Sandy, 8/7 post). The facilitator also made a point to be a part of the interpersonal reaching out: "I'll be off the computer tomorrow because my husband and I are going to Manhattan to see a Broadway show for his birthday!" (Kathy, 9/30 post).

The cooperating teachers expressed an appreciation for feeling "connected" to the group, for example, "It's a link and communication to somebody out there. Without it we wouldn't have had any communication [with each other]" (Shari, interview 2). Several others also described how participation in the forum helped make them feel less isolated: "This online discussion board has helped me get some sense of what is going on in other people's classrooms instead of feeling really isolated" (Andrea, interview 1); "I've really enjoyed hearing the feelings of other people when maybe I've felt some of the same feelings…and then hearing how someone else handled things" (Amanda, interview 1); "I think a big thing is that teachers always need sounding boards…You're always stuck in a room and it helps to be able to play things off somebody else…That's worth a whole lot" (Holly, interview 1).

Within the context of mentoring student teachers, not only did the participants share information, but they also expressed some of their feelings and emotions related to that experience. One participant described her uncertainty about balancing her role as a cooperating teacher: "My tightrope is ambiguous this year, as I continue to provide more training and guidance while also disappearing from the scene more. From day to day, I am unsure in which direction to step" (Andrea, 10/25 post). As the time came for student teachers to take full responsibility for teaching in the classroom, and for the cooperating teachers to completely turn their classrooms over to the student teacher, one participant expressed emotions more intensely: "I give my student teacher advice and it does no good. I feel horrible but on Friday I [had to tell her something critical]. Yikes, I hate to type that…I am going nuts and want the room back. I know she is trying and I am giving her lots of positive feedback but DANG LISTEN TO ME WOULD YA! O.K. I feel better. lol (laugh out loud)" (Amanda, 11/8 post). Cooperating teachers also reported that they shared their emotions with their student teachers: "…when things don't go so well, we talk about it, but I try not to let it discourage her. Some days I feel inadequate as a teacher and mentor and I share those feelings with her" (Betsy, 9/15 post).

The experience of being a cooperating teacher mentoring a student teacher is one that can be intense and emotional (Caruso, 2000). Although a large portion of the messages contained efforts at social and emotional connections, these interchanges tended to stay at a somewhat surface level. For example, one participant described a situation with her student teacher in a matter-of-fact reporting of events, without stating any emotions: "On Friday I tried to stay back and just watch to see if she would recover, but they just continued to talk while she stood there. I just had to step in. I don't mind giving up control, but I have seen her just stand there and not be able to function" (Rebecca, 10/18). In conversation with the university supervisor, however, this event stood out as a very emotional one for the cooperating teacher, even to the point where she questioned continuing in this role. There were several other instances of participants reporting events on the forum without the emotional undertones that were apparent in anecdotal reports of face-to-face conversations. The teachers were consistently polite and respectful of one another, but did not appear to use the forum to move beyond social conversation.

Therefore, the characteristic of "Social/Emotional Connections" possessed most of the necessary indicators for success, although the sharing of feelings and emotions was more on a social/superficial level than grappling with the emotions involved in being a cooperating teacher.

Sharing/Constructing Knowledge

The cooperating teachers did use the discussion forum for the purpose they determined at the start, to offer support and request and offer advice related to their mentoring of student teachers. They posed questions to one another, for example: "I'm just curious as to how many teaching responsibilities your student teachers are assuming during the next two weeks?...I'm thinking about just having her plan and provide differentiation. Any thoughts?" (Betsy, 11/7 post). She received two responses to this question, one offering advice about Betsy's idea and one sharing what another teacher was doing with her student teacher. This message spurred Betsy to question what end-of-the semester activities others had planned for their student teachers. One teacher responded with her ideas. In fact, each time that a cooperating teacher posed a question to the group, at least one person responded. In one case, the teacher shared a situation with her student teacher and asked, "Are we really giving them a true picture of what teaching is REALLY like? Anybody else experiencing these thoughts?" (Holly, 10/7 post). She received seven responses to that message, one acknowledging her experience and the others sharing their own student teachers' situations.

