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## The Communities of Practice Project of The Small Community of English Learning in PUCC

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### ABSTRACT

Under the use of the ideas of Wenger's Communities of Practice, the research project was conducted for the purpose of observation on the improvement of learning ability of the community members in a private university in Central China (PUCC). By using the new social theory of learning, the questionnaires were distributed to the university's three major departments, the international education department, the business department, and the electronic information engineering department. The major elements around the thirteen questions in the survey included meaning, practice, community and identity. Of the four factors, the element love of community received the most attention from the participants (n=219). The method used in this project is descriptive statistics. Besides the questionnaires, the author of this paper also took part in the real activities in classes. At the same time, the author collected some information related to these small communities from the English teachers of those classes. Participant comments with the highest frequencies revolved around the love of the new study method, the improvement of self-ability, the better communication among the classmates, and the expectation on the prosperity of the community.

### KEYWORDS

Community of Practice; English learning; Practice; Community.



## INTRODUCTION

### Background and purpose of the research

Wenger (1998)'s Communities of Practice introduced a fresh idea on learning process which is very different from the typical one in current China. He held that "it is always believed that learning is a constant process done only by the individuals. And the activity of learning always is thought to be a special one clearly separated from other activities. Furthermore, teaching is regarded as the sole access to learning" (p. 3). He also said that "The process of learning even is regarded as a fierce struggle among the students. Even the cooperation and discussion is labeled as the signal of cheating" (P. 3). Nevertheless, in his book, Wenger demonstrated that "a social theory of learning must integrate the components necessary to characterize social participation as a process of learning and of knowing" (P. 5). He emphasized "community was a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence" (p. 5). Finally he thought that "identity was a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities" (p. 5).

### Locality

This research took place in a private university of central China, Henan province (PUCC). PUCC is near the heart of the capital of Henan province. Although the central China is regarded as the birthplace of forefather of Huaxia, the development of higher education in this area is not so prosperous. The average number of population of central China is one hundred million, but every year only around six hundred thousand high school students obtain the access to the universities. PUCC provides more opportunities for the high school students' further study. In contrast with the public universities, PUCC can only receive the applications from those whose score are not high enough to the public universities. Generally speaking, PUCC is called the third- level university.

### Organization of the research

This project included three parts. Part one was an introduction to the background and the purpose of the research. Part two dealt with the methods used in the research, that was, the descriptive statistics. Part Three was about the results concerning about the analysis of the small communities.

## METHODS—DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

### Data collection

The major methods used in this project were questionnaires. The thirteen questions were distributed to the members in the different small communities. Some of them were interviewed. The researcher also participated some of the classes serving as a teaching assistant. At the beginning of the project, the participants were told the purpose of the project. At the end of semester, the questionnaires were handed out to the students. For each small community, in half an hour, all the questionnaires were handed out and then were collected into a big bag. Within one week, all the 219 copies of the questionnaires were put on the tables of the researcher. All the participants were very active and full of passions showing from their careful writings and long lines of answers to the last two open questions.

