

## LETTER TO EDITOR

### Responding to ‘nurturing global collaboration and networked learning in higher education’

Sir,

I read with great interest the case study on iCollab reported by Cronin, Cochrane and Gordon (2016), which was recently published in your esteemed journal. The authors created the iCollab for the purpose of networked learning and they claimed that iCollab is based on the principles of Community of Practice (CoP) proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). In associating CoP with iCollab, the authors talk about the ‘concepts of boundary crossing and brokering’ (p. 4). Other important characteristics of CoP, especially the ‘membership’, the roles of ‘old-timer and newcomers’ and the ‘Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP)’, are missing in the discussion. In fact, these are amongst the defining characteristics of a CoP which distinguishes it from other sorts of affiliations. As highlighted by Gee (2005, p. 214), even though Wenger (1998) ‘has tried to be careful in delineating just what is and is not a community of practice’, it has been used by others ‘to cover such a wide array of social forms that [they] may be missing the trees for the forest’. Whilst I acknowledge that iCollab is an innovative approach to learning and a practical model to be applied in other parts of the world, especially in Southeast Asia, I was wondering whether iCollab holds the true spirit of a CoP as the paper does not discuss how iCollab meets the defining characteristics of CoP.

There are several studies which reveal that adopting the notion of CoP to conceptualise a group of networked users is problematic (e.g. Harris and Shelswell 2005; Pellicone and Ahn 2014; Taylor 2014). Taylor for instance suggests that in networked environment, learning does not always involve newcomers observing and interacting with old-timers but could be the other way round, as it is common to have expert newcomers and novice old-timers amongst the many networked learners. My own PhD research carried out at the University of Nottingham, UK, on teachers’ informal learning on social networking sites (see Rashid 2015) supports Taylor’s argument where I found that when teachers introduce topics to seek teaching-related knowledge, they pose their questions to all the community members, including newcomers and old-timers (however defined), and even if they specifically address their questions to expert old-timers or expert newcomers, other members of the community still respond to them, which reflects that learning on social networking sites occurs in a more complex way than LPP.

Gee’s (2005) concept of affinity space, which emphasises different levels of involvement and flexible forms of participation amongst a group of networked individuals in a particular space seems to be more useful than Lave and Wenger’s (1991)

CoP for explaining the iCollab project. This is not surprising as Lave and Wenger put forward the concept of CoP based on their observations of offline communities, whereas Gee's concept of affinity space is based on his observations of online activities. Unlike Lave and Wenger who give structure to how learning takes place in the community through LPP, Gee is of the view that learning can occur in any way 'through the joint action with advanced peers' (p. 216) who might be newcomers or old-timers in the space. Since the focus of the iCollab project is the collaboration amongst the users instead of the 'membership' of the users, I strongly recommend that the authors consider Gee's contribution of affinity space in making sense of the activities that take place in iCollab.

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## Biography

Radzuwan Ab Rashid is a senior lecturer in School of English Language Studies, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia. He is also the coordinator for master's programmes at UniSZA Graduate School. He has an educational background in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and has received his PhD degree from the University of Nottingham, UK (2015). His doctoral dissertation *Exploring Teachers' Co-construction of Social Support on a Social Networking Site* was a discourse analytic exploration of displays of support in social interaction. He has published papers related to TESL and discourse analysis in several reputable journals including *Discourse Studies*, *International Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning*, *MEXTESOL Journal* and *English Language Teaching*.

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