Entering the Virtual Teacher's Lounge
The Efficacy of Community in Computer-Mediated Communication Based Environments for Professional Educators

Randall Scott Dunn
A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education
University of Bath
Department of Education
March 2008

Document Information

Index of Tables

Index of Figures

Abstract

This study seeks to illuminate an understanding of naturally forming online communities of professional educators in the context of off-line communities. Essentially, an online discussion forum for educators is evaluated for the purpose of determining whether the forum provides a "space" conducive for the development of a community of professional educators as benchmarked against an understanding of offline community formation and existence. The foundational works of Ferdinand Tonnies, James Coleman, and Ray Oldenburg are used to develop 13 characteristics of community - as understood in the context of informal social communities as opposed to the types related to more formal aspects society.

The primary approach to this study is qualitative in nature with some quasi-statistical support to elucidate analysis and conclusions. The study employs the use of a "snapshot survey" approach to gathering a single point of data for a single U.S.-based discussion forum. The research used QSR NVivo 7 to collect, catalog, and analyze discussions from this online forum, examining discussions topically, contextually, and structurally. The study analyzed all active discussions on a specific day, with all contained postings within the discussion threads – resulting in 4,211 postings split among 115 discussions made by 301 unique posters.

The study finds that online communities closely resemble offline communities in structure and interaction, but only for select participants. These participants demonstrating or facilitating the characteristics of community comprise around 10% of the total number of users participating in the analyzed discussions. The level of participation correlates to the likelihood of benefit from and participation in the online community. Those participants who did not participate heavily in discussions primarily remained in the more formal and professional set of exchanges, whereas those with higher levels of participation in the analyzed discussions (and overall participation rates in the context of the forum in its entirety) participated both heavily in the more informal and "playful" discussions and in the more formal professional discussions, with the participation in the latter type taking on more of an "expert" role.

Acknowledgements

It must be stressed that this thesis could not have been completed had not my wife, Donna, supported me throughout the long process. Her emotional and logistical support and critical advice moved this project to completion. Further, the 301 members of the online teacher discussion area analyzed as part of this paper must be appreciated for their participation (albeit an unknowing participation). Thanks to both Dr. Alan Reid and Professor Yvonne Hillier for invaluable feedback and guidance. Finally, my appreciation for the support and wonderful advice and direction from Dr. Rajani Naidoo, my advisor, must not be left out. Without her patient understanding and expert opinion, this thesis would not have been finalized. This work is dedicated to my two children – Graham and Isabella – both born during its development.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore the efficacy of communities in virtual environments, specifically with regard to the virtual social (differentiated from communities for the purpose of professional practice) community formation of professional educators. While this particular concept – the nature of virtual communities – has held a large interest for researchers of computer-mediated communication (CMC) over the last 10 years, this paper takes what is widely regarded in the CMC body of knowledge and apply it to the exchanges in naturally forming virtual teacher communities to determine the viability and effectiveness of naturally forming teacher communities in these virtual environments.

Research Aims

This study explicitly seeks to illuminate the informal exchanges among teachers in virtual environments and the extent to which these exchanges go toward cultivating a community (based on an "off-line" reference point) in an online environment. This study does not address the nature of professional communities, learning communities, or pedagogical communities in virtual environments specifically (all interesting and at varying degrees recently researched), although the nature of these types of educator communities is addressed and unavoidably appear in the results of the research.

This study uses a set of concepts framed in theory – specifically the works of Ray Oldenburg (*the Third Place*), James Coleman (social capital) and Ferdinand Tönnies (*Gemeinschaft*). Using these theorists' work in three very different contexts, the study seeks to determine the level of "community" that virtual communities attain. As this particular study requires an analysis of community members in their natural setting – a virtual world – the most appropriate approach for research of this phenomenon is the use of qualitative methods (Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

Discussion and Context

Significance

As globalization continues to bring more individuals to CMC mediums of interaction (as found in the phenomenon of the Internet), the education community must continue to embrace the technologies that exist to better address social, pedagogical, and professional needs (and desires). The United Kingdom has looked to technologies (current and emerging) as cornerstones of its recent educational reforms (Selwyn, 2006). It is only reasonable for the educational community, speaking in general terms here, to purposefully explore the latest technological innovations as possible means of assisting in the execution of what is expected most out of educators – communication – for the purposes of professional development, collaborative support in pedagogical and social contexts, and for the discovery and connections of important content expertise. These tools can prove to be the connecting points between education professionals on the opposite sides of

the globe and around the literal corner, being used by local educational systems to connect educators with little time in their schedules for these types of development and social activities or connecting educators globally for collaborative purposes. The challenge is to properly determine the most important and effective methods to best allow educators the opportunity to effectively use resources and time to best meet the needs and demands of the 21st century global environment.

Value statement
As I have participated in online community interaction in the topics of education, politics, philosophy, and technology, I am approaching this study as a former participant in online communities and a proponent of technology use in pedagogical practice. I believe there are limitations to technology use (pedagogically, professionally, and personally) and, therefore, look to critically identify any of those in this study.

Researchers need to be careful when conducting such research as that based in online communication, as researchers have been guilty of actually designing research around using the tools that are available in such environments (Fielding & Lee, 1993).

Context of the Internet
As this research deals directly with the almost two-decades-old medium, the Internet, it would be useful to provide a context for the use of Internet-technology to assist in community development.

In the span of four decades, the Internet has traveled from a research collaboration tool among specific elite universities to a world-wide integral part of first-world commerce. Due to the Sputnik event in 1957, the United States formed ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency) under the Department of Defense, developing communication means among four participating universities. This agency's purpose was to progress the U.S.'s leadership in science and military-related technology.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, ARPANET expanded, transformed, and morphed into a web of networks connected as a community of host computers. Much of the activity on these networks focused on academic research and government-related activities. Then, in the latter half of the 1980s, rogue networks tapped into the power of networking — as an indirect result of 1960s radicalism and free access — and began making their foothold in the form of virtual communities. These free nets (as some were termed) allowed many participants free (or near free) access via modem technology to communities of *subscribers* and shared community-related information. Howard Rheingold describes one of these remotely-based, connected societies in his book *Virtual Community*. (Rheingold, 1994)*.

More networks formed (from three in the 1970s to some 50,000 in the mid-1990s), and by 1985, the "Internet was already well established as a technology supporting a broad community of researchers and developers, and was beginning to be used by other communities for daily computer communications." (Leiner et al., 2003, not paginated)

The communities of the late 1980s and the early 1990s began to grow and the common "consumer" found the online world to be useful. In 1991 the

WWW (World Wide Web) and other technologies that created the framework for Internet growth were released.

Suffice it to say, the technologies surrounding the Internet and CMC should only continue to exponentially increase in complexity and accessibility (Leiner et al., 2003). What was in existence for the few now is distributed world-wide (through developed nations). Out of necessity, smaller groups of individuals will "connect" to keep hold of identity in this macrocosmic virtual world.

The technological foundation has been established to scale out a global community of extensive proportions. Naturally community – and community-building tools – would grow out of this global technological foundation. And so it has. The question remains, are these technologies effective at really connecting people to one another in meaningful and real ways?

Research Questions

The research, undertaken as part of this project, works to examine the nature of the exchanges among professional educators in an online environment and answer the question of whether these virtual environments can effectively connect these educators in what is widely considered a community.

The Literature Review (Chapter 2) explores the foundations for defining communities, for developing formal and informal relationships, and for the methods and tools for connecting individuals and groups in virtual and via computer-mediated environments. As part of this review, the concepts of community, social capital, communities of practice and professional communities of educators, and virtual communities (general and what little is known about professional educator communication in online environments) is explored in detail, outlining specific issues and current trends in these particular areas and for how these specific concepts relate to and contribute to an overall social connectedness in virtual environments.

Developing systems of measurement for determining levels of connectedness (through the filter of social capital) proves difficult as previously created tools (Putnam, 2000; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002) measure the ways of civic engagement as opposed to social connections (and the meaningfulness of those connections). Further, the communication avenue of the Internet (and computer-mediated communication in general) negates the sole use of face-to-face meetings and geographic meeting places as primary means of measurements. To better understand the effectiveness of computer-mediated communication and its impact on the exchange of social capital among professional educators, a more communication-centric approach needs to be adopted – focusing on the types and content of communications exchanged and the reflections of the participants in those communities.

Research Limitations

The primary limitations to this research project entail its inability to access the complete human experience. The chosen medium for study is virtual; thus, many individuals have not (and will not) meet face-to-face, even

though they may have shared in hundreds of nodes of virtual communications (conversations).

Sound cues – including factors such as pausing and reflection; emotion; speed, loudness and pitch; age and gender; national, ethnic or class accents – all are not present in common form in virtual environments. Further, visual cues – such as appearance, height and weight; clothes, make-up, jewelry; gender, age, ethnic group; physical handicaps; facial expressions; eye contact; body language and gestures; psychophysical responses e.g. blushing, yawning, blinking; and emotions – also make less impact here (Clarke, Internet). While the use of visual communication devices (such as video-conferencing and webcam equipment) is becoming more extensive, these are not at the same non-verbal effectiveness level as face-to-face interactions. Language and "visual" cues need to be expressed (and often are) via alternative means through virtual communication mediums.

Paper Organization

This paper is organized as follows:

This chapter (chapter one) has discussed the context of this study and a broad view of the research questions to be answered. The chapter then explored the particular purpose of this study. Finally, this chapter identified research limitations unique to this study.

The *Review of Literature* section (chapter two) begins with an examination of the nature of community (with particular attention being paid to Ray Oldenburg's *Third Place* and Ferdinand Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft*). I then introduce and explore the primary theorists in the area of social capital. I proceed to a discussion of Etienne Wenger's *Communities of Practice* social learning theory set and professional educator communities and their relevance to this study. Finally, in the review of relevant literature, I discuss the literature covering virtual communities as related to characteristics of these communities, the nature of virtual reality, the importance of identity and culture, and a comparison between offline and online existences.

The *Research Design* section (chapter three) discusses the developed research question. Specifically, I first touch on details concerning the actual question to be answered. I then discuss the guiding theoretical framework for conducting the study as developed. Following the theoretical discussion, this section enumerates the particular methods and the overarching methodology employed for the study. Next, considerations for working with the particular sample chosen and the specific "place" of study are explored. Methods for data collection and data analysis are then discussed. Finally, I discuss the ethical implication of such a study as this, and my means of addressing any uncovered concerns.

The *Presentation of Findings* section (chapter four) discusses the findings from data collection – as aligned with key categories of content identified in the research design section of this paper. Key findings are then identified for analysis.

The *Discussion of Findings* section (chapter five) discusses the findings in the context of the categorizations previously identified and in reference to the literature and research question.

In the *Conclusions and Recommendations* section (chapter six), I draw conclusions based on the analysis, identify possible bridges to other contexts for this type of research, and identify other questions for inquiry based on the conclusions of this research.

Chapter 2 Review of Literature

Introduction

This review of the current literature relevant to this study looks at
- the specific definitions of community, for the express purpose of developing a definition appropriate for this particular study's context,
- the use of a social community construct in the context of this study (t*he Third Place*)
- the use of Social Capital in the context of this study
- the nature and construction of virtual communities, and
- the relevance of communities of practice and professional educators communities in light of this study

These areas are explored for the purpose of illuminating theoretical constructs for analysis of a teacher community formed in an online environment. This review is not meant to be exhaustive in its examination of the concepts of community, virtual communities, communities of practice or social capital as each of these are large theoretical constructions in their own rights. This review of literature looks at all of these concepts as people build toward virtual communities.

Considering Community

Definitions and Distinctions

There has been great debate on the true nature of community; or specifically, whether it exists today as it once did, whether it will ever exist as it once did, or whether community has dynamically evolved into something completely different and has therefore adopted a new meaning (Bauman, 2001; Putnam, 2000). I function within the framework that community – in some form – exists today and will continue to evolve with the changing times and avenues of communication and relationship building.

With this perspective in mind, I begin to form a definition of community. As the 1998 edition of the *Dictionary of Sociology* notes, "the concept of community concerns a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common - usually a common sense of identity" (Marshall, 1998). Identity is an important component of the formation of and participation in community. The perception of self, the subsequent behavior, and the juxtaposition of self with others all are vital concepts to understanding community (Bauman, 2003; Turkle, 1995). Community really can be considered a relationship between identity and the formed relationships with that identity. As volumes could be (and have been) written on this subject, I limit the focus of this inquiry on self and others to how functioning occurs within a virtual environmental framework. This is discussed from the angle of virtual interaction later.

The *Dictionary of Sociology* further states that the notion of community represents "a wide ranging relationship of solidarity over a rather undefined area of life and interests" (Marshall, 1998).

The dictionary continues on to admit that the actual agreed-upon definition is non-existent at this point. There is no clear and accepted definition "of just what characteristic features of social interaction constitute the solidaristic relations typical of so-called communities" (Marshall, 1998).

Robin Hamman notes, "much of the terminological ambiguity surrounding the definition of the term 'community' within the social sciences is that the very social construct which it seeks to describe is continually changing and evolving" (Hamman, 2002). Is this continual evolution a product of a natural progression – i.e., has there always been continual change in "community" — or is this a recent phenomenon due to technological and social innovations?

George Hillery undertook the daunting task of reviewing the literature concerning sociologists and definitions of community. In this process, he identified 90-odd reported characteristics of community, eventually narrowing them down to a unique 16. He notes (in his *Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement in Rural Sociology*, 1955) "there is one element, however, which can be found in all of the concepts . . . all of the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement" (Marshall, 1998). Therefore, communities are built upon relationships amongst individuals, aside from specific interests, geographical proximity, or necessity. None of these elements are present in agreed-upon definitions. This is particularly important for the pursuit of an understanding of CMC-based community formation as obviously geographic proximity and such provides some difficulty in that context.

Offering a different perspective, Zygmunt Baumun (2001) defines community as small, distinctive, and self-sufficient. Really, the sense of community, according to Bauman, depends upon a community not knowing it is a community. This community must evolve "naturally" – and not be artificially manufactured. Once realization occurs, then community is no longer pliable and that real community becomes something entirely different (Bauman, 2001, pp. 10-13). Grossman et al. actually attempted to fabricate such a community in an urban educational environment (2001). This further complicates the matter, as is what was formed in this study truly a community? This point becomes very important in the context of virtual environments. Forced community construction does not a community make (Bauman, 2001; Grossman et al, 2001)). The individuals — with their individual and corporate relationships, their motivations, their interests, and desires, and their relationships to others in and outside of the community — constitute the backbone of what is community.

Turning to an analysis of community, Bauman separates communities into two basic types: aesthetic communities and ethical communities. Aesthetic communities are formed as temporary and quickly passing groups, often based on an "idol." Membership in these communities remains noncommittal. Ethical communities, on the other hand, are communities that are based on rules, allowing members to experience security, safety, and certainty (Bauman, 2001, pp. 59-73) thus creating stronger ties.

Marshall (1998) looks at communities similarly, but with different attached constructs. Marshall's focus is on the distinction between community and society, which is important in this discussion. This distinction is made through the sociological terms, coined by Ferdinand Tönnies in 1893, Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (Harris, 2001). The former denotes community — focusing on relationships based on family and close face-to-face ties. There exists an attachment to place, concern over ascribed social status, and elements of homogeneity and a regulated community. The latter — Gesellschaft — refers to society and general association, denoting the

concepts of urbanism, industrial life, mobility, heterogeneity, impersonality (Marshall, 1998).

Mark Granovetter (1973 & 1983), in further review of this dichotomous distinction, explored in depth the notions of social ties by looking at the effects of strong and weak social ties on professional success. He found that weak ties (or casual or societal relationships; Gesellschaft) were highly effective in the dissemination of information and the connections for advancement. In contrast, stronger ties (much like Tönnies' Gemeinschaft) proved less effective in connecting persons to opportunities as the close-knit groups, by nature, were actually closed. In order to bridge groups, weak ties are a necessary element. Further, Granovetter developed the separations of relationships into bonding (close connections), bridging (connections among groups), and linking (casual and societal).

I am most concerned in the context of online relationships and community with the elements of Gemeinschaft — closeness, regulation, homogeneity — and individual, interpersonally based identity formation. I see the bonding relationships as essential to these close-knit groups. It should be noted, as it is discussed further in the section below on Social Capital that I am not concerned with societal level relationships that result in social mobility and power (that could be categorized with Gesellschaftt). These explorations will be left for other studies.

Putnam sums up the concept of community as basically a social group (Putnam, 2000). I explore this notion of social groups (the Gemeinschaft) by looking at how groups are formed and interact.

For the purpose of this discussion, I look at communities as self-forming informal units of interaction – of the more ethical community type as Bauman defines them – where individuals have social connections on multiple levels in a stable and securely established conduit of communication. This can be best summed up by Ray Oldenburg's description of the "Third Place." This is the pub house, the bar, the bowling alley, the church meeting hall, or any place where informal relationships are continually reinforced. The third place exists outside of family and work (the first and second places, respectively). And for the purpose of this discussion, the Third Place can actually not be an actual place at all.

Considering the Third Place

Oldenburg, in the *Great Good Place,* describes the problem of place in America as manifesting in "a sorely deficient informal public life." He argues that America must revitalize its informal connections - dubbed "The Third Place" - a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work." This *Third Place* is community, the informal connection among individuals on personal common interests and issues. Home and work are the first two "places," according to Oldenburg. These first two places remain a large factor of a person's identity. The existence of the *Third Place* is in decline (Oldenburg, 1997).

Oldenburg describes the *Third Place* as including the following characteristics:

Escape/ time-out from daily duties

This provides a tool of comparison between the first two places (home and work, respectively) and the *Third Place*. As far as a stand-alone indicator, this aspect does not comply. It has less to do with what this is and more to do with what it is not (Oldenburg, 1997).

Neutral ground

Sociability in the Third Place depends on the ease of entering and departing thus making it easier for people to "not be in each other's hair" (p. 23). "Friends" must be able to enter and exit relationships as desired. The example of neighbors is most illustrative – where there is no neutral ground for neighbors to meet, they may never do so. Essentially, in the context of physical cities (instead of virtual ones), people would greatly benefit from frequently placed public gathering places for intimate and informal relationships to emerge (Oldenburg, 1997).

"Leveler"

The *Third Place* is notorious for making everyone equal. There are no formal criteria for admission or membership, and it allows colleagues to get to know each other on a more personal level. These places expand opportunity for unique and unusual associations (between the judge and the pick-pocket; the fop, nonconformist and the lawyer; and so on). The station in life is irrelevant, the personality and character are what counts.

This place also functions as a means for co-workers to gather absent discussion or thoughts concerning work or purpose. Those who have not experienced success in life (by those standards dictating success) can enjoy relationships with those who either have or have not enjoyed success. It is irrelevant. Moodiness and personal problems are "checked at the door" (p. 25). This place is a place of joy and camaraderie (Oldenburg, 1997).

Conversation

Conversation is the main activity here. Oldenburg draws a distinction between just talking (as in to obtain a specific aim – and what Americans are accused of embracing) and the art of conversation. The latter entails a specific set of skills employed for the enjoyment of interaction. These include, according to Oldenburg (referring to Henry Sedgwick),

- Remain silent your share of time

- Be attentive while others are talking
- Say what you think but be careful not to hurt others' feelings
- Avoid topics of general interest
- Say little or nothing about yourself personally, but talk about others assembled
- Avoid trying to instruct
- Speak in as low a voice as will allow others to hear (p. 28)

These characteristics paint a picture of the effective conversationalist. The "bore" also appears in places of sociability – by talking too loudly and too much without regard for others. Oldenburg quotes a researcher of English pubs (John Timbs) as saying, "Above all, a club should be large. Every club must have its bores; but in a large club you can get out of their way" (p. 29).

Conversation in the *Third Place* is more attended by laughter, more spirited, and less inhibited. And that which interrupts the flow of the Third Place conversation is "ruinous" (p. 30). Conversation can be a game and is often ignored in modern restaurants and such. Moreover, sometimes games become part of the Third Place themselves, as games can spark conversation and participation amongst many (Oldenburg, 1997).

In summary, Oldenburg quotes Sedgwick as saying conversation is a game that

> . . . requires two and gains in richness and variety if there are four or five more . . . it exercises the intelligence and the heart, it calls on memory and the imagination, it has all the interest derived from uncertainty and unexpectedness, it demands self-restraint, self-mastery, effort, quickness – in short, all the qualities that make a game exciting. (p. 31)

Accessibility/ accommodation

Philip Slater states that, "(a) community life exists when one can go daily to a given location and see many of the people he knows." The Third Place must be geographically convenient and must keep long hours. The Third Place must be ready to receive visitors when other obligations release them. The parallel is drawn to the English pub, which exists among people's homes. This truly is a Third Place as it is a short distance from where the participants exist (Oldenburg, 1997).

Regulars

The charm of the *Third Place* is its inhabitants, the regulars (those that engage in that lively conversation). Regulars set the tone and the atmosphere. This identifies people as fellow customers.

In order to become a regular at the *Third Place*, the stranger must establish trust among the inhabitants. Enthusiastic greetings are given to the "returning prodigal" (a former regular), followed by the regular, then by the stranger or newcomer. The trust is earned by being "decent" (in the art of conversation and treatment of others) and by being present (Oldenburg, 1997).

Low profile

The *Third Place* is plain in appearance - possibly older. Newer places are often built for other purposes. As "older" places do not have a recently conceived function, they become havens for those seeking to find a place for conversation and friendship. Further, the plainness of a Third Place makes for less stranger traffic and more unity among its regular participants (Oldenburg, 1997).

Mood is playful

Serious conversation has no place here. This place – a place for play – would be a place separate from the regular world (Oldenburg, 1997).

Home away from home

Using the third definition of "home" in *Webster's,* the third place is a congenial environment (Oldenburg, 1997). This place (*the Third Place)* unlike the home is public, has those of the same gender socializing with one another, and has few choices for activities. Nevertheless, similarities do exist, such as the *Third* Place roots us, contains an element of possessiveness (as *his* place), a place where individuals are regenerated, a feeling of being at-ease, and warmth.

Conclusions

These aspects are implied to be unique to the Third Place. Our home and work places are thus void of these impersonal and informal characteristics: escapism, neutrality, playfulness, conversational, community-feel. Oldenburg sums up that "(t)hird places that render the best and fullest services are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurances that acquaintances will be there" (Oldenburg, 1997). While the places of work and home can be avoided temporarily through some means, the more permanent status of the Third Place is one of escapism, rather than a temporary escape. The Third Place is the home away from home (and away from work) – the place where people know they are accepted, feel comfortable, and interact informally with those they care about.

The Third Place is quite relevant to our study of community-mindedness and connective-ness in the sense of comfort and informal connections.

Community, in the context of this study, is thus painted as an informal connectedness among individuals for the purpose of connecting one another to fulfill needs surrounding escapism, social support, close-knit relationships, understanding and empathy, and recognition. This community coincides with Oldenburg's Third Place and Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft*.

Another relatively recent concept in the realm of community, and relevant to this study, is the concept of Social Capital – focusing on beneficial relationships (mutual and singular).

Considering Social Capital

Introduction

This section, building on concepts introduced above, discusses the concept of Social Capital – in both general terms and in the context of the above discussion. This is not meant to be an exhaustive review of the concept and theories surrounding social capital, but rather covers the most widely recognized theorists and the concepts most relevant here. Specifically, the theorists that are discussed in some detail here include James Coleman and Robert Putnam. These four have employed the theory of Social Capital for different purposes.

Exploring the theory

Social Capital has been defined as "features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). As individuals and as groups, people desire interaction with one another for specific benefits. These benefits can be economic, social, political, cultural, psychological, physical, or even educational. Social capital theorists have examined this from several varying facets. The actual formation of the Social Capital theory arose out of a need to reconcile the differing approaches of economists and social theorists with regard to individual motivation – one explaining it in terms of gain and the other in terms of complying with norms (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1983). A theory was necessary to demonstrate the effects both social expectations and participation and individualistic drive have on an individual's choices and actions – an introduction of "exchange theory" into sociology (Coleman, 1988).

Coleman (1988) argues that, beginning with a theory of rational action, people can view Social Capital as another "resource" available to individuals. An important concept developed by Coleman examines the transfer of information. Those who would like access to information but are not able to spend the attention on accessing this information can use others who have to remain up-to-date. This requires social contact – obviously – with those who have the information to be able to gather it.

Coleman pays additional attention to the formation of social norms in the governance of social environments. Norms do not exist, he argues, when there is no closure among its members. Unless there are existing relationships among all members in a community, then a formed group cannot impose norms (and subsequent consequences for the non-adherence to expectations) among the group's membership (Coleman, 1988). The use of closure imposes sanctions on those who do not fulfill obligations – corporately. Thus community governance is effective in establishing normed behavior among its membership.

The great economic benefit of Social Capital, according to Coleman, is the replacement of formal mechanisms for group governance. Thus, a group does not need to suffer formal contracts but can use the in-group trust already built in order to accomplish tasks. This results, simply, in an efficiency. The other added benefit to efficiency is the count of participants. The higher the count the more Social Capital is exchanged, the more effective the group can be (Fukuyama, 1998; Coleman, 1988).

James Coleman takes a very practical approach to the use and existence of Social Capital in society. His focus is on the microeconomics of Social Capital and its effects on human capital (Coleman, 1988). Building on Pierre Bourdieu's propositions, Coleman explores the use of Social Capital in small-scale community contexts, such as in neighborhoods and families. He argues that the use of Social Capital is for the betterment or the advancement of the individual (exchanges of favors; bringing something to the relationship with the expectation of getting something out of the relationship) (Halsey et al., 2001).

The informal third place becomes very important in the light of social capital. This takes the concepts proposed under Oldenburg further. The benefits are not merely confined to our list of characteristics (escapism, neutrality, playfulness, conversational, community-feel, etc.), but rather may directly rely upon more social advancement-related reasons. People need personal interaction that indirectly or directly has positive effects on our development. They gather valuable tools, form valuable relationships, and establish long-lasting relationships to their benefit (short-term and long-term).

Talja Blokland found that those less advantaged socially could glean much from the "urban elite" provided there exists "informal rather than institutional relationships" and that success also depends on "specific characteristics of reciprocity and mutuality of neighborhood networks across race and class" (Blokland, 2002). So here enters our advanced definition of the Third Place again, the informal gathering for the betterment of self.

This is a challenging time concerning informal connectedness. The last 25 years of the 20th century saw a change in community - moving more toward individualism from the close-knit community nature of the first quarter of the 20th-century. Putnam sees the great influence of the Baby Boomer generation as changing the way people interact. Suddenly they have a debate of which came first: the decline in community and subsequent use of technology or the use of technology in lieu of more traditional means of connecting with others, causing a decline in community and thus civic participation. This issue has a great effect on the exploration in this paper as the question arises as to whether people can experience connectedness — the macher/ formal or schmoozer/ informal types as Putnam describes — in a seemingly disconnected environment (Putnam, 2000).

But, as Lerner notes and Oldenburg reiterates, there still exists a "Problem of Place in America" where the small town (informal) cannot be revitalized, so a new community structure must evolve to take on integrated community needs in the "quest for community" (Lerner, 1957).

This research has established concepts surrounding community, community formations and the relationship to a Third Place (as defined by Oldenburg) and Social Capital (as defined by Putnam and Campbell). This research now turns to Etienne Wenger's Communities of Practice.

Considering Professional Communities

Introduction

This section explores the formation of professional communities for educators in the context of Etienne Wenger's (1998) work in (and subsequent writings on) communities of practice and Pamela Grossman's (Grossman et al., 2001) research on the attempted formation of a community of professional educators.

Communities of Practice

In the last two decades, Etienne Wenger (with the help of Jean Lave) developed a theory set about learning and organizations. He rooted this theory-set in a concept called *communities of practice*. In short, these particular communities contain "members (who) regularly engage in sharing and learning, based on their common interests" (Lesser & Storck, 2001). Wenger's theory's application travels from the commercial/ business world to the world of education as it looks at learning as a social process. Community members seek to learn from social groups (gaining membership) in addition to collectively develop the social rules for engagement as pertaining to practice among its membership.

This practice approach to social learning has also been called an "apprenticeship model" (Kimble & Hildreth). The primary argument is that individuals newly joined to a particular practice can best learn the overt and subtle rules, processes, and shortcuts of accomplishing day-to-day practice best from those who have developed these components of the job. The other piece of this puzzle is that once the newly joined participant begins his or her participation in the practice, then he or she essentially contributes to the further evolution of the same.

Professional Educator Communities

Understanding professional communities has primarily been associated with communities of practice. This same exploration by Wenger and others has actually examined the issue of communities of practice in an educator context, but others not related to this specific social learning model have also arisen in the last decade.

Grossman et al. (2001) looked at the semi-natural formation of an educators' community in a secondary school among history and English teachers. This project sought to put these groups of teachers together to accomplish two primary activities in the context of professional development: the development of pedagogical practice and of professional content knowledge in view of the two disciplines. These two divisions traditionally comprise the main goals of professional development, and therefore, obviously would be goals of a *professional* community. Grossman et al. (2001), while seeing some success in the discussions that ensued in this venue, noted that the discovery of constructed professional communities (as opposed to naturally forming ones) saw less success than was initially anticipated. Merely providing time and resources does not meet the basic needs of community formation among professional educators. There is a

mysterious element, very social or intellectual in nature, which addresses this gap in effective formation.

Communities of Practice in a virtual environment

The classical examination of social learning theories includes primarily face-to-face communication methods as the necessary component. More recently, a re-examination of this theory set (in light of Communities of Practice and the advent of powerful tools in computer-mediated communication) has allowed the discussion to expand to include other media such as e-mail and discussion forums (Lesser & Storck, 2001). In fact, not only do these technological media provide a means to *grow* Communities of Practice but also these media can actually *be* the primary facilitation for the development of Communities of Practice (Lesser & Storck, 2001).

Theory and Dimensions

Etienne Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice - as it relates to community formation and development contains three important components:
- Mutual Engagement
- Joint Enterprise
- Shared Repertoire
- These are elaborated upon in the following discussion.

Mutual Engagement involves the actual action of individuals being involved with one another (as opposed to being just a theoretical application). As a result of this, membership in a community is not merely a social category but is defined by the actual interactions of the participants. Further, social connections (who knows who) and geographical proximity also prove unimportant. What is important here is the act of being engaged in what actually matters to the community. Further, diversity and partiality (as opposed to homogeneous backgrounds, interests, thinking, or beliefs) is important. This can result in harmonious or contradiction-oriented relationships - both equally part of a community (Wenger, 1998).

The second component discussed in relation to community formation and development is the area of Joint Enterprise. This results primarily from the complex collective process in Mutual Engagement. Therefore, as part of a Joint Enterprise, negotiation (involving personal, intrapersonal, and instrumental issues) occurs. As discussed above, this can involve agreement or disagreement, but it must be communally negotiated. An overlying organization can mandate a Community of Practice's creation and initial tasks, but a true Community of Practice will truly belong to the participants who then determine what is important, why, and how the practice and the particular enterprise should proceed. Ultimately, a system of mutual accountability arises from the practice itself (Wenger, 1998).

The final component of community development in this theory set is a Shared Repertoire; it is called a "repertoire" to denote that the pieces of this repertoire are both practiced and are available for future use. This repertoire includes symbols, artifacts, routines, tools, ways of doing things, words, stories, gestures, genres, and concepts, all that become part of the practice and its functioning. This repertoire arises out of a practice of negotiation, with items being rooted clearly in history and also remaining ambiguous to allow

for change. Again, negotiations arise to produce meanings, among agreement and disagreement (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger also identifies several indicators of the existence of a community as a Community of Practice. These include:

- sustained mutual relationships (harmonious or conflicting)
- shared ways of engaging or doing things together
- rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
- absence of introductory preambles (continuing conversations)
- very quick setup of a problem to be discussed
- substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs
- knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute
- mutually defining identities
- ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products
- specific tools, representations, and other artifacts
- local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter
- jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones
- certain styles recognized as displaying membership
- a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world (Wenger, 1998).