### Data analysis

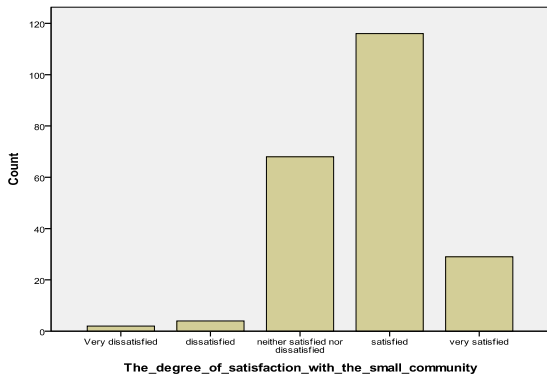


Figure. 1

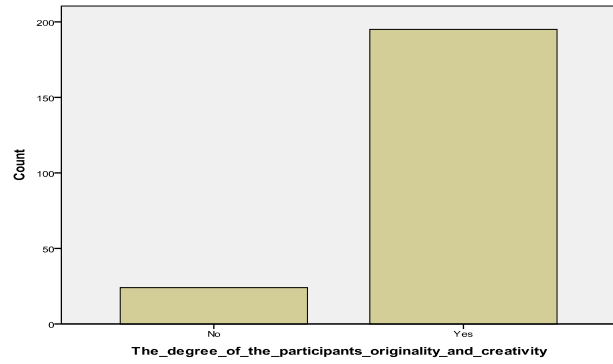


Figure. 2

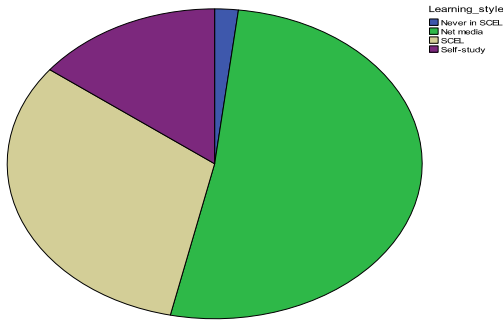


Figure 3 : the portion of the different learning styles

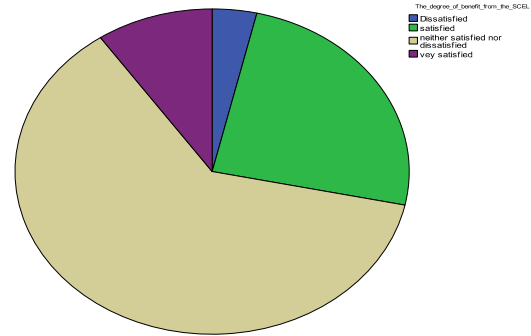


Figure 4 : the degree of benefit from the SCEL

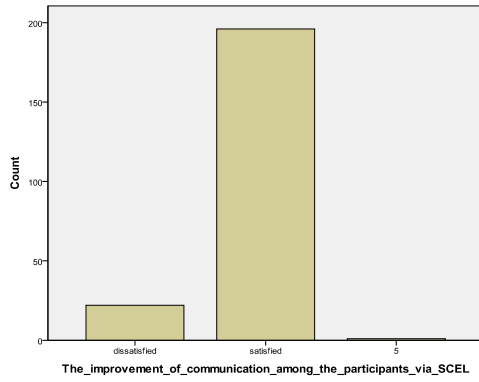


Figure 5

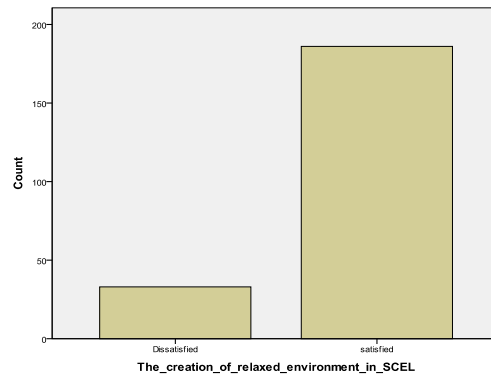


Figure 6

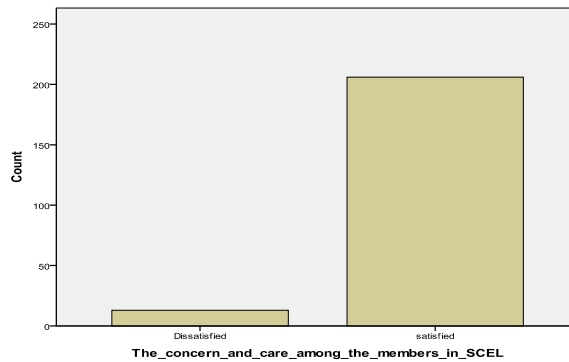


Figure 7

From the above figure 1, the satisfaction with the Small Community of English Learning (SCEL), it is clear that those who were satisfied and very satisfied with the SCEL account for 66.2%. Thus the number indicates that most of the participants love this new and fresh learning method. Figure 2 says that nearly 89% of the participants think that SCEL provides opportunity for their originality and creativity. In figure 3, one can find that different students have different learning styles. The three major learning styles are Net media, SCEL, and self-learning, which account for 55%, 25%, and 20% respectively. The numbers indicate that the application of internet and multimedia is the major approach in the students' learning process, and SCEL is a fresh and newly- appeared concept for the community members. At the end of this research, from the interviews with most of the members, the participants say their favorite learning style is definitely SCEL which accounts for 60% or so. Figure four indicates the SCEL brings more interests in English learning to the participants. Those who are satisfied with the new learning approach account for nearly 50%. At the same time, figure 5 demonstrates the SCEL also has improved the communication among the participants. Consequently, figure 6 says that the relaxed environment is also formed in the SCEL. Figure 7 shows that 94.1% of the participants think that the concern and care among the participants are also deepened in SCEL.

### **Data analysis on the last two open questions.**

From the answers to the last two open questions, the most satisfied point and the most dissatisfied point in the SCEL, one can see the following four major factors. Firstly, the SCEL has improved the originality and creativity of the participants. Secondly, in SCEL the efficiency of English learning is much stronger than ever before. Thirdly, the SCEL promotes the harmony among the participants. Finally, SCEL is very helpful if the participants want to improve his or her sense of cooperation or team work.

So far as the dissatisfied point is concerned, the questionnaires say that it is necessary for the group to have a monitor who can improve the efficiency of cooperation. Some of them think the efficiency of SCEL is not as good as the former one, the self-learning.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

With the guidance of Wenger's idea, *Communities of Practice*, the paper holds a new perspective of social theory of learning, that is, learning is always taking place everywhere and anytime in our daily lives. This paper puts such a fresh view into practice on the research of the small communities of English learning (SCEL) in a private college of central China. Throughout the data collection and data analysis, together with the necessary information from the interviews and dialogues with the members of the participants, the paper indicates how the community members have