

ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: A PLATFORM FOR REFLECTION, SHARING, AND SUPPORT IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PRACTICUM

CỘNG ĐỒNG THỰC HÀNH TRỰC TUYẾN: NỀN TẢNG ĐỂ GIÁO SINH PHẢN TƯ, CHIA SẺ VÀ HỖ TRỢ NHAU TRONG THỰC TẬP SƯ PHẠM

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(Received: June 30, 2025; Revised: August 01, 2025; Accepted: August 11, 2025)

DOI: 10.31130/ud-jst.2025.23(8C).439

Abstract - This study examined an online Community of Practice (CoP) supporting twenty pre-service EFL teachers during their 8-week practicum through weekly meetings, reflective journals, and resource sharing. Participation patterns evolved throughout the practicum: initially high engagement in reflective journaling shifted to increasingly interactive group discussions focused on collaborative problem-solving as participants gained confidence. Rather than transforming professional identity, the CoP gradually reinforced teachers' emerging professional self, helping normalize challenges and develop contextually responsive practices. Emotional support from peers and facilitators remained consistently valued, fostering community and belonging. These findings demonstrate that online CoPs function as dynamic support platforms whose effectiveness depends on intentional facilitation, adaptive activities responsive to participant needs, and balanced opportunities for individual reflection and collaborative dialogue.

Key words - Community of practice; online CoP; pre-service teachers; practicum.

1. Introduction

The transition from student to teacher is a defining stage in professional education, with the teaching practicum bridging academic coursework and real-world classroom experience. During practicum, pre-service teachers face the complexities of classroom management, instructional design, and student engagement for the first time in authentic settings. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, this transition is especially challenging, as pre-service teachers must also address language-specific issues such as authentic communication, diverse proficiency levels, and integrating cultural elements.

While this period is critical for developing professional competence and identity [1], it is also marked by uncertainty, stress, and isolation-particularly when support mechanisms are limited [2], [3]. Traditional models of practicum support, like mentor observation or post-lesson feedback, often do not meet the dynamic, multidimensional needs of pre-service teachers. EFL research highlights the need for sustained, collaborative support addressing both pedagogical and linguistic challenges [4]. In this context, Wenger's [5] Communities of Practice (CoP) framework has gained traction in teacher education for its capacity to foster collaborative learning, problem-solving, and belonging [6] - [8].

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed practicum support. Online CoPs now enable

Tóm tắt - Nghiên cứu này khảo sát Cộng đồng Thực hành (CoP) trực tuyến hỗ trợ 20 giáo sinh tiếng Anh trong 8 tuần thực tập thông qua họp hàng tuần, nhật ký phản tư và chia sẻ tài nguyên. Mức độ tham gia thay đổi theo từng giai đoạn: từ tích cực viết nhật ký phản tư ban đầu chuyển sang thảo luận nhóm sôi nổi tập trung giải quyết vấn đề khi giáo sinh tự tin hơn. Thay vì thay đổi đột ngột danh tính nghề nghiệp, CoP củng cố dần bản sắc nghề nghiệp đang hình thành, giúp họ nhìn nhận khó khăn như điều bình thường và phát triển thực hành phù hợp bối cảnh. Sự hỗ trợ tinh thần từ bạn học và giảng viên luôn được đánh giá cao, tạo cảm giác gắn kết cộng đồng. Kết quả cho thấy CoP trực tuyến là môi trường hỗ trợ năng động, hiệu quả phụ thuộc vào điều phối chủ đích, hoạt động thích ứng nhu cầu người tham gia và cân bằng giữa phản tư cá nhân và đối thoại hợp tác.

Từ khóa - Cộng đồng thực hành; cộng đồng thực hành trực tuyến; giáo sinh; thực tập sư phạm

pre-service teachers to participate in structured, regular interaction regardless of location [8], [9]. Research shows that these spaces can reduce isolation and support confidence, self-efficacy, and willingness to address classroom challenges [6], [7], [10]. However, effective online CoPs require intentional facilitation to encourage genuine participation, promote deep reflection, and support identity negotiation amid diverse challenges [11], [12].

Despite growing interest, limited research explores how online CoPs specifically facilitate reflection, sharing, and support among pre-service EFL teachers during practicum-or how participation shapes professional identity development. This gap is especially significant in Asian EFL contexts, where cultural factors such as hierarchy may influence participation in online communities.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the implementation and perceived impact of an online CoP for Vietnamese pre-service EFL teachers during practicum, focusing on two research questions:

(1) How does participation in an online community of practice facilitate reflection, sharing, and support among pre-service EFL teachers during practicum?

