

# Development of teaching practice among university English language teachers – cases from Hong Kong

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### **Declaration**

I, LEE Pui confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## **Abstract**

At the turn of the 21st century, universities in Hong Kong established language centres – teaching-focused units responsible for equipping the majority of their students, who are non-native speakers, with the language proficiency necessary for English-medium instruction. During the subsequent decades, the professional development needs of this unique group of teachers has been a concern of these centres' managements. With a lack of previous models, they have adopted various approaches, resulting in varying policies, to encourage individual and collaborative professional development among these teachers. While there were various models of collaborative professional development such as Community of Practice (CoP) in the literature at the time this research started, this research examines the discrepancies between the theoretical model and the practitioners' actual professional development experiences. This was achieved through the recording, analysis and discussion of the professional development experience of eight teachers from one of the university language centres in the territory. Three waves of semi-structured interviews were conducted over one calendar year, in order to elicit their memories and thoughts on their experiences in developing their teaching practices through a range of individual and collaborative activities. Transcripts of these interviews were then consolidated into cases and then analysed thematically, followed by a discussion of these findings' implication for institutions in similar circumstances.

### **Impact statement**

This thesis provided a contextualized and comprehensive review of the implementation some “words-of-the-time” notions in professional development (Communities of Practices, reflective practitioners, teacher-as-researcher...) despite the fact that professional development of TESO/FL teachers is a well-researched area, I believe this thesis contributes to knowledge and professional practice in three ways:

First, its longitudinal design enables the emergence of any changes and continuation (or the lack of them) of HE TESOL/FL teachers’ professional development-related perceptions and actions over the entirety of a regular academic year, particularly before and after professional development events and at different stages of various projects. These findings can shed light on the factors influencing the effectiveness of professional development activities and would be of reference value for HE teaching units in their formulation and development of professional development policies: For instance, rigid reporting cycle of professional development progress may discourage practitioners from planning any projects that may not yield immediate results. It is therefore important for the appraisal system to recognize teachers’ long-term efforts in different stages of projects that span over more than one year (or an appraisal cycle of any other length).

Second, it could potentially be seen as a hypothetical “what-if” case for any higher education teaching units which may one day expand, stabilize and eventually getting into a seemingly state of “plateauing/ contentment”. By reading this thesis, policy makers and managers of these units can possibly think ahead for remedies of some issues that may emerged as a result of that state. For instance, by creating a mechanism which allows (or expects) practitioners to flexibility adjust the weightings of their teaching, scholarship other duties according to the evolving needs of the institution.

Third, the rather *lasses-faire* approach in the featured institution’s professional development policies, and the diverse ways of interpretation and manifestation of professional development among the participants, could remind institutions and professionals about the an important lesson: No single paradigm, approach, method or tool can be seen as the one-size-fits-all solution --- even if that appears to “word-of-time” and

everyone seem to embracing it. In this research, Wenger's Community of Practice had been seen as the solution to a myriad of issues, yet the initial enthusiasm among the participants quickly dwindled out. The same can be said to the seemingly unchallengeable notion of "collaboration among practitioners": At the end of the year, those who did spend a lot of time and effort in collaborative projects and those who initiated communities for practice were noticeably less motivated to continue their efforts. The conclusion of this thesis should add more urgency to institutions to continuously research into their staff's changing professional development needs and the ever-evolving repertoire of professional development strategies and tactics.

### **Reflective statement**

In this statement I am going to review and reflect on my initial motives and expectations when I first applied to the EdD programme, each of the stages of the coursework, my experience in IFS and how that had shaped the subsequent thesis in terms of research scope, epistemological view and methodology. I am also going to share about how unexpected external circumstances had nearly stalled the entire project, and how I, with the generous support of my supervisor and other caring people, managed to regain momentum and reached the final stage. I will conclude by discussing how the EdD journey has molded me professionally, academically and personally, and impact it might have on my future. (It's potential contribution to knowledge and practice were discussed in the impact statement)

For many years since my not-too successful undergraduate days, I simply did not consider myself "PhD material". I did a taught master's degree and I thought that was about the highest academic level I could get to. The idea of needing a doctorate came to me when I started teaching in higher education settings – a doctorate was what everyone around you either have or saying that you should have, if you want to continue working in higher education.

Then for many years I did not manage to compile a successful proposal/ application – there were frustrating external factors, but I must admit that I was rather ignorant about the nature and expectation of a doctorate. To compensate my lack of systematic research training, I then undertook a systematic course on research methods, developing both a holistic understanding and a practical competency in conducting empirical inquiries which I then carried forward to subsequent proposal writings; And as I my experience in higher education accumulated, I was exposed to a wider range of institutional circumstances, policies and practices that could potential be discussed in a research. And also through constant interactions with fellow teachers, administrators, students and other stakeholders, the scope of my research topic started to take shape.

In this process I also became of determined to go down this path --- I vaguely had a "vision", or at least some "hunches", and was wishing that through a guided research process I could contribute to the betterment of a particular area or issue in the field. More specifically, after

working with so many dedicated and professionally competent teachers, I could not help wondering what made them great teachers? I initially wanted to delve into the influence of initial teacher education (and did that in the IFS) but later realised that there was a wide range of pathways leading to a teaching career in Higher Education, even within my seemingly narrow field (TESOL/ EAP/ESP in HE settings). I then had to “zoom out”, read more extensively and eventually for a rough theoretical framework for the initial proposal for application. This application was then accepted by the UCL (IoE back then) EdD programme. This was the only programme that accepted me, so I enrolled.

I can now reflect and say the younger me was in a state of euphoria throughout the coursework stage – it was actually a very packed and demanding series of courses on top of a full-time teaching job, mixed with the excitement and tiredness of frequent intercontinental travelling. And I need I am particularly grateful for my cohort of 12 lovely colleagues – we are all so different – 12 nationalities and all very different prior experiences and career goals (and more than 30 years of age range), and yet we are all so similar in being determined, willing to take risk, endure lonely and difficult times while still remaining sympathetic and supportive to everyone else. Most importantly, we were able to provide timely, critical yet constructive feedback to each other, despite our very different academic and professional upbringings.

The course started off with a discussion about the nature and contemporary development of professionalism (not necessarily education). This was a bit of a surprise for me as I had a rather narrow perception of what Education research entails back then. However, after interacting with my colleagues and knowing more about what they intended to get out of the EdD journey I could see that professionalism was actually the perfect starting point of everyone who were newly onboard – it was like the intersection point of what we were doing and the starting point from which inquiries into various workplace issues can be initiated. I was lucky enough to have Dr Celia Whitchurch to be my tutor. Her concept of “Third-space professionals” was eye-opening for me as that demonstrated how “hunches” developed in daily professional practice can be theorised and potentially make profound impacts in the field. Through the theoretical lens of the readings and her guidance over the two drafts I started to bring my seemingly trivial and fragmentised thoughts about

university English teachers' professional development into a more coherent and grounded whole for future developments. Her comments also helped me to set high standards in terms of coherence, organization and consistency in the upcoming tasks.

With the "not PhD material" doubt subsided I can say I sailed quite enjoyably through MoE1 --- perhaps partly because of the systematic research method training courses I did prior to application. However, there were still lots of gaps to fill when you are expected not only to shape a research scope, word the questions, proposal a methodological framework, and most importantly justify your choice of methods. This experience will later be essential in the thesis and viva stage. I received useful feedback from Dr Charlie Owen about how to make the structure of a research proposal clear and easy-to-follow for the readers and myself. This is an important lesson which I would later realise (during IFS) that I should have worked harder on.

MoE2 soon came and I was in good spirits as I finally had the chance to practice using the methods that I have been training for. However, a slight bit of worry started to emerge as ethical clearance, data collection and analysis were uncharted territories for me. I did have a plan, tools and timeline but little idea about how a research project unfolds, and as a qualitative researcher I did not have a lot of hands-on experience eliciting responses from participants. All the above worries turned out not to be problematic as I had the ideal group of participants – enthusiastic on the topic, articulate and supportive. For an initiative attempt and a short project that may be ideal, but that also means that I did not have the chance to deal with less consistent and organised findings, which would eventually emerge in my IFS and thesis stages.

My IFS was the first major obstacle during the EdD journey. The scale and complexity of the IFS project had then grown significantly. It was hard to make sense of the data, to identify continuities between the literature and findings, and even more difficult in organising and communicating my ideas in a way that is comprehensible to readers. As the deadline approached I resorted to compiled the paper in an unconventional way – something like a chronological narrative. And perhaps not too surprisingly the examiners were critical of this, together with my writing's inadequacies in terms of coherence and preciseness. I was given a 10-point to-do list for improvement, based on which it rewrote my paper and passed the



course on the second attempt. Those points, such as importance of a more critical view on adopted theoretical and methodological frameworks, and a more explicit continuity between paragraphs and sections, were honestly issues that would still recur from time to time during the thesis stage – but then I was equipped with more sensitive and critical eyes to detect them, and the techniques in fixing them.

With these lessons learnt my research proposal and ethical clearance were approved without many difficulties. I managed to justify a year-long longitudinal, interview-based research on teachers (changing views) on (factors influencing) professional development, as they were going through various in-house and external professional development activities. Quite quickly after that the data collection process began in earnest. With another group of very keen and expressive colleagues to participating as interviewees, I again seemingly “sailed through” the three rounds of interviews, without much thought and effort in processing the massive amount of data except perhaps mechanically transcribing. This was early 2019 and Hong Kong and the world around me was on the verge of some massive turbulences and changes.

First escalating and continuous political unrest left the city in turmoil. Everyone might have their own opinions and reactions, but as educators I had to continue our work among a torn and traumatised student population, facing a uncertain future. Worse still, the COVID19 pandemic hit and the city went to nearly three years of panic, social distancing, lockdown, quarantine... and on the education front, repeated class suspensions and switching between online and restrict face-to-face teaching. This was an unprecedentedly demanding time for the education profession. For me personally, prolonged state of confusion, uncertainty and continuous emotional labour finally took their toll --- the stress put me in a state of “paralysis” – I evaded from reading and doing anything about the thesis.

It took me over a year to “switch back on”. Here I particularly need to thank the kind and continuous effort of my supervisor Dr Gwyneth Hughes in literally finding me, and supporting me when I was slowly regaining the momentum in the subsequent months. She and my co-supervisor, Dr Jane Allemano, provided me with practical suggestions on data reduction and analysis, and pointed me to some good samples of some EdD graduates’ thesis. With their help I decided to take a two-step approach in the presentation of findings

through cases, followed by discussion of thematic findings. This made the completion of the final parts of the thesis finally looked reachable.

Now as I am getting ready to defend this thesis, apart from being grateful for the opportunity and the support I have received through the journey, I am evermore certain that embarking on this journey was the right decision: It is of course a degree from a highly recognised institution, and more importantly it is tailored for education professionals, equipping us with the intellectual depth and exposure to maneuver through the current and future challenges in the field; I now possess hand-on experience on the planning, designing, unfolding and presenting of empirical research projects in the education field, which is an increasing necessary competency as the profession become a more fluid mix of teaching, research and other services; I am also now connected to a global network of professionals, which can potentially lead to fruitful collaborations.

I would like to conclude by sharing a personal point of view. I think I can compare the EdD journey with my other “hobby” which involve voluntary “self-inflicted suffering” – Marathon running. When the younger me was determined to run a full 42.195 Km Marathon I did not have a clear idea about where this hobby would take me to physically and spiritually. For a few years I trained religiously, hoping to reach the revered “finisher” status. However, on the race day as I “sailed through the 20, 30, 35... and eventually 41 km sign, I strangely did not feel really excited about finishing, but instead being amazed and grateful for all the tiny bits of progress I have achieved and accumulated over the years, and the joy of being in this race – both individually and with people around me. Now, at perhaps the equivalent of 41 km mark of my EdD journey, I am not overly excited by the prospect of adding a few letters on my business card anymore. Instead, I am celebrating accumulation of knowledge, betterment of practice, and the satisfaction brought through a deeper knowing of myself and other people.

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I would first like to express my gratitude to many kind and wise people who have given me encouragement and support throughout my EdD journey.

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## **1. Introduction**

This section will explain how the research was first incepted, followed by the justification of its intended purposes. Then the contextual information necessary for understanding of the following findings and discussions will be provided.

### **1.1 Initial motivation and rationale**

I am currently as an English language teacher in a university language centre. Over my 11 year stint here I can observe that sharing and collaboration among teachers did not seem to be as common, sustainable and effective as the centre management had visioned.

In my earlier Institution Focus Study, I briefly attempted to look for reasons why teachers tend not to share or collaborate: Emerging from the data back then, most participants were not against sharing --- in fact exchanges had always taken place spontaneously, and they did agree and hoped that these exchanges could lead to collaboration and ultimately better teaching practices. Then I probed further to identify the reasons behind why these informal exchanges remained fragmentised and undervalued and therefore remains in the pantry and hallways, rather than making impact on policy making, curriculum planning, pedagogy development and ultimately their students' learning. Their responses were almost unanimously about the lack of time, or time clashes with their other duties.

It seems paradoxical: Teachers would be motivated to share and collaborate if they see that as relevant and helpful in accomplishing their teaching goals (in this case, enhancing English Language proficiency for academic purposes in specific fields, yet such rewards would only emerge after investing the time in sharing and collaboration. This observation led me to considering what could be done by practitioners (individually or as groups) and the institution's management to kick-start a momentum of professional exchange: one that would bring together these existing fragments of sharing and collaboration, making them visible to other practitioners and in and beyond the institution, and potentially creating a synergy that could be harnessed for the development of the practice of teaching English for Academic/Specific purposes (EAP/ESP) at the university level.

## 1.2 Intended purpose and potential significance

As mentioned in 1.1, this research aims at making empirically informed suggestions for practitioners and management who have the intention to promote collaboration for a better practice, and to identify and remove existing barriers which are preventing that from happening. It also intends to help participating teachers to recall and reflect on which they have been doing individually and collectively for their own professional development, and to acknowledge the progress they have made during the data collection period. This aggregate of experience would hopefully inspire ideas for more effective professional development beyond this research; for managers, it would provide a non-consequential space in which they can reflect on the formulation and implementation of certain professional development initiatives and policies outside the institutional process. This reflection could potentially enable better-informed and more nuanced policy making in the future.

And from a wider perspective, the need for collaboration seems to have drawn the attention of our counterparts in other universities in the territory. Similar initiatives have already emerged in recent years. For example, the cross-departmental communities of practice initiative in Baptist university which was started in 2014 (Wong et al, 2016), and an inter-university Language Centre network (Hong Kong Continuous Professional Development Hub for University English Teachers, HKCPD Hub) initiative was launched in 2017. The development of these initiatives has caught attention at a national level and are now subsidized by the University Grant Committee of the Hong Kong Government. This has made possible for an investigation into the planning, implementation and evaluation of collaborative professional development to, potentially, go beyond one single institution. This breaking of barriers would lead to findings that could inform professional development policies of language centres, and potentially that of any other teaching-intensive units.

## 1.3 Background

It would be difficult for readers from outside of Hong Kong and its English language teaching field to understand some of the phenomena that are discussed in this thesis. Therefore, here I am including some essential background information about education, language and

teaching profession in the territory, then narrowing down to the university in which this research took place in the latter parts. The account, unless otherwise referenced, is based on my personal experiences as a resident in the city, a student in the education system, and later on as a practitioner of the profession.

#### i. The city

It should be noticed that despite being regarded as an international city by many, Hong Kong's population is predominantly Chinese (over 97 percent), most of them Cantonese speakers who either migrated here or have ancestry in Southern Chinese provinces. Although Cantonese is the default language in daily life, English is very widely present visually in the city as most printed materials and signages are bilingual. There is also common mix-coding in the local variant of Cantonese (Bolton, Bacon-Shone & Luke, 2020).

20 years after the end of British rule, English still possess the status of "high language", although both Chinese and English are official languages constitutionally (Lai, 2019). English is the lingua franca in the legal and business matters, and in higher education. It common for important documents to be only available in English, or bilingual yet come with a "In case of discrepancies between the two versions, the English version shall prevail" statement.

#### ii. The education system

Free education is available for all. Pupils start with a six year primary school curriculum, then spend another six years in a secondary school. They would take a centralised public examination (HKDSE) upon completion of secondary 6. In the examination, Chinese and English languages, Mathematics are required, plus a combination of several other subjects of the pupil's choice. The result of this examination determines their further studies and career options.

These has been a long and ongoing debate over Medium of instruction in schools. Policies are constantly changing and varies among schools. There are schools which teach entirely in English (except in Chinese and Chinese History lessons), some teach entirely in Chinese (except in English language lessons), most schools are somewhere in between. On top of



this, there is another debate over while Chinese instruction should be in Mandarin or Cantonese or a mix of both (Li, 2022). It should be noticed that English medium schools are generally perceived to be “more prestigious”, as parents see them as a necessary preparation for studying in better universities (which are almost always EMI) and subsequently having better careers.

The government funds nine institutes through the university grant Committee (UGC) and they absorb about 25 percent of each cohort of school leavers. Tuition fees are fixed at HKD\$42,195 (around 4,000 Pound sterling) per annum across all majors, affordable for most Hong Kong families. Different subsidies are also available to those in need. These institutions are all very resourceful, internationally recognised in terms of teaching quality and research capacity (Top universities, 2018). It is generally believed that their graduates tend to have good career prospects. Subsidies are provided to those who have attained a certain level in the public examination and wish to pursue studies in private institutions, while some would choose to study abroad on their family’s expenses.

Most parents here attach great importance to education, universities studies are considered by many to be “the default” for school leavers. Competition into UGC institution is keen, resulting in widespread exam-oriented teaching, after-school tuition and high stress. Three of the UGC universities, including the one in which this research took place, are widely considered to be “the top three” due to their high international rankings and good reputation among employers.

### iii. The teaching profession

Most school teachers are not directly hired by the government, they are contracted to individual schools or institutions. However, most are paid according to a fixed and open pay scale according to their experience and training background, and the government fund the schools accordingly. The annual increment is automatic and there is good chance of turning tenure. School teaching is considered to be one of the better paid career paths for graduates and a well-respected occupation. To enter this field, one need to possess a good honours degree, followed by a postgraduate certificate in Education (PGCE), during which a

practicum is required. It is not uncommon to find applicants with master's degrees, and most teachers would eventually get one or more during their careers.

At tertiary level there is a clear distinction between research staff (professorial ranks and post-doc fellows) teaching-track staff (Instructor/ lecturers), switches between the two pathways are rare. A significant portion of the universities' undergraduate curriculum is delivered by members of the teaching-track staff, particularly the generic subjects like languages, mathematics, liberal studies and physical education. Though they have a significant impact on the undergraduates' learning experience, there is no centralised qualification requirement for this group of teachers. Individual universities and departments/ units can set their own employment criteria and hire according to their own needs and discretion. Generally speaking, these teachers tend to be hired on contracts and paid less than school teachers. They may or may not have prior teaching experiences, but some may have experiences in other fields.

#### iv. The university

The university in which this research took place is a comprehensive university, offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in areas ranging from Science and Engineering to Business, Social Science and Humanities. It is considered to be one of the "top three" locally and has been very highly rated by international rankings organisations like QS and Times Education.

Due to the government's funding policies, at the time this research was conducted 80 percent of the undergraduates are local students. A dominant majority of them went through the local education system and did well in public examinations, while others got associate degrees or other qualifications; About half of the remaining student population were from the mainland of China, many of them were high-flyers in the country's very competitive college entrance examination. There were also a relatively small but very diverse group of international students.

This university is fully English-Medium --- English is supposed to be the sole language used in lectures, lectures, correspondences and assessments. There were some non-compliances in small group tutorials or postgraduate supervisions, but the policy was mostly respected and implemented. However, Cantonese remained the dominant language in local students'

social life, and it could be observed that non-local students tended to gather with peers who speak the same language.

#### v. The language centre

Like all other universities in the territory, there was a dedicated unit for language teaching and learning, usually referred as the language centre. Below is an overview of the structure and dynamics in the centre in which research is based.

#### vi. The Curriculum

The centre's main responsibility was the planning and delivery of compulsory English and Chinese language courses, particularly the undergraduate English language courses which occupied most of the centre's manpower and resources.

All undergraduates of each intake (About 5000 students) needed to go through an English language curriculum, which consisted of English for Academic purpose (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes courses (ESP) (To be further elaborated in points vii and viii). The former was a common requirement across all freshmen of all majors. It had components of general proficiency enhancement and basic academic literacy: such as vocabulary expansion, presentation and discussion skills, paraphrasing and referencing; the latter was spread across the students' second to fourth years, and were designed in response to the needs of different fields of studies, such as technical description for Engineering, article critique for Humanities and Social Sciences, proposals and sales pitches for Business. Writing support was also offered to those who needed to complete a thesis/ final year project.

There was also an informal curriculum available to students who would be interested in enriching their language learning. While some of these of them were leisurely like movie nights, others were very goal-oriented like IELTS preparation and mock job interviews. Individual speaking and writing consultation sessions were also provided as part of the informal curriculum, yet teachers of formal courses can refer their students to these services according to their students' needs.

#### vii. English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

In this research, much of the participants' duties were related to English for Academic Purposes (EAP). It is therefore important to define it and review its recent development at the beginning of this thesis: EAP emerged as a unique type of English Language Education in the 1970s, parallel to the expansion of university recruitment across English-speaking countries, an increasing flow of international students, and the inevitable increase of diversity in terms of students' language learning needs as a result of that.

To understand the emergence and initial development of this field, it would be helpful to examine the evolution of the name of the EAP professional body in the UK. It reflects the origin and a subsequent, more refined understanding of the scope of the practice: It was first founded as "Special English Language Materials for Overseas University Students (SELMOUS) in 1972, targeting a very selective group of teachers and the pedagogical context that they were practicing in, and it was later transformed into "The British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes" (BALEAP) to accommodate and represent a growing force of EAP practitioners and to facilitate EAP's development as a specific and recognised discipline in the field of higher education (About us - BALEAP, 2016).

Over the past decades of EAP's development, there has been an ongoing debate between the EAP practitioners with other stakeholders in university education about the boundaries and nature of EAP. And as a result, EAP practitioners feel that there is a constant need to clarify their roles and responsibilities in students' academic and intellectual development. They need to defy a common misconception of seeing EAP as a "spelling and grammar correction service" (Nicholls, 2021, p.168) and make a case for the crucial role in equipping students with the linguistic and communicative competencies which enable them to engage in learning and research in their respective disciplines (p.177); That is also a noticeable tension between university management who would like to keep EAP a teaching-only department to maximise its profitability potentials, and the EAP practitioners who recognise the need of allocating resource to research for better practice (Ding & Bruce, 2017).

To sum up concisely, EAP can be defined as "the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). While it is often seen as an auxiliary service on the side of other academic departments in universities, some EAP practitioners are actively making a case for this field

to be recognised, not only as an important functionality in students' development, but also as a recognised academic discipline per se through developing research-informed practices.

#### viii. English for Special Purposes (ESP)

English for Special Purposes (ESP) is a relative generic type of English Language teaching. It first appeared in response to the communicative need of professionals travelling to work in English-speaking countries. A similar need also later emerged among students, especially international ones, as academic disciplines then were becoming increasingly specialised and complex, leading to the rise of EAP (as illustrated in the previous point).

However, as EAP continue to develop, some practitioners like Jordan (1997) started to further divide EAP into EAP and "English for Generic Academic Purposes (EGAP)": While EAP aims at developing general language competencies and transferrable academic literacy skills (most typically paraphrasing and referencing) to students across different disciplines; "English for Specific Academic Purposes" (EASP) focuses on developing students' competencies in discipline-specific genres (e.g. Laboratory Report for Science). On the other hand, some other practitioners like Hyland (2002) argues that there should not be such a distinction, as any EAP course should by definition be specific to their respective disciplinary context and therefore such a subdivision is not useful.

As this debate is not in the scope of this research, I am not going to take any of the stances discussed above. For simplicity, I adopt the terms EAP and ESP only, and define them in the context of the research field (More details of various aspects of the field to be provided in the rest of this section): EAP here in this thesis refers to the first-year courses for general proficiency enhancement and academic literacy skills; while ESP refers to the subsequent, more discipline-specific courses.

#### ix. The university English teachers

In this centre all teachers possessed at least a Master's degree. Most had studied language or education related subjects. About a quarter to a third had or was pursuing a doctorate. Most had teaching experiences in various settings before joining the centre, while some had

worked in other fields. The staff was a very culturally diverse group, more than half of the members were from outside of Hong Kong, or had spent time overseas studying or working. Under the director and associate directors (the senior management) there were several senior lecturers who taught less hours and did more administrative work, including appraisal of teachers, strategic planning and liaison with other university units and outside organisations. Promotion to this rank was open for application by all teachers, but quite a few were directly recruited from outside.

#### x. Work allocation

Teachers in this centre had a standard weekly teaching load of up to 20 hours. They usually taught five to six classes of two to three different courses in one semester. Class size was relatively small (18-20, compared to around 35 in secondary schools) and was supposed to be student-centred and interactive, revolving around formative feedback. Teaching hours could be reduced by taking up administrative duties, leadership roles, teaching during winter/summer breaks or other reasons approved by the centre management.

Teachers could indicate which course(s) they prefer to teach, but the management had the right to assign according to the centre's needs. It was assumed that any teacher in the centre should be qualified and able to teach any of the courses offered. Movement between courses were common and there was no guaranteed continuity in teaching duties.

Work allocation and appraisal were almost the only occasions that the centre management interacted with the individual teachers. Day-to-day delivery of courses was coordinated by various course teams, headed by their respective course coordinators; while teachers' professional development was taken care of by the professional development committee of the centre, and also by several teacher-initiated interest groups, and a then newly-started intervarsity initiative. These notions are mentioned frequently in this thesis and therefore I am now explaining what they were and how they worked here.