contributed to the dynamics and prosperity of the community. Most of the participants love this new and fresh learning style very much and most of them agree that SCEL has improved their originality and creativity. At the same time this kind of community provides an opportunity for their critical thinking. The communication among the participants makes most of them feel the relaxed environment and strong interests in English learning. The care and concern among the members demonstrates the advantage of this new learning methods, that is, learning can also occur among the small community and the love and care can come into being in the course of study.

At the same time, some question marks are formed at the end of this research project, which bring some thought-provoking ideas. Figure 3, the portion of the different learning styles, indicates that net media accounts for 55%. Are there some members who are using both SCEL and net media during our research course? Can we find the harmony between these two learning styles? How to make full use of SCEL based on net media? This research neglects these questions and they should be put into consideration definitely because of the popularity of internet and online learning. Figure 3 also tells that there are nearly five percent of the community members never using SCEL in the past. Whether should those students be paid attention from the counseling office of this university? Being a member of society

and a social animal, each individual had better enjoy and participate in some group activities. Otherwise, maybe some psychological problems should be put into attention on campus. In figure 4, the numbers demonstrate those who are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied account for 55%, but when the researcher did the interviews with the participants face to face, more than 60% said that they were satisfied with the new SCEL learning style. What is wrong with the two different numbers? Maybe the root of this question lies in the Chinese culture, the collective spirit. The Chinese seldom show a sharp negative attitude when faced to an interview or engage in a free talk. But when surveyed in a questionnaire in his or her own house or office secretly without showing his or opinion to another person, the participants usually tell the truth from them pens. Therefore, when analyzing some data and reports, the research should take the Chinese culture into consideration in order to draw a true conclusion finally. In figure 4, nearly 10% of the participants are not satisfied with the new SCEL learning method, and the answers to the open questions give the clues. Some of them said that a monitor was urgent in the practice in order to improve the efficiency of the new method; and the clear and tangible assignment is also urgent for this new method. Unfortunately, those elements were neglected by the researcher and the participant teachers. It implies that many times the suggestions from the participants are very useful and should be accepted and put into practice in the new run of such kind of research.

Although the small community of English learning in PUCC is not so big, the members in it devote their heart to its growing up and the life-long learning of them in this kind of community will definitely contribute to the promising future of PUCC in China.

#### Acknowledgements

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