

Examining Pakistani English Teachers' Professional Learning in an Online Community of Practice

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored how English Companion Ning (ECN), an online community for English teachers, enhanced the professional learning of university English teachers in Pakistan. Six teachers, selected through purposeful sampling, participated in this study. Drawing on a community of practice framework, the following data were analyzed: in-depth interviews, guided tours of teachers' interactions on the ECN, and ECN observations. The researchers employed grounded theory to analyze the data through initial, focused, and axial coding. Findings indicated that the Pakistani teachers learned with others in the supportive and collaborative environment of the ECN community. The aspect of legitimate peripheral participation in the ECN offered teachers an opportunity to observe, interact, and learn from more knowledgeable community members, which helped these teachers advance from peripheral towards full members of the ECN community. Implications for developing higher education systems are shared.

Keywords: Community of practice, English as a second language, Online community, Online teacher professional learning, University teachers

Introduction

As the Internet and digital technology become increasingly significant tools for creating social connections and fulfilling personal and professional needs across a variety of contexts (Collins & Halverson, 2009), educators in many countries are using the Internet for multiple teaching and learning purposes (Leu & Forzani, 2012), including enhancing their professional learning (Beauchamp, Burden, & Abbinett, 2015). Teachers are using online communities and social networking tools to gain new skills and ideas, share knowledge with others, and engage in collaborative and reflective activities (Sari, 2012). While there has been a significant increase in teachers' online professional learning (Murray, 2014), this is not the case for teachers in all countries. For example, in Pakistan, where this study took place, teachers' professional learning typically involves conventional one-day, instructor-led workshops (Chaudary, 2011) and use of the Internet remains largely for social communication and entertainment purposes (Batool &

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Mahmood, 2010). How the Internet might support teachers' professional learning remains relatively unexplored in Pakistan (Qureshi, Ilyas, Yasmin, & Whitty, 2012).

In this article, we examine how ECN contributed to the professional learning of six Pakistani university English teachers by functioning as an online "community of practice" (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). This study details how, contrary to most of the individual, isolated, and non-supportive face-to-face professional learning programs in Pakistan (Ali, 2011; Hussain, 2009), the participant teachers learned together in a community and enhanced their professional learning through the different activities in the ECN. This study seeks answers to this research question: How did the Pakistani teachers learn in this CoP? We begin with a discussion on communities of practice followed by what literature says about teachers' professional learning, particularly in Pakistan. Then, after detailing this study's methodology, findings are presented about the teachers' experiences in the ECN and how participants became full members of the community through the process of *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Finally, this article concludes with implications for researchers and higher education institutions.

Situating our Research

The theoretical framework guiding this study was the notion of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). We also situate our work within ongoing conversations about teacher professional learning in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Communities of Practice (CoP)

Born out of earlier work to understand situated learning and apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991), CoPs describe groups of practitioners who share "a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Writing about the structure of CoPs, Wenger et al. (2002) and Wenger et al. (2009) asserted that the framework of a CoP consisted of three interconnected elements: domain, community, and practice. Additionally, legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is another important aspect of a CoP, which emphasizes that participation of newcomers in a CoP is essentially passive and peripheral in the beginning, but becomes active and central gradually as learners continuously engage in the activities of the community.

Because we wanted to explore how the Pakistani teachers learned, co-constructed, and shared knowledge with others through interaction and participation in the ECN, using the lens of CoP helped us see how the Pakistani teachers enhanced their professional learning as a result of interaction and collaboration with teachers from other countries, who had a common purpose of helping and supporting English teachers in their professional career. Additionally, we observed how the participation of the Pakistani

teachers moved from peripheral toward central (legitimate) participation in the ECN as they interacted with other ECN members.

Teacher Professional Learning

The literature on traditional face-to-face teacher professional learning has characterized many professional learning programs as brief, periodic, and based on the transmission model of instruction, which hardly contribute to teachers' professional learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Murray, 2014). Teacher professional learning in Pakistan similarly provides very few opportunities to interact, collaborate, and develop professionally (Memon, 2007). Traditional professional learning programs in Pakistan are "limited, fragmented, one-shot or short term, pre-packaged" and are isolated from teachers' classroom experiences (Hussain, 2009, p. 109). Also, financial or geographical constraints associated with face-to-face professional learning sessions limit many Pakistani teachers from receiving professional training at all (Ali, 2011).