#### xi. The teaching teams

Each team consisted of all teachers teaching the course and was convened by a course coordinator, who was usually an experience teacher on the course, or for newer courses a teacher who was involved in the development of the curriculum and materials. Bigger

courses may have one or more co-coordinators. The team meet several times throughout the semester. Typically, there would be a pre-course briefing session, moderating sessions before or after assessment gradings, and a post-course evaluation. Administrative reminders would be shared via email, and there were also occasional experience and teaching materials sharing in these emails.

It should be emphasised that in this centre course coordinator was a functional title. They were not necessarily senior lecturers. Other team members were not really subordinated under his/her command: While everyone was expected to adhere to the course's general goals, assessment criteria and deadlines, individual teachers' methods and styles were respected and seldom interfered. Also, the coordinator did not have power over his/her team members' appraisal.

#### xii. The appraisal system

At the time when the research was conducted, all teachers needed to go through the centre's appraisal practice annually. The result of the practice determined their chances for contract renewal, salary adjustment and promotion to senior positions in the centre. It started with the completion of a form consisting of self-reflection and future plans, coupled with student-feedback questionnaire results and other evidence of contribution to the centre and professional growth (e.g. peer comments, lesson observation). Research output like conference presentations, and evidence of pursuit of further studies could be included but would be only listed as "optional" items. Teachers report to their "appraisers" (senior lecturers assigned by the director and rotated bi-yearly) in this process, and the appraiser would meet and discuss with teachers individually several times over the year, and eventually recommend a grade (from unsatisfactory to excellent) to the senior management, who would then make the final decision.

#### xiii. Professional development committee

As all teachers hired were experienced and assumed to be able to teach any course in the curriculum of a certain language, there was little provision or intervention from the centre management and the university's higher hierarchies. At the university level there were optional, short-term courses provided centrally, most of them were for academic staff

members who might not have teaching qualification or experience. The rest were almost entirely practical, such as induction to teaching-related online platforms.

At the centre level the approach was equally *laisses-faire*: There was a committee formed by members from senior management and staff representatives who volunteered to be on commit (elected among teachers if there were more volunteers than needed). Their main duty was to approve applications for reimbursement of conference or tuition fees from teachers, and to organise a series of “Friday professional development workshops”, led by either teachers who volunteered to share their thoughts or research findings on a certain pedagogical issue, or workshops delivered by outside experts. Participation in all these activities were optional.

#### xiv. The interest groups/ communities of practice

Encouraged by the centre’s management, several teachers started interest groups on various topics ranging from teaching of a certain language skill to exploration into issues in Applied Linguistics and Psycholinguistics. These groups were renamed “community of practice” by the management (with reference to Lave & Wenger’s (1998) model) shortly before this research started. Some groups were formed along the lines of existing work groups (e.g. part of a course team), some were started from scratch.

Participation in these groups was voluntary and no commitment was expected initially. The meeting frequency, format and topics were flexible, either initiated by the convener or agreed among participants. Some participants eventually formed smaller groups and committed to scholarly projects like conference presentations.

It should be noticed that this is not this centre’s first attempt in setting up interest groups. A similar idea had been put forward about five years before this one. However, all those groups started back then did not survive for longer than two years due to dwindling interest and commitment of participants.

#### xv. Inter-varsity collaborative initiative



In 2017 five university language centres jointly submitted a proposal to the University Grant Committee to start a platform for sharing of good English teaching practices, and to facilitate collaboration between language centres. A three-year grant was eventually provided for a “Hong Kong Continuous Professional Development Hub for University English Teachers (HKCPD Hub)” to be set up, leading by these centres but open to centres of other UGC universities as well.

Teachers can participate in this initiative in different capacities: They can share blog/video entries about their practice or discuss in the forums on the Hub’s online platform; they can join seminar/ workshops on various topics, during which they can interact with their counterparts from other centres; they could also take part in symposiums and conferences as participants or presenters. Apart from providing a platform on which professional peers can share their experiences, the government grant had also made possible for the Hub to invite international experts to share their insights on current EAP/ESP issues on these occasions.

The descriptions above are the necessary contextualisation and explanation of terminologies for readers of this thesis. I will now conclude this initial chapter of the thesis by shifting the focus back to the research: I am elaborating on the philosophical and epistemological stance I took during the research, and will provide a structural overview of the entire thesis after that.

### 1.5 Philosophical and epistemological stance

This research is inspired by a constructivist epistemology. At this initial point of the project, two principles are highlighted as they are particularly relevant to a number of choices in methodologies and methods that will be detailed in the following sections.

The first is the co-authorship of the researcher and the subjects. Behind this are assumptions about the existence and availability of one’s experience to its owner:

“My past is available to me in memory in a fullness ... but this ‘better knowledge’ of myself requires reflection. It is not immediately appresented to me.” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p.29)

As the researcher can facilitate this “reflection”, as the researcher “offers from the outsider’s standpoint explanations that emphasize causal or structural patterns of which participants in the case are unaware... it may affect their perception and hence tacit grounding of their actions.” (Stenhouse, 1988, cited by Bassey, 1999, p. 28) This is manifested in the design of this research through longitudinal interviews in which the researcher and participants co-create accounts of experiences, and subsequently help them to surface and create meaning out of these experiences. To this end, Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) is adopted as the overarching methodology, as IPA specialises in the study of humans making sense of their own lived experiences (Smith & Osborne (2015). How it has shaped the design of this research will be elaborated in section 3.1.1.

The second principle stems from the relativist tradition advocated by Karl Mannheim, which preceded the formation of constructivism as a paradigm. He acknowledges that “knowledge must always be knowledge from a certain position”, but at the same time argues that limitations brought by such subjectivity can be mitigated by “the systematic analysis of as many as possible of the varying socially grounded positions” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p.10). This principle has led to my choice of Case Study as the approach of data collection and analysis, as it can be a compilation of “multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 1994, cited by Bassey, 1999, p.27). In the context of this research, the professional development of the target institution can be seen as a case that is based on eight sources of evidence, who are the eight participants; and at the same time each of the accounts of individual participants are also cases, as all of them involve triangulating data from multiple interviews. The details of and the rationale behind the Case Study approach in this research will be elaborated in section 3.2.

## 1.6 Structural overview of this thesis

Section 1: This introductory section includes an explanation of the initial motivation and purposes of this research; a general-to-specific illustration of the research context; declares the philosophical stance of the researcher; and provides a preview to the structure and flow of this thesis.

Section 2: The literature review begins with a discussion of what constitutes teacher knowledge, followed by a review of a few approaches for attainment of that. Then it will be narrowed down to several models of collaborative teacher professional development, and their application in recent East Asian contexts. It also includes a critique of these models, and an alternative perspective through the lens of knowledge management in non-education fields. At the end of the review research gaps are identified, based on which research questions are formulated.

Section 3: This section outlines the rationale behind the design of this research and provide the details of the procedures. There is also critical discussion of the choice of methods, my positionality and ethical considerations.

Section 4: In this chapter data collected from the three waves of interviews will be reduced into eight cases --- one for each of the eight participants. The cases summarise the participants' professional development undertakings throughout the entire data collection period and their reflections on that.

Section 5: Based on the thematic analysis of the cases, eight emerging themes are concluded and discussed in light of the literature review and in an attempt to answer the research questions set at the end of section 2.

Section 6: Based on the findings, in this section suggestions are made for both teachers and managers for more effective and sustainable professional development in similar institutional contexts.

Section 7. Before the conclusion of the thesis, the limitation of this research is acknowledged. Taking into consideration the recent development in the field, several possibilities of further research are proposed.

## 2. Literature Review

This review starts with the evolution of perception of teacher knowledge, followed by the means to acquire such knowledge --- teacher education and professional development; then an argument for the need of professional development to be expanded from individual practitioners to communities of practice. Then from a wider perspective, the role of non-teaching activities in the field of higher education will be discussed, and references will be made to experiences of non-education fields. At the end, it is concluded with identification of gaps which this research intends to fill and the research questions which emerge from the gaps.

### 2.1 Teacher knowledge

First of all, what do teachers need to know so that they can teach a certain subject? Most teacher education programmes appear to hold the view that it includes two distinctive parts: Content/Subject matter knowledge (What to teach?) and Pedagogy (How to teach?). (Johnson & Golombek, 2011)

In English Language Teaching, examples of content knowledge include answers to questions like “How to say ... in English?”, and “is it (grammatically) right to say ...?”; or at a more advanced level “Should I write ... in the conclusion of an argumentative essay?”. Knowledge of the lexis and syntax of a language can be regarded as a relatively static body of knowledge, while the methods that such knowledge can be transformed into proficiency in using a language, is constantly changing in response to changing contexts. In other words, when compared to static knowledge, pedagogies are dynamic and may seem less tangible as something to be learnt: Its scope is not clearly defined, as pedagogies can be “any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance the learning in another.” (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999).

In teacher education, they are typically “covered” by formal, theoretical instruction about approaches and strategies which the teacher can implement in classrooms. However, in reality the gap between theory and actual achievement of “enhance the learning in other” needs to be bridged by development of tacit knowledge gained through actual practice, possibly through, simulation, practicum and mentorship. Attempting to bridge this gap

between the teacher's knowledge and students' understanding, Gudmundsdottir & Shulman (1987) introduced the concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). Ball (2000) elaborated this concept in the form of two questions to teachers:

*How can teachers be prepared to sufficiently know content flexibly so that they are able to make use of content knowledge with a wide variety of students across a wide range of environments?*

*How can teachers develop a sense of the trajectory of a topic over time or how to develop its intellectual core in students' minds and capacities so that they eventually reach mature and compressed understandings and skills?*

Johnson & Golombek (2011) consider the above conceptualization still inadequate for development of an effective teacher education approach. It is because while the variety of students and environments are taken into account, the "teachers", although in plural form, appeared to be isolated. They argue that teacher education should not only focus on dissemination of prescribed pedagogical knowledge to individual teacher-to-bes. It needs to refocus on the key concept in Vygotskian learning theories --- learning through interaction with more able peers (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of teacher education, one way for this to be achieved is "responsive meditation" - trainees should reflect and make sense of their teaching experience while the trainers facilitate as more experienced peers (Johnson & Golombek, 2016). More on teacher reflection's role in their professional development will be elaborated in section 2.2.1.

This view is echoed by Freeman (2002, 2016). He also asserts that instead transfers of static knowledge, teacher education is a "social process" in which trainees become a recognised member of the "community" of the language teaching profession through interactions with their trainers and their professional peers. The notion of teacher professional development communities will be elaborated in section 2.3.

## 2.2 Teacher education and professional development

Prescribed teacher education curricula usually involve, depending on the learners' prior experiences, theoretical instruction of selected content knowledge, pedagogies and perhaps PCK (e.g. PGCE). Some of these curricula may include practicums, yet most of them are

delivered isolated from the actual context which the student-teachers is preparing themselves to teach in.

However, as Freeman (2016) argues, learning of teaching should be a kind of “situated learning”. This means it is not just about what is presented to teachers or teachers-to-be, but also who presents it, how and where (p.82). From this view, the ability to teach a certain subject, which entails understanding of its content and ability to implement relevant pedagogies, cannot simply be transferred through formal instruction. Instead, it “travels” with the teacher “from training room back to classroom”, and backward and in between, while teachers constantly make sense of the activities in light of his or her prior experiences. Therefore “teacher education is not a process with an end point” (p.112). Based on this principle he argues that teacher education should not be “one-size-fits-all”, and it is “erroneous” to perceive that any pre-service training programme can fully equip a teacher. Continuing professional development is crucial as “what is being learned challenges and transforms what is known over time”(Freeman, 2002).

### 2.2.1 “Reflective Practitioner”

There are various theories illustrating this continuous interplay between teachers, people and situations around them. Schon’s (1983) notion of “Reflective Practitioner” is among the most cited ones. He urges professionals to develop an ability to be aware of problematic situations and make changes to ongoing actions for immediate improvement of that (reflection-in-action); and also the ability of “post-mortem” formulation and understanding of the problem for better handling of future situations. Based on this pretext, various research was conducted in search of effective methods of reflection on teaching, here are a few examples:

Mann & Walsh (2017) contextualises the notion for the field of English Language Teaching, emphasising the value and feasibility of reflective practice in different career stages of teachers. They particularly highlighted the central role of “artefacts” such as recording or transcripts of classes and classroom incidents in catalysing dialogues among practitioners, during which interpretations of the artefacts could be co-created and eventually become the empirical basis of future interventions in pedagogy and course design.

In subsequent years, there are investigations all over the world into how to train pre-service and in-services teachers to be reflective practitioners. Some were of considerably large scale: for example, Godinez Martinez (2021) brought together a group of teacher trainers, novice and experience English teachers in Mexico in her research, and concluded that teachers in Mexico seem generally willing to implement reflective practice, and their level of engagement in reflective practice can be enhanced with the help of trainers; while a systematic literature review conducted by Columbian Association of Teachers of English (Olaya Mesa, 2018) sums that reflective practice helps teachers to be more aware of issue arising from teaching, and be more open-minded in discussing them and embracing changes in their practice.

Despite the positive outcomes observed by some researchers, some may argue that teachers do not always find reflective practice favourable or feasible: In a research among Ethiopian English teachers, Habtamu and Belay (2023) find that they tend to have good theoretical knowledge on reflective practice but demonstrate low reflexivity in their professional lives; and among their Japanese professional peers, Watanabe (2017) identifies a relatively low level of reflexivity among more experienced teachers. The reasons behind low reflexivity include contentment of working within the “comfort zone” of existing practices, a lack of immediately noticeable impact, a perceived lack of framework, guidance and time, and suspicion of managerial intervention. While some researchers acknowledge these practitioners’ concern and sentiment that comes which them, they have suggested strategies and processes through which reflective practice can be more easily incorporated into daily practices: For example, Farrell (2014) has worked closely with in-service teachers in researching an effective system of keeping and using reflective journals; while Mann and Walsh (2017) outline and exemplify the potential of professional dialogues in communities of practice of teachers (To be further discussed in section 2.3.2).

Despite some disagreements over the precise definition of Schon’s notions and how teachers actually apply them (e.g. Freeman, 2016; Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987), there is a general consensus that reflection should be a helpful component in pre-service and in-service teacher education (Farrell, 2014; Mann & Walsh, 2017). Furthermore, elaborating on the “who” dimension in situated learning, as Farrell (2014) puts it, teachers need to reflect

“beyond classrooms” and “engage in critical reflection through dialogue with other teachers”. (p.xiii); while Freeman (2002) calls for “social arrangements that connect new and experienced teachers in learning teacher across a career span” (p. 11). This leads us into the realm of collaborative teacher Professional Development.

## 2.3 Collaborative teacher professional development

In the following subpoints (2.3.1- 2.3.4), the overall argument for the necessity of a collaborative scholarship of teaching and learning will be reviewed, followed by how this view has been contextualized and operationalized into various models of collaborative professional development.

### 2.3.1 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

Earlier exploration in the concept of was a response to the increase concern over university faculties’ teaching effectiveness. Boyer (1990) first pointed out that university teaching staff should not only focus on scholarship in their own discipline. They should not overlook the importance of continuous improvement as a teacher, to make the subject more accessible and interesting to students. Later researchers like Shulman (2001) and Rudd (2005) added “and learning” to teaching to more fully encompass the work of educators – facilitating learning through deployment of strategies and techniques, including but not limited to teaching.

They also put more emphasis on the collaborative nature of SoTL. Both Rudd and Shulman argue that findings in SoTL need to be shared publicly so that they can be critiqued, adopted and further developed by other practitioners. And by making one practitioner’s findings available to be applied in other practitioners’ classrooms, the practice of teaching can be continuously improved. Kreber (2013) added that SoTL means making the practice of teaching more intellectually vigorous, theoretically grounded and subsequently of more transformational power to students. Felten (2013) furthers the argument for SoTL to go public by bringing in the perspective of university administration, seeing open demonstration of SoTL’s transformation power as a justification of resource allocation.



Some English language teaching units in universities have adopted the concept of SoTL and have been actively promoting it. For example, There is a “Centre for Excellence in Language Teaching” in the University of Leeds dedicated to this purpose; while Hoon & Looker (2013) acknowledged the necessity of promoting SoTL in non-Western universities, despite the unique geographical, institutional and cultural challenges she and her Asian colleagues face.

In their attempts to bring practitioners together in their development as teaching professionals, some universities have made reference to several models of professional communities. These models and examples of their adaptation are discussed below:

### 2.3.2 Community of Practice model

Then there is the most-cited model of collaborative Professional Development so far --- the Communities of Practices model by Wenger et al (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermeott & Snyder, 2002). They have drawn findings from studies of all kinds of organisations ranging from the U.S. military to the World Bank. It outlines the fundamentals of situated collaborative professional learning.

Professional development in Communities of Practice (CoPs) revolves around three fundamental elements: Domain, Community and Practice:

DOMAIN refers to what the participants recognise as complex and long-standing issues that they commonly experience and require sustained learning. This common ground fosters a sense of common identity.

COMMUNITY refers to the space in which regular, reciprocal interactions on domain-related issues occur. In such interactions mutual trust and commitment are developed, which in turn encourages contribution.

PRACTICE refers to the recognition, further development and documentation of a shared body of knowledge, ready to be disseminated to new participants.

(Wenger, McDermeott & Snyder, 2002, pp. 27-40)

While these elements might seem to be rather common phenomena that exist in most professions and workplaces, the CoPs are unique in a way that they are set up to promote situated learning, which means spontaneous learning in the workplace context through continuous interaction with professional peers. This form of learning is actualised through

the “legitimate peripheral participation” of less experienced members, and their eventual transformation into “full” members of a community through their mastery of the skills and vocabulary necessary for them to perform in that particular professional context (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In his later work, Wenger et al (2002) emphasize the evolutionary nature of CoPs. They suggest that communities go through roughly similar developmental stages, albeit some individual variations like those found among life histories of human beings. The three fundamental elements should emerge in the “Potential” stage, followed by the CoP’s formal launch and initial recognition of its value in the “Coalescing” stage. Then contradictions of focus/expand, ownership/ openness and even let go/move would emerge in subsequent stages of “Maturing”, “Stewardship” and “Transformation”.

The CoP model has been developed as a model that is rather flexible and can be adopted by virtually groups of professions of any trade. In the subsections below I am going to focus CoPs in the field of English Language Teaching and provide a few examples of the characteristics of these groups.

#### 2.3.2.1 CoPs in the field of Higher Education Language Teaching

At the turn of the century more practitioners seemed to have realised the need of collaboration at the face of an increasing pressure to demonstrate better practices, rooted more stringent accountability checks in various countries around that era; and at the same time, an intensifying competition between institutions internationally for resources. Many of them turned to the CoP concept which emerged around the same period for guidance. These CoP initiatives typically involved participants who were diverse in terms of geographical locations, backgrounds, expertise and experiences for a specific purpose or vision.

Recent examples of CoPs formed by educators include The Film in Language Teaching Association (FILTA) was formed in 2010 as an international, multilingual platform to promote the development of materials and pedagogies in teaching languages through audio-visual materials (Herrero, 2016); In Hong Kong, the Baptist University launched a CoP initiative in 2014 under the supervision of scholar Milton D. Cox, aiming at bringing

expertise of faculties across departments to generate interdisciplinary innovative ideas in undergraduate curriculum and teaching (Wong et al, 2016). The initial evaluation of this project showed that changes in attitude towards reflection and teaching innovation; and higher student attainments in terms of intellectual depth reflected in their works, can be attributed to teachers' participation in CoPs (Kwong et al, 2016).

#### 2.3.2.2 Communities of practice online

The increase of significance of online communications in communities of practice, as Brooks (2010) argues, is a response to the increasing diversity, geographical dispersion and workload among university faculties. Some research findings suggest that online Communities could build networks in which the ties between professionals are as strong as face-to-face meeting-based networks (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). There seems to be an emerging question about whether online CoPs can replace the traditional face-to-face ones; There are also recent reports on CoPs which are "blended" or "hybridised" (Brook, 2010; Vaughan & Garrison, 2006), recognising the possibility that synergy which could not be achieved by either platform alone. Wenger, McDermeott & Snyder (2002) acknowledge that increases in distance, size and diversity can be two-sided swords for CoPs. It enables convergence of ideas and collaboration at a global level, but at the same time it comes with communication barriers that are hard to overcome. His suggested remedies include development of a rhythm --- regularity in virtual and face-to-face interaction, and moderation of online threaded discussion, both aiming at maintaining the "presence" of the community and its connection with the individual participants (p.138).

#### 2.3.1.2 Critique of the CoP model

While the earlier works of Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991) portrays a primarily practitioner-initiated model, under which communities are initiated and run for the practitioners and by the practitioners, they do not rule out the possibility of CoPs being initiated by managers from top down. Other researchers like Li et al (2016) argue in the real world, CoP has become increasingly a management tool.

And in response to some managements' attempts to promote Communities of Practice, there are some critical remarks about the effectiveness of professional sharing and collaboration among higher education teaching professionals. For example, Ratcliffe-Martin,

Coakes & Sugden (2000) comment that “Universities do not generally manage (practice-related) information well. They tend to lose it, fail to exploit it, duplicate it, do not always share it, do not always know what they know and do not recognise knowledge as an asset”. This seems particularly ironic, as universities, according to these comments, actually fails in the functionalities that determines its very existence.

While some universities adopted CoP as a solution to the problem of lack of exchange and collaboration, and some were keen on using technology to make possible a professional network of unprecedented reach, some researchers have expressed reservation on various grounds: Roberts (2006) concludes that although online CoPs can potentially be infinitely large and dispersed, hosting a great range of knowledge, that might be achieved at the expense of the complexity and situatedness of the knowledge; it would also be harder for trust to catalyst the interactions in a large and diverse group, while the risk of distortion by asymmetrical power remains; having observed the asymmetrical power between administrators and teachers in some institutions, Hargreaves (1994) has coined the term “contrived collegiality” to illustrate how top-down managerial manipulation, which usually takes the form of compulsory “collaborative” initiatives without considering the actual needs of their participants.

Wenger, McDermontt & Snyder (2002) admit that organisations do need to “live with” disorders in CoPs --- sometimes parts of the communities grow disproportionally influential at the expense of others; other times bureaucratic mentalities like documentism might encroach. There are no universal trouble-shooting guidelines, but a need of “constant attention and fine-tuning” (p. 159).

For example, concerning the issue of strength and longevity of ties among professionals, Granovetter (1973) argues that weak ties (e.g. acquaintances) are preferred over strong ones. For example, when colleagues develop close friendship over a long period of time, or when people with similar backgrounds and experiences come together and quickly find common ground, these groups tend not to be the most innovative as there would be more presumptions than critiques. Yet the opposite view like Moolenaar & Slegers’s (2010) also exists, arguing that trust is crucial for quality professional exchanges (e.g. ones which involve honest admittance of weakness) and that requires strong ties. Kezar (2014) adds

that strong ties are particularly favourable for exchanges of tacit knowledge. At the end, it seems that decision making in these uncertain circumstances depends on the organisation's situated understanding of the community.

### 2.3.2 Professional Learning Community Model (PLC)

While CoP adopts a broad sense of "practice" --- ranging from a trade to a hobby, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) clearly emphasis "professional" --- practice at workplace, often ultimately oriented towards the good of society. For instance, PLCs of educators are formed not only with the professionals' learning in mind, but they should ultimately work towards betterment of students' learning (DuFour, 2004; Hord, 1997).

Stoll et al (2006) sums up that some of the characteristics of PLC include:

i. Shared vision and values

A shared sense of purpose; the believe in the necessity of collaboration

ii. Reflective practice

"Deprivatisation" of practice through conversion of tacit knowledge into shared knowledge

iii. Group

Mutual trust, respect and support in a communal setting

On top of the characteristics suggested by Stoll (2006) , Dufour (2004) added that PLCs should be result-oriented --- in a school context that means teachers are accountable for students'. Achievement of this would require goal-setting, followed by continuous reflection and assessment for the goals to be achieved.

These largely overlap the notions of "Domain, Practice and Community" in Wenger's CoP model. This similarity is understandable as the PLC model also has a Social Constructivist theoretical root, particularly Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development in collaborative learning (Hord et al., 2010).

However, it cannot be ignored that there are discrepancies between the two models: First of all, it can be noticed that the PLC model put more emphasis on participants' commitment: Stoll et al (2006) regard the interdependence of teachers as "central" to achievement of educational goals; based on this, sense of collective responsibility must be

developed in all participants' mind, Free-riding and isolation need to be eradicated; while CoPs acknowledge different levels of participation --- even the more "peripheral" kind of participation, the participants who partake more than contribute, is perceived to be "legitimate".

Another notable difference is the influence of external leadership and organisational agendas on teachers' communities: Blankenship & Ruona (2007) point out that PLCs tend to be more significantly influenced by factors external of the teachers' community (e.g. the school principal), while CoPs put more emphasis on leadership from "the grassroots" (i.e. within the teachers' community).

This could possibly explain the popularity of PLC model in organisations which are relatively hierarchical because of cultural, organizational or political reasons: It does not require revolutionalising structures or challenging authorities, it is actually a strategy in mediating the leaders' influence. For instance, research in Chinese Schools have affirmed the link between PLC participation and improved teacher efficacy. Those PLCs achieved that by promoting trust, commitment to students and collective responsibility (Lee, Zhang & Yin, 2011; Zheng, Yin & Li, 2019).

### 2.3.3 Community of Inquiry model (CoI)

Compared to the CoP and PLC models, this model further specified the way of achieving betterment of practice --- through identification of problems arising from frontline practice and the collaborative quest to solve them. According to Garrison et al. (2001), learning experience is the convergence of three presences:

#### i. Social presence:

Like in any community, there has to be a group of people who identify with the group, communicate and then develop trustful relationships. What is emphasised in CoIs is that all these are purposefully done for achievement of agreed learning goals.

#### ii Teaching presence:

This involves design, facilitation and direction of the social and cognitive presences. Garrison et al argued that it should not be confused with "teacher presence", as

sustainability of the community should be the collective responsibility of all participants. However, it is also acknowledged that leaders' role is crucial in urging the group to move from identification and deliberation of problems, to a collective attempt to resolve them. (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2010).

iii Cognitive presence:

Participants continuously construct and confirm meaning in their internal thoughts, their practice and their interactions with other participants. The interplay between these realms is further detailed and operationalized in the Practical Inquiry (PI) Model (Garrison et al, 2001):

This model (PI) is a cycle of triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution. It illustrates how private reflections are articulated, shared, then converged with that of other participants and become problem(s) to be resolved collectively within the community-specific context.

