BUILDING A VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITY ONLINE: SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM AN ONLINE MA PROGRAM FOR ART TEACHERS AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This paper presents some findings from the Online Masters Degree Program for Art Teachers at The Ohio State University. The program aims to promote professional growth of in-service art teachers. One of the goals of this program is to build a virtual learning community through online interaction and facilitation. The author discusses the program results in terms of building a community for learning online, and presents evidences of community development. The discussion focuses on two perspectives, one from instructor's side—on how they facilitate community interaction, and the other from student's side—on how they interact with the learning community. The themes

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explored under the two perspectives include: 1) the changing roles that art teacher educators have taken and how they have created new ways to foster effective learning in an online learning environment, 2) the ways the virtual community has worked to bridge theory and practice for the teacher participants and encourage them to become a reflective practitioner, and 3) members of the learning community learn not only from their instructors, but also from their peers and from the community's group reflective process as well.

Keywords

Art teacher education, Online distance education, Professional development, Teacher network

I. Introduction: Facilitating professional development in the virtual world

Traditionally, programs of professional development for teacher practitioners are often implemented on a local, policy, or content-oriented basis. For example, the programs can be district-wide implementation, in preparation for educational policies or initiatives on a one-time fashion. Or, they can be school-wide training of teachers for teaching on certain academic subjects. There are also many more professional workshops that aim to spread new ideas of teaching in different topics. These programs benefits teacher practitioners by providing more up-to-date information on informative level of professional training. But they are often scattered in their focus and fragmented in their impact on teacher's intrinsic professional growth. There are two major trends in recent development of teacher education which made the limitation of the traditional mode of informative professional development programs becomes clear. One is about raising teachers' reflective thinking over their own practice and the other about building teacher network to promote sustained professional exchange. On training more reflective teachers, the impact of traditional professional programs is limited because they often discount individual teacher's own context, and only acts as an informative agent. On promoting sustained professional exchange, their impact is limited because the major concern is often to promote change in curricular content or policy, not for change and growth in individual teachers.

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Element of individualized growth in conventional professional development approaches is overlooked most of the time. To promote long-term growth in practitioners, technology has offered some solutions. The development of distance education via the online-based format has been proved to have major contributions and educational potentials on professional development. One of its benefits is how online technology is able to bring a group of people to undertake learning activity as c community with far more flexibility and productivity than ever. This paper will present some findings focusing on building virtual learning community on the experimentation and implementation of the Online Masters Program for Art Teachers which is initiated by Department of Art Education at The Oho State University. This program has been undergone for one and half years. As the online course designer and designated program researcher, I will focus on 1) how the faculty members of the online program have worked to create a productive virtual community for the teacher participants to foster sustained professional growth, and 2) how the community has fostered interconnection between theory and practice for the participants and made them more reflective of their own teaching, and 3) how the members of the learning community learned not only from their instructors, but from their peers and also from the community's group reflective process as well. The discussion will provide evidences of the formation of a learning community as shown in online classroom interactions and course activities and discussion postings. As the reader will see later, both art teacher educators and in-service practitioners have assumed different roles within this new context as compared with the traditional face-to-face professional development setting, and because of this role-change, teacher practitioners are able to learn collaboratively in a professional support network which is responsive to individual's learning.

II. About Online Master's Program at The Ohio State University

In the Department of Art Education at Ohio State, our experimentation to take advantages of online learning has been undergone for years. Taking together all the experience, a series of online courses were then developed by faculty members aiming at graduate level for practicing art teachers, and the

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resulting Online Masters Program for Art Teachers began its first year in the summer of 2002. The main purpose and goals of this program are to:

1. Promoting teacher's professional growth through learning to re-evaluate one's own practice, and learn to become a reflective practitioner in fostering interactive exchange between theory and practice.

2. Developing a virtual community and professional network to foster professional exchanges through the online learning network. With the aid of online technologies, this community should be able to break physical boundaries and reach more teachers without constrains of time and place, and therefore promote more dialogues among art educators coming from different school contexts.

3. Exploring the possibilities of online masters program in art teacher education and expanding dialogues and communication between university and K-12 schools.

There are sixteen practicing teachers who attended this new program in summer 2002, and they come from various geographical locations and time zones, including different states in the US (Alaska, California, Missouri, New York, and Ohio) and overseas (Saudi Arabia). Their average years of teaching experience are more than five years, and they age between mid-twenties and mid-fifties. The program is structured to have this group of sixteen teacher participants take one online course in each quarter for the two-year period with a total of eight courses. These eight courses represent the most important topics concerning art teaching today, including 1) current issues in art education, 2) studio method, 3) art criticism, 4) beginning research/action research, 5) proposal writing, 6) multicultural art education, 7) assessment in art learning, and 8) thesis writing. The online learning takes place in an asynchronous fashion, that is, the participants log on to the course website at the time of their own schedule to 1) participate in online course activities, 2) discuss course materials with their fellow participants, and 3) submit their assignments to share with the class. In addition to the online course engagement, the participants are required to visit the campus for a weekly

gathering in the two consecutive summers within the duration of the two-year period. This meeting has later proved to be fruitful and become a major catalyst for the group to become personally and emotionally supportive toward each other in the virtual classroom.

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III. About the research methodology

As the designated researcher to document the ongoing episodes of the program and its results both regarding to in-service art teacher education in general and the participants' online learning experience in particular, I have unlimited access to the data which are results of all posted online course activities. The different kinds of data being studied include:

1. All postings in the eight online course websites including records of communications in discussion board, online student projects, and assignments.

2. Interview transcripts generated from individual participants and instructors' responses. The form of interviews will be semi-structured to include individual inputs besides my targeted questions.

3. Electronic correspondences between the researcher and the participants and instructors.

4. The researchers' observation fieldnotes on class interactions and community development.

5. The researcher's research diary to record ongoing thoughts and reflections.

The methodology employed in this study is participant observation, for the goal of documenting a particular group's community interaction and the meanings behind it—typical of an ethnographic study which attempts to closely observe and analyze a community's cultural and consensus-building process, interactive patterns, and members' behaviors.