The limitations of traditional professional learning programs necessitate a continuous, accessible, collaborative, reflective approach to professional learning that relates more to teachers' classroom practices (Murray, 2014). Fortunately, the Internet now provides teachers a chance to connect, interact, and participate in formal and informal online learning contexts (Kerrey & Iskason, 2000). Research has demonstrated that online spaces can provide teachers with ongoing support, peer coaching, and mentoring (Hur & Hara, 2007) and can offer them an equal and respectful platform for sharing opinions and resources in a collaborative setting (Sari, 2012). Due to such advantages of online spaces, many teachers in countries such as U.S.A., Indonesia, and Australia are turning to online spaces for their professional learning (Hur & Hara, 2007; Sari, 2012; Seo & Han, 2013). However, Pakistan still lags behind in reaping the benefits of Internet and digital media and traditional face-to-face professional learning programs still dominate in the country (Ali, 2011).

Study Design

This article draws from a larger qualitative in-depth interview study of the Pakistani teachers' use of the ECN. The specific type of qualitative research, in-depth interview strategy, helped us to focus on the "individual lived experiences" of the Pakistani teachers in the ECN and also allowed us to "capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants' own words" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 93). Prior to starting this study, we underwent an ethics review at [our] University and received formal approval from the Pakistani institution to conduct this research. We worked to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of our participants.

Research Context

ECN (<http://englishcompanion.ning.com/>) was created in 2008 by Jim Burke, a high school English teacher in the United States and author of numerous English teacher

professional resources. On the ECN, teachers from different countries share knowledge and teaching resources, tips, and ideas with each other, making the ECN a global professional learning community (Author1, 2014; See Figure 1 for what ECN looks like).



Figure 1. *Image of ECN*

This study took place at Sana University (all names are pseudonyms) in Pakistan. As participating in the ECN requires the Internet connectivity, Sana University was chosen because teachers there have easy access to both the Internet and computers in their workplace.

Sampling and Participants

Six English teachers participated in this study. We started with convenience sampling by contacting the easily available teachers in the English department of Sana University. Approximately 16 teachers expressed willingness to participate in this study. Author1 introduced these teachers to the ECN and they began visiting the website, reading posts, commenting, and participating in discussions. Then purposeful sampling was used to select participants from this pool who had the most interest in participating in ECN. For the purpose of this study, the participants had to visit the ECN at least once per week prior to the start of data collection, to become familiar with the site and its practices. They had to participate in the ECN by reading posts, commenting on others' posts and participating in discussions. Six out of 16 participants fulfilled these criteria and became participants of this study. These teachers taught English at the Masters level, fell in the range of having 3 to 12 years of teaching experience at Sana University, and, as will be discussed later, displayed different categories of participation in ECN (See Table 1).

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

| Name | Age* | Years of Teaching Experience* | Area of Expertise | Participation in ECN |
|--------|------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Afreen | 25 | 3 | Linguistics | active |
| Ruby | 28 | 4 | English Language Teaching | active |
| Maha | 32 | 7 | Linguistics | moved between active and periphery |
| Rani | 32 | 7 | English Literature | periphery |
| Aiza | 36 | 8 | English Literature | moved between active and periphery |
| Noor | 40 | 12 | English Language Teaching | periphery |

* As of the start of the study, on April 6, 2015.

Data Collection

Over 10 weeks, Author1 generated data through in-depth interviews, guided tours, and online observations of the ECN. Two in-depth interviews were conducted per participant, one in the beginning of the study and the other at the end of the data collection period. In initial interviews, participants answered questions about their demographics, ideas about traditional face-to-face professional learning in Pakistan, and experiences (if any) with using any online space for professional learning. The initial interview protocol consisted of eight semi-structured questions. However, based on the participants' response to these initial questions, Author1 asked additional questions of each participant. During follow-up interviews towards the end of data collection, Author1 focused on the participants' use of and professional learning within the ECN website. The protocol for this interview contained 13 semi-structured questions; but as with the initial interviews, the participants were asked some additional questions based on their responses and use of ECN. Interviews lasted for 45-60 minutes each; they were audiotaped and later transcribed.

