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A Community of Peer Interactions as a Resource to Prepare Music Teacher Educators

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate interactions between two doctoral students and their colleagues in a graduate music education program and determine how a community of peer interactions functions as a resource to prepare music teacher educators. Results of this study showed that peer interactions between two participants and other students in graduate classes demonstrated characteristics of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). The domain was the commonality of working as full-time music educators at the college-level and wanting to be better music teacher educators. While reflecting on this common goal, they developed a shared repertoire including their own strategies and skills related to class materials, which was closely related to the practice. The development of a community was greatly affected by the structure of the cohort program, similar career backgrounds, group work, and faculty members as facilitators. Suggestions for building a strong sense of belonging and mutual commitment beyond graduate classes are discussed.

Introduction

Preparing music teachers is considered one of the most important topics in music education (Campbell, 2007; Conway, 2002), but there are surprisingly few studies regarding music teacher educator preparation. Several scholars have dealt with related issues, including formal and informal interactions between undergraduate students and doctoral students (Conway, Eros, Pellegrino, & West, 2010), factors that influence the entrance of a music teacher education doctoral program (Teachout, 2004), and the professional lives of music teacher educators (Hewitt & Thompson, 2006). However, research has not considered how interactions among doctoral students affect their preparation of music teacher educators.

Scholars of general education have argued that interactions with a group of peers are necessary to help doctoral students develop as teacher educators (Cochran-Smith, 2003). Similarly, Wenger argued that learning is not an isolated or individual process; rather it is a social activity that “shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). Recognizing the importance of peer interactions, a few music education scholars have investigated the impact of a group of peers on music teachers’ professional growth. For example, Blair (2008) organized a mentoring group for three novice elementary general music teachers. At the beginning of the study, Blair led the meetings and mentored the teachers, but with time, they gradually became mentors to each other in a “music teacher community of practice.” The nature of this community allowed the members to share their vulnerabilities, realize that they were not alone, and develop a shared professional identity. Although Blair illustrated the value of peer interactions among music teachers, studies to date have not examined how collaboration and interaction among doctoral students might serve as a resource for improving music teacher educator preparation. Not only do graduate music education programs provide formal instruction on how to become teacher educators, but they can also provide formal or informal arenas where doctoral students can develop relationships with one another. Careful examination of their interactions may provide helpful suggestions for designing more successful music teacher educator preparation programs in colleges and universities.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate interactions between two doctoral students and their colleagues in a graduate music education program to determine how peer interaction and collaboration might function as a resource for teacher educator preparation using Wenger's (1998) communities of practice. The specific research questions were:

1. How do two participants interact with their peers and what topics do they discuss inside and outside the classroom?
2. What factors in a graduate program help two doctoral students interact with their colleagues in a community?
3. Based on Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework, what are the characteristics of the domain, community, and practice shown in peer interactions?

Conceptual Framework

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) defined communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). Further, communities of practice have three important elements:

1. A domain consists of key issues or problems that community members all experience, promoting a shared sense of identity.
2. A community is a group of people who interact with, learn from one another. In the process, they build relationships and develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment.
3. A practice is a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents that community members share (Wenger et al., 2002, pp. 27 – 38).

A group can only be called a community of practice if it possesses all three elements. Regardless of whether the group is formed formally or informally, the interplay among these three elements can help constitute a healthy and fruitful community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002).

In addition to communities of practice, Henri and Pudelko (2003) described the four types of communities in terms of the cohesion among group members and the extent to which membership is defined by a common goal:

1. A community of interest formed around a topic of common interest.
2. A goal-oriented community of interest is created to satisfy a specific need to solve a particular problem, or to define or carry out a project.
3. A learners' community is comprised of students who may be in the same class, at the same institution, or even dispersed geographically.
4. A community of practice is defined by sharing the same trade or working conditions. (Henri & Pudelko, 2003, pp. 476 – 484).

Figure 1 (Henry & Pudeloko, 2003) shows that communities of practice have the strongest strength of social bond and are most strongly defined by a common goal. In the current study, these four different conceptualizations of “community” were used to analyze peer interactions in a graduate music education program.

