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ESL Teachers' Online Discussion Forums and Professional Development

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Abstract

Teachers' online discussion forums play an important role in ESL teachers' professional development. They provide opportunities for in-depth peer-to peer interaction, self-directed learning, exchange of knowledge and expertise, and greater involvement in teaching-learning and student-teacher issues. Forum members can share resources such as tests, e-books, lesson plans and software. They post questions and receive answers about teaching and learning English issues. Forums also enhance teachers' awareness of non-conventional issues such as: Teaching business with no teaching certificate, Facebook pen-friends, teaching in rural schools in China, online tutoring, using Taekwondo to teach English, testing private students at Euro levels, using songs in TEFL, stopping parrot training, teaching pre-literate students and others. The presentation will give examples of online discussion forums for ESL teachers, kinds of topics, issues and problems posted about the teaching and learning of English, and their role in ESL teachers' professional development as perceived by teacher members.

Keywords: professional development, ESL teachers, online forums, discussion forums, teacher's performance, language teaching

1. Introduction

Latest developments in information and communication technology have made it easier for teachers to communicate with each other. Teachers no longer need to meet face to face to discuss teaching and learning issues and problems and exchange ideas and experiences. They can do so through e-mail, mailing lists, newsgroups, live chat, text-messaging, videoconferencing, webinars and online discussion forums (ODF). Synchronous and asynchronous online learning communities are widely used in almost every profession such as education, business, law, medicine and others. In particular, asynchronous ODF 's for English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) teachers have become popular online learning communities where teachers from many parts of the world join and interact.

A review of the literature has shown that numerous studies have investigated the effectiveness of participating in ODF's on teachers' performance and attitudes. For example, Carboni (1999) investigated the use of an ODF to support practicing elementary school teachers' professional development in mathematics. The forum was structured around teachers' sharing, discussing, and reflecting on elementary mathematics teaching. The forums helped math teachers make sense of teaching mathematics, helped them support and share with each other as a learning community.

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In another study, the pilot Teacher Dialogue Forums provided Georgia teachers with an opportunity to learn about current research on teaching, share views and learn from colleagues. It let their voices be heard and used to shape practice and policy in teaching. The teachers appreciated the forums and the opportunity to discuss teaching in the light of current research (Fletcher, 1999).

In a third study Hawkes and Romiszowski (2001), 28 practicing teachers in ten Chicago suburban schools participated in a two-year technology-supported problem-based learning curriculum development effort. Asynchronous computer-mediated communications (CMC) were featured as teacher communication tools of the project. The researchers concluded that the value of CMC lies in its ability to facilitate professional collaboration between teachers and encourage critical reflection on educational policy and practice.

A review of the literature on asynchronous discussion forums by Andresen (2009) revealed that asynchronous discussion forums can generate the critical dimensions of learning found in the traditional classroom, but it has some limitations.

In Prestridge's (2010) study, 16 teachers across eight geographically removed schools participated in an online threaded discussion forum for a school year as part of an ICT professional development program. The findings gave evidence of both collegial and critical forms of discussion. Collegial discussion was found to be important in developing and maintaining community while critical discussion was vital for transforming teachers' beliefs.

In second language teaching, Son (2006) examined an online discussion group established for a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) course and investigated patterns of interactions generated through the online discussion and participants' attitudes toward the computer-mediated communication (CMC) activity. The participants were 24 English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL), 1 French and 1 Japanese in-service teachers. Interactive messages were exchanged between the teachers to give their opinions/ideas and support. The teachers' overall reactions to the online discussion group activities were positive. Most teachers considered the activities to be constructive, enjoyable and valuable. They agreed that online discussions were an effective way of learning CALL and CMC could facilitate collaborative learning. The researcher concluded that CMC can provide teachers with communication channels for sharing ideas and resources and collaborating with their fellow teachers.