Ultimately, placing these characteristics in the context of educational communities is an important enterprise. Educational communities at their core are based on professional identity and can form around specific types of educators (kindergarten teachers, teachers of middle schoolers, etc). As a result, some of these characteristics may evolve into quite different manifestations from more traditional business-based communities of practice. The notions of "problem," "products," "innovation" may take on different meanings. What teachers produce or tackle as problems or develop as innovations all relate to the practice of teaching . . . to the development of pedagogical practices and at times professional practices. This differentiator then separates the practice of teaching into these broad groups of what teachers do to get their day-to-day jobs done and how they work with children to accomplish the task of learning. Does this apply to educators as community participants in largely social venues? Informal exchanges? The needed support we would see in a teacher's lounge (traditional or other-wise)?

Regardless of medium or method, the initial development and further cultivation of communities of practice is directly related to the exchange of Social Capital. This Social Capital enables the overlying organization to be successful in light of these community formations (Lesser & Storck, 2001). Members exchange Social Capital in the form of trust, mutual obligation, and language. Through structural (making connections between members), relational (making connections among networking processes), and cognitive (shared context and codification of meaning and processes) dimensions, Communities of Practice develop. The most important dimension for this study is the relational dimension.

Within this relational dimension, four components are identified: obligations, norms, trust, and identification (attributed to Nahapiet and Ghoshal by Lesser & Storck, 2001). Obligations (mutual benefit) and norms (behavioral and interactive standards) go to the organization and primary interactions of these communities, whereas trust and identification go toward the personal aspect (how a person sees himself in the context of the whole) (Lesser & Storck, 2001).

Application

Indeed, one of the challenges for any educational practitioner is the lack of time to devote to professional growth, both as an educational practitioner and as a professional. The lack of time can potentially be addressed via any time/any where communities that provide a menu of discussions on various topics of most concern at any given time. These topics, and the discussions of these, could supplant the need for professional development opportunities being created or developed. The teacher can remain focused on his or her priorities and seek assistance and information when needed.

This is the primary benefit of an examination of Communities of Practice: as the effect on how a group of teachers develop methods and means to improve their practice as teachers (Wenger, 1998). In the context of informal social exchanges, researchers can use the relational dimension as discussed above to further solidify discussions on social capital and Oldenburg's work, but we must keep the notion of communities of practice in its proper perspective here. Does it apply to our building of informal social communities, naturally forming? Does the characteristics list apply here? This is where the above discussion applies and is halted in the context of this research. The above is provided to develop context for teacher communities, but the use of the Communities of Practice model (or the work of Grossman) is primarily devoted to exploration of professional communities as they develop the practice pertinent to them. This research explores the nature of the social exchanges of participants in communication avenues and whether these exchanges support the construct being applied of communities (yes, professionally labeled but social in nature).

Considering Virtual Communities

"Technology doesn't 'act' in itself, neither are the people willingless objects, but much more creators and social actors which employ the technology according to their needs" (Zurawski, 2002).

The past two decades have seen great advances in technology, bringing a globalization to community like never seen before. Concerns have arisen over the direction of community (see Bauman, 2003, and Giddens, 2002, for discussions on negative aspects of the globalization of community) with the advent of the Internet. The Informational Revolution is upon us (see Putnam, 2000). So how effective can virtual environments be in helping to establish or progress community (the notion of informal connectedness or the actions of the "macher" as Putnam notes)?

Manuel Castells notes that the technological innovations that brought into being the Internet and virtual networking were conceived to solve a problem concerning connecting individuals. For example, Ward Christensen and Randy Suess' invention of the modem to share information through Chicago's harsh winter and UseNet's News service's rise (at Duke University and at the University of North Carolina) to meet the needs of community/online computer discussion among students and BBS (Bulletin Board Services) focus on allowing the posting of messages by members of various communities, addressed needs of connectedness. More recent examples include Virtual Environments (VE) like Sony's experiments with a large scale, shared virtual environments suitable for use in the Internet, demonstrate virtual connectedness and an even more relevant example like the online teacher community TAPPEDIN. The key foci of these projects are open environments, suited to supporting large numbers of participants in a highly interactive environment (Yoshiaki, 1996; SRI, 1998). Suddenly, the world is connected and geographic boundaries are no longer impeding the formation of global communities.

Characteristics of Virtual Communities

Virtual communities as Manuel Castells defines them are "like Howard Rheingold('s) self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose, although sometimes communication becomes the goal in itself." He notes that virtual communities may be formalized systems (like BBS or hosted conferences) or be spontaneously formed (like around interest groups or events). In either case, the communities are ephemeral from the point of view of the participants - where users can move in and out as necessary (as interests or expectations change). (Castells, 1996).

Virtual community participants are described as either transitory or electronic homesteaders (Castells, 1996; Ward, 2002). These participants either remain for a long time in close communication and connection with those who are also present in the virtual space, or else only stay for very short time periods, then moving on in the virtual frontier looking for other locations to plant their roots.

What is unusual about CMC in general, and traditionally virtual communities specifically, is there exists a many-to-many relationship

(Castells, 1996). This provides for many touch points for interests and individualism. It also makes it difficult to account for the many different informal virtual communities in existence as individuals can (and do) pass casually from one informal community to another without completely attaching (in   a traditional sense). Regardless of the medium, virtual communities appear to still "real" to its participants.

Critiques of the Online Social Community Context

As we move towards a definition of community and as framework for analysis of an online community, it is important to note the dissenting voices in the literature in this area. Notably Charles Soukup (2006) has recently critically examined the use of the Third Place construct in the context of online communities. Specifically the following issues arise from this use:

- CMC and the virtual third place has not undergone sufficient theoretical scrutiny
- Citing Sherry Turkle, people are pretending to be in a real place, thus there is a lack of a Third Place experience
- That Oldenburg's chief claim of the Third Place is that it offers a means of developing localized communities, which are hardly the case (or the aim) of virtual communities
- That there is still a digital divide (with a large middle and upper class Caucasian representation on the web) and thus is not the leveler and the accessible locale the Third Place calls for (Soukup 2006).

One means of reconciling a few of these last points (access and leveling) can be found in Putnam's work (the norms of reciprocity and trust in the exchange of social capital). Detraction from this also might be the combination nature of the web as a communication tool and existing communities.

This final point can bring us back to the underlying next steps of this study – the examination of potential teacher communities for the purpose of professional development and communities of practice. These would essentially be location/ geography-agnostic but very well could exist in conjunction with off-line localized existences. A school could essentially supplement the faculty's interactions by providing an online communications means, which potentially could encourage meaningful community. However, the pure notion of the Third Place is problematic according to these points and these must be examined in light of this study's results.

Soukup ends his analysis by looking at future directions of virtual community and third place analysis. He argues that this direction provides a wonderful opportunity for the examination of communication and interaction in the context of CMC rather than as a comparison to offline communication means. We need not dismiss virtual communities, we need not embrace them blindly, and we merely need to look at this in the context of its own right.

As more become involved in the analysis of online communities and even the notion of the pub in an online environment, we will begin to see more critique of using this theoretically and substantively in the fashion we have initially described.

Virtual reality

The distinction between "virtual" community and "real" community is unwarranted. The term "virtual" means something akin to "unreal." This researcher's experience has been that people in the offline world tend to see online communities as virtual, but the participants in the online communities see them as quite real (Stubbs, 1998).

I recently participated in a discussion with an academically inclined individual where I was instructed that community online is really a virtual communication arena — quite different from the real world — and unable to sustain real community. In order for a community to exist, I was told, there must be face-to-face interaction. I hope that evidence outlined above and below provides an alternate way of looking at this concept.

Manuel Castells notes "CMC is constructed not around virtual reality but rather real virtuality" or the experiencing of reality through virtual or perceived communication (Castells, 1996). The communication remains real and the participants remain real. What is altered is the method of communication. What is hoped for is that the content, as a result of the communication method, is not altered. The naturally developed adaptation for this concern is discussed below, surrounding the use of emoticons, and other means.

Castells continues by stating, "all realities are communicated through symbols," that is what we say face-to-face; what we display through non-verbal communication; general communication all use a body of symbols for communication. CMC is a typographically and multimedia-based method of communication and all resulting language is rich with the use of symbols. He further reports that "[CMC] is a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/ symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become experience" (Castells, 1996). If virtual communications can exist and sustain community as real, then what can be said of the relationship between virtual communities and offline communities?

Some have argued that the virtual detracts from the "real"/ offline one. In his study on AOL users and the effect of online interaction on the maintenance of offline communities, Robin Hamman notes,

online communication . . . does not take the place of, or diminish the occurrence of, offline interaction for my participants. Cyberspace is not merely a simulation of the 'real' world, it is part of the 'real' world. Our activities in cyberspace do not supplant the 'real' world, but are supplemental to it. Going online is an activity which is beneficial to both the individual and their pre-existing, privatized network community. In fact, for many users, computer mediated communication is necessary for the continued maintenance of pre-existing social networks (Hamman 2002).

He further notes that "communities continue to exist, but are supported through a number of technologies including the printed word, transportation, and new communications technologies" (Hamman, 2002). The online community becomes another method (a necessary one in some cases) to

maintain connectedness with others in pre-existing defined social networks and off-line communities. Hamman, confirming this, concludes that individuals in his study used online communication methods "to communicate with others within their pre-existing offline communities (Hamman, 2002)."

Rheingold, like Hamman, has suggested that virtual interactions and relations overlap in to the real/ physical lives of those participating. Face-to-face meetings were common among Rheingold's compatriots in the 1980s, spending their evenings sharing information and experiences in online environments and some weekends gathering for picnics to see who actually was the individual behind the virtual identity (Rheingold, 1994).

Some studies show that more than half of participants in newsgroup discussions not only begin long-lasting relationships in online environments but also continue off-line relationships with these online friends. Other avenues of communication are employed (postal service and telephone), and over time these develop into long-lasting personal interactive relationships. Social bonds become redefined. Thomsen sums up that newsgroup relationships "typically serve as catalysts for long-term and meaningful relationships" (Thomsen et al., 1998).

Furthermore, evidence demonstrates that physical co-presence is not necessary for "intimate quality interactions" (Thomsen et al., 1998). Thank goodness, as he also notes — as do Steven Jones (1998), Ray Oldenburg (1997) and Howard Rheingold (1993) — that the various CMC technologies "have sprung out of the need to re-create this sense of community, that participants join and become involved with the express purpose of re-establishing social bonds" (Thomsen et al., 1998). Suddenly virtual communities become Oldenburg's "Third Place" – where bonding relationships can be established through the exchange of informal Social Capital.

Hamman discovered, in a brief analysis of a discussion he personally had with a woman he called Sarah online, that many of the topics so taboo and sensitive were actually discussed more freely in this virtual environment. As Sarah's offline identity - with the exception of her first name - were basically hidden, Sarah discussed very personal feelings about her divorce, which was potentially too uncomfortable to discuss in a "real" and physical location (Hamman, 1996).

Although they transcend the physical and spatial boundaries that have traditionally defined a 'community,' 'cyber-communities' are often a primary form of social interaction for the growing number of individuals who often spend hours each day surfing the net. (Thomsen et al., 1998)

The cyber-community becomes the connection to the real world for the web-surfer. As Steve Jones sums it up, Internet users have strong attachments online (Jones, 1998, p. 5), thus it is a real experience. As Markham (1998) notes, "All experiences are considered real so therefore virtual is a misnomer." The gravest of subjects becomes a real exploration using online community tools to interact with other real participants through virtual communication lines.

Identity and Culture

For one who has led a less than exuberant social life, Internet chat can be exhilarating. In the first month on-line, I met more people then I had in 39 years of real life (i.e. non-computer-mediated) existence. This is something that takes some getting used to, the sheer vastness and vitality of the chat scene. It can only be compared to a gigantic party with tens of thousands of rooms; a party that never stops, that includes people from all over the world, that is totally safe and non-threatening, that lets you put on any disguise, be any age or gender or appearance, and talk in half a dozen rooms simultaneously. (Cyberrdewd, 2002, not paginated)

What becomes interesting in the development of virtual communities is the notion of cultural identity and individual expression. "Cyberrdewd," quoted above, notes that online communication (in this case online chat) is "exhilarating" and that it is like a huge party where you can be whoever you want to be. Communication is quite individualized and demonstrates the birth of culture online, quite unlike and unrelated to any culture existing offline. What is acceptable socially offline might become quite unacceptable or inappropriate online. What is quite natural online can be very much unacceptable offline. The limits of social acceptance are pushed in virtually built communities (Bowker, 2001).

Social meaning is created online, in reference to individual identity and in reference to societal interaction. Baym recorded interactions among soap opera enthusiasts in online chat and discussion areas. She noted that there was a building humor among participants (where previous understood notions are necessary for understanding and acceptance) and a building of "group solidarity" (Baym, 2002). This became part of their social identity.

People use the Internet because of its excellence to discuss issues that affect their day-to-day lives and may be organized along identities or lines of interest. (Zurawski, 2002)

Interests and identity appear to be the glue that holds virtual communities together. Unlike geographic proximity, familial relations, or "friends of a friend" scenarios, virtual communities can be solely built on a common interest point (like soap operas) and how the use fits into the identity of that group. Adolescent girls can discuss interests in boys in a safe and a somewhat anonymous environment (Smyres, 2002). Senior adults are using chat rooms more and more to discuss issues important and relevant to them (Philbeck, 2002).

One thing I have found especially fascinating is the way that CyberSpace communities have all the characteristics of a real flesh and blood Physical Space community. There is the same sense of community, and also the same exclusion of outsiders. In general, what happens is that people settle down in a group and a chat format they feel comfortable with, or have managed to establish themselves in, and then log on primarily to that group. In this way they establish an on-line

circle of friends, who quickly become just as real and close and familiar as 'real life' friends. (Cyberrdewd, 2002, not paginated)

An example of group formation on interests is the TrAce community. TrAce was financed by the Arts Council of England to provide a means for the literary community to "flourish and grow." The organization offers a "virtual space to discuss, workshop, and debate." The group refers to itself as an 'Interactive assembly' and an "online community" (Thomas, 2002). What TrAce claims is unique about their formation is not that the interest group flocked to the newly created virtual location, but rather that the community already existed and needed a virtual location to reside (Thomas, 2002). Again, a great connection between online interaction and off-line living.

As noted above, online is not necessarily completely separate from off-line life. Hine notes the World Wide Web "demonstrates that the boundary between off-line and online is constructed through the actions of the participants." However, as to relations to culture, Hine notes, "it is possible to see the Internet as a culture is its own right, but that culture is tied in by complex connections to off-line life. When closely tied to off-line life, the Internet is used as a transparent communications medium" (Hine, 1998). Online and off-line must remain together in analysis.

Offline verses online community

As discussed above, online environments are no less real than off-line. Further, Castells (2001) notes that the online world has been proven to not take the place of off-line but rather complement online. The online community world differs greatly from the off-line in that these methods of communication and interaction allow for full communication among participants – body language and other non-verbal cues included. What would be interesting to further research would be an examination of the effectiveness of textual descriptiveness of physical status as opposed to actual visual evaluation of intended (or unintended) non-verbal cues of face-to-face participants. As the online participant clearly states intent, would this be more effective than possible misinterpretations of mood between two silent participants?

Other differences, as outlined above, involve geographical and logistical constraints. What is beneficial to the off-line world is the fact that those of different backgrounds and geographical separation can arrive in the same communication sphere – in anonymity – to discuss on the same level and share in an informal relationship.

The off-line world carries with it issues of social stratification. Common separations among social levels exist – even in Third Places – and provide for gaps in communication (and thus any hope of community). However, the online world eliminates some of the social levels existing in off-line interaction (again in anonymity and identity alteration and development as discussed above) so that many are able to function on the same level. This does not necessarily mean that all enter equally into this venture and exit equally. Certainly, systems of stratification are established as part of communities in these online environments (as explored in the research below, notions of types of users/ members obviously plays a role at least at a surface level and likely at a more personal level). In short, the notions of status are definitely

not as they are in off-line communities, but need more exploration to truly understand what they in fact are.

The gathering of a community of participants around specific subjects and topics as a sole factor is much more prevalent in the online virtual space. Communities in this venue are often formed based on a topic of pop-culture, politics, religious inclination, or recreational interest. In contrast, off-line communities initially exist often due to geographical and convenient logistical factors. Without this initial convenience, off-line communities see lower chances of formation. While topics of interest are also important in the off-line arena, the issue of logistics (as discussed above) has to remain a factor in formation and development.

Virtual communities of professional educators

Little has been accomplished in exploring virtual communities in the context of professional educators. This is likely because, as discussed above, the world of virtual communities is completely reliant upon the only recently birthed computer-mediated communication modes, such as the Internet. Obviously, because it is recently formed, there is a small window of time for exploration,

Selwyn (2000) provides one such exploration into the world of teacher-based virtual communities. This study examined the SENCo community (a communication group of Special Educational Needs Coordinators for schools in the UK). As a result of the UK government's push for the use of "virtual communities" as part of its educational reform practices (not altogether different than the exploration and thesis as the basis of this research), the researchers began to question if these virtual communication avenues truly accomplished the goal of connecting educators in communities from geographically disparate locations. The format of these communications followed what has been called discussion forums but also can be called e-mail list-servs (or e-mail groups that are archived in online environments).

The approach to examination for this project used grounded theory where four primary purposes for communication were identified:

- As Information Exchange (or the exchange of expert information)
- Empathetic Exchanges (or the commiseration of participants over the difficulties of their positions)
- As Virtual Respite (or a break – and sounding board – for general frustrations and job demands)
- A Sense of Community (Selwyn, 2000)

This last one – a sense of community – is really the question at hand. Selwyn found that participants certainly did exchange in the top three, but the deep connectedness of community was not as prevalent. One more note here in this study is the emergence of some 24 participants who essentially became the hard-core users. These participants contributed some 50 percent of the message analyzed.

A distinction in this community formation is the imposition of the creation of community (as in Grossman's study above) by external forces as opposed to the natural evolution of community.

Concluding Remarks

Above, James Coleman, Ray Oldenburg, and Ferdinand Tonnies provide the foundation of what is understood about *social* communities (close-knit, naturally forming). An understanding of online communities can be found in works, as noted above, by Howard Rheingold, Steve Jones, Sherry Turkle, Robin Hammon, Stephen Doheny-Farina, and Nathaline Bowker (and of course built on understandings of social communities). What is missing here is an understanding of teacher social communities and specifically teacher social communities online. Wenger's work moves toward understanding the formation of professional communities, but his work focuses on how communities of professionals share meanings to articulate, develop, and refine processes and knowledge to assist in practice. Selwyn attempted to look at the viability of these communities in the context of government-identified educational groups (identified with a job function), but does not see the arrival of communities online in that form or under those conditions.

Taking these findings, one may synthesize a full picture of the potential of educator communities in online environments. Research notes communities are naturally forming, often informal, social groups. These groups are built on conduits of communication and social connections. Norms for behavior are established as part of a collaborative process, where individuals agree through negotiation on proper processes for group functioning. Participants gain membership – and thus are enveloped into the system of trust – in the group. Community is strengthening from the participation and efficiencies developed.

Now, with regard to mechanism, the community practices can easily be accomplished through real-occurring virtual environments. Electronic and computer-mediated communication can provide needed community "spaces" – Third Places – to accomplish these community formations.

The primary question that arises from this discussion – in relation to educational professionals participating in online communities – is what is the nature of social and informal exchanges among these professionals and do they follow the pattern of forming close-knit communities in virtual spaces? Ultimately, this could answer the question of whether online environments – virtual spaces for community participants to interact – are effective locales for the exchange of informal Social Capital among educational professionals. And finally, this could further enlighten as to whether these communities can serve as meeting spaces for educators as educational professionals meet new demands – pedagogically and professionally.

To note again, this study does not attempt to answer the viability of Communities of Practice or professional community formation (for the purpose of professional development). Notably, the importance of Communities of Practice arises in this study's contextual explorations, but this study was deliberately designed to not use the theory of communities of practice in the development of a theoretical framework, as this study sought to understand the informal exchanges rather than the professionally-minded exchanges among participants with the common identity (generally speaking) of "educational professional."

In simplest terms, Wenger's work and considerations in the arena of Communities of Practice looks at how communities share in social learning experiences and naturally occurring methods for the express purposes of developing understanding about a particular practice (usually professional practice/ vocational practice) as opposed to more traditional and less effective means of professional learning and training. The construct here – of social communities and the third place married to online environments – rather works towards understanding whether purely social exchanges can effectively occur in online environments.

The development of understanding as related to problems, the contributive nature of participants, characteristics of movements of information, the development of tools, and professional language features all are uniquely identified in the Communities of Practice theory set (Wenger, 1998). The study here looks at the social exchange features of Coleman, Tonnies and primarily Oldenburg. These comprise the main drives of design for the study as the informal social and non-professional purposes of community formation of these (and primarily Oldenburg) present the type of community attempting to be analyzed/ identified.

Therefore, the following characteristics of communities can be gleaned from the above discussion to be used in this study (as primarily associated with Oldenburg, Tonnies and Coleman but considering Wenger):

- A place for participants to escape the other duties of this world
- A place for participants to exchange ideas and conversation on neutral ground
- All participants have equal access to participation in the community
- The community location is a place of conversations and informal communications
- The community location has regular attendees
- The mood is playful
- The community location is often a "home away from home"
- The participants are attached to the location of the community as a place (or how a participant sees the space in which they participate in social exchanges and whether it becomes a place of comfort and identity)
- The community has an aspect where social status in the community is a concern for the participants
- Many of the participants (while beginning as diverse possibly) end up being homogenous according to some identifying characteristic – ethnically, interest-wise, vocationally or professionally.
- Participants adhere to contracts, policy identified for participation in the community
- The community acts as a location for the exchange of ideas for the individual development of the participant

This synthesis of understanding of community is the foundation for proceeding in this study, where in the Research Design section, I designed a study for examining online interactions for efficacy of community.

Chapter 3 Research Design

Introduction

The following discussion outlines the design and methodological considerations of this research endeavor. First, I shall restate the specific question attached to this project to identify the large framework for discussion. Then, I shall discuss the issues and considerations contained within the guiding framework for taking on this study. Third, I address specific methodological (and therefore methods) issues in the research approach. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations made particular to this style and type of enquiry.

The Research Question

The research, undertaken as part of this project, works to answer the question of whether online social communities created and maintained among professional educators constitute a social community, as we understand them

Guiding Theoretical Framework

This study, at its core, seeks to answer a simple question dependent upon observation and analysis. At first glance, a simple positivist approach could be used to determine adherence of text and dialogue analyzed to a set of identified core characteristics. This approach would seek to account for occurrences/ instances of adherence to identified classifications of interactions - observing these in context, testing the direct question with the collected data (Bryman, 2004). In this project, further analysis and interpretation is necessary to actually determine alignment of "observed" text-based discussions and pre-identified characteristics. This is the construction of the design of this project – a positivist approach employed in a simple research question (identifying the viability of a naturally forming online community of professional educators in the social realm of relations) accompanied by interpretations/ analysis of the gathered textual data for attaching deeper meanings to the associations (and seeking other opportunities for developing further and more meaningful research endeavors in this area of study). Simply put, the analysis of unsolicited textual submissions proves to be too complicated for a simple quantitative mode of enquiry. A more inductive approach is necessary for such meaning-rich data that employs analysis of numerical representations of social phenomena (Kuikin & Muill, 2001).

Further, the examination of these discussions in the naturally occurring environment highlights the need for more traditional qualitative means of understanding meaning in dialogue. As this study is naturalistic in its approach, looks for meanings, employs descriptive data and is concerned with process, it can be classified as qualitative. Ultimately the considerations of bias, issues of impression and influence, and concerns of personal involvement all play into the development of a qualitative study's design. The use of traditional qualitative means (coding practices in textual analysis) with quantitative approaches (simple statistical analysis to bring about understanding and lay foundations for discussions) presents this study as a mixed-mode research project.

Another perspective in this study's approach is the descriptive label being placed of "constructive realism" (Cupchik, 2001). Ultimately, this approach recognizes the real nature of a phenomenon but it is shaping by the participants' experiences as a constructive element in its presentation. My own interpretation in this study – even if I played a minimal role as a participant – essentially shapes meaning based on the observation of and my own personal meaning-making activities in reading and experiencing the exchanges of the participants. As this approach (and accompanying considerations) marries the realist nature of the quantitative world and the idealist and interpretivist nature of the qualitative world, it is more than appropriate to see its influence here. The primary lesson is to be aware of my own meaning-making as part of this study's reporting, analysis, and conclusions. In short, this study required a discovery methodology that accepts the interpetivist nature of the researcher. (see Kleining & Witt, 2001).

The use of multiple methodologies is not unknown in this type of enquiry (see Bowker, 2001). Further, and recommended, subsequent "phases" to this research endeavor would likely embrace some of Bowker's more purely identified qualitative approaches (in-depth interviews developing themes, e.g.) as, as discovered in the results of this study, there is much to be uncovered concerning the very personal experience of the community participant.

Approach

To determine the nature of exchanges among professional educators in virtual spaces, these exchanges must be analyzed in light of a model of an off-line, informal community. I use Ray Oldenburg's descriptors of the *Third Place*, Ferdinand Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft*, and the discussion of Social Capital (with particular attention to James Coleman's discussion of small-scale community and neighborhood interactions) as the basis of this benchmark off-line community (and thus the impetus for the identified categorizations to be used in the study). These together form the necessary picture of informal community – close-knit, supportive, mutually beneficial and connected. Deliberately excluded from this group are Wenger's notions of community in the context of professional communities. These chosen sets used for constructing a model for interpretation comprise an image of exchanges of the purely informal variety for the purposes of social interactions, not for the development of professional practices.

In order to gauge the community existence in this project, I use the following guiding questions of community, gleaned from the works of Oldenburg, Coleman, and Tönnies, to gather data and guide conclusions.

- Is the virtual space a location for participant escapism?
- Does the locale provide an area of neutral ground for all participants?
- Do all members have equal access to participation?
- Does conversational-style communication dominate the environment's discussion patterns?
- Are there "regulars" in this environment?
- Is there evidence of playfulness in this virtual space?

- Does this place act as a "home away from home" for the membership?
- Do the members of the constructed group appear to identify themselves with this "place?"
- Is there evidence of a concern over ascribed social status among the place's membership?
- Are there elements of homogeneity – via beliefs, interest or backgrounds – among the space's membership?
- Does the "community" exert self-regulation? Is there evidence of a contract (explicit or understood) for membership governing behavior and participation?
- Is there evidence of an exchange of ideas for the development of individuals?

These questions then are transformed into the coding-based categories for examining the relationships and the interactions contained within the chosen community.

Methodology and Methods

The aim of this study was to view a random group of individuals and study the nature of their exchanges in light of the categories of community identified in the constructed model. This would meet my basic theoretical needs identified of providing a portion of exchanges for textual analysis and interpretation. This is best achieved by examining a select portion of a naturally forming online community (to avoid issues discovered by Selwyn's study (2000) of UK government established communities). These types of communities are easy to come by, but a few select fit the need for naturally forming, unofficial and easily accessible.

Population and place

To answer the outlying question of what types of exchanges occur in virtual communities of professional educators, I selected an online teacher community (primarily consisting of a cost-free discussion board area to remove boundaries of general access) called AtoZTeacherStuff (forums.atozteacherstuff.com). A particular weekday was selected, and every electronic discussion (and subsequent responses with the same attached date) active on that particular weekday was then gleaned for analysis. In essence, a random sample of discussions was then used for answering the basic questions posed as part of this study (see Theoretical Framework discussion above to note questions).

The participants in this online community are primarily educational professionals (or para-professionals). See *Appendix A* for a gathered list of "teacher types" for examples of the types of educators using this forum. All discussions were gleaned irrespective of the original poster or topic.

At this point, there is some value in establishing a technological and procedural basis for the function of online discussion forums such as used in this study. These online communication tools require participants to create a simple membership (at a minimum, the participant must choose a screen name, a password and provide an email address). Other options are

available to further personalize a participant's screen identity (provide a birth date, allow the choice of an "avatar" or image for identification and subscriptions to particular topics of interest). Once a participant has logged into the online discussion forum, then he/ she is free to post.

In the case of this particular "place," rules exist as to what kinds of content can be posted based on previous participation levels. In other words, the more you participate the more freedom as to what can be posted is granted. This technology allows participants to create new discussion threads organized under specific topic headings (like "kindergarten" and "teacher timeout" referring to a place for kindergarten teachers to post questions or comments and a place for teachers to take a "time out" from their daily routines, respectively). Further, anyone logged in can post against topics created, quote a previous poster's text, or create a new response. In this fashion, discussions can be linear and non-linear and are certainly asynchronous in nature.

The sheer volume of the available discussions, even under the above noted constraints, gave pause to other potential restrictions. Time proved a primary constraint on the whole study's execution. Restriction by user or by general category of discussion area proved inappropriate and purely detrimental to the potential outcome of the study. As a result, any discussions that exceeded five pages (twenty posts on each page for a total one hundred posts) were limited to those one hundred posts. This limited the ability to analyze previous discussions, but many of these discussion types proved to be the "game-like" discussions and appear to not have severely impacted the study.

The other limitation to note here is elaborated upon and developed further later. This relates to the notion of what has been categorized as the regular user. The limitation of this study identifies a group of users in such a category for the purpose of this study and analysis, but the number identified here and its relevance does not speak to the actual occurrence of "regular-ness" in quantifiable terms. In other words, the thirty identified here do not tell us anything about how many users are actually represented by this group. In some respects, this is an intrinsically focused number and categorization to identify further characteristics and understandings of those more identifiable as regulars in an online forum for interaction.

Data collection methods and tools for analysis

In consideration of the above, this study's primary approach for data collection and analysis is described in detail below.

The data collection aspect involved the collection of online discussions from AtoZTeacherStuff. AtoZTeacherStuff has six categories of discussion forums, containing 25 forums (not counting an archives location) with two sub-forums. Each of these 25 forums contains several active threaded discussions on any given day. See the hierarchy in the below listing.

A to Z Teacher Stuff
    Announcements
    Forum Guidelines & Tips
    Introductions

    TeacherChat Forums
    General Education
    Preschool
    Kindergarten
    Elementary Education
    Secondary Education
    Teacher Timeout
    Chitchat
    Games

    Connecting Classrooms
    Classroom Penpals
    Postcard Exchanges
    Other Projects

TeacherChat Special Interest
Forums
    Behavior Management
    Montessori
    New Teachers
    Special Education
    Student and Preservice
Teachers
    Substitute Teachers
    Homeschool

    Examinations for Teachers
    Basic Skills Tests
    Multiple Subject Tests
    Single Subject Tests
    National Board Certification
    Other Tests

    Prayer Requests/ Inspirational
    Prayer Request Forum

All discussions posted to or created within the 24- hour period (12 a.m. EST to 12 a.m. EST of the following day) are saved as text files. Some of the actual discussions contain multiple pages (possibly in the 20- or 30-page range). If so, then all discussion posts within the most recent five pages are gathered (plus the page containing the initial posting to glean the initial comment or topic starting the thread). On average, some 10 topics are "active" (i.e., have been active on any given day) per a forum on any given day. This procedure was followed due to the considerations as noted in the previous section, primarily due to restrictions of time. The effect on the study's output seemed minimal in regard to the nature of the actual interpretations on the content of discussions, but the actual categorization of regulars and non-regulars could have been affected. There was no way to follow-up easily with discussions after the date of collection without repeating the entire study. A further study of interest could employ similar techniques on the very same threads of discussion or certainly, and obviously, the very "regular" participants identified to determine the quality of that categorization.

The resulting discussion threads from the 25 discussion forums are imported into QSR International's NVivo 7's software interface for organization and analysis. At this point, the coding of the data proceeds.