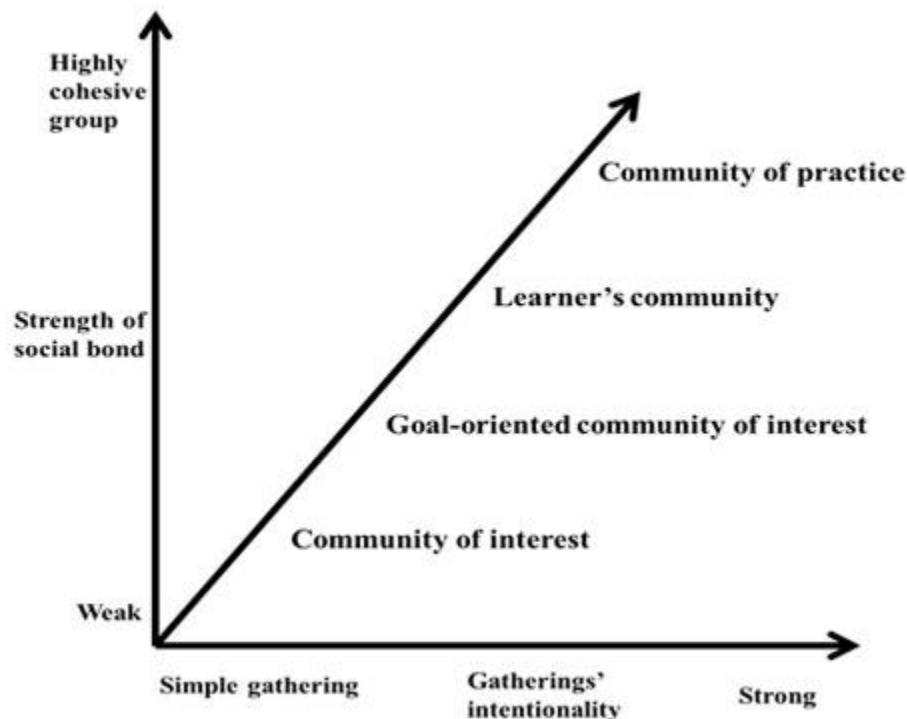


Figure 1. Different forms of virtual communities according to their context of emergence (Henry & Pudelko, 2003)

Method

Based on the purpose and research questions, it was determined that a case study design is most appropriate for this study since case studies focus on a bounded phenomenon and provide detailed description of the phenomenon, which helps readers' understanding about the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Further, a case study design was chosen because of the possibilities of a cohort graduate music education program providing foreseeable rich, thick descriptions of what participants experience in the program and in discovering how the program functions as a resource for music teacher educator support.

Participants

Anna is a director of bands at a small liberal arts college and teaches music education courses, including conducting and woodwind/brass method courses. Prior to working at the college-level, she worked as a director of bands at a high school and taught marching band, concert band, jazz band, and pep band. She worked as a high school teacher for 18 years and has been at

her current college position for the past five years. Anna has spent her third summer as a doctoral student. Bonnie is a piano pedagogy professor at a university and has been teaching group piano lessons for music majors and non-music majors since 2003 and privately since 1990. Bonnie began her doctoral study in 2006 and is preparing the advanced proposal for her dissertation.

Setting

A university located in the northeastern region of the United States offers a cohort doctor of education degree, which is designed for music educators holding full-time academic appointments who are interested in completing a doctoral program. Because of their full-time teaching jobs, students in the cohort program come to the school and take courses on site during summers—and between summers, they enroll in online music education courses to complete the requirements for a doctoral degree.

Because of several characteristics, this program was purposely chosen for the study. Doctoral students in this program have similarities, such as full-time teaching positions at the college-level and many years of teaching experience. Another characteristic of the program is the cohort structure. Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) defined cohorts as “groups of students who move through their teacher education program together, sharing coursework and developing a sense of community and support” (p. 351). Within the cohort model, summer classes are intensive, so students meet with the same classmates three or four days a week. This environment likely allows them to build close relationships with their colleagues more easily and quickly and create a “cohort community.”