There are concerns about whether this model is overly idealistic and therefore insufficient of theorising communities in the reality. For example, Armellini, & De Stefani (2016) argue that there can be Cognitive Presence without a community, and the social presence can “remain social” and be unrelated to critical reflection on practices.

Nonetheless, in terms of CoIs influence on participants, research of CoIs in the Education field generally report that through collaborative problem-solving experiences, participants could demonstrate critical, high level learning and high level of perceived learning satisfaction (e.g. Akyol & Garrison, 2011), and to influence their students the same way they have been influenced by the CoI (e.g. Green, Condy & Chigona, 2012).

The CoI was initially developed for studies of online learning communities, at a time when that mainly take place in the format of asynchronous discussion. However, it does not exclude other forms of learning community. In fact, the framework has been widely adopted in research on blended learning, which involves varying amount of face-to-face interactions. The creators of the CoI model actually acknowledged that the difference

between the dynamics in asynchronous discussions, live chats and blended form of learning community is way smaller than previously anticipated. (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2010)

Though most researchers would use only one of the three terms (CoP, PLC, Col) for consistency, it is not uncommon to see Wenger's work being quoted to help explaining the nature and mechanism of PLCs and Cols (e.g. Tam, 2014; Murugaiah et al 2012)

The use of different terms could be a matter of contextual differences: For instance, while collaborative pedagogical innovation has long history in China and remains one of the strategies embedded in the recent National Curriculum Reform, Chinese practitioners do not commonly use the term PLC (Sargent and Hannum, 2009 ; Wong, 2010). However, most English-speaking researchers consider the PLC concept consistent with their observation and have been using that instead of coining a more literal translation, which may in turn make the term "fashionable" in China (Zheng, Yin & Li, 2018) ; on the other hand, research on online or blended learning communities more commonly adopt the notion of "Communities of Inquiry", as the origin of the model make it the readily available in theorising collaborative learning in cyber networks, which could span across multiple institutions and across state borders (e.g. Shin, 2016; Murugaiah et al, 2012).

To conclude, there is no fundamental contradiction between these conceptual frameworks of communities. They may have different focuses, but the core elements --- people, common enterprise, collaboration are the same. These models emerge as a result of different temporal, organization and technological context. By reviewing and comparing them, researchers could base their studies of communities on a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomena of collaborative professional learning.

## 2.4 Zooming out for alternative perspectives

While focusing on teachers, this research cannot assume that their professional development is only about pedagogies: Whitchurch (2009) regarded the intertwining of the once-separated professions of teaching, administrating and researching as an inevitable consequence of intense marketisation and vocal calls for accountability in higher education. She argues that "Third space professional" who can fluidly transit from one role to another



are those who can survive and excel in this field. Indeed, on top of their teaching and administrative duties, teaching professionals are increasingly expected to engage in continuous professional development. As we can see from the previous discussion of teachers' CoPs, CoIs and PLCs, some of their professional development activities have actually gone beyond of reflection and sharing, entering the realm of action and empirical research. Whitchurch's "Third-space professional" concept may have provided an alternative approach in understanding the dynamics of the three realms in the teachers' professional lives, bringing insight on how possible tensions between them may be mitigated, while at the same time identifying potential synergies emerging from the interplay of the trio.

And zooming out further away from the education field, I am aware that private corporations have long realised that knowledge, including tacit knowledge like good practices, should be treated as assets and be managed strategically. This gave rise to the discipline of "Knowledge Management" and theoretical models like Nonaka's SECI model, theorising the transfer of tacit knowledge of the staff to explicit knowledge of the firm, based on his investigation into successful Japanese manufacturing firms in the 1980s (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This is in sharp contrast with the previously cited remark by Martin, Coakes & Sugden (2000) about universities' lack of knowledge management and failure in recognising knowledge as an asset. With this in mind, I should find out whether it is true in the featured university language centre and see if there could be lessons that this field can learn from the knowledge management experiences of other professions.

## 2.5 Research gap and questions:

Among the Hong Kong university language centres, CoP has become a widely used word, mostly by managements in attempts to promote experience and resource sharing. Within this body of literature, I have identified two gaps which are worth further exploration.

First, as contextualised in section 1, university English teachers in Hong Kong work in a unique context and there has not been a lot of research on their professional development. More specifically, except for Kwong (2016), at the time when this research began there was no other literature on specifically on the topic of Communities of Practice for university English teachers in Hong Kong.

Second, in response to Kwong et al's (2016) call at the end of a report of their own study of Community of Practice in another university in Hong Kong, further research should be done to track the CoP's impacts in long run, particularly qualitative ones in an Asian Context. The existing research on CoPs among educators are mostly cross-sectional. Many of them were done as summative assessment of professional development initiatives, fulfilling funding requirements. There is a lack of longitudinal research tracking the evolution of CoPs within a developmental stage, or across several stages. This research can be a response to this call through collection and analysis of longitudinal qualitative data.

Zooming out to the practice of English Language Teaching in Higher Education worldwide, most of the literature focus on curriculum and pedagogical issues or student experiences. There are relatively less researchers investigating from the teachers' perspective, and even fewer focus on their professional development. While there are recent papers like Breen (2015) and Dhillon & Murray (2021) discussing university English teachers' Communities of Practice and recording numerous positive impacts on different aspects of education, the researchers admit that their findings and conclusions could be confined to a specific institutional context. There is not enough volume of literature for a general pattern to be identified, nor is their research on diverse enough institutional contexts. In other words, while there is certainly a research gap for large scale, quantitative projects; and there are also gaps smaller scale, case or institution-based studies.

And from the critique in subsection 2.3.1.2, it appears that there can be tension between the management's vision of CoPs and that among the practitioners, which could influence the process and outcome of CoP initiatives. While researchers like Li et al (2009) conclude, based on their extensive literature review on the development of the CoP framework, that such tension can be "the most contentious of the issues that make the CoP theory challenging to apply." (p.7), Wenger and his more recent collaborators argue that through CoPs practitioners can negotiate with the management how their competencies should be defined (Farnsworth, Kleanthous & Wenger-Trayner, 2016, pp.157-158). As there do not seem to be a consensus on the issue of management's role and influence in CoPs in the

literature, how management-practitioner dynamics would unfold in the unique context of this research should also be a research gap to be addressed.

To address the aforementioned research gaps, two research questions were formulated:

1. During the data collection period, did the participants form and participate in communities of practice? (Or did they collaborate with other teachers in other ways?) how and why they did so?
2. Which factors facilitate (or hinder) their collaborative professional development?

## 2.6 Anticipated Significance of this research

### i. For the featured institution

For any organisation investing in CoP initiatives, nominal establishment of groups which resembles CoPs or use of CoP terms in professional development policies do not guarantee achievement of the desired type and level of professional development among participants. There is a need to constantly evaluate its effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) and investigate into the reasons behind that. Wenger, McDermeott & Snyder (2002) characterise this process as measuring, tracing, making casual connections and documenting of knowledge and human acts (pp. 166-167). They regard it as integral for CoPs to gain competence, legitimacy and influence (p. 185), which ultimately create value for the institution. They recommend use of anecdotal data, and therefore to this end qualitative methods are adopted as in this research. These methods will be detailed and justified in section 3.

### ii. For the practice (English teaching in universities)

The CoP theories emerged and developed in the 1990s, quickly drew the attention of various professions including education. Yet overall, it is still a relatively new area of inquiry, particularly in the higher education context --- let alone specifically among English teachers in universities. The amount and scale of existing research is still relatively small, and practitioners are still developing their strategies and tactics for implementation of CoPs. For the practice of English language teaching in universities, this research can add to the literature a study that is done in relevant context, which can potentially sparking wider and deeper inquiries into the professional development needs of this particular group.

### **3. Methodology**

This section outlines the methodology and methods used in this research, details the research proceedings and discusses the rationale behind methodological choices.

In a nutshell, guided by the epistemological view of phenomenology, this research adopts a qualitative approach, manifested through the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and case studies: It revolves around semi-structured individual interviews at three different stages of the data collection period (one year), which record the development of the participants' perspectives longitudinally. The records were then organised into cases, and subsequently analysed thematically.

#### **3.1 Phenomenology**

It is necessary to stress that the subject of this research is “professional development of teachers”, not any individual teacher or organisation. More precisely, it is the experience of professional development from the perspective of participating teachers. This can be studied as a phenomenon, as a phenomenon can be defined as “live experience” – events described and interpreted from the subjectivity of people who have experienced it (Qutshi, 2018). Although the researchers adopting this approach would have substantial contact time with individual participants, Vagle (2014) points out that “particular individual humans might help the phenomenologist gain important access to all sorts of important manifestations and appearances of the phenomenon, but the ‘unit of analysis’ in phenomenology is the phenomenon, not the individual. (p. 23)”.

Phenomenological research methodology is particularly relevant in inquiries into how individuals' experience varies in a shared experience, such as the professional development experience of the participating teachers in this research. In fact, Creswell's (2007) definition of phenomenological research: “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.”(p. 57). This appears to be a close description of the purpose of this research.

My research design is also informed by previous researchers who used the phenomenological methodology. For instance, according to Moustakas (1994),

phenomenological studies are typically based on long interviews which he describes as informal, interactive and open-ended, at the end of which honest and comprehensive full stories of the interviewees' experience related to that specific phenomenon should be recorded (p.114); he also stresses that "the inquirer should collect data from persons who have experienced the phenomena, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of 'what' they experienced and 'how' they experienced it." (Moustakas, 1994, cited by Creswell, 2007, p. 58). How a 'composite description' of the participants' professional development experience is elicited and recorded through interviews will be discussed in section 3.3.

This approach seems suitable for a study of a phenomenon among teachers as they tend to be articulate when invited to speak at length, and would also be motivated to contribute as the phenomenon is relevant to their professional and personal development. There are plenty of examples of phenomenological studies on teacher-related issues: For example, transition from student teacher to inservice teacher (Fenwick, 2011; Rossi et al, 2011; Romano, 2008); transition from clinical jobs to teaching/ academic jobs (Gourlay, 2011a, 2011b) and from school teaching to teacher training (Dinkelman, Margolis & Sikkenga, 2006). They have demonstrated that phenomenology is a feasible methodology for exploratory inquiries into different stages and circumstances in teachers' professional lives.

### 3.1.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

A more specific strand of Phenomenological methodology emerged during 1990s and here under this subpoint I am going to discuss how IPA has informed my subsequent choice of approaches and methods:

Further developing Phenomenology's efforts in describing and interpreting peoples lived experiences, Smith et al (2009) argues that IPA research "focus on examining how individuals make meaning of their life experiences". In other words, IPA can be perceived as a kind of "Double Hermeneutics" --- interpreting how people interpret their lived experiences. This methodology was first commonly adopted by researcher in the fields of medical and psychology for investigation into the experience of people who were experiencing certain illness or adversity. IPA was a necessary and appropriate methodology

in their contexts, as these people tend not to have the capacity to form and articulate their interpretation of their own experiences. The IPA researchers would be the ones to co-create such interpretations with them.

It can perhaps be assumed that teachers tend to be articulate when communicating their thoughts and experiences, and they do reflect on their own development as a professional. However, I would argue that when prompted by an investigator such reflection would be of richer details and organised more systematically around a theme. To this end, semi-structured in-depth individual interview method was adopted so that participants are allowed the space to recall and reflect on their own experiences.

In terms of research design, Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012) suggest that in IPA researchers should choose a “fairly homogeneous group of people” and they also argue that “the main concern in IPA is give full appreciation to each participant’s account (case)”. In this research all English language teachers are from the same teaching unit and therefore can be seen as a rather homogeneous group. In order to surface any similarities and differences between their interpretation of their own experiences and the reasons behind them, three waves of in-depth interviews were conducted in order to create accounts of greatest possible details, and so that any longitudinal changes can be recorded for subsequent interpretations.

The following will be a discussion of the aforementioned key components of IPA research, beginning with the case study approach, followed by selection of participants and the design and flow of longitudinal in-depth interviews.

### 3.2 Case study Approach

According to Yin (2003), a case can be an individual, a group, or a phenomenon; In the context of this research, while the entire institution’s professional development provision can be seen as a case in a broad sense, each participants’ professional development experience during the given period can be also defined as individual cases within the broader case. From this perspective this research can be seen as an “embedded case study” (Yin, 1998). However, my epistemological preference in phenomenology requires me to collect and interpret data from the subjectivity of individual participants. Therefore, eight

cases are written, each from the perspective of an individual participant. In other words, this research consists of eight cases of eight individual teachers, rather than a case of one institution.

Cohen & Manion (1989) points out that the purpose of having these cases is to “probe deeply into and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which to the unit belongs” (Cohen & Mansion, 1989, cited by Bassey, 1999, p. 24) – ‘the wider population to which to the unit belongs’ in this research extends to other practitioners in the same institution and their counterparts in similar settings in the field of higher education. This establishes the significance to practice of this research (to be elaborated in section 7.3).

Unlike some other approaches, the case study approach does not stipulate or advocate specific methods of data collection and analysis (Bassey 1999 p.69). Robson (2011) goes as far as considering “every research project is a kind of case study” (p. 142). In other words it is flexible enough to be used in conjunction with another methodology, or a selection of methods from different paradigms. Robson (2011) even listed “multiple methods” as one of the features of case studies (p. 136), echoing with its unique strength in enabling (“tolerating”) convergences of multiple (maybe contradictory) perspectives in pursuit of wholeness and depth of description. In this project, multiple methods from the paradigms of ethnography and grounded theory will be adopted, although this research does not intend to be either of them. The rationales behind these choices are explained in the following sections.

Lastly, as the data in this research will be collected from only one institution, it could be perceived by some as idiosyncratic. I would argue that findings of a single case study like this is potentially generalisable and hence of reference value for institutions in similar situations --- for instance, the other language centres, or any university departments which depend heavily on non-tenure, teaching-only faculty. As Yin (2011) asserts, the relationship among particular concepts identified in case studies tend to generalise to relevant but different situations (p. 19). He advocates construction of “analytical generalization”. In contrast to their statistical, conclusive counterparts, they are logical frameworks with the

potential to be transferred and further developed across situations. Bassey (1999) has also put forward a similar notion called “fuzzy generalization”. Their view is now accepted in various fields and has become the paradigm of professional development in Medical (Hong & Yu, 2017), Business (Evans, 2016) and other fields.

The operational process of consolidating interview data into cases in the context of this research will be detailed in sub-point 3.3.1.

### 3.3 Methods of data collection

#### 3.3.1 Boundaries and sampling

Due to limited access to other institutions and data collection time, and as justified in the discussion about IPA methodology in section 3.1.1, the scope is restricted to the experience of a sample of eight participants from one of the university language centres in Hong Kong only.

Selection of participants was based on their levels of participation: ranging from core members to representatives on periphery of the Community. The experience of a total of eight participants were tracked, recorded and analysed. I included two senior lecturers to include a teacher-manager’s perspective; three active members who contributed by initiating CoP meetings and action research projects; and three other members who appeared to be relatively passively being led by the previous group of colleagues.

I was aware that level of participation of individuals could be determined at the beginning of the initiative, as such level might change over time. However, operationally, voluntary commitment in operation and contribution of ideas could be fairly reliable indicators of one’s level of participation. Any increase or decrease in that were then recorded in the subsequent stages of data collection.

#### 3.3.2 Longitudinal interviews

Longitudinal approach is chosen because CoPs, and professional development in general, “like other living things ... continually evolve” (Wenger, McDermontt & Snyder, 2002, p.68), and “development” by definition means a process of something changing over time. And as



the initiative did not terminate at the end of the data collection period, it was not the time for a summative cross-sectional account.

Interviews with individual participants were conducted with a view to collect anecdotal evidence --- the form of data which Wenger, McDermeott & Snyder (2002) regard as the only way to “describe complex causal relations while incorporating implicit contextual factors” in evaluation of CoPs (p.168). The interviews were semi-structured. As argued by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012), this format “give enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise, which the researcher may investigate in more detail with further questions.” (p. 365). These interviews consisted of open questions and prompts which facilitates the participants’ reflection on more abstract issues (e.g. The beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> interview and at the end in the second interview).

Each of the participants were interviewed individually three times during the data collection period, each with different foci derived from the research questions. There was an interview guide (appendix ii) for each wave of interviews. During the interviews, I managed to cover all the points with minimal probing and signposting (exemplified in the sample interview transcript in appendix iii). Participants were encouraged to speak in their own words. The interviews were transcribed afterwards for subsequent analyses.

The below subpoints illustrate the planned flow of data collection process:

i. First interview

The aim of it was to set the reference points for future comparisons, so that pre-existing phenomena will not be attributed to the inter-varsity initiative (section 1.3 xv) which was about to begin. The participants were asked about their current pedagogical concerns and expectations on their own professional development. An initial understanding of the participants’ professional development engagements, their current relationship with colleagues, and their experiences in collaborating with them, were formed at this stage.

ii. Second interview

Another round of interviews was conducted after a major event of the inter-varsity initiative--- the summer symposium. The aim of it was to record individual participants’

experience in terms of connections made, and ideas received and shared. It also probed into their anticipation of how these new connections and ideas would influence their practice in the future.

### iii. Third Interview

The final interview aimed at forming a conclusive account of individual participants' experience over the data collection period. It revolved around reflections on whether their initial expectations had been changed or met, and their experiences in implementing the CoP-generated ideas in their teaching so far. Their view on the factors leading to the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) were also probed into.

## 3.4 Methods of Analysis

Qualitative Longitudinal need to be analysed both cross-sectionally and longitudinally for emergence of a variety of themes and their change over time respectively (Smith, 2003; Thomson & Holland 2003); while interpretive phenomenological analysis should go through a process of initial reading, identification of emerging themes and clustering of these themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

With the above guidelines in mind, I decided that the interview data from each of individual participants in each of the three waves should first be reduced through constant comparison and consolidated into cases, each from the perspective of one individual participant. These cases were then thematically analysed.

### 3.4.1 Data reduction through constant comparison and formation of cases

As discussed in section 3.2, interview data from each of the participants over the three waves of interviews were consolidated into individual "cases". The method adopted for data reduction is constant comparison.

Glaser & Strauss (1967) first propose this method as an alternative to then-prevailing approach of qualitative data analysis. He asserts that coding data using preset schemes actually quantifies the data and this does not match the purpose of research designs that do not involve proving hypotheses; he then suggested a more systematic and replicable way

for new theories, concepts and the inter-relation between them to emerge from any empirical data set. This can be done through a process of continuously categorising incidents in the data, and simultaneously re-defining these categories, till a theory of the property of that category emerges. As Patton (1990) argues, categories "emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (p. 390).

While often associated with Glaser and the Grounded Theory Method that he advocates, Fram (2013) argues, based on a systematic review of literature and a trail research, that constant comparison method does not necessarily result in grounded theories. She asserts that constant comparison method only "assures that all data are systematically compared to all other data in the data set. This assures that all data produced will be analyzed rather than potentially disregarded on thematic grounds." (O'Connor et al, 2008; cited by Fram, 2013). With such flexibility, operationality and comprehensiveness, this method appears to be particularly suitable for initial data organisation and reduction.

Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg & Coleman (2000) metaphorises this method of data processing as viewing and organising "bits" (of data) through a Kaleidoscope: While the "bits" would seem completely random and meaningless at the beginning, they would eventually be organised to meaningful categories. This can be done through constant "swirling" – that is to quickly generate possible patterns, and "refinement" – constant sorting of bits under categories, followed by combinations and dividing of categories.

This method was selected as it is suitable for exploratory, inductive inquiries. Like in the initial stage of this research, I did not have clear hypothesis or prior model to guide my data collection and analysis. I was very much doing what Glaser vocally advocated – "Just go out and get some data". After that, I started making sense of the phenomena of teachers developing professionally from that pile of data I collected through constant comparison method; constant comparison is also particularly suitable for my longitudinal research design, as the initial categories I established after one wave of interviews would likely run into contradiction or repetition in subsequent waves, as the thoughts and behaviours of participants would constantly evolve over a one-year period. This method accommodates continuous refinement of categories so that they can better encapsulate these nuances. The resulting categorisation can be seen in the individual cases in section 4.

It is also worth noting that there are different names for the method of consolidating cross-sectional data from separate waves into a coherent whole: Narrative (Thomson & Holland, 2003); Case History (Thomson, 2007); Through Line (Saldana, 2003); Profiles (Smith, 2003); However, they all entail a similar process of condensation of data collected at different points of time from the same individual, in order to identify and capture changes and continuities in that individual's experience. However, in this research I use the more generic term of "case" as this study adopts a case study approach, in which data aggregates do not only serve descriptive purposes – they are consolidated as basis of exploration into the target phenomena. (The adaptation of this approach has been justified in section 3.2.)

#### 3.4.2 Thematic analysis

The cases were then analysed thematically. This approach was chosen because it is capable of "theorizing across a number of cases by identifying common thematic elements across research participants, the events they report, and the actions they take" (Riessman, 2008), which fits the purpose and design of this research.

Braun & Clarke (2006) highlighted the flexibility of thematic analysis, such flexibility implies that "the potential range of things that can be said about your data is broad". This is important for a project which was exploring into a relatively new research area in which patterns could emerge unanticipatedly.

And as this was a project with a view to contribute to the practice and the institution being studied, thematic analysis's strength in being "straightforward and intuitive" (Riessman, 2008) that it can be communicated without major difficulties to practitioners, policy makers and general educated public" (Robson, 2013) was also a reason for it to be adopted.

Procedurally, I adopted the three approaches suggested by van Manen (1997),: "capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole" with a "sententious phrase"; and/or highlight statements of such quality on the transcript after reading it several times (p.93). They were then followed by line-by-line analysis, which refers to the process of capturing the essence of each individual sentence or sentence cluster by asking "What does this reveal about the phenomenon under study?" and answering "by lifting

appropriate phrases (from the data) or by capturing in singular statements the main thrust of the meaning the themes” (p.93)

For review and finalizing of the themes, I applied Patton’s (1990) practical rule of thumb --- internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, which means consistency within a theme and lack of overlapping across them.

Operationally, I also adopted Hermanowicz’s (2013) consolidation of Saldana’s (2003) conceptual and thematic questions for analysis of longitudinal qualitative data. They were aligned with the research questions so the changes and continuities identified would lead to answers to the research question.

Analytical Question	Research Question(s)
1. What increases or emerges through time?	1
2. What is cumulative through time?	1
3. What kinds of surges occur through time?	1
4. What decreases or ceases through time?	1
5. What remains constant or consistent through time?	1
6. What is idiosyncratic through time?	1
7. What is missing through time?	1
8. Which changes interrelate through time?	2
9. What are participant or conceptual rhythms through time?	2
10. What is the characterization of across time experience, and how do characterizations differ by sub-groups of the sample?	2

Table 1: Conceptual and thematic questions for analysis of longitudinal qualitative data (Hermanowicz, 2013, p.199)

### 3.5 Positionality and ethical considerations

As I was a full-time employed member of the teaching staff at the university language centre in which this research took place, I have the unique positionality as an “insider researcher”. In the following subsections, the methodological and ethical considerations related to this positionality are discussed:

i. Insensitivity as a result of prolonged immersion

As an insider researcher I enjoy the benefits of unrestricted access to the field, existing trust and rapport of participants, and ease of communication based on the common ground I have with them. However, the potential shortcoming of my positionality is also obvious --- Everhart (1977) concludes from his experience in long-term fieldworks in educational settings that the researcher might develop a “nothing-happened-syndrome”, resulting in the loss of sensitivity to details and changes, and failure in identifying patterns.

Experiences of ethnographers can be useful for alleviation of these problems: Fetterman (2010) suggest that researchers should actively “suspend” (p. 23) their judgmental orientations. For instance, I might have “oh gosh why you need to be so defensive when I ask about this...” emerging in my mind during an interview and I need to consciously remind myself not to be carried away by this judgement; This proactiveness should be extended by taking Delamont’s (2012) advice on strategically focus on “bizarre irregularities” during observations. For example, the consistencies and inconsistencies of word choice across interviews (which might indicate information leak or unwillingness to disclose information).

ii. Trust, anonymity and consent

In the organisational hierarchy, five out of the eight of them were from the same rank as I was in, bearing the same job title and performing very similar duties; the other three were teacher-managers with higher ranking titles, however I was not subordinated to them as they were not my appraisers at the time when this research was conducted. Therefore, I can assume that all participants were my professional peers, and our conversations were unlikely to be affected by power distance.

That said, I assumed that they opened up to share their real experiences and real opinion on various issues at work because they have trust in me as a colleague and a researcher. Therefore, I took the following measures to ensure that they were full informed of my intentions, the procedures of the research, and the potential significance and risk of it.

Before the first interview, participants were given consent forms (appendix i) to sign. The form details the purpose, boundary, duration, format and dissemination of the research and its findings. It also clearly indicates what is expected of the participant, and their right to withdrawn at any point of the process.

It is also explained in the consent form that they are given pseudonyms and will not be identifiable in the research report. Their personal attributes such as year of service and past experiences are generalised for this purpose.

For data collection from the online forum (if any), although the forum is open to any interested parties and all participants know that their postings are in the public domain, it is still stated in the consent form that their postings in the forum would also be observed.

#### 4. Findings and analysis (Cases)

This chapter consists of 8 cases, written based on the transcriptions of the responses of each of the participants during the three rounds of interviews. It is the result of the data reduction through constant comparison process (detailed in the methodology section 3.4.1), through which quotes relevant to the research questions were extracted, themes were then identified through initial coding, and eventually consolidated into the ones under each case.

Before the presentation of these themes and quotes from interview transcripts that help illustrate them, each case starts with a pen portrait which provides an overview of the professional life of the teacher featured, in terms the responsibilities s/he had, and their involvement in collaborative professional development inside and outside of the institution.