The following categorizations provide the guiding aspects for the coding of the data gleaned from the forums (based on the guiding theoretical discussion questions as noted in the previous section *Guiding Theoretical Framework)*:

- Participant Escapism
- Neutral Ground
- Equal Access to Participation
- Conversational as Dominant Style
- "Regulars"
- Playfulness
- Home Away from Home
- Membership Attachment to Place
- Social Status a Concern?
- Homogeneity (as in identified perceived likeness in areas of interest, professional or vocational identification, ethnic affiliation)
- Self-Regulation/ Contracts
- Idea Exchange for Individual Development

To determine adherence to these characteristics, the research examines the general content of the discussions being analyzed. In essence, questions such as the following allow the researcher to identify what the discussion follows:

- What generally are the participants discussing?
- What is the overall content of the discussion and does this comment (or set of comments) follow or deter?
- Are there anomalous statements contained?
- How does this discussion fit into the big picture of what was being discussed in the overall forum, the specific forum and the specific sub-forum?

These questions help to guide the thought process as analyzing these discussions. Largely these fall into conversational analysis, but certainly elements of discourse (the analysis of meaning-making and individualistic perspective) helps in understanding these discussions in overall context (Bryman, 2004).

The number of occurrences and the level of adherence to these concepts are examined.

Further, in this phase, the following statistics are gathered:

- The initial poster's identity for each forum
- The number of posts in each forum thread
- The number of questions in each forum thread
- The particular posters in each forum thread
- Any identifying information publicly allowed by each poster participating the forum threads gleaned
- The number of posts by each participant in that particular forum thread

Finally, peripheral information on posting policies, FAQs and other website provided information on the forums are gathered to use toward answering the questions posed. This document review is used to complement in the interpretation of the gathered data from participation.

All data gathered is used to form an analysis of the actual interactions contained within these randomly selected in the study.

Primarily, the method of analysis involved the specific examination of these discussion threads in isolation and the collection of the following information:

- Identification of specific participants and level of participation (i.e., number and quality/ nature of posts)
- Time frames for discussion (long lags verses all posts within a short period of time)
- The content and type of posts (as related to the identified categorizations in the model)
- The context of the threads in relation to the overall forum's types of content, as related to the specific discussion area and as related to the other threads in that particular area

These all contribute towards that mix of quantitative/ positivist understandings of numerical adherence and the interpretivist/ meaning-making activities of the qualitative side, which more dominates this study.

Issues arise from the use of this model. First, the study is limited in scope for several reasons. The number of participants examined is limited by the boundaries setup in the description of the study's methodology. The volume of the discussions was also limited by the scope as set. As a result, the actual conversations analyzed were less than could have been accomplished using a larger net for gathering (all conversations, multiple days, etc). The design could also have used a select set of conversations over a long period, even revisiting.

This study is acting as an important first step in analyzing these types of online interactions (naturally forming) among educators. As a result, the method employed – a snapshot of a particular moment or group of moments – appeared to be a good choice for a random grab of data. The next steps in this research could easily be to revisit what was determined to be the group of Regulars and engage with more in-depth interviews and analysis of activities in that forum (or other venues).

Theoretically, this sets the stage for what can be examined in future studies – individual contributions to a community, social networking ties among specific individuals, multiple communities, and professional interactions for benefit.

Ethical Considerations in Virtual Qualitative Inquiry

The intent of this project is to not be ethnographic but rather observational. The researcher's role is to be minimally engaged with the members/ participants of the online community. As required to view some of the peripheral content, a registered user account was created.

Pertaining to ethical issues surrounding doing research in computer-mediated communication environments, ethical concerns over use of posted discussions needed to be taken into account. Rafaeli et al. (1998), through their research into online discussion forums, determined that discussion forums are essentially public in nature, as opposed to private or semi-private (Mann & Stewart, 2000). As a result, the researchers determined a guiding ethical framework for the research that includes the following:

- Only texts posted to public lists or that are publicly available will be used in the study
- Informed consent will not be sought before analysis proceeded
- No writer will be identified by name (instead, using a numerical coding system)
- No messages will be quoted, except in short passages (with consent of author)
- General avoidance of identification of individuals or groups (Rafaeli at al, 1998)

The world of online research is still in its infancy, so the "informed consent" question is still being debated in this particular context (Mann & Stewart, 2000). As this posted text is considered "public" by not only those who read the text, but also to those who post, it is reasonable to make the argument that the information is publicly distributed and does not realize the same protections or ethical considerations as do privately held conversations. This point will likely be debated for some time to come, as no clear consensus has been identified. As this study uses a nearly identical medium for data collection as Rafaeli (1998), I will be using the same approach.

The following are the identified guiding ethical principles for this study:

- Informed consent is gathered for any private interviews (via CMC methods) only (if performed). All publicly posted text (defined as only requiring a registered user status at this particular online discussion forum) will be considered for public display and not necessitate any gathering consent prior to collection, analysis, or publication.
- All forum participants are granted pseudonyms in publication and published data so as to protect anonymity
- The reporting of the results and analysis includes only shortly quoted passages.

As part of the early stages of this study, an attempt was made to contact the owner and administrator of the analyzed forum. This contact resulted in no response, but essentially notified the owner that the study was to take place in the summer of 2006, that the above protocol was to be followed, and that the results of the research would be shared with her upon its finalization.

Concluding Remarks

This process provides a picture of how the participants actively engage one another in an online forum, whether the forum itself constitutes a community (as defined by the theories of Oldenburg, Coleman, and Tönnies), and the thoughts of a sampling of the participants on how they themselves view the community-oriented nature of this computer-mediated communication environment.

The following chapter, *Presentation of Findings* (Chapter Four) presents the findings organized by the particular aspects of community as developed in the *Guiding Theoretical Framework*. The level that each characterization exists in that document and what we can glean about the participants is reported. Further, all information to further validate the gleaned data, as pulled from the subsequent interviews is provided.

Chapter 4 Presentation of Findings

Introduction

This chapter primarily focuses on the data collected, the particular patterns and trends in that data and the relationship to the overall research question. The chapter is organized primarily by three broad categories that comprise the key findings of this study:. Additional relevant data is presented as relates to the overall site geography, the user groups who participated, and the particular users. Specifically, the chapter is organized as follows:

- The Place and the Participants
- The Participant Divide: Regulars and Non-Regulars
- Regulars and the Role of Expert: Professional Assistance
- Regulars and the Online Playground: Social Interaction
- Key Findings Summarized

The Place and the Participants

Nature and Number of Settings and Informants

As the initial intent of any meeting place illustrates not only its intent but its design, it is more than useful to spend some time discussing the nature of the studied site itself. The particular "place" studied touts itself as "a teacher-created site designed to help teachers find online resources more quickly and easily" (About AtoZTeacherStuff.com, appendix). The actual discussion area of the Web site really only comprises one portion of an overall Web site for teachers looking for help, materials and expert advice.

The site's origins lie in a student teacher's collection of teaching materials during her own teacher education program. As of early June 2006, there were some 15,000 registered users of its forums section (see About AtoZTeacherStuff.com in appendices for more details).

The Virtual Landscape

The forums pre-created, as repositories for organizing potential discussions, can be divided into three primary types: those as related to professional needs, those as related to social needs, and those as related to the management of the discussion forum itself. The discussion areas thus could be divided as follows (note there are some repeats as the actual division of the forum discussion types is not so easily accomplished):

Table 1 Discussion Forum Types

Professional Needs	Social Needs	Forum Management
TeacherChat Forums	TeacherChat Forums	Announcements
General Education	General Education	Forum Guidelines & Tips
Preschool	Preschool	Introductions
Kindergarten	Kindergarten	
Elementary Education	Elementary Education	
Secondary Education	Secondary Education	
Connecting Classrooms	Teacher Timeout	
Classroom Penpals	Chitchat	
Postcard Exchanges	Games	
Other Projects	Prayer Requests/	
TeacherChat	Inspirational	
SpecialInterest Forums	Prayer Request Forum	
Behavior Management		
Montessori		
New Teachers		
Special Education		
Student and		
PreserviceTeachers		
Substitute Teachers		
Homeschool		
Examinations		
forTeachers		
Basic Skills Tests		
Multiple Subject Tests		
Single Subject Tests		
National Board		
Certification		
Other Tests		

Further divisions can be made within the Professional Needs category as some discussions centered on professional practice, some centered on the application and hiring process, some focused on the certification process, and some focused on curricular and pedagogical practice. As these discussions often intersected within these individual forum areas (and even within the same discussions themselves), the division into categorizations proves to be nearly impossible.

Examining the actual discussions that took place on the day of collection, an understanding of what types of discussions took place (or what types of discussions were active) is helpful. The table below shows how many of each active discussions\ existed on the day of collection for each of the 26 sub-forums (and sub-sub-forums). Sub-Totals are presented for each Forum.

Table 2 Discussion Thread and Topics Overview

Forum/ Thread Title	Discussion Threads
Announcements (sub-total)	5
Forum Guidelines & Tips	None
Introductions	5
TeacherChat Forums (sub-total)	68
General Education	8
Preschool	2
Kindergarten	5
Elementary Education	16
Secondary Education	4
Teacher Timeout	10
- Chitchat	10
- Games	13
Connecting Classrooms (sub-total)	1
Classroom Penpals	1
Postcard Exchanges	None
Other Projects	None
TeacherChat Special InterestForums (sub-total)	27
Behavior Management	4
Montessori	1
New Teachers	14
Special Education	4
Student and Preservice Teachers	None
Substitute Teachers	4
Homeschool	None
Examinations for Teachers (sub-total)	14
Basic Skills Tests	2
Multiple Subject Tests	3
Single Subject Tests	6
National Board Certification	None
Other Tests	3
Prayer Requests/ Inspirational(sub-total)	1
Prayer Request Forum	1
Totals	116

Where "None" is noted, no active discussions as defined by the research design existed on the day of collection, thus no discussions in these particular forums were observed, recorded, or analyzed. Please note that all of the

recorded discussion forums, sub-forums and sub-sub-forums are pre-created by the forum moderators and owner. The threads themselves are created and posted to by board members.

Note that the greatest number of active threads took place in the TeacherChat forums (comprising discussions geared toward social and professional needs). The misleading statistic here is that these numbers merely show the amount of threads active, not the actual amount posted in each thread. This point is revisited and further elaborated upon in the *Users* discussions below. Regardless, we can draw some conclusions.

The highest number of active discussions occurred in the Elementary Education sub-forum of the TeacherChat Forums (with 16). The next highest number of active discussions in a sub-forum appeared in the New Teacher Sub-Forum of the TeacherChat Special Interest Forums. Following closely behind are the Games and the ChitChat sub-sub-forums (both of the TeacherChat Forums/ Teacher TimeOut Sub-Forums) and the Teacher TimeOut Sub-Forum main area itself. These discussions will be examined in more detail below. The ChitChat area proves to be the most active area during the discussion analysis period.

These users are primarily participating in discussions about a specific professional need (like Elementary Education) or they bear participating in social engagements (like ChitChat and Games). This very differentiation – a divide between the professional and the social - becomes a hallmark of the analysis of this forum *world* in the following sections.

The Divide: Regular and Non-Regular Users

This next session will discuss in some detail the nature of the users in this analyzed forum. This piece instructs analysis into the nature of the differences between the types of users, what they are doing and how they are going about their existences in these virtual venues. So this section will answer the question – who are these users?

Users

As the nature of this study remains quite observational where interaction is intentionally minimal, all data illustrative of the participating users' backgrounds is gathered from public sources, primarily from the users' member profiles. Here, the location, the age, the overall posting record, and the particular vocational (or personal in some cases) interest of the poster (with some other background details) can be gleaned. With the exception of the posting history, all details remain optional for the forum members, thus only a sampling can be provided of the types of users posting to this forum. The count of non-responders is included with each demographic below. This sampling still remains illustrative and enlightening.

Out of the 301 users who participated in the discussions, the following break-down of citizenship was determined.

Figure 1. Overview of country affiliation of user group.
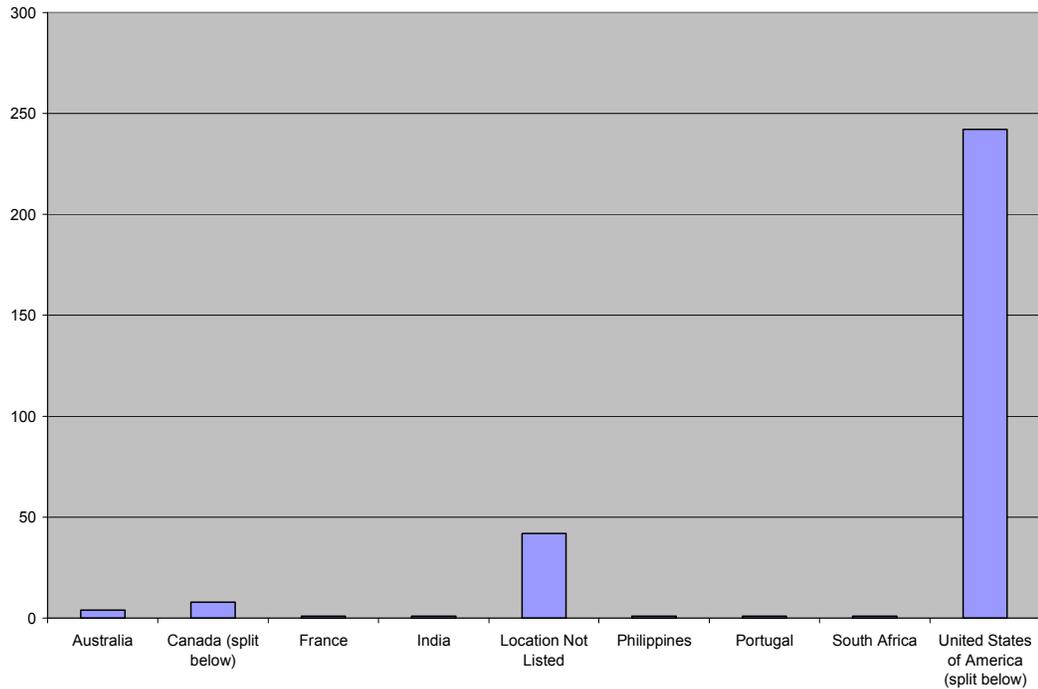
Around 86% of the users listed a location (a specific state, a province, or a country). Using this data, one notes that the highest participation rate is within the United States. Canada and Australia follow with a much smaller percentage of the users associated. This is significant, as the United States is certainly not representative of the world as a whole. While this forum was selected randomly, the nature of a world-based discussion forum was not employed or easily found. Chances are, issues of language differences and sheer common interest in specific issues (as reflected in licensure exam discussions and programs) would limit the existence of these forums.

Within the United States, California clearly is the most common origination point for users (with 22% of the total United States-based users living their offline lives here). This comes into play later, especially in the discussions centering on the certification process. Other states with relatively high counts of participants include Florida, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, and Texas. Missouri has a larger count of participants (considering this state is not as populated as the ones previously listed) but this may be explained by the fact that the initial creator of this forum lives in Missouri.

The next piece of data involves age of the participants. This piece of data is not used to draw specific conclusions, as there are some issues with this piece. First, users may not be honest about their ages when listing this in a public forum (although, the age is automatically calculated from a birth date so the data may be more reliable as compared to an open listing spot within a forum profile area). Next, the users who reported ages may be more inclined to do so

as these users may be more representative of the younger segment of the user group. In other words, the older users may be less likely to reveal ages than the younger users (as reflected in off-line life). With these caveats, reported ages are examined. The users who chose to include a birth date in their profiles comprise 22% of all users analyzed. The breakdown is included below.

Figure 2 User Count by Age
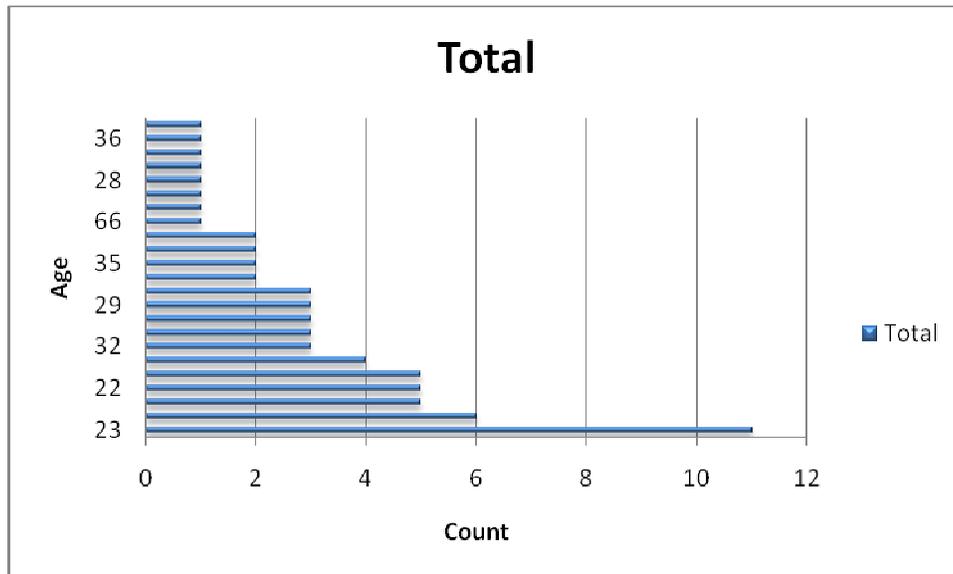
Clearly, the users including birth date in their profiles tended to be younger (with those aged 30 and below comprising 71% of the total). The oldest recorded was 66 while the youngest was 20. The early-twenties users tended to be college students or recent graduates looking for assistance in job searching, help in creating a teacher portfolio, or advice for early teachers. This will be discussed in more detail in several of the sections below (especially when *Idea Exchange* is discussed).

Next, an understanding of vocational and professional pursuits or personal interests can be quite helpful in understanding the users posting to this forum. The data gathering process identified 50 different types of professions or affiliations. The appendix notes the actual specific affiliations. Several users noted in-between affiliations (4th/5th grade, for example). Even with these in-between affiliations, a clear pattern emerges. The first, second, and third grade teachers (not counting in-betweens) comprise 18% of the overall user group. Also interesting to note, 22 (or 7%) of the users identified themselves as students (or college students in teacher education programs or pursuing licensure). A higher-level view of these types as organized by categories is shown in the figure below.

Figure 3. Breakdown of user profession types.
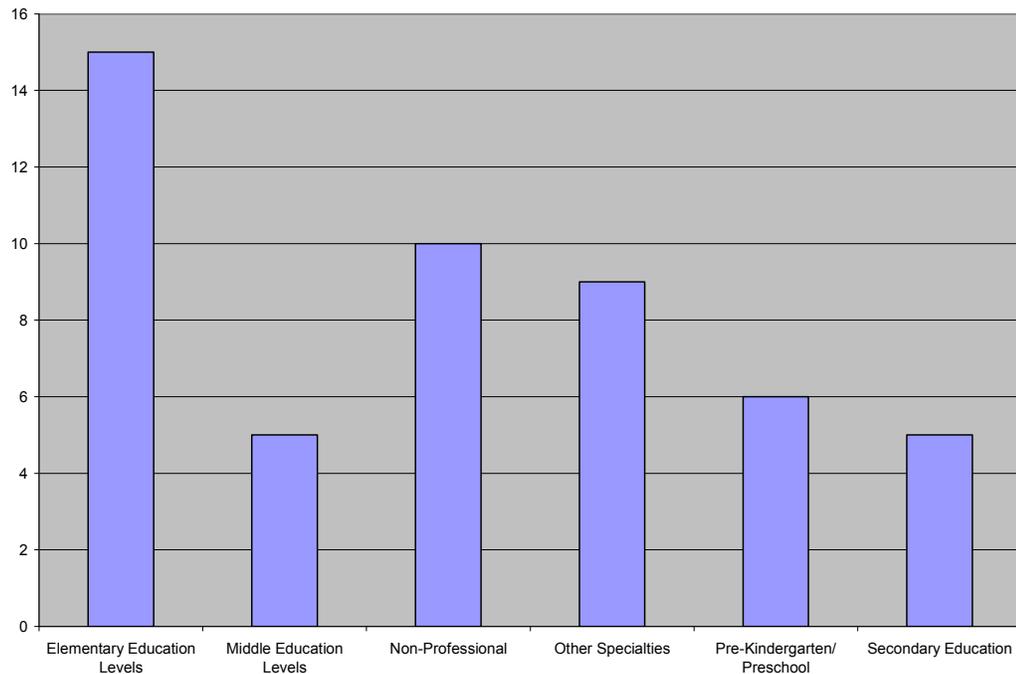
Elementary Education rises to be the most identified profession. This is corroborated through an examination of the actual postings and active discussions (discussed below and above respectively).

"Regulars"

In a discussion of "regulars" (and how to determine the presence of regulars in a virtual space), there are three identified components (as gleaned from the literature on communities, as discussed above):

- Possible return of the prodigal member (i.e., a member returns after a long hiatus and is welcomed back into the fold)
- Pre-regulars (or new participants) gain trust by being present and "decent"
- Regulars themselves actually set the tone.

The return of the prodigal member will be addressed first, then a discussion of the pre-regulars and finally a discussion of the regulars themselves, really emerging as a cornerstone of this research's results.

The aspect of the prodigal was less noticeable in the actual discussions. The only one to note here was the initial posting in a thread "How do I answer this" by an English teacher from Illinois. This teacher had joined the forum in February of 2006, had only posted a total of 13 times and only posted this one post in the one discussion thread in the analyzed discussions. To clarify further, the post was initiated at 10:22 p.m., and therefore did not allow much time before

the data collection ceased. This teacher started the discussion with "I haven't posted for ages, but I need some advice." Unfortunately, the other prodigals were not so self-descriptive in this respect.

Other prodigal members may exist (and likely do). One way to examine this is to examine the data gathered from profiles. Some 160 users (of the total 301) posted less than 50 times (in total as opposed to the actual participation in the analyzed documents). Of these 160, 107 joined the forum during one month before the discussion threads were gleaned for analysis. In short, over one-third of the users posting in the analyzed threads registered prior to one month before data collection and posted less than 50 posts in their time on the forum. The 107 users described are organized by "Join Date" below.

Figure 4 Non-Regular Join Dates
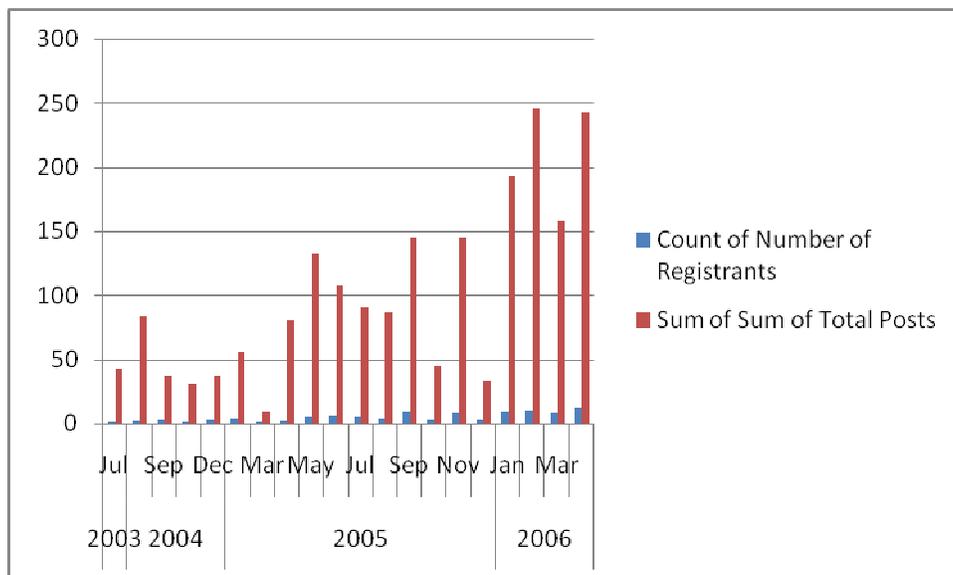
Sixty of these posters had joined in 2005 or earlier, averaging 19.3 total posts per a user (the max being 49 and the minimum being 1). This group is an infrequently posting group of users.

The Pre-Regulars are essentially the new users of the forum. All users had to go through the pre-regular stage (even Regular_01 with her currently identified heavy participation). One instance – a very overt declaration of being new – occurs in the "Introductions" Sub-Forum. This woman introduces herself, declares she is new, describes her family and asks if any other home-schooling parents are out there. Most of the responding posts in this forum discussion are orientation types of posts – i.e., "Go to the main forums page and scroll down. You will see a Homeschool forum" and "But you're also welcome to stick around here too. ;) We DO have some home-schoolers on this forum as well. ;) However, you will find a LOT of HS'ers on the Homeschool Spot forum. :)" These are the communicated and sometimes understood rules of engagement and a piece of this will be discussed in the self-regulation/ contracts section.

Another does not recognize the "place" of the forum as much as he/ she just wants to use this avenue as a means to connect with other teachers (new or old) in the Las Vegas, Nevada area. One of the responses merely welcomes the new user from "a continent away." This is evidential of the use of a communication forum for another non-related purpose . . .rather utilitarian.

A few others introduce themselves briefly and make requests (template for introduction letter to parents, knowledge of universities that offer certain types of teacher training, and knowledge of alternative routes to certification).   One even enters the "regular user" heavy fray of the Monkees discussion to talk about how much he enjoys that band. There is some evidence of posters tagging onto a discussion where others are discussing interview practice and the posters choose that discussion to post personally relevant questions.

In either case, the posters are welcomed (overtly and tacitly). There is no obvious difference between those that post some as compared to those who post a lot – except that sometimes those who post a lot greet each other with known names or personal details. This brings in interesting points about the nature of the users here (transient, infrequent, common, and new) and how their interactions can be of differing types in this venue. This is to be explored more below.

With regard to actual activity among users, a clear group of "regulars" arises from the group of 301 users. This group of regulars will be referred to extensively and explored throughout the rest of this report.

First, here lies an examination of the actual count of users per posting during the analysis period. For this discussion, refer to the appendices for data.

In essence, 84% of the users were responsible for 16% of the posts (or 10 or less posts per user). Conversely, 3% of the users were responsible for 52% of the posts (or 106 or more posts per user). There obviously is a core group of individuals participating in this forum – where the top user posted 558 times in the discussions analyzed with the next heaviest poster having posted 360 times. A handful of the users (especially these top few) are heavy posters in relation to others identified.

For the purpose of this discussion and further analysis throughout this paper, the top 10% of users (by post count) – comprising the top 30 users – will be identified as "heavy users" or "regulars." These users have been provided a code below (along with their post and thread records). Regular_01 is the heaviest user while Regular_30 is the lightest user (of the regulars). See below.

Figure 5. Top 30 regular users by post count – analyzed and total posts.
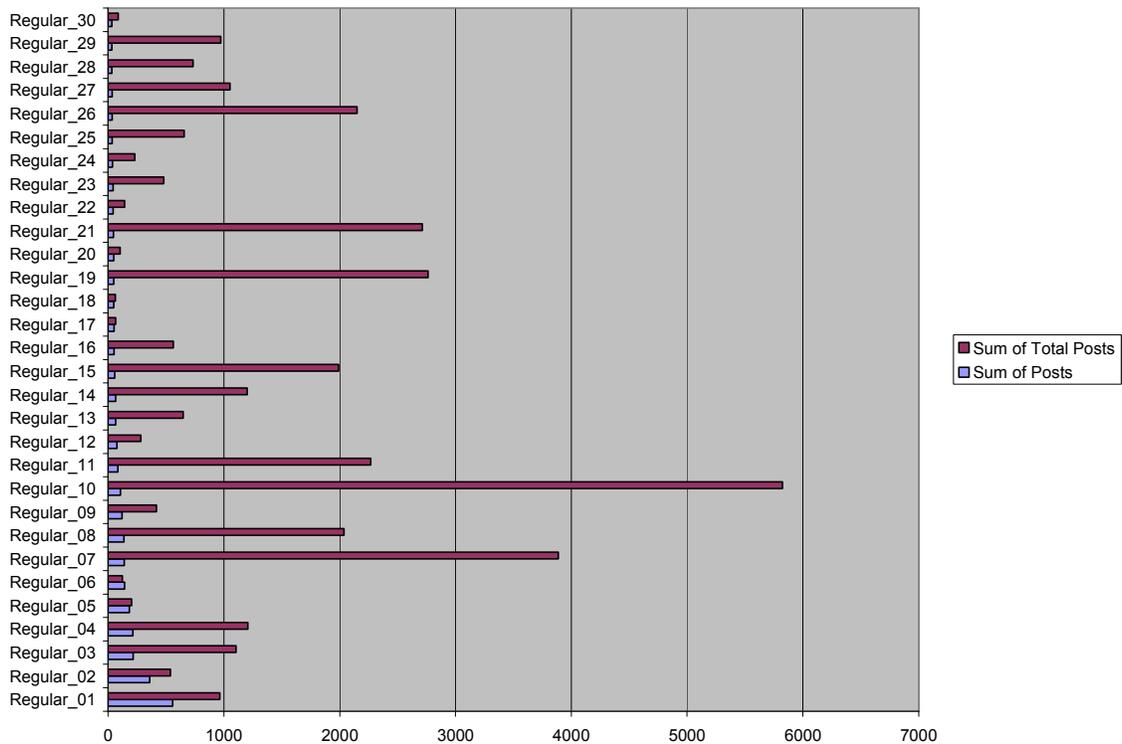
The first piece of the data above notes the amount of discussions (or sources) each of the 30 regulars participated in within the body of discussions analyzed. Regular_04, Regular_07, Regular_10, Regular_12, and Regular_14 all participated in more than 20 discussions each. The lowest participation in this group was by means of participating in only five discussions.

The second piece denotes the comparison between the posting amounts of regular users in the analyzed documents verses the posting amount for the entire history of the regular users.   Again, Regular_07 and Regular_10 are notable here. The variance here is much larger – a comparison of low hundreds for the lower posting users to nearly 6,000 for the highest posting user.

Using the initial list of 30, the questions arise: Who are the regulars participating in the discussions analyzed? What are their professional backgrounds? What types of discussions do they participate in? What types of interactions occur? These are answered in more detail below.

Initially, some details about these users are gathered from the data from the user profiles. This data is included below.

Figure 6. Regular users home location distribution.

Total
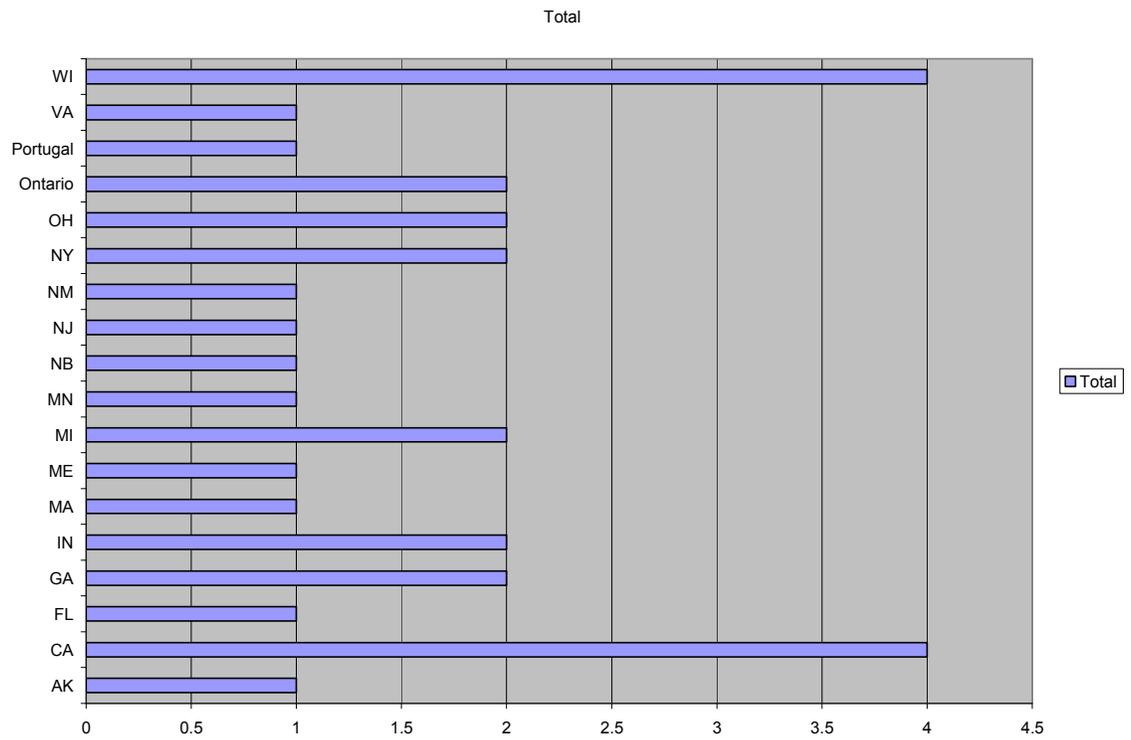
These regulars hail from 16 states in the United States, Canada and Portugal. The heaviest participation is from Wisconsin and California (4 each). The significance of California will be discussed later in this paper. Next, is a review of professional identification among the 30 regulars.