(2) What are the perceived impacts of an online community of practice on pre-service EFL teachers' professional identity development during practicum?

2. Literature review

2.1. The teaching practicum: Purposes, challenges, and support needs

The teaching practicum is a cornerstone of teacher education, immersing pre-service teachers in real classrooms and bridging the gap between coursework and practical application [13], [14]. This transition exposes trainees to the complex realities of teaching. In EFL contexts, the challenge intensifies as novice teachers must address both pedagogical and language-specific demands [15].

Despite its value, practicum support often falls short. Traditional methods-like occasional mentor feedback-rarely address emotional or social challenges [3], [16]. Many pre-service teachers feel isolated, especially in unfamiliar placements. Recent research suggests online CoPs and professional learning communities (PLCs) can promote collaborative learning and enhance reflection and professional development during internships [17]. Participation in these forums helps pre-service teachers recognize shared problems, compare strategies, and benefit from peer experiences [6], [10], though issues like internet access, time demands, and anxiety about criticism remain [6]. Effectiveness is further limited by the structure of online spaces; even structured forums rarely prompt high-level critical reflection unless carefully scaffolded [11].

In Vietnam, the practicum is often brief and lacks strong supervision [18], [19] and meaningful university-school partnerships [20]. During their placements, student teachers frequently encounter a disconnect between the theory learned at university and the practices and expectations at local schools, as they navigate two distinct institutional cultures [21]. This gap, compounded by limited opportunities for critical reflection, often leads them to replicate the approaches of their cooperating teachers rather than develop their own pedagogical reasoning [18]. As a result, the authentic construction of professional identity can be impeded [22], [23]. Studies have also emphasized the importance of supporting students in navigating not only practical teaching challenges but also identity and the process of learning as personal transformation as part of moving into practice [24].

2.2. Online Communities of Practice (CoP): A framework for effective practicum support

The CoP, introduced by Wenger [5], conceptualizes learning and identity construction as dynamic, socially situated processes in which engagement, imagination, and alignment foster a sense of belonging and professional growth. In teacher education, CoPs provide structured opportunities for both individual and collective reflection, promoting dialogue and the sharing of classroom experiences and solutions [7], [8].

Digital technology has expanded CoPs beyond face-to-face settings. Online CoPs now enable pre-service teachers to maintain regular, collaborative contact regardless of placement [9], [25]. Research shows online CoPs can enhance teaching self-efficacy, knowledge, and agency. Both active and peripheral participation contribute to

confidence, with peer exchanges fostering learning agency [10], [26]. Engagement in online CoPs encourages self-efficacy and open expression while helping participants identify shared challenges [6], [8], though vibrant CoPs require voluntary participation, empowerment, and skilled facilitation [27].

Online CoPs are especially valuable for ongoing reflection-via asynchronous discussions, digital journaling, and group meetings-allowing participants to revisit and deepen insights [28]. They also foster resource sharing and peer support, helping mitigate isolation and promoting problem-solving [9], [26]. However, without active facilitation, reflection often remains descriptive rather than analytical, and connections to theory may be weak [6], [11]. Intentional scaffolding-guided prompts, focused questions, and models of deeper reflection-is needed to maximize critical engagement and professional learning.

2.3. Pre-service teacher identity development and CoP participation

Central to the CoP framework is the idea that teacher identity develops dynamically through social participation and engagement in teaching [5]. In teacher education, professional identity evolves as pre-service teachers participate in collaborative, reflective communities and navigate the challenges of practicum. Recent studies confirm pre-service English teachers' identities are shaped by both internal factors (such as conviction and prior experience) and external factors (including program structure, mentorship, and peer networks) [12], [29]. In EFL, identity formation is further complicated by native/non-native issues and negotiating valued practices [12].

Participation in online CoPs helps pre-service teachers navigate these tensions, offering opportunities for reflection, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving as they bridge theory and classroom realities [7]. Overall, these findings highlight the interdependence of practicum challenges, the affordances of online CoPs, and the complex process of identity formation in teacher education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context and participants

The study was conducted at the University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies (UD-UFLS) during the spring 2025 practicum period. The practicum is a mandatory 8-week field experience for final-year students in the English Teacher Education program, during which students teach at assigned local secondary schools under the supervision of cooperating teachers and university supervisors.

Of the 45 pre-service teachers enrolled in the practicum, 20 volunteered to join the CoP initiative. Participants included both local practicum students (placed in Da Nang schools, $n=18$) and those completing international placements (in Thailand, $n=2$). Two experienced faculty members from the Faculty of English Teacher Education served as CoP facilitators

3.2. CoP structure and activities

The online CoP was established as a formal, structured

support network for pre-service teachers, based on Wenger and Wenger's [30] three key elements:

- Domain: The shared domain was EFL teaching and pedagogical development, with a particular focus on the realities of classroom practice in Vietnamese secondary schools.

