

## *What Precludes Community of Practice from Functioning?*

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a qualitative case study about the early experiences of newly graduated teachers (NGTs) of English in post-conflict Libya. The research question is what are the NGTs' perceptions of their experiences during their first year of teaching in post-conflict Libya? The methods employed were: semi-structured interviews, observations and documents. The teachers were interviewed three times, and observed twice. The study also included other administrative staff of relevance to teacher training and development.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998) as a social theory of learning, is the conceptual framework upon which the research is based. It helped the researcher to understand the data deeply and reveal the factors that contributed to the formation of the teachers' perspectives. This theory sees practice as central to the community, and through it people participate, establish relationships, learn and build identities. Operationalisation the elements of the theory enabled to trace the extent to which CoPs was experienced by the NGTs in the post-conflict Libyan context. The findings revealed that there were some significant factors overlapped in formulating the teachers' experiences. One of the greatest factors was that antagonism emerged as a result of that bloody conflict which exacerbates other social and cultural perspectives. The trilogy; the political and social and personal values worked together and precluded CoPs from existence. The NGTs found themselves unable to cope with the demands and challenges of everyday work experience. The argument of this paper is that CoPs does not exist because of these points discussed below.

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## **Introduction**

The study analyzes the experiences, perceptions and views of a group of newly graduated teachers of English (EFL) in post-conflict Tripoli, Libya. The focus was to gain a deep insight into those teachers' experiences, perceptions and the contextual factors that shaped them. This would reveal the reasons standing behind their construction of in that context. The institutions involved in the study were all in one of the largest areas in Tripoli. They were four schools representing basic and secondary education. Basic education extends from class one to class nine involving students aged from 6-15 years of mixed gender in three schools. The second one was a secondary school for girls only and their ages range from 15-19 years. All students in all the schools selected study English as a compulsory subject for 3 hours per week. The 10 NGTs were all Libyan females of ages ranged from 24-30 and only one was married while the others were still single. They graduated from different institutions such as faculty of Arts (4 teachers), faculty of Education (1 teacher), a college for teacher training (1), and a higher institute for teacher training (5 teachers). Only the last two institutions qualify teachers to teach English in the basic and secondary education in Libyan schools. They all studied in the state-run schools and taught in them respectively. They neither had practice teaching as part of teacher education study nor received any training before commencing teaching as they stated in the interviews repeatedly.

## **The conflict when the uprising erupted**

Libya is a country in North Africa and has boarders with six African countries; namely Tunisia and Algeria in the west, Chad and Niger from the South and Egypt and Sudan from the east. It also has a coast of about 2000 kilometres. It was a stable country till February the 17<sup>th</sup> 2011 when the uprising erupted in Benghazi, the second biggest city in the eastern part of Libya developing later on to spread to other cities and towns. Libyan people suffered from decades of grievance, lack of freedom and repression of the dictatorship and his regime. All these together contributed to the eruption of what becomes known as "Arab Spring". With the help of the NATO, Libyan revolutionaries toppled the Libyan dictatorship after 42 years of suffering and Libya has entered a new era.

Although the military actions finished, they have opened the scope for endless political ideological and tribal ongoing conflict that puts the country in a dilemma. The armed conflict in Libya completely transformed every aspect of the daily life, including education where the possibility of learning and development has become very limited. It has halted the progress and set back the gains built up over generations, disrupted economic growth and advances in nutrition, health, housing, education and employment. The conflict has had serious impact on the provision and service delivery of education.

## **Communities of Practice**

The choice of communities of Practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998) as a theory upon which the theoretical framework of this research was based its relevance of how the NGTs in the Libyan context might learn and develop their identity as EFL qualified teachers. Before going further, what is CoPs then? Lave & Wenger define CoPs as "a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (1991, p. 98). Newcomers to a workplace practise the community activities and gradually become socialized with its routines, norms and regulations. They develop understandings of the language and

what is appropriate and inappropriate in terms of behaviours within that community. Lave & Wenger posit that;

social communities are in part systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities. ...identity, knowing and social membership entail one another (1991, p. 53).