Also, each participant provided Author1 with a guided tour of the ECN website once a week at the university so that the participants' ECN experiences could be observed

from their perspectives. Each participant's guided tour took approximately 10-20 minutes during which they showed Author1 their different experiences in the ECN community during the previous week. Author1 audiotaped all the guided tours and also took field notes as the participants shared their experiences and perspectives regarding the ECN website. For both interviews and guided tours, the participants were asked questions in English but were given the choice to respond in Urdu or English.

Finally, to capture the participants' online practices, Author1 downloaded their discussion threads during systematic ECN observations. Whenever a study participant started a new discussion, uploaded a document on the website, shared some link, or participated in existing discussion posts, Author1 received an email notification and could follow a link to that participation on the ECN.

Analysis

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), data were coded with initial, focused, and axial coding. Initial coding involved line-by-line coding and use of gerunds to capture "a strong sense of action and sequence" in the data (p. 120). After initial coding, focused coding helped us in developing more salient codes, studying and comparing the most important or most frequently appearing initial codes across different sets of data. Axial coding followed to relate categories to subcategories, and to help in classifying, categorizing, reassembling, and organizing the "split" or "fractured" data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124).

Study Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research depend on the constructivist criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, we achieved the credibility and dependability criteria by triangulating the data sources through ECN observations, interviews, and ECN guided tours, and then analyzing the data through the grounded theory approach. For the transferability criterion, we provided a rich and detailed description of the participants and setting so that the findings could be transferred to other developing countries like Pakistan that share similar characteristics in terms of technology resources. To fulfill the confirmability criterion, we worked together and sought help from our research colleagues by sharing the analysis and findings of this study with them so that they could evaluate whether our inferences and interpretations made sense to them.

Findings

Following were the findings of this study.

Learning in the ECN

Findings indicated that the ECN members had a domain, “a common ground and a sense of common identity” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27), which bounded members together in this online community. The domain is articulated on ECN’s homepage as: “A place to ask questions and get help. A community dedicated to helping you enjoy your work. A cafe without walls or coffee: just friends.” In line with this domain, the ECN members helped, supported, and solved each other’s problems. For instance, Afreen, a new teacher in the university, raised her teaching-related concerns and got support from the ECN members. She had to teach a course about grammar to her students towards the end of the semester, and had been looking unsuccessfully for interesting grammar activities. Afreen had been using a prescribed book in her class for some time but she did not find it useful. She shared her issue with the ECN community and got six ideas for teaching grammar. Rob, another ECN member, shared a book of grammar activities with her, which she downloaded and shared some of its activities for prepositions and use of articles with her students. Afreen found the activities so beneficial that she thought of recommending the book to the university principal for future use. This example demonstrates that ECN served as a platform where teachers like Afreen could share their concern with others and get solutions.

The Pakistani teachers also learned in the ECN as the CoP’s second element, community, connected the group by creating “the social fabric of learning” and by nurturing relationships of “mutual respect” in this online community (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 28). For instance, Ruby received encouragement and acknowledgement from the ECN members mostly for sharing ideas. Ruby commented on another ECN member, Diya’s, blog about “Six ways to improve students’ preparation for college” (ECN post, May 3, 2015). Ruby shared her point of view, to which Diya responded, “You are right. I agree with you [Ruby]...” (ECN post, May 28, 2015). Ruby expressed the impact of this welcoming attitude from ECN members, saying, “Comments like ‘I agree with you [Ruby]’ really motivated me to share more of my ideas with the ECN members”^{*} (Interview 2, Ruby, June 16, 2015). In return, Ruby showed appreciation for ECN members by saying, “Thanks to all of you. You have increased my knowledge regarding...” (ECN Post, May 27, 2015), which helped maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect in the ECN and encouraged participants like Ruby to share and participate more in the ECN community, which leads to learning.