- Community: The community comprised pre-service teachers and two faculty facilitators.

- Practice: The CoP facilitated professional learning through weekly 2-hour online meetings (held every Saturday, via Microsoft Teams), reflective journaling, resource sharing, and peer discussions.

Each week, meetings focused on a specific theme relevant to practicum experiences, including:

- Orientation and expectation-setting;
- Understanding EFL learners and building rapport;
- Teaching grammar and vocabulary meaningfully in EFL contexts;
- Overcoming challenges in teaching listening and speaking skills;
- Addressing difficulties in teaching reading and writing;
- Managing mixed-ability EFL classes;
- Summative reflections and lessons learned.

During meetings, participants shared experiences, discussed challenges, and collaboratively generated solutions. Reflective journals were submitted weekly via the Google Classroom, documenting participants' professional and emotional journeys. Faculty facilitators maintained a supportive environment and guided discussions to maximize engagement and benefits.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data sources included:

- Reflective journals from all participating pre-service teachers;
- Transcripts and notes from weekly online meetings;
- Participant feedback collected via open-ended survey at the end of the practicum.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by the CoP framework [5], with attention to three dimensions: development of professional knowledge (domain), community and emotional support (community), and translation of shared knowledge into classroom practice (practice).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Online CoP as a facilitator of reflection, sharing, and support among pre-service teachers

The online CoP established for this practicum functioned as a platform offering structured opportunities for both individual and group engagement that supported pre-service teachers' reflective practice, resource sharing, and emotional support.

Reflection

In the initial weeks, most participants engaged in

reflective journaling, aided by ongoing facilitation and guided prompts. However, most written reflections remained largely narrative or descriptive, with participants recounting classroom events and expressing their feelings, rather than probing underlying causes or making theory-practice connections. This trend is consistent with previous studies, which find that even with structured support, pre-service teachers often reflect on what happened and how they felt, but rarely engage in deeper critical analysis or articulate concrete strategies for future improvement [11], [31]. For example, one participant wrote:

"Fortunately, the lesson flowed smoothly and met my expectations. I believe this was because the lesson was adapted to match the students' level by adding tasks and increasing the difficulty. As a result, students were highly engaged, and there was little time left for off-task activities."

Similarly, another shared:

"For the writing lesson, I still remember Mrs. Chau's advice... I liked the activities in this lesson, and it went smoothly. The supervisor said it was better than my previous two lessons, so I felt very happy... At post-writing, students weren't focused when reading other groups' work. I realized this was a classroom management issue. Also, my feedback was still too general, not specific enough. Looking back, I see there were places I should have improved but didn't notice in the moment."

Such reflections provided a valuable emotional outlet but tended not to examine instructional choices in depth or develop action plans for improvement. By the end of the practicum, only a minority of participants continued journaling, and for some, the focus shifted further toward emotional expression. For example, a participant wrote:

"I feel tired because the ideal activities of mine and supervising teacher do not align... sometimes I feel like it is just a practicum-why bother?"

In contrast, most participants described the weekly Microsoft Teams meetings as a more comfortable and effective space for reflection. Group discussions made it easier to articulate classroom experiences, listen to peers' stories, and engage in dialogic meaning-making. Over time, participants credited these discussions with specific professional growth, such as improving interactions with supervising teachers (week 2), adopting new classroom management strategies (week 3), and implementing ideas for writing lesson planning (week 4). This shift from written to verbal, collective reflection highlights the social and practical dimensions of the CoP and demonstrates how dialogic exchange can spark changes in teaching practice.

Sharing

Beyond reflection, the online CoP became an accessible and collaborative forum for sharing resources, teaching experiences, and solutions to common challenges. Each week, facilitators synthesized group discussions and shared practical guides based on participants' contributions. For example, after an in-depth discussion on writing instruction, a structured summary ("How to increase student engagement with writing feedback in a

large class”) was circulated, compiling group ideas on time management, scaffolding, and peer assessment. Participants valued these shared resources, and some reported trying new approaches as a result. One reflected:

“I have applied the ideas of peer assessment. Luckily, my supervising teacher liked the peer-assessment sheet I designed based on the previous discussion and materials. It did not turn out perfectly successful, but I learned a lot from the experience.”

Sharing dilemmas-such as managing large, mixed-ability classes or encouraging student participation-fostered a supportive problem-solving environment. This ongoing, practical knowledge exchange aligns with research showing the value of peer learning in teacher development [32].