Interviewing

Merriam (1998) indicates that interviewing is one of the most common methods in qualitative studies and is necessary in conducting “intensive case studies of a few selected individuals” (p. 72). Further, Kvale (2007) suggests that this process is necessary to obtain “descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 8). Therefore, an interview method was chosen for the present study to intensively investigate the interactions of two doctoral students enrolled in the same cohort. Individual student interviews were conducted in 2011 using an interview protocol created by the researcher. The interview questions focused on their backgrounds, interactions among doctoral students inside and outside the graduate music education classroom, and the doctoral program’s characteristics. Each participant was interviewed once, but the interview process was intensive, lasting between one to two hours.

Individual interviews were recorded and transcribed, which enabled the transcription process itself to become a process of analysis. The transcriptions of all interviews were sent to the participants to help clarity and make corrections. In reviewing the interview transcripts, I sought to find recurring themes considered to be important and coded the raw data using these themes. The units were then compared and contrasted and aggregated into groups as necessary. To protect the participants’ anonymity, all interview transcripts used pseudonyms.

Peer examination (LeCompte & Prissle, 1993) was used to enhance validity. A colleague was asked to code several interview transcripts to prevent researcher bias in the process of coding and analysis. Also, my common background as a doctoral student as well, may have resulted in researcher's bias, which can influence data collection, analysis, and synthesis (Merriam, 1998). To address this problem, member checks were used to determine the accuracy of individual interviews (Merriam, 1998).

Results

Interactions inside the Classroom

When asked to describe what topics they talk about in classrooms, both interviewees mentioned class topics and materials the faculty chose for their students. Anna explained her experiences with other doctoral students inside the classroom: "In groups, we mostly talked about what we heard or how we interpreted what we heard ... we did a lot of improvisation. We spent a lot more time talking about what we heard." Anna took several classes where students were encouraged to improvise. Faculty members recorded students' performances and asked them to discuss their own and others' performances. Throughout this discussion time, Anna and her peers talked about their thoughts and opinions about class improvisation and performances. Anna further emphasized that the interaction with other students gave her a chance to reinforce her understanding about class topics or materials:

I learned so much about improvisation from some people that were in there so far above me. There were people that were really good at that [improvisation] and could make the process really simple. They shared how they did the work.

During her individual interview, Anna mentioned that she had a lack of knowledge and experience of improvisation, so she was a little bit intimidated to conduct projects in several classes. However, while discussing class materials and sharing her individual work with other colleagues, Anna had opportunities to learn from others' strengths, which helped her better learn about the class topics and materials.

Before entering the program, the two participants already have many years of teaching experience, so they also easily shared their own teaching experiences and learned from others' successes and failures inside the classroom. When asked if she had a chance to share her own teaching experience or knowledge as a music teacher educator, Anna said, "If she [one professor] would say, 'Share some ideas about this,' I would have a lot of ideas about that because I've done that a bunch of times." Bonnie also remarked, "Everyone else in my classes [in a graduate program] were [like] teachers to me. So when they talk and share their experiences about something I never knew, it was just fascinating." Based on class topics, Anna and Bonnie shared their related teaching experiences with peers, which enabled them to learn not only from professors and class materials but also from other students' teaching experiences. The value of class materials emerged as another important shared knowledge between the two doctoral students and their colleagues. Bonnie expressed it this way:

We shared [in classes] how meaningful this [class material] is for us because we have experiences on our own, but not this way. The music education field speaks to us [about] what we were doing in the past. Actually [it] explains more [about] what we were doing like theoretical ways, more frameworks about [what] we were thinking.

Bonnie and most doctoral students in the same cohort received their master's degrees in music performance, so some music educational concepts or theories seemed new to them. While taking courses and interacting with classmates in the classroom, Bonnie discussed the connection between what she has taught and what she has learned in the graduate classroom and talked about how important and meaningful these materials are in her teaching career.