Despite the multitude of ODF's and their popularity among many teachers worldwide, more studies that explore the content of ODF's for ESL/EFL teachers are still needed. Therefore, the present study surveyed a number ODF's for ESL/EFL teachers and aimed to explore the following: (i) areas of ODF's for ESL/EFL teachers; (ii) kinds of topics and issues posted about the teaching and learning of English as a second/foreign language to students of all ages; (iii) benefits and weaknesses of ODF's and their possible role in teachers' professional development, based on the views of a sample of ESL/EFL teachers who are members of those ODF's, as well as a content analysis of a sample of threads posted and issues discussed.

Despite the popularity of ODF's among many ESL/EFL teachers, many more ESL/EFL teachers are still not members of such forums. Thus results of the present study will introduce those teachers that are not familiar with ODF's and those who are hesitant to join them to the types, uses, benefits and weaknesses as perceived by colleagues who are members of such forums.

Definition of Terms

*An **online discussion forum***[1] is a website that is hierarchical or tree-like in structure. It can contain a number of sub-forums, each of which may have several topics. Within a forum's topic, each

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_forum

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new discussion started is called a *thread*, and can be replied to by number of people. Depending on the forum's settings, forum members can be anonymous or have to register with the forum and then subsequently log in in order to post messages. On most forums, users do not have to log in to read posted messages. ODF's differ from chatrooms in that messages are temporarily archived. A forum has an administrator and one or several moderators.

Professional development[2] refers to skills and knowledge attained for personal development and career advancement. It encompasses all types of facilitated learning opportunities, ranging from college degrees to formal coursework, conferences and informal learning opportunities situated in practice. Professional development is also achieved through a variety of approaches, including consultation, coaching, communities of practice, lesson study, mentoring, reflective supervision and technical assistance. A wide variety of people, such as teachers, health care professionals, lawyers, accountants and engineers engage in professional development. They may participate in professional development because of an interest in lifelong learning, a sense of moral obligation, to maintain and improve professional competence, enhance career progression, keep abreast of new technology and practice, or to comply with professional regulatory organizations.

2. Data Collection

2.1 Sample of ESL ODF's

A random sample of 10 ODF's for ESL/EFL teachers was located online. They were browsed and their content examined to explore the kinds of sub-forums they contain and kinds of discussion threads and topics posted. The sample covered the following forums:

1. *ESL Teacher Cafe: http://china.eslteachercafe.com/*
2. *TEFL Net: http://www.tefl.net/forums/viewforum.php?f=4*
3. *MES English Forums: http://www.mes-english.com/forums/viewforum.php?f=3*
4. *ESL Teachers Board: http://www.eslteachersboard.com/cgi-bin/forum/index.pl*
5. *English club: http://www.englishclub.com/tefl/viewforum.php?f=9*
6. *English forum: http://www.englishforum.com/00/teachers/*
7. *Using English: http://www.usingenglish.com/forum/teaching-english/*
8. *ESL pages forum: http://www.eslpages.com/forum/*
9. *ESL Partyland: http://www.eslpartyland.com/tdisc.htm*
10. *ESL Cafe: http://www.eslcafe.com/discussion/*

2.2 Participants

A sample of 100 participating ESL/EFL teachers was randomly selected from the ten forums surveyed. The sample covered novice as well as experienced teachers from China, Korea, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Oman, India, Spain, Mexico and Brazil. The sample also covered ESL.EFL teachers with a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degree.

2.3 Questionnaire-surveys

The participants were contacted by e-mail and were asked to answer a survey-questionnaire with open-ended questions that asked about the following: (i) the benefits of participating in an ODF for ESL/EFL teachers with examples; (ii) the shortcomings of participating in an ODF for ESL/EFL teachers with examples; and (iii) whether an ODF has any effects on their professional development and in what way it enriches their teaching performance.

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professional_development

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The total number of teachers giving the same response was computed and then converted to percentages. Responses to the survey questions are also reported qualitatively.