Figure 7. Regular users profession distribution.

Total
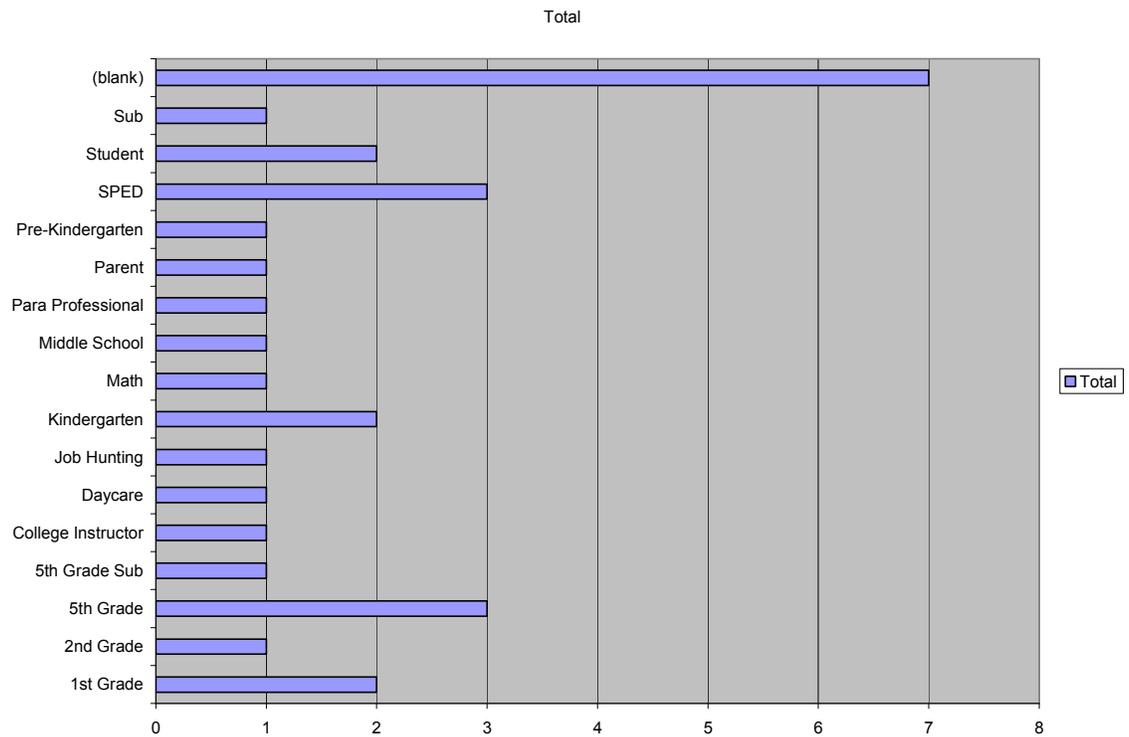
Referring to the above figure's reporting of professional identification, seven chose not to report this information, eight identified themselves as being a professional associated with elementary education (kindergarten through fifth grade), three self-identified as special educators, two identified themselves as students (or pre-service teachers), and the others identified themselves as a general substitute, a pre-school teacher, a parent, a para-professional (often an aide in a special education or early education classroom), a middle education teacher, a math teacher, a daycare provider, a college level instructor and a person looking for a teaching job. The heavy elementary education participation is not remarkable as the participation rate in those forums is relatively high.

The next measure provided is the age distribution of the 30 regular participants (discussed briefly above).

Table 3 Regular Users Age Distribution

Age	Users
20	1
23	1
24	1
26	1
30	1
31	1
33	1
53	1
Not Listed	22

The ages range from 20 to 53 among the eight reporting ages. Finally, the following is an examination of what discussions the regulars are posting to and which threads they are not.

The following discussion threads received the most postings by the identified 30 regulars:

Table 4 Top 22 Posted-To Discussions by Regulars

Discussion Thread Title	Posts by Regulars
Place Name Game	500
Prediction Game	380
Bacon Anyone	253
Five of a Kind Game	194
The Movie Quote Game	189
Connect the song	181
This or That Game	119
How did you get here	115
The Random Letter Game	105
The Book Title Game	105
Fashion Trends . . . When we were young	99
Word Association Game	97
Math challenges II - Want to give it a try	83
Let's start on some interview practice	62
Applying for jobs	56
Crazy Neighbors	56
The Monkees	24
Question for moms	21
Packing tips	21
first year teacher needs input	20
I am going crazy!	20
How can I help (sorry, a bit long)	20

Note that of the top 10 discussions in this list include nine "games" (to be discussed in more detail later). Other threads include discussions of fashion trends from youth, interviewing practice and advice for job applicants, musical interests, pregnancy experiences, family issues, and procedural and organizational tips for teachers.

The discussions not being posted to include some assistance on moving from one grade to another; specific reading programs; some job application advice; summer school advice; particular activities in poetry, astronomy, and discipline; free materials on the web; and teacher certification advice.

The Lurker

A final note in this general area touches on the notion of the "lurker" – or the individual that merely observes discussions, potentially gleans benefit from these observations but does not interact with others in the forum setting. These lurkers may in fact be registered members of the board or not at all. There is no way to determine the number of these types of users, but it must be noted that they in fact do exist. They likely do gain benefit and are recipients of information, but they do not in fact interact and so are not discussed in the context of this community. This certainly brings up an interesting question to be ep0xlored – at what point does a lurker become a casual non-regular participant, then eventually becoming a regular heavy participant?

Self-Regulation/Contracts

The forum discussion area – in order to gain the greatest benefit of interaction – requires that potential users "register." This process entails agreeing to the rules and guidelines (see Forum Rules in the Appendices) by selecting a checkbox next to the statement "I have read, and agree to abide by the A to Z Teacher Stuff Forums rules." A username, a password and an email address are then required for completion of the registration process. In order to avoid tools for mass signup of user accounts, an image verification system is used.

The statement insists that users agree to follow the basic rules of the board (avoiding hostile, vulgar, or illegal posts). The statement further details the very public nature of the posts on the board and the agreement on the board administrator's part to not disclose any identifying features for commercial reasons. Privacy is emphasized here (acting in the capacity of tips for protecting identities). Guidelines for using the boards as an advertising venue are outlined. Finally, "personal attacks" are defined and consequences are outlined. These, in their simple form, constitute the overt agreed-upon rules for engagement at this discussion forum. This becomes the "closure" of the community as all agree to these norms and are held accountable by way of their membership agreements and agreed-upon consequences. Much of the remainder of the documentation on this site can be best characterized as "help documentation" (answering questions such as "how do I send a PM?").

The formal agreements are agreed upon prior to completion of registration (with the consequence of the removal of posting rights should users violate these rules). The more informal rules of engagement appear more in the actual

conversations. These are less likely to result in "banning" or removal of privileges per se but more in the realm of effectively communicating and experiencing satisfaction in the interactions (and subsequently maintaining positive interactions with other board members).

Social norms are presented by more experienced group members as in the case of a new user, when asking about home schooling, being directed to the home-school forum (by a regular, Regular_10 – see discussion of Regulars below for coding explanation). This sub-forum (the home-school forum) is where posters place those types of questions. Another example is in the form of a regular, Regular_07, informing posters that phone numbers and email addresses should not be posted in replies but rather should be shared as "that's what private messages (PMs) are for." Others understand the unacceptable practice of "hijacking a thread" (or changing the initial topic of a thread to something unrelated or only remotely related). These are not formally written rules, but understood expectations for effectively interacting with other members of the forum.

Trust

Users in this forum ask for personal advice and inherently trust that those who respond have good intentions for the welfare of the poster and the poster's family (as a virtual understood entity). These pleas for help (with an honest seeking of answers) can be found in the form of work-related and personal non-work related issues. The most telling, concerning the issue of trust, though, arrives with the sincere plea for advice in the personal lives of the posters.

One non-regular adds this comment,

> I'm addicted to this site, though, and on days when I can't get hold of a computer with internet, I'm totally lost...I don't know how I managed before I met all of you!! . . . Just to add...I joined right before I quit my horror job...and it was all of you who gave me the courage!!

She is a connected individual in this community who gathered strength to make an off-line life change from her relationships in this online environment. Others have made similar comments, such as Regular_10 whose husband had died and many difficult personal issues were happening. She writes,

> I remember the monitor glowing in the dark in the middle of the night and me crying ..... sorry to be such a downer. AtoZ really helped me feel connected. . . . The professional camaraderie at AtoZ is what I value the most.

In the personal advice solicited on this forum, much has to do with professional practice. Additional assistance is requested in personal choices as well, such as Regular_16's request on advice about a potential summer job.

Regulars and the Role of Expert: Professional Assistance

An interesting large thematic result of this research is the role of the Regular in this forum as the expert in certain subjects. The below discussions will explore this very motion of professional support – an area not initially meant to be examined in the research design but unavoidably rose to the forefront of analysis.

Unique associations among different types

The "types" in an online environment really relate to the particular demographics of this group, an important place to begin analysis on professional-based interactions. Through the member profile area, the age, location, and general professions can be identified for a portion of the group of 301 users (see discussions).

These diverse backgrounds allow users to flock to certain areas of interest specific to their areas of expertise (i.e., those interested in information in or have knowledge on examinations for teachers congregate at those sub-forums devoted to teacher examinations while new teachers needing advice and those in the area of elementary instruction would seek exchanges in the new teacher and elementary sub-forums respectively).

The discussion of Regulars revealed that many of these frequent visitors seek to exchange socially (not related to work or home) in the form of games and recalling the past. In fact, the group of Regulars represented very different professional backgrounds and interests (16 listed among the 30 analyzed users), varied ages (at least age 20 to age 53), and are from 16 different states, Ontario and Portugal. The question to ask is if these very unique users would have opportunity to congregate if the online virtual means did not exist? Likely not.

With the varied backgrounds above, the Regulars posted heavily in the TeacherChat areas (General Education, Elementary Education, Secondary Education) and to a far lesser degree but still noteworthy the Special Interest Forums (New Teachers and Substitute Teaching being the two bigger areas).

Noticeably, several of the posters are not new teachers, yet there existed a heavy concentration on this forum. Clearly, the Regulars (those that have experience in the world of education) felt inclined to assist those new teachers and job seekers in their pursuits.

Idea Exchange for Individual Development

The component of "Idea Exchange" relates directly to an understanding of social capital as outlined in the literature review of this paper. The two aspects of this are one-to-one exchanges and the presence of experts. This really cannot be easily separated as often the expert exchanges one-to-one with others and sometimes the expert is not so easily identified.

Below are several of the types of exchanges sought by users in the forum.

Certification Advice

One of the most prevalent groups of exchanges – expert to novice or equals exchanging – is in the area of certification. This is often a state (or country) specific question and an online forum of over 14,000 users is a sensible

place to post such questions. To note, there is an entire area devoted to Exams for Teachers probably because of the interest in answering these types of questions. Regular_07 and Regular_27 are frequent posters in this forum area.

Posters seek advice on GRE exams, the California-based CSET exam, the national Praxis exams, tutor recommendations, the RICA exam, and others. Regular_07 and Regular_27 dominate this area as "experts."

Many of these questions are similar in construction (how should I study for . . . , how do I go about getting . . ., what should I expect . . . .). These posters are seeking advice from those who have been through the same. What they often get is advice from the local resident expert in certification (Regular_07) who has developed a process (or an approach) for studying for these exams.

Many times, Regular_07 searched and found data, and then proceeded to post. The following quote is illustrative of Regular_07's postings in these examination forums:

First, download the Tests at a Glance document so you see what you're up against. Don't just depend on the sample questions, however: pay attention to the list of topics covered, since any of them could show up on a particular version of this test.

Next, use the Internet to help you learn the math you don't already know. ((non-forum identifier)), who helps people with the very challenging CSET Math exam, passed on a nifty tip: if you want to see some topic in math animated, try Googling for the topic followed by the word "applet" (for example, "Pythagorean theorem applet"). Google will spit back a list of Web sites with Java applets that illustrate that topic.

You may also want to look through the threads on CSET Math for resources that can help you review the math you need.

Regular_07 truly is the expert, in both knowing and the process for finding the answers to certification queries. Invariably, the lurkers also benefited from the discussions posted.

Teacher job application assistance

Another heavy component of these forums is the search for information on how to approach job applications (including who to contact, what to write in cover letters, what to include in portfolios) and how to handle interviewing (pre-, peri-, and post-). Topics covered associated with this theme include cover letter generation (and specific tips as this particular discussion became a collaborative effort in developing a specific cover letter for one participant), tips on turning down job offers, thank you note creation tips, portfolio ideas, and interview preparation. Other topics covered travel compensation by school districts for distant employees and specifics on a certain school district or a specific type of

instructional program. Regular participants in this context include Regular_04, Regular_14, Regular_15, Regular_23, Regular_26, and Regular_27.

This environment provides many opportunities for new teachers/ pre-service teachers to gain the valuable insight and experience from those with more knowledge on the process and expectations. This is classic idea exchange – request for information and granting of answers.

Teacher practice assistance

The next group of questions and requests come in the form of the actual practice of teaching. These range from early education classroom jobs, organizations, and activities to behavior management advice to parental management.

These discussions can be further classified into novice and student teacher requests, requests involving behavioral issues, and more peripheral and logistical requests. Several novice teachers and students ask for help in the areas of final projects, lesson plan expectations for substitute teachers, general preparation advice, and class job ideas for students, first day writing ideas, and planning methods (units vs. weekly lessons).

The behavioral issues discussed involve ideas for getting students to better deal with transitions (settling down after lunch and when parents arrive to pick up pre-schoolers), dealing with confrontational parents (This discussion also turns to an issue of non-support from the poster's school becoming an expression of frustration at the non-support of the principal by the initial poster and a show of support and expert advice by the responders), and issues of a substitute taking on a notorious class. One other behavioral issue to be discussed in more detail involves a relatively inexperienced teacher who witnesses a violent altercation occurring within the first few days of teaching a summer school 5th grade. She thinks it might be related to her being white and all of the students being black. Advice and responses offered turn to the methods and approaches for dealing with students who are black and approaches for dealing with those who are currently living in an urban environment. The conversation also includes those who think she should leave her job teaching that class as it will not improve and it was unfair for the system to put her in that position (Regular_21, Regular_10, Regular_23, Regular_07, Regular_28, Regular_16, and several non-regulars post responses). This discussion crosses the border of idea exchange to social support.

In the category of more logistical and peripheral issues, posters seek knowledge of posted school salaries, ideas and advice for experienced teachers moving to new grade assignments, a specific issue involving post-swimming fifth graders and a single changing room, and ideas for class library organization.

Again, these varying discussions seek to gather the experiences and knowledge of the veterans for very specific issues in the field of teaching.

Homogeneity/ Alikeness

The category of homogeneity involves multiple areas, noting where participants are

- Alike in personal interests
- Alike in ethnic background
- Alike in professional interests
- Alike in vocational pursuits

This particular area of observation plays a role at a very surface level in examining community formation. While it is obvious that community forms around some element of homogeneity (forced or naturally occurring), understanding the nature of those homogenous features proves valuable. This discussion examines the elements of homogeneity in the context of online "community" formation. As discussed in the analysis, the actual types of homogeneity play into our understanding.

Three of these four can be observed in this context. The fourth (ethnic background) is more difficult to ascertain as a poster's ethnic background or affiliation is not identified in a user's profile and only observed to be briefly mentioned once in one of the discussions (specifically the discussion on being hit with a chair and the possible relationship that the discipline issue has with the difference of race between the teacher and students in the class). As only one discussion touched on this (out of more than 100 total observed discussions) and that discussion quickly turned from race discussions to urban education discussions, ethnic likeness will not (and cannot) be addressed here.

There is some value in beginning this section with a quick review of the actual forum structure of this discussion forum (i.e., what forums have been created). This will be valuable in the analysis of the intent and actual conversations that occur in this virtual space.

There are 18 sub-forums organized into six main forum divisions. Four of the six forums are primarily for connecting individuals of a like interest in the teaching profession. These include the pen pals area (for teachers to connect two of their classrooms in writing and sharing), certification exams and preparation, special interest areas such as behavior management, Montessori, new teachers, special education and substitute teachers) and chat areas focused on specific professional interests (such as elementary, kindergarten, preschool, secondary education, and general education areas). Therefore, out of the 18 sub-areas, 14 are representative of vocational and professional interests (preparing to be a teacher, practice of teaching, professional discussions, personal interests as related to their teaching jobs).

Looking at the actual posting amounts (see below and Appendix H Postings by Discussion Threads) and comparing these numbers, one can make the following conclusions.

Note initially that of the main discussion sub-forums identified, Special Interest Forums (or forums devoted to specific professional interests) and Teacher Chat Forums (or forums devoted to particular vocational identities and subsequent discussions) make up the bulk of the discussions here (82.6% of all posts in this sampling fall into these two sub-forums).

The most posted to Sub-Forum is the New Teachers area, with General Education and Elementary Education close behind. The reason for this becomes clearer below.

Breaking down to the thread level, a thread entitled "applying for jobs" and another entitled "let's start some interview practice" comprise 21% of the posts in these forum threads (937 of the 4,211 total posts). These could be best summed up as how to go about applying for jobs and how to prepare for interviews. Idea sharing and emotional support among those going through the interview process (or those who have gone before and offer some expertise).

In the General Education sub-forum, the heaviest participation came in the form of mathematics practice (Regular_09 posting math puzzles for others to tackle). This is certainly an example of a common personal and a common professional interest.

Other moderately heavy posting occurred in the Elementary Sub-Forum under a discussion of CHAMPS and Harry Wong (and discipline and classroom procedures), a discussion of reading for the summer (what professional/ teacher books will posters be reading during the summer), a specific discipline issue perceived to be race related (and how to handle this issue), and an exertion of frustration over a classroom issue. In the New Teachers Sub-Forum, moderate posting occurred in a discussion on needed input on first year of teaching. Finally, in the General Education area, a discussion on how to pack up the classroom for the summer saw moderate posting from users.

Within these discussions, we see more specifics in the discussions among those alike in vocational, professional, and personal interests.

Vocational pursuits

In the realm of vocational interests, users would be inclined to share interests in the actual practice of teaching a particular area or in this case in the practice of obtaining a teaching job. Evidence exists of these posters sharing connections to one another as teachers — "I'm just finishing up my student teaching. I don't have a job yet, but I can already feel a connection to a very special group of people. It's an amazing feeling to teach!"

Through the review of these discussions, common themes arise in the vocational focus. These users primarily seek advice/ support on

- how to interview for specific position types (such as elementary special education to assist students in inclusion settings and run a resources room)
- similar or shared teacher examinations (SAE (Subject Area Exams) exams - come together and pray for a good outcome)
- how to apply for specific jobs (these become support venues as well, where teachers and recently graduated students are provided emotional and advisory-type support as they search for new jobs).

To elaborate on this final theme, Regular_26 posts an update to her job search and poses the question "(h)ow's everyone else doing with the job search?" In response, Regular_23 writes, "Good for you. We have had only one posting for positions in this area for 06-07. I have apps completed and resumes on file, but I search the school district web sites daily for new postings-nerve wracking. Summer school postings are just starting to get online around here." Regular_15 even tells Regular_26 that she is thinking of joining her for a job fair

near both of them (or relatively so), "I am very tempted to come down and go to the job fair with you." These posters share in the preparation for job searching (as in a card system for maintaining organization), search processes (how to find prospective employers), the process of application (what to include in a portfolio, what to include in an application, what to prepare for with regard to interviews), and even the etiquette for how long one can wait before accepting/ rejecting an offer.

These posters are supporting each other in their personal and vocational goals. Regular_26 asserts in response to one poster's constant checking of job sites, "(y)ou're not alone on that one! I check constantly. I'm absolutely determined to have a position for next school year!" A male teacher provides nearly daily updates (sometimes hourly) about his progress for applying for a job. He discusses his actual interviews, how they went and how he felt. He even relays the personal difficulties in finding a way to get to the interview without jeopardizing his wife who needs the car.

These teachers celebrate in their successes. One successful poster exclaims, "Well....ta da! I got a call from a Principal and I GOT A JOB!" Nevertheless, the process is not over with being hired. A newly hired teacher asks a myriad of questions about what to expect now that he/ she is hired. This teacher asks about schedules, materials, procedures, planning, etc. Worrying about this new position and what to expect is occupying his/her time. This is further supported by the fact that the actual posting/ discussion thread begun at 1:36 AM. One can imagine this poster is restless enough in trying to sleep that he/ she feels the need to jump online and share in the anxiety and seek advice from those of like interests

Another thread seeks for those having experienced teacher examinations (a particular examination) to explore the "virtues" of this specific test required of teachers. Answers vary and are shared, like

- boosting confidence in new teachers
- keeping teachers who don't have any business being teachers from becoming teachers
- allowing some otherwise qualified teachers to get a credential for teaching subjects without having to go back to school
- forcing teachers to "get current" on their subject matter
- offering the opportunity for teachers to reflect upon the test process itself.

This is a discussion of shared experience and opinion. Other conversations include assistance in the development of a portfolio (and how to approach school systems at a job fair).

Professional interests

In the context of professional interests, one mother introduces herself as a home-school teacher and seeks other home-schooling parents in the forum. This

introduction was made in the "introductions" forum, but there actually is a home-schooling forum.

Another poster seeks to get advice on how to go about revamping classroom rules/ procedures to be in line with Harry Wong's methodology (as presented at a CHAMPS seminar). Others join in this discussion interested in expressing their practice and gathering ideas from others, as all teachers (regardless of the specific area of instruction . . . or vocation) need to exert classroom management practices.

I also return to the discussion thread as noted earlier entitled "frustrated" that covers a sub's experience in a fifth grade classroom and how the students just were not trying. This is a sharing of frustrations and what these teachers have done in the past to try to help students, what these teachers were seeking to do to meet student's needs, and where the limit was in their efforts.

Other teachers seek advice in

- switching to a new grade (as discussed in the previous section)
- general thematic ideas for summer school teaching (not grade or subject specific)
- ideas on how to handle a difficult commuting situation
- finding general teaching salary lists
- advice on how to obtain certification to teach in Florida via alternative means
- how to plan for first-year teaching before one is given materials, curriculum, etc.

Personal interests

For a discussion of posters' similar personal interests, the reference can be made to the previously discussed elements in the vocational and professional sections (which also touch on a personal interest component). These include the discussion, *Frustrated*, which explored one teacher's frustration with a lack of initiative among her students. The joining-in by the various posters demonstrating the empathy, as people, these posters feel towards the initiator of the discussion as evidenced by the quotes, "we have all experienced it!," "I know how it is," and "I've seen the same."

Again, this area overlaps with professional and vocational interests, as evidenced by the discussion allowing users to participate in math puzzle and the discussion on how to best pack the classroom for the summer. This really is a personal interest in addition to its professional and vocational connections.

More notably, personal kinship can be discovered in a discussion on "fashion trends . . .when we were younger." This conversation began as a result of a high-jacked thread called "how did you get here" (as discussed above). This discussion covers many of the teacher's fashion choices (or faux pas as the cases may be) during their younger years (as in the 1980s). The posters begin to wax nostalgic about high bangs, hair spray, dresses with sequins, huckapoo blouses, banana clips, Cabbage Patch Kids and baggy pants. The conversation also turned to popular singing groups from that time, like Duran Duran, New Kids

on the Block, the Beach Boys and the Monkees. Note that these groups are actually from different points in history, representing the varied ages of the group of posters participating.

The conversation in this thread then turns to a sharing of personal experiences having watched the Monkees or facts about the Monkees (or even which Monkee they thought was the best looking) and a sharing of favorite songs. Another turn occurs with the advent of a discussion on new types of music (and old music influences). This thread wraps up with a return to a discussion of '80s American fashions – being intricately connected with two other special interest threads based on like personal interests ("how did you get here" and the Monkees).

Another thread, very humorous in its premise but very related to this context, is entitled "Postit Notes Anonymous." The initial posting (made by Regular_12) notes that she had "saw in one of the Chitchat forums a number of comments from people who are "stuck" on Post-It Notes," and she then admits to being one. Here is an example of a perceived common personal interest (albeit related to professional and vocational interests) that makes its way into its own personal and individual thread.

So, appropriately and tongue-in-cheek, Regular_12 begins with "Hello, my name is (Regular_12) and I am a Post-It Note addict." Others follow (including Regular_04, Regular_13, Regular_09, Regular_25, Regular_10 and 2 non-heavy users). Brands, colors, styles are all discussed. There is certainly a light air of discussion here, but it is also obviously a real sharing. These posters truly love Post-it notes.

Regular_12 comforts Regular_04 with, "Really you don't need to apologize (sic) for your predilection (sic). I understand completely." She then proceeds to inquire "do you find that you must have the Post-It brand, or are you tempted by all types of stickies?" Regular_13 admits to having "12 different kinds of sticky notes!" The discussion, not surprisingly, turns to be of a quite practical nature where posters discuss the best and latest Post-it notes to be available. Regular_12 at one points exclaims, "OOOooo! Index cards and sentence strips that are Post-its! That is pretty exciting. I'm sure I could find uses for those! I wonder if they will be on the market by August."

A non-heavy user (12 posts in four discussion threads) posits the question to the general forum, "I was wondering if any of you actually liked being pregnant?" The criteria for anyone to directly answer this question would be that posters should have actually had the shared experience of being pregnant. Not surprisingly, many of the regulars post here. Regular_14 chimes in with comparing the experiences between her biological and adoptive children (and preferring the latter experience to the former). Regular_29, Regular_21, Regular_04, Regular_23, Regular_14, Regular_08, Regular_03, and five non-heavy users participate in this discussion. This discussion mostly stays on topic (discussing experiences during pregnancy and delivery) but does veer into the role and experiences of the husbands as well.

The final discussion to note here is the related thread, "how did you get here," which has been discussed in other characteristics sections above. This

thread began the other personal interests discussion and is an inquiry into the history of the participants on the forum. Obviously, each of these participants share the common personal interest of participating in this forum – and this becomes the topic of conversation.

Therefore, to examine this same discussion from a different angle, these posters are sharing about common journeys ("my first post was about 3 years ago. I responded to a question about tables vs. desks. Post was about Harry Potter!"). These posters related to each other's personal journeys. Many of the posters arrived at the site initially as they were looking for help in their teaching careers. Should that have been the only type of information or enjoyment to be gleaned from the site, then they likely would not have remained. Instead, the participants became "addicted" (as many had noted) and felt empty if that did not log on. These posters made personal connections based on similar interests.

Essentially, these discussions reviewed in the context of common interests seek to either validate the opinions of the posters, seek advice from those in similar vocational fields (in the form of issues at home, at the workplace in general and in the classroom and how to approach resolution), or share in the personal histories and experiences common among posters. These discussions are begun with no particular posters in mind, and the dynamic process occurs where multiple posters join in (based on timing and other variables uncontrolled by the initial poster).

Regulars and the Online Playground: Social Interaction
The third area for analysis is the construct of the virtual playground. Above, some of the more playful experiences arose in the discussions. These are elaborated upon and categorized below.

Participant Escapism
This particular aspect – an escapist attitude as the interactions take place – relates directly to Oldenburg's work on the Third Place. This Third Place is neither directly related to the home (the first place) nor is it related to work (the second place). This "place" is in fact a place to escape those other two places. So, in order to determine if this virtual space is in fact characteristic of an escapist Third Place, the types of conversations in this context must be examined. Below is an attempt to do just that.

To begin, the forum repositories in this discussion site (as has been noted) often fall into the three separations of professional discussions, personal discussions, and discussions related to the management of the forum itself (see discussions at the start of this chapter). This does not effectively provide a detailed view of the nature of the actual threads (as opposed to the anticipated discussions according to forum or sub-forum intent). The below table shows a forum/sub-forum overview tallied by whether the actual discussions contained were related to personal issues (to be broken down later) or work issues.

Table 5 Forums and Sub-Forums Comparing Personal to Work Discussions

Forum	Sub-Forum	Personal	Work
Announcements	Introductions	3	2
Connecting Classrooms	Classroom Penpals		1
Exams for Teachers	Basic Skills		2
	Multiple Subject Tests		3
	Other Tests		3
	Single Subject Tests		6
Exams for Teachers Total			14
Prayer	Prayer Request Forum	1	
Special Interest Forums	Behavior Management		3
	Montessori		1
	New Teachers		14
	Special Education		4
	Substitute Teaching		4
Special Interest Forums Total			26
Teacher Chat Forums	Elementary Education	1	15
	GeneralEducation	1	7
	Kindergarten		5
	Preschool		2
	Secondary Education		4
	Teacher TimeOut	31	2
Teacher Chat Forums Total		33	35

The escapism aspect of a community calls for it to not be an environment like or related to home or work (the first or second places respectively). This is explored below.

Not directly related to work

Many of the discussion threads fall into a discussion of work-related issues. Note that out of the 115 discussions analyzed, 78 are related to work in some fashion. This proves unremarkable for two primary reasons. First, this forum is marketed to be an online gathering place for teachers to discuss education. For members not to talk about the profession in general or the specific practice of teaching would be a surprise. Second, the forums and sub-forums created have also been specifically targeted to specific sub-teacher groups (i.e., Elementary, Secondary, Special Education, Montessori, Substitute,

etc). The overall design of the forum site is geared toward the interaction of professional educators in the exchange of ideas and the request for assistance.

This being said, there still are 37 discussions that are unrelated to the specific profession of teaching. This is where the view of this online gathering space changes. One out of every three discussions tends toward discussions not necessarily related to the profession of teaching. These 37 discussions are explored in more detail below.

Not directly related to home

This component becomes a bit more difficult to gauge. In essence, this is an escape from the pressures of home. In this context, what discussion threads best exemplified an avoidance of discussions of "home?"

The following threads have been identified as such:
- Did you hear about new moms
- Fashion Trends...When we were Younger
- How can I help (sorry, a bit long)
- How did you get here
- Kids say the darndest things....
- News Stories of our youth
- Postit Noters Anonymous
- The Monkees
- Divey-read please
- Summer Readings!
- Mexico
- Airsoft
- Recipe I made last night - broccoli and shrimp pasta
- Plus the thirteen "games"

These discussions (26 out of the 37 total "personal" discussions noted above) primarily focus on social discussions exploring each other's backgrounds or just having fun. This truly is an escapist group.