An ethnographic research requires the researcher to be critically aware of his/her role in the filed, and the impact of his/her presence on data collected as well as his/her ability to see and analyze the contextual significance of

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data. For the presence of me being the researcher, I see myself as a participant observer who is recognized as important by the teacher participants to help them to solve problems but is not in the position to affect their course interactions, that is, the data being studied. The literature of the ethnographic research has multiple views when it comes to seeing the role of the researcher in the community at study. Although I am not participating in the program activities with the group, I am involved in different aspects with the program to the extent that I am able to see the meanings of the data with more contextualized understanding in their situated significance. Atkinson & Hammersley (1998) argued that the researcher observer can not exclude himself/herself from the social group he/she is studying. They said:

> ... in a sense all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). From this point of view participant observation is not a particular research technique but a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers. Both ethnography and participant observation have been claimed to represent a uniquely humanistic, interpretive approach, as opposed to supposedly 'scientific' and 'positivist' positions. (p. 110-1)

In my case, I am involved in collaborating with instructors in developing online courses, and have helped to manage the program in technical aspects and assisted the teacher participants in solving technical problems of online learning and offering advices on assignments, which have all made me become part of the social group I am studying. Although I am part of the social group, my impact on their class interactions is limited and is insignificant enough to enable me to stay only as an observer. Therefore, I see myself as participating the social group from the aspects of my technical and other assistances and through my understanding of the content materials presented online, but I am able to remind on the sideline to objectively observe the evolvement of the online program without interference. On the other hand, however, since that to a great extent I have developed close social relationship with this particular virtual community as an assistance provider, I am able to illicit more honest response from the participants when conducting research activities such as interviewing the members. My per-

sonal involvement with the virtual community enables me to earn members' trust and openness to provide me the whole picture of social evolvement from their perspectives as clear as possible.

IV. The changing roles of art teacher educators in the virtual community

Instructor's new role in online classroom

In a regular classroom, teacher educators often possess absolute authority over the content knowledge of their specializations which are what the university institution values as major intellectual assets—their strength in constructing knowledge and formulating theory. This content authority has shaped how teacher educators interact with their students. The major format of interaction is usually to examine issues with critical approach, that is, it is a learning situation where issue-centered intellectual discourse dominates. Here, teacher educators have leading roles in validating different positions on issues and trends. However, the instructional delivery takes on a different form in the online classroom. From analyzing the textual dialogues posted on the seven online course websites to date, each of the four teacher educators who have taught in the online program has adapted different role in this new learning situation that is less seen in their face-to-face teaching situation. To sum up the new roles, there is no better way than the following theater analogy by Lynch (2002):

> To use a theater analogy, the traditional instructor serves as the lead actor—the one who must carry the show, even though there is allowance for other characters to interact. In contrast, the online instructor is more like the director—one who ensures that all the characters play their part and that the show moves smoothly from beginning to end, adding his or her expertise only when the actors seem to need assistance. The director (teacher) leaves the content delivery to the script (Web pages and assignments) and the uniqueness of character development and nuances of meaning to the actors (the students). (p. 64)

To add more dimensions to this analogy, in the virtual classroom, the

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class discourse—the depth and breadth of the drama—is on the hands of the actors—the students, for spontaneous and creative additions and revisions when necessary; and how much direction he or she needs from the director is his/her own choice as well. These conditions have all pointed to a more student-initiated or flexible students-directed learning situation. Next, I will provide close examinations of the four instructors' new roles as exhibited from the textual reconstruction of their presence in the virtual classroom.

Re-constructing instructor's online presence

The four instructors in the online program are all highly experienced art teacher educators. Each of them has established substantial academic credibility in their content specialization, which has made them the lead actor on the spotlight—in intellectual terms—in the traditional classroom discourse. Their role in the classroom is well-received by the students who look up to them for both academic and emotional support. The way these instructor-experts discuss and structure the course interactions results in students' confidence on their professionalism. In the online classroom, however, their physical attributes and presence—their voice, facial expression, and body language—have lost, and they need to reconstruct their presence as instructor through textual dialogues in online communication. Interestingly, although each has their own variances on adjusting to online teaching, their instructional styles have all incidentally exhibited more of their caring personality as an academic supporter for learning, and less of a strong intellectual leader to dominate academic discourse. And most importantly, their newly adapted instructional roles have all contributed to create a productive virtual learning environment for the teacher participants. In this paper, their approaches to online teaching are examined based on building community learning, promoting interaction between theory and practice, and reflective learning—both individual and collective.

Commonalities in online teaching approach

Having common goals and high expectations for this online program, the four instructors share the same general instructional approaches in mind. The first instructional commonality is that they all assigned a term project which usually began at the second half of the course in which participants

took the ideas they learned into action and interpreted what the ideas meant to their own teaching context. Project-directed learning was used by the instructors to encourage more reflective learning on theory and practice interaction. The second commonality is their goal to bring participants' virtual discourses with the same intellectual standards as regular graduate courses, that is, they strove to model intellectual clarity, consistency, and depth in participants' written responses, assignments, and also their commentaries to peers. The third commonality is that the instructors had each committed great amount of time and effort in course design where they built in their expected student responses and interactions into the class structure and course activities. I cannot stress enough how important it is to design online course from individual learner's perspective to allow self-directed learning to take place. Online course design itself is another important topic demanding lengthy discussions.

Despite their common grounds in teaching online course as stated above, the instructors still display their own distinctive styles which bring lights to this virtual community from different angles, and consequently illicit different social and learning behaviors from the participants. In the present paper, I limit myself only to focus on how the instructors' distinctive styles have served to facilitate and foster community-building, may it be building intellectual value, social value, or encouraging students' self-expectation. This is not, however, to preach that these distinctive styles being discussed are necessary elements to guide online teaching in general across all situations. Rather, it is only to illustrate the impact of online teacher's professional presence and instructional style on outcomes of online learning.

Instructor S.W.: Modeling ideal attitudes for socially-supportive learning community

Firs of all, by examining the postings by instructor S.W. (coded name) over the three online courses that she has taught in the program, one can easily sense the encouraging and sensitive role she has played in the course interaction. The language she used to interact with the participants is positive and encouraging. She is not afraid of showing her feelings to the virtual community—words of heartfelt emotions are commonly found in her postings. Another distinctive instructional style she has adapted—either being

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aware of it herself or not—in the virtual classroom is downplaying herself as a learner in the community, rather than an academic leader to control how learning proceeds. This is evident from her postings where she referred herself as being motivated by the participants' response to think further or learn better. Comparing with the role she plays in traditional classroom, her online self—or online professional identity—has seemed to discard content control and take up the role of motivated learner and become active in integrating—not structuring—the ongoing course interaction. For illustration, here are a few extracts from her online postings (these were taken out of different courses contexts, not in time sequence) with my observation notes:

> Dear D,
>
> As I said in an earlier response, you certainly stirred up some response among the group. I appreciate your honesty about integrated curriculum and don't take it as pessimism, but honest wondering. I also appreciate the involvement by others in responding to your thoughts. Ideally, this is the way a good online discussion works. —S.W. (Message Id: W2-33)

The above message shows how she encouraged community input and praised that being sincere and honest is what she valued as positive community behaviors and interactions.

> Dear D,
>
> Thank you for your soothing words of comfort. We do realize how difficult this can be to take on when you already have a full time job and are trying to also have a life as well. If it makes the group feel any better, you should know that I am very pleased and impressed with the level of your work and attitude. It certainly makes teaching much more of a pleasure for us. I hope you will all take T's words of wisdom and try to enjoy this rather than get too stressed out over it. —S.W. (Message Id: W2-74)

In the message above, she was expressing concerns over the participants' busy and sometimes uneasy professional life. A personal concern makes the community less informal and more personal.