The third element of CoPs, practice, facilitated the Pakistani teachers’ learning through creating new discussion forums, sharing links with other ECN members,

^{*} Quotes from participants’ data are shared exactly as they stated/wrote them.

exploring, reading, and participating in discussion posts, asking questions, and giving ideas to others in this online community. In this study, the Pakistani teachers learned *from* the personal experiences and ideas shared by the ECN members on different teaching related issues. For instance, Maha shared how she learned about strategies for giving creative homework assignments to students after reading an ECN member's discussion post on how to give good homework assignments. One week later she reported implementing one of the strategies saying that she assigned her students the task of creating questions on some of Keats' poems in their homework and she was "happy to see that most of the students did that homework" (Guided tour, Maha, May 6, 2015).

Also, the Pakistani teachers learned *with* the ECN members when they tried to make meaning of some new information or problem. For instance, Ruby shared how she came to know about a new writing software after reading Angela's [another ECN member] blog on "Six Ways to Improve Students' Writing" (ECN post, April 18, 2015). Ruby read about writing software that could be utilized in the process of students' writing and peer editing. Ruby wanted to improve her students' writing skills, so she asked Angela, "I wonder is there any specific software for a computer-based writing program? If yes, can you please share one?" (ECN post, May 4, 2015). Angela referred Ruby to the writing software Myaccess.com that Ruby tried using with her students in Pakistan. This exchange between Ruby and Angela reveals that Ruby, through the practices associated with her membership in ECN, learned new information about using writing software that she was able to apply in her university classroom.

Most of the Pakistani teachers' learning occurred by participating in *informal* practices, such as spontaneous sharing of tips and strategies, and questions and answers on diverse teaching topics, as was illustrated above with Ruby. These teachers also took part in some *formal* practices, such as downloading videos and e-books from the ECN's free e-library called "Learning Library." Further, the Pakistani teachers' learning was informed by both *external* as well as *internal* community sources. Instances of the external sources on the ECN included exchanging links to other websites, whereas, the internal community sources involved sharing of lesson plans, activities, and e-books within the ECN community.