As mentioned in the methodology section 3.3.1, these eight teachers were chosen based on their level of involvement in collaborative professional development. However, I must admit that in some cases their level of involvement was beyond my initiate understanding. They might have engaged in activities I did not know about, or they were engaged in capacities which differs from my understanding before the interviews. In the end I found that all eight participants were involved in ongoing collaboration projects, none of them were just peripherally involved. Those who were selected because of their known position as initiators or coordinators remain in those roles throughout the data collection period and did provide me with their perspectives as “core” community members.

The interviews initially started with nine participants. However, one participant had to take a break from work after the first round of interviews and therefore was not available to be interviewed during the second and third round. I then had to remove this case from the research.

The following table summarises the eight participants’ length of stint in this institution, and their roles in the community/ interest group/ project team they were involved in.

Pseudonym	Year teaching in this center	Leader/ initiator?
Seth	10+	Y
Annabelle	5-10	N
Daisy	10+	Y



Issac	5-10	N
Chris	5-10	N
Renne	<5	Y
Naomi	10+	Y
Greta	20+	Y

Table 2: Prior experiences of the participants

#### 4.1.1 Pen portrait of Seth

Seth was a senior lecturer at the time of interview, which means he had a relatively smaller teaching load and was heavily involved in administrative and managerial duties of the centre. He was fully engaged in professional development at all levels, and most of the time being the initiator and facilitator: He founded an Interest Group exploring possibilities in using technology in language education; organizing and delivering workshops relating to that to all staff members; and he was a core committee member of the intervarsity professional development initiative, being a key figure behind various territory-wide professional development events. He had a deep personal interest in technology itself and tended to pioneer latest software and platform in his teaching. And he often shared, formally and informally with his colleagues about the technical knowhows, experiences in implementation and pedagogical implications of that.

#### 4.1.2 Theory and experience grounded understandings

As a middle manager of the centre, and with post-graduate qualifications and ongoing scholarship work in technology in Education, Seth appeared to be apt at explaining rationales behind policies and initiatives from through theoretical lens. For example, he has a clear idea of the natural and function of a “community” in professional development:

*“I think having a community, a formal community that's connected to everything within the centre would help so that people have a physical and virtual place that they can go to when they know they want (the) information or to seek guidance.”*

His many years of teaching and administrative experience in HE also enabled him to be aware of the institutional dynamics, and key to success implementation of policies and initiatives. For instance, here he was sharing his idea about key factors to the sustainability of communities of practice:

*"It needs to be something that's consistent. You can't be an ad hoc community that only meets once in a while. It needs to be formalized so that people are aware of it, they can make use of it when they need it, that has someone clearly leading it, um, and it needs to be connected in with all the other communities or the other relevant committees."*

It seemed that his experience in communities of practice, both as a leader and a participant, had contributed to the formation a vision in his mind, which will be illustrated in the next point.

#### 4.1.3 Vision driven

During the first interview Seth made a few points on what the centre's professional development lacked at the time. He was particularly concerned about individual interest groups being isolated and as a result the colleagues lack of awareness of ongoing projects and developing ideas in the centre:

*"The communities tend to be isolated communities and don't really talk to each other as much and that's something that we could work on better."*

This point was reiterated in the second interview. He then tried to pinpoint the root cause of it, and also reemphasis the potential synergy that could have been formed among those communities:

*"There's a small network itself and these little communities, these interest groups, uh, or even smaller communities, smaller networks. And so internally, when you get those small networks talking to each other, that helps inform us in many ways, become better teachers and so you have any knowledge transfer in that sense."*

In response to the issue he had identified, he believed that technology could potentially be the catalyst of sharing and collaboration among practitioners. Although there seemed to be room for improvement in the centre:

*"Teachers I find tend to be slow in adopting, at least, online collaborative approaches. Um, it's something that's done quite frequently in the commercial world, I think. And our students do make use of things like Google docs to collaborate."*

His vision was, first, to involve practitioners of all levels and all roles in the centre. he again took use of technology as an example:

*"I'm hoping that we can have some sort of impact on particularly the course designers and the coordinators because in that sense of tends to need to go top down, um, and they need to be competent in how they're making use of technology and they need to be implementing it in a logical way that's effective. Because if not the teachers won't be picking it up."*

Beyond his own institution, he was also keen on connecting with and facilitating exchanges between practitioners in other institutions and countries. To begin with, through getting involved in the intervarsity English teacher collaboration initiative (HKCPD Hub), he seemed to have developed a strong sense of urgency on sharing and collaboration beyond individual centres:

*"I think one of the greatest, if not the greatest, but one of the most, the expectations that I have is collaboration across institutions because I really believe that, um, if we don't make connections across institutions, uh, innovation will kind of become stagnant within our own center and it's good to have that sort of free flowing community as well."*

In the second interview, his believe in the potential of collaboration seemed to be strengthened. The interview was conducted shortly after the intervarsity symposium.

*"Our teaching practices become better, but if it's only isolated within our centre, then at some point it will hit a plateau, right? If we connect these groups or how we're developing it to, through this initiative that allows the knowledge to transfer to the other networks, the other institutions. And hopefully it's reciprocal, right? So, um, it's just a way of collaboration and cooperation and collaboration."*

This may sound like quite a far-reaching and idealistic goal – indeed, as exemplified above, Seth was mainly sharing his perspective in the first and second interviews. However, it can be seen from his other responses that he was aware of the practicality issues, and how the different views of other practitioners might lead to resistance to implementation of his vision and plans. This will be illustrated through quotes in his later interviews.

#### 4.1.4 Acknowledging discrepancies between vision and reality

From the previous point, it could be seen that Seth did have high and concrete expectation on all the new initiatives that he was involved in. However, it was also clear during the second interview that he saw some worrying signs:

*"The ideas are fantastic, what's coming out of it, but like I said, the hype and the enthusiasm and expectations might not equal the outcome because the outcome is constrained by your very busy schedules, uh, in our other duties."*

Then, in the third interview, he had to acknowledge that little progress was made in terms of promoting sharing and collaboration among colleagues within the centre.

*"I think they're still a little skeptical... So if you have people who are critically looking at it and questioning it, it kind of slows down the process. But I think it makes it better, right? You're able to see the constraints that you're trying to do. You're able to tweak any problems ahead of time as well. So, uh, I think the reception is getting better."*

And things were not as constructive as anticipated at the intervarsity level either. He did not really have the chance to communicate with people he met at the intervarsity symposium.

*"I haven't gotten out of my way to look at it yet. Apart from emails, recent emails about a sharing powerpoint slides. I haven't really thought about it."*

But instead of frustration or having doubt on his vision, he appeared to be seeing that as one step towards the right direction.

*"Those goals were very solid goals. So the community has a reason to meet at least virtually online once every month or once every two months to talk about it. So if you have that deliverable, it gives the group a reason."*

However, by the end of the data collection period he had to admit that the community that he led and his other plans were struggling in maintaining the interest of their respective participants. During the second and third interviews, he reflected upon experiences in past events. He actually did manage his expectation before all the aforementioned events and groups were launched. For instance, he did anticipate that he would not be able to reach and convince every colleague:

*"I always have that open door so people want to come in and show what they're doing or have follow up questions that there's that option ... I think they, they have a very set belief on how they feel that teaching should be done. Also there, their identity as teachers and how they view themselves... There's those who just have the opinion regardless that they don't want to use the technologies and they choose not to. So it tends to be down to the individual for those who do have the interest."*

He was also well aware that purely personal enthusiasm cannot sustain development of all these initiatives and communities, and there are factors beyond the initiator's control, despite all the efforts made.

*"Sometimes I might be really excited about an idea and then in talking about that with other people and I can see that they run into problems or they run into concerns, it kind of grounds me and makes me be a bit more critical of my own ideas and to make sure that I'm being as practical as I can and not just be excited about the novelty of the technology which can be problematic."*

At the end of research period Seth admitted that much could have been done in that year but he would continue to advocate the ideas and plans he had been advocating. He did not seem to have lost faith in his initial vision.

#### 4.2.1 Pen Portrait of Annabelle

She was an engineer by trade but chose to get a Postgraduate Certificate in Education and become a secondary school teacher instead of pursuing a career in Engineering. She was overseas educated but she did not appear to lack understanding of local society, education and adolescent students.

She joined this centre about 5 years ago and quickly adjusted to teaching at undergraduate level (EAP and ESP) and identified English for Engineering as an area to focus her professional development on, tapping into both her Engineering background and teaching experiences.

At the time of interview, she was teaching of one of the English for Engineering ESP courses, fully engaged in its curriculum and material development, and was made the course leader later during the research period. She was a core member of an ESP-themed community of practice, and was also involved in a collaborative project on teachers' view on different modules of another course, with an intention to present findings at an upcoming conference for practitioners in the territory.

#### 4.2.2 Clear but "mixed" motivation

Annabelle appeared to be very dedicated in her teaching and administrative duties, and also keen on developing professionally. She had also identified a clear area that she would like to devote her time to, and had been able to tap into the connection and resources available to achieve that.

*"I'm one of the teachers (in an ESP for Engineering course), I of course was very interested in how we can maybe improve my teaching. So by making, use of, maybe some studies that I do hope that I can do something."*

She was also very aware of and concerned about effectiveness of her practices, particularly from the perspective of material and curriculum development. She willingly and constantly made changes that benefits students' learning and appeared to take pride in this. For instance, she got herself involved in a community which aimed at discussing ways to strengthen the vocabulary power after seeing her students struggling with that aspect of language learning.

*"We did find out from the various sources that's some of the students actually want more help because basically we don't really teach them vocab. We teach them so many other things, right? There's no specific components called vocabulary."*

Beyond sharing and discussing pedagogical ideas in the community, she was then invited by some other members of the community to be involved in an action research project, for a more systematic and scholarly inquiry to their shared pedagogical concern. Annabelle admitted that she had not thought of such a possibility before the invitation from more experienced colleagues. Though she did emphasize that she became more interested in these initiatives after getting involved for a while. She described this as "mixed" kind of motivation.

*"I'll say it's a mix ... I'll say partially I was kind of invited to start a research, gradually becomes more like self-initiated as well."*

It should also be noticed that some people who did not get invited to more scholarly collaborative projects like Annabelle did remain peripheral members of the community, rather than starting initiatives of their own within the group.

*"People come and gone ... even though we may not be all working together for conferences or papers, but we do share experience."*

I wonder why Annabelle and other members of the community waited for the “invitation” instead of taking a more proactive role. The reason appears to be related to “time”, which was an often mentioned and complicated notion in Annabelle’s responses.

#### 4.2.3 “Time” factor

“Time” was mentioned multiple times during the three interviews. Whenever it was brought up, it tended to be “paired” with an initiative that Annabelle had the intention to do but did not do due to time constraint. For example:

*“We have very limited time to meet with other colleagues time teaching timetable that we have. So a lot of the time they clash.”*

*“But I wouldn’t say like to include too many people on the team as there will also be problems like for example, organizing meetings, you have to work with hectic schedules. As I said, time is very valuable in the centre.”*

Apart from the objective fact that there were frequent time clashes, the participants of the research project seemed to have denied possible follow-up work by a rather subjective assessment of the time needed.

*“We have an intention to do some papers, but given the timeline seems to be very tight so we don’t know whether we can do it for this conference.”*

It was noticeable that she tended to use “we” in her remarks about lack of time and high workload. Based on this we can observe that she was aware of, or had been assuming that other teachers are under the same circumstances.

This prevailing belief in “a perceived lack of time” could perhaps be the reason behind her rather passive approach in “accepting” professional development opportunities illustrated in 4.2.2.

#### 4.2.4 Purpose of sharing is not necessarily collaborative

When asked about motivation behind her conference effort, she seemed to have a rather individualistic perspective.

*“I think it’s important to tell people what we’re doing because some people thought developing material is easy, but it’s not.”*

Apart from pride and making her work visible, another important value of conferences for practitioners is to facilitate self-reflection.

*“We often neglect about what’s going on around us apart from teaching. And I think if we step back a little and apart from teaching then actually as teachers I think we can do a lot of other things.”*

She saw the importance of these sharing occasions like conferences in a profession which independence of individual practitioners seemed to be emphasised.

*“Teachers are kind of very independent individuals in one way because we all teach and we all have our own style of teaching, I think. So by having this kind of sharing section and conferences, we are able to learn more about the others so that when we come back we can reflect on yourself.”*

This remark agrees with Annabelle’s actual conference experience. She recalled that exchange of ideas in Q&A after presentation was brief. Both the presenters and attendees did not seem to have thought about possibilities to collaborate in work. Practitioners could be drawn to a presentation section as the title appeared relevant to their teaching duties at that time, this tended not to result in concrete changes in these attendees’ practices. Annabelle and the colleagues she knew were no exception to that.

*“Every teacher handles their class very independently. Like every teacher has their own style of teaching. Every teacher have, they may have their own materials and a vision on their own materials that they use to fit in the students.”*

For Annabelle and these attendees, the value of attending events outside of their institution was that exposure to outside ideas and facilitating self-reflection. Ultimately what appeared to be a collaborative platform remains a mean of self-reflection. Such reflection’s effect on these teachers’ practices would be hard to be traced.

#### 4.3.1 Pen Portrait of Daisy

Daisy had worked for the centre for a few years after transferring from a similar EAP/ESP teaching post in another local university. Around of the time of the research she had developed a special interest in the enhancement of academic English reading proficiency



among undergraduates. She then initiated and led a Community of Practice about teaching of reading.

She and some members of this group were engaged in a research project at that time, investigating the reading habit and motivation of a group of students, hoping that the findings could inform pedagogy, material and curriculum development. They went on to present in a conference for practitioners from all universities' language centres in the territory.

Another ongoing project of her was an online ESP course and the learning platform that hosted it. She was involved in both the design of the platform and the delivery of the course.

She was promoted to the rank of senior lecturer at a later stage of the research period.

#### 4.3.2 Clear gap to be bridged by better practice and research

Based on her teaching experiences, Daisy very clearly saw a gap between the proficiency needed by students at university level and the reading training provided by the university's EAP/ESP courses.

*"We teach more of a task-based approach. So the teaching of skills is not as focused."*

She saw CoP as a possible way to address this issue together with other teachers who saw the same gap.

*"Also in teaching of language for business students, there's a kind of a gap between the, the reading that the students are asked to do and their reading ability. And so we haven't really gotten a lot of structured reading teaching so that's why I volunteered to be the convener for this group."*

She not only saw this gap as a pedagogical practice issue, but also a research gap that should be filled by practitioners in this territory, who were all teaching students with similar needs and characteristics.

*“There wasn't really anything specifically about that in Hong Kong. It didn't really seem like anyone had actually done that research, which was surprising to me considering reading is such an important skill in university.”*

Therefore, to fill this gap she initiated a Community of Practice herself. She then shared about her experience in leading the group:

#### 4.3.3 Peripheral CoP members

Daisy was well-prepared for each of her CoP's meetings. She adopted a relatively structured approach to facilitate discussion among participants. She would select a piece of reading and send it out with a few thought questions to all group members a week ahead of each meeting. However, she found that some members would attend the meeting without reading it.

*“There were some people in the group who do consistently come, come to every, every meeting, but don't ever do the reading. I think that there may be the, they feel that they're interested but not interested enough to take any time from their schedule to prepare for the meeting.”*

This might sound ironic but it seemed like Daisy, as the convener, felt she had difficulties in maintaining the interest level of some people in the group. That said, Daisy still sounded quite understanding to people who were not contributing but looking for benefits to be taken away.

*“This is a meeting that people aren't given any credit for or they're receiving anything beyond just maybe improving as instructors are improving as colleagues or educators.”*

These people's participation remained peripheral over a few months, but they did not leave the CoP. That could be discouraging to a convener as well-prepared as Daisy. However, it seemed to me Daisy had managed her expectation. She understood that to change the situation, changes were needed at an institutional level, like “giving credits” to those who contributed to communities.

*“I think senior management in our centre is aware if you've joined these groups because you can put it in your appraisal. But what you do within the group, that's nothing. No one is reporting on that within the appraisal, so I think simply attending the meetings is enough.”*

When asked about what she as the convener would do to address that issue, she said she was not really pushing for changes in the behaviours of those participants.

*I think that would motivate them if there would be some repercussions if they weren't prepared. But I'm not willing to check on them because they're my colleagues but not my students."*

Despite feeling that the atmosphere in her communities had room for improvement, and she as the convener might not have a lot of control over that, she still remained positive for the future of sharing and collaboration in the centre.

*"So I think it seems maybe take some time for the personality of the centre to change, that people feel like we're teachers and we do our professional development through our research and stuff, but I don't want them to feel resentful that I'm putting too much more on there."*

To sum up, the level of commitment and contribution among participants of her community varied, but her attitude towards changes in perception of colleagues remained hopeful. Her hopefulness could be attributed to the fact that there were fruitful exchanges between she and the more committed participants, and this eventually resulted in the aforementioned collaborative research project; On the other hand, the point on non-intrusiveness re-emerged and was more detailly elaborated when Daisy was reflecting on her experience in another project.

#### 4.3.4 Reservation in involving other colleagues

At Daisy and her team, which consist of the more committed members of the community, did an exploratory action research on the reading habit and of undergraduates, and later had the opportunity to present their findings in an intervarsity symposium. When asked about what her expectation on the project and the upcoming presentation during the first interview, Daisy mentioned a rather abstract notion of "momentum":

*"I know there's a problem with how we teach reading or lack of reading, but there isn't any proof of that, so I'm trying to create this sort of momentum forward to maybe amend and improve the teaching of readings. The feedback (after the presentation) I'm hoping to get is to help build that momentum, and help to then have some, some more concrete structured ways of improving the reading."*

However, when probed to provide more concrete elaboration on how this “momentum” can be built and sustained, she sounded rather reserved as the subsequent actions for continuation of the “momentum” would involve mobilising practitioners outside of her current community, and she seemed to perceive that as a difficult task.

For example, within the centre, the first obstacle to expansion of the research is to get access to students outside classes taught by the initial research team members. However, she seemed rather reluctant in reaching out to do so.

*“I’m not teaching the first year courses right now, so it’s hard for me to impose my questionnaires on the other teachers.”*

Her reservation is also observable when she talked about initiate discussion between other Communities of Practice, which might have similar or related interests. There seemed to an underlying concern over losing individual CoP’s boundaries and autonomy, and such a change may not be welcomed and treated reciprocally.

*“M\_\_\_, she’s the convener for the vocabulary group and I’m also in that group with her, so sometimes we will reference each other’s readings, but she hasn’t actually brought any material to my group yet. I do feel like there’s a, some interrelationship, but I’m not willing to kind of merge the groups yet because I do think there’s also a relationship with reading and writing, you know, not just reading vocabulary.”*

When the third interview were conducted, she had been promoted to a higher rank in the centre, and the new position enabled her to see the teaching and learning issues of the centre from a more holistic perspective.

*“If I ever had any more time, I think I’ve been quite inspired to be looking at what, as a set of courses that we offer within the centre, how we could be linking the skills that students focus on across courses so they really understand how these skills are linked and how they’re improving over there... I think that we’re quite fragmented as a centre right now.”*

However, she still seemed to have same kind of uncertainty over other her colleagues’ view on expanding collaborations, and seemed to still hold the believe that she would not have the authority to advocate that.

*But I'm not in the position to do that research because I'm just a new Senior Lecturer... ultimately it's not just research, it's sort of, you have to get the buy in from the director and then the coordinators. So I think that's an obstacle right there."*

#### 4.3.5 Pragmatism in research topic selection

Apart from worries about how her research initiatives might be received by other teachers, another major consideration was relevance of the project to the courses that she was teaching.

For example, at that conference presentation about academic reading, there was interest from practitioners from another university. They actually shared that what they did to enhance students' interest and proficiency in reading (a mentorship scheme). However, there was no actual further communication beyond the conference.

*"I think it's an interesting topic for us. But I think on its own, academic research on academic reading like this needs to be implemented into a course. I don't know the way they teach, we don't teach writing and reading separately."*

It seemed like merely same area or same target group of students were not considered to be relevant enough for further exchange and follow-up work. There seem to be an assumption that results from exchange and collaboration with a group with different views on teaching approach and curriculum design would not be transferable. Interestingly this pragmatic attitude is perhaps comparable to that of the peripheral CoP participants mentioned in 4.3.2.

This was even more explicit after her promotion as that meant even less time available for research alongside teaching and administrative duties. She clearly indicated that if her time was invested in any research that had to be related to her current teaching.

*"Things I prioritize right now are the things that I'm responsible for. So I prioritize research into business communication, 'cause I'm coordinator for that."*

It was observed there had not been significant change in Daisy's perception of the nature and potential of communities of practice and other collaborative initiatives, even after a very eventful year filled with duties as a community convener, action research, symposium presentation and promotion.

#### 4.4.1 Pen portrait of Isaac

Issac was a relatively young teacher in this centre. He was mainly involved in the teaching of one of the ESP courses due to his previous experiences related to that particular field, and he eventually became the coordinator of that course. He was also involved in the first year EAP course, the biggest course of the centre. During the research period he was involved in a Community of Practice about teaching of writing, and that some members of that community prepared a conference presentation on learner differences in the EAP course. He also collaborated with other teachers in another presentation on material for the ESP course that he was coordinating.

#### 4.4.2 “Research”, “sharing” or “showcasing”?

Despite being formally involved in collaborative projects and presenting in conferences, “research” was not the first word that came to his mind when asked to describe what he had been doing for his own professional development. For him, he thought that he was just naturally sharing about his practices.

*“It's not that we have researched and then we apply, is how we have been doing these things and we share.”*

This sharing of practice was an inductive process. It was driven by needs and curiosity emerged in his day-to-day practice, not by theories and literature. For example, as a newer teacher he was quite surprised by the level of flexibility in course delivery enjoyed by his colleagues.

*“Amazingly I know that, oh, uh, colleagues may not be using the materials that have been using. I mean I've been following quite strictly to the course book and to the teacher' notes and how things should be done, like task cycles, but then now I found out that perhaps not all the colleagues are doing that and they have their reasons.”*

He then became curious in finding out what were the different practices of other colleagues, and decided that he should first “showcase” his own to facilitate feedback and sharing from other teachers. This “showcasing” seemed to be driven by a sense of efficacy, as in the case of his action research on teaching of vocabulary to weaker EAP students:

*“I shared that because, um, I noticed the improvement in the vocab test result is*

*quite phenomenal. It's even, I think my remedial stream students performed better than the regular stream students, even some of the advanced stream students. And that's why I thought this worth sharing with the team."*

It is important to clarify that he seemed to attach a lot more importance on "showcasing" over what others might share with him and satisfying his curiosity. What "showcasing" means will be further illustrated in the next point.

#### 4.4.3 "Done my part"

Knowing that he had been actively sharing good practices, I became interested in why the number of teachers involved in each of his projects remained consistently small (3-4). I asked Isaac if he wanted to have more teachings collaborating with him. He said he would welcome that in principle, yet he indicated that "sharing" should be purely voluntary:

*"I'm not saying that they (those who do not share) are not passionate teachers, but they may not be as passionate as in sharing; They can be very good teachers in classrooms, but about sharing... they may not have the interest."*

In his understanding, "sharing" was done without the assumption that other colleagues should do the same. He was also not expecting recognition or feedback from fellow teachers, as he did not assume what he shared would be useful or insightful to them:

*"I think when I see the need to share some of my so-called "good practices", I do so via email or during the team meeting... I am not sure whether they use it or not. But I mean, I've done my part, just like what P\_\_\_\_\_ (an experienced colleague) shares. I mean, we (also) didn't response to him whether we use his ideas or not."*

And neither did Isaac expect any recognition or reward for making the effort to organise ideas and share.

*"Honestly speaking, I don't expect teachers praising me after I've presented."*

As what Isaac did appear to be mostly one-way dissemination of ideas and experiences, instead of "sharing", "showcasing" seems to be a more accurate word to describe what he had been doing.

While this discreet practice of “showcasing” appeared to be demonstrating humility towards the colleagues in the centre, what seemed to be an interesting contrast can be observed from his experiences presenting in the intervarsity symposium:

#### 4.4.4 “Not to our extent”

I asked Issac in the first interview, which was before his presentations, about his expectations. He mentioned that he would like to exchange ideas with counterparts in other universities, who may be teaching similar courses. That said, in the second interview I found that what he actually did in the conference appeared more like “showcasing”, particularly when he said that the audience was like his “students”:

*“We made it really like a classroom. So participants were like students in our workshop. And there were three of us, the presenters actually went into the different groups and we talked to them and we gave plenty of time for them to try things out and experience how we teach.”*

He mentioned there was a brief Q&A session, but was not able to recall the questions brought up by the audience. He did ask the audience about how similar topics were taught in other institutions, but then decided that their experiences might not be useful:

*“So are they doing similar things in the institutions? Well, sort of, but not to an extent that we are doing. We are very focused in audience awareness (in ESP) and that's why we presented how our ideas. But then they, they also taught their students those things, but not as much. Not to our extent.”*

The “exchange” then ended with a ritualistic exchange of name cards and emailing of powerpoint slides. This seemed to be consistent with the “showcasing” and “done my part” mentality illustrated in the previous point. But on the other hand, the reasons behind the lack of follow-up exchanges seemed to be different: within his institution, Isaac seemed to assume that his colleagues might know better; while in the conference he seemed to be quick in deciding that the work of his counterparts in another university was less sophisticated.