There are discussions that do (even if remotely) have to do with the issues of the home. This list of nine has been provided below by discussion thread title:

- Crazy Neighbors
- How do you control CAT HAIR
- I am going crazy!
- It's a boy
- May Have Gotten The Hubby To Cave
- Question for moms
- wedding songs...
- My Grammy
- DUI and Credentials

These range from undesirable neighbors and a son-in-law to pregnancy announcements, birth announcements, pregnancy advice to wedding advice to a request for an ailing grandmother. In the case of the women with the insensitive son-in-law (in the thread appropriately entitled "I am going crazy!"), there is undoubtedly a direct relationship to home. In fact, the premise is based on the frustration she is directly dealing with in her own house. These are expressions of the issues that these posters are experiencing at home and the personal struggles (or joys) the poster is dealing with.

Neutral Ground

The concept of "On Neutral Ground" arises from the work of Ray Oldenburg as discussed in Chapter 3 of this paper. Oldenburg's description begins with the notion that

> The individual may have many friends, a rich variety among them, and opportunity to engage many of them daily only if people do not get uncomfortably tangled in one another's lives. Friends can be numerous and often met only if they may easily join and depart one another's company. (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 22)

In other words, as discussed in Chapter 3, public gathering places that do not present threats but allow personal (but not too personal) interaction allows for the strengthening of community.

These places would allow for participants to

- Easily enter and exit as desired
- Allow for temporal relationships
- Avoid being too personal (or getting too mired in one another's difficulties)
- Avoid being too intrusive with one another

Ease of entering and exiting and temporal relationships

That these relationships online are temporal in nature is obvious. Users have the ability to maintain control over interactions and can therefore move in and out of discussions fairly easily. Should a user wish to engage in a discussion, then he or she can. Should the user wish to merely observe the interaction (often called "lurking" in the online community), then he or she can.

Looking for specific evidence of temporal relationships in these analyzed discussions proves difficult except to point to the varied participation in the discussions among the regular users (identified earlier).

Figure 8 Forum discussion areas overview.
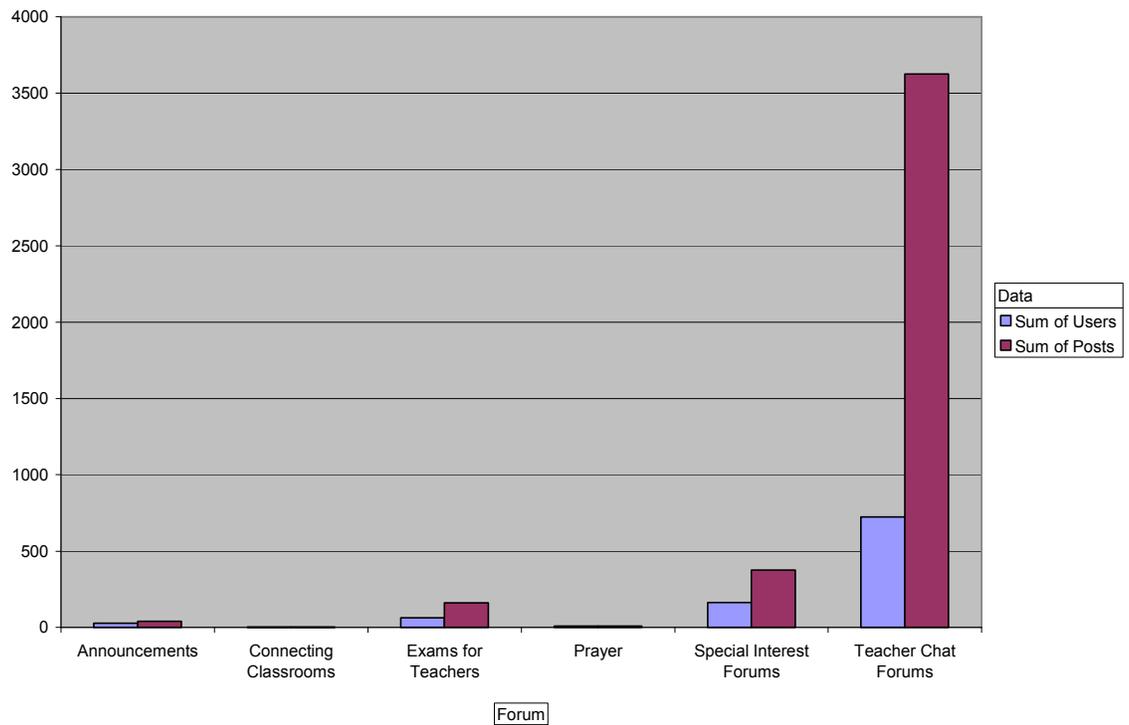
Looking at just the numbers of discussions that these 30 participated in, we get a picture of the wide and varied participation among the core users of the forum.

Figure 9 Discussion Thread Participation Counts by Regular Users
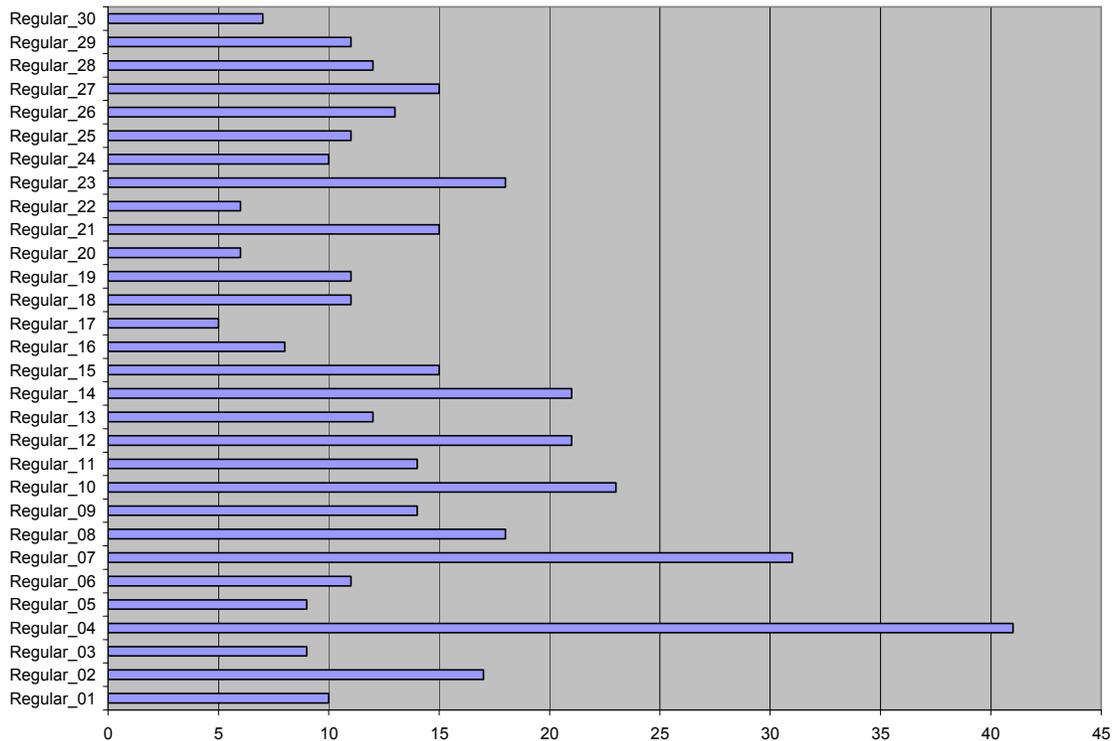
Note that these heavy users participated in anywhere from five to 42 different discussions as analyzed from the discussion threads gleaned (a total of 117).

These users are not participating in a single discussion, nor are they only participating in a few. They move in and out of discussions as interests change. They offer advice or an anecdote and move on. They feel no tie to a single group of people for interaction nor is there any evidence that these discussions were begun in hopes of having a permanent set of posters that remained there (virtually) for the duration of the discussions.

Many of the initial posts – and even the sub-forum titles themselves – indicate the temporality of these discussions.

Just looking at the Exams for Teachers Sub-Forum, the titles of the threads indicate very focused discussions on very specific subjects.

- praxis 2 0511 and 0100
- writing score 41
- finally passed the praxis 2
- help prek 3rd sae
- virtues of the cset
- gres vs mats
- rica question
- cset english prep

- english cset
- great cset tutor single and multiple subject
- passed ss english 1 2 and 4
- praxis help 49 69 89
- praxis middle school math 0069

These all indicate a desire for help, specific answers, or directions on a specific test towards teacher certification (with the "virtues . . ." and the "finally passed . . ." discussions being a bit of an exception as they become more informal (celebratory and exploratory) in their discussions rather than seeking assistance). These all have been discussed in more detail above.

The games (in the Teacher Timeout Sub-Forum) really demonstrate this, as posters participated in these discussion threads for months.

- Bacon anyone
- Connect the song
- Five of a Kind Game
- Movie trivia!
- Name Game
- Place Name Game
- prediction game
- The Book Title Game
- The Movie Quote Game
- The Random Letter Game!
- This or That Game
- What I Learned Today
- word association game

All of these threads are meant as temporal fun engagements for posters to come and go as they please. The two lists above really highlight the very different purposes this forum serves – as an escapist/ fun place to go (to be discussed later in the games section) or a place for advice and/ or assistance.

Switching between the forums is shown by the various participation levels by each of the participants. Note these rates of participation as recorded below as separated by forum.

Figure 10 Counts of Regulars' Postings by Forum > Announcements

Total
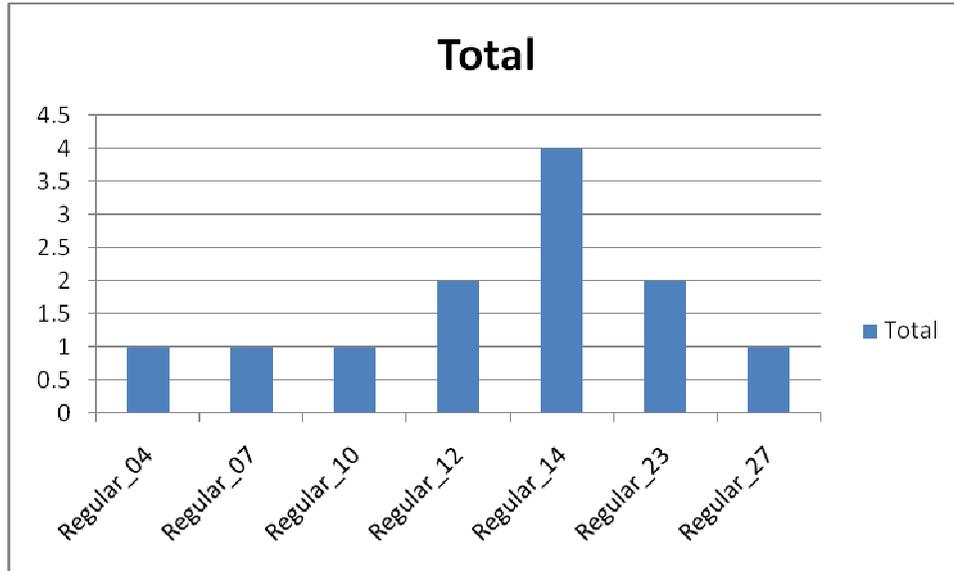
Figure 11 Counts of Regulars' Postings by Forum > Exams for Teachers

Total
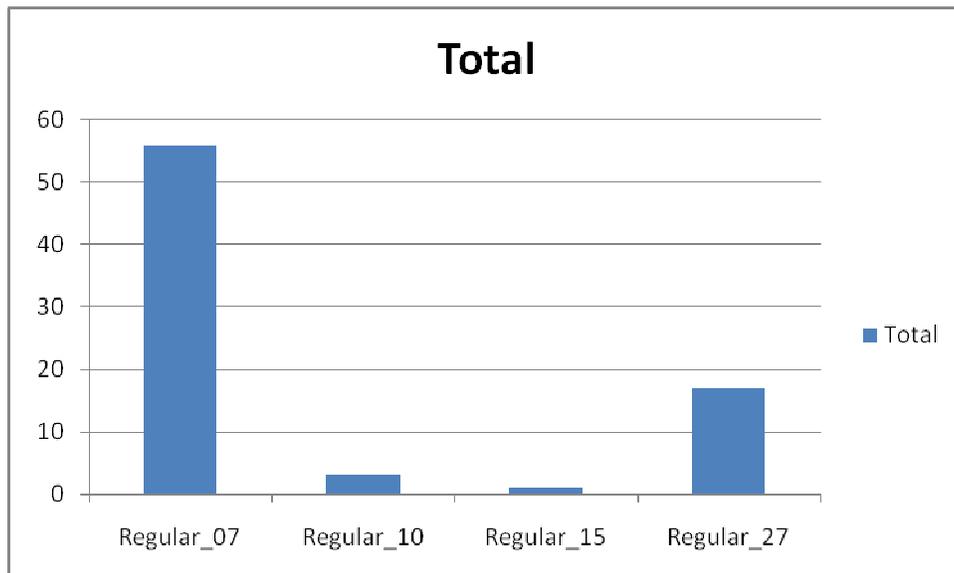
Figure 12 Counts of Regulars' Postings by Forum > Prayer
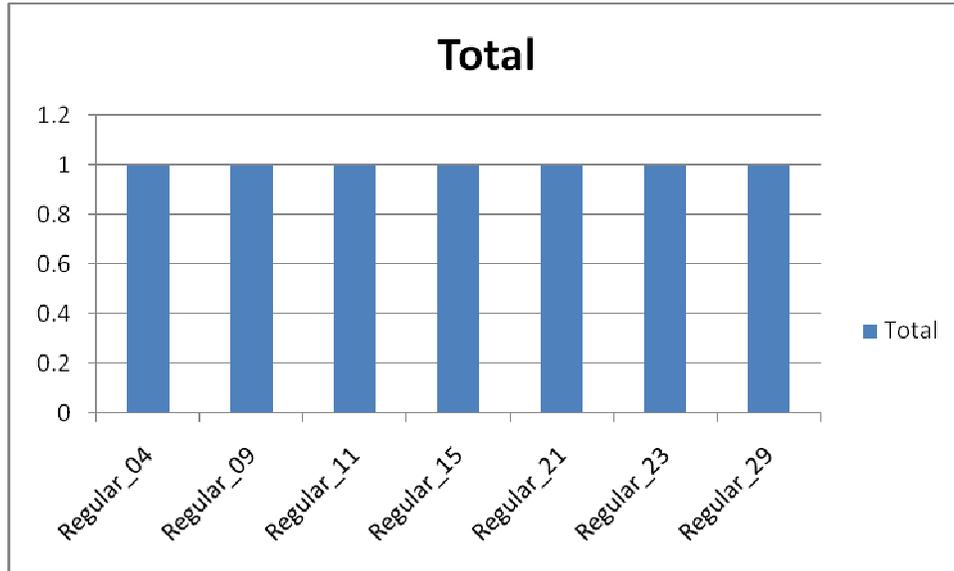
Figure 13 Counts of Regulars' Postings by Forum > Special Interest
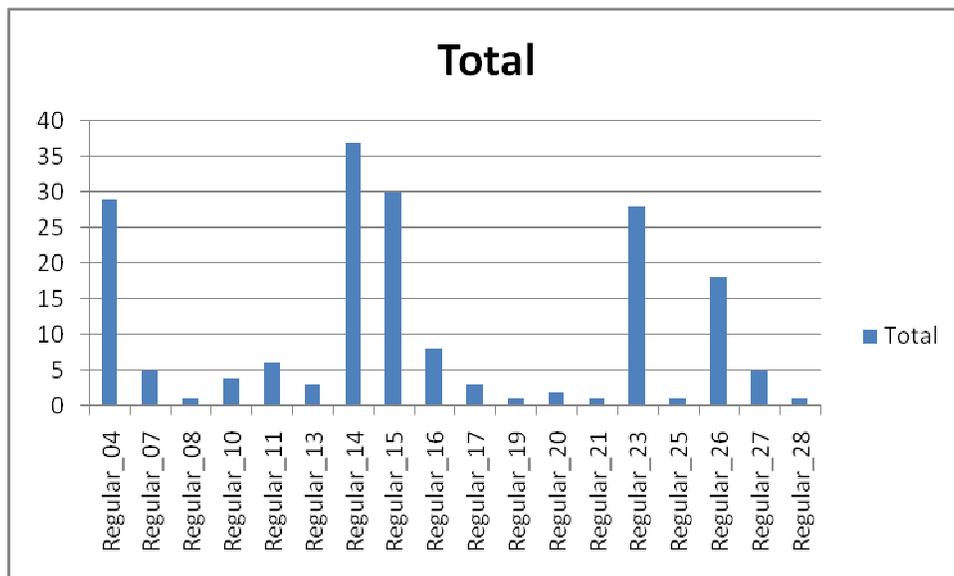
Figure 14 Counts of Regulars' Postings by Forum > Teacher Chat
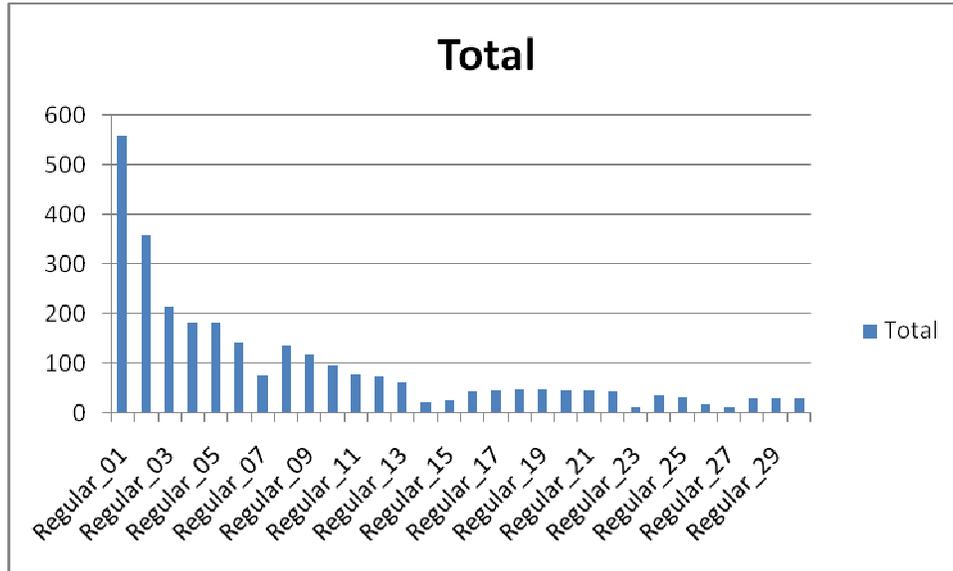
Regular_01, Regular_02, and Regular_03 all posted exclusively in the Teacher Chat Forums.   Others remain more dispersed (like Regular_07 and Regular_27 who posted most of their responses and interactions in the Exams for Teachers Forum; and Regular_14, Regular_15, Regular_04, Regular_23 and Regular_26 who all posted heavily in the Special Interest Forums). That being said, there is an obvious heavy posting in the Teacher Chat Forums area as opposed to others (in fact, 91% of all regular-initiated posts occurred in this area as opposed to the other four).

Looking at Teacher Chat Forums > Teacher Chat Sub-Forum in isolation, we see the popularity of the "TimeOut" forums (see below).

Table 6 Teacher Timeout Sub-Forum by Regular Posting

Users	% of Total Posts		Users	% of Total Posts
Regular_02	100%		Regular_08	98%
Regular_22	100%		Regular_20	96%
Regular_01	100%		Regular_25	94%
Regular_03	100%		Regular_17	94%
Regular_24	100%		Regular_19	94%
Regular_05	100%		Regular_21	93%
Regular_30	100%		Regular_12	88%
Regular_06	100%		Regular_13	86%
Regular_18	100%		Regular_28	85%
			Regular_16	79%
			Regular_04	78%
			Regular_10	75%
			Regular_11	73%
			Regular_09	61%
			Regular_15	43%
			Regular_26	40%
			Regular_14	28%
			Regular_07	26%
			Regular_23	20%
			Regular_27	12%

Ten of the regular users all posted 100% of their postings in this sub-forum. Eleven additional users posted more than 75% of their postings in this sub-forum. Only two posted less than 25% of their postings in this forum (Regular_27 and Regular_23 who primarily posted in Exams for Teachers and Special Interest Forums, respectively). In order to provide a clearer picture as to what these regulars are posting to in these discussion forums, the next area to explore is the actual discussion threads. See below for a reporting of the threads within the most widely posted to forum area.

Nine of the top 10 posted to discussion threads are game-like in intent and interaction. The non-game discussion thread – rounding out the top 10 at number eight – was the discussion on how the participants arrived at the forum in the first place (which also turned to fashion trends and a discussion of music that comes in at numbers 11 and 13 respectively). These game discussions comprise 76.48% of all the postings in this sub-forum.

Not personal and not intrusive
To explore the concepts of *not personal* and *not intrusive*, the actual nature of the discussions to which regulars posted should be examined. The

table below shows the top 22 posted-to discussion threads by the regulars (as discussed above). This table shows the forum and sub-forum locations for each of these threads.

Table 7 Top 24 Discussion Threads by Regular Users

Forums/ Sub-Forums	Totals
Exams for Teachers	**27**
Basic Skills	27
Special Interest Forums	**138**
New Teachers	138
Teacher Chat Forums	**2606**
Elementary Education	24
General Education	104
Teacher TimeOut	2478
Grand Total	**2771**

Nineteen of the top 24 discussions took place in the Teacher TimeOut sub-forum (where nine of these – as noted previously – were games). The very nature of these discussions (and the Teacher TimeOut sub-forum itself) allows for ease of entering and exiting (as noted above) and are not very personal discussions themselves. This sub-forum serves as an escape from the pressures of the off-line world. The more personal discussions (of personal home issues and even personal issues dealing with profession) will be discussed in more detail below.

Of these 22 discussion threads, two should be noted as personally revealing. The "Crazy Neighbors" and the "I am going crazy!" threads become quite personal as the first deals with issues with the next-door neighbors and obnoxious nightly campfires in the yard, while the other deals with a strained relationship with an insensitive son-in-law. These become quite personal and quite intrusive as the "victims" here are revealing many personal data about their individual struggles.

Equal Access to Participation
The "Ease of Access" component is comprised of seven sub-categories. These are

- Personal Interaction
- Lack of formal criteria
- Unique associations among different types
- Discussions other than on work
- Place of joy
- Geographically convenient
- Participation during non-obligation hours.

The sub-categorizations are discussed and explored in detail below.

Personal interaction

The section explores the general types of discussions that lend toward an environment of personal interaction among forum participants.

The aspect of *personal interaction* is most readily observable in the discussions surrounding the very discussion of personal topics. For example, the conversations centered on cat hair management, the management of a son-in-law who does not respect the family as a whole, the announcement of (and subsequent congratulations for) a new birth, the tongue-in-cheek discussions (with hints of seriousness) in discussing the inevitable membership in Post-it noters anonymous, the sharing of a recipe for shrimp and broccoli, and the solicitation of advice for a trip to Mexico. These are demonstrably personal in nature (without getting "too personal") and offer the opportunity for the posters to interact with one another. These discussions could be considered one-offs (or one-time questions with a potentially limited number of answers, such as gaining advice). Eventually, these discussions dissipate and do not continue.

In addition, notable in this area is the more long-term general question that applies to many. This can cause a flood of responses from participants for some time to follow, which often opens the opportunity to share personal details about off-line lives and to have personal interactions with one another. It should be noted that these discussions contained higher levels of coding as opposed to the first group outlined above.

Specific examples here include the discussions exploring how participants arrived at the particular forums, the light-hearted discussion of fashion trends from the participants' periods of youth (primarily resulting in a discussion of the various '80s trends), what participants are planning on reading during the summer, what various participants recommend for wedding songs, and the discussion of how participants felt about their own pregnancy experiences (which has some very personal revelations and very directly engaging discussions). These discussions all fall into the area of open-ended questions to the whole board where some participate and exchange personal information.

Another construct for this group is the area of job-related discussions. These discussions allow for the participation in many (in a personally interactive way) among many. The most notable here are the discussions on interview practice (exchanging questions potentially found in job interviews for teaching positions), job applications process discussions, and tips for packing up the classrooms. These discussions pose open-ended questions and allow many to participate.

What might prove more useful here is to characterize what discussion types proved not personally interactive. These discussions centered on very focused questions posed (nearly one or two answers possible) and usually professionally-based (i.e., focused on work-related questions or problems). The more serious problems lend toward more serious personal interactions. The less serious problem tends towards less serious personal interactions.

Lack of formal criteria

Two approaches are employed to explore the notion that informal membership is the prime mode of joining this community. The first explores the very nature of the forum and its particular criteria for membership and/or access (discussed in more depth below in this paper) and the second examines the very nature of a select few discussions.

Actual "membership" in the forum discussion area is open to all who are interested. The restrictions come in the form of an agreement made explicitly between the registrant and the board administrators. This agreement transfers to an agreement among all registrants as the actual agreement outlines the expected protocols for interaction and respect among participants. These become the expected norms in this microcosm. No other formalities exist for gaining access to the interaction mechanisms available.

Turning to the actual discussions, this point becomes more illustrated through the responses to the new registrants. As an example, in the discussion "hello i'm new here" the new registrant is immediately embraced by the other posters and directed to areas of the discussion board that are most relevant to her interests, specifically home schooling discussions.

The lack of formality is even more evident in the discussion centering around the backgrounds of the posters and the primary reasons for their convergence on this particular forum. These discussions demonstrated that many of the participants merely "stumbled" upon the discussion board when he or she was looking for materials, ideas or even full lessons. Others were familiar with the non-forum components of the site and merely saw that the forum existed, visited, and then joined. This casual and very informal self-induction into the forum membership indicates an open and easy access by all potential members of the forum.

Discussions other than on work

As discussed in the introductory sections to this chapter, the discussion forums/ sub-forums really fall into one of three categories (as concerning intent): related to professional concerns, related to personal issues, and related to the management of the discussion forum itself. By the very nature of the discussion forum, these different types of discussions should naturally arise.

In analyzing the discussion threads in the collected data, the following generalizations can be made about the types of discussions that occurred in each of the forums and sub-forums (see below).

Table 8 Forum and Sub-Forum Work-to-Personal Comparison

Forum	Sub-Forum	Personal	Work
Announcements	Introductions	3	2
Connecting Classrooms	Classroom Penpals		1
Exams for Teachers	Basic Skills		2
	Multiple Subject Tests		3
	Other Tests		3
	Single Subject Tests		6
Exams for Teachers Total			14
Prayer	Prayer Request Forum	1	
Special Interest Forums	Behavior Management		3
	Montessori		1
	New Teachers		14
	Special Education		4
	Substitute Teaching		4
Special Interest Forums Total			26
Teacher Chat Forums	Elementary Education	1	15
	General Education	1	7
	Kindergarten		5
	Preschool		2
	Secondary Education		4
	Teacher TimeOut	31	2
Teacher Chat Forums Total		33	35
Grand Total		37	78

Note that much of the "work" discussions occurred in the Special Interest Forums, the Exams for Teachers, Connecting Classrooms Forum, and some of Teacher Chat Forums. The more personal discussions occurred in the Teacher Chat Forums, Announcements, and the Prayer Forums. This is not to say that discussions not related to work did not occur in the non-work identified sub-forums. For example, a discussion in the General Education Sub-Forum that merely allowed posters to tackle math puzzles is arguably not work related. These puzzles were not posted for the intent of sharing for instructional use, but rather merely for the fun of the challenge of solving.

Many of the Teacher Time Out Sub-Forum discussions could be characterized as non-work related, and as noted, this area is the most heavily posted-to area of the forum data collected.

Notable discussion threads easily identified as non-work related are:

- Airsoft
- Crazy Neighbors
- May Have Gotten The Hubby To Cave
- Mexico
- Kids say the darndest things....
- News Stories of our youth
- Recipe I made last night - broccoli and shrimp pasta
- Postit Noters Anonymous
- Did you hear about new moms
- How do you control CAT HAIR
- The Monkees
- Question for moms
- wedding songs...
- I am going crazy!
- Fashion Trends...When we were Younger

These discussions cover the topics of parenting, news, reflection on youth, cooking, pregnancies (and future pregnancies), travel, favorite musical groups, pets, and weddings. Conversations involve the contributions of those who have knowledge of that topic and those seeking guidance. Others involve merely the fun exchange in a game-like manner. Additionally, the discussions in the Sub-Sub-Forum of Games is undoubtedly 100% non-work related. The information and interactions shared in that area are definitively escapist in nature.

Place of joy

A review of the presence of conversation expressing joy in the analyzed discussions reveals interesting data. Primarily – especially considering the data at the forum and sub-forum level – the data shows that most of the conversations really did not necessarily express joy (or even the antithesis of joy – anger, sadness, hostility, or frustration). In fact, a majority of the discussion threads were based on conversations that proved indifferent in this context. The presence of Joy was determined through the expressions (deliberate such as the use of emoticons and expressions and through the use of types of language). See below where the "Yes" column provides a count of discussions that definitively exhibited joy; "No" exhibited frustration, hostility, sadness, or anger; and "Indifferent" exhibited neither joy nor anger and hostility.

Table 9 Forums and Sub-Forums Joy to Non-Joy Comparison

Forum	Sub-Forum	No	Yes	Indifferent
Announcements	Introductions			5
Connecting Classrooms	Classroom Penpals			1
Exams for Teachers	Basic Skills			2
	Multiple Subject Tests			2
	Other Tests			3
	Single Subject Tests			6
Exams for Teachers Total				13
Prayer	Prayer Request Forum	1		
Special Interest Forums	Behavior Management	1		2
	Montessori			1
	New Teachers			14
	Special Education			4
	Substitute Teaching	1		3
Special Interest Forums Total		2		24
Teacher Chat Forums	ElementaryEducation	3		13
	General Education			8
	Kindergarten			4
	Preschool			2
	Secondary Education			4
	Teacher TimeOut	2		22
Teacher Chat Forums Total		5	0	53
Grand Total		8	1	96

Reviewing the above data, less than 10% of the discussion threads definitively did not exhibit joy, slightly more than 10% did exhibit joy (definitively) and around 80% exhibited neither (as ascertained through either deliberate use of emoticons for expression or specific overtly joyous language). The areas of Behavior Management, Substitute Teaching, and Elementary Teaching all provided avenues for users to express frustrations and anger over issues whereas the Kindergarten and Subject Tests Sub-Forums provided avenues for expressing joys (or are chosen locations for expressing joy).

The Teacher TimeOut area proved unique in several contexts. Firstly, around one third of the discussions allowed for the expression of joy or

frustration/ anger/ etc. The split of that third then was nearly half and half for each side. This is not surprising as discussed below

The task proves difficult to take a broad view of the forums and sub-forums to characterize discussion threads at the thread level (as done above) as certainly there exists some expression of joy outside of the identified threads. Further, a better understanding of the types of discussions meant as expressions of joy and those expressed as the opposite (and even those that are neither) can be made by understanding the actual context of these discussions.

Joy-filled discussions (or at least discussions built upon the premise of an expression of joy) involve multiple themes – either entrenched in the world of work or in the personal world. Along the lines of work, discussions celebrated the beginning of a new school year ("The new academic starts!!"), announced the receipt of a grant applied for ("Smart Board Grant"), and proclaiming success at passing the Praxis II exam ("Finally passed the Praxis 2"). Other work-related discussions explored books that assisted in pedagogical practice, which resulted in excitement in developing an online book group ("Summer Readings!"); and, many celebrations over actually obtaining employment at a school after a long journey of interviews ("Applying for jobs").

In the celebrating the first world – the world of home – announcements of the births of children ("It's a boy"), excitement expressed over a vacation planning ("Mexico"), and the relaying of one woman's husband agreeing to have children (and subsequent joy) all resulted in expressions of joy and subsequent congratulations. Additionally, joy was expressed through conversations exploring the participants' pasts like in "The Monkees" and "How did you get here" (where the latter actually saw participants expressing joy over finding the forum site itself). However, these discussion threads did not always begin on the premise of an expression of joy (or result in such).