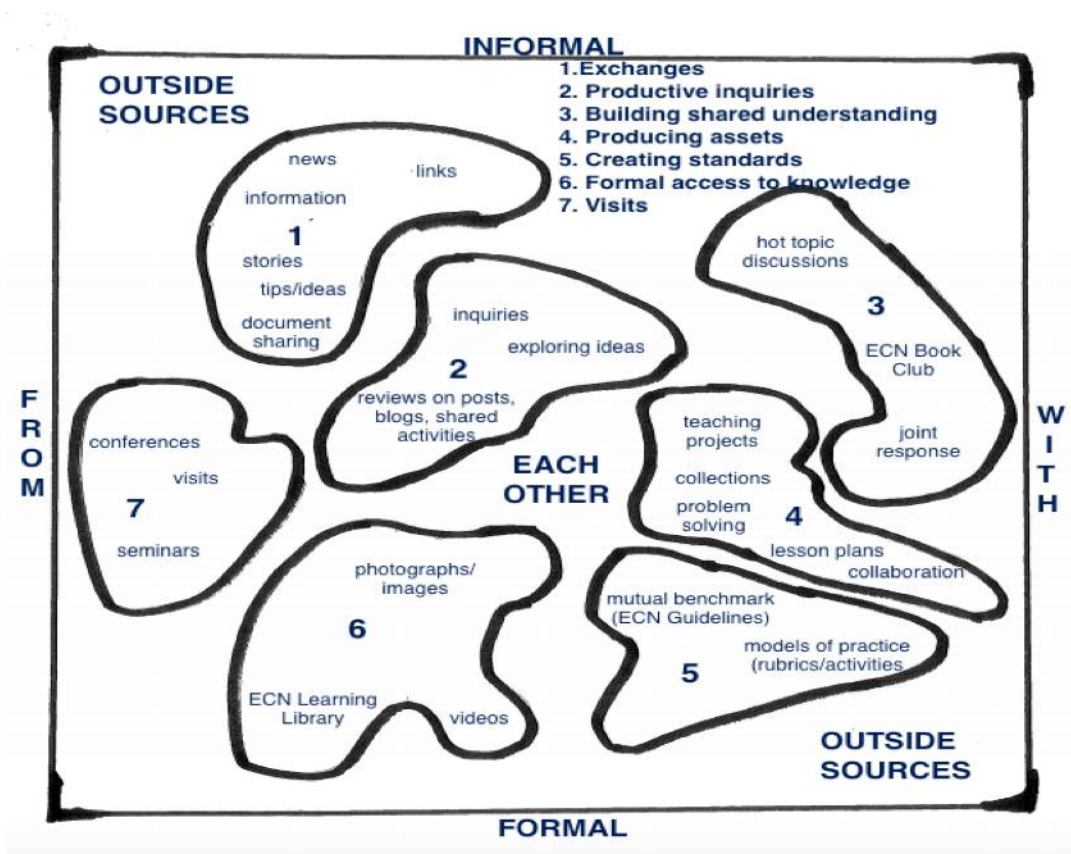


Figure 2. *ECN members' engagement in different ECN practices* (Adapted from Wenger et al., 2009).

Figure 2 illustrates the range of practices that ECN members engage in along all of these dimensions of from/with, informal/formal, and external/internal. By tapping into the different sources of learning through ECN's practices, members, including the Pakistani teachers in this study, expanded their knowledge beyond what they could learn as individuals.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation in the ECN

A CoP encourages different levels of participation during the process of moving from peripheral towards central participation in the community (Wenger et al., 2002). In this study, some participants (Ruby and Afreen) were active mostly because they posted frequently on the ECN and their activity indicated more full participation in the CoP. Other participants (Noor and Rani) posted rarely and remained on the periphery of ECN. The remaining moved between the active and peripheral levels of the ECN community

(Maha and Aiza). However, all of them spent some time just exploring and reading the ECN posts in the beginning. Such behavior could be considered passive “lurking” in the ECN site, though from the CoP standpoint, lurking in the ECN would be conceptualized as legitimate peripheral participation. The peripheral activities of these Pakistani teachers are an important dimension of a CoP as staying on the periphery gave them an opportunity to learn about the ECN and its practices as they began to enter into the community.

Wenger et al. (2002) viewed that people on the periphery of a CoP “gain their own insights from the discussions and put them to good use” in their own way during the learning process (p. 56). For instance, Rani and Noor, who joined ECN because they wanted to learn new teaching approaches and strategies, posted very little on the ECN and remained on the periphery for most of the study. These participants were learning in their own way while just observing other ECN members. For instance, Rani read innovative ideas on the ECN about using social media like Facebook to teach Shakespeare’s plays. When she tried one with her students, it went well (Guided tour, Rani, May 14, 2015). Likewise, though Noor posted not more than four times on the ECN, she also shared with us the different teaching tips and ideas she gained from posts on the ECN (Guided tour, Noor, May 30, 2015). These examples suggest that Rani and Noor were not passive in this study; rather, they learned different tips and ideas from the ECN and used them with their students in classes.

Ruby’s participation in particular serves as an illustrative example of LPP in this study. Her participation was gradual and peripheral in the first three weeks. She read various discussion posts and blogs in the first week and observed how the ECN members shared and responded to each other’s queries. In the second week, she posted a question on the ECN about Shakespeare’s play *Othello* that she had been anxious to know about for quite some time. She expressed in one of the guided tours,

I still have a question that my teacher asked many years ago. The question was “Why Iago hated Desdemona?” I never found the answer to this question... The first thing I’m going to ask [on ECN] is this question. Other than this I have some other questions that I’ll ask one by one. (Guided tour, Ruby, April 15, 2015)

Ruby spent time to observe the ECN community and familiarize herself with its functioning and beliefs before starting to participate. In order to look for the answer, she joined the “Teaching Shakespeare” group first and read through the different discussions there. When she could not find the answer in the existing discussion posts, she posted her question “Why Iago hated Desdemona?” on the ECN (ECN post, April 16, 2015). As soon as Ruby posted this query, she got 11 responses, six of which were on the very day she asked this question. In the second and third week of the study, Ruby asked a couple more questions related to her teaching. When the ECN members responded to her queries,

she again got encouraged. Gradually, Ruby started relying on the ECN to learn solutions to her teaching problems.