3. Results

3.1 Types of ESL/EFL Teachers' ODF's

An examination of the types of forums surveyed has revealed that there are general-purpose ODF's that target all ESL/EFL teachers regardless of their level of expertise, area of specialization, a specific student group, a courses or skill taught. Such forums consist of many sub-forums that target any language learning and teaching area as in Figure 1. In addition, there are special-purpose forums that focus on a specific area such as announcing TESL/TEFL items and events, applied linguistics, assessment and testing of ESL/EFL students, ESP and business English, material writers, ESL/EFL textbooks, teaching TOEFL, teaching pronunciation, keypal projects, multiculturalism, bilingual education, use of computers and technology in ESL/EFL, using video in the classroom, or ESL/EFL computer software. A special-purpose ODF may also target a particular group of people involved in ESL/EFL teaching or learning and those who teach a special group of students such as an ODF for academic directors and coordinators, teachers and administrators of IEP programs, elementary education ESL/EFL teachers, teachers working with preschool children, teachers working with secondary school students, teachers working with refugees or teachers working with deaf students.

3.2 Advantages of ODF's

Participants indicated that membership in ODF's is free (93% of the participants). Members include teachers from different countries and cultures, different ages and years of experience (novice, experienced), different areas of specialties (CALL, bilingual education, applied linguistics and others), educational level (B.A., M.A., Ph.D.) (91%). Forums can be accessed anytime, anywhere and as many times as they wish. Forums provide opportunities for in-depth peer-to peer interaction (78%). They foster dialog and create social inter-personal rapport among members. They provide opportunities for cognitive, social, and teaching presences (53%). They promote asynchronous self-directed learning, peer support and greater involvement in teaching-learning and student-teacher issues (59%).

3.3 Effects of ODF's on Professional Development

The participants surveyed indicated that ODF's help them exchange knowledge and experiences (94% of the participants). They learn from other teachers' posts and learn from the teaching tips offered. They can upload and download resources such as tests, video activities, movies for the ESL/EFL classroom, ebooks, lesson plans, software, Powerpoint presentation, puzzles and worksheets (92%).

The participants reported that they find the forums very helpful (93%). They help them communicate problems and suggestions to other members. They post queries and receive immediate answers from several members to teaching and learning issues such as teaching via Skype, grammar usage rules, improving students' accent, ideas for increased comprehension, communicative activities, how to reinforce speaking, problems in teaching writing, reading, grammar, pronunciation and others. They can post requests for teaching strategies, lesson plans, audio-visual aids, solving software problems, and teaching and learning problems as in Figure 1 (91%).

In addition, ODF's enhance teachers' awareness of non-conventional teaching issues such as: Teaching business with no teaching certificate, Facebook pen-friends, teaching in rural schools in China, teaching Buddhist monks, online tutoring, using Taekwondo to teach English, testing private students at Euro levels, using songs in TEFL, ideas for teaching presentation with 600 students, stopping parrot training, and teaching pre-literate students and others (53%).

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3.4 Weaknesses of ODF's

Although participants in the present study find ODF's helpful, they pointed out several weaknesses. For example, the volume of threads posted and responses is overwhelming. It is difficult to locate a certain topic (89% of the participants). The forums' search tool is inefficient. When a keyword is entered, a random list of threads is obtained (74%). They added that it is time-consuming to read and respond to the messages of so many teachers (87%). The main forum categories are too broad and some are overlapping. This might lead some members to misplace their topics (65%). Threads with specific subjects generated more posts, responses and views than non-specific ones. Sometimes the message subject is not specified as in question *"I have a problem"; "please help me"; "Christmas"; "greetings and congratulating."* (Figure 1).

4. Discussion

The positive effects of ODF's on ESL/EFL teachers' professional development in the present study are consistent with other studies in the literature such as Carboni (1999), Fletcher (1999), Hawkes and Romiszowski (2001), Andresen (2009), Prestridge (2010) and Son (2006). As in the present study, Fauske and Wade (2004) revealed that both men and women participating in ODF were inclusive, supportive, personalizing, receptive to others' ideas, and attenuating.