Several discussion threads demonstrated the expression of frustration of the participants – which this site acted as a means for participants to share in this virtual time about very frustrating times in their lives. After being hit with a chair one day in class, one teacher expresses frustration (and confusion over what she should do) when writing,

> Now I don't know what to do. I want to return b/c I feel I've made a commitment to them and the school, but I'm lost on what to do with them. I've cried in front of them. and I'm afraid I've lost face

This discussion sees quite a few of the Regulars coming to comfort and to express support (and to offer advice). Other discussions in this category include the relaying of the events surrounding the insensitive son-in-law living in the basement, the highly confrontational and enabling parent, and the legendary fifth grade class with the horrible behavior problems.

Geographically convenient
The geographical convenience of online interactive tools is certainly inherently apparent and discussed not only in the literature but implied in this

paper already. Regardless, some notes to clarify this can be made in this discussion.

As noted previously, the users of this forum hail from many different locations (see Table 16 for this data). Notably, eight countries, 38 U.S. states, one U.S. territory, and six Canadian provinces and territories are represented. The distribution of users to locations is not evenly done so (as the United States has the most members represented whereas the other countries' see far less so). Regardless, the varying locations and contributors are notable.

The actual discussions lend toward the irrelevancy of place (in fact, only once does the issue of actual geographical place arise in the discussion in terms of off-line relationships – to be discussed more below).

In essence, discussions explored places and place-specific issues without the need to discuss actual geographic limitations or relocation. Advice is offered on traveling to Mexico, a new teacher to begin in Las Vegas seeks other teachers in the area before arriving, California teachers communicate about the various requirements for certification in California for teachers, and questions are explored on reciprocity among states with regard to certification. These issues are irrespective of place per se as all participants never had to consider moving to discuss.

The one instance of actually referring to an offline limitation of place comes in a discussion concerning job fairs and two members actually meeting to go to a job fair together. Otherwise, the actual physical place of the participants never comes into consideration except in the context of the question.

Participation during non-obligation hours

The final component of equal access for participants comes in the form of participants having access during non-obligation or off hours. As participants are essentially living in different time zones and have different schedules of obligation (and even different cultural expectations of what is considered a work day) this particular item proved more difficult to evaluate. The standard of after 5 p.m. EST and before 7 a.m. EST was used simply because the majority of participants lived within the United States and that would put participants "close to the end of school" on both sides of the U.S.A. (three-hour difference). The results are provided below.

Table 10 Forum and Sub-Forums Percentages of Off-Hour Postings

Forum	Sub-Forum	Percentage
Announcements	Introductions	10.49%
Exams for Teachers	Basic Skills	17.42%
	Multiple Subject Tests	12.96%
	Other Tests	33.33%
	Single Subject Tests	32.74%
Exams for Teachers Total		26.47%
Prayer	Prayer Request Forum	18.75%
Special Interest Forums	Behavior Management	28.10%
	Montessori	16.67%
	New Teachers	19.49%
	Special Education	22.75%
	Substitute Teaching	21.49%
Special Interest Forums Total		21.19%
Teacher Chat Forums	Elementary Education	14.73%
	General Education	18.39%
	Kindergarten	24.70%
	Preschool	31.58%
	Secondary Education	20.42%
	Teacher TimeOut	12.13%
Teacher Chat Forums Total		15.75%
Overall Average		18.25%

Note above that a larger percentage of posting occurred in the off hours in the exams sections of the forum. This can be explained as the most frequent poster in this arena was Regular_07 who posted quite late in the evening/ early in the morning. In addition, Kindergarten, Preschool, and Behavior Management are noticeably higher as compared to the others. A question that will be discussed later for future studies (even using this same data perhaps) arises concerning the frequency and timing of posts of certain types of users as directly compared (preschool teachers verses elementary for example).

It should be noted that of the top 19 threads containing heavy off-hours postings (based on 25% of postings and above represented in this category), six involved certifications in some fashion, four involved job applications, four involved lesson planning, three involved behavior management, and one was an introductory type of discussion.

Conversational as Dominant Style

The conversational nature of this group of participants and interactions focused on eight aspects.

- Be careful of feelings
- Avoid general topics
- Say little about self
- Avoid trying to instruct
- Presence of the "bore"
- Laughter present
- Interruptions of conversation is "ruinous"
- Game-like

Be careful of feelings

Of the many discussions analyzed (and the individual posts) nearly no evidence of insensitivity towards others arose. In fact, the sensitivity levels toward others and the particular issues they were facing were evident in many of the posts that involved serious issues. This is notably not true with one of the Regulars who posted – Regular27. While Regular_27 does not necessarily exhibit rude behavior, he (and his gender is known as his chosen screen name reflected a distinctively male name and others referred to him with male-specific pronouns) was rather matter-of-fact in his postings. It is possible that this is because he is male (the only noticeable male among the Regulars) but this cannot and should not be assumed. This also could be because his area is mathematics – but again not a proper analysis as it is only assumptive. This is a great question to look at in light of further study. Regardless, the discussions that the participants interacted in can be analyzed for this phenomenon.

The most notable thread involving carefulness towards others' feeling occurred in the discussion involving a teacher being concerned about being hit by a chair and "losing face" with the students (as discussed previously). This poster begins this discussion by expressing frustration and worry and earnestly sought advice from other participants. It was obvious that her anxiety was getting the best of her. All participants offered advice or comfort – bringing about clarity and grounding to her feelings of anxiety. Comments like

- "Oh (name of poster), I am sorry you had a terrible experience."
- "And please don't let this keep you from trying to make a difference in the lives of kids. They need it. But not at the expense of bringing harm to yourself."
- "I am sorry that happened to you, but you don't need to spend your summer like that."
- "Good luck. I know it's tough."

All of these comments preceded or followed a set of advice or observations by the posters. All knew of her anxiety and likely empathized with her as they had been through similar situations.

On the other side, Regular_27 unapologetically remarks to a poster when asked advice about first-day activities

If your school did not teach you what to do on the first day I think they did you a disservice. If the rest of your colleagues are in the same boat, I don't think you want to do something "normal."

He does offer advice following this comment. Another example from Regular_27 involves a poster who is looking to change jobs to teaching and is trying to determine what summer jobs other teachers have gotten in hopes of determining what is possible for him/her. Regular_27 responds with the following,

I think it all comes down to what marketable skills you have. Some folks tutor. Some folks work in construction. Some work as office temps. Some folks work in stores. Obviously, if your marketable skills or availability are limited, so will be your opportunities.

Tone becomes an issue in written communication as it is not so easily discernable (as discussed extensively in the literature review, this is a notion of language as developed in online venues). Regular_27 may think he is being highly sympathetic but in comparison to his fellow posters, the tone does not convey as such.

The discussions where obvious concern for not hurting others' feelings is noticeable include mostly work-related discussions (applying for jobs, additional jobs, commuting issues, issues with class management and student motivation, and questions of classroom procedures). A few non-work discussions also develop this characteristic, like discussions on neighbors who have nightly campfires (and the subsequent frustration of the poster) and toys with which husbands play.

Avoid general topics
By the very nature of the discussion forum, the topics themselves are rarely general in nature. Many of the specific discussions cover
- Specific questions of certification process and examination preparation assistance (including targeted questions on California-specific procedures in this area)
- Requests for advice from veteran teachers in how to approach classroom procedures, issues of pedagogy, and even classroom organization
- Pleas for advice in personal areas – like how to handle family members, neighbors and others who cause some anxiety
- Exchanges of reading material supportive of the teaching practice
- Family members who are sick
- Advice for those seeking and applying for teaching positions (is specific areas and in general)
- Lively discussions on favorite musical groups, television programs and movies

- And even discussions reflecting on the past and reminiscing about what it was like in youth and childhood

There is no doubt that these topics are identified often in the very first posts of these threads. This is not to say that the topic does not change and move onto other topics – so the actual discussions themselves are not always neatly packaged and self-contained. "Hijacked" discussions at times spawned other discussions (as in the case of a discussion of fashion trends spawning a discussion of a musical group, the Monkees). This is discussed more in the Interruptions section below.

Again, the very nature of discussion forums is to pose specific questions, challenges or statements that then elicit discussion. More general discussions (like remember back to your youth) are rarer and can cause more specific discussions in new threads.

Say little about self

Revelations about off-line life (or the real poster) are rarer in online forums as anonymity helps to protect the posters from the unknowns. This being said, there still exists evidence that posters do reveal some details about who they are, where they live (generally), what they do and information about their families and day-to-day off-line lives.

Discussions about pregnancies (and even how long participants were in labor, how their bodies changed during pregnancy, and even how their husbands handled their pregnancies) arose in a discussion entitled "question for moms." Other personal discussions (and subsequently revealing personal details) revolved around discussions of neighbors (where revelations about the home positioning, who lives in the house with the participant and how they reacted to a minor annoyance in the neighborhood), a son-in-law (where family members' ages and genders, background of the family and personal details about the marriage of a daughter and a son-in-law were chronicled in great detail) and personal interests and histories (as in "how did you get here" and "Fashion Trends" – already discussed elsewhere) all provide great details about the personal lives of participants.

Additionally, as already noted, participants can reveal some details about themselves (virtual signs, if you will) by filling in some of the online forms in the profile area of the forum itself. These have been discussed previously, but do include location, age, birth date, profession or personal interests, and some biographical details.

Other discussions centered on professional and job-seeking questions revealed details about participants' classes, certifications obtained, universities attended, states lived in, and even personal beliefs about teaching (as especially revealed in "Let's start some interview practice" where the very nature of the discussion is all about personal beliefs).

These participants spoke freely about their personal backgrounds, their families and their jobs, but refrained from using real names (except on occasion, and revelations never included surnames), specific hometowns and family

member names. This could all be characterized as identifying information. In fact, Regular_07 reminded some users to never post email addresses and home phones online (in a discussion about tutors for a teacher exam) by instructing

> People, please do NOT post personal phone numbers or email addresses on these forums, unless you want to be besieged by sales calls, spam, or worse.

This is the largely unspoken (as it usually does not need to be said) rule of online forum participation. Moreover, the rule is primarily one for self-preservation.

Avoid trying to instruct (about use of the site)

One of the few evidences of instruction in the analyzed discussions presented itself in the example used above (not posting email addresses, phone numbers, etc in online forums). Other brief examples primarily focused on providing directions to new participants/registrants ("Hello im new here"), and assistance with classroom procedures as requested by the initial poster. The etiquette is to avoid instructing unless requested to do so. None of the forum discussions produced non-requested "instructions" from posters.

Presence of the "bore"

Oldenburg (1999, p. 29) refers to the bore as one who speaks too loudly without regard for others – a conversation hog. He then quotes (as quoted above) John Timbs as saying, "Above all, a club should be large. Every club must have its bores; but in a large club you can get out of their way" (p. 29). The difficulty here – admittedly – is that actually identifying a bore by the standards of conversation and community as outlined by Oldenburg becomes difficult as volume cannot be so easily assessed in the written form (unless the poster deliberately uses all caps – a common method of depicting shouting in online worlds).

The closest to a "bore" in this community is Regular_27 – although he is certainly not one as he is embraced, respected, and interacted with among the members of the forum. His only association as the bore comes in the form of insensitivity to others' feelings. This certainly does not constitute him as a conversation hog but it does go to his – at the very least – perceived style in posting.

Laughter present

In online communities, the determination of "laughter present" can be challenging for the same reason as noted for the presence of a "bore." Simply put, a poster has to deliberately indicate as such. In the analyzed documents, existence of laughter was present in several of the threads, although many did not have this component. The forums and sub-forums dealing with professional issues were more likely to not contain evidence of laughter, joviality and such, while the Chat forums and sub-forums did.

Notably, stories about the "crazy neighbors," favorite bands, cat hair management, pregnancy experiences, the evolution of the support group Postit Noters Anonymous, fashion trends of years past, and the journey to arrive at the forum all contained deliberate and overt evidence of laughter by participants.

Even though the laughter usually needs to be expressed deliberately, (the common Internet-based symbol "LOL" means "laugh out loud" or the simpler "haha") some leeway can be given to interpreting statements that imply joking (a virtual smile).

Examples of this include the following,

- In welcoming a new poster, "Welcome! As (name) has hinted, pretty soon you may be as... um, /batty/ as the rest of us!"
- To the question, "There are actually some wonderful things about the CSET (California Subject Examinations for Teachers). Can you think of any?" the sarcastic responses included "(Insert here chuckle) If this thread doesn't get some fairly rude responses, I will be surprised" and "And, of course, it gives teachers and aspiring teachers something to whine about, not that some would not find something else to whine about if CSET did not exist."
- In discussing a game called "airsoft," Regular_12 refers to it as "Definately (sic) a testoterone (sic) activity!"
- Regular_21 during the discussion of fashion trends virtually exclaims "High high high bangs!!! EEK! I had "waterfall" bangs and I used lots and lots of hairspray to get it to stay like that. So icky to think of it now!" to which Regular_29 replies "OMG...It took forever!!! I remember going to prom my freshman year & my friends a jr. & sr. were doing my hair...I think we were gagging from the hairspray...The sr. did my bangs & of course they looked just like hers!!!"

This last comment (about hairspray usage) is actually embedded in very long uproarious conversation about such practices (primarily during the decade of the 1980s). The virtual discussion here is nearly the most real of all of the discussions analyzed as the same group of women (mostly) fire back and forth funny stories and practices from their youth – marveling at their own choices. Self-deprecation in the name of good fun is the primary motivation here. This is best exemplified by Regular_21's comment "I had vests too!!! What a dork am I hey?"

Of course, as alluded to many times previously throughout this paper, this discussion board is not all laughter and games. Several heart-felt and anxiety-inducing issues have been shared among the participants and hardly laughter would be an appropriate response or component to those discussions. In addition – little in the way of laughter is present in the very focused professional discussions (job searches and applications, new teacher help, certification advice and direction and procedural discussions).

Laughter was most easily found in the following discussion threads:

- virtues of the cset

- Crazy Neighbors
- Let's start some interview practice
- The Monkees
- wedding songs...
- How do you control CAT HAIR
- Kids say the darndest things....
- Question for moms
- Math challenges II - Want to give it a try
- Postit Noters Anonymous
- Did you hear about new moms
- Fashion Trends...When we were Younger
- How did you get here

Interruptions of conversation are "ruinous"

In this component, as with others discussed, it proves difficult to determine when an interruption has actually "ruined" a discussion. The nature of online discussions provides opportunity for multiple discussions to occur in the same space without interruption per se. This is mostly clearly found in the discussion threads "Fashion Trends...When we were Younger" and "how did you get here."

Regular_04 poses the question — in a thread about how the posters arrived at the forum — "Are we hijacking this thread" to which Regular_08 responds, "Oh yes.......this thread has been officially hijacked..........it will get back on track down the line, I'm sure of it!! LOL" and then she immediately launches back into the hijacked discussion "AQUA NET!!!!!!!! My mom used that. Too funny. My dad always sneezed uncontrollably when we were in church..." Regular_29 then announces, "We've taken over a thread again!!! I started a new one to chat about or(sic) fashion do's & don'ts."

This thread begins with the question posed: Fashion Trends from the youth of the posters. It meanders to a discussion of musicians. After several posts of initially exploring the Monkees, then Andy Gibb, Linda Ronstadt and some new artist, Regular_04 tries to steer participants back onto the initial discussion with, "BACK TO FASHION How about those rubbery bracelets (like Maddonna had) and the lace glove:D."

A non-regular poster expresses the sentiment best in an initial posting on a new thread with "I am hoping that it is alright to do it this way.....my sincere apologies, (Regular_25), if I am doing this wrong, but I didn't want to hijack the other thread. :) :sorry:" The posters exhibit concern over "hijacking a thread" but in all reality they really do it all the time. The etiquette (the unspoken rule) is to stay on topic, but the fun of the forum is to not stay on topic. The result is not a ruinous experience for the conversation but rather simultaneous fully existing conversation that at times spawn new completely separate discussions altogether.

Game-like

The discussion of the game-like features of these discussions takes place in two parts – the identified game area that is separately created for posters

(containing 13 threaded discussions) and some non-game discussions that become quite game-like.

The Games Sub-Sub-Forum is located in Teacher Chat Forums > Teacher TimeOut. This area is obviously intended for long-term engagement on simple games that can be played online (often word games). Names and descriptions of these games can be found in the appendices.

The game discussions really fall into four main categories: a listing game, a word play game, a personal response game, or a trivia game.

These games have been divided below:

- Listing Games
- Five of a kind
- Word Play Games
- Place name
- Random letter
- Connect the song
- Personal Response Games
- Prediction
- This or that
- Name game
- Word association
- What I learned today
- Trivia Games
- Movie quote
- Book title
- Bacon anyone
- Movie trivia

Therefore, these games often require either a bit of skill, a bit of knowledge, or for users to reveal personal data about themselves. The participation amounts in these games are quite high. Out of the 4,211 total posts analyzed, 2,587 are in this area of the forums (see below). These discussion threads are begun and carry on for more than 12 months in some cases. The attraction here is that users can easily come and go as they please and there really is no need to figure out what has happened since the last visit.

Table 11 Games Sub-Sub-Forum Overview

Discussion Title	Posts	Users
Bacon anyone	292	31
Connect the song	196	16
Five of a Kind Game	249	36
Movie trivia!	9	6
Name Game	29	22
Place Name Game	599	43
prediction game	440	36
The Book Title Game	125	27
The Movie Quote Game	220	26
The Random Letter Game!	129	18
This or That Game	144	26
What I Learned Today	21	11
word association game	134	20
Games Total	2587	

In fact, not only is there a generally high participation rate here, but there is also a high rate among the Regulars,

Only four of the Regulars did not participate in one of these 13 discussions. Three of the games were initiated by Regular_18 (and even five were initiated by a single non-regular user). This area is a popular area for long-term posting participation.

Several discussions became game-like in their style of interaction – or they became fun and exchange oriented. These discussions included the Monkees discussion, Fashion Trends exchanges, News Stories from the youth, the interview practice discussion, and the math challenges discussion that became a puzzle-solving exercise.

Playfulness

The playfulness of this forum arrives nearly exclusively in the set-aside sub-forum TeacherChat Forum > Teacher TimeOut sub-forum. This forum area is for the exchange of fun/non-work related/non-home related conversations. Many of the analyzed documents in this context actually resided in the Sub-Sub-Forum of Games (see list below). These number 13 and were discussed in more detail in the Conversation section immediately above. Game descriptions are found in more detail in the appendix section.

- Bacon anyone
- Connect the song
- Five of a Kind Game
- Movie trivia!
- Name Game
- Place Name Game
- prediction game

- The Book Title Game
- The Movie Quote Game
- The Random Letter Game!
- This or That Game
- What I Learned Today
- word association game

The other more playful conversations in this context included the following threads (as discussed extensively in previous contexts):

- Fashion Trends...When we were Younger
- News Stories of our youth
- Postit Noters Anonymous
- The Monkees

These primarily constituted a joking nature, an exploration of humorous ideas, or funny anecdotes from earlier, maybe more foolish, days. These conversations were escapist in feel and obviously fit the mold of playful exchanges.

These 17 discussions (constituting slightly more than 10 percent of the total) can be placed in sharp contrast to many of the very non-playful discussions dealing with certification exams, new teacher advice, direction on applications for teacher jobs, procedures and methods of teaching, and even personal traumas requiring advice. The interesting note here is that the "fun" threads are deliberately segregated (or possibly created to actually encourage fun conversations).

Home Away from Home

To understand this online space as a potential home away from home, the contexts of possessiveness, regeneration of participants, and the at-ease demeanors of participants must be explored.

The greeting from a poster who has already previously entered the virtual space to a new poster is "welcome." This indicates that this space is place that the poster resides in. This has been explored in some detail in the "membership attachment to place" section of this paper. Suffice it to say, these users use this virtual space as a congregation space for personal and professional issues and merely a location for fun.

The users proceed with discussions on all sorts of topics that are not necessarily common among those sharing casual relationships. These users discuss details of pregnancies (body changes, feelings, and husband's feelings), issues with family members, frustrations with home life and work life. Conversations also turn to professional discussions that generally are not even discussed with peers at the place of work, like frustrations with principals, parents, and students. These discussions are casual in mentioning details.

Potentially one of the most important factors in determining this at-ease nature is the fact that all participants remain in varying levels of anonymity. It

becomes quite easy to discuss personal issues when no readers really know who you are. That being said, some of these users are known by other posters as they have created an identity online that is recognizable.

In the context of "regeneration" (or a place to regenerate), a long-term substitute teacher, Regular_26, discusses the frustration she feels with her fifth grade students who did not do well on an administered science test even after review (and even after an opportunity for a retake).

A discussion ensues between Regular_07, Regular_19, Regular_26, Regular_08, Regular_25, Regular_12, and six non-heavy users that is primarily focused on the lack of initiative among children to learn. Others candidly provide details to support Regular_26's experience with anecdotal evidence of the same. Regular_26 returns no less than two more times to offer more evidence/ experience of the same, beginning one with "Ok...I think I'm going to scream....."

This discussion becomes almost a therapy session, as a non-heavy user demonstrates by stating,

> I have spoken with other teachers about this, and they are experiencing the same things. I really don't know what to do, and as a teacher, I blame it on myself. My husband tells me that if a student doesn't want to learn, it's not my fault. I tell him that if that happens, I am not doing my job...I need to help the student want to learn, to find a way to make it fun for him/her. He doesn't get it, he's an engineer. I take it home with me and worry about it. It's frustrating.

Regular_07, after a speech on the need to be diligent ourselves as teachers as well as expect the students to do the same (she has been a heavy participant in the realm of certification on the boards) ends with this encouragement, "I wish I had better answers for you, ((user's name)). If it's any consolation, I think the day any of us doesn't care about this is the day to quit teaching. Hugs to you."

Another non-heavy user observes that "Mostly I don't want to believe they don't care."

The conversation that occurs here results in suggestions and a body of knowledge (much in the way that Etienne Wenger's Community of Practice might function) that is re-ified and ideas are shared.

A slightly different — but somewhat related — discussion focuses on a frustration with a personal event as opposed to a professional event. This discussion, entitled "I am going crazy," begins with the statement, " I just need to vent." And that is what she does. This user is a non-heavy user who has only participated in three discussions, posted 20 times in the analyzed document set and only had posted a total of 373 times in her totality on the forum.

She relays the frustration she has had with her son-in-law and having him disrupt her home-life (and those of the immediate family members living in her household) when he moved in for several months.

Much in the way of very personal information is revealed about her (about her concerns for her daughter's and her relationship, initially, and for her daughter's marriage, later). This discussion was an on-and-off discussion that took place during a period of one and a half months. In that time, several

regulars offered emotional support to this poster and even offered advice on how to best manage this insensitive son-in-law (setting expectations clearly, "putting her foot down," and which battles to fight) and eventually how to get rid of him. The conversation moves from being concerned for her daughter and how to maintain order to how to get her daughter out of this seemingly doomed-to-failure marriage. The posting users at large offer support for her decisions.

The most important result of these conversations is empathy and support. These teachers come online to express frustrations and know that they are not alone in these frustrations. They have a place to come to gather ideas, comfort and strength. These posters are at-ease in posting personal issues and use this space as a means of regenerating (or just gathering advice) during difficult times.

One teacher observed, "I feel like I've been here FOREVER!!! And I love that even when I'm away for a while, I come back and it feels like home. ;)"

Membership Attachment to Place
A great deal of the most obvious attachments to place on the board comes in the form of one thread "How did you get here?" This thread initially asks users to elaborate on the statement "how we found this site." This is not only interesting in the context of this portion of the question being asked (is there evidence of attachment to place in a virtual environment geared toward interaction among professional educators), but also in the context of providing yet another valuable piece of data on the frequenting users.

The initiator of this particular thread is Regular_08. She asks and provides the first response. Other responses are listed below (with the Regular's code making the comment):

- Regular_02 notes that due to boredom, she stumbled across the forum while searching for classroom materials. She ponders, "I am not really sure that was a good thing because now I feel like I have to check in daily to see if I missed anything...am I addicted??? No, not me....well maybe a little tiny bit!"
- Regular_06 admits that he/ she visited the non-forum portion of the site and suddenly found the forum.
- Regular_07 jokes that the stork arrived with her ("of course!")
- Regular_09 (one of the resident math experts and a resident of Portugal) found the site while searching for math material. She also had experienced some very rough times and felt encouraged by those online.
- Regular_10 discusses how she found the forum while searching for ideas to make her second year of teaching better than her first. She further elaborates on how she had suffered some tragedy at that time (loss of husband and daughter had run away) and that the forum had helped her feel "connected" - even comparing to her off-line life with her colleagues, she felt more connected to those online.

- Regular_12 was looking for information and materials on the Middle Ages.
- Regular_13 relays that she first arrived looking for ideas for the first days of school. She states, "(a)mazing how people you don't really know can help you with problems they don't know you have!"
- Regular_15 notes that she arrived when she was interviewing for positions.
- Regular_16 can't initially recall the reason for her arrival but recalls it was at the beginning of her student teaching experience.
- Regular_19 purely wanted to find others who loved teaching children. "I really like the idea that we can talk about anything and everything!!!"
- Regular_21 found the site while looking for lesson plan ideas for a zoo theme. After stumbling across the "discuss" link, she has been an "addict" ever since.
- Regular_23 found the site when looking for "work for (her) 8th grade son to do."
- Regular_25 noted that she found the website name on the bottom of a worksheet she had been given. "I enjoy this place so much! Like Daisy (I know that isn't your first name, but I don't remember where I saw it!) I enjoy the funny stuff, but also the dedicated, professional people; unfortunately my grade level colleague isn't too interested in learning or trying anything new. Thankfully I have found all of you, who are!!"
- Regular_26 found the site while searching for a teacher chat forum
- Regular_28 found the site when looking for suggestions for data collection. "I found the discussion group right away and have been addicted every since."
- The site owner (not identified in the regular group as she did not post to that extent in the analyzed discussions) noted that the forum began in 1999, two years after the site went up.

Other non-heavy users note that they arrived at the site (the forum specifically) looking for lesson plans, ideas, printable worksheets, and unit ideas. One even notes that she was referred by another. Another said she arrived after planning her wedding — figuring other boards must exist if she found those helping for her wedding. "I'm addicted to this site, though, and on days when I can't get hold of a computer with internet, I'm totally lost...I don't know how I managed before I met all of you!!" Just to add...I joined right before I quit my horror job...and it was all of you who gave me the courage!!" "My friends go nuts when I quote from here..." Also a home school parent found the site while searching for materials and jokes that she wants to be identified with teachers as they "rule the stickers and the art supplies."

All of these users "arrived" at the site and now refer to it as place in which they come (return to). The issue here that must be recognized is that these users – the ones who would post to this thread – are regulars or reasonably so,

at least frequent posters. There is a large group of people who did not post here and cannot be represented in this accounting. Regardless, there is evidence that a group of posters – the frequent and heavy ones – see the forum as a place they come to and that they are attached to now that they have arrived. The discussion on how the users arrived takes an interesting turn.

Regular_10 notes, "We have a lot of very expressive people here. It's nice because you really feel like you can get to know everyone. Much better than reality TV!" This causes a great discussion about this site possibly being a reality TV show – and who would get voted off. This is another means of expressing solidarity and appreciation for other board members. Interestingly, Regular_08, Reular_09, Regular_07, Regular_04, Regular_10, Regular_15, Regular_19, and Regular_13 all join in on the jokes about who would be voted off. Criteria such as those who wear plaid blazers become the running joke among these regular users. The conversation turns to the addiction aspect of the site.

The posters begin joking about excuses to be online (Regular_08: like a husband "says I spend way to (sic) much time on here! I tell him it is all part of the job.:rolleyes:" And Regular_02: "You mean there are other areas other than this board?!?!?!?!?!?")

These users use this virtual space as a gathering place for friends who only know each other through avatars, monikers, and interactions).

Social Status a Concern?

One's social status in this online educator forum can be overtly identified in several different fashions (or perspectives). Specifically, an online persona's statuses as well as an offline persona's statuses are identified here. Additionally, a more subtle recognition of regulars and their own statuses within specific subjects and contexts are identifiable. Each of these will be explored below.

<u>Online persona status</u>

Users of the forum discussion area are organized into member titles based on the count of postings associated with the registered identity. For example, Regular_30 has 107 posts, therefore is identified automatically as a "Member" to all viewing her posts and profile. The specific rules for the determination of this status (and others) are listed below (as gleaned on Aug. 2, 2006) based on a total registered user count of 14,334.

Table 12 Member Title Counts

Member Title	# of Users	% of Total
A to Z Teacher Stuff Owner	1	0.01%
Forum Administrator	1	0.01%
The Links Lady	1	0.01%
Moderator	1	0.01%
Member	712	4.97%
New Member	1,775	12.38%
Hello, I'm new!	11,843	82.62%

Other Member Titles were conceived (like *Veteran Member* for posts of 200 or more; *TeacherChat Addict* for posts of 500; and *TeacherChat Guru* for posts of 1,000) but these apparently experienced technical difficulties and never came to fruition.

Twenty-nine of the identified regular users have a status of "Member." Regular_10 has a status of "Moderator." "Forum Administrator," "The Links Lady," and "AtoZ Teacher Stuff Owner" all are not represented in the group of 30 regulars.

A second identifier for the online persona relevant in this discussion comes in the form of the user's choice of moniker. These monikers often say more about a user than what is found in the editable profile (with a biography section and an identified profession). For example, a home-schooling mother may identify herself through her moniker as hs_mom while a music teacher may identify himself as ITchMusic. Others actually put more of an emphasis on interests (as in poohteacher), or location (as in VirginiaTeacher), or something that just makes the user unique (as in PCLoadLetter). Finally, some users actually identified themselves using their actual off-line names in some capacity (as RandyD or Mr.D). These identifiers are created by the users themselves.

As this research aims to maintain anonymity for the discussions analyzed, the actual names will not be discussed her except in generalities (as in above and below). The following small table shows the categories of chosen names among the 30 regular users analyzed.

Table 13 Moniker Types

Identified Types	Count
Moniker appears to be related to an offline given name in some capacity	15
Moniker appears to be an expression of uniqueness	3
Moniker appears to be an expression of vocation	7
Moniker is related to location	1
Not clearly decipherable (i.e. acronyms or possibly nicknames)	4

Another representation of the user's status online – directly related often to the user's offline persona – is the choice of an avatar to place under the user's chosen moniker. The avatar choices (that are standard) are listed in the appendices. This list is representative of what is actually written in the small picture that is selectable by the site user.

A cursory glance at this list of avatars shows that these are nearly 100% representative of the types of vocational affiliations (1st Grade Teacher, Montessori Teacher, etc) with which these users identify. Interesting to note, this initial list does not offer any non-teachers any choices (to include educational researchers). Parents and home-school teachers do not have any initial choices. Once a user has been a member for at least 30 days and has at least

50 posts, his/ her registration will be automatically upgraded to allow for the upload of a custom avatar (or any photo that he/ she wishes).

Offline Persona Status

Offline Persona Statuses can be found in the profiles of the users themselves. This has been briefly discussed in the discussion of "Regulars" above. Users maintain their professional and personal identities (those to be seen by the general registered user population of this forum) through their "Control Panel." Users communicate professional and personal interests, location, and professional affiliation (first grade teacher or high school English, e.g.).

As discussed previously, the users of this forum are more likely associated with the Elementary level than other chosen levels or related professions or interests.

All of these descriptors and identifiers go to the demonstration of who the posters are in relation to other posters. The amount of postings, the title, the offline professional (or non-professional) identifier and even other details provided in posts paint a picture of who the poster is in relation to other posters on the board.

More personal exchanges

Finally, a more general category of personal exchanges demonstrates the other types of questions and general exchanges that are posed in the virtual discussion environment. These range from testing each other's math abilities to cat hair to understanding special education students.