Support

Evidence from feedback survey, meeting transcripts, and interviews highlighted that emotional and professional support was a distinctive benefit of the online CoP. Many pre-service teachers began the practicum feeling anxious or uncertain, especially when working with strict supervising teachers or in new environments. However, regular group meetings quickly fostered a sense of community, reassurance, and collective resilience. Participants reported that hearing peers’ similar struggles and receiving encouragement reduced their anxiety and increased their confidence. As one teacher described.

“I initially felt overwhelmed by the gap between my students’ English level and the textbook requirements. Hearing others discuss similar challenges in the CoP meetings helped me realize this was a systemic issue, not a personal failure. The group’s suggestions for differentiation strategies really helped me adapt my teaching approach.”

Facilitators and peers provided three main types of support: informational (practical advice and resources), emotional (encouragement and empathy), and appraisal (constructive feedback and validation of progress). Over time, participants became more willing to seek help and share difficulties, illustrating a shift from individual coping to collective resilience.

4.2. Perceived impacts of the online CoP on professional identity development

Participation in the online CoP reinforced and gradually reshaped pre-service teachers’ professional identities through ongoing cycles of reflection, peer sharing, and collaborative problem-solving. Rather than dramatic transformation, the impact was a steady shift from idealized or theoretical conceptions of “the teacher” to more realistic, adaptive identities responsive to the complexities of EFL teaching in the Vietnamese context.

Reflection-both written and verbal- and sharing played a key role in this process [29]. Participants’ evolving reflective habits and ongoing peer exchanges contributed to meaningful shifts in their professional identities. For example, as they discussed classroom realities, shared strategies, and reflected on feedback, pre-service teachers gradually moved beyond the belief that good EFL teaching

requires the exclusive use of English or simply showcasing their own language competence. Collaborative reflection and peer support enabled them to adapt their practices-such as using Vietnamese to clarify key points without fear of being judged for their English proficiency. This process suggests that pre-service teachers’ sense of professional self becomes more flexible and context-responsive. As one participant shared:

“Through our CoP discussions, I learned that sometimes using Vietnamese for explanations helps students understand better, and that’s okay. I used to worry my supervising teacher might disapprove when I used Vietnamese [...]. Now I feel more comfortable with the use of Vietnamese. But sometimes I not sure if it can make lazy to think simpler ways to express in English. But in the class, when the clock is ticking, I go for what suits best.”

This reflection demonstrates identity development as an ongoing negotiation. Initially, the participant felt anxiety and pressure to meet supervisory expectations, but through CoP engagement, they gained confidence and agency to prioritize student understanding. Although some concern remains about code-switching, the participant’s willingness to adapt reflects a shift toward a more flexible and context-responsive teaching identity, balancing professional ideals with classroom realities.

A key impact was increased self-efficacy, similar with what other scholars [6], [10] found. Participants who were initially hesitant to try new techniques became more confident as they discussed challenges, experimented with strategies, and received peer support. This was reflected in the increase of self-rated self-efficacy scores from 3.5 to 4.1 out of 5, as many described that they felt more willing to experiment and less anxious about “getting it wrong” after normalizing their struggles through reflection and group dialogue.

The CoP also fostered a stronger sense of professional belonging. Participants described feeling “heard and seen” within the community, and several noted that regular meetings reduced their sense of isolation, especially when working with strict supervising teachers or in unfamiliar settings. The collective reflection and support provided reassurance and a shared sense of purpose, making it easier for participants to view themselves as part of a professional teaching community.

In summary, the online CoP offered both the reflective space and the social context for participants to negotiate, test, and ultimately reconstruct their sense of self as teachers, supporting their growth into more confident, connected, and contextually responsive professionals.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion

This study explored how an online Community of Practice (CoP) supported pre-service EFL teachers during their practicum, with particular attention to the interplay of reflection, sharing, and support in shaping professional growth. The findings show that the online CoP acted as an evolving platform: written reflection served as an initial outlet for articulating beliefs and concerns, while, as the practicum progressed, collaborative group dialogue and

resource sharing became central to professional learning.

Rather than bringing about dramatic transformation, participation in the CoP facilitated a steady shift in teacher identity—from idealized conceptions toward more realistic, adaptive professional selves attuned to the complexities of EFL teaching in Vietnamese classrooms. Engagement in reflective cycles, peer validation, and collaborative problem-solving increased self-efficacy, fostered a sense of professional belonging, and empowered teachers to make contextually responsive instructional choices. Emotional support and the normalization of challenges emerged as key outcomes, helping participants manage anxiety and isolation.