However, the effect of participation in those forums on professional development and on whether teachers are following the lesson plans, applying the teaching strategies posted, and readily choosing to incorporate web resources into their teaching cannot be estimated without pre- and post-participation measures and assessment. Koszalka (2001) found that teachers who participated in computer-mediated discussions had significantly higher attitude scores toward the use of web resources in their classrooms and were more likely to adopt such innovations than those who did not.

Moreover, the effect of ODF's on teachers' professional development depends on several factors. McAteer and Harris (2003) indicated that success is influenced by purpose, i.e., reasons for introducing CMC, the content, tasks, intended outcomes, group profile and support systems available. Hough, Smithey and Evertson (2004) added that clearly articulating purposes for discussions, framing the kind of participation expected, including both experienced and beginning teachers, and establishing trust among participants shape the kinds of issues and depth of thinking revealed.

5. Conclusion

Online Teachers' Discussion Forums are popular among ESL/EFL teachers. Results of questionnaire-surveys, in the present study, with 100 ESL/EFL ODF participants revealed many benefits for EFL/ESL teachers such as: Posting teacher-made tests, resources, links to ESL websites, lesson plans, teaching tips and ideas, using the computer in teaching and learning, and job searching issues and others. The Forums seem to be ideal for fostering dialog among ESL/EFL teachers. They promote asynchronous self-directed learning, peer support and greater involvement in teaching-learning and student-teacher issues. They provide an opportunity for cognitive, social, and teaching presences, essential for the successful development of online learning communities.

Although the members of the surveyed EFL/ESL ODF constitute a homogeneous group and the climate of interaction is warm and positive, EFL/ESL forum categories need to be more focused, message subjects need to be brief, clear, specific and messages need to be posted under the designated category. Adding an index, thesaurus of terms or tags to EFL/ESL ODF will help EFL/ESL teachers enter their comments in the right place.

To overcome the overwhelming amount and variety of information posted in EFL/ESL ODF, and to facilitate the storage and retrieval of posts on specific topics, the study recommends the creation of an ESL/EFL teachers' network with several databases, similar to Discovery School and teachers' T.V., that may include an EFL/ESL ODF, different language teaching subject area sub-forums, a test-

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bank, lesson plans, teaching resources, an e-library, teaching ideas, conference dates and calls, live training and tutoring; web-links, news about current developments in the profession and others. Each of these may be created in hypertext and searched in a way similar to specialized database searching such as ERIC, using keywords, descriptors and Boolean operators *"and, or, not".* To help EFL/ESL teachers join the forums and network, links may be included in the school districts' and university websites. Orientation workshops and user guides may be used to introduce ESL/EFL teachers to those technologies which will ultimately lead to better communication, interaction and professional development among members of the ESL/EFL profession.