- Several regulars (Regular_10, Regular_07) participate in a discussion thread devoted to solving math puzzles (a game) started and maintained by Regular_09.
- Regular_04 seeks help in how to control an inordinate amount of cat hair in her house. This discussion is interesting on two points – that there is a called-for expert on cats already known (Regular_19) and that the users exchange in actual first names at times. (Regular_10, Regular_08, and Regular_19 – with Regular_19 truly emerging as the expert).
- Related, a new teacher seeks advice on what he/ she can expect from the school with regard to materials/ curriculum.
- In the interview practice discussion, a specific issue arises concerning how special education students are graded. Regular_15 acts as the expert here.
- A new teacher education student needs to observe moderately and severely disabled students in a classroom and seeks advice on how to get in touch with a program. Regular_07 offers advice.

- A poster seeks to know whether the cost she has determined for becoming a substitute in California is typical and correct. (Regular_27, Regular_07 among a few others offer advice and figure out the correct cost.)

The interesting aspect of this type (as with the practice types of questions) is that the posters sometimes either cannot find the answer offline (i.e., colleagues have not been helpful) or the issue is too personal to bring up with offline colleagues. This virtual space acts as a means for asking difficult questions or making general exchanges with others of similar interest or specific expertise.

Key Findings

These findings will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter – Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings – but a short summary shall be provided here.

The basic construction of online discussion forums for professional educators contain two primary targets of content – the discussions centered on issues of a professional nature and those discussions centered on a personal/ social nature. While the discussions themselves are organized as such, the people participating in these and moving from one to the other behave and interact in different ways according to the discussion content.

In those discussions centered on content of a professional nature – those that focus on certification issues and questions, on job applications and hiring questions and advice, on level-specific teaching methods and approaches, and on general pedagogical and professional issues – the participants contributed in very professional ways. The process here involved the query/ problem stated, the contributions of those in positions of authority on the subject (or even those that empathized) and a synthesis (or confluence of ideas) to form a best approach for the participant/initial poster. Many of these discussions proved shorter in nature, very focused, and many of those who were frequent posters acted as the subject matter experts.

In contrast, those discussions focused on more social interactions – those that focused on game-like discussions, on personal issues and celebrations, on funny stories, on past reflections, and on home life and its trials and fun – proved more interactive (as to the types of interactions), more long-lasting, containing higher levels of participation, and the presence of those that are more participatory in the forums as a whole.

These two types of interactions constitute the gamut of types of discussions on these boards. The question remains: Do these types of discussions (the process, the content, and the outcomes) effectively create environments of community for those who participate? This will be explored in the context of the initial research question as outlined in Chapter 1, the literature as discussed in Chapter 2, and the particular process employed for this study as shaped in Chapter 3.

Chapter 5 Discussion of Findings

Introduction
Returning to the initial research question:

The research, undertaken as part of this project, works to answer the question of whether online communities created and maintained among professional educators constitute a community, as we understand them in the context of off-line communities.

The literature review summarized what is already known about communities in general, online communities specifically, professional communities as related to social understandings, exchanges of social capital, and what Oldenburg has termed the "Third Place." This review allowed the emergence of a framework in which to evaluate this online discussion forum and its efficacy as an informal community of professional educators. This chapter will review the sub-questions of the research – these 13 characteristics – in terms of analytical findings and synthetical conclusions. The initial guiding questions (found in the conclusions of Chapter 2) will be re-asked as the guiding questions for this chapter. Finally, an overall statement in answer to the research question will be provided.

Guiding Questions Re-Asked
In order to gauge the community existence in this project, the following guiding questions of community (gleaned from the works of Oldenburg, Coleman, and Tönnies) provided a framework of reference to gather data and guide conclusions. These will now be revisited to provide a mechanism for conclusions, providing a needed link to the literature.

Are there "regulars" in this environment?
The question of "regulars" really relies on the notion that there exist those who frequent and feel attachment and affection for this "place" — enough to participate in the discussion, enough to be present more than a few times, enough to move from a new member to a prodigal member to a fully engaged member (Oldenburg, 1997).
As noted in the findings, a small portion of the posting community was responsible for a large portion of the actual posts analyzed. This aspect is a reinforcement of Selwyn's findings (2000). The selected group (a group of 30) became the identified "regulars." These regulars (as coded by the schema "Regular_(number)") acted as experts, asked questions of one another, enjoyed each other's company during reflections, during hard times and stressful situations, and through silly and nearly meaningless conversations. These regulars embraced new and relatively unknown members graciously (no identified rude behavior – only slightly insensitive behavior by one of the regulars).

While this might seem to be an obvious conclusion, the questions surrounding this could multiply. Before we assume many conclusions, we must be skeptical and honest about this particular study. The very restrictive nature of this study – in initial and natural structure and the specific employment of methodological approaches in research design and execution, limits our generalization of findings. This study has identified that there is clearly a separation between regular and non-regular, but it cannot be so easily relied upon quantifiably as reported. Keeping this limitation in mind, we can draw some tentative conclusions – to be explored in other studies employing other approaches.

Posting rates overall proved high in this group of regulars – both in the posts in the analyzed documents and in the overall posting rates in each of the regulars' board histories. Additionally, two of the essential components of becoming a regular are to establish trust and to act decent. These 30 live up to this set of standards (Oldenburg, 1997).

The challenge in this question is that 30 users became regulars in this virtual space. Two hundred eighty one did not. The specific numbers can be held in suspect but the actual comparison should be accepted. The types of discussions in which these two groups participated are illustrative of the needs being met for each. The regulars participated heavily in light discussions while the non-regulars did not and chose rather to participate in those discussions that proved serious and focused often on professional questions and issues. This is further elaborated upon in other questions below.

Further reflections should be made, referring back to Soukup's criticisms, of whether the actual nature of these interactions (among Regulars) can be considered along line with off-line interactions. Would the nature of the actual discussion forum actually impact the results of these interactions? In addition, would these take place in MOOs, MUDs, MMPORGs, etc as noted by Soukup? What role does the nature of this forum (asynchronous, textual posting) play in the development of these interactions between Regulars?   In short, would these Regulars still be the same type of "Regular" we see here and how would the environment impact that? This impact could only be gauged by revisiting this study in other technological settings (in Second Life for example).

Another note to make here is the further unknown group that participates in this forum to some extent: that of the lurker. This individual explores content – presumably personal and professional – potentially to answer not only questions (like in the case of licensure questions, issues on behavior management or on the organization of instruction) but also to merely enjoy the conversations (in a potentially a voyeuristic way) of the participants. Can this group – the great unknown – be considered part of the "community?" Is their undefined benefit making them any less as compared to their Regular comrades? Do they feel that they are part? Moreover, potentially, could we even say that some Regulars actually could function in this role

Is the virtual space a location for participant escapism?

As this indicator has more to do with what this is not (having little to do with the issues of home or the issues of work), the question really comes to whether home and work played into the discussions shared by the participants (Oldenburg, 1997).

As discussed in Chapter 4, the actual overall structure of the forums themselves tended towards discussions of work, (four of the six main forum titles actually include the word teacher in the title). After all, a discussion forum geared toward the gathering of teachers for online discussion must at some point include the discussions of the practice of teaching. This proved absolutely true.

The research process revealed that much of the discussion actually related directly to work (78 of 115). As noted above, 26 discussions of the remaining discussions did not have to do with work or home. These discussions comprised mainly games (one half of the total), news items, music, personal histories, recipes, activities of husbands, books, and fashion trends. These participants engaged in lively discussions that contributed nothing toward the betterment of their profession (as someone like Wenger would see the point of an online community with professional educators naturally engaged to potentially do), their own professional advancement or even to the betterment of their own role in the home. These discussions merely served as a means of escaping the realities of the first two places (home and work) for a moment's solitude in interesting or silly discussions.

The regulars participated heavily in these games, and this certainly would follow our own understandings of communities (or anecdotally speaking, our own personal understandings of how people develop relationships). We often develop surface-level purpose-driven relationships upon first meeting (the online world and its level of anonymity makes this practice even easier) but only begin sharing when we begin to know one another in more intimate ways. The games here act as a bit of an anomaly as the participation in games does not necessitate a pre-established intimacy. Certainly going to a large party and beginning a silly game (like *similes* in The Christmas Carol, e.g.) does not require close interactions and relationships. Regardless, this proves an interesting area to explore in more depth . . .the natural inclination for online participants to seek escape after beginning their relationships in work contexts.

Of course, the nature of the escape remains a bit difficult to quantify. The participants see this virtual environment as a means to, at times, discuss their off-line lives, and at times, to avoid it altogether. Nevertheless, can't we also escape our current lives without getting online?

Does the locale provide an area of neutral ground for all participants?

The inherent nature of the technology associated with online communication allows users to remain on neutral ground. More specifically, Oldenburg (1997) notes that neutral ground constitutes temporal and non-personal relationships.

These users are participating in many different discussions in a variety of forums and sub-forums. Only a few of the regulars proved isolated to one area (mainly the heavily posted-to games section). Users moved easily in and out from one discussion to another by merely using the technological devices granted them as part of the forum. The results demonstrate that much of the discussions remained neutral with regard to being personal. A bulk of the discussions began with questions centering on a plea for help (in certification or teacher applications) while others on non-professional subjects shared casually about news or musical interests. The most personally revealing discussion involved the backgrounds of the posters in relation to the board – not their own histories. This almost feels like the history of the offline user and the history of the online user really are quite separate identities. And are we surprised by that? This warrants further study (some already done by Robin Hammon and others). This environment allows posters to remain anonymous, move out of discussions as it pleases them, and move into others as interest guides them. These discussions are very temporal and non-personal out of emergence of the discussions and technological mechanisms. This structure finds very little parallel in the off-line world. But what of other online world environments? Suppose this took place in more of a virtual world (avatars and three dimensional worlds)? Would there be an inclination towards only social interactions in lieu of some professional interactions?

However, neutrality is still tempered against the reality that not all can access fully even this forum without going through some sort of access steps/ process. Moreover, as noted in the findings, the users traverse through statuses as reported with their online identities. Does this identification impact the behavior, the interactions of the users? This also applies to the next section, access to participation.

Do all members have equal access to participation?
The research followed the evidence on the following elements in determining the level of access toward participation for users.

- Personal interaction
- Lack of formal criteria
- Unique associations among different types
- Discussions other than on work
- Place of joy
- Geographically convenient
- Participation during non-obligation hours

As these discussions prove technically open to all who wish to participate of all different backgrounds, two of the above are addressed. The actual interactions themselves support this lack of formalities and the unique associations (note the known break-down of age distribution, professional affiliations, interests and home states/ countries). Regulars and non-regulars alike enjoy great diversity, as the discussion is open to all.

Evidence of non-work discussions (as noted in the above question on participant escapism) and joyous discussions arises from the analysis. Many of

the light-hearted discussions in the chat area prove that these exist in this forum. This being stated, the actual intent of many of the forum areas as discussion areas for work-related topics (often serious in nature) still remains. This point clearly points to a presence of a Community of Practice (see discussion in literature review) as these discussions on work are meant to hone the practice of teaching.

The forums demonstrate geographic convenience in the actual construction of the regulars (and non-regulars) as those discussing geographically and non-geographically specific topics from all over the world (literally). Many of the specific state discussions saw participation from non-Californians in other time zones. Geography is truly irrelevant in this environment.

The last component – non-obligation hour participation – is demonstrated through the volume of posts during these off hours. Time of day proves irrelevant here, as well. This is not surprising considering the avenue of interaction – a technological a temporal communication means with those spanning many time zones and geographical identities.

Evaluation of these criteria substantiates access as open and equal for all in this virtual space, as defined through the elements described above.

Does conversational style communication dominate the environment's discussion patterns?

Conversation in the Third Place entails laughter; avoidance of general topics, instruction of others, and hurting others' feelings; the presence of the "bore;" interruptions as ruinous; and a game-like nature (Oldenburg, 1997). These proved difficult to fully ascertain in a virtual environment for reasons noted, but some conclusions arise from the analysis.

The presence of laughter, specific topics, and games is easily determined. Nearly all of the discussions centered on a specific discussion, whether in the form of professional questions, personal queries, or even fun games and silly discussions. Laughter came much of the time with the sillier, more deliberately social discussions (although the deliberate notation of laughter most certainly was not employed by all those actually laughing in the off-line lives). The more professional discussions saw little in the way of laughter here. The games aspect actually enjoys its own home in the social Teacher TimeOut Sub-Forum. Thirteen such discussions made their way into the analyzed documents while other games emerged in the analysis of other social discussions.

The "bore" did not appear in the analyzed discussions. The only participant that came close may have proved slightly insensitive but did not speak over others and was not ignored. (although actually "speaking over others" in a virtual world is difficult to ascertain as due to the very nature of the technology and process naturally dictated by that technology) This may further be due to the nature of online discussion (and the fact that one can catch one's own comments before "speaking" while writing). Interruptions did occur in this environment but the process of interruption actually enjoys its own term – hijacking a thread – and while frowned on as part of the normed behaviors of the

community, experienced some common occurrences in the social threads (with light-hearted jibing accompanying someone recognizing his or her own violation of that very common understanding of that rule). Finally, as many of the professional discussions (and some of the personal discussions) sought assistance from experts, veterans, and those with experience, the actual instructiveness proved part of the conversations. This never appeared unsolicited and always proved respectful and often careful of others' feelings.

Is there evidence of playfulness in this virtual space?

While Oldenburg's Third Place has no place for "serious conversation" (Oldenburg, 1997), the online teacher community embraces such conversation. As discussed previously, many of the discussions center on serious questions of a personal, professional, or even pedagogical nature. This does not mean that the playful discussions do not exist; they are merely relegated to their own home in the Teacher TimeOut Sub-Forum.

This area is set aside for the casual discussions of light-hearted remembrances of years past, word and get-to-know-you games escapist in nature, and general social discussions that enter the realm of laughter as participants play games of who would be kicked out if this were a reality television show. The playfulness of discussions is present, just often contained in where it is meant to be. This is an interesting natural separation – and almost naturally occurring phenomena in online discussions. This discussion forum takes time to be sure that participants know what can be posted where. Some of these understandings are explicit and some are implicit. This actually can be likened to Social Learning Theory and in the Community of Practice construct as those participating – and the more they participate – develop and build understandings of where it is appropriate to discuss X and where it not appropriate to do Y.

Does this place act as a "home away from home" for the membership?

Oldenburg's Third Place (1997) experienced a feeling of a "home away from home" – espousing the gift of regeneration, at-easeness, and hints of possessiveness from its occupants. One of the most important roles this forum plays is that of a means for teachers to come together to regenerate. Many of the teachers (or educationally-minded participants) seek others to share frustrations and joy, but also to escape (as discussed above) and to recuperate. Discussions seeking a result of regeneration included personal issues, disappointment with students, and frustrations with parents and the profession in general. Participants note that they cannot find the answers and comfort in their workplaces that they can find in the virtual space of this forum.

These participants are at ease possibly simply because they remain anonymous. However, to be sure, these regulars also know one another and must take comfort in identity and status on the forum. These participants joined as members of this board, and they return as they find the answers they need or

meet the needs they have. This is their forum and they found it. This is discussed further below.

Is there an obvious attachment to place among the place's membership?

The regulars (the 30 heavy posters) comprise a group who fit into Tonnies' Gemeinschaft (Marshall, 1998) — one where they feel an attachment to this virtual space. They have developed an identity here (and it is interesting to note that this identity is in terms of actually who they present themselves to be and how they see themselves apart from presentation in the context of the virtual space). These 30 posters return (many daily) to the forum to gain the answers they seek or the comfort they need (or maybe just because it is fun). The unrepresented group here is the vast number of people that register and post a few times or less and never return. The attachment does not appear to exist for them. They gain the answer they need and move on, possibly to never return. The difference between these two types of users proves to be the interesting question that needs to be explored.

Regardless, the regulars – the ones who return to this home away from home – possess this virtual space as theirs. What has not been clearly examined in the nature of membership in this group in the context of personal identity. This can only be determined by getting behind the screen instead of interpreting discussions. There would need to be more examination of the nature of this community formed as an exclusive community of an inclusive one.

This notion of identification and attachment with place is more definitively identified as such as compared to Selwyn's work (2000) that found little evidence of attachment to place. The difference between these two studies appears to be in motivation. In Selwyn's examination, the users were provided space with a very specific set of content to be explored and shared (very professional in nature and following a mind-set of a community of practice – sharing practice, etc) whereas this community studied is completely naturally forming and the ideas and topics have developed form the users participating. More work is needed here.

The non-regulars, the vast majority of the users in the study, obviously do not attach in the same way as the regulars identified. This is a crucial finding – these regulars have entered a different phase of interaction in this virtual environment.

Is there evidence of a concern over ascribed social status among the place's membership?

Social status as a component of Tonnies' Gemeinschaft (Marshall, 1998) plays a large role in this discussion. The complexities have yet to be revealed, but the different approaches are clearly discernable. Users enjoy visual and textual notations of status in the community (based on chosen identities, expressions of professional affiliation, and posting counts). Further, some of the regulars (and even some of the non-regulars) gain notoriety in their various roles

– such as a math expert, an expert on certification issues, etc. This is status and this provides identity in a world where identity is often masked.

With a large number of participants (generally speaking in terms of the lifetime of the forum) never exiting "new member" status, the question arises again – what pushes one user to leave the group of thousands of nearly unknown users with monikers to users with reputations in a group of elite posters? And what pushes the lurker to a new member status?

Are there elements of homogeneity – via beliefs, interest or backgrounds – among the space's membership?

Tonnies' Gemeinschaft (Marshall, 1998) again provides direction useful in this analysis. This group of users and this virtual space provide opportunity for users of like interests, backgrounds, or identities to congregate and share. This is the nature and often the primary purpose of online discussion forums – and this forum proves to be no different.

The affiliations of a professional nature clearly point to like mindedness in interests. The elementary contingent is notable among the groups with others trailing close behind. Further, the structure of the forums themselves attracts members to specific areas for specific query types (or general discussion types). With discussions ranging from similar interests in math, music, and fashion trends to similar jobs, teaching practices, and geographic locations to level in pursuing certification, and stage in applying for a teaching job, the level of homogeneity is clear. The data confirms that the users share similar interests and congregate according to these. The similar backgrounds are often identifiable through profiles.

What would prove interesting is an exploration of the level of connectedness (to place or to one another) experienced by these various types of homogeneity. Our understanding of community in general dictates assumptions of homogeneity. How these homogenous identities play in virtual worlds may change that further. The simple existence of these types of relationships was observed in this context.

Does the "community" exert self-regulation? Is there evidence of a contract (explicit or understood) for membership governing behavior and participation?

There clearly is evidence that formal contracts per se do not exist for gaining or maintaining membership (Coleman, 1988), but, rather, a simple agreement of basic rules is affirmed and normed behavioral expectations are then understand through interaction. The posters police themselves in the interactions occurring. Hijacking threads is understood to be not polite. Posting personal contact information is understood to be a poor idea. Posting questions in the wrong forum is understood to be not effective. The users in this forum have developed over time clearly understood rules of engagement.

No serious infractions arose in the analysis (except the few causing the listed examples above). The gateway to posting has some agreements, but the

continued posting and participation means the understood agreements must be recognized and adhered to.

Again, we can evoke the name of Wenger in this context as to how these communities regulate (and Coleman in that same regard) where it is in the community's best interest to develop guidelines and processes for engagement. In Wenger's context, it is a system for the development of a practice as an online member of that community. For Coleman, it is the exchange of ideas and rules and the development of those for the function of the community.

The avenue of the discussion forum must impact the arrival at this particular phenomenon. Would the nature of this "community" change should we view it in other contexts? Regulations in locales like Second Life and There seem to take on more of a Wild West feel.

Is there evidence of an exchange of ideas for the development of individuals?

The exchange of ideas (and its presence in a community) deals directly with the concept of Social Capital (Coleman, 1988). The users primarily use this forum for exchanging ideas – ideas for classroom management, ideas for projects, lessons and activities, ideas for gaining employment, ideas for studying for exams, or ideas for a nonsensical game or notion. These are all exchanges that others benefit from in one way or another.

The presence of some experts, the regulars self-identifying in these roles, provides a basis for providing the exchange of ideas. The notion that the receiver then becomes the giver is not easily discernable in this data, as the scope of analysis is limited to a specific set of discussions and time frame for many of the discussions. The four primary types of exchanges noted in the analysis include teacher practice assistance, teacher application assistance, personal advice, and teacher certification assistance. The obvious exchange for benefit exists in this environment. The true nature of the exchanges and their adherence to the understanding of social capital needs more study.

Conclusions

In conclusion, how does this analysis answer the research question posed:

The research, undertaken as part of this project, works to answer the question of whether online communities created and maintained among professional educators constitute a community, as we understand them in the context of off-line communities.

Using the benchmarks (13 in total) as formed from the literature reviewed for this project, the analysis points to a complex answer. While this community of users strongly feels an attachment to place, self-regulates through informal contracts, exchanges ideas for the benefit of the individual, are homogenous in interest, have the opportunity to express social status in the context of the

environment, play (at times), converse and escape the realities of the world in a neutral environment; they do this if they have moved to a status of regular (or near-regular). The challenge is in the statistic provided in the Social Status portion of the results – 83% of all of the forum users have posted less than five times. This is sobering statistics that demonstrates a large number of users exist who definitively do not feel a connection in this environment. Is this environment a community for virtual members? Yes – but only for some.

The next chapter, Chapter 6, will briefly explore the limitations of this study as a reflection and further questions as insinuated as part of this chapter.

Chapter 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will briefly discuss the conclusions as laid out in the previous chapter, discuss recommended next steps in this field of research, and discuss other questions that arose from the analysis and synthesis contained within this report.

Conclusions

This study appears to demonstrate that a select few individuals self-identifying as professional educators form communities of users in online environments much in the same fashion (and containing the same general characteristics) as off-line communities. The limitations of this research and the restrictions on collection and data types make this a tentative conclusion that needs further solidification through other modes of data analysis. This formulation of a community appears to be anomalous as compared to the entire body of potential and registered users. Admittedly, an unknown lingers in this discussion that bears heavy weight upon the conclusions – the 30 identified regulars represent a larger body of individuals and that number is not known. Likely, some (or all) of the posters represented by the member status and above (some 716 in number) could be considered "regulars" in other contexts, but this study does not determine that.

This conclusion comes as part of the limited nature of this study – where the only analyzed discussions proved to be only observed ones.

Further Recommendations and Questions

This study (as Selwyn's before) serves well as a frame of reference for other studies on the efficacy of community for professional educators. Selwyn's work relied heavily on government-created communities whereas this study worked with communities that arose naturally among the participants (at least one).

Further studies should examine the actual nature of these "regulars" and why they moved from the new status to member (and beyond). What is the mysterious factor that pushed the social experience from casual participant/ lurker to "regular?" Additional research into the motivations and needs of these users would prove useful in understanding the potential use of online environments for teacher interaction and community-building. Working on illuminating more details on who these participants really are and what skills they have acquired and what lives they lead would greatly expand the understanding of this mysterious factor. Specifically, more should be done on following users – if possible – through these phases of online existence. In addition, work and examination in areas of professional identification and personal and social identification as juxtaposed with this notion of "regular user" should be worked into future research in this area.

This study sought to understand informal social exchanges, but in the process found the professional development potential for such online environments (pedagogically and subject-specific). This area could be further

explored as its potential for addressing the time issue and the definitive need for professional development for today's educators is undeniable. Important here is the understanding of potential policy implications – can we develop effective online professional development modules AND online avenues for professional communities (as envisioned in the Selwyn study). If so, do our notion of Regular user and our eventual understanding of the nature of the Regular user's evolution as an online persona have an impact in this venture design and implementation?

In addition, how does the impact of these lurkers – the silent observers – change the way this community should be considered? Do we then conceptualize the nature of community based on what is present (surface-level) and what is potentially possible based von assumed lurkers? Does the presumptive presence of these lurkers have implicit impacts on the types of participation or the level of personal (or professional) interactions in these environments? In addition, of course, does the actual venue of the technology have an impact here?

Other questions arise concerning the true nature of the exchange of social capital among these educators online and if the differences exist between non-regulars and regulars. Additional research in the nature of the discussions – i.e., more of a topical analysis going much further than the scope of this paper – would also bring to light an understanding of these communities.

Much works needs to be done here. This study has pointed to an unknown gap between those who participate and those who do not. This phenomenon could result in real impact on how we design and develop online communities (or online spaces for interaction) for professional educators.

Concluding Remarks

This study illuminated the basic efficacy of community in an online medium for professional educators. The potential exists as some of the users certainly fully participated in forming a community with characteristics alike in many ways to our understanding of offline communities, but the scope of users falling into this group is limited. The primary question arising from this study is why.

References

Baym, N. (1995). The performance of humor in computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 1*(2).

Blokland, T. (2002). Neighbourhood social capital: Does an urban gentry help? Some stories of defining shared interests, collective action and mutual support. *Sociological Research Online, 7*(3).

Bourdieu, P. (1983). The forms of capital [originally published as Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital]. In R. Kreckel (Ed.), *Soziale Ungleichheiten (Soziale Welt, Sonderheft 2)* (pp. 183-198). Goettingen: Otto Schartz & Co.

Bowker, N. I. (2001). Understanding online communities through multiple methodologies combined under a postmodern research endeavour. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung /Forum: Qualitative Social Research*.

Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society* (Vol. 1). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Castells, M. (1997). *The power of identity* (Vol. 2). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Castells, M. (1998). *End of millennium* (Vol. 3). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Chaiklin, S. (1996). *Educational Applications of VEs*. Paper presented at the Fifth International WWW Conference. Retrieved 7 December, 2002, from http://tecfa.unige.ch/moo/paris96/papers/seth.html

Cupchik, G. (2001) "Constructivist Realism: An Ontology That Encompasses Positivist and Constructivist Approaches to the Social Sciences." Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal], 2(1). Available at: http://qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm [Date of access: July 1, 2006] .

Clarke, P. (2000). Internet as a medium for qualitative research. *South African Journal of Information Management, 2*(2/3).

Coleman, J. (1988). Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*(S95-S120).

Coleman, J. (1998). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Cyberrdewd. (1996). IRC on AustNet - an example of a virtual community. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine*   Retrieved 7 December, 2002, from http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/magazine/2/is2cyberdude.html

December, J. (1996). Units of Analysis for Internet Communication. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 46*(1).

Doheny-Farina, S. (1996). *The Wired Neighborhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Fielding, N., & Lee, R. (Ed.). (1993). *Using Computers in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Fukuyama, F. (1999). *Social Capital and Civil Society*. Paper presented at the IMF Conference on Second Generation Reforms. Retrieved 10 April, 2005, from http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/seminar/1999/reforms/fukuyama.htm.

Garton, L., Haythornthwaite, C., & Wellman, B. (1997). Studying Online Social Networks. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 3*(1).

Glatthorn, A. (1998). *Writing the Winning Dissertation*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.

Gordon, M. (Ed.). (1998). *A Dictionary of Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Halsey, A. H., Lauder, H., Brown, P., & Amy Wells, A. (Ed.). (2001). *Education: Culture, Economy, and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hamman, R. (1996, 7 December 2002). The Application of Ethnographic Methodology in the Study of Cybersex. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine*, from http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/magazine/plummer.html

Hamman, R. (1996). One Hour in the eWorld Hot Tub: a brief ethnographic project in cyberspace. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine* Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/project.html

Hamman, R. (1997). Introduction to Virtual Communities Research and Cybersociology Magazine Issue Two. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine* Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://www.cybersociology.com/files/2_1_hamman.html

Hamman, R. (1998). *The Online/Offline Dichotomy: Debunking Some Myths about AOL Users and the Effects of Their Being Online Upon Offline Friendships and Offline Community.* University of Liverpool, Liverpool.

Hamman, R. (1999). Computer networks linking network communities: effects of AOL use upon pre-existing communities *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine* Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/cybersociety/

Herman, A., & Swiss, T. (Ed.). (2000). *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge.

Hine , C. (1998). *Virtual Ethnography*. Paper presented at the Research for Information and Social Scientists (IRISS) Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://www.sosig.ac.uk/iriss/papers/paper16.htm.

Holge-Hazelton, B. (2002). The Internet: A New Field for Qualitative Inquiry? *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*.

Jackson, M. (1997). Assessing the Structure of Communication on the World Wide Web. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 3*(1).

Jonassen, D. (Ed.). (1996). *Handbook of Research for Educational Communication and Technology*. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.

Jones, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cyberspace*. London: SAGE Publications.

Jones, S. (Ed.). (1998). *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*. London: SAGE Publications.

Kleining, G., & Witt, H. (2001). "Discovery as Basic Methodology of Qualitative and Quantitative Research." Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung /

Forum: Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal], 2(1). Available at: http://qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm [Date of access: July 1, 2006] .

Kuiken, D., & Miall, D. S. (2001). "Numerically Aided Phenomenology: Procedures for Investigating Categories of Experience". Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research [On-line Journal], 2(1). Available at: http://qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm [Date of access: July 1, 2006].

Leiner, B., Cerf, V., Clark, D. , Kahn, R., Kleinrock, L. , and Lynch, D. (2003). A Brief History of the Internet. *Internet Society*, from http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.shtml

Lerner, M. (1957). *America as a Civilization: Life and Thought in the United States Today*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Mann, C., & Stewart, F. (2000). *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A handbook for Researching Online*. London: Sage Publications.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1999). *Designing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Metz, J. (1994). Computer-Mediated Communication: Literature Review of a New Context. *Interpersonal Computing and Technology Journal, 2*(2).

Millarch, F. (1998). Net Ideologies: From Cyber-liberalism to Cyber-realism. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine* Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://www.millarch.org/francisco/papers/net_ideologies.htm

Oldenburg, R. (1997). *The Great Good Place: Cafes, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts and how they get you through the day*. New York: Marlowe & Company.

Paccagnella , L. (1997). Getting the Seats of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 3*(1).

Philbeck, J. (1997). Seniors and the Internet. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine, 2*(2).

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rafaeli, S., Sudweeks, F., Konstan, J., & Mabry. E., . (1998). A Collaborative Quantitative Study Of Computer-Mediated Communication. In F. Sudweeks, McLaughlin, M. and Rafaeli, S. (Ed.), *Network and Netplay: Virtual Groups on the Internet* (pp. 265-281). Mass.: MIT Press.

Reid, E. (1991). *Electropolis: Communication and Community On Internet Relay Chat.* University of Melbourne, Melbourne, AU.

Reid, E. (1994). *Cultural Formations in Text-Based Virtual Realities.* University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Schneider, D. (1996). *Virtual Environments for Education, Research and Life*. Paper presented at the Fifth International WWW Conference. Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://tecfa.unige.ch/moo/paris96/papers/schneider.html

Schneider, D. B., K. (1995). The World-Wide Web IN EDUCATION. *ANDREA* Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://tecfa.unige.ch/tecfa/research/CMC/andrea95/andrea.html

Selwyn, N. (2000). Creating a "connected" community? Teachers' use of an electronic discussion group [Electronic version]. *Teachers College Record*, 102(4), 750-778.

Smyres, K. M. Virtual Corporeality: Adolescent Girls and Their Bodies in Cyberspace. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine*, 7 December 2002, from http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/magazine/6/smyres.html

Stubbs, P. (1998). Conflict and Co-Operation in the Virtual Community: eMail and the Wars of the Yugoslav Succession. *Sociological Research Online, 3*(3).

Suler, J. Life at the Palace: Cyberpsychology Case Study. Retrieved 7 December, 2002, from http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/palacestudy.html

Taylor, S., & Bogdan, R. . (1984). *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: The Search for Meanings*. New York: John Wiley &Sons.