Practice is central to the community wherein members build relationships and develop identities. In CoPs “the focus on creating identity through membership of (a) community is thought to distinguish it as a social learning model” (Moule, 2006, p. 371). Likewise, Kirkup asserts that “individuals and collectivities are seen to create or perform their identities through learning” (2002, p. 182) in their communities which “are seen as having strong reciprocity and members are actively engaged in the negotiation of meaning” (ibid, p.187). Furthermore, Wenger (1998) goes on to suggest that communities are not necessarily homogeneous, but are composed of diverse individuals. However, through working together they make “engagement in practice possible and productive” (1998, p. 75). Disagreement and conflict can constitute a core characteristic of a shared practice and may support the existence of the community. Individuals will create their own identities that function within the community through mutual engagement, a sharing of practice. In the context of this study, a working definition of CoPs is a group of people-staff members (teachers) bound together by profession and interests in teaching English in mainstream education in both basic and secondary schools in Libya and who continually interact and negotiate issues of interest and relevance to all schools on a regular basis.

Wenger (1998) outlines three major components of CoPs: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire which are the source of community coherence. These elements are of great importance and relevance to the current study and are therefore operationalized for analysis of the data. Thus, it is important to give a clear explanation of what each element means in relation to this research.

### **Mutual Engagement**

Mutual engagement is the basis for establishing coherent relationships in the CoPs. Members engage in activities whose meaning is negotiated on a regular basis (Wenger, 1998). This requires members to be involved in regular interaction in which they negotiate the meaning of practice within their community. This interaction might be manifested through formal or informal meetings which create engagement and actions to maintain the community. For teachers in the context of this study, issues such as discussion of the curriculum, exchange of books or lesson plan notebooks, exam preparation and marking may be keystones for negotiation and practice in the community. Other issues of social interest may stimulate extra interaction and act to maintain the community. Gradually this extends to include discussion about current social events.

The teachers might share mutual engagement as they engage in establishing relationships with their colleagues (teachers of English) and other teachers in schools. Such interactions might include sharing or exchanging course books, negotiating issues related to exams, having extra classes to make up missing time during the semester, participating in preparing midterm and final exams and carrying out marking of final exams together. These conditions might provide opportunities for continuous interaction that enhances the creation of relationships between the members that can work to the benefit of the community.

### **Enabling engagement**

Being a member and involved in the community's activities is necessary for enabling engagement. Within the physical environment of the community (school in the context of this study), this might include being present at meetings and other formal activities related to school norms as arranging an open day or a trip, issues connected with the curriculum, or even being involved in workplace gossip during break time. Such engagement defines belonging; knowing and understanding issues related to the community and yields full participation. Maintaining the coherence of the community requires work that might be less noticeable and done by one particular member, for instance, sharing breakfast, drinks, reading, exchanging magazines, newspaper together during breaks. This might be a voluntary act on the part of members as a means to enhance mutual relationships. The NGTs may approach experienced teachers to ask for help. In turn the more experienced teachers can help to create the appropriate atmosphere to start negotiating relevant issues with those teachers. The possible outcome might increase engagement and development of understanding on both sides. However, the opposite might be the case when either side is reluctant to participate or prefers to remain apart as shall be seen.

According to Wenger's argument (1998) homogeneity is not a necessity for the continuity of the community; "what makes engagement in practice possible and productive is as much a matter of diversity as it is a matter of homogeneity" (1998, p. 75). Yet members' relationships enable them to influence each other's interaction within the community. They work together, meet regularly, and exchange information and opinions. However, participants still build their own identities that contribute to the mutual engagement and a shared practice. "Each participant in a community of practice finds a unique place and gains a unique identity, which is both further integrated and further defined in the course of engagement in practice" (ibid, p.75-76). Mutual engagement involves both our own competence as well as the competence of other members in the community. "... this competence is experienced and manifested by members through their own engagement in practice" (Wenger, 1998, p.136). Participants are required to know how to give and receive help from others rather than to know everything by themselves. Contributions to the community are complementary with all participants playing their part.