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Dear Group,

Thank you for all the feedback about my article.... It was very encouraging to find that the article speaks to classroom practice which is my primary intent. I was interested to find out which of the examples resonated with you or if any of them did not. ...I realize that writing, especially longer texts, will not always work in your classrooms. Thus, I welcome knowing about strategies that you devise for engaging students with inquiry as part of the artmaking process.—S.W. (Message Id: W2-231)

In the message above, she was expressing how much she valued and respected the participants' input from experimenting ideas in their own classrooms, and encouraging individual sharing of practical experience and insights.

Dear H,

You may not feel that you are making a lot of progress, but I am really excited that you are trying to change your teaching practice to a more discovery based approach. It takes time for you and your students to grow into it. I am heartened by your recognition that "without adequate strategies students become disillusioned and confused." This, for me, is one of the most difficult points to make that. After a frustrating morning, your openness to the ideas in the chapter have put me in a much better frame of mind. —S.W. (Message Id: W2-205)

In the message above, she shows her passion toward participants' learning and growth. This would in turn make the participants value their own learning because they see their instructor do so.

Dear T,

I was on my way to bed and not planning on responding tonight, but when I read your description of how you do not love your job now, my heart went out to you. I wanted to say you, as other teachers, have a tough job. It is no fun to teach unless you can find time to do some of the things that you think are important and make you feel successful. There will of course never be adequate time to do

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everything the way we want, but if you can't find time to do some of it, then I'm afraid you will become one of the drop out statistics... I hope you can find ways to make things better. —S.W. (Message Id: W2-63).

In the message above, she was sharing her personal feelings about how to cope with teaching as one's profession, and what teaching should be about even struggles will come and effort can become unrewarding. This kind of message would open the door to the participants about sharing their real life obstacles as they experience in the teaching field. It would further the development of emotional tie among the members of this community.

These extracts have shown how instructor S.W. presented herself in the virtual classroom as both academic and emotional supporter in the learning process, and her words with positive and caring emotional tones are attributes to make the virtual community more personal and less formal. She also wrote very often in terms of modeling ways to convey feelings and emotions to the virtual community so that the participants will do the same. In a quiet way, besides her content delivery and intellectual guidance, she is setting ideal social behavioral patterns for the community to promote caring support for each member. Caring for each other intellectually—that is, to become aware of and care their peer's learning process—would come only after emotional caring for each other is established. In retrospect, the participants gradually opened themselves up emotionally in the virtual classroom after S.W.'s course.

Instructor P.S.: Modeling ideal intellectual standards and research ethics

Teaching online course is one story, teaching people on how to do research through online course is another story, and the latter posts a greater challenge. For that it takes a lengthy back-and-forth textual communication to clarify all sorts of complex problems involved in a research endeavor. Instructors P.S. and T.B. have all taught the research writing course in the program. Similar to instructor S.W., P.S. and T.B. are also respected as the content authority in their specialization and take leading role in shaping students' classroom discussions and intellectual orientations. Instructor P.S.'s face-to-face classroom instructional style is very structured which offers students

clear direction as to where the course is moving to. Unlike her face-to-face instructional style, in the online research writing course P.S. offered a reflective big-picture approach to guide the teacher participants in conceptualizing their research plans. Below are two examples of her response to a participant in thinking about how to conduct the research. From the extract, we can see how her critique of participants' research report helps to mapping and pinpointing the strength and necessary steps to take for furthering the research. Her words of encouragement to the participants on what is expected of a graduate research to connect theory and practice really show her enthusiasm toward participant's learning. She has become the facilitator who helps participants to identify their individual relevance and how they can integrate knowledge with practice.

Dear D,

Whoa you wore me out just reading this proposal. I know you are of high energy, so may be all of this is possible. You have a great start on what promises to be an exceptional project. I really think your introduction and background sections are strong. I'm not positively sure that your question is completely set yet because I see what you are doing in two distinct parts/two questions. The first is planning the curriculum using video/new technology and the second is trying it out. It seems you've kind of blended some of this stuff together for now. Maybe later you can separate it out a bit for clarity. Try thinking of the project in terms of processes (1) the processes and steps involved in planning and (2) the processes and steps involved in teaching. This might help to analyze data and to write up your experiences. It could also help in the data coding process. I really like your project and the way you think about curriculum and teaching. This is terribly exciting stuff! However, I do think this project is more about you and your curriculum development and delivery than it is about student learning. You do gauge your success in curriculum development and teaching in measure in how well students learn what you are teaching though. Think about this. Maybe it would be a way to focus this project a bit more and help you decide what is really important to document. Congratulations!

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—P.S. (Message Id: S1-16)

Dear H,

I read your proposal for the MA Project and think you are on the right track. You may have bitten off a bit too much, but you seem very able and this plan is well configured. So my advice to you is just do it. Your introduction and background are written in an interesting narrative form. I feel this form may work for you throughout the project, but you might want to check with Sydney on this to be sure. The questions and concerns you raise are legitimate. These ideas that torment and plague you are the ones that concern many in the field. You are going through what graduate school is meant to put people through—reflective practice. We struggle to make meaning out of life, theory, and what gives our existence value, thus, what we feel is worth passing on to others. This is really a normal reaction to having your taken-for-granted assumptions questioned. You might just as well go with it, because from this point on it probably won't go away. You are now involved in the most important part of graduate school—the construction of new knowledge. This is what the theory and the practice of other is built on. It is an immense responsibility. You seem up to it. I trust you to do what is right for you. You are now a practicing scholar. Soon you will learn to love this believe it or not. Thinking can become addictive with practice. Just learn to stick up for, and support what you feel-believe is right for now. (Even if others don't). Tomorrow (metaphorically) these ideas and values may turn to dust, and others more relevant to the social, political, and economics of the times and better argued with take their place. Congratulations on a great start and envisioning a most worthy project. —P.S. (Message Id: S1-28)

Similar to S.W.'s role in setting the emotional depth of the virtual communication in her rather hidden curriculum, instructor P.S. has conveyed to participants in her online guidance about what academic research and intellectual quest is really about. P.S.'s communication made it clear for the partici-

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pants on what role the research should play in relation to their own professional practice. As she said in her message above, research endeavor involves individual teacher's interplay of life attitude/philosophy, professional insights and beliefs, broader context and culture, continuing quest for better teaching, and academic responsibility of seeking better answers. These messages imply academic expectation and research ethics and set up the common understanding for the virtual community. They will be more likely to hold similar standards and expectation toward their own and others' research.