Apart from asking about his experiences, I also probed further on what he thought might have hindered other colleagues’ involvement in collaborative professional development. They could be concluded as follows:



#### 4.4.5 Institutional factors

He talked really openly about the managements' recognition, as reflected in the centre's appraisal system, was a key factor determining priorities of teachers. This differed from his attitude towards recognition by his fellow teachers:

*"I've heard colleagues saying appraisers don't really value this kind of attendance or participation (in seminars/conferences) while comes to appraisal..... if more recognition is given perhaps colleagues may be more willing, or ready, and passionate."*

Another way the management could help was to assign teachers who had already form communities or project teams to the same course over a longer period of time. This actually greatly facilitated their action research in the ESP course:

*"Naomi (another participant in the research) and I are the coordinators and part of the material development team and this is why we're able to actually put things in and suggest new things, because we are decision makers for the course...we actually make requests (to the management) and so far their responses has been quite nice and we have L\_\_\_ on the team for a number of semesters. During summers usually he's helping out with our writing."*

He also emphasised the importance of integrating professional development into the specific kind of teaching of individual teachers, just like in the case of himself:

*"If the management wants it to be like really more involvement into professional development, there should be some mechanisms to make sure that things are really integrated, like in my case teaching ESP students and I joined the ESP related kind of presentation. Otherwise, that can be quite haphazard and separate."*

That said, he felt that such arrangement is strategic and should be under the management jurisdiction. He believed that ultimately that was about the time one could possibly allocate to work on top of one's teaching load.

*"But yeah, perhaps it's really something top down – at least there are some ways, there should be some ways. Otherwise teachers may feel, I mean to an extreme point, frustrated. If I want to present on something which is not really related to what I'm teaching every day, extra time and efforts have to be put on."*

Overall, it seemed to me that Issac gained good satisfaction from what he had been doing over the year and had the wish to continue doing that as a way to enhance his current teaching practice. He did not seem too keen on reaching further away from his usual collaborators, or trying to influence other teachers' practice or centre policies.

#### 4.5.1 Pen Portrait of Chris

Chris worked for vocational institutes before joining the university. He possesses many years of EAP and ESP experiences. He involved in a research project on vocabulary learning among undergraduate of different levels of proficiency with his colleagues in an EAP course team, and they presented their findings in an intervarsity symposium.

#### 4.5.2 Modest expectation

A very experienced EAP and ESP teacher he might be, when it came to disseminating research findings and teaching experiences, he seemed to have a consistently modest estimation of the significance of them throughout the data collection period. He clearly and repeatedly positioned himself as primarily a teacher, and his involvement in action research and symposium presentations were really secondary to his teaching.

*"I am not really into conducting research."*

He did not expect the latter to be of significant impact on the former, and did not see the point of following up or further developing those projects beyond the presentation.

*"What I was sharing wasn't really something new... I was sharing old things, like reminders."*

*"(For symposium presentations) There would not be follow-up normally."*

When asked about what motivated him to spend the time and effort in his presentations and despite such modest expectations, he did not seem to have a very concrete idea on the potential of such kind of work. He only recognized that teaching experiences of him and his teammates can be consolidated in the process:

*"In the presentation we also share experience, but we know how to present it so that people can see the focus. But if it's just some conversations between colleagues ,*

*which is like 'I tell you what, this what I did...' I, I, I would not be making or emphasizing anything in that conversation. It probably, if I do not highlight certain parts then you can't get the focus. I think it is why it is, what affects that. It just what would affect the effectiveness."*

And he also brought up an interesting perspective about sharing with an audience being a therapeutic experience:

*"Sometimes we really need to talk to people so that we can continue to face our problems...although sometimes there's no solution. Like, like those chat group for patients, they don't get solutions the way they talk to people, they have the energy to face their illnesses."*

With such expectations, he chose to only present his research findings with his team and attend sessions of colleagues from the same university, despite the fact that was an intervarsity event:

*"It wasn't an occasion for me to know more about how other universities doing the teacher... I think would just be more motivated to listen to things that are relevant to, to ,to what I'm doing."*

#### 4.5.3 Scepticism reaffirmed

Despite not actively seeking dialogue with practitioners from other institutions, he and his team did have representatives from language centers of other universities attending their sessions. They were teaching similar subjects in similar settings and did ask them relevant questions. However, Chris did not think his practice was in any way influenced by these exchanges:

*"I think it just confirmed what I had thought before. The presentation, when I thought of what I did for the presentation, especially when I actually have been teaching low proficiency students for a couple of years, so maybe my belief has been strengthened rather than changed."*

His view on the potential of exchanging with a broader professional audience did not turn more positive either. He became more sceptical of it:

*"Sometimes I feel that we are just there. It's just like a cycle. For example, if we now have three different streams in the same cause and then later tell they think that we should only have one stream, and after a while we think that we should have different streams. It means that I feel that we are just repeating things regularly. It's*

*like a cycle. So after some sharing, maybe we will go back to what we were doing and then after a while and we, when we have more sharing, then we will do the same thing again. So I think it's something that I found in this presentation from the, from the discussion after the presentation."*

For him a symposium like this seemed like a detour from his teaching duties. He did not see the need and possibility of integrating such activities into his routines and that becoming a regular part of his professional life.

#### 4.5.4 Contentedness or complacency?

Like many other participants in this research he talked about how heavy teaching load prevented teachers' further involvement in collaborative research, and that management of the institution could take actions for this situation to change.

*"When we are doing the same thing for a very long time, probably change doesn't happen very easily, especially where we have a very busy schedule, and I think unless maybe we should take a break from the course and then come back. Maybe this could make change happen more easily."*

That said, Chris sounded quite satisfied with his current circumstances at work, particularly after comparing with what he had learnt about the experiences of his counterparts in other institutions:

*"That workshop or that the sharing session make me feel that every university, everywhere is the same."*

While there were issues, such as high teaching load and time clashes between teaching and professional development activities, that he would assume "everywhere is same" in the higher education field, he is aware of the professional development opportunities available in his institution:

*"Can I say that what we're doing now is very good already? Because I think without a doubt, we've got different channels like the interest groups for us to join, like the development sessions on Fridays. And I think the good thing is that we can choose the ones we interested in, this is why we don't feel that we are, it's like a job or a duty to attempt something. I think that is important for our development. So I think we, we don't have to do something different for now."*

He seemed to be appreciative of the flexibility and resources provided by the centre, which would enable him to engage in more collaborative or research work if he wishes. However, he did not think that was the pathway he would like to take at that time.

#### 4.6.1 Pen Portrait of Renne

Renne was relatively new to the centre, but she was already widely involved in the curriculum and material development of a series of ESP courses, relying on her previous experiences in the private sector of consultancy, teaching material development and teacher training. Her teaching duties in the centre then included general EAP for first years, and ESP for a particular group of second years. Combining all these experiences, she convened a Community of Practice which focuses on feedback in classrooms. She was also involved in another CoP, which explored possibilities of using technology in teaching and material development. Apart from participating in CoPs, she was also actively advocating a culture of professional development through peer observation.

#### 4.6.2 Pre-existing view on Professional Development

She developed both theoretical knowledge and practical experiences of teacher professional development in her previous job as an educational material developer in a private consultancy. She seemed to believe that she had a solid and informed view on collaborative professional development: In contrast to what the centre was trying to do to promote collaborative professional development, her view place a lot more emphasis on the proactiveness of individual members of staff.

*“Places of work that are inherently collaborative don't need things that are called ‘communities’ because they have. I think all of the function of a community inherent in its workers, and places, and practices. But if, uh, if an organization is...for whatever reason people feel they are less able to share openly, then I think organization, start thinking about communities of practice.”*

She felt that initiatives like communities of practice were of questionable effectiveness, but were often taken by organisations reflexively as remedy to issues that fundamentally are rooted in individual staff members.

*“In my experience, um, things that you learn in any kind of teacher development session can be that interest group or otherwise don't get implemented into practice for a long time by the majority. And, and even by the minority often don't get regularly implemented.”*

While CoP seemed to be a popular notion during the data collection period, she did not believe that CoP was always necessary or viable. Her prior experiences led her to a rather realistic view on the impact of professional development – that professional development takes time, and would only be possible after practitioners are given the time and space to reflect as they practice:

*“I think all teacher development is a long-term investment. So I think if anyone with the aim to drastically change their practice the next day would, would come out disappointed...I think teacher development requires a period of reflection on your practice before you can cognitively assimilate things and then putting it into practice.”*

Then in the second and third interviews she expressed a lot about whether the aforementioned ideal situation had been achieved, and what she thought might be factors necessary for that to be actualised.

#### 4.6.3 Expectations on community participants

Renne considered the intrinsic motivation of teaching professions to improve, and to communicate the perquisites for any sharing culture (including but not exclusive to CoPs) to be formed and sustained. During the first interview, she did recognise the potential among her colleagues in achieving this:

*“The vast majority of people in a workplace I believe want to be productive and improve and do well...if there are people around them who, who can simply talk, I mean, it's not really anything more complicated than that.”*

Apart from the willingness to engage in professional development, she also pointed out that individuals need to take the initiative to contribute in order to sustain a reciprocal cycle sharing:

*“Yes, you do have to invest a little time. But overall we're all trying to get to the same place. And if we all do it separately, you're all gonna be going down the same dead ends. If you can save somebody else going down at that end because you share your*

*own problems and difficulties and failures and successes, then you will save that person's time to do the same for you."*

The role of leaders/ moderators / facilitators was emphasised. She argued that passively waiting for others to ask questions and simply replying to those would not lead to formation of a community:

*"For the communities, those who are managing these, um, I think, need to be the ones creating, taking the initiative to set things up and guide things and moderate things rather than being a, the, the answers of questions, you know, we're not a, we're not a service, we're a community that's different."*

And apart from vision and moderation, she expected these leaders to bring to the community a clear structure and goal-oriented mindset:

*"Work happens when products are planned and deadlines are set, so I believe when we have meetings, action points should be made and deadlines for those action points should be made and human resources should be committed and I think when those things happen, work gets done."*

However, she then elaborated on the discrepancies between her expectation and her observation in a later stage (second and third interviews) of the data collection period.

#### 4.6.4 Disappointment?

Towards the end of the final interview, she quite clearly expressed her view on whether some of her colleagues had done their part in the development of their communities. First, she seemed to have come to the realisation that some colleagues did not have the internal motivation to engage in sharing and professional development in general. They appeared to be expecting rewards and recognitions by the institution:

*"There are many people, even though it may not be desirable, there aren't many people who will do work only if it's recognized appraisals or any other kind of recognition system. That's a very cynical approach. Um, though that would probably be effective to some extent for some people."*

On multiple occasions, she seemed to be disappointed towards the level of commitment of participants in general:

*“Well, I believe colleagues, uh, frequently told that they are busy, and I think that encourages colleagues to say that they are busy. In fact, I believe we can find the time to do this work. So just getting on and doing. I mean it's not difficult.”*

She thought that the responsibility of committing to improvement of practice lies with individual teachers, while institutional provision of resources was of secondary importance.

*Um, do we need more resources? Well, more is always helpful, but we have the technology available to us, we have people who are interested, but if those people are saying they don't have time, then work obviously won't be done.”*

And the responsibility of those in leadership position should be to set clear tasks, goals and timelines for others to follow.

*“I think in meetings I 've been to, people simply say that we are all busy and that we want to look at these things for another six months. Then it's inevitable that these things don't happen. So I would be more in favour of more detailed project planning, planning, organization time management.”*

To conclude, she clearly indicated that the aforementioned groups, which set out declaring themselves to be Communities of Practice, were actually CoPs.

*“There have been two or three face-to-face kind of sessions... Um, I haven't considered that a community. I consider that several face-to-face sessions...I wouldn't consider it a community yet.”*

And she did not think what she shared with her colleagues in those “face-to-face sessions” was well-received either, for example:

*“I showed them a way of using video captioning to get feedback to students... for me that takes no extra time at all and it was interesting to know that most of the teachers couldn't see that at all and believe that it would take ten times as long to do that... teacher resistance to new methods is, is common.”*

Such discrepancies between she and her colleagues' perception of “new methods”, and her subsequent frustration because of that, were a recurring topic over the interviews.

At the end of the data collection period It seemed like her experience leading or participating in (nominal) CoPs, or attending large scale seminars/symposiums during the year did not change the belief that she had carried forward from her previous job as an educational material developer:



*“I think it (developing teaching materials) is one of the best ways to develop your practice. Probably because it's easy to develop your own practice, but it's much more challenging to put your practice into the context of other people's practice, and develop things that other people would understand, and that other people would use and other people would like. And that fits with other people's beliefs about teaching, and other people's ability and skills.”*

To sum up, it seemed that Renee held a view on the nature on collaborative professional development that were different from that of the centre management and many of her colleagues, particularly over the importance of individual responsibilities. She appeared to be rather critical of the level of commitment in professional development – particularly in setting apart time for that, and in making the effort to understand ideas shared by other practitioners.

#### 4.7.1 Naomi's pen portrait

At the time of interviewing, Naomi was already very experienced in the institution, both as a teacher and as a manager. Her teaching mainly focuses on ESP, and she had been managing a wide range of teaching and teacher development matters including curriculum, assessment and appraisal. Her research interest was in ESP curriculum and pedagogy, particularly the use of technology in it. During the research period she was leading a team of ESP teachers in an action research project on teaching of presentation skills, and they presented their findings in an inter-varsity symposium. They were also writing that up and attempting to have that published as a peer-reviewed journal article.

#### 4.7.2 Vision

She appeared to have both theoretical understanding and practical experience in CoP and collaborative teacher professional development in general, and was able to articulate the essence of them during the first interview:

*“I think for any community of practice to develop, well I think you really need to sit down. You need to meet, of course online is good, but you also need to meet, um, you need to have talks, discussions or debates about things. Um, and even, I'm not only talking about it, but doing it and then getting back to the community and say, okay,*

*so this is what I've done, this, this works or this doesn't work. I think it's a community of practice for me.*

She was also able to explain how these are interacting with the dynamics of the institution, and what kind of outcome such interactions were leading to:

*"I think it's more about getting people to, to join and to share the same, uh, sort of, uh, not ideology, but same beliefs and practices of why you're doing what you do. So I think later on, yeah, we will see, okay, do want to do this. In fact, we are doing it as part of the course as well, we do encourage teachers to, you know, share their contribution. So we hope that this, this pass on you know, as a workshop or something that they can share."*

She was not only promoting and managing collaboration at an institutional level, but she was also personally involved in that, actively leading by example.

*"I'm actually practicing that (a certain pedagogy). So, um, and then modify it (the same pedagogy) even further to see it or what else I can add on or, you know, to make the task better. And at the same time, because, uh, other writing a paper with two other colleagues. So we actually working on the same paper. So it's a more formal thing. So we got on from, you know, giving a presentation at the symposium and then you're also going backwards, back to the classroom and then feeding it back into the research."*

#### 4.7.3 Reflective Practitioner

Apart from having the vision as a leader, she presented herself to be a self-motivated reflective practitioner who was constantly seeking ways to better her own practice.

*"Usually you teach about a few classes, right? So the first class you'd try it out, it doesn't work. And then the same time in a week, you know, you teach another class and I would have refined it already. So immediately after teaching the first time, uh, that task the first time, and then if it works, um, you know, I will actually push it to the second class. If it doesn't work, then you know, I actually modify it and then make it better for the second class."*

And the main motivation behind her self-reflection and improvement was students' response, which she perceived as signs of improvement in her own teaching efficacy. To achieve this, it was important for her to set clear purpose and sensitively observing for outcomes.

*“You want to make sure that, you know, um, students learn very effectively. And I think I was looking for a solution where, you know, they can actually learn something really fast and again, then they can apply it...so I keep looking at, okay, how do they learn it effectively? ... I think the most important thing is, you know, motivation-wise is students. I think that's the main thing. Um, and then in terms of my own professional development, I think in terms of being a better teacher, I think that's what's driving me. Uh, I guess, I think once I see the students happy, I think I'm happy.”*

#### 4.7.4 Team Purpose

In the teams that she was leading she adopted the same purpose-driven mentality:

*“I think it's about having, having a purpose. And I mean, I'm sorry to say for being very cold, but it's about functions, isn't it? It's about function about building something and I think you, you get somebody at a point in time when you say, okay, this is what I want to do. And you have the same mindset and say, okay, so let's get doing it. Um, I don't think people would do anything for nothing.”*

And that is why she did not start an “interest group”, nor did she specifically gather colleagues with the Community of Practice concept in mind. The team she was then actively researching, presenting and publishing with, actually stemmed from a course teaching team, and that also overlapped with the material writing team of that same course. This was to make sure that a collective purpose could be clearly seen by all members:

*“I think it (the team) is working because they are material writing team members. So they've been working with me for at least what, three or four years. So I think working together helps, you know which areas you're stronger, which areas, you know, you can get new input. So I think, um, we do get together, um, you know, as a material writing team member and we also share, you know, what new things we find and um, like technologies, uh, approaches. And then things that we should discard and ‘okay, this doesn't work’. Yeah. So I think in, in that sense, we can develop as a team.”*

In her view, these members would certainly be the first to be benefited by the extra efforts they had made in exchanging and researching. This would keep them motivated in continuing to contribute, and could perhaps encourage colleagues around them to see the benefit and join them.

#### 4.7.5 “A matter of wanting to do it”

She believed that the institution had already provided what was necessary for the kind of collaboration that her team was engaging in to take place. She thought that the colleagues should do their part as well:

*"I think it is a matter of wanting to do it. Yeah, I think in terms of facilities, yeah, maybe if you hold a talk and so on, but I believe that you can always find a space in it, you know, facilities, if you want to do something. Yeah, I'm sure you even, you know, going down for coffee and you say, you know, you can still get things done at Starbucks."*

When asked about whether time-off or flexible scheduling would help, she did not think that would be necessary. She instead pointed to what she thought to be a more important factor for CoPs or collaborative effort alike to be successful:

*"Time off? I wouldn't like a time off because I need to be in the classroom. Okay. Yeah, I'd rather have the money to employ someone to do the data." It's doesn't work if there's no contribution of, uh, if there's no sharing of like... okay, real life, real life, uh, teaching as a real-life practice. I mean there's a lot in theory, definitely. And you can debate about theory if you want, but if you don't practice it, I think it defeats the whole purpose."*

She believed that collaborative action research or any exchange of ideas between practitioners should be situated in the participants' teaching practice, echoing with her emphasis on team purpose.

Over the interviews Naomi seemed to very able in articulating her believe, goals and plans to actualise and achieve them. She appeared to be very goal-driven and focused, and would expect those who were working with her to be the same.

#### 4.8.1 Pen Portrait of Greta

Greta is a long-servicing member of the center. At the time of interview, she was mainly teaching EAP. She had a continuous research interest in teaching and learning of writing, stemming from her postgraduate studies. She was actively involved in the professional development initiatives in the center throughout the years, often in a leading role. Her latest commitment was to initiate and convene an interest group on writing pedagogies,

and leading a team which was working on a conference paper on streaming in undergraduate EAP courses.

#### 4.8.1 “Conference Animal”

Before analyzing Greta’s involvement in the center’s professional development provisions, it would be useful to bring together the remarks she made about her some of her changing perceptions, which she claimed to be the motivation behind her professional development-related engagements.

First, she recalled her professional development and scholarly activity at an earlier stage of her career for quite a few times during the interviews:

*“When I was younger I, I like to go to overseas countries to present for different reasons and one of the major reasons is I would like to showcase our work to practitioners from other countries... I was labelled by the associate director as a “conference animal”... but I chose conferences to go. I usually went to conferences of higher profile, international conferences and I tried to make connections. But I find the connections don't last too long... the interaction can be very superficial, so I don't care about that anymore.”*

Apart from showcasing, she also found satisfaction in pure theoretical work. There was not much thought on her research’s pedagogical implications. However, after realising the limitations of individual scholarship, she switched her focus to colleagues within the institution.

*“In the past I was very much a theoretical person. I love discourse analysis, but I just would like to do literature review and um, tried to make discoveries regarding to theories. Although at the end, if I write on my paper, I'll talk about applications, but they are fake applications. But now maybe because I'm getting older and I'm thinking about retiring, I think it's very important to build some sort of culture. Um, also share something with someone who you can sync with. Yup. And that's why I think I'm moving towards more action research.”*

She considered engaging in collaborative action research as perhaps the only effective way to connect with younger colleagues, and to pass on good practices in teaching and research.

*“(by collaborating in action research projects) I got to know a bit more about some of the colleagues I am working with. I think this is a very valuable part to me because*

*we are very busy in the centre and it's not easy to really get to know people nowadays."*

She thought that having a common, tangible outcome is the way to keep the group working together when everyone's teaching load was high.

*"I always think that that should be some outcome and when I actually volunteered to from the group, I hope that some of us can come together to do something arising from, not really arising from the meetings, but arising from having the chance to be together, we can sort of confirm that we're interested in a certain area... and four of us decided to come together to run a workshop in the (upcoming) symposium."*

With this vision Greta initiated a research group among a few of the participants of her community of practice. However, even with a common tangible goal, leading the group was not an easy task for Greta:

#### 4.8.2 Sacrifices made by the initiator

As illustrated in point 4.8.1, collaborating with younger colleagues in the centre and presenting locally was not Greta's personal preference. She said that she was doing it largely for the benefit of her colleagues.

*"I usually do my own presentation, um, but when I see that there can be some group activity, then I tried to explore the possibility of a running a workshop or a colloquium or something like that."*

She admitted that the input and output ratio of collaborative work was not desirable.

*"It took me much, much longer than before to prepare for presentations because as you can imagine, we have to really agree on things and sometimes, you know, it's not easy to come to consensus. And then we had to rehearse our own parts and then we had to do it together and that's why it's not just doubling up the workload. Um, I would say that is tripling or even more than that."*

She also mentioned that she did not really learn anything from her group members that could be applied to her own teaching.

*"I have listened to that presentation in the individual rehearsals for many, many times. So I got to know how they actually teach in a more thorough manner... but to be honest I think everyone has a very different teaching style and that's why perhaps I can't really generalise or apply too much from what I learned from them."*

However, as she also acknowledged that there were difference in terms of “teaching style” among the group, it could also be possible that Greta was already at the end of her career and was therefore not actively looking for changes in her practice.

#### 4.8.3 “Honest sharing” and “Non-threatening”

Apart from the effort of the initiators and to have a concrete common goal, Greta considered creation of a space that enables “honest sharing” as another key factor to group professional development. For her “honest” means colleagues sharing both strengths and weaknesses.

*“My basic expectation was that we can have some very honest sharing and in the flow of ideas and inspiration... sometimes we share success stories, sometimes we, we talk about frustrations.”*

Apart from accommodating sharing about the less desirable parts of participants’ professional lives, she also perceived that to encourage sharing and collaboration, it was important to assure colleagues that they would not be “threatened” into doing research or anything that they might not be ready for. She also thought that the management of the centre agreed with this approach:

*“I was the convener (coordinating all “research interest” groups) at that time (about five years back). And this time round, we, at least when I talked to the (new) convener, she doesn't want to make things to be so academic, so threatening to some colleagues. So they took away the word ‘research’.”*

Not only did she disagree with any approach that would be perceived as pressurising, she herself resist the idea of be required to take on work on top of normal teaching duties involuntarily.

*“The management doesn't want to be seen as too pushy...of course that that's good because if I feel I am working under pressure, I might pull out... I don't think that any people can be pushed into doing things.”*

And despite being proactive in initiating and running various collaborative projects for research and better practices, she seemed to be a believer of equity and would prefer collaborating with colleagues as professional peers, rather than being hierarchically superior:

“I was being asked by one of the senior managers to do something on discourse analysis. I said no. I don't really see the value. I mean, who am I? Am I, I, you're asking me to lecture on people? I, I'm not comfortable with this.”

And as seen in point 4.8.2, she seemed to have adopted this egalitarian approach in her leadership of the community of practice and research group, focusing on empowering younger colleagues to achieve their own goals rather than imposing agendas on them.

#### 4.8.4 Honest sharing on institutional restrictions

Greta's group did complete their action research project and had a successful presentation in the inter-varsity symposium. However, there were frustrations during and after the project. Most of these come from institutional environment. First and foremost, she was removed from the course which she had spent so much time in trying to make research-grounded improvements. She appeared a bit frustrated because of the fact that she could not continue her research:

*“The interesting thing is, um, that's really a joke, but anyway, I'm not teaching X (an EAP course she researched on) anymore this semester.”*

And while the intention of action research is to inform the development of pedagogies and material development, the research-based suggestions may not always be considered and taken onboard by subsequent teachers and course material writers. This could be another source of her frustration:

*“We know that our teaching duties have always been assigned. Then you have to sort of abide by what they want you to teach...I didn't write the course and someone wrote it up and you know, the practice here, we have to teach it. So I am trying to make the best out of what I am given.”*

Apart from limitations in her own institution, she had doubt over the of inter-varsity sharing, as there did not seem to be room for further collaborations at the level of teaching practitioners. A lot of the topics being discussed are specific to individual institution's context, and that changes in that context requires management approval.

*“They (teachers from another university's language centre) said that they're thinking about streaming. So they kept asking us questions about the rationale of streaming and where the, we found that this is something good for our students. I tried my best*



*to answer them, but at the end of the day I told them that I'm not the one who made the decision, I'm not the policy maker."*

She also cast doubt on some of the centre's one-off professional development events, which appeared to be unsystematic.

*"Just ask ourselves: when (another university) people are invited to come to talk with, to talk to us or to share with us their curriculum development, do you think a lot of us can really learn from them by attending a one-hour session? because unless we understand the background very well, it's not really transferable and applicable. "*

However, despite the aforementioned reservation, Greta still believed that these inter-  
varsity meetings had a purpose. They seemed to be providing an environment that was more accommodating and less scrutinizing for new ideas to be presented.

*I just want to be honest, sometimes you're doing it in house. There can be an element of embarrassment and competition because your intention might simply be sharing ideas, others might be thinking "How can this be showcased? What I'm doing maybe better than what you are doing?"... whereas the symposiums are offered to teachers of all the institutes and the outsiders, this might be more open minded... they might not know so many existing mechanisms.... there is no reason for competition.*

To sum up, while approaching her retirement, Greta was still making a lot of effort in supporting and guiding some younger colleagues' effort in research for better practices. And she quite vocally expressed her frustration towards the managerial actions that hinders collaboration and further research.

