Written Speech:
A Barrier to Knowledge Building in Blended Learning Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Data collected within this qualitative, multiple-case study included teachers’ knowledge building preferences for written speech in a virtual community of practice (VCoP), blended learning, teacher professional development program. This data was analyzed using the theoretical tenets of Vygotsky’s social constructivist learning theory. Through heterogeneous sampling, six sites were selected from 11 program participating schools, with 11 participating teachers purposively selected from these sites. Following semi-structured participant interviews, data were coded and analyzed, where the findings indicated that participants preferred the audiovisual learning content to the written activity format in the blended learning, VCoP teacher professional development program. Program developers may use the research findings to guide the development of VCoP content alternatives to singularly text based online professional development delivery models. Recommendations for future research include studies that address the impact of audiovisual VCoP content on knowledge building.

KEYWORDS
Knowledge Building, Semiotics, Social Constructivism, Teacher Professional Development, Virtual Communities of Practice, Vygotsky, Web 2.0, Written Speech

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of Web 2.0, emerging online educational opportunities abound for advancing teacher professional development. Education researchers are investigating this potential, with the goal of developing more effective teacher training through social media that can unite geographically diverse teachers and broaden their online options for peer- and facilitator-based learning (Gulamussein, 2013; Okello-Obura & Ssekito, 2015; Pozzi, Ceregini, Ferlino, & Persico, 2016). Although communities of practice are a ubiquitous product for shared goals and interests, their virtual parallel, particularly for teacher professional development, is a more recent advancement. Although debated that virtual settings are often isolative and disengaging, Web 2.0 virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) provide teachers broad geographic access to a diverse range of teachers within the same specialty area (Liu & Lan, 2016; Moen, 2016).

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Yet, despite these benefits, there are gaps in the literature regarding teachers’ perspectives on the impact of written speech as the primary vehicle for information transfer in online communities of practice (Kazempour & Amirshokoohi, 2014; Mohammadi & Talebinejad, 2015; Tang & Lam, 2014). As teachers formalize thought through written expression in virtual community of practice (VCoP) blogs, chat rooms, and discussion forums, the writing process adds complex mental constructs that are very different from those used during verbal communication and audiovisual content review (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). It was within this context that Lev Vygotsky’s views on thought and language development served as the theoretical lenses through which to assess the influence of written speech on adult VCoP knowledge building. Thus, the objective of this study is to provide a Vygotskian-based analysis of the influence of written speech on knowledge building in a VCoP setting to advance understanding for VCoP program and content development to better meet the learning needs of those participating in online teacher professional development.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Although Vygotsky, as a developmental psychologist, advanced his views on language, cognitive development, and culturally based learning through the social and cultural lenses of early Soviet Russia, these views remain relevant to the educational practices of the digital age (Ahmadian, Pouromid, & Nickkhah, 2016; Baleghizadeh, Memar, & Memar, 2011; Linask, 2012; Smagorinsky, 2013). Accordingly, numerous researchers have applied Vygotsky’s theoretical framework to the implementation of collaborative practice strategies and subsequent analyses of social presence in online settings (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Brooks & Gibson, 2012; Churcher, Downs, Tewksbury, 2014; Liu & Lan, 2016; Siriwardane & Durden, 2014). Likewise, there have been frequent studies on writing activities in virtual environments and their effect on learning, but few have applied Vygotsky’s language based learning theory for analysis of the impact of written speech on adults as an online knowledge building tool (Ahmadian et al., 2016; Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Farr & Riordan, 2015; Jablonski, 2015; Kuo, Belland, Kuo, 2017; Lee, 2015; Siriwardane & Durden, 2014).

Vygotskian based literature that is available on language acquisition and written speech is primarily directed toward second language acquisition studies (Ahmadian et al., 2016; Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Baleghizadeh et al., 2011).

Given the dearth of Vygotskian based research on written speech as an adult knowledge-building tool among native speakers, VCoP professional development programs represent social-learning networks through which this gap may be addressed (Arshavskaya & Whitney, 2014; Jablonski, 2015; Linask, 2012). Through this online learning medium, teachers’ perceptions of the signs and tools of information exchange can be analyzed through the agency of written speech. As mediated influences have early links to cognitive development through cultural interaction and social engagement, language is the principle interspsychological symbolic sign that mediates the developmental stages of learning from infancy into adulthood (Ahmadian et al., 2016; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). As knowledge building occurs through the internalization of language, language developmentally manifests as inner speech, which is the self-conscious, quasi-organization of thoughts regarding complex imagery and their connections (Roskies, 2015; Vygotsky, 1962). Inner speech thus mediates self-regulatory guidance of word selection for clarity of oral expression and is likewise relevant for the abstraction and introspective selection of language to express the written word (Lee, 2015; Roskies, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Although affective thinking can occur without reflective introspection, the emergence of abstract thought requires the semiotic mediation of inner speech (Linask, 2012; Thompson, 2014; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Accordingly, as an individual’s inner speech develops and matures, it can facilitate the advancement of writing skills, which requires abstract cognitive abilities not inherent to spontaneous spoken language (Jablonski, 2015; Kattsoff & Thibaut, 1942; Roskies, 2015; Thompson, 2014; Vygotsky, 1962).
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