Support from the ECN community brought a sense of confidence in Ruby that ECN would be the place to seek help, if she was in need ever. ECN in her case served as an “important lifeline” to deal with the problems and frustrations present in the life of a new teacher (Murray, 2014, p. 136). Further, a transition in Ruby’s participation occurred when she went from just exploring and asking questions in the first three weeks, to giving opinions and sharing ideas with others for the remainder of the study. Ruby explained this transition by saying, “When I asked them [ECN members] something, they gave answers so now I give them replies when they ask something” (Guided tour, Ruby, May 14, 2015). Such reciprocity in sharing knowledge implies that after learning from the ECN members for some time, Ruby now wanted to pay back to the community by sharing her knowledge with them. Like the apprenticeship of the novice in the community of tailors studied by Lave and Wenger (1991), Ruby also went through the process of observing, interacting, and collaborating with the experts of the ECN community. This development from an observer to an active participant shifted Ruby from being a consumer to a creator of knowledge, and thus Ruby became a full participant and a significant contributor in the ECN community.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored how the ECN contributed to the professional learning of the Pakistani university teachers by functioning as an online CoP. The ECN members supported each other in their professional careers due to a well-defined and shared domain, which brought members closer to each other. The supportive environment of the ECN resulted in a feeling of community, commitment, and belonging in the Pakistani teachers. Just as Hur and Brush’s (2009) study established emotional support to be one of the factors for developing a sense of camaraderie among teachers, the support from the ECN community helped to develop a feeling of mutual support and trust among its members. Wenger et al. (2002) contended that the three elements of a CoP (domain, community, practice) depend on each other to keep the CoP sustained and thriving. These elements should develop in parallel as “it is their interplay that makes for a healthy community” (p. 46). This study exhibited that the ECN as a CoP maintained a balance among its three elements. Since the ECN had a clear and well-defined domain, it gave its members a purpose and an identity. The ECN members shared knowledge and learning collaboratively and helped in keeping this community moving by participating in the different practices of the ECN.

Additionally, this study explored how the learning of the Pakistani teachers (newcomers) developed overtime as they participated peripherally in the ongoing activities of the ECN. Lave and Wenger (1991) regarded LPP as a vital process in the newcomers’ learning of a new practice, as a result of which the novice becomes an expert

and starts performing an active role in the community. After illustrating the peripheral participation of Rani and Noor, this study discussed the development stages of one participant, Ruby, in detail and examined her transition from passive to active membership in the ECN due to the help and support of the expert community members. Ruby enhanced her professional learning by engaging in diverse activities in the ECN including creating new discussion forums, participating in discussions, commenting on posts, and giving ideas to other members.

As evidenced above, this CoP provided these teachers an opportunity to learn through dialogue and share knowledge in an international, collaborative environment. Thus, professional learning in the ECN was unlike the typical opportunities available to these teachers in Pakistan (Ali, 2011; Hussain, 2009). Not only did the ECN help these teachers overcome the temporal and spatial factors impacting face-to-face professional learning, but the examples shared illustrate how participants connected their learning directly with their classroom practices. This study suggests that higher education institutions, particularly those in developing educational systems, should encourage their teachers' connections to professional online spaces and facilitate the teachers' professional learning through different online networks, like ECN. Doing so can help higher education teachers learn from teaching strategies, ideas, and experiences of others in diverse contexts. However, in countries like Pakistan, where learning via online spaces may be less common, providing a local guide to facilitate teachers' learning in different online spaces may be helpful. These local guides can support teachers to reflect on their learning experiences, as Author1 did with the Pakistani teachers in this study through the interviews and guided tours, and thus can help leverage learning through different online spaces for teachers' professional purposes. As teachers in many countries have already discovered, online professional learning expands possibilities and connects teachers to a global network of resources and collaborators. We hope that sharing the experiences these Sana University teachers had on ECN will encourage educators in developing countries to similarly explore learning in online communities.

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