Thomas, S. (2000). Creative Interaction in Cyberspace: the trAce Online Writing Community. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine* Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/press/soc.htm

Thomsen, S., J. Straubhaar, & Bolyard, D. (1998). *Title: Ethnomethodology and the Study of Online Communities: Exploring the Cyber Streets*. Paper presented at the IRISS '98. Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://www.sosig.ac.uk/iriss/papers/paper32.htm

Tonnies, F. (2001). *Tonnies: Community and Civil Society*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tsouk, N. (1996). *VEs as a Tool for Integrating Faculty and Students in a Learning Community.* Paper presented at the Fifth International WWW Conference, Paris, France.

Turkle, S. (1996). Virtuality and its Discontents: Searching for Community in Cyberspace. *American Prospect, 7*(24).

Ward, K. J. (1999). The Cyber-Ethnographic (Re)Construction of Two Feminist Online Communities. *Sociological Research Online, 12*.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Westhead, M. D. (1996). *EPIC : Building a Structured Learning Environment.* Paper presented at the WebNet'96 (WorldConference of the Web Society). from http://www.epcc.ed.ac.uk/t+lwkshp/submissions/martin.html.

Wood, A., & Smith, M. . (2001). *Online Communication: Linking Technology, Identity, & Culture*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Yaojun L., S., M., Tampubolon, G., Warde, A., & Tomlinson, M. . (2002). Dynamics Of Social Capital: Trends And Turnover In Associational Membership In England And Wales, 1972-1999. *Sociological Research Online, 7*(3).

Yoshiaki, A. (1996). *An internet based, large scale virtual environment* Paper presented at the Fifth International WWW Conference. Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://tecfa.unige.ch/moo/paris96/papers/araki.html

Zurawski, N. (1999). Among the Internauts: Notes from the cyberfield. *Cybersoc | Cybersociology Magazine* Retrieved 7 December 2002, from http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/magazine/6/zurawski.html

Appendices

Avatar list from AtoZTeacherStuff Forum

The following "teacher types" were identified in the control area for the forum being studies. This list is provided to demonstrate the types of users visiting and posting to AtoZTeacherStuff's forum.

- Preschool Teacher
- Kindergarten Teacher
- 1st Grade Teacher
- 2nd Grade Teacher
- 3rd Grade Teacher
- 4th Grade Teacher
- 5th Grade Teacher
- 6th Grade Teacher
- 7th Grade Teacher
- 8th Grade Teacher
- Middle School Teacher
- High School Teacher II
- Class Teacher
- Montessori Teacher
- Reading Teacher
- Special Ed. Teacher
- Student Teacher
- Substitute Teacher
- Teaching Assistant

About AtoZTeacherStuff.com

As gleaned from www.atozteacherstuff.com on June 2, 2006.

General Statistics
Most users ever online was 1,723, on April 24, 2006, at 9:47 p.m.
Threads: 16,684, Posts: 171,593, Members: 14,547 (as of 1 a.m. on June 2, 2006)

General "About Us" Statement
A to Z Teacher Stuff is a teacher-created site designed to help teachers find online resources more quickly and easily. Find lesson plans, thematic units, teacher tips, discussion forums for teachers, downloadable teaching materials and eBooks, printable worksheets and blacklines, emergent reader books, themes, and more.

Amanda Post: Founder & Owner of A to Z Teacher Stuff

A to Z Teacher Stuff was founded in 1997 as a personal teaching resource while I was completing my studies as a student teacher. It was posted on the Web for others to enjoy, and as it became more popular, I expanded and added content to make it easier for teachers to find online materials to use in their classrooms. The primary goal of A to Z Teacher Stuff is to enhance the learning of students everywhere through helping teachers find the resources they need. After seeing the need for reproducible books for emergent readers, I began offering downloadable mini-book packs to visitors in May, 2001. The sales of these packs also help to financially support the thousands of pages of free resources available to visitors on A to Z Teacher Stuff and LessonPlanz.com. I've since started working with other publishers and authors to offer songs & poems, theme units, ASL resources, leveled readers, teaching strategies, and more!

I have taught five years in kindergarten and first grade, and have a Master of Science in Education. As a lifelong fan of reading and writing, my graduate studies focused in the area of reading. I enjoy having the opportunity to pass on the joy of books to students everywhere. Click here to see all the resources for reading I have created.

Forum Rules

Registration to this forum is free! We do insist that you abide by the rules and policies detailed below. If you agree to the terms, please check the 'I agree' checkbox and press the 'Register' button below. If you would like to cancel the registration, click *here* to return to the forums index.

By agreeing to these rules, you warrant that you will not post any messages that are obscene, vulgar, sexually-orientated, hateful, threatening, or otherwise violative of any laws.

Public Forums/Privacy. Anyone with internet access may view these message boards, they are not private, and messages you post are not confidential. Please use discretion when posting, especially when discussing situations at school, students, and/or parents. It is best not to use names or information that might identify you and/or anyone involved.

Personal information, such as your email address, will not be sold or shared. However, in respect unlawful online activities of any visitor, we reserve the right to reveal your identity (or whatever information we know about you) in the event of a complaint or legal action arising from any message, submission, or action by you. All actions on the site are indentified *(sic)* by an IP address accessible by forum administrators.

Usernames. We recommend choosing a username that doesn't include your full name.

No Self-Promotion/Advertising. Please do not post any messages anywhere on this site that are primarily for the promotion or advertising of any website, forums, email address, business, MLM, activity, or other entities that you have an affiliation with (ie. no self-promotion). These types of posts will be removed from the forum, and offenders will be banned. If you have any questions, please contact the forum administrator.

No Personal Attacks. The purpose of this forum is to provide encouragement, advice, support, enjoyment, and [insert positive word here]! It is a safe and friendly environment in which to share. The expectation is that visitors to the forums will be both professional and respectful. It is fine to disagree with someone, but personal attacks or disrespect will not be tolerated on this forum. Messages of this type will be removed from the forum, and repeat offenders will be banned from using the forum.

Messages/Posts. The owners of A to Z Teacher Stuff Forums reserve the right to remove, edit, move or close any thread for any reason.

Although the administrators and moderators of A to Z Teacher Stuff Forums will attempt to keep all objectionable messages off this forum, it is impossible for us to review all messages. All messages express the views of the author, and neither the owners of A to Z Teacher Stuff Forums, nor Jelsoft Enterprises Ltd. (developers of vBulletin) will be held responsible for the content of any message.

Table 20 Discussion Thread and Topics Overview

Forum/ Thread Title	Discussion Threads
Announcements (sub-total)	5
Forum Guidelines & Tips	None
Introductions	5
TeacherChat Forums (sub-total)	68
General Education	8
Preschool	2
Kindergarten	5
Elementary Education	16
Secondary Education	4
Teacher Timeout	10
- Chitchat	10
- Games	13
Connecting Classrooms (sub-total)	1
Classroom Penpals	1
Postcard Exchanges	None
Other Projects	None
TeacherChat Special Interest Forums (sub-total)	27
Behavior Management	4
Montessori	1
New Teachers	14
Special Education	4
Student and Preservice Teachers	None
Substitute Teachers	4
Homeschool	None
Examinations for Teachers (sub-total)	14
Basic Skills Tests	2
Multiple Subject Tests	3
Single Subject Tests	6
National Board Certification	None
Other Tests	3
Prayer Requests/ Inspirational (sub-total)	1
Prayer Request Forum	1
Totals	116

Table 15 Sub-Forum Counts by User and Posts

Forum	Sub-Forum	Users	Posts
Announcements			
	Introductions	28	40
		28	40
Connecting Classrooms			
	Classroom Penpals	2	2
Connecting Classrooms Total		2	2
Exams for Teachers			
	Basic Skills	13	44
	Multiple Subject Tests	12	27
	Other Tests	8	14
	Single Subject Tests	30	76
		63	161
Prayer			
	Prayer Request Forum	8	8
		8	8
Special Interest Forums			
	Behavior Management	11	12
	Montessori	2	2
	New Teachers	122	318
	Special Education	12	17
	Substitute Teaching	16	27
		163	376
Teacher Chat Forums			
	Elementary Education	92	163
	General Education	60	184
	Kindergarten	13	15
	Preschool	7	7
	Secondary Education	18	29
	Teacher TimeOut	534	3226
		724	3624
Grand Total		988	4211

Table 16 - User Count by Location

By Country	
Australia	4
Canada (split below)	8
France	1
India	1
Philippines	1
Portugal	1
South Africa	1
United States of America (split below)	242
Location Not Listed	42

United States of America	
Arkansas	3
Alabama	6
American Samoa	1
Arizona	7
California	53
Colorado	2
Connecticut	2
Florida	19
Georgia	8
Hawaii	1
Illinois	9
Indiana	5
Kansas	3
Kentucky	2
Louisiana	1
Massachusetts	2
Maryland	1
Maine	2
Michigan	10
Minnesota	3
Missouri	9
Nebraska	1
North Carolina	8
North Dakota	1
New Hampshire	2
New Jersey	11
New Mexico	2
Nevada	4
New York	11
Ohio	5
Oregon	1
Pennsylvania	3
South Carolina	5
Tennessee	2
Texas	17
Virginia	7

Washington	3
Wisconsin	9
West Virginia	1
Canadian Provinces/ Territories	
Alberta	1
British Colombia	1
Manitoba	1
Nova Scotia	1
Ontario	2
Toronto	1
Unspecified Canada	1
Grand Total	301

Table 17 User Count by Profession

Profession	Total
Pre-Kindergarten/ Preschool	
Pre-K SPED	1
Pre-Kindergarten	10
Pre-Kindergarten Asst	1
Pre-Kindergarten SPED	1
Daycare	1
Head Start	1
Elementary Education Levels	
Kindergarten	15
Kindergarten/ 1st Grade	1
1st Grade	17
French Immersion 1st Grade	1
2nd Grade	11
3rd Grade	10
3rd/ 4th Grade	1
3rd/ 4th/ 5th Grade	1
4th Grade	3
4th/ 5th Grade	1
5th Grade	10
5th Grade Substitute	1
Elementary	2
Elementary Music	1
Montessori Elementary	1
Middle Education Levels	
6th Grade	1
7th Grade	1
MS English	1
MS Math	1
Unspecified Middle School	1
Other Specialties	
AR Reading	1
Behavior Specialist	1
Reading	1
Librarian	1
Math	2
Music	2
Reading Intervention	1
SPED	9
Para-Professional	1
Secondary Education	
Unspecified Secondary Education	2
English	2
History	1
Math	1
Music	1
Non-Professional	

Job Hunting	4
Nanny	1
Ex-Teacher	1
Homeschool	2
Parent	3
Student	22
Substitute	7
Teacher	1
Unemployed	1
Not Listed	137
Grand Total	301

Table 18 Break-down of User Post Counts

Number of Posts	Count of Users	% Of Users	# of Posts Users are Responsible For	% of Posts Represented
1	105	34.88%	105	2.49%
2	55	18.27%	110	2.61%
3	28	9.30%	84	1.99%
4	13	4.32%	52	1.23%
5	10	3.32%	50	1.19%
6	10	3.32%	60	1.42%
7	6	1.99%	42	1.00%
8	7	2.33%	56	1.33%
9	7	2.33%	63	1.50%
10	4	1.33%	40	0.95%
11	4	1.33%	44	1.04%
12	4	1.33%	48	1.14%
13	2	0.66%	26	0.62%
14	1	0.33%	14	0.33%
16	5	1.66%	80	1.90%
17	2	0.66%	34	0.81%
19	1	0.33%	19	0.45%
20	2	0.66%	40	0.95%
21	2	0.66%	42	1.00%
25	1	0.33%	25	0.59%
26	2	0.66%	52	1.23%
31	1	0.33%	31	0.74%
32	1	0.33%	32	0.76%
33	1	0.33%	33	0.78%
35	3	1.00%	105	2.49%
37	1	0.33%	37	0.88%
43	2	0.66%	86	2.04%
47	1	0.33%	47	1.12%
48	1	0.33%	48	1.14%
49	2	0.66%	98	2.33%
50	1	0.33%	50	1.19%
52	1	0.33%	52	1.23%
58	1	0.33%	58	1.38%
65	2	0.66%	130	3.09%
77	1	0.33%	77	1.83%
86	1	0.33%	86	2.04%
106	1	0.33%	106	2.52%
120	1	0.33%	120	2.85%
136	1	0.33%	136	3.23%
139	1	0.33%	139	3.30%
143	1	0.33%	143	3.40%
183	1	0.33%	183	4.35%
213	1	0.33%	213	5.06%
216	1	0.33%	216	5.13%
360	1	0.33%	360	8.55%
558	1	0.33%	558	13.25%

Appendix C >   Regulars' Data

Table 19 Regular Participation in Games Sub-Sub-Forum

Code	Movie trivia!	Name Game	What I Learned Today	word association game	The Book Title Game	The Random Letter Game!	This or That Game	Connect the song	The Movie Quote Game	Five of a Kind Game	Bacon anyone	prediction game	Place Name Game
Regular_01	0	0	0	20	1	31	54	0	52	77	79	61	181
Regular_02	1	0	3	10	26	26	18	37	37	55	33	7	99
Regular_03	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	39	78	0	88	1	0
Regular_04	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4	17	0
Regular_05	0	1	0	10	15	15	1	50	0	0	1	37	53
Regular_06	0	0	0	3	5	3	1	17	5	8	16	4	78
Regular_07	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regular_08	0	0	2	7	0	0	27	0	0	0	0	28	0
Regular_09	0	1	0	19	0	0	1	20	1	2	0	18	1
Regular_10	0	0	0	2	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	30
Regular_11	0	1	0	7	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	48	0
Regular_12	2	1	2	7	9	0	0	0	0	0	16	13	4
Regular_13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	42	1
Regular_14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regular_15	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	0	3	0
Regular_16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	32	0
Regular_17	0	1	0	0	16	17	0	0	0	0	0	13	0
Regular_18	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	5	1	10	2	21	3
Regular_19	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
Regular_20	0	0	0	2	0	1	5	0	0	17	0	0	21
Regular_21	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regular_22	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	7	10	6	10	0	8
Regular_23	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Regular_24	0	1	0	4	2	6	4	6	2	7	1	0	4
Regular_25	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	19	0
Regular_26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Regular_27	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regular_28	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	12	5
Regular_29	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Regular_30	0	0	0	4	1	3	3	0	0	6	2	0	12
Grand Total	6	10	16	97	105	105	119	181	189	194	253	380	500

Table 20 Regulars' Counts in Teacher Timeout Sub-Forum

Title	Regular_01	Regular_02	Regular_03	Regular_04	Regular_05	Regular_06	Regular_07	Regular_08	Regular_09	Regular_10	Regular_11	Regular_12	Regular_15	Regular_16	Regular_17	Regular_18	Regular_19	Regular_20	Regular_21	Regular_22	Regular_23	Regular_24	Regular_25	Regular_26	Regular_27	Regular_28	Regular_29	Regular_30
Airsoft	0	0	0	1				0	0	0	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bacon anyone	9	33	88	4	1	16	0	0	20	0	0	6	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Connect the song	0	37	39	0	50	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	10	0	0	7	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Crazy Neighbors	0	0	0	14	0	0	1	11	6	0	0	2	1	4	0	0	4	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Did you hear about newmoms	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	11	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0
Fashion Trends...	0	0	0	40	0	0	0	12	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	0	15	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	10	0
Five of a Kind Game	7	55	0	0	0	8	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	3	7	0	6	0	7	0	0	0	0	1	6
How can I help	0	0	3	3	0	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
How did you get here	0	3	0	22	0	3	3	24	2	8	0	2	9	3	0	0	7	0	4	0	1	0	1	2	0	4	3	0
How do you control CATHAIR	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	4	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
I am going crazy!	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	5	0	0	0	4	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
It's a boy	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Kids say the darndest . .	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0
May Have Gotten The Hubby To Cave	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	0
Mexico	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Movie trivia!	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Name Game	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
News Stories of our yth	0	0	0	7	0	0	1	2	0	31	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Place Name Game	181	99	0	0	53	78	0	0	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	8	0	4	0	0	0	5	0	12

Topic																												
Postit Noters Anon	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	11	1	0	6	4	1	3	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
prediction game	61	7	1	17	37	4	0	28	8	3	8	3	3	2	3	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	9	0	0	12	0	0
Question for moms	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	5	0
Recipe I made last night	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	0
Smart Board Grant	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Teach Summer School	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Book Title Game	1	26	0	0	15	5	0	0	0	0	4	9	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	4	0	0	0	0	1
The Monkees	0	1	2	9	0	0	0	10	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Movie Quote Game	52	37	78	1	0	5	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0
The Random Letter	31	26	0	0	15	3	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	7	0	0	1	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	3
This or That Game	54	18	0	0	1	1	0	27	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	5	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	3
wedding songs...	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	6	0
What I Learned Today	0	3	0	3	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Grand Total	558	359	216	164	183	143	21	133	72	76	62	66	24	41	47	49	46	46	43	3	38	37	13	4	2	28	31	31

Table 21 - Announcements Forum Counts

Discussion Title	Users	Posts
Any Ideas	5	4
DUI and Credentials	3	4
Hello	6	7
Hello Im new here	6	8
New Teacher in Vegas Here	8	17
Grand Total	28	40

Table 22- Connecting Classrooms Forum Counts

Discussion Title	Users	Posts
4th grade pen pals	2	2
Grand Total	2	2

Table 23 - Exams for Teachers Sub-Forum Count

Sub-Forum	Discussion Title	Users	Posts
Basic Skills			
	praxis 2 0511 and 0100	1	1
	writing score 41	12	43
Basic Skills Total		13	44
Multiple Subject Tests			
	finally passed the praxis 2	2	2
	help prek 3rd sae	6	17
	virtues of the cset	4	8
		12	27
Other Tests			
	gres vs mats	3	5
	h	1	1
	rica question	4	8
		8	14
Single Subject Tests			
	cset english prep	2	2
	english cset	13	48
	great cset tutor single and multiple subject	6	11
	passed ss english 1 2 and 4	2	3
	praxis help 49 69 89	3	8
	praxis middle school math 0069	4	4
		30	76
Grand Total		63	161

Table 24 - Prayer Sub-Forum Count

Discussion Title	Users	Posts
My Grammy	8	8
Grand Total	8	8

Table 25 - TeacherChat Sub-Forum Counts

Sub-Forum	Discussion Title	Users	Posts
Elementary Education			
	California Teachers	3	6
	CHAMPS and Harry Wong, classroom rules	15	28
	changing area	5	7
	classroom jobs	8	10
	free educational coloring pictures	1	1
	Frustrated	13	30
	Grade Transitions	2	2

	Help! I'm moving from 5th to 3rd!	1	1
	I just got hit with a chair.. now what - race issues	15	20
	Need Summer School Theme Ideas	2	3
	organizing class library	6	7
	Praxis exam-content and knowledge-HELP	2	2
	Reading First	3	3
	Scary Parent	8	12
	Summer Readings!	7	30
	summer school help!	1	1
Elementary Education Total		**92**	**163**
General Education			
	Am I loony	8	14
	Divey-read please	1	1
	Do you plan by the unit or by the week	8	10
	gas money- Need Advice!	7	9
	Math challenges II - Want to give it a try	9	99
	Packing Tips	10	27
	Salary Schedules	6	5
	Teaching Portfolio	11	19
General Education Total		**60**	**184**
Kindergarten			
	Introduction	2	2
	Poetry Lessons	1	1
	Sight words	4	4
	Star of the Day -Month	1	1
	The new academic starts!!!!	5	7
Kindergarten Total		**13**	**15**
Preschool			
	How to Handle Discipline in Public School	2	2
	need some transition songs	5	5
Preschool Total		**7**	**7**
Secondary Education			
	Classroom projects	2	3
	First day - week	7	14
	How do I answer this	5	6
	Seeking Teacher Certification	4	6
Secondary Education Total		**18**	**29**
Teacher TimeOut			
	Airsoft	6	7
	Bacon anyone	31	292
	Connect the song	16	196
	Crazy Neighbors	11	58
	Did you hear about new moms	13	19
	Fashion Trends...When we were Younger	12	103
	Five of a Kind Game	36	249

	How can I help (sorry, a bit long)	9	22
	How did you get here	30	147
	How do you control CAT HAIR	7	27
	I am going crazy!	14	40
	It's a boy	10	10
	Kids say the darndest things....	15	26
	May Have Gotten The Hubby To Cave	6	12
	Mexico	8	12
	Movie trivia!	6	9
	Name Game	22	29
	News Stories of our youth	8	15
	Place Name Game	43	599
	Post0it Noters Anonymous	8	18
	prediction game	36	440
	Question for moms	12	31
	Recipe I made last night - broccoli and shrimp pasta	10	17
	Smart Board Grant	9	11
	Teach Summer School	2	2
	The Book Title Game	27	125
	The Monkees	8	27
	The Movie Quote Game	26	220
	The Random Letter Game!	18	129
	This or That Game	26	144
	wedding songs...	18	35
	What I Learned Today	11	21
	word association game	20	134
Teacher TimeOut Total		534	3226
Grand Total		724	3624

Table 26 - Teacher ChitChat Sub-Forum Count

Sub-Forum Teacher TimeOut	Sub-Sub-Forum	Discussion Title	Users	Posts
	ChitChat			
		Airsoft		7
		Fashion Trends...When we were Younger	12	03
		How did you get here	0	47
		How do you control CAT HAIR		7
		Kids say the darndest things....	5	6
		May Have Gotten The Hubby To Cave		2
		News Stories of our youth		5
		Post0it Noters Anonymous		8
		Question for moms	2	1
		The Monkees		7
	ChitChat Total		12	13
	Games			
		Bacon anyone	31	92
		Connect the song	6	96
		Five of a Kind Game	6	49
		Movie trivia!		9
		Name Game	22	9
		Place Name Game	43	99
		prediction game	36	40
		The Book Title Game	27	25
		The Movie Quote Game	6	20
		The Random Letter Game!	18	29
		This or That Game	6	44
		What I Learned Today	1	1
		word association game	0	34
	Games Total		18	587

Table 27 - Special Interest Forum Counts

Sub-Forum	Discussion Title	Users	Posts
Behavior Management			
	after lunch behavior	2	2
	Parents Arrival	3	3
	Sub plans for first grade	6	7
		1	12
Montessori			
	Interviewed and still looking	2	2
		2	2
New Teachers			
	38	2	20
	Accepting an offer	5	5
	Applying for jobs	6	108
	certification test	5	5
	Cover Letter Help	7	10
	Financial Burden	5	7
	first year teacher needs input	9	39
	Got the job. . . now what	3	2
	High School Reading Specialist Interview	3	2
	hmmmm	3	3
	Lesson Plan Book	0	15
	Let's start some interview practice	4	91
	Teach in different states....	8	9
	Teaching Portfolio	2	2
		22	318
Special Education			
	Alternate Route to SpEd Certification	4	8
	Interviewed and still looking	4	5
	obs for students with mod sev disb in gen class	2	2
	Still looking considering regular ed	2	2
		2	17
Substitute Teaching			
	cost to become a sub	3	7
	for those wanting permanent positions	6	9
	high school vs grade school	5	7
	what to do with 5th grade terrors	2	4
		6	27
Grand Total		63	376

Table 28 Game Thread Descriptions/ Rules

User type/ Name	Game Title	Rules/ Explanation (from initial post)
Non-Regular User 1	Movie trivia!	Hi everyone! Here is a new game I thought would be fun and possibly mind-bending! (If I can think of good enough questions!) Alright, what I'm going to do is ask you all a question about a movie. Maybe a little detail that you just " know you remember - It's on the tip of my tongue " kind of question. When someone answers the queston (sic) (correctly) they ask a new question, and so on. Here I go! /What was the name of Jack's cat in " Meet the Parents " ?/
Regular_18	What I Learned Today	Life's full of little lessons, and I think as educators we certainly learn our fair share, and that it'd be fun to share what we learned. So...here's what I learned today: /I need to always look at my feet before I walk out the door on my way to work. / I had two pairs of shoes side by side in the sunroom...one pair of white canvas slip-on shoes (no backs)...and one pair of black slip on loafers. I slipped on my loafers this morning; when I got out of the car at work, I met one of the other first grade teachers in the parking lot. She looked at me and asked if it was clash day in my room. I looked at her quizzically and asked, "No...why do you ask?" When she stopped laughing, she told me to look at my feet. You guessed it...one white shoe, and one black shoe. :o So...what did you learn today????
Non-Regular User 1	Connect the song	Wanna Play Connect the Song? The way this game is played....when someone posts a section or phrase from a song, you take the last word in that thread and post a line from a song with that word 'anywhere' in there...for example... If someone posts: "Hopelessly devoted to *you*" And then the next person might post: "*You* must have been a beautiful *baby*." So now the next person will need a line or a phrase with the word "*baby*" in there somewhere.... Please think about the next poster when you choose a song. Try to make sure your song phrase doesn't end with an impossible word that would probably never be in a song...also, please post enough song for us to hopefully recognize it - but not a whole verse or anything... Anyone can continue!
Non-Regular User 1	The Random Letter Game!	Alright, so as the poster of our previous three games, I have been getting bored with them, so today I am posting a new game. The rules for this game are really simple. 1. Press three random letter keys (For example tlf) 2. The next poster makes up a short meaning for the three letters. 3. It does not have to make sense! (For example this could mean: True Love Forever /or/ Tiny ladies feet /or/ taste lizas fudge) I hope you enjoy this game!
Non-Regular User 1	word association game	;) Well, if it hasn't, here goes. Whatever the word is on the last post, type in whatever word first pops into your head. Keep in mind it's a public forum, and kids could be reading! Ready?
Non-Regular User 2	Name Game	Okay the whole point of this game is to type your first name or screen name which ever with your elbows!! It's pretty funny to see what people come up with...and no cheating...be sure to type what it's supossed to say after it... Oh yeah...don't use the backspace!! so here goes mine.. nbedccxsa....becca!!!
Non-Regular User 1	*Bacon anyone?*	:angel: [size=1]Are we ready for new games yet? I have been holding onto this one for a month. The game is very simple. It is based on the game the seven degrees of Kevin Bacon. 1. Post the name of a famous person. 2. The next poster gives a connection to another famous person and that person. 3. The connection can be co-stars, Directed or directed by, produced, married, child, parent, or any other clear connection you can prove. 4. There has to be a connection that you can show!

		5. We will not be aiming towards a certain famous person, just making a chain.
Non-Regular User 3	*The Book Title Game*	I liked the Movie Title Game so much that I thought of The Book Title Game! Let's see how many titles of books that we all know. They can be any book out there whether it be what children read, adults read or audio books. Here are the Rules!! It is just like the The Movie Title Game! 1. I start off with a title of a book. 2. You use the last letter in the book title as the first in your book title. 3. Please be kind as X is not a common letter and that will break the chain. 4. Try not to repeat titles if possible. ;)
Non-Regular User 4	The Movie Quote Game	In "The Movie Quote Game," the players will give the source of the quote in the previous post, and then post a new quote for people to guess. Anybody want to play? First quote to guess: "Sleep well; I'll most likely kill you in the morning." What movie? And if you can tell us who said it, we'll be even more impressed. Well, I will, anyway. Guess, and then post a movie quote of your own for others to guess
Non-Regular User 5	This or That Game	The Rules: 1. I start off with a similar pairing of something. [*example:* Apples or Oranges? (in this case it's fruit)] 2. The next person answers as per /their/ preference. 3. Then that person gives another similar pairing of something. It's that simple! Enjoy! ;)
Regular_18	prediction game	A friend of mine started this game in e-mail, and I thought it would be fun. It's called the prediction game' and here is how it works: I make a prediction about the next person that will post to this thread. He/She says 'true' or 'false' and then makes a prediction about the next person and so on and so forth. The next poster is from the midwest.
Non-Regular User 5	Five of A Kind Game	The Rules: 1. Someone says, "Give me 5 fruits. 2. The next person answers: Oranges, Apples, Blueberries, Cherries, Grapes 3. Then the person who answers gets to say, "Give me 5 (whatever)" or "Name 5 (whatever)". It's that simple! Enjoy! ;)
Regular_18	Place Name Game	Easy rules! 1. I start off with a name of a city, town, state, province or country. 2. You use the last letter of my word as the first in your place name. 3. Please be kind, X is not a common letter to start a place with, and that will ruin the chain!

Table 29 Regulars' Total Counts and Percentages in Teacher Timeout Sub-Forum

Title	Post Total	Percentage of Total
Place Name Game	500	18.88%
prediction game	380	14.35%
Bacon anyone	253	9.55%
Five of a Kind Game	194	7.32%
The Movie Quote Game	189	7.13%
Connect the song	181	6.83%
This or That Game	119	4.49%
How did you get here	115	4.34%
The Book Title Game	105	3.96%
The Random Letter	105	3.96%
Fashion Trends...	99	3.74%
Crazy Neighbors	56	2.11%
The Monkees	24	0.91%
Question for moms	21	0.79%
How can I help	20	0.76%
I am going crazy!	20	0.76%
How do you control CAT HAIR	19	0.72%
wedding songs...	18	0.68%
What I Learned Today	16	0.60%
Postit Noters Anonymous	15	0.57%
News Stories of our youth	14	0.53%
Did you hear about new moms	13	0.49%
Recipe I made last night	13	0.49%
May Have Gotten The HubbyTo Cave	12	0.45%
Name Game	10	0.38%
Kids say the darndest . .	8	0.30%
It's a boy	7	0.26%
Smart Board Grant	7	0.26%
Mexico	6	0.23%
Movie trivia!	6	0.23%
Airsoft	5	0.19%
Teach Summer School	2	0.08%

Table 30 Threads and Sub-Forums Focused on Interests

Forum	Sub-Forum	Posts	Users
Connecting Classrooms			
	Classroom Penpals	2	2
Connecting Classrooms Total		2	2
Exams for Teachers			
	Basic Skills	4	13
	Multiple Subject Tests	7	12
	Other Tests	4	8
	Single Subject Tests	6	30
Exams for Teachers Total		61	63
Special Interest Forums			
	Behavior Management	2	11
	Montessori	2	2
	New Teachers	318	122
	Special Education	7	12
	Substitute Teaching	7	16
Special Interest Forums Total		76	163
Teacher Chat Forums			
	Elementary Education	63	92
	General Education	84	60
	Kindergarten	5	13
	Preschool	7	7
	Secondary Education	29	18
Teacher Chat Forums Total		98	190
Grand Total		37	418

Table 31 Member Title Counts

Member Title	Rule for "Membership"	# of Users	% of Total
A to Z Teacher Stuff Owner	Established by owner	1	0.01%
Forum Administrator	Established by owner	1	0.01%
The Links Lady	Unknown	1	0.01%
Moderator	Established by owner	1	0.01%
Member	Once a new member reaches twenty-five posts, the status of that user switches to "Member"	712	4.97%
New Member	A poster with the status of "Hello, I'm new!" becomes a "New Member" upon reaching his/her fifth post.	1,775	12.38%
Hello, I'm new!	This denotes anyone who has registered with the forum regardless of whether the poster has actually posted anything.	11,843	82.62%

Table 32 Top 24 Discussion Threads by Regular Users

Title	Forum	Sub-Forum	Sum of Totals
Place Name Game	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	500
prediction game	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	380
Bacon anyone	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	253
Five of a Kind Game	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	194
The Movie Quote Game	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	189
Connect the song	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	181
This or That Game	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	119
How did you get here	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	115
The Book Title Game	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	105
The Random Letter Game!	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	105
Fashion Trends...When we were Younger	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	99
word association game	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	97
Math challenges II - Want to give it a try	Teacher Chat Forums	General Education	83
Let's start some interview practice	Special Interest Forums	New Teachers	62
Applying for jobs	Special Interest Forums	New Teachers	5
Crazy Neighbors	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	56
writing score 41	Exams for Teachers	Basic Skills	27
Frustrated	Teacher Chat Forums	Elementary Education	24
The Monkees	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	24
Packing Tips	Teacher Chat Forums	General Education	21
Question for moms	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	21
first year teacher needs input	Special Interest Forums	New Teachers	20
How can I help (sorry, a bit long)	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	20
I am going crazy!	Teacher Chat Forums	Teacher TimeOut	20