Interactions outside the Classroom

Bonnie and Anna maintained their relationships with their colleagues outside the classroom during summers and between summers. However, compared to experiences inside the classroom, interactions outside the classroom were informal and infrequent. First of all, discussion about their lives as doctoral students was the area the two participants mainly focused on outside the classroom during summers. Bonnie explained how difficult it was to study in the cohort doctoral program: "We only have 24 hours, [but] we have to do readings and writings, and many classes all through the summer. We took 12 credits, every summer, so it was a lot. We don't do anything but study." Bonnie further noted, "I feel like I have somebody I can share my agony [with]. We have the same goals, and we have our own community that something we can share together, nobody else." Most cohort students are in a similar situation where they need to take intensive summer courses during a limited time period; they need to take three or four classes from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm at least three times a week and participate in different group projects. This commonality allowed Bonnie to easily share her own concerns and problems as a doctoral student with her peers in the same program. During summers, the two doctoral students' teaching experiences were also shared outside the classroom. During lunch or dinner, Anna and her cohort colleagues talked about their teaching, students, and performance: "We kind of talk about what we are doing professionally ... what's going on in our schools, and what's going on in our own playing or our own teaching." It is important to mention that although Anna talked about her teaching situation with others, she tended to just share her experience, instead of asking about specific teaching strategies or knowledge.

Bonnie, however, mentioned that she sometimes contacted her peers between summers when she had problems at her school:

If you have any questions [like] "How are you doing it in your school? I have this problem and what would you recommend to solve the problem?" We can talk because we have a community and we are more comfortable to talk about it.

While taking summer classes together, Bonnie and her colleagues in the same cohort appeared to create a community where they learned and received support from each other, which also

enabled them to interact with each other outside the classroom and ask for help in their own teaching. Bonnie appeared to understand who her colleagues are and whom she needs to ask for help when it is necessary (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). However, this type of interaction occurred infrequently and randomly during and between summers.

Between summers, Anna also called her colleagues and talked about online class assignments she took during the fall or spring semester:

We [Anna and her colleague in the program] take online courses, and a lot of times, he and I ended up with the same courses, so we call each other and say, “Hey, what do you think about this?” or, “How are you going to do this?”

Compared with class collaboration during summers, the interaction with peers in the fall and spring semesters focused on exchanging information about class assignments. Most students in the cohort doctoral program have a full-time teaching position at a university or college, so they usually take one or two online classes in the fall or spring semester. Since it is difficult to meet professors or classmates in person while taking online classes, Bonnie and Anna tend to contact cohort students taking the same classes whenever they have questions regarding class assignments.

Factors that Affected their Interactions

While analyzing the interview transcripts, I found that the development of a community between the participants and their peers was affected by the personal backgrounds they bring to the program and various elements of the program, including similar career backgrounds, the cohort program structure, group work, and faculty members in the classroom.

Similar career backgrounds.

Compared to other doctoral programs, the cohort program is designed for music teacher educators who hold a full-time teaching position at a university or college and are interested in pursuing a doctoral degree. Because of their current teaching positions, Anna and Bonnie actively shared their own teaching experiences inside and outside the classroom with their peers and easily found value in the class materials. Also, the commonality of having similar years of teaching experience and age helped them more easily create a community. In response to the question about how this cohort program is different from programs in her undergraduate and master’s degrees, Anna replied, “The cohort program used to have a requirement that you are teaching music fulltime, so most of them are like me, a little bit older, so that makes us a lot alike.” She further commented, “There are similarities in the way that we think about teaching just because we’ve taught so many years. I think that makes people a little bit closer together.” Specific teaching areas also played a vital role in creating a community. In particular, different teaching areas made it difficult for students to have in-depth discussions about problems and concerns in their own teaching situations outside the classroom. When asked about her experiences in contacting other cohort students for help in her own teaching, Anna said, “In the cohort program? Not as much because there is not anyone in the cohort that does exactly what I

do.” Specific class topics or materials helped Anna collaboratively work with other classmates inside the classroom regardless of the specialty in music education, but she tried to find colleagues who worked in the same areas when she needed to ask specific questions about her own teaching outside the graduate classroom.

The cohort program structure.

During summers, Anna and Bonnie stay in a dormitory and intensively take classes together, which enabled them to spend a large amount of time with other doctoral students inside and outside the classroom. When asked how she became closer to her colleague in the cohort program, Anna replied, “We just hung out a lot together. We had lived across the hall [in the dormitory] from each other. She and I spent the whole summer, and we eat breakfast together and dinner together.” Bonnie also mentioned:

Because we are cohorts, we have a bond, and we just happen to sit next to each other, which means when you have a discussion, we just easily turn around to each other and talk. And if we do that on a regular basis, then you just become a good friend.