In short, this study demonstrates that an intentionally designed online CoP provides more than a platform for resource exchange; it offers a social context where pre-service teachers can reflect, adapt, and grow into more confident, connected, and contextually aware educators.

5.2. Implications and recommendations

The results highlight the value of integrating intentionally designed online Communities of Practice (CoPs) into EFL teacher education, especially during field placements. Online CoPs can serve as an effective bridge between universities and schools during practicum, enhancing university–school partnerships and providing a platform for connecting theory with practice. This link can be further strengthened if future CoPs include supervising teachers who are willing to actively participate and dedicate time to collaborative activities.

For teacher education providers: Online CoPs should be embedded as a regular component of practicum, with structured activities and facilitation aimed at supporting both pedagogical adaptation and professional identity development.

For policy and program design: Digital platforms offer scalable, flexible solutions for distributed cohorts or international placements, ensuring that all pre-service EFL teachers have equitable access to professional communities regardless of placement location.

For pre-service teachers: Participation in an online CoP not only supports immediate classroom challenges but also fosters long-term habits of reflective practice and collaborative professional learning essential for ongoing development in EFL contexts.

5.3. Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. This study focused on a single cohort of pre-service EFL teachers at one Vietnamese institution, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts. Participation in the online CoP was voluntary, potentially attracting more motivated or tech-savvy students and influencing results. Data were primarily based on self-reports, reflective journals, and meeting transcripts, which, while offering rich qualitative insight, may not capture all aspects of the experience. Finally, the study examined impacts over an 8-week practicum; longer-term effects on professional practice and identity development remain to be explored.

5.4. Future research directions

Future research should explore the implementation of online CoPs across varied educational contexts and institutional settings. In addition, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the sustained impact of online CoP participation on teaching practice and professional identity development beyond the practicum period. Last, future research should examine facilitation strategies that best support engagement and critical reflection in online CoPs.

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APPENDIX

Illustration of a typical MS Teams CoP session

A typical weekly MS Teams session in the online Community of Practice was structured as follows to foster reflection, peer sharing, and collaborative problem-solving:

1. Pre-session preparation

Reflective journal submission:

Before the session, participants submitted private reflective journals via Google Classroom. Weekly prompts were provided (e.g., "Describe a classroom challenge you faced this week. How did you address it? How did it make you feel?") to scaffold individual reflection.

Synthesis of reflections:

Facilitators reviewed and compiled key themes, challenges, and achievements from participants' reflections, structuring them into an anonymized summary to guide group discussion. The example below is taken from Week 3 reflections.

Category	Example reflections/Issues
Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thought nervous but turn out being comfortable - Confident – had a joint lesson plan. The other teacher taught and got feedback. - Excited and nervous - Nervous but it turned out to be fine
Minor problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forgot the planned instruction sequence - Forgot writing on the board. Got better in the next lesson - Confusing tasks? - Adapted tasks but still easy to students → slow flow and not as exciting as the other lesson - Magnet of the board did not work → students had to hold their writing
Perceived challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students learn other subjects - Students talk privately - Overestimate students' abilities: only some groups (with strong students) finished the task within assigned time. - Discussion: not enough time for all groups - 2 different classes: one more open and engaging and stronger while the other is quieter (2 teachers encounter the situation) - Strong class: textbook activities are easy → adapted (Follow the textbook, students seemed to lose interest) - Did not finished the lesson on time: take too much time for warm-up, eliciting questions, set context → inadequate time for main activities - Board writing skills not good: small font, forgot to write on the board when presenting but did it later - Time management - Writing feedback: could not engage all students

2. Online group session (MS Teams, 2 hours)

Welcome and agenda overview (10 minutes):

Facilitators greet participants, outlines the session focus, and highlights the main issues gathered from the reflections.

Experience sharing (30 minutes):

Participants were encouraged to elaborate on specific experiences or challenges from their journals. Peers were encouraged to ask questions, share similar stories, or offer support.

Collaborative discussion & problem-solving (45–50 minutes):

Group discussion addresses the key themes and problems identified in the week's compiled reflections (e.g., classroom management, lesson adaptation, time management). Facilitator prompts participants to brainstorm solutions, share resources, and suggest alternative approaches.

Resource and strategy sharing (15–20 minutes):

Facilitators or participants introduce relevant teaching resources, techniques, or materials that address the week's challenges (e.g., strategies for time management).

Wrap-up (10 minutes):

Facilitators summarize the main takeaways and reminds participants about next week's focus and journal prompt.

3. Post-session follow-up

Session summary:

Facilitators share a synthesized summary of group insights, practical strategies, and resources discussed during the session.

Continuous support:

Participants continue informal discussions and receive reminders in the Zalo group throughout the week.