



TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

Communities of Practice in Online Learning

by [Jennifer Renn](#), [Trish Morita-Mullaney](#), and [Wayne E. Wright](#)

In the face of a rapidly growing K–12 English language learner (ELL) population worldwide, many schools and school districts have struggled to provide training that supports teachers who work with ELL students. In most cases, they have relied on traditional professional development (PD) approaches that are convenient and time-efficient, but are also often episodic, disconnected, short-term, and “nice to know” but not of immediate application to their classrooms (Teemant, 2014; TESOL International Association, 2018). In contrast, online licensure and degree programs provide longer term, more in-depth training, but are often perceived by teachers as impersonal and distant.

In this article, we describe how our graduate program at Purdue University has implemented an online ELL licensure program that has overcome these concerns about online learning by successfully using teacher cohorts to develop communities of practice and creating courses that are relevant, accessible, and engaging for in-service K–12 general education teachers (Morita-Mullaney, Renn, García, & Wright, 2020). Given the recent and swift migration to online learning in K–12 and teacher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we use our experience to shed light on how training and preparation for all teachers of ELLs can persist and be enhanced through an online format.

Components of a Quality Online Program

Purdue University’s online ELL licensure program consists of five courses covering conceptual and applied topics on the language and literacy development of ELLs. The courses are taught over the course of one calendar year, providing ample opportunities for reflection as teachers dig more deeply into theoretical and practical topics related to teaching ELLs. Based on our experience, three key components make an online program more accessible to K–12 teachers:

1. coherent content
2. user-friendly technology
3. regular interaction among students and instructors

Content Coherence

To attain a clear, coherent curriculum, it is important to identify where the courses connect, overlap, and build upon each other to ensure that the courses reinforce one another, helping teachers to see how the content is connected across courses. In addition, all class instructors should make sure that instructional samples are furnished for abstract topics and that concrete examples are coupled with related scholarship so that teachers are able to make connections between theory, research, and practice.

Technology as a Scaffold and not a Barrier

In-service teachers are busy and have varying levels of comfort with technology, so it is important that they can easily find instructions, assignments, and resources within the online learning management platform. When a course is poorly designed, students and instructors end up spending a large portion of their time dealing with technical issues. By working with instructional designers, programs can create a consistent format across courses and maximize the accessibility of the content. The online navigation should be clear for users, allowing technology to serve as a scaffold toward accessing the target content through the inclusion of supports like videos and interactive presentations and activities; this can be accomplished with strong planning.

Interaction Is Key

Finally, online programs should place a strong emphasis on promoting interaction throughout all of the courses. Interaction should be frequent, required, and relevant. It should also be facilitated through both written activities, like blogs and discussion boards, and oral means, using applications like [VoiceThread](#), a cloud-based multimedia presentation program where instructors and students can easily create narrated online presentations. Class members can also post text, audio, or video comments on any slide to discuss the content. This creates an engaging, asynchronous conversation that feels more like in-class presentations and discussions. Using this oral medium allows for a more authentic dialogue, where teachers can build on each other's comments and ideas. This supports the development of a community of practice as teachers connect with their peers as they reflect on their ELL-focused teaching practices.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2015, p. 1).

Communities of practice possess three key elements:

1. the domain
2. the community
3. the practice

Here we describe the three key elements of communities of practice and explain how they can be incorporated into programs.

The Domain

The *domain* is the shared interest that generates a group identity. Though teachers may enter the program for a range of reasons, they all share a commitment to serving their ELL students and an interest in learning how to do so more effectively. Despite working in different grades and in a variety of school districts, these shared interests can naturally create an immediate connection among the program participants. This group identity can be enhanced by activities, like blogs, where the teachers introduce themselves and their reasons for joining the program. Encouraging them to then comment on their peers' blog posts creates opportunities for finding shared interests and goals in the process. This allows participants to "get to know" each other, dispelling the myth that online courses lack connectedness (Kim, Song, & Coppersmith, 2018). When possible, teachers should be encouraged to post videos rather than audio or text comments, especially at the beginning of courses, so that they can actually see each other's faces. These approaches help to overcome the "distance" that is often felt in online learning and allow the group to develop and strengthen a shared identity.

The Community

The *community* is where members jointly construct understanding around content of interest with increasing complexity. Because members of the community learn from one another, it is critical to require frequent, regular interaction. Major concepts can be introduced through readings, short video lectures, VoiceThread presentations, and video clips of effective classroom practices. Discussion boards, blogs, and VoiceThread discussions then provide opportunities for the teachers to ask questions, make comments, and share experiences as they make connections between theory, research, and effective practice for their ELLs. The community can be enhanced through group projects and field experiences, such as conducting ELL student case-studies in teachers' own schools and classrooms.

Rather than establishing the instructor as the sole expert in the class, these projects enable teachers to collaborate and share across their different school settings and grade-level classrooms, making the content pertinent to their personal and professional experiences. One teacher in our ELL program said, "I love our classroom interactions. At the end of the week I have learned from my instructor and my fellow students. My classmates often discuss newer topics in ways that make the content more relatable to me." When teachers join the program as a cohort and stay in the same group over the program's duration, the feeling of collective belonging deepens over time.

The Practice

The *practice* is where community of practice members codevelop resources and strategies that inform their shared identities as practitioners. Building understanding and engagement in an instructional practice entails the sharing of experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing persistent problems (Wenger, 2015). It takes time to build the necessary trust and understanding required to share a practice, so it is important that teachers have the time to build those relationships.

Throughout the classes, teachers should have regular opportunities to share thoughts, strategies, and experiences, in order to find overlap with others as well as to hear different perspectives and new ideas. For some activities, it can be beneficial to organize participants into small groups based on the grade or the content area that they teach. This allows students to have more in-depth and sustained interactions with two to three students, as well as develop a practice that is specific to their professional context. Throughout the courses, teachers can be invited to share concerns, successes, failures, strategies, and instructional approaches, working together to more effectively teach their ELLs.

Sustaining Communities of Practice

At the end of our program, teachers report feeling more knowledgeable and better prepared to serve their ELLs. A big reason for this is their sustained participation in a community of practice. Working with other in-service teachers provides them with a range of views and experiences and a richer, more relevant learning experience. Program graduates are excited when they recognize each other's voices and faces at professional ELL conferences and workshops. They stay in touch with each other and remain a source of support, continuing to share knowledge. Furthermore, participants leave the program with increased confidence and renewed purpose. One graduate, for example, reported seeing herself as "being more of an advocate for the ELL students in our school and being more of a teacher-leader" after completing the program. Teachers take on leadership roles in their schools and districts and become vocal advocates for their ELLs. Most importantly, they serve as mentors for other colleagues and build communities of practice within their own schools, districts, and communities.

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