Within the cohort program structure, regular and intensive interactions with other students inside and outside the classroom appeared to help Bonnie and Anna easily create a cohort community with other doctoral students.

Group work.

The two participants had many opportunities to work with their peers on group projects while taking classes in the cohort program, and group work was also an important element which made them know other colleagues quickly and easily. As for the informal interactions with other students, Anna stated:

For the most part, it’s been very positive and certainly had social aspects to it as well. Almost every large group project that I’ve been a part of ... our group liked each other very well. And we might go [out] when we are finished working.

Group projects gave Anna opportunities not only to work and accomplish assignments with group members but also to become good friends with each other. It is not surprising that interactions on group projects facilitated interactions outside the classroom.

Faculty members as facilitators.

When asked to define the professors’ roles in the classroom, both Anna and Bonnie referred to them as facilitators. Anna remarked:

He [one professor] really made me [think about] things in a new way. We [Anna and the professor] had a philosophical argument about that [defining a musician], and so he gave

us a poetry writing assignment.... They [classmates' poetry] were gorgeous ... what came out of the people within that small bit of structure was just incredible. And, he said, 'Who in this room is not a poet?' It was true.

As shown in the above quote, faculty members in the cohort program facilitated students' thoughts and ideas about music, teaching, and music education while preparing different class activities and materials. Bonnie also emphasized, "They [professors] opened me to speak, share, and view things differently by asking questions differently." By introducing different ideas and concepts and promoting student learning, faculty members enabled the two participants to think about class topics from various perspectives, which made student interaction and collaboration in the classroom richer and more fruitful.

Discussion

Evolution of Interactions in Cohort Classes into Communities of Practice

Based on Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, the above findings were reviewed to determine how a community of peer interaction functions as a resource for teacher educator preparation. The discussion between the two doctoral students and their colleagues during summer classes was mostly about issues related to music education. Bonnie and Anna talked about class topics such as improvisation and student-centered learning and tried to learn these materials for their own students and teaching, so the domain in these classes included the commonality of working as a full-time music educator at the college-level and wanting to be a better music teacher educator. While reflecting on this common goal, they developed shared repertoire with peers, including their own strategies and skills related to class materials, which helped them learn new knowledge more easily. These characteristics were closely related to the practice. The development of a community was greatly affected by their similar career backgrounds, the cohort program structure, group work, and faculty members as facilitators.

While investigating the interactions among beginning elementary music teachers in a group mentoring program, Blair (2008) argued:

Through the sustained interaction of our year of meetings and correspondence, a deeper level of community emerged, supporting them in their shared practice. The mentoring group began with the "domain" and "practice" characteristics, but emerged at the end of the year with a powerful sense of community (p. 113).

In this context, the interactions between the two participants and their peers in summer classes showed a similar path of evolution into communities of practice. Their interactions began with the characteristics of the domain and the practice characteristics similar to Blair (2008), and their similar age and years of teaching experience also enabled them to take on the community character from the beginning. Through intensive summer courses and group projects, their interactions within cohort class evolved into deeper level of communities, referred to as communities of practice.

It is interesting to note that the two participants actively discussed the value of class materials in the classroom. They commonly acknowledged the importance of class materials for their teaching careers and talked about the connection between what they have taught in their own classrooms and what they have learned in their cohort classes. According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), one of the principles to catalyze the development of communities of practice is to “encourage community members to be explicit about the value of the community throughout its lifetime” (p. 60). Because of their years of teaching experience, Bonnie and Anna appeared to immediately understand the value of class materials, which was further reinforced by peer interactions. Focus on the value became one of the major elements to help the doctoral students feel that participation in the cohort classes was useful, which led to a more active development of shared repertoire based on class materials.

Professors also played important roles in encouraging students to have different perspectives on music, teaching, students, and music education in communities of practice. Instead of teacher-centered lectures, faculty members in the cohort program introduced new class activities or materials so that the doctoral students could naturally learn new knowledge and skills by interacting with other members. Wenger (1998) defined brokering as “connections provided by people who can introduce elements of one practice into another” (p. 4). Faculty members in the cohort classes played brokering roles by introducing new material, asking different questions, and encouraging peer interactions in the classroom, which was another important factor that enabled a community of peer interactions in a graduate program to evolve into communities of practice.