Instructor T.B.: Modeling critical thinking for research practice

By comparison, instructor T.B.'s online advising style is more of a questioning approach. His research critique goes into great detail to facilitate participants for critical examination of their own research assumptions, which is different from P.S.'s approach that guides participants to look at their research process from a holistic point of view. He looked into the participant's research from different angles including research purpose, logics of formulating research, theoretical foundations, data analysis and interpretation, etc., and helped participants to check on their own thinking process at each stage of formulating research. This is critical of making them become a more reflective thinker in conducting research (Hsu, 2004). T.B.'s critical questioning approach forced participants to clarify the conceptualization of conducting a research at the preliminary stage which is often full of uncertainties and ambiguities to the beginning teacher researcher. Below is an extract of his critique to a participant's research proposal.

Dear L,

Your research looks like this: 1) "How can visual art activities at the secondary level change to better evoke students to exhibit analysis, synthesis, and evaluation?"

And it also looks like this: 2) "To see if students could be coaxed to use higher order cognitive thinking in their class work."

And then it contains this: 3) "Does the requirement of a "big idea" over a series of art projects require the student to do more analysis,

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synthesis and evaluation than a series of unrelated projects:"

And finally, there is this: 4) "Does the use of synthesis and evaluation change when a student critiques her own work as opposed to a classmate's work or work of a famous artist?"

You say that you want to identify analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in 1) student art works and/or 2) student talk or student writing about artworks. You then introduce the further variables of a) students' own artwork or their writing about it, b) students writing or talking about a peer's artwork, and then c) students writing or talking about professional artwork.

I'd like to know quickly if you are looking for evidence of "analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" in both Artmaking activities and in art response activities? It sounds like you are. If so, have you defined what "analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" looks like in a work of art? Can you do this? How will you do this?

Question #3 and #4 above are two different although related cognitive activities: one primarily verbal, the other primarily visual. I believe that Bloom was working with verbal thinking operations. You seem to want to work with both verbal and visual thinking operations.

You will have to apply Bloom's verbal interaction to students working with non-verbal materials. Thus, you will have to invent new definitions or exemplifications of what "analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" look like in clay or paint.

Or perhaps you going to get into the minds of the students while they plan and make art? That is, are you going to have them think out loud to you as they think about "analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" while they make a painting or a sculpture?

You say you will "examine the work of my advanced art class by

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reviewing past work and comparing it to current and future lessons specifically constructed to require the use of analysis, synthesis and evaluation." If this is really what you are doing, I don't think you will answer your question(s). You will be comparing "work" to "lessons." First, I don't know what you mean by "work," or how you will find "analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" in artworks, as I just said above. Second, I don't think you want to compare work to lessons, but work to work, or lessons to lessons.

Overall, I think this is way too much for this course and project. Please scale down and get more specific.

Most importantly, I think, is for you to first explain what you think Bloom meant by "analysis, synthesis, and evaluation," and then how you will identify these in 1) students' art works, OR 2) students' talk or writing about art works, their own or that made by peers or professionals.

Perhaps, after clearly identifying "analysis, synthesis, and evaluation," take ONE of these three concepts of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and investigate how it emerges in students' Artmaking OR in students' writing about art works.

Let me know what you think of these suggestions, please. —T.B. (Message Id: B2-72)

This piece of extract is long, but the reader can see how instructor T.B. meticulously analyzed the participant's thinking process to seek better clarification. With such approach, T.B. has acted similar to P.S. on individualized advising but through a rather inquiry-based educative process. Participants will be bound to think more critically of their own conceptualization on research process. This training of critical thinking in a way also promoted the participants' critical responses to each other's learning in the virtual classroom. Moreover, this kind of highly articulated intellectual feedback will help to significantly foster sustained and continued research discourse between instructors and participants, and among the participants themselves too.

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In terms of setting intellectual standards, instructor T.B.'s inquiry-based teaching approach probably would be more effective in conveying to the virtual community on what high standards means and entails in graduate research than simply giving good grades. Since participants will not have access to others' grades, they will not know which participant get what grade on which assignment. Consequently, participants will not know how academic performance is judged and valued at graduate level. However, as the community evolved through different courses, they seemed to become a better judge in constructing critically-structured response to comment classmates' learning. The other instructors have all demonstrated their valuing critical thinking in their online teaching, but instructor T.B.'s analyzing approach made it more transparent and concert for the learning community. I think that in some way, instructor T.B.'s way of evaluating one's thinking demonstrated to the community on how to assess learning and also why seeking clarity and consistency in one's thinking process is important.

Instructor M.P.: Modeling community reflection and collective thinking

Another instructor M.P. who has taught both research writing and assessment courses has demonstrated yet another interesting approach to foster the building of this virtual learning community. His approach to online teaching is again different from his usual face-to-face instruction. Unlike his face-to-face classroom instruction where he is the great philosopher who leads academic discourse, he has downplayed himself to the role of a learner in the virtual classroom. In his assessment course, there were questions for the participants to answer after readings as a collective reflective activity, and he answered the questions himself as well to post online. In the virtual course interaction, the presence of him being the instructor has being subdued—he has become a student himself. Every week, he conceptualized theoretical and practical ideas and reflected together with the participants and posted what he thought were important at the time. After weekly online discussion, he then summed up the virtual community's posted responses as a whole, and pinpointed directions where the collective thinking seemed to be heading, and what particular insights people have brought that deserved second thought. He seemed to serve as a mirror to reflect and recapture what had happened in the group thinking process. This new form of instructor-as-stu-

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dent-himself was new to the learning community at this time, and lasted for the first half of the assessment course. In the second half where participants were conceptualizing their term projects, instructor M.P. began to assume more of an usual advising style seen in instructors P.S. and T.B giving individual attention to participant's learning process. Below is an extract of his response to assigned questions which posted online where he analyzed issues not for giving out absolute answers but sharing his thoughts at the time:

> Question: Would a national assessment imply a national curriculum?

> Answer: Well, I think that strictly speaking a national assessment would not imply a national curriculum. We already have the NAEP (more comes on that later) and it was created   specifically to "take the temperature" but not to affect curriculum. On the other hand, many people feel that this means it cannot assess what students actually learn because it is curriculum-free (and, because it has no consequences, nobody is tempted to teach to the test). But any national assessment that has consequences would surely affect the curriculum. And unless it was based on the same curriculum for everyone, it could not be a fair assessment. So I think that the answer, practically speaking, is yes, in the long run it would promote a national curriculum.

> Question: Are the National Standards a step in this direction?

> Answer: The Standards were deliberately written in very general ways, so they would not determine a specific curriculum. But they do try to constrain what teachers can do and what they should do and they may be re-written at any time. Now, for example, in art they do push away from Lowenfeldian free expression toward a DBAE-like (updated) curriculum. Of course the strength of their push depends on the sanctions that accompany them, which is left to States and districts to determine. So it seems a step, but a small one.

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Question: And would this be desirable?

Answer: I pass on this for now.