The more experienced cooperating teachers occasionally offered advice based on their experiences: "[Along with supporting my student teacher] I try to make sure the other student teachers in my building feel welcome to come into our room to talk to one another…When another student teacher comes into the room I tend to remove myself (though not far in case they want to talk to me) so that they can vent or collaborate or whatever in a semi-private atmosphere. After all, isn't our greatest support our colleagues?" (Sandy, 9/14 post). Some teachers also celebrated their student teachers' successes: "I'm happy to report that my student teacher had a breakthrough regarding classroom management this week!...She kept talking about how powerful it was for her, how she had no idea before that, how much more enjoyable and easy it made her teaching. Phew!!! I'm curious about others' experience with this issue" (Andrea, 9/6 post). This message generated nine responses about individual student teachers and classroom management, as well as five responses that got into teachers' own issues with classroom management, for example: "[When I had a very large class] I can honestly say that it took every ounce of my energy just to keep my head above water! I never felt that I knew each child as closely as I wanted to or was used to" (Holly, 9/28 post).

This transition from discussion of mentoring student teachers to discussion of classroom teaching in general was evident from the beginning weeks of the forum. Teachers "compared notes" about their teaching situations, daily schedules, and behavior management strategies. The lengthiest discussion of the semester came in response to this message: "Amanda and I will be starting literacy centers next week with our student teachers and two resource teachers who don't have much experience with this…(description of the schedule)…Does anyone have experience with this type of setup? Ideas for the writing block? Ideas for saving on planning time? Any ideas you'd like to throw out there? :>)" (Andrea, 9/6 post). Other teachers suggested resource books, listed their literacy centers, shared the logistics of their literacy time, and added questions of their own. This thread of 12 messages stands out as the most interactive, with participants sharing and responding to each other in a give and take that was not apparent in most of the other threads of discussion.

The facilitator attempted to prompt the exchange of knowledge and feelings about being a cooperating teacher: "I walked my own tightrope between trying to keep the discussion going and maybe pushing it to a higher level, but making sure the teachers were

driving the discussion and using it to meet their needs" (Kathy, interview 2). She tried to do this by posting a question each month to which everyone was asked to respond. These questions asked the cooperating teachers to consider topics related to mentoring student teachers: how they help student teachers analyze their own teaching (four responses), how they deal with student teachers' emotional states (five responses), how they balance supporting their student teachers with giving them independence (seven responses), and how they provide useful feedback for their student teachers (two responses). The facilitator was hoping for more give and take about these issues: "My hope was that we would engage these issues together and, through all this, construct our own understandings about being a cooperating teacher. I just don't think it got to that level, though" (Kathy, interview 2).

The facilitator's observation appears to be characteristic of the discussions in which the cooperating teachers engaged. The participants demonstrated many instances of sharing ideas and expertise, posing questions, soliciting feedback, and responding to one another's questions. They typically did not, however, seem to move beyond the sharing of ideas and experiences to deeper levels of grappling with the issues of being a cooperating teacher. Some teachers expressed, however, that their participation in the discussion forum had an impact on their mentoring of student teachers: "Just reading over what other teachers were doing was helpful for me, even if I didn't respond, but just to get ideas" (Rebecca, interview 1); "It just gave me insight into what other student teachers were doing and where they should be and what we should be doing to help them" (Karen, interview 1); "[It helped me find] ways to communicate with my student teacher (Betsy, interview 2); "I think it changed how I worked with [my student teacher] just from getting the feedback" (Shari, interview 2).