## 5. Findings and analysis (Themes)

Section 4 recorded the participants' experiences and reflections on their engagements in professional development, collaboration and research as separate cases. Before proceeding to discussion of the themes emerging from these cases, I would like to organise and summarise the group combination among the participants into a table for easier reference. It will be followed by a summary of the general pattern of responses observed during interviews:

Participants	management role in the center	Interest/ research group/ CoP involvement
Seth	Yes	Technology and language learning interest group (Convener) International interest group in technology in Education
Naomi	Yes	Technology and teaching of ESP research (individual) ESP (Business) Material Writing group
Daisy	Yes	Teaching of Reading interest group (Convener) Technology and language learning interest group (Convener) International interest group in technology in Education
Chris		Streaming in EAP course research group
Isaac		Teaching of Writing interest group Streaming in EAP course research group ESP (Business) Material Writing group
Greta		Teaching of Writing interest group (Convener) Streaming in EAP course research group
Annabelle		English ESP (Engineering) interest group, Teacher evaluation of ESP materials research group
Renne		Classroom Feedback interest group (Convener) Technology and language learning interest group ESP (Science) Material Writing group

Table 3: Roles and group memberships of participants

An observable general pattern recurred in a number of cases: For instance, in the cases of Annabelle, Daisy, Issac, Chris, and Greta, they were are leading or participating in a broader group for practitioners (although some used the Community of Practice label, some didn't),

in which they share practice-related ideas relatively casually – participants are not expected to be committed in continuously attending meetings and contributing to discussions; and among these broader groups, a few more committed participants form a small “inner” group in which participants had a common concrete goal (In their cases, action research projects which would subsequently be presented as a conference paper), for which they met more frequently and work closely. In other words, or in Wenger’s Community of Practice terminology, in the groups that they were affiliated to, there were certainly some “core participants” and some “peripheral participants”.

Therefore, it can be concluded that, on the surface, some features of Community of Practice did emerge from the eight participants’ professional development experience over the data collection period. Does the aggregate of these features constitute one or more communities of practice?

#### 5.1 Stocktaking of professional development activities among participants

Although individual professional development is not the focus of this research, as a reference, here I am briefly summarising what the participants reported as their professional development engagements during the data collection period, these include:

- i. Reflection on daily teaching, which results in changes in pedagogies and adaptation in materials (by Annabelle, Daisy, Renee and Naomi)
- ii. Reading literature on professional issues to address concerns emerging from teaching experience (by Seth, Greta and Daisy)
- iii. Formulating direction, scope or question for possible future inquiries (by Annabelle, Daisy and Greta)

The above was what the participants did individually for their own professional development through the data collection period, according to their interview responses. What they did collaboratively with other practitioners will be elaborated in the next subpoint as the answer to research question 1.

#### 5.2 Compatibility of Wenger’s CoP framework

Before answering research question 1, the definition of community of practice needs to be reviewed:

*“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-Trayner, 2023)

On face value, the accounts of experiences of the participants in Chapter 4 seem to be relevant to the above definition: The “concern” is obviously the practice of teaching English for academic or specific purposes to second language students in a university context, and they work together to “better” this practice in various terms such as sensitivity to learners of difference proficiencies, development and application of specific tools and approaches.

Beyond this superficial definition, Wenger (1998) did provide a more detailed framework about the constituting components of a Community of Practice: namely, domain, community and practice, and “legitimate peripheral participation” should take place under these domains. In the following subpoints I will attempt to identify these features of CoPs based on the cases in section 4:

### 5.2.1 Domain

The participants, all in-service English language teachers, share a “domain” --- that is “a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people” (wenger-trayner, 2023). Some responses which frequently emerge during interviews represent such recognition of a collective competency and the sense of a collective identity stemming from that. These include likes of “We are educators” (Greta), “We have problems faced by everyone in this profession” (Chris).

They also frequently express the expectation that their practice needs to be continuously developing; and there are things they can learn from other teachers. For example “Everyone want to do a better job” (Renne); “(I agreed to join an action research group) becoming a better teacher” (Chris) and “(I join the symposium in order to) learn from other teachers”(Annabelle), “We can do so much more for other people (teachers) not only in this centre, but also other centres.” (Naomi).

On top of a clear intention to improve and learn from each other, the participants were able to point out the specific issues or areas in their practice that could potentially be bettered through collaboration with other practitioners. For example, Isaac's revelation that not all teachers strictly follow the given materials led him to join the project started by Greta, with an intention to seek ways to better cater the needs of students of different proficiency through collaborating with teachers teaching different streams; similarly, Daisy took the initiative to start a community on teaching of reading and continuously shared research articles with the participating teachers, after she had identified a lack of emphasis in curricula and support to teachers in this area.

These are indications that a "domain" clearly existed among the participants.

### 5.2.2 Community

The aforementioned mutual learning process in a domain should take place among members of that domain through engagement "in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information" (Wenger-Trayner, 2023), based on these activities a community is formed.

There were certainly a lot of discussion and sharing of information among the participations and in the wider institution: some took place regularly in relatively formal settings with required attendance: like course moderation/ evaluation meetings, discussing systematic issues like grading; while others took place spontaneously "in the hallways" in response to immediate issues arising from individuals lessons (Isaac). Based on the identified issues, there were sharing of materials and pedagogical ideas among teachers, despite that being non-interactive and would better be described as "showcasing", as in Isaac and Chris's cases (the phenomena of "showcasing" will be further discussed in section 5.4).

Other than these required and spontaneous meetings, there were some teacher-initiated communities of practice/ interest groups which were convened with clear purposes but did not require regular attendance. These group hosted activities ranging from sharing of thoughts after reading academic articles on selected practice-related topics (Daisy), to action research with a view to present in an upcoming conference (Greta).

Despite all the initial good intentions and efforts, some participants (e.g. Daisy and Greta) reported that these groups struggled to find gaps in the academic calendar and individual teachers' timetables to meet regularly, this greatly limited the sustainability of these initiatives; And in Greta's case: although she clearly had an intention to help some younger colleagues by passing on tacit knowledge about teaching in this particular institution, she also expressed that she did not have the intention and capacity to share with a bigger group of colleagues.

Therefore, to conclude, there were some interactions among the participants that emerged and started to display some of the superficial features of a community. Yet they did not sustain long enough, and the sharing and discussion tend to remain within a limited group of colleagues.

### 5.2.3 Practice

Apart from identification of a collective professional identity, and the formal and informal interactions between these professionals, Wenger-Trayner (2023) emphasized that being on the same job and meeting regularly do not necessarily mean that these practitioners are in a CoP: CoPs should also be characterized by "a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice."

Furthering the "showcasing" phenomena mentioned previously, it reflects what seems to be a detachment between the "tools" and the "stories and experiences": Classroom experiences of teachers could be shared, consolidated and even developed into artefacts like conference presentations and papers that could potentially be disseminated within and beyond the institution. However, they might not have impact on the "tools" --- the curricula and materials as they were centralized and not always developed by teachers actually using them. Such a mismatch can be observed in Greta, Isaac and Chris's case, as they are not the material writers of the course they teach and research on. Problems may recur in the same courses if the same tools continue to be used, however the experiences and stories that could potentially address these problems did not have the chance to be absorbed into a repertoire that complements the tools. "A shared practice" could not be formed as teachers

were assigned to different teaching duties, and were not recognised and rewarded for sharing their experiences (Isaac and Daisy).

#### 5.2.4 Legitimate peripheral participation

Apart from the lack of a sustainable shared practice, the presence of legitimate peripheral participation, which is another key feature of CoP in Wenger's model, is also questionable in the cases of the participants of this research: It appeared that throughout the data collection period, core members remained core members while peripheral memberships tended to come and go and were not really integrated into the community. For instance, Greta, Chris and Issac worked did work very closely towards the common goal of improving their practice in teaching of vocabulary to students of different proficiency levels, and to present their findings openly in an intervarsity symposium. However, during the interviews, there was no mentioning of their other colleagues in the community of practice which they were all in; Daisy, who led another CoP, also did not say much about in what way the more peripheral participants were engaged, except for their lack of commitment in attending and completing the preparatory readings.

Concluding the four subpoints, the groups that the participants engaged in during the data collection period met some of the criteria of Wenger's CoP framework, namely the existence of a common domain, and some forms of group interaction with betterment of practice as the goal. However, the existence of a shared practice is questionable, due to a lack of continuity of the combination of people and the platforms on which experiences and stories about a practice could be shared. This prevented a repertoire of good practice to be formed and disseminated, and potentially address the recurring problems faced by practitioners. The details of and the reasons behind this lack of continuity will be elaborated in section 5.4 "The "task-and-finish mentality".

And while none of the closer-knitted research groups continue their inquiries and collaboration after finishing a perceived "task" --- a conference presentation, the more peripheral members also did not seem to have made any progress in ending their "legitimate peripheral participation" to become more committed and contributing members of their respective communities of practice. Across the cases, there was no mentioning of

new projects that might include new combinations of colleagues, and some participants clearly indicated reluctance in expanding the existing “core” group, like in Naomi, Daisy and Greta’s cases, they expressed concern over difficulties in coordination, especially in finding common time slots.

It is worth noticing that most of the participants did not seem to have prior knowledge of Wenger’s framework, therefore it is unlikely that their experience sharing was skewed due to theoretical preloads. They just shared the facts and their perceptions of that in their own words. All the alignments between their responses and the CoP framework were done by the researcher after transcription of their interviews.

Seth, Naomi and Daisy were exceptions as these three had taken on leadership positions which required them to develop theoretical ground for the professional development policies they advocated. Wenger’s framework was arguably the most cited professional development-related framework in those years so they would have read about it. That said, Naomi and Daisy’s responses are still very much experience-based rather than theory-based, just like the rest of the participants’. Seth was the only one who used quite a lot of theoretical terms, but those terms were more from the Community of Inquiry framework which he was more familiar with.

Now with research questions 1 answered, I will now proceed to the answer of research question 2 - by elaborating on the what could be seen as the reasons contributing to the aforementioned ineffectiveness in the observed Communities of Practice and other collaborative groups (subsections 5.3 to 5.8).

### 5.3 Emphasis on Teacher individuality and Contrived Collegiality

One of the most repeated lines in the interview transcripts is some form of “They (my colleagues) have their own way of teaching”, and there seem to be some kind of unspoken understanding of boundaries between teachers. For example, this was how Isaac put it:

*“I’m not saying that they (those who do not share) are not passionate teachers, but they may not be as passionate as in sharing; They can be very good teachers in classrooms, but about sharing... they may not have the interest.” (Isaac)*



Daisy felt like there was an unspoken understanding of respecting the boundaries of classes taught by another colleague, even when there that could be related to professional development and potential collaboration, this was her first-hand experience:

*"I'm not teaching the first-year courses right now, so it's hard for me to impose my questionnaires on the other teachers."*

And even long-serving Greta were not comfortable with sharing what might be perceived as definitively "good practice":

*"Who am I? Am I, I, you're asking me to lecture on people? I, I'm not comfortable with this." (Greta)*

This could be link to the notion of "teacher individuality" (Hargreaves, 1994) discussed in the literature review. He argues that teachers are expected to be working individually or risks being seen as inadequately competent by peers and supervising authorities, and the structure of school as an institution do not require nor facilitate exchanges among colleagues, and the intensity of the job does not allow the room for teachers to think otherwise and try reaching out.

I was then curious about why this point seemed so important to the participants. Greta might have touched on the issue of "embarrassment and competition", which seemed similar to Hargreaves (1993) and Flinders's (1988) claim that teachers did that to protect themselves from judgement by peers and management. There was indeed some mentioning of what seemed to be sense of "competition" in inter-varsity occasions. This will be discussed in subsection 5.4.

However, what I really could not ignore was that this emphasis on teacher individuality seemed contradictory to the ongoing discussion on sharing and collaboration during the interviews.

This response from Annabelle during the third interview might have provided an explanation for my observation above:

*“Teachers are kind of very independent individuals in one way because we all teach and we all have our own style of teaching, I think. So by having this kind of sharing section and conferences, we are able to learn more about the others so that when we come back we can reflect on yourself.”*

Some participants who were already manager-teachers further echo with this aspiration towards reciprocal cycles of sharing that would feedback to person professional development, and expanding that to an even broader community of practitioners:

*“Our teaching practices become better, but if it's only isolated within our center, then at some point it will hit a plateau, right? If we connect these groups or how we're developing it to, through this initiative that allows the knowledge to transfer to the other networks, the other institutions. And hopefully it's reciprocal, right? So, um, it's just a way of collaboration and cooperation and collaboration.” (Seth)*

It seemed like the participants did find a way to interpret and harmonise two seemingly contradicting beliefs --- collaborating and “keeping own style of teaching”, and they indeed were teaching individuality in their respective classrooms while engaging in different forms of collaboration activities.

However, I was still sceptical in all what seemed to be unanimous positivity towards collaborative professional development among them, especially when the same people started to report that the collaborative professional development activities over the year had little or no influence on their practice.

Most of them could not provide any explanation other than “did not have time to meet more often” or “time clash”. While Greta, perhaps due the fact that she was about to retire, finally admitted in the last interview that what she was trying to do was “building some sort of culture” before leaving, and she “can’t really generalise or apply too much from what I learned from them (colleagues that collaborated with her)”.

This shows that what participants claimed might not be what they truly think. I recalled Hargreaves’s (1994) “contrived collegiality” argument from the literature review, especially the part about “(true)collegiality reduced to (untrue) congeniality” as a result of top-down mobilisation and orchestration. With this in mind, I could not rule out the possibility that they all congenially stressed the importance of collaboration because that was what the

institution's management told them, they had to conform to what contrived collegiality required but actually they all had other thoughts like Greta did.

In order to find out whether the observed congeniality was true or contrived, I revisited the definition and criteria of contrived collegiality and tried to compare their reported experiences to them:

- 1.) Top-down topic (on teaching of handed-down curriculum)
- 2.) Fixed design and time frames (Instead of spontaneous formation)
- 3.) Mandatory attendance and responsibilities
- 4.) Predictable Outcomes

Although topics were set by initiators of respective communities, they mostly revolved around issues close to the teaching of hand-down curriculum, and were always put into the context of those courses; time frames and format were inflexible due to dense teaching load and therefore lack of common free time; Although initial participation were encouraged but not mandatory, once involved in specific tasks like conference presentation, participants will be obligated to see the process through, achieving a predictable outcome (e.g. a presentation on a certain topic at a certain occasion). While most participants put it positively, it can be seen from Annabelle and Chris's responses that "invitations" to prepare for these tasks could not said to be completely voluntarily:

*"I'll say it's a mix ... I'll say partially I was kind of invited to start a research, gradually becomes more like a self-initiated as well." (Annabelle)*

*"I am not really into conducting research." (Chris)*

Based on these four criteria, it can be concluded that the "communities" that the participants were involved in could be seen as a form of contrived collegiality.

Therefore, it seems sensible to attribute the contradiction between emphasis on individuality and collaboration to contrived collegiality: The participants only paid lip service to the manifested form and declared efficacy of collaborative groups, as they were handed down by the management with little consideration of individual practitioners' professional needs. This then led to the predictable result of not having any impact on individual participants' practice.

When probed deeper into the subtle differences between participants, we could observe that Seth, Naomi and Daisy, who were in or were moving into to the rank of manager or teacher-manager, seemed to have firmer belief in and higher expectation on the impact of collaborative teacher professional development. As seen in the quotations at the beginning of this section, they were more able and likely to think in terms of the theoretical framework handed down by the institution management (Wenger's CoP in their cases). Like Seth said:

*"You can't be an ad hoc community that only meets once in a while. It needs to be formalized so that people are aware of it, they can make use of it when they need it, that has someone clearly leading it, um, and it needs to be connected in with all the other communities..." (Seth)*

They took the initiative and leadership role in grouping colleagues into communities, and communicating to them the benefits of doing so. However, when examining the outcomes of their engagement, theirs were as predictably unimpactful as other participants. It seemed that theoretical understanding of communities of practice could not change the nature of groups brought together by contrived collegiality.

The Inter-varsity Continuous Professional Development Hub initiative might have been formed with the intention of fostering true collegiality. It arguably could have addressed the concern of "Mandatory attendance and responsibilities" as it was obviously beyond the participants' job description, consistent with Greta's observation that participants' tend to have less concern over competition and scrutiny of colleagues; and on such occasions participants tend to be find less predictable outcomes from presentations of their counterparts from other institutions.

However, the participants also reported that exchanges after intervarsity meetings remained very superficial, as they would eventually realise they were still teaching hand-down curriculum and there would be little room of application of finding from other settings. This could be seen in the case of Greta, Isaac and Chris's presentation about streaming students in EAP courses; The issue on limited and inflexible timeframes was worsen when different academic calendars across institutions were taken into consideration. For instance, even Naomi, who was a manager-teacher with relatively light

teaching load, could not find a time to engage in deeper exchange with her audience after meeting at an intervarsity symposium, let alone participants with regular teaching loads.

Among the conveners of “communities”, Renne was perhaps an exception, as she was clear that she was not organising a “community”, as she firmly believed that sharing and collaboration should be part of the nature of the teaching profession. However, at least some of those colleagues who participated in the groups she convened did not share her vision and still perceived their engagement as a form of “mandated responsibility”, and therefore expecting “recognition and rewards” in exchange of their extra efforts.

The impact of what could be seen as indifference of the institution’s management will be discussed in subsection 5.5.

For those who followed someone else’s lead, not completely voluntarily, into what they were told to be resembling Communities of Practice like Annabelle, Issac and Chris, they unanimously decided not to pursue collaborative research further with the same group upon the completion of a task (in their cases a conference presentation). As their experience in their respective groups met the criteria of “contrived collegiality”, This perhaps could be a manifestation of their unspoken dissatisfaction towards the partly “mandated responsibility” they were given.

This “task and finish” nature of collaborative research groups will be further discussed in section 5.4.

This subsection started with identification of what appeared to be an internal contradiction among the responses, and then attempted to explain that through the theoretical lens of Hargreaves (1994) ’s “contrived collegiality. This finding is particularly noteworthy to any managers of higher education who are trying to promote professional development through sharing and collaboration. Experience of this center seems to be consistent with Hargreaves’s conclusion about the incapability of a top-down approach in such initiatives. This issue will be further discussed in section 6.

#### 5.4 “Showcasing” and “task-and-finish”

What could be a sidenote on the unspoken but observable emphasis on teacher individuality and reluctance in any potential judgement and interfere of other teachers' practice is the phenomena of "showcasing": which means sharing materials or good practices without actively seeking feedback from the intended recipients. This was clearly demonstrated in Isaac's case:

*"I think when I see the need to share some of my so-called "good practices", I do so via email or during the team meeting... I am not sure whether they use it or not. But I mean, I've done my part, just like what Paul (an experienced colleague) shares. I mean, we (also) didn't response to him whether we use his ideas or not."*

Apart from not expecting and seeking reciprocal feedback, it also appeared that the participants did not perceive their involvement as long-term and continuous. There seemed to be a tendency for them to take on collaborative work or research as a "task-and-finish" project on the side of day-to-day individual teaching loads. The group can be dismissed when a certain concrete goal has been achieved. Like in Annabelle's case, her group agreed not to proceed further with their projects after presenting in a conference, despite seeing potentials among colleagues and opportunities emerging (publishing). It seemed that they prioritise their teaching and would not like other projects to be drawing attention from them for too long:

*"We often neglect about what's going on around us apart from teaching... We have an intention to do some papers, but given the timeline seems to be very tight so we don't know whether we can do it (publishing the conference paper they presented)" (Annabelle)*

And collaboration involving other institutions seemed to be an even less desirable option due discrepancies in curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Although such differences should perhaps be the reason why exchanges were needed and set up in the first place, but if the curriculum, material and approaches were non-negotiable, teachers would eventually find the exchanges unimpactful to their own practice:

*Research on academic reading like this needs to be implemented into a course. I don't know the way they teach: we don't teach writing and reading separately."*

Greta was an exception as she was the one who did want to pass on "a legacy". She wanted younger colleagues to continue to be benefited from the effort she and her research group

member had made after her imminent retirement. However, as recalled in chapter 4.8, her vision was not actualised in the end due to her assignment to a new teaching team. While the intention of her action research is to inform the development of pedagogies and material development, the research-based suggestions may not always be considered and taken onboard by the subsequent course writers.

*“We know that our teaching duties have always been assigned. Then you have to sort of abide by what they want you to teach...I didn't write the course and someone wrote it up and you know, the practice here, we have to teach it*

In contrast, Naomi was able to keep working with the same team for four years and could align collaborative professional development, research, course material writing and teaching of her team members. She believed that this alignment is key to her team's continuous motivation:

*It's about functions, isn't it? It's about function about building something (course materials to be used by oneself) ...I don't think people would do anything for nothing.”*

She admitted in the interview that she did request the same colleagues to stay on the team. Her role as manager-teacher might have put her in a relatively more informed and convenient position to do so:

*“Well you can request, yeah, we do make requests... especially if it's a smaller team. You want to know that you get a good mix... I think it (the team) is working because they are material writing team members. So they've been working with me for at least what, three or four years.”*

Chris confirmed this request did happen and spoke of it positively in a separate individual interview:

*“We (the ESP (Business) team) actually make requests (to the management) and so far their responses has been quite nice and we have L\_\_\_ on the team for a number of semesters. During summers usually he's helping out with our writing.”*

The importance of such alignment and other potential managerial impacts on collaborative professional development will be discussed in the next subsection.

## 5.5 Managerial influence

On the flip side, a lack of the aforementioned alignment not only discourages teachers, it could potentially stop collaborative professional development from taking place. For instance, Greta and her team's post-conference presentation experience was discouraging: Despite completing an action research project on EAP streaming, Greta felt like the management did not recognise the effort made by she and her team. During an interview she, perhaps a bit sarcastically, remarked:

*"The interesting thing is, um, that's really a joke, but anyway, I'm not teaching X (the EAP course she researched on) anymore this semester."*

Isaac, who was also in Greta's research team, quite frankly admitted there was dissatisfaction over lack of recognition of effort in identifying issues in practice, going through an inquiry process and disseminating of research findings and reflections:

*"I've heard colleagues saying appraisers don't really value this kind of attendance or participation (in seminars/conferences) while comes to appraisal..... if more recognition is given perhaps colleagues may be more willing, or ready, and passionate."*

Daisy also mentioned the backwash effect of the appraisal criteria, but perhaps from the negative perspective: As the initiator and facilitator of a CoP, she attributed the lack of effort in preparation to meetings to the superficial and ambiguous definition of professional development engagement in the appraisal then:

*"I think senior management in our center is aware if you've joined these groups because you can put it in your appraisal. But what you do within the group, that's nothing. No one is reporting on that within the appraisal, so I think simply attending the meetings is enough."*

This view was echoed by Renne. She had a similar observation, but she saw that rather negatively as "cynicism" and lack of motivation of some practitioners, rather than a managerial issue:

*"There aren't many people who will do work only if it's recognized appraisals or any other kind of recognition system. That's a very cynical approach... Um, do we need more resources? Well, more is always help, but we have the technology available to us, we have people who are interested, but if those people are saying they don't have time, then work obviously won't be done."*



It is worth noticing that Daisy transitioned from the position of a teacher to a manager-teacher during the data collection period. She provided a perhaps unique insight on difficulties faced by both the management and the individual teaching teams and teachers: While individual team coordinators and teachers may be quite occupied in delivering their own “fragments” of curriculum, the management may have difficulty in convincing them into seeing beyond their own immediate proximity and open up for collaboration. The management may also have difficulty seeing how the limited amount of “buy-in” (time-off from teaching) can be fairly allocated and what kind of result that might yield.

*I think that we're quite fragmented as a center right now. But I'm not in the position to do that research (about teaching of reading across different courses) because I'm just a new Senior Lecturer... ultimately it's not just research, it's sort of, you have to get the buy-in from the director and then the coordinators (their agreement to collaborate). So I think that's an obstacle right there.”*

That said, as she was not involved in the remedial EAP course, she did not seem to be aware of Isaac, Chris and Greta’s situation: the fact that they have already found collaborative possibilities beyond their “fragments” and even actualised fruitful collaboration, but the management did not seem to be recognising it and facilitating further development of it.

Naomi, who has been a manager-teacher for many years, perhaps believed even more firmly that it was up to individual teachers to make collaborative professional development possible:

*“I think it is a matter of wanting to do it... if you want to do something. Yeah, I'm sure you even, you know, going down for coffee and you say, you know, you can still get things done at Starbucks. (even if one does not have buy-in to work on collaborative projects during office time)”*

She was perhaps not unreasonable in making the above remark, as there were some signs of teachers not seeing the need of pushing even harder and further in their professional development. Some of my observations, which are related to what seemed to be a sense “contentment” among some participants will be further elaborated in the next subpoint:

## 5.6 Contentment or “Plateauing”?

There are a few episodes in the interviews that could be seen as indicators of a generally “contented” atmosphere among this group of teachers (Perhaps with Renee as the exception as she was quite vocal about some of her colleagues comparatively low level of commitment to their own professional development).

It is perhaps not difficult to understand: as teaching English language at the highest possible level to an elite student population is generally considered as an desirable and admired career advancement. More specifically, it can be seen from some individual participants’ comments on various aspects of their professional lives: Among all participants, Chris seemed to be the most satisfied about the status quo back then: He did not see a need for change or development after interacting with counterparts from other similar institutions, and he considered the centre’s support “very good already”; Isaac echoes with his point about lack of motivation to learn from practitioners outside, and even went further by considering the practice (i.e. streaming in EAP classes) in his centre more advanced than that of other centres. There seemed to be a strong sense of self-efficacy, aligning with the centre’s vision in achieving the status as a world-class language education institution and being proud and contented to be a contributing part of it.

While the “contentment” that was observable among the participants in this research can be interpreted positively or neutrally as above, their lack of motivation to create and change is interpreted by some researchers like Milstein & Barder (1992) as a “malaise” (p.23), and therefore need to be resisted at its emergence, or reversed if already prevailing in any organisation, usually among the experienced staff members: They use a metaphoric notion “plateauing” when referring to the situation in which professionals consider their career to be stable, and subsequently perceiving their work as “sameness and stagnation” (p. 23). The notion can be further divided into “structural plateauing” and “content plateauing” (Bardwick, 1986): the former refers to the lack of opportunities for further promotion in the hierarchy of the organization; the latter refers to the perceived lack of necessity to develop new skills and competency for a job that they consider to be unchallenging and repetitive. Between the two, Milstein & Barder (1992) consider content plateauing more negative to educational organisations.