Question: Could there be a national assessment that is fair to all students and schools?

Answer: It was one of the intentions of the Standards movement that there should be standards affecting teacher quality, time in the curriculum, extra help for various groups of students, etc., so that all children would have reasonably similar opportunities to meet the Standards. Then it could be fair. But of course this takes money and the current administration has notably failed to provide it. —M.P. (Message Id: P2-03)

His instructional approach came at a time when the virtual community was mature and independent enough to learn in ways that pushed the individual participants to take control of their learning. The participants' growing independence on intellectual quest was evident from how they maintained high commitment in participation to the course activities. By high commitment I mean the degree of their constructed postings and responses as compared with their previous course performances, even without the obvious presence of an instructional leader. As a result of the instructor's take on a new role as the facilitator of collective thinking activity, this assessment course has seemed to work its way to develop a critical and reflective community as a whole. It promoted members to be more aware of their fellow members' intellectual contributions. However, the resulting autonomy of this learning community was built on the grounds of previous instructors' effort of creating a virtual community with high standards and expectation for the participants.

In the end, I think that these four instructors have complemented each other's instructional styles in pushing limits of physical isolations associated with the online learning environment and fostering the virtual community to its maturity from different angles. With S.W's online presence as a professional who is not afraid of showing her passion for learning, and at the same time her anxious quest for better answer as well, she has brought more personal

and sensitive elements to the virtual community. With P.S's big-picture approach, the participants are able to think from the big picture to reflect their own and their peers' research processes. With T.B's highly articulated and constructed questioning approach, the participants were able to understand the expected intellectual rigor underlying the program's goal, and therefore were held to higher level of self-expectation. With M.P.'s liberal approach of completely de-personalizing his instructor's presence as a leader and answer-provider, and quietly pushed the participants to take control and responsibility of their own learning and develop critical mind, the virtual community learned to gain autonomy of its own. Autonomy is an important component to foster the online learner to become a self-disciplined and self-reflective student. Taken together, all these four different modeling styles— the personal/passionate, the reflective-holistic, the constructive questioning, and the autonomy-building—have played important roles in laying out the intellectual, academic, social, and cultural cornerstones on building the virtual community.

Online instructor's role on shaping community interaction

Looking at the literature on online distance education, the textual representation of online instructors and its social and intellectual consequences on student learning as a whole has been a major topic. K. White, as experienced online educators at University of Phoenix who is a major player of online learning in higher education, has stressed the online communicational impact on students, he said:

> Nowhere is thinking more evident than in the textual environment of the online classroom. If writing is thinking, then online students display their thinking throughout the course, illustrating their individual styles and changing attitudes. Online instructors can show recognition for their students by maintaining high standards of rigor that challenges students and by building opportunities for choice into their online courses... Online educators, like other educators, are fundamentally in the business of person building. As in all classrooms, person building is the foundation for learning and growth in the online classroom. It is the quality of human contact that continu-

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ally develops online student—constantly reforming who they are and who they will become. Whenever the instructor communicates interpersonally online, he or she participates in the building of people and shares in their learning and growth... ((2000, p, 6-8)

The quote above further supports that, unarguably, the four instructors' online professional personalities have substantial impact on influencing the overall interactive characteristics and qualities of the virtual community. The virtual community is a new social situation where trust, honesty, motivation, and caring support for each other are to be created from scratch through textual communication. Every single posting in the online course is like a little brick which little by little builds up the quality and life of the virtual learning community. The sixteen participants in the first year have been displaying significant social behaviors that have shown solid development of mutual trust and respect among themselves. To this result, the four instructors have undeniable contribution.

The four different instructional personalities `in the online program have illustrated that, unlike the traditional face-to-face instruction which allows instruction to focus on content knowledge, an effective online instruction requires both content knowledge and communication skills to be able to deliver the instruction online. Their instructional delivery relies heavily on how they communicate their ideas and feelings online. This posts a new challenge for the teacher educators, and this also explains why these four instructors adjusted their presence to be more of a supporter for learning rather than an expert-leader who controls how learning for each individual participant goes. It is then fair to say that without building mutual sincerity on support for each other—the human connection that needed in a rather physically-isolated learning environment, online learning can not be set free of physical barriers and be able to take the fullest advantage of technology. A successful and effective teacher educator would need to become a good listener before becoming a good intellectual supporter, and they would need to be good at conveying their caring support and expectations for the students through textual communication. As evidenced in the online program, with the endless possible interpretations of muted online textual communication—without voice and body language to aid in the meaning-making endeavor, it

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does take time and effort to understand a person's intent when he/she says what he/she says. However, once the virtual community is warmed up—that is, sincerity for each other's learning and trust is established, the quality of interaction between the instructor and the participants can reach to more deeper levels since intellectual exchanges are sustained, well-articulated and thought out, and therefore more productive learning will take place. The beauty of this online program at current stage, although much is left to learn and experiment, is that the program is able to benefit from different instructional styles in different courses and these instructional impacts are sustained long enough to provide long-lasting educative experience for the participants to grow over time together as a social, professional, as well as educational community throughout different courses within the two-year period. The next section will examine the program from the learner's side of the story.

V. Building a teacher network for sustained professional development: Some characteristics of the virtual learning community found in the online program

In the virtual classroom, just as the teacher educators abandoned their strong intellectual presence in dominating academic discourse as they would in traditional classroom, the in-service teacher participants have also exhibited taking different learning approach from conventional face-to-face professional development setting. I will focus only on discussions of three characteristics. First of all, they do not learn just as an individual but as a group and community as well, which added in the dimension of peer social support for their own learning process. Secondly, their learning takes place in a more self-directed fashion which makes their learning more responsive to their own local context in teaching. Thus, their effort to bridge the gap between theory and practice is greatly enhanced. Third, the courses in the program have all encouraged the participants' development of their ability on self-assessment and peer assessment, which are important learning behaviors of an independent online learner. The following sections will provide examples on how this particular virtual community evolves in developing its own life and dynamics from these three directions.

1. Developing social relationship to foster sustained professional

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exchanges

Literature of online education has documented the importance of building a so-called learning community for productive educational experience to take place in the virtual world. Here is an example from an experienced online learner's perspective:

> ...the online learner needs a social context for learning. Working adults may be self-directed, but they also value the exchange of ideas and meaningful relations. It is particularly important that online programs addresses these two issues. I suggest that online programs give their students the opportunity to follow the progression of classes with the same people, what has been referred to as learning communities. I found that in doing so, I was able to develop close relationships that enhanced my own learning. It gave me a chance to get feedback from people I trusted about how much I learn throughout my program and how other people were struggling with concepts and issues. (Priest, 2000, p. 42)

For our online program where fostering professional exchanges on theory-practice dialogues is the goal, the building of a virtual learning community is all the more important, and therefore the trust, sensitivity, and mutual respect toward each other are crucial of the characteristics of this group. In looking at how the virtual community has developed its strength and identity as a community, it became obvious that by the second online course, the participants began to share their professional life to each other, both for the sake of sharing and also for asking advices and opinions. This aspect of the community interaction happened sideways to the regular planned course activities, and though unplanned, the social interactions signify the growing sense of member's recognition of belonging to the community and emotional attachment to it. By articulating what one is doing, one is able to communicate with others through self-reflecting what is going on in professional life. In their stories, we see a group of art teachers sharing their struggles, hopes, feelings of accomplishments with successful teaching stories, as well as disappointments and the unresolved problems they face. To exemplify on how they value this virtual community to a great extent, below are some extracts

from countless examples for illustration.