A Music Teacher Educator Community of Interest outside the Classroom

Unlike the experience inside the cohort classes, peer interactions outside the classroom demonstrated characteristics of a community of interest (Henry & Pudelko, 2003). Anna and Bonnie shared their teaching experiences with their colleagues in the program outside the classroom, and this interaction derived from the behaviors of exchanging information based on their common passion in music education. Although they shared similar interests in music education, the community outside the classroom had a weak social bond and the group’s intentionality was low. In particular, different teaching areas including band, orchestra, piano, jazz, and general music made it difficult to have in-depth discussions about their own teaching situations and create a strong social bond outside the classroom.

To develop a community of practice, it is necessary to foster common goals among members (Akerson, Cullen, & Hanson, 2009). The two participants appeared to have a common goal with their colleagues, which was to become better teacher educators. In addition, cohort classes enabled these students to have more specific objectives, such as improvisation and creativity, which helped all members in the classroom freely contribute to the topics of discussion. The community outside the classroom, however, appeared to exist without these specific topics, which made interactions outside the classroom only evolve into a community of interest. The lack of regular interaction was another element in determining the strength of the social bond between the participants and their peers outside the classroom. Sustained interactions

and correspondence help a group of people evolve into a deeper level of community (Blair, 2008). Compared to the summer program, the social bond in the fall and spring semesters was weak because the two doctoral students had few opportunities to take classes and interact with other colleagues outside the classroom.

A Doctoral Student Community of Interest

Another form of a community of interest was found between the two participants and their peers. Outside the classroom, they shared their difficulties in taking intensive courses and sought to help with class assignments. The domain in this community was to survive as a doctoral student in the cohort program, and they shared their concerns and exchanged information and knowledge about their doctoral studies (the practice) while informally interacting with other colleagues by phone and email (the community). Although the three elements of communities of practice existed in this group, the two doctoral students seemed to “identify themselves more to the topic of interest of the group than to its members,” so the interaction was not “assimilated into that of a formal group motivated by a common goal” (Henri & Pudelko, 2003, p. 478).

A common interest in music education was the primary goal among the group members. To become better music teacher educators, the two participants decided to pursue their doctoral degrees, which encouraged them to actively share their own teaching experiences inside the classroom. However, the members’ common problems as doctoral students were not as important as the primary goal they all shared in the cohort program, so they were inactive in developing shared resources about their doctoral studies and had a weak social bond in this type of community.

Conclusion and Implications for Music Education

As this study was conducted with only two doctoral students, findings are not generalizable. Nevertheless, several important conclusions can be drawn from these results. A community of peer interactions in a graduate program is valuable for doctoral students preparing to become teacher educators. Common interests, shared repertoire, and regular interactions with peers enabled the interaction inside the cohort classes to evolve into communities of practice where the two participants learn from others and develop shared repertoire about music education. Discussion about the value of class materials also helped them to be actively involved in their classes.

Professors played important roles to facilitate interactions among the doctoral students in the classroom. Instead of teacher-centered learning, student-centered class activities should be provided so that doctoral students can interact with each other and learn from other colleagues. Professors also need to encourage them to engage in class topics and materials from their own experiences and prompt them when needed. Finally, students should have opportunities to share their thoughts on class materials and ideas about how it can relate to their classrooms so that they can explicitly determine the value of their graduate classes.

In order to create a stronger social bond among doctoral students beyond graduate classes so that they can have more opportunities to collaborate with peers, it is necessary to encourage them to share professional projects or goals that they undertake in their own teaching situations. It would be helpful to distribute a list of professional or personal websites where students can find specific information about others' professions and find colleagues who have similar professional interests.

Graduate programs can use a blog to help doctoral students regularly interact with other colleagues outside the classroom. Members can continuously update the blogs without time and place restraints. Also, blogs make members become more involved than other pedagogic and web-based environments, creating a stronger sense of community (Wenger, 1998; Yang, 2009). Through blogs, doctoral students can ask questions about their own problems and receive answers and support from others, making it possible to have continuous interactions beyond the graduate classroom.

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