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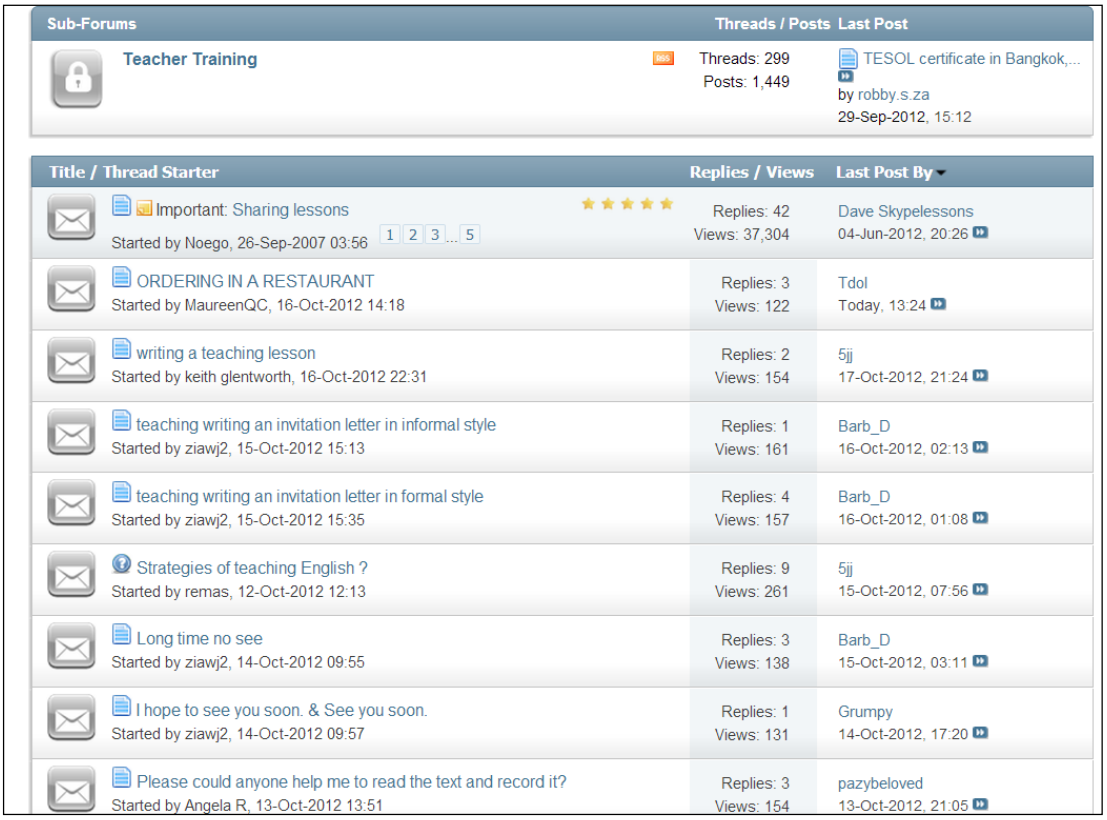
Appendix



Sub-Forums	Threads / Posts	Last Post
Teacher Training	Threads: 299 Posts: 1,449	TESOL certificate in Bangkok,... by robby.s.za 29-Sep-2012, 15:12

Title / Thread Starter	Replies / Views	Last Post By
Important: Sharing lessons Started by Noego, 26-Sep-2007 03:56 1 2 3 ... 5	Replies: 42 Views: 37,304	Dave Skypelessons 04-Jun-2012, 20:26
ORDERING IN A RESTAURANT Started by MaureenQC, 16-Oct-2012 14:18	Replies: 3 Views: 122	Tdol Today, 13:24
writing a teaching lesson Started by keith glentworth, 16-Oct-2012 22:31	Replies: 2 Views: 154	5jj 17-Oct-2012, 21:24
teaching writing an invitation letter in informal style Started by ziawj2, 15-Oct-2012 15:13	Replies: 1 Views: 161	Barb_D 16-Oct-2012, 02:13
teaching writing an invitation letter in formal style Started by ziawj2, 15-Oct-2012 15:35	Replies: 4 Views: 157	Barb_D 16-Oct-2012, 01:08
Strategies of teaching English ? Started by remas, 12-Oct-2012 12:13	Replies: 9 Views: 261	5jj 15-Oct-2012, 07:56
Long time no see Started by ziawj2, 14-Oct-2012 09:55	Replies: 3 Views: 138	Barb_D 15-Oct-2012, 03:11
I hope to see you soon. & See you soon. Started by ziawj2, 14-Oct-2012 09:57	Replies: 1 Views: 131	Grumpy 14-Oct-2012, 17:20
Please could anyone help me to read the text and record it? Started by Angela R, 13-Oct-2012 13:51	Replies: 3 Views: 154	pazybeloved 13-Oct-2012, 21:05

Figure 1: Sample Discussion Threads from "Using English" ODF[3]

[3] http://www.usingenglish.com/forum/teaching-english/

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