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In the following posting, student A expressed how she valued very much the learning process and learning outcomes of her peers:

> Hi, S,
> The only thing I miss is having the time to really read other's work and discuss the issues that have been investigated here. For this, I wish there was more time! The ideas are brilliant! It's a huge stimulization. I dearly loved this opportunity and, as a teacher, with little time, thought about all of your efforts to design this course (a work of art), wondering where you find the time...Thank you so much and congratulations to you for your success in our success. —A. (Message Id: W2-43)

In the following posting, student J indicated that although he couldn't start to participate yet to the discussion due to his busy school schedule, he still managed to find time to monitor his peers' learning, and read what his peers have to say about discussion topics:

> Dear S, R, and D,
> Sorry to post so late but like Liz, I've been up to my elbows in the school musical production. I'll try to keep up. I've been reading all your entries and I am amazed at how well focused you are. I'm trying to get a handle on the format of this class right now as far as the sequential order of the questions and the number of discussion assignments we need to finish each week in order to complete the tasks on time. —J. (Message Id: P2-413)

In the following two postings by student D, sideway to regular class discussion, she initiated questions that she thought were important to art educators and was interested to know what her peers have to say about it. The postings show that she respects and values her peers' professional judgment and positions.

> Dear group,
> Has anybody read the following article from the latest issue...
> July/August 2002 of Arts Education Policy Review: "Discipline

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before Discipline-Based Art Education..." by Theresa Marche? It provoked lots of thoughts and questions, and I'd love to discuss it. My best —D. (Message Id: S2-275)

Hi, class,

Do you think mass media and technology is homogenizing at least all Western Civilization (I don't see an eastern/western mix for a long time, yet.) into a blend that is strongly flavored by the most economically powerful (guess who)? And do you think this is something we should fear or welcome? And do you think that the modernists were right after all, and that all this postmodern thought is just a last, dramatic attempt to stave off the inevitable death of national culture? Something to ponder and write to me about. Love and kisses. —D. (Message Id: S2-260)

In the following posting, student R showed her emotional attachment to the community when a new school term was about to begin and she was eager to get back to the class to learn new ideas:

Dear class,

I am beginning to feel like I am out here all alone during the summer vocation. I need someone to communicate with. My summer vacation ended today and I have returned to the classroom ready and excited to begin a new year. I have a really hectic schedule this year, I am in three different schools. Thank goodness I don't have to do an art show this year. I want to hear how everyone else's year is starting off and how the course is going for you. I can't wait to hear from someone on the other end. —R. (Message Id: W2-225)

In the following posting, student B shared with the class in details about how his school conducted standardized assessment tests in art learning and how he learned from mistakes. He voluntarily described his experience—despite its imperfection—which showed his trust to open up his heart to this community about his own professional experience:

Dear class,

Yeah, I survived the week from hell. Previous week was the hassle of Scholastic entries, then last week we had a HS art show at a local gallery (My kids did great, 2 awards out of 8 entries) plus our

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semester ends Monday (We are on blocks so we basically teach a course Sept. >Jan. then another schedule Jan.> June). Last spring we were REQUIRED to have a multiple choice, comprehensive exam for each course. In the hassle of having to write three multiple choice exams for my classes I let the other art teacher (young, enthusiastic, but trained in theater and no clue about many things) write the exam for her Art I classes... This year i forgot about it, but we have another teacher now (Thankfully an art teacher) who is also teaching Art I. She came to me with real concern when she saw the exam. I had to agree with her. It had 200 questions, 35 on art history (Some so arcane the other teacher and I couldn't answer them!), it had 20+ questions just on rhythm, and diagrams on perspective that were incomprehensible! We had a meeting on Thursday that thankfully went well. We came up with a quick fix that will not penalize the students... —B. (Message Id: P2-30)

These extracts above have all shown how the participants value their fellows' professionalism and their strengths and perspectives. They would go into greater details to share they stories of teaching. They also demonstrated their emotional reliance on this particular community and showed care to their peers on their professional agenda. Without recognizing the value of this social network and its intellectual output, the participants would not have opened up their mind to discuss intellectual issues with sincere attitude, and would not open themselves up to learn life stories from others. With the relationship well-established, they are able to raise issues whenever they run into problems at schools, and also not afraid of offering lessons they learned from teaching. When someone posted a question, the members would offer their opinions and advices. This initiation of raising questions and expressing one's concerns which happened sideways to the regular course activities has evidenced that even when the program ends after the two-year period, the participants will have found themselves a long term professional community online that will be there for them to share life with. In other words, this professional exchange will produce sustained life of its own; when a member needs advice or needs to share ideas, he or she has got a network of fifteen other fellow teachers to go to. This professional network is of particular importance

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to these art teacher participants whose subject of teaching is often not seen as the core subjects in K-12 schools. As Cohen-Evron (2001) who researched teacher identity based on four case studies of art teachers said, the feeling of being along is not new to most art teachers. She learned from the art teachers that belonging to a professional network would help with a great deal on providing moral as well as professional support. She said:

> Naomi, Tamar, and Noga described in this study said that as art teachers they felt isolated. That feeling was expressed even in Noga's case, who portrayed herself as being part of a team of teachers at her elementary school. Still, she felt the lack of having other art teachers with whom she could discuss curricula questions and share her debates about the goals of art education. She felt that an art teachers' group was in particular necessary in a field that does not have an imposed curriculum and is heavily influenced by the teachers' deliberations. (p. 347)

2. Bridging the gap between theory and practice

When it comes to talking about "bridging the gap between theory and practice," one can have different definitions in mind, or distinctive interpretations in different situations as to what it means and how it exemplifies itself. In this research, I have also found one can have different ways or approaches to solve the gap. Due to the limited length of this paper, I will present one focused view only, so as to ensure clarity. In this paper, the "gap" is defined as the conceptual distance between theory and practice, and by "bridging" I mean how the participants relate to their practical context in light of the issues and concepts discussed in the online courses, and vise versa. I will present evidences which show their reflective dialogues and comments when they are making the connections between the two. By "practice," it does not necessarily mean that the participants have actually invested their effort in implementing their ideas—since implementation often requires administrative support—but how they have conceptually recognized the significance of the interrelationship between the two and become aware of their own practice in the long run. Their action of reflecting the theory-practice interrelationship is a sign of their overall professional growth. Therefore, what counts here in my

analysis is not action but awareness and reflective effort. The followings are a few extracts of the course postings that qualify for this purpose here.