Possibly, the facilitation of the forum could have been used as a way to provoke the teachers' consideration of multiple perspectives and engagement in respectful debate and disagreement. Dealing with such challenges to their ways of thinking may have helped the teachers grow further in their understanding and learning related to mentoring student teachers. Therefore, the characteristic of "Sharing/Constructing Knowledge" possessed the necessary indicators for success with regard to sharing knowledge, but the participants did not exhibit the construction of new knowledge through the online discussion.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

First, this online discussion group fully or partially demonstrated all characteristics of successful electronic communities described by Riel and Levin (1990). It was especially successful in the organization of the network, the response opportunities available to the participants, and the coordination/facilitation of the online discussion. The organization of the task(s) on the forum was more nebulous, but some participants did take the initiative to begin and maintain conversational topics. One implication of this lack of organizational structure is that more well-defined tasks, created by the facilitator or the participants themselves, might have increased the productivity of the community. These types of tasks might also have increased participants' sense of response obligation and accountability to the group. Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth (2001) note that common experiences, such as this type of shared task, can provide a foundation for the building of community. They caution, however, that setting up a structure to support the development of community in and of itself does not teach people how to interact differently. We consider this discussion forum to be successful in the original definition of an electronic community (Riel & Levin, 1990;

Stephens and Hartmann, 2002), but believe that an online *learning* community goes beyond these characteristics.

In considering our additional characteristics of "Social/Emotional Connections" and "Sharing/Constructing Knowledge," the discussion forum demonstrated less development in these areas. The forum did prove useful for sharing ideas and experiences, which seemed to reduce the isolation that these teachers typically felt, as have other online forums (e.g. Carboni, 2003; Parr & Ward, 2006; Selwyn, 2000). The discussion did not, however, include the more complex aspects of constructing new knowledge, such as considering multiple perspectives, building consensus, or debating issues. Selwyn (2000) contends that online forums will never be "more than sites of information and empathetic exchange among disparate professionals whose sense of community lies elsewhere" (p. 774), although he does allow that online groups could complement face-to-face communities and networks among teachers.

Therefore, although the online discussion forum generally met the criteria of a successful electronic community and was particularly useful in the giving and receiving of ideas and advice, it did not appear to evolve into showing the full promise of a learning community. It served as a complement to the work the university was already doing with cooperating teachers, but did not move beyond sharing ideas to actually grappling with them as professionals. Perhaps tasks or problems could have been created within the context of the discussion forum that might have provoked these aspects of discussion, although it is likely that skillful facilitation would be needed to increase the value of these tasks (Kienle & Ritterskamp, 2007). More consideration needs to be given with regard to how the role of the facilitator and the design of tasks contribute to the development of an online learning community.

The cooperating teachers universally reported that participating in the forum was a valuable experience and they would choose to participate again. They indicated that the forum provided a positive, supportive environment, one where they could connect socially and emotionally with others having similar experiences and frustrations (as in Carboni, 2003; Parr & Ward, 2006; Selwyn, 2000). As one teacher said, "It allowed people to…say what they felt. And there were times when there were questions that needed to be answered and there were times when we needed support and it was out there" (Shari, Interview 2). Further study of online professional development could help more cooperating teachers connect with one another and the university to further their own and, hopefully, their student teachers' professional growth.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Mid-way interviews:
What do you feel you have gotten out of participating in this discussion forum so far?

How do you feel about your level of participation in the forum?

Did the fact that you were leaving a permanent written record of what you were saying ever influence what you wrote? How so?

How, if at all, does participating in this online forum affect what you're doing as a cooperating teacher?

How would you change the online forum to make it better?

Is there anything else that you want to tell me that might help us understand this better?

Final interviews:
What do you feel that you have gotten out of participating in this discussion forum this semester?

What do you remember about the kinds of things that you posted on the forum?

How do you feel about your level of participation in the forum?

Did you have any technical problems using the website?

Think about how participating in the forum related to how you mentored your student teacher this year. Do you think participating had any effect on what you did with your student teacher?

When you have a student teacher, do you typically collaborate or talk with other cooperating teachers about your mentoring of him or her?

Do you feel that by participating in this forum you have the chance to communicate with people you normally wouldn't communicate with?

How do you think this whole experience could this have been more effective or more rewarding for you?

If you were talking to another teacher in your building who had no experience with this and they said, 'What is this thing you're doing with the computer?,' how would you sum it all up for them?

Is there anything else that you want to tell me that might help us understand this better?