The negative impact of plateauing among experienced teachers is a well-researched area:

Earlier research in school settings like Milstein (1990) & Milstein and Barder (1992) attributes absenteeism, tension with other members of the institution like colleagues, management and even students, and attrition, to plateauing; There are also some recent investigations into this topic in the context of Chinese higher education: For instance, Yuan, Qin & Zhang's (2022) longitudinal studies of 389 university faculty members first confirms that plateauing is a common phenomenon across the country's higher education field; it also asserts that both types of plateauing causes significant negative impact on these faculty's organisational identification and work engagement; while Yan, He, Guo & Wang (2023) conducted another longitudinal research of 18 EFL teacher educators in 3 normal universities. They observed that plateaued faculty members tend to be reluctant in taking on new duties other than teaching, resistant to meeting institutional expectation on their professional development and research, and could be described as in a state of "professional inertia" (p. 303).

These observations in the literature summarised above has some resemblance to some participants of this research: For example, Chris very directly indicated that *"I am not really into conducting research."* (Section 4.5.2) and his reluctance in following up on his conference presentation in the interviews; Chris and Daisy's clear doubt on the lack of recognition of non-teaching work, particularly research and participating, and organizing professional development activities, in the centre's appraisal policy; and also the recurring *"I am a teacher and I don't have much time for things other than teaching"* rhetoric in Annabelle's and Diasy's cases, this may help explaining the generally undesirable reception and lack of continuity in many of the professional development initiatives that existed in the institution during the data collection period.

It is therefore worthwhile for the featured language centre and those with similar function and staff composition to be aware of the potential influence of plateauing in their respective staffs: Various researchers have suggested solutions or remedies to plateauing of experienced educators: For instance, Farrell (2013) holds that professional communities would enable teachers to be exposed to new ideas and possibilities for professional development continuously, hence resisting the tendency of plateauing after prolonged periods at the same position; while Yan, He, Guo & Wang (2023) call for top-down reforms

in managerial approaches and institutional policies. These possibilities will be further discussed in chapter 6.

### 5.7 “Overshadowing” of surrounding academics

In contrast to what might be seen as “contentment”, when it comes to conducting research and disseminating findings, there is also a general ambient of self-undermining, or “being humble” among those respondents. They did not consider their efforts impactful to their own practice, to their colleagues’ teaching, and to the practice as a whole, and were therefore not motivated to continue the scholarly projects they initiated. As this pattern recurred in different interviews (Isaac, Chris, Renee, Greta), I first suspected that could be cultural factors behind that. However, I do not think there is any evidence from my data supporting that, as participants making such remarks were from different cultural and educational backgrounds.

Then I started considering the possibility of expectation management: in hindsight, what these participants experienced during the one-year data collection period can be seen as a very steep learning curve. This was particularly true for less experienced teachers Isaac and Chris: while still relatively new (~5 years) to the practice of teaching EAP/ESP in a university context, they were already aiming at presenting vigorous research findings in an open (even international) and formal academic conference. However, the participants did not seem to be aware of the significance of the leap they had made. This lack of self-recognition could be attributed to the a unique position (as discussed in section 1) these university English teachers are in: they are, on one hand, constantly surrounded by academic seminars/ symposiums/ conferences on a daily basis in their workplace (a world class research-oriented university), but on the other hand not having experience of being directly involved in any of them (due to the non-research employment terms they signed up for). As most of them (except Greta and Naomi) did not hold a research degree (they only had coursework-based taught masters), they did not have the experience of being “early career scholars”.

It is therefore perhaps understandable that they did not find the conference presentation a particularly rewarding process – they may find the preparation very demanding, as they might have been, unreasonably and unnecessarily, comparing their outputs to the kinds of

impact made by professorial rank staff; while at the same-time not knowing how academic dialogues can be initiated and further developed through conference presentations (e.g. as observed in section 4.4, they did not seem to know what could be done beyond exchanging name cards and presentation slides). Their counterparts in other language centres might be in a similar situation and therefore further reducing the possibility of continuation of potential dialogues.

The leadership and support (or the lack of) of more experienced colleagues might be another determinant of their perception towards their initial experience in practitioner/action research. Two of the participants, Naomi and Greta, were PhD holders and had experience in research in EAP/ESP related topics and attending academic conferences. Among them, Naomi appeared relatively less sympathetic to the possible struggles of beginning researchers. This can be seen in her comment on colleagues lacking motivation “It’s a matter of wanting to do it” (section 4.7.5); In contrast, Greta was making extra effort in sharing what she considered to be enjoyable experiences of presenting at conferences (section 4.8.2), trying to involve younger colleagues so that they could also find such experiences rewarding. However, she did admit that her most enjoyable experiences (when she regarded herself as a “conference animal”) dated back to the old days when teachers’ workload was lower (section 4.8.1) and she was doing her own research alone.

It appeared that that some of the participants seemed to be trying to fit into an idealistic model of academic life, a model which they have developed by remotely imitating what their full-time research colleagues in the university were doing – research and disseminate. This model is by nature unfair and unproductive as it ignores the fact that these professionals are researching on top of a full-time teaching load, and lack access to critical resources like fundings and supporting staff; it is also an invalid model as it ignore the fundamentally different nature of the “research” conducted by two fundamentally different groups of professionals, who at that time were perhaps confusingly, both employed as “faculty” – while the professorial rank staff can research for academic breakthroughs and fundings for that, teaching-focused faculties research for betterment of their own practice (EAP/ESP teaching).

Identifying the root of some of the frustrations voiced by some of the participants (Greta in particular) could be a unique discovery: It is more than the commonly identified difficulties faced by contract teaching faculties in prior research like low pay, long hours and decreasing job security (e.g. Bess, 1998; Halcrow & Olson, 2011; Nica, 2018): it's about a group of faculty, who are by contract not required to research but aspire to research on top of their teaching; about the potential contribution they could make should their effort be channeled to smoother pathways and more achievable goals. In section 6, I am going to discuss a model that emphasizes the fluidity (across teaching research and other duties) of professional lives as a possible remedy for the above confusing circumstances; I will also further elaborate on a concept that could guide these keen teacher-researchers on their ways to the right summit of scholarship.

## 5.8 Individual factors

There are some observations which I have difficulty in organizing them under themes. I still consider them worth-discussing: On one hand it is because of the fact that particular participants repeated and vocally expressed their opinions; and on the other hand, based on my understanding of individual participants, had reasons to believe that such opinions might stem from their prior experiences before or after they had joined the centre:

Naomi:

Being in the management, she clearly knew what could be done within the framework of existing policies to facilitate scholarship. Therefore, when she felt like the research project she led would be extending over multiple teaching terms, she actively requested for retainment of the teaching/researching team combination.

Greta:

She chose "not to fight" when her team members were moved to other teaching teams and therefore could not continue researching on the EAP classes' streaming. She mentioned that she wanted and had somehow successful pass on her experiences in teaching and pedagogical research. She felt that as a soon-to-be-retiring teacher, she had done her part to be reciprocal to the help she received when she was a younger budding teacher-researcher.

Isaac:

His involvement in both the ESP and EAP teams provided me with a unique angle: From his experience working in Naomi's team he should be aware that request about team combinations could be made. However, he did not seem to have actively informed his other team leader, Greta about this possibility. This could be one of the reasons why the project on streaming in EAP in classes could not sustain. This could perhaps be related to his years of experience in a junior position in the institution as an Extra-curricular activity officer, in which he mostly execute orders from seniors.

Annabelle:

Her experience teaching in secondary schools may have shaped her very student (performance)-centred view on research. This is because secondary schools in Hong Kong put a lot of emphasis on students' performance in high-stake public examinations, and often hold individual subject teachers directly accountable to their classes' results. She might have carried this mentality forward to her new position and that was then manifested in her choice of scope when a research opportunity emerged.

Chris:

Experience in technical institute may have led him to believe that this institute's support is "very good already". He used to work for much longer hours (and semesters); working with students of much lower proficiency and motivation; much less flexibility in curriculum, even more isolated colleagues and more complicated organizational hierarchies. Here in this centre, even after factoring in the research project that he did not want to do, the workload was still comparatively lower and there was a lot of resources and support he could rely on.

Renee:

Her critical view on her colleagues could have come from a comparison with the level of motivation and efficiency in the private companies she worked for. She felt like initiatives and reforms that were planned were happening and changing too slowly, and at least some of her colleagues' attitude and efficiency would not have been tolerated in the private sector.

The above individual views could perhaps be summed up as a debate over the role of teachers and the role of the institution over collaborative professional development: Some thought that the institution can do more, some thought that it is up to the practitioners.

To sum up, from the perspectives of the eight participants, some processes and interactions did take place over the data collection period: an overall mandate of promoting communities of practice was given by the centre's management, and some practitioners responded by initiating groups with, in general, aims at finding ways to better the practices of their respective participants. The level of commitment varied in these groups, as they engaged in various activities ranging from article reading to preparation for a conference paper; After one year, based on the interview accounts of the participants, it can be concluded that these initiatives resembled some of the forms of Wenger's CoP model, but they were not complete nor sustainable. Participants had different opinions on the reasons which prevent the CoPs from further developing: some were institutional, while some others lied with the participants themselves and other teachers in the centre.

Based on these findings, the implication of findings in this research will be discussed in the next section.



## **6. Implications for the institution and the practice**

While recognizing that the initiatives which took place during the observation period have achieved little of their intended outcomes, it is perhaps harsh to conclude that the centre's attempt to promote professional development during the one-year observation period was a failure simply because it fails to fulfill the criteria of the theoretically ideal community of practice model. An observer could acknowledge that the centre was first of all decisive at the beginning, and appeared to be prompt and driven in planning and actualising various initiatives throughout the year. This was made possible by the dedication and perseverance of a group of highly motivated teachers.

There were interest groups promoting reflection and sharing; some went further by probing into ESL/ EAP literature, and bringing together colleagues of similar pedagogical concerns to start collaborative action research projects, and eventually presenting in an open conference. It is encouraging to see some younger teachers exploring into the territory of reflective practice and action research, and have their level of professionalism and scholarship recognised within and beyond their own institution, while the more experienced and resourceful colleagues support in this process must also be emphasised.

What could, in contrast, be disappointing is the lack of continuity in all their initiatives, which ultimately greatly limited their impact on the practice in this centre and beyond. In light of the possible causes discussed in section 5, some possible alternatives in planning and execution of initiatives promoting collaborative professional development among university English teachers will be suggested in this section. These suggestions would be of reference value for language-teaching institutions in similar situations in the future.

### **6.1 Transparency, stocktaking, cataloguing and showcasing**

It can be observed from the cases that teachers were often unaware of the others teachers' professional and research interests and ongoing projects. The same lack of awareness can also be observed between the centre's management and its teaching staff (as in Greta's case). An observer may wonder if these teachers might be motivated to leave their isolated circumstances if other teachers' intention, interest, plans and discoveries in their individual

professional development can be more transparent to the rest of the staff; while the management could have done more in facilitating existing teachers collaborations.

During the data collection period there was a small degree of transparency in colleagues' professional and research interest: The themes of the interest groups are known to all teachers in the centre, and there were occasional catch-all email invitations with brief elaboration on upcoming interest group activities. Other than that, details like the scopes of interest, goal of individual groups and expected level of commitment were not always visible to non-participants; also, although some interest groups evolved into, or overlapped with action research groups and produced works presentable in open conferences, these works were not accessible after its public presentation, making them unknown to teachers who did not attend that particular conference session. The management also did not follow-up on the activities and productions of these groups. Under such circumstances, it was difficult for teachers outside of these groups to see the relevance of the discussions and inquiries to their own practice, and then be motivated to participate and contribute their expertise and experiences. Those who were dedicated in various collaborative projects may eventually lose motivation in continuing their projects due a lack of formal institutional recognition and support.

In this centre, tacit and contextualised knowledge of teaching, curriculum implementation, material development and adaptation were generated, but the dissemination of such knowledge did not seem to be effective. This did not seem to have improved after all the initiatives over the year in which the interviews took place. From the cases it can be observed that sharing tended to revolve around face-to-face events and regular meetings, with occasional spontaneous exchanges in other circumstances. However, what is common across these attempts in sharing is that they are all one-off "showcasing", with little records retained for wider dissemination. It could be observed that some teachers tried to retain their experience in the form of scholarly publication, however that did not actualise as it would demand too much time for teachers on a full teaching load.

There seems to be a need of a way for sharing to be retainable and accessible to all teachers, but not as demanding as formal publishing: There could be a centralised collection of professional development resources transparent to all teachers. With video streaming

and online sharing technology becoming very accessible in recent years, resources like video recordings of presentations can be stored and organised in an online platform. There should also be space for teachers to indicate their professional development interest, ranging from exploration into an initial idea, to formal invitation in project teams. With this enhanced transparency, knowledge that has already been generated can be disseminated wider and would then make more long-lasting impacts.

One could argue that the intervarsity professional development hub initiative (introduced in chapter 1) had already built such a platform. However, in reality, it could be observed that teachers did not find sharing of teachers in other institutional context relevant and thus not be motivated to use that platform (as illustrated in Isaac's case). The situation may be different if this was done within the institution, particularly a unit in which all staff members have relatively homogenous goals, like a university's language centre.

The establishment of such a platform would first of all require a round of "stocktaking of talents" in the institution: it can be assumed that educational institutions collected information about professional and research interests and track records of each member of staff during the recruitment process. Listing of such information in an institution internal network platform would make possible for "matchmaking" of interest among teachers to take place from bottom up, instead of the often ill-received top-down initiatives.

With the allocation of some administrative manpower, the "list" can be better organised into a more user-friendly "catalogue" of professional and research interests of every member of staff. The catalogue should be constantly updated through periodic re-collection of relevant information from the staff. New teachers should be introduced to this system and be included upon their arrival.

The same platform can also be utilised for preservation and dissemination of various forms of practice-related knowledge: From more formal scholarly presentation and articles to more spontaneous blog entries, lesson plans, lesson recordings. The enthusiasm in "showcasing" among some teachers, as demonstrated in some cases in section 4, can perhaps be channeled here --- and without concerns of not reaching practitioners in a relevant context. It would also enable fluid movement through different levels of

participation: ranging from browsing (without being scrutinized by others as in face-to-face events), observing, to active outreaching to teachers of similar concern or interest, and to formation of possible collaborative projects groups.

This “no-string-attached”, “trying-before-buying” flexibility, which is in some ways comparable to Wenger’s notion of “legitimate peripheral participation” (One can “try” in the periphery before committing to “buy” and join the core), may ease the worries teachers who previously perceive that active participation in collaborative professional development draws unwanted attention (as illustrated in Greta’s case) and obligations, and thus expanding involvement in collaborate professional development in the institution.

## 6.2 Lessons from the private sector – Closing the knowledge cycle

While practice-related knowledge is constantly generated among the participating teachers during the data collection period of this research, it can be observed that such knowledge was not properly stored and not effectively disseminated. Therefore, these teachers’ effort, as they reported during the final interviews, did not have observable impact on the practice of themselves and other teachers in the centre. This seems to echo with Ratcliffe-Martin, Coakes & Sugden’s (2000) comment (reviewed in section 2) on universities’ lack or ineffectiveness in knowledge management:

*“They tend to lose it, fail to exploit it, duplicate it, do not always share it, do not always know what they know and do not recognise knowledge as an asset.”*

This sounds particularly ironic, as the situation in this institution appeared to be the same so many years after this remark was made.

One may wonder would this centre be able to identify the root causes of its ineffective professional development initiatives, and as this centre’s counterparts in the territory did not seem to be keen on sharing and collaboration either (as illustrated in Isaac and Chris’s cases) , it may make sense for one to turn to the experiences from other fields and contexts be of references.

There was not a trend in higher education to adopt knowledge management theories and models at the time the literature review of this research was written. There were calls from

individual researchers (e.g. Rowley, 2000; Metcalfe, 2006; Kidwell, Vander Linde & Johnson, 2000) attempting to draw educational institutions' attention to the well-researched Knowledge management literature in the field of Business Studies. A lot of such exploratory inquiries emerged in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, possibly in response to the worldwide tide of tertiary education expansion and marketization. However, up till the 2020s these attempts remained fragmented (Quarchionia, Paternostro & Trovarelli, 2022).

Despite a general lack of awareness and interest in the education field, knowledge management models, for instance, the SECI model proposed by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) (As illustrated in Fig 1. ), which was reviewed in chapter 2, appear to be instrumental in visualising the seeming malfunctioning collaborative professional development in this centre: In the cases in chapter 4, it can be seen that there were some attempts of “socialization” (informal sharing of tacit knowledge) among some teachers, and from the symposium presentations it could be seen that there were also attempts to “crystalize” and externalize such tacit knowledge, making it available externally. However, the momentum of knowledge development appeared to be truncated here, without progression to the subsequent stages of “combination” and “externalization”.

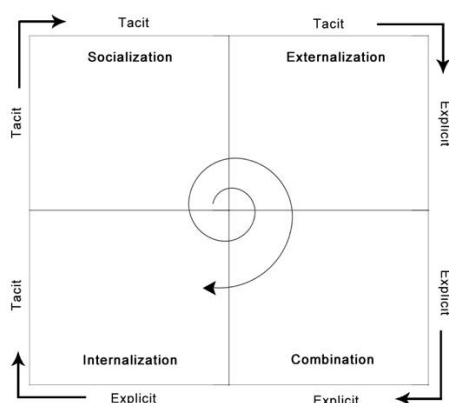


Fig 1. The SECI model of knowledge dimensions (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995)

The open-access “knowledge catalogue” discussed in section 6.1 may provide the space in which crystalized knowledge can be combined and organized, ready for further dissemination. However, establishment of institutional knowledge sharing infrastructure per

se would not ensure that the generated knowledge to be ultimately adopted by teachers, “internalized” and applied in their practices. In the case of this centre, it is, in the end, up to individual teachers’ choice whether they want to be involved in collaborative professional development. As discussed in section 5, teaching, particularly in this centre, could be seen as a rather isolated practice. There was an unspoken assumption that teachers should not comment or advise on others’ practice --- “They all have their own way of teaching”, the participants repeatedly emphasized. This could be a discouraging situation for those teachers who have been actively sharing ideas, experiences and materials, as they rarely know whether their ideas were adopted and how well they were received in classrooms. This also prevents any further development of those ideas through open discussions between the creators and the users.

Teacher isolation is certainly not unique to this centre. Whenever there is a managerial push on collaborating teachers could respond by nominal conformity which results in what Hargreaves (1994) regards as “contrived collegiality” (reviewed in section 2). Hargreaves also concluded, after closely observing a group of Canadian teachers, that teachers tend not to express appreciation or disagreement to their colleagues openly, and this significantly impedes opportunities for improvement (Hargreaves, 2005). This in contrast to the context in which Nonaka and Takeuchi developed the SECI model: They found that knowledge sharing in Japanese manufacturing firms is greatly influenced by the “Wa” (harmony) culture --- emphasizing greater organisational good over individual preferences.

This echoes with what Renee mentioned in her case. As the only person with recent experience in the private sector, she appeared to be quite shocked by some of her colleagues’ relative lack of commitment in search of opportunities of professional development, and reluctance in contribution to the organisation through sharing. Both of which she considered to be expected responsibility of any professionals.

Therefore, apart from institutional knowledge management awareness and building up of infrastructure for that, a change in teachers’ mentality towards collaboration, and more fundamentally, professionalism, would be needed for an institution’s professional development system to be successful and sustainable.

Such a change would start from developing agency of teachers in their own professional development, and equipping them with the tools for a reflective practice. These points will be elaborated in the following subsections:

### 6.3 Developing agency in reflective practice

As mentioned by Daisy during one of the interviews, the “optional” label had put sharing and collaborative work in an embarrassing position in the centre’s appraisal system back then. Teachers may naturally perceive collaborative professional development as “optional” and thus think that it is acceptable to continue to teach “in their own ways”. While Issac, despite being proactively involved in two action research groups and had made substantial contribution during the data collection period, admitted that formal institutional recognition would possibly encourage more colleagues to contribute more.

From the cases, it seems that a change in the appraisal system’s criteria and priority may lead to a backwash effect among teachers’ attitude towards different aspects of their professional lives. Therefore, if collaborative professional development is to be encouraged in an institution, it needs to be reflected in the appraisal system correspondingly.

This might seem to be a rather passive way of encouraging professionals to be more proactive in developing their own practice, and may well be the beginning of another emergence of contrived collegiality. Therefore, this change in appraisal system should only be seen as a kick-starter, or statement-maker of a wider reform in professional development policies in an institution. The reform should focus on developing teachers’ agency in autonomous professional development.

First, perhaps before promoting any collaborative initiatives, teachers may need help in developing their own reflective practices. The research participants reported that many of their colleagues insisted on “their own way of teaching” and did not see the need for professional exchanges. While on the other hand, when I first approached colleagues to seek consent to participate in this research, a lot of them, including those who in the end agreed to participate, responded by emphasising their perceived lack of “interesting things

to share”, but then surprised me by their rich accounts of collaborative professional development during the subsequent interviews. These observations could be an indication of a lack of awareness and methods in continuous reflection among some teachers in the institution.

About developing teachers’ agency in their reflective practice, Farrell (2013) suggests that regular writing helps teacher to “consciously explore and analyze that practice in a more organized fashion” (p.76). He concluded after working closely with three Canadian ESL teachers in a three-year project that teachers did not like journal writing on top of their heavy teaching loads when they were first asked to do so, but they then to eventually see the value in doing so.

It seems that some form of external motivation would be needed to “kickstart” the practice of keeping reflective journals among teachers. What the management could do is adjusting the appraisal system to integrate reflection. Reflection on practice can be encouraged by considering reflective writing as one form of evidence in teaching efficacy. This could, on one hand, complement the student evaluation questionnaires which a lot of institutions rely on in teaching evaluation, and at the same time provide some motivation for teachers to start keeping and refining their reflective journals. Also, through integration of reflection in appraisals, any signs of teaching innovations in the institution can also be more visible to the management, and they could be encouraging these innovative teachers to contribute to the institutional knowledge catalogue, if for whatever reason they have not been doing so despite producing knowledge in their practice. And this substantiation of the knowledge catalogue would then increase the chance for dialogues and collaboration to emerge.

#### 6.4 Call for actions: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and creation of “the third space”

Based on the concern about teaching staff self-imposing unrealistic expectation about the quality of their research concluded discussed in section 5.7, institutions who want to promote collaborative scholarship as a way to strengthen professional development among teaching staff should move away from the perhaps readily-available models from other academic departments in the university, and develop a model that focuses on practitioner/action research which aim at results that could be fed back to the practitioners’



own teaching practices. Apart from setting a clear goal, there should also be a better scaffolded pathway, one which does not necessarily have to be on the academic publishing and conference presentation trajectory. This also needs to be coupled with a more accommodating atmosphere for scholarship of different levels to emerge and be developed through collegial support.

The above argument has been discussed in recent research in similar East Asian tertiary ESL context: Based on his research among College English teachers in China, Borg & Liu (2013) concluded that overemphasis on results recognisable in a traditional academic sense (e.g. frequent appearance in high-ranking journals) is a barrier to their engagement in practitioner research. He also acknowledges the negative backwash effect of appraisal criteria, the competitive mentality associated with that, together with centralised curriculum, on teachers' willingness to research through experimentation. In contrast teachers' lack of training in traditional research methods is not a problem in his experience – he argued that they should instead be helped with methodologies of practitioner/action research. He then calls for a shift to pedagogical, experimental, innovative, critical, small-scale, reflexive and often collaborative inquiry.

#### 6.4.1 Action 1: Distinguishable terminology

Such a shift may start with a term to replace “research” to avoid the aforementioned confusion. While “reflection” can be a good starting point for individual activities, the notion “collaborative inquiry” used by Borg & Liu (2013) can be seen as a term that more closely represents the kind of activities observed during the data collection period.

On the other hand, “Scholarship of Teaching (and Learning) (SoTL)” emerging from UK higher education in the 1990s (reviewed in section 2.3.1) is perhaps a clearer term as it clearly outlines the scope and aim of the aggregate of activities it encapsulates.

Another possible set of terms which also clearly point out the scope of the engagement is the trio of “Pedagogical Research (PedR)” , “Pedagogical Development (PedD)”, and “Research for pedagogical development” when the former two overlapped. PedD refers to individual and informal reflection on one's own practice, and subsequently attempts to make improvement to own practices. Such actions tend not to be theorised and

disseminated for wider application; while PedR activities are informed by reviews of literature, guided by empirical research methodologies and aims at reaching a wider audience. (Gordon, D’Andrea, Gosling & Stefani, 2003).

For better clarity, in their report to HEFCE on Scholarship of Teaching, Gordon, D’Andrea, Gosling & Stefani (2003) organised these terms and their definitions into this typology:

1.20 We have sought to emphasise that PedD and PedR are overlapping not distinct practices, but, to summarise the discussion above, we can construct two “ideal types” (see Figure 3) which represent, in a simplified form, the different emphases of the two terms.

**Figure 3 A representation PedD and PedR “ideal types”**

	<b>Ped D</b>	<b>Ped R</b>
<b>activity</b>	aim to improve practice informal methodology context specific own teaching/own department aimed at local audience pragmatic, low theorisation subject focused or generic	aim to describe, analyse, conceptualise formal research proposal applicable to wider contexts independent of own teaching aimed at national/international audience based on established theory subject focused or generic
<b>outputs</b>	improvement to practice limited general applicability non-refereed publication guidelines on good practice for own institution use web-site publication	better understanding of practice generally applicable output peer reviewed publication analytic description/ conceptualisation results in the public domain may be reported on web-site publication

**Figure 2 : Typology of SoTL**

Referring back to the cases, what the participants did for professional development can clearly be organised under the categories of PedD and PedR: Take Issac’s case as an example, he reflected on his own practice based on students’ responses and attempted to engage them more effectively (PEdD); reconsidered some of his own practice after knowing other colleagues’ different approach in adapting materials (PEdD); engaged in a group action research and presented in an open symposium (PEdR); and during the first interview, Chris’s view on the pedagogical research he had engaged in (*“It’s not that we have researched and then we apply, is how we have been doing these things and we share.”*) indicates that the boundary between PEdD and PEdR is not clear cut.