> I learned that even though a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, it is certainly not the most interesting. I found out that an artist's private journey is a lot more public if the viewing audience takes the time to look a little harder.... I have learned that there are many ways to approach artmaking. I had not previously kept a journal while working and found that it did give me insight into what I was trying to say.... Dealing with elements, principles, technique and media as well as art history through and including some post-modern work is relatively safe. However much of this work is hard for students to relate to. As we move into contemporary artists we can find ourselves moving into dangerous territory. The same questions that new art raises about government, religion and lifestyle are the questions that students are beginning to ask. Popular culture seems to be in direct opposition to the values a school environment is supposed to support and we as teachers are supposed to safely bridge the gap. How much autonomy do we give our students? Where do we set the boundaries to maintain expressive significance without stepping on the authoritarian toes? It's a challenge, but one that's worth the risk. A written dialogue can work as an indicator of possible problems that might occur. —J. (Message Id: W2-304)

> As I take this course, I think more and more about the higher thinking skills that are used within the art classroom. As students evaluate in a critique, they are arguing, comparing, contrasting, justifying their responses, explaining choices, and becoming more discriminating viewers. They are doing this in conjunction with learning how to paint, draw, carve linocuts, manipulate wire, word, and paper... As far as what I would like to try in my class—I would like to have a critique based on artist's involvement. This past two weeks, we have been doing drawing from observation-drawing plants in fact... A critique that revolves around the idea of artist involvement would

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be so much more suitable for a project like this... —L. (Message
Id: B2-130)

George Lucas's thoughts about the mythology of his "Star Wars"
series were right on. I was particularly struck by his quote "Children
love power because children are powerless." I think this idea is
crucial for us as teachers to understand as we try to teach young
people. Any time one can provide an opportunity for authentic deci-
sion-making within the classroom, our children grow within them-
selves their own power. According to Lucas, the action of art mak-
ing takes "a leap of faith" based on feelings, separate from what we
perceive with our senses. It is empowering to learn to trust one's
intuition, to see "with the perfect eye" past the fog, to gain the confi-
dence to create one's own art. —L. (Message Id: S2-767)

These participants' reflections have all evidenced their critical dialogues
on examining practical teaching in light of the issues and topics discussed in
the online courses. They are able to critically examine theories in light of their
teaching context, and try to consider theoretical implications that speak to
their own teaching reality. This kind of reflective posting has grown in number
and depth over the first year of the program as the participants reflect even
more after reading their fellows' reflective processes. It has seemed to
become a mutually-received way of making connections among the course
content, the individual, his/her own context, and his/her thinking at the time.
This learning behavior of constantly keeping reflection of what theory means
to practice and vice versa has become obvious from their online postings,
which was still absent from their performance in the very first course when the
program started. When a participant reflects about issues and theories, what
he or she is doing is really inviting the other members to reflect together, and
his/her reflection often triggers other members' joining effort in making the
theories and issues meaningful. Therefore, reflective learning in this virtual
classroom becomes a socio-cultural activity—it is both an individualization
and localization of theories as well as collectively-processed understanding.
And the most valuable thing is that one reinforces the other. This has been a
recognized benefit of online learning in the literature: "reflection—whether on

the results of a collaborative activity, on the learning process, or on course content—is a hallmark of online learning. (Palloff, Pratt & Rena, 2003)"

3. Developing ability of self-assessment and peer assessment as a way to enhance teachers' reflective practice

In this virtual community, the participants are highly motivated and determined to succeed which has led them to have strong commitment to the time and effort required in the program. Overall, this is undoubtedly one of the major catalysts to provide ground for the subsequent success of the program. And most significantly, this factor of high motivation attributes to their higher level of engagement on self-assessment of learning outcomes, because of that being motivated to assess one's own and the other members' learning provides the opportunity for them to become a more reflective practitioner. Unlike traditional classroom where instructors establish criteria of assessment and conduct the assessment, participants of this group are placed more responsibility in monitoring their own learning and expected to ask for help and support from the instructor and their fellow members. Not only do they constantly assess what they have learned—which is shown from the fact that they actively consult with the instructors whether or not they are going in the right direction on coursework—but also they assess what the community has learned as a group. Below is an example where one participant reflected to the whole group about what the class has gone through in the virtual classroom, and shared analogies of how she felt, and, she also believed that the group felt the same way as she did:

> Well, this has been quite a process, don't you think? It has been an eye-opener that's for sure. I think you and I are like barn-swallows— having a hard time settling in one spot, more interested in swooping around—seeing all the angles, seeing many avenues instead of plodding faithfully down one road. Well, we might have to become more like water buffaloes—steady, deliberate, and true to their course. —E (Message Id: W3-704)

Since the learning process and outcome of each participant has being

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recorded in the online classroom, it is more than nature for each participant to become good at peer assessment. Evidence of this characteristic of the online community is the growing phenomenon that whenever a participant's posting is genuinely thoughtful and constructive, other participants would respond and comment in no time. Besides, they commented on each other's course assignments voluntarily when they learned a lot from them, which is seen in the following example:

> Ok, I started responding and the more I read the more I loved what I was reading. What wonderful ideas!!!!! I really like this part—the sharing of ideas that work and give sight to the artistically handi-capped, like myself! I am a visual learner and the abstract is becoming easier, but until then, please keep leading me in the right direction. Thanks! —P. (Message Id: W2-540)

In fact, from my observation, they have spent a lot of their life online in commenting how their peers' ideas and thoughts have motivated and chal-lenged themselves to think and reflect more. This characteristic of learning behavior is really an interesting finding because it challenges some common-ly-held assumptions about online learning, including 1) students are less aware of or even interested in other online students' learning performance than the traditional students in face-to-face learning situations, 2) students know little about their peers' learning outcomes or they don't care because they don't know them in person.

Now it maybe time to illustrate community engagement and level of par-ticipation with some statistic measures for evidence. However, these can only be seen as giving a general picture, not definitive measures, because some courses required less frequent discussion and more project learning than other courses. In the first online course in summer of 2002, the total number of discussion postings is 269, and 11 out of the 16 participants read 40% of the postings. (The postings include both whole class and small group discussions). But one and half years later, the current seventh online course's statistics shows 15 out of 16 participants read 60% of all 704 post-ings. In addition, in the first online course, participants logged on to the course website 8 times in weekly average. But in the seventh online course, participants logged on to the course website 15 times in weekly average. In

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sum, the total number of postings has grown from 269 in the beginning of the program to 704 in current course activities, and the frequency of logging to course website has increased from 8 times a week to 15 times a week. These figures show a growing participatory level in the virtual community.