Mutual engagement does not create homogeneity, but rather yields relations in the community. Moreover, disagreement, challenges and competitions can represent forms of participation that contributes to the development of the community (Wenger, 1998). However, disagreement, not in the sense interpreted by Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), might be coated with social and political values and views that entirely contradict with the norms of the community. Although this area is not sufficiently addressed by Lave & Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), it is of

particular relevance to understanding the situation of newly appointed teachers in post-conflict Libyan schools.

### **Joint enterprise**

Joint enterprise refers to “a process, not a static agreement. It produces relations of accountability that are not fixed constraints or norms” (Wenger, 1998, p. 82). It is not only sharing goals but also a negotiated enterprise that involves mutual accountability (ibid). Lack of homogeneity can be viewed as a productive part of the enterprise. Members bring their own ideas, views and skills that can sometimes enhance the enterprise. The enterprise is joint because it is communally negotiated; members negotiate all the conditions of CoPs which shape their practice.

Negotiating of a joint enterprise creates relations of mutual accountability. These relations of accountability include various issues and their counterparts. This mutual accountability makes members “feel concerned or unconcerned by what they are doing and what is happening to them and around them, and under which they attempt, neglect, or refuse to make sense of events and to seek new meanings” (Wenger, 1998, p. 81). They have developed the sense of belonging to one particular community.

In the context of this study, this would require the NGTs to negotiate ways of working towards a communally agreed enterprise. This does not mean that all the teachers must have the same view, but must negotiate their enterprise. Negotiating a joint enterprise manifests in relations of mutual accountability within the CoPs (Wenger, 1998, p. 81). Mutual accountability is the means by which “individuals, members feel concerned or unconcerned by what they are doing and what is happening to them and around them” (ibid).

In the context of this study, and as a result of the military actions and the political situation of the country, a sense of accountability among the NGT might be insufficient. Those teachers could be divided into two groups; one might prefer to isolate themselves because they are not interested in teaching and have accepted it as a temporary occupation. They might not look forward to becoming effective members of a professional community they joined unwillingly. The political and social consequences of that bloody conflict might still have their impacts on teachers' experiences and lives. In addition, other factors such age and experience might be behind such isolation.

### **Learning and Communities of Practice**

Lave and Wenger envisage learning as socially situated activity, focusing on “the structure of social practice rather than privileging the structure of pedagogy as the source of learning” (1991, p. 113, p.360). Hammersley believes that Lave and Wenger “emphasize that learning generally involves social participation in communities, and even more importantly that it amounts to the learner coming to behave in ways that are recognized as competent within a particular community” (2005, p. 6). Lave & Wenger describe learning as an “aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but also a relation to social communities” (1991, p. 53). Significant Learning is significant as it “changes our ability to engage in practice, the understanding of why we engage in it, and the resources we have at our disposal to do so. ... Our experience and our membership inform each other, pull each other, and transform each other”

(Wenger,1998, p. 95-96). It is postulated that members create what is to be learned while learning. This “suggests that the workplace itself offers opportunities for learning that cannot be easily provided in other venues” (Felstead, 2005). Hence, learning is social and is embedded in practice, not outside it or prior to it. Thus in post-conflict Libya, the NGTs can learn and build their identities and develop themselves as qualified teachers through situated learning within their professional communities.

The most significant finding of the current research was the antagonism that triggers other social and cultural restrictions which all work together and prohibited professional CoPs from functioning. The results were surprising as the conflict destroys everything and exacerbates other factors that work together to preclude the formation of professional CoPs. Therefore, the NGTs in the Libyan context experienced antagonism with all its manifestations.

### **Antagonism**

The term antagonism is used to differentiate from the term conflict which has been applied to the recent Libyan context. Sometimes antagonism sneaks into the communities; members bring it and the rift un