Choice of terms is perhaps not important per se – what matters is there should be a set of term that is distinguishable and recognisable by the staff of that particular institutes, so that scholarly work can be systematically categorised, recorded and eventually be recognised and rewarded; this set of terms should also be what the other practitioners in the field can recognise and share a same understanding of it. This would then be a term under which professional development and collaboration can be promoted.

#### 6.4.2 Action 2: Rethinking formal research degrees' necessity

All the teachers in the featured language centre possess at least a taught Masters, and there was a policy of encouraging teachers to pursue higher research degrees, typically doctorates (PhDs or EdDs), although the time-off and subsidy given were minimal. doctorates level theoretical and methodological training can certainly enhance the vigour of their subsequent research. However, from the perspective of both teachers and teaching units, the tremendous time and financial commitment required for PhDs might not be proportional to the degree's ultimate impact on teaching practices and relevance to issues within the institution's context.

While professional doctorates like EdDs might partially address the above concern by focusing more on practice and institutional issues, for most teachers, particularly those with less-established careers, is still a level of commitment beyond their reach. What they may need is more short-term, hands-on, and preferably in-house training that would enable them to start inquiries into their own practices, to be informed by theories and literatures, and to come up with findings that are reasonably vigorous and ready for sharing among practitioners. Such short-term trainings can be delivered by external trainers (e.g. Faculty from Education Institutes), or staff members within the institution who have completed research degrees, or possess experience conducting inquiries into teaching practices.

Apart from initial preparative trainings, research degree holders in the staff could also be mentors of colleagues who would like to begin their SoTL, providing them with information about upcoming opportunities, connections to relevant academic organisations, and practical know-hows in different stages of action research projects (as in Greta's case). What the management need is to institutionalise such help, supporting people like Greta with

necessary resources like time-off from teaching, and possibly matching of research interest and methodological preferences.

#### 6.4.3 Action 3: Flexible workload model reflecting the versatility of “Third space professionals”

As discussed in section 4 and 5, “lack of time/ time clash” was often brought up by participants as reasons for not engaging in professional development, collaboration and SoTL further --- “time” appeared almost like a reflexive response. Therefore, it is important to show that collaborative professional development does not necessarily mean sacrificing time that could be dedicated to teaching and administrative duties, it is actually about how work time can be more efficiently utilised. For this purpose, Whitchurch’s concept of “Third space” would be a helpful framework.

As reviewed in section 2, when Whitchurch (2009) discussed the emergence and expansion of professionals who fluidly move between research, teaching and various administrative roles in various tertiary institutions, she was mainly describing and analysing a trend that naturally emerged as a coping mechanism of professionals in the context of higher education in the UK, amidst an irreversible wave of marketisation and rise of managerialism. In contrast, among universities in Hong Kong, a higher education system which till this moment is still a lot less marketized than that of the UK (echoing with Renee’s view in chapter 4.6.4), the teaching professionals may lack the external motivation to engage in the transformation into third-space professionals. If SoTL is to be advocated, the management might need to consider actively promoting it as a more flexible and promising model of career development, and before that, a flexible model of work allocation needs to be introduced. This would enable and encourage fluid transition between various types of tasks that need to be done by the teaching staff in an institution.

Workload model is referred as “Work Allocation Models, WAM”) in some studies like Vardi (2008). It is a tool commonly used by higher education institutions to manage the spread of work among their staffs. It has drawn more attention as higher education institutions worldwide face more pressure on recruitment, funding and accountability, resulting in increase in the amount and diversity of work and thus difficulties in maintaining faculties motivation and satisfaction (pp.499-500). It can generally be categorised into time-

based models (“Hour” systems based on “contact/ teaching hours or actual number of hours needed for various tasks) and non-time based models (Arbitrary points/units systems) (p.500).

At the time when this research was conducted, the centre’s work allocation was mainly time-based. Generally, teachers do not get time-off for non-teaching activities. As discussed in chapter 5.5, some teachers may feel like their effort in SoTL and collaboration are not acknowledged and rewarded by the institution. In response to this, a transition from a contact (teaching) hours centric workload model towards a point system would enable formal institutional recognition of non-teaching work.

Compared to a contact(teaching)-hour based system, a point system can be more dynamic: the weighting of various tasks, be that teaching, administrative, scholarship or a mix, can change from time to time (can be at regular intervals) according to “supply and demand” within the unit (e.g. “unpopular” tasks get more weighting), or adjusted specially for any activity deem worth promoting by the management (e.g. SoTL). With such a model, institutions would have a more refined tool to assert their professional development strategies.

Another strength of a point-based system is a better reflection of work that does not fit into regular semester/academic years: On one hand, there are a lot of tasks in a teaching unit that are one-off: for example, an evaluative action research project on a newly-adopted approach or set of materials. Typically, a team of teachers need to convene a few times over a short period of time only for completion of such tasks; and there are also projects that does not necessarily start at the beginning of a semester and may last for more than one. These tasks may not occupy “hours” all semester/year-long and require an alternative way for them to be quantified and acknowledged. Point System would allow the necessary flexibility for that as it is not bounded by the singular factor of “time” – instead it can take into account considerations like impact, complexity and innovativeness of the tasks.

Some may argue that changes in the weighting of various tasks and outputs can be seen as inconsistent, or even being perceived as favouritism (Hewett, Shantz & Mundy, 2019), as point systems could be a lot of complicated then contact-hour systems, possibly leading to

perceived vagueness and uncertainty. Other research has also shown that university faculty tend to see such models as a threat to their autonomy (Boyd, 2014) and further undesirable bureaucratisation of the intuition (Hull, 2006).

However, if the staff know in advance that point weighting is on continuous review and applicable to everyone in the teaching staff, they would instead embrace it and try to maximise their own benefits in it. For instance, Hewett, Shantz & Mundy (2019) counterargues based on what they concluded after interview 347 university faculty members in the UK: They found that majority of them do not want WAM to be scrapped. Instead, they demand transparency in the implementation of WAM.

To achieve such transparency, Vardi (2008) suggests that work allocation of every staff member, together with criteria and rationale of point allocation should be visible to all members of the institution. This echoes with Kenny & Fluck's (2014) view that the effectiveness of WAM requires involvement of the whole staff in its development and implementation. Boyd (2014) and Hull (2006) go even further by asserting that increased transparency and accountability brought by implementation of WAM can actually be used as bargaining chips for the faculty to demand more resources from the university management.

## 6.5 Beyond Institutional level: Inter association exchanges

As of the end of the data collection period, HKCPD hub, the inter-varsity English language teaching was still very much being perceived as an “event organiser” by practitioners. While its success in organising and promoting one-off events should be acknowledged, there still seem to be work to be done in order to actualise and sustain its initial goals of promoting sharing of good practices and collaboration: The organisation need to find a way to earn more recognition among practitioners as a professional body, so that they would eventually develop a long-term sense of affiliation to it.

My earlier conversation with one of the founders of this association revealed that the rationale behind the inception of the initiative was rather intuitive: A few experienced

practitioners discussed and tried to find a way avoid “re-inventing the wheel” among language teachers who are teaching comparable EAP and ESP course to students of similar characteristics. And after that they tried to back it the idea up with a theoretical framework – then Wenger’s Community of Practice model happened to be the one that was the most popular at that time and was thus adopted.

However, before the organisation can help practitioners to re-invent the wheel, they initiators of it might have, arguably, did exactly that themselves: What they did not do was to refer to the relevant experience of other professional organisations. There were similar organisations in other countries which had already achieved a high level of recognition by both practitioners, the employers and the profession: Most Notably, BALEAP (introduced in section 1) and JALT (Japan Association of Language Teaching) were both founded in the 1980s and they both possess a lot of experience in assessing practitioners’ needed, outreaching and engaging, securing funding, promoting and organising one-off events like symposiums, and recurring activities like special interest groups (SIGs) or regional practitioner networks (About us – BALEAP, 2016; A Brief History - JALT, n.d.). BALEAP has even developed a system of “fellowship” through which professional competence and achievements of individual practitioners can be systematically recognised; and sets of standards and guidelines for enhancement of the operation of language-teaching institutions.

Exchanges between the people who are steering these organisations can potential evolve into something like a “community of communities of practice” – and with proper documenting and dissemination of the knowledge generated in these exchanges, newer organisations would not have to re-invent everything and could avoid the mistakes made by older ones.

To conclude, transforming the currently fragmented, unsustainable, contrived and inefficient attempts to promote professional development would require the concerted effort of the institution’s management and individual practitioners. Some of the possible solutions are mainly technical (e.g. an online knowledge catalogue), some require efforts of individual practitioners’ commitment (e.g. reflective practice), and for structure and

strategical changes the management should play a crucial role. Lessons from the experience of more established professional organisation would be of high reference value.



## **7. Conclusion and Way Forward**

### **7.1 Limitation**

The design of this research, particularly the purposeful recruitment of teachers who are already involved in some form of collaborative professional development, has prevented me from collecting data from teachers who were not involved because they were new to the centre, did not see the need of participating, not interested, or for other reasons not known to me. However, these teachers' view could provide a different perspective on how institutional policies could be interpreted differently. Such a perspective should also be taken into consideration in future development of professional development policies. However, this could be methodologically challenging: Unlike the tendency of "showcasing" of good practices and scholarly findings observable in the cases in chapter 4, it may not be easy to elicit people's idea on things they have not done. And as involvement in professional development was at least nominally a behaviour encouraged institutionally, non-compliance to that could be a sensitive topic that can be hard to be handled ethically as an insider researcher.

### **7.2 Suggestions for Future Research**

If a research is to be done on non-involvement in professional development activities, instead of directly interviewing teachers, it would need to be based on the observation and analysis of a wide range of indicators, such as previous professional and educational experiences, student feedback ratings (if available), and involvement in managerial and administrative duties. Quantitative methods can be useful in identifying possible correlations among these indicators; Network analysis can also be helpful in finding out the dynamics between teachers with similar or contrasting attributes, unveiling the previously unrecognised synergy or non-cooperation among them. These findings could shed light on managerial issues like teaching team combinations and physical arrangement of offices.

Apart from non-involvement, another area which I could not find data for analysis was online sharing and exchanges. There were online asynchronous platforms at the featured language centre for individual communities of practices to use, and there are also similar online forums for practitioners of different professional and scholarly interest available

under the inter-varsity continuous professional development initiative. However, the number of threads in these forums were virtually zero. I tried to find out the possible reasons of the unpopularity of these online platforms during the third interviews, and the response were unanimously unenthusiastic among the participants. They did not feel like using, did not see the need of using them, and unanimous said they would prefer face-to-face interaction.

That was before COVID19 pandemic hit --- Most of these participants would soon then experience an unexpected, unprepared switch to completely online work, including teaching, scholarship and administrative duties. A few years on, with the relevant technology now being accessible and mature, and the teachers now having extensive experience of handling various aspects of their professional lives online, their view on the role of online interactions in professional development would have evolved tremendously and certainly worthy to be investigated in future research. This is also a research area that need to be constantly updated due to the continuous advancement in technology (like the emergence and proliferation of Generative AI after 2023).

Further down the road, if we could agree that the ultimate goal of teacher professional development is to enhance teaching practice for better service of the students and society, the scope of research should be expanded to include students and other stakeholders of education: research into the possible correlation between teachers' professional development engagements and their students' performance could be instrumental in justifying the continuous investment into related initiatives; while qualitative data collected from students of teachers who are differently involved in professional development can possibly provide an alternative angle in assessing the far-reaching impact of teacher professional development provisions.

### 7.3 Impact on Institution and Practice

This research was initiated with an interest in finding out the reason behind a perceived lack of collaborative professional development in my workplace, particularly when there were (or lack of impact) various initiatives aiming at encouraging and facilitating that. Through the data collection process, I first realise there were actually a variety of professional

development attempts ongoing in the centre. Some groups of teachers started projects with observably strong commitment and enthusiasm at the initial stage, but there seemed to be a lack of continuity once a concrete task was finished. This could be attributed to a lack of acknowledgement of work outside of teaching; unclear structure for entrance into and progression through different levels of scholarship work; a lack of platform and audience for dissemination of hard-earned findings; and a lack of concrete institutional recognition.

These findings, which are based on accounts of teachers' experiences and their reflections on them, indicate that previous institutional attempts in gathering and harnessing fragmented pieces of professional knowledge had been ineffective because they tended to be unidimensional (overly relying on singular theoretical models) and isolated (not linked to other crucial functionalities of the institution such as appraisal and curriculum planning). This is an important lesson learnt for institution managements in similar situations --- they cannot rely on any "word of the time", one-off events or individual enthusiasm. They need a comprehensive evaluation of the needs, concerns, expertise and interests among the teaching staff, coupled with a wider repertoire of professional development strategies, in order to conceptualise, build and maintain sustainable professional development infrastructures.

That said, promotion of professional development should not be solely a managerial issue -- in fact it is the cornerstone of teacher professionalism. I hope the conclusion of this research can be a reminder to fellow English language teaching professionals: We should be aware that tunnel vision on teaching duties, as well as failure in consolidating and disseminating the knowledge generated in classrooms, would prevent English Language Teaching from being recognised as an established, self-sufficient discipline, and this would eventually jeopardise English Language Teaching practitioners' autonomy. Apart from the intellectual implication which some may consider distant and overlook, this would also have pragmatic implication on the future survival and prosperity of the profession, one which every practitioners need to consider.

#### 7.4 Conclusion

During the one-year data collection period, it was observed that of all the participants did make various attempts to develop professionally: at an individual level, this includes reflection on daily teaching, trying out changes in pedagogies and adaptation in materials, reading literature on professional issues to address concerns emerging from teaching experience, and planning for action research projects.

As explicit answers to research question 1, the participants were engaged in collaboration with their fellow teachers in their professional development: Such collaboration include exchanges of pedagogical ideas and materials, initiating and participating in community of practice meetings. Some even collaborated in action research and presented in open conferences. However, despite some superficial resemblance to communities of the practice theorised by Lave & Wenger (1998), these groups lacked some of the crucial criteria, most significantly a lack of functioning process to integrate peripheral participants as full participants, and a lack of continuity in their common practice beyond the completion of some short-term tasks.

For question 2, there were an array of factors motivating the participants to engage in collaborative professional development: an internal desire of personal and professional growth, encouragement of more experienced professional peers, and positive experience in “showcasing” of good practices; while in contrast there are also factors that might have retrained them from continuing and expanding their collaborative activities: these include personal factors like a sense of contentment in current level of professional competence, misunderstanding professional development as a collection of “task-and-finish” one-off events, reservation in commenting on other teachers’ practices, and a lack of confidence in the vigour and impact of their scholarship work. On the other hand, there were also institutional factors like a lack of clarity and reward mechanism in appraisal, and insensitivity in team and workload assignment.

From the findings above, which are based on the cases in this research, it can be observed that promotion of professional development is a complex task for the management of any higher education teaching unit. The success of it can be attributed to the dynamics of multiple internal and external factors. There is no single model that would be well-received

by all members of staff, and its effectiveness could dwindle over time due to the fact that all these factors are constantly changing.

Lessons need to be learnt from other fields which has long-established tradition and successful experience in consolidating, disseminating and developing the tacit knowledge generated collectively in the process of work. For example, from the SECI model developed in the manufacturing field. Education institutions can first learn that generation of tacit knowledge is natural and ubiquitous, and the systematic consolidation and dissemination of such knowledge is crucial to the continuous development of the productivity of both individual staff members and the institution collectively. It is a process that need to be planned, executed and monitored with clear vision and assertiveness, not lips-service to empty slogans and leaving it to “optional” to individual staff members.

Whitchurch (2009) 's notion of third-space professionals can be helpful in debunking the rigid, isolated, unidimensional view on the scope of professionalism, which prevails among some higher education teaching professionals and institutions – For instance, the sole emphasis of teaching in the centre featured in this research. Such mentality can result in institutional policies and structures that may hinder collaborative professional development; confusion and resistance to changing professional development expectations may also emerge among the teachers. With versatility and fluidity established as the new norm of professionalism, institutional policies and structures can be reviewed for better alignment with the institutional goals in staff professional development.

Priority should be given to a new system of work allocation and appraisal, with is transparent to all staff, and strikes a balance between flexibility and simplicity. This could be achieved by introducing a dynamic point system for a variety of teaching, scholarship and administrative tasks. While the management can decide strategically about the weighting of various tasks, the rationale behind allocation and the results of it should be made transparent can clearly explained to avoid perceived unfairness among staff members; This should also be a system that actively encourages and enables reflective practices, ; It should also be flexible in terms of cycle lengths, allowing tasks that need to be completed within short timeframes to be credited, while allowing long-term plans to unfold across reporting intervals.

Of course, what Wenger and his colleagues has written about CoP can remain a useful reference – however it should no longer be treated as the “word of the time” or a rigid dogma. When any member of staff initiates sharing or collaboration, it is perhaps not useful to restrict them with so-called theory-based guidelines. Instead, support should be provided by removing institutional barriers, such as liaising common time slots, relevant allocation of teaching assignment, and also building online or offline platforms for SoTL findings to be showcased and disseminated among the staff. The professional knowledge accumulated on such platforms would not just dissipate as in one-off events, they can be passed on, further developed and eventually be adopted and making impact on the development of the institution and the practice.

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Appendices:

Appendix i: Consent form for participants

### Consent form for participants

Longitudinal study of a Community of Practice initiative among university English teachers in Hong Kong  
Researcher: LEE Pui

I volunteer to participate in the captioned research conducted by LEE Pui, who is a doctorate student at the Institute of Education of University College London (IoE of UCL).

I understand the purpose of the research.

I understand that the data collected, including responses from me and other participants will be analysed and presented in a thesis which will be submitted to the IoE of UCL.

I understand that my role as a participant means I will be interviewed individually 3 times for approximately 20-30 minutes between May 2018 and November 2018, and the interviews will be recorded. My postings on the online forum of HKCPD Hub will also be observed and analysed during this period.

I understand that I will not be compensated or rewarded, financially or in any other way for my participation.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from this research before and during the interview. I also have the right to read the parts emanating from my responses of the aforementioned thesis before it is submitted to UCL IoE, and have the right to demand a removal of these parts before the thesis is submitted. I am not obligated to offer any reason for my withdrawal.

I understand that all records of my responses, including but not limited to interview recordings and transcripts, will not be disclosed to any person other than the researcher and his supervisor at UCL IoE. They will be stored with care and handled only on the researcher's person devices. The data collected will only be used for the research purposes and will be destroyed by the end of 2020.

I understand that the thesis may be available to any person who has access to the UCL library system in the future.

I understand that the researcher will try his best to protect my anonymity in this thesis. He **will only refer to me by a pseudonym, generalise my personal particulars and prior experiences, and refrain from quoting verbatim what I would have posted online.** However,

I also understand that as the report will indicate that the research scope is the HKUST participants of the HKCPD Hub, **there is still a possibility that readers of this thesis can identify me.**

I understand that this research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education of University College London.

**By signing on this consent form, I declare that I have read fully understood the above information, I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, I have been given a copy of this consent form, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.**

Participant's signature : \_\_\_\_\_ ( \_\_\_\_\_ )

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ (LEE, Pui)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about this study, please contact LEE Pui (Tel: xxxxxxxx, email: xxxxxxxx@xxxxx).

**1<sup>st</sup> Interview Topic Guide**

1. I understand that you have joined the new Community of Practice Initiative (HKCPD Hub) as a member of the steering committee/ symposium presenter/ participant ...
  - a. How would your participation in this initiative influence your ...
    - teaching practice?
    - relationship with other teachers?
    - any other aspects of your professional life?
  - b. What kind of contribution do you think you would bring to the community?
2. Are there specific topics/ ideas/ initiatives which you would like to develop via participating in this initiative?
3. What is your experience in professional development as university English teacher so far? (particularly the experiences which involve collaborating and sharing with fellow teachers?)
4. Have you heard of the notion of “Community of Practice” before? What does that mean and what makes it successful, in your understanding?

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview topic guides

### (Domain)

- Did you come across any new ideas which could potentially influence your practice in the future?
- Did you interact other practitioners about teaching-related issues? Who did you interact with and what was the conversation about?

### (Community)

- Have you been in contact with people you met in the symposium?
- If yes, did the interaction take place online or face-to-face?
- What did you talk about?  
(including but not limited to:
  - teaching experiences: positive and negative ones
  - theories and paradigms
  - references and resources
  - possibilities of collaboration))

### (Practice)

- Are other practitioners aware of the aforementioned discussion?
- Would you welcome other practitioners to
  - read / listen
  - participate in this discussion?
- How do you think this discussion could potentially evolve into?
- Do you think there is a need to record the development of this idea so that it can be available to practitioners in the future? How would you do that?

### (Facilitation)

- Have you joined any of the “communities” under the HKCPD initiative?  
(Let participants freely talk about their initial impressions and experiences)

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Interview Topic Guide

1. Reviewing 2018, how have you developed as a teacher?  
(Including but not limited to: pedagogical innovation and refinement, material development, self-reflection, theoretical perspectives, action research projects, career goals and possibilities...)
2. What are the factors catalyzing such development?  
(Including but not limited to: Formal courses, PD Events, conferences, research projects, professional exchanges, informal encounters...)
3. Do you think the other teachers has a role in your professional development? In what way and to what extend?
4. Do you think you have influenced other teachers in their practice? How?
5. Has the HKCPD Hub initiative helped your professional development? How?
6. In the future, what changes could HKCPD Hub made to facilitate professional development more effectively?

### Appendix iii: Sample interview transcription

Researcher:	<a href="#">04:05</a>	So how often stay kind of informal feedback occur? It's just very occasionally or quite often you have people asking you questions.
Seth:	<a href="#">04:18</a>	Um, occasionally, very occasionally and it's usually down to a particular couple of individuals,
Researcher:	<a href="#">04:27</a>	so it's only through these people perhaps we can have access to, a way to know whether people are implementing those things they've learned. It's like you've presented at that particular occasion and that's it?
Seth:	<a href="#">04:49</a>	it's absolutely individual. Uh, I mean I'll, I'll, I'll sometimes in the hallways informally ask them, hey, how's it going to be tried? But that's a very rare occasion. So there's nothing them for me to follow up on whether or not they're implementing stuff. No.
Researcher:	<a href="#">05:06</a>	Okay. So could that be a more effective system? Like, um, do you think that the SIGs (special interest groups) and community that we're doing now, it's like moving towards that direction?
Seth:	<a href="#">05:22</a>	I think so. Um, I think having a community, a formal community that's connected to everything within the center would help so that people have a physical and virtual place that they can go to when they know they want the information or, or, or to seek guidance. But it needs to be something that's consistent. You can't be an ad hoc community that only meets once in a while. It needs to be formalized so that people are aware of it, they can make use of it when they need it, that has someone clearly leading it, um, and it needs to be connected in with all the other communities or the other relevant committees. So for example, to a quality assurance committee, your, the UGC or so the Undergrad committee that, that are in charge of setting the curriculum of the courses, um, if they're not talking to each other, it just doesn't, doesn't seem to matter what they do.

## Appendix iv: illustration of the coding and thematising process

### Step 1: Initial reading (points of interest highlighted):

Researcher:	<a href="#">04:05</a>	So how often stay kind of <b>informal feedback</b> occur? It's just very occasionally or quite often you have people asking you questions.
Seth:	<a href="#">04:18</a>	Um, occasionally, <b>very occasionally</b> and it's <b>usually down to a particular couple of individuals</b> ,
Researcher:	<a href="#">04:27</a>	so it's only through these people perhaps we can have access to, a way to know whether people are implementing those things they've learned. It's like you've <b>presented at that particular occasion and that's it?</b>
Seth:	<a href="#">04:49</a>	it's <b>absolutely individual</b> . Uh, I mean I'll, I'll, I'll <b>sometimes in the hallways informally ask them</b> , hey, how's it going to be tried? But that's a <b>very rare occasion</b> . So there's <b>nothing them for me to follow up on</b> whether or not they're implementing stuff. No.
Researcher:	<a href="#">05:06</a>	Okay. So could that be a more effective system? Like, um, do you think that <b>the SIGs (special interest groups) and community</b> that we're doing now, it's like moving towards that direction?
Seth:	<a href="#">05:22</a>	I think so. Um, I think having a community, <b>a formal community</b> that's <b>connected to everything within the center</b> would help so that people have a <b>physical and virtual place that they can go to when they know they want the information or, or, or to seek guidance</b> . But it needs to be something that's <b>consistent</b> . You <b>can't be an ad hoc community</b> that only meets once in a while. It <b>needs to be formalized</b> so that people are aware of it, they can make use of it when they need it, that has someone clearly leading it, um, and it needs to be <b>connected in with all the other communities or the other relevant committees</b> . So for example, to a quality assurance committee, your, the UGC or so the Undergrad committee that, that are in charge of setting the curriculum of the courses, um, <b>if they're not talking to each other, it just doesn't, doesn't seem to matter what they do</b> .

Step 2: Grouping of similar and related ideas

Group 1: Informal feedback, occasionally, in the hallway, ad hoc community

Group 2: down to a particular couple of individuals, absolutely individual, nothing to follow up on, (Communities) not talking to each other

Group 3: Formal community, physical and virtual space, the SIGs (special interest groups) and community

Group 4: consistent, connected with other communities, go to get information or to seek guidance

Step 3: Consolidation into themes

Theme 1: Spontaneous professional development

(Exchanges restricted to a certain small group of professionals, which were not sustained or connected to other ongoing exchanges)

Theme 2: Structured professional development (Communities)

(Recurring connection among a group of practitioners, during which a sense of “community” is formed --- participants become aware that in these communities they can exchange of practice-related information and ideas; ideally they should also be connecting to other ongoing communities)