One underlying reason to explain that participants of this particular virtual community are very aware of their peers' performances is that they really do care every one of them. As a result of this strong caring attitude for each other, and their strong emotional tie with this learning community, they develop greater ability on self-assessing their own learning—because they are aware of that their performance is in front of the eyes of the other participants whose comments they care a lot. Consequently, this ability of being cable to assess group performance in turn encourages everyone to critically examine their own learning process and constantly seek better performance of their own. Below is an example of this kind where one participant commented with passion and sincerity on his project partner's ongoing process, and from reflecting his partner's process, the commentator also reflected on his own learning. He said:

> Well, D,
>
> You are on to some important stuff with your pursuit of the metaphor. It is a way that many of us make sense of things and a valid way help students and adults understand. As a means to express an interpretation, I think the metaphor has no equal as long as we don't trivialize it. Since I hold no credibility as a poet or philosopher, I can only encourage from my vantage point of literary bumpkin to continue in this pursuit. I'm counting on you to help me sort out my sorry little life, metaphorically speaking. As a partner I feel that I have given far less than I received. But in my defense, I have got to say that you have been a high maintenance partner. I've worn out two pairs of reading glasses since this class began. It's time to think about adjusting your medication and slow down so the rest of the world can catch up. I look forward to seeing you soon. Love, —L (Message Id: W3-710)

In terms of the interaction between theory and practice, their ability of self-assessment and peer assessment has more implication regarding to becom-

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ing a reflective practitioner—they are crucial in promoting the participants' active conceptualization of theory-practice interaction. This is one of the benefits of building a virtual learning community where one can witness other people's learning processes and growth in real-time. The message below is an example where one participant reflected on her own professional belief while commenting on her partner's project proposal:

> Dear H,
>
> Your final report was much more specific, you've really stuck it out and worked through the whole process. I think you could continue this into a masters project. Although, I'm not sure how you feel about that. You made a quote in your final report that stuck out to me, it is, "what steps an artist takes to research a subject before completing his or her own artwork." What a valuable lesson for kids of all ages. If your kids are like mine, sometimes it's like pulling teeth to get them to work through the process. It reminded me of actors that sometimes research roles for months prior to anything going on film. What you accomplished with your youngsters is valuable and will stick with them. Congratulations!! I look forward to seeing you in July. —R (Message Id: W3-674)

Since this virtual community is meant to be geared toward making meaningful connections between theory and practice for individual teacher, the quality of successful academic performance does not rest on one universal criterion for all, but highly individualized. When a participant made excellent points about theories in light of his/her practice, other participants will applaud, though the ideas may not apply to their own practical situations. Compared to the traditional face-to-face classroom where academic rigor are hold by central standards, this individualized assessment that is rewarded in the virtual classroom seems more feasible in encouraging teachers to become more aware of their own strength and weakness in their practice. If members of this virtual community are able to make good assessment of their peers' sound ideas in connecting theory and practice, one can not help but admit that, in the long run, they become better judge of themselves when connecting theory and practice. The argument is that when a teacher is viewing how the other fifteen teachers make connection between theory and

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practice—in other words, fifteen versions of connecting theory and practice—he/she will become a better practitioner on re-interpreting theories in relation to various practical situations, and therefore become critically reflective of his/her own practice. This reasoning is based on the same ground as what Greenwood (1991) had argued when he expanded the notion of "reflective practice" by adding the elements of pluralism and diversity of sense-making process. From his argument, culturally and anthropologically speaking, reflective practice can involve collective effort and develop multiplicity in perspectives. This is exactly what has occurred in the virtual community where participants become very interested in learning about their peers' reflections and are eager to share their own reflections at the same time.

VI. Conclusion and some final words from the researcher

Having studied this online program, I think that the most significant strength of online learning in the context of teacher education signifies itself on how it allows a group of professionals—either teacher educators or teacher practitioners—to engage in professional discourse without being restrained from time and space, and are able to collectively reconstruct interrelationship between theory and practice together. Through the online real-time recording on individual and group thinking process, a group member is able to access the other members' learning processes. It takes time to build a professional network which is intimate enough to break geographic, spatial, as well as interpersonal and cultural barriers for the group to rely on. In the case of our online program, the path to gaining trust from the members and building a trustable professional network with mutual respect for each other is rather fast—after the first quarter of online learning, the group began to show more personal sides of the stories of their life and shared more about their daily encountering at school, and also their feelings and thoughts as an art teacher, a parent, and a student at the same time. This side development of their social intimacy is unplanned in the online regular coursework. One interesting example of this is that, one day when the Middle West America was struck by a big snowstorm and schools were off, many participants logged on to the course at the same time to talk to each other in the discus-

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sion board's conversation room. This example shows their dependence on each other for emotional and social support. For a virtual community like this who only interact with and know each other through online contact most of the time, what more intimate can you ask? Their life in this virtual community has really become part of their personal and professional life. To this result, I attribute it to the four instructors' efforts on laying out the grounds for such a virtual community to flourish through their online teaching as role models of learning and caring for this learning community.

To end this paper, I want to make some final notes about my observation of the ongoing online program so far regarding implementation of such program. They are about both individual and collective stories that are not being documented in the online course activities and postings. Although these stories require lengthy discussion of their own which is not the intended topic of this paper, it may be necessary for interested reader to get a grasp on the implementation side of story. As the first experimental online degree program being created in the field of art education, its road to success is not without bumps and rocks. I want to acknowledge that there are unexpected problems—as many as the wonderful and rewarding surprises—occurred along the way. Here are a few of them:

> 1. The instructors took much more than expected amount of time and effort to negotiate their own online instructional style and adjust to find effective ways to online teaching. They also always sought for better course organizations which never seem to be free from further revisions. Partly because that instructors found out what worked and what didn't after the course ended, and partly because that during the course instructors came up with new ideas that they wanted to try out. Online course design requires not just presenting content activities through web pages and hyperlinks, but most importantly, to be able to anticipate how the online students will interact with the content design from learner's perspective, and how the designing strategies suits or limit student's capacity to learner better.

> 2. The individual participant's level of struggle to accommodate the

technical proficiency required to be able to perform well in an online environment is out of their prior expectation. Even though the technical skills that are required to work with computer are basic, including writing e-mails, posting messages to threaded discussion board, composting simple web pages, downloading files, surfing the web to find information, there are still all kinds of different technical problems occurred. At the time when the first online course took place, the participants were less patient and more frustrated whenever they ran into technical problems that they couldn't make sense of. Interestingly, they often felt helpless when running into technical problems, not academic problems related to the course activities. This makes technical staff very important in implementing this kind of program that heavily depends on technology to ensure course running smoothly, and it is also necessary to make the students realize that whenever they need technical assistance, someone is always online to help, which will largely reduce their level of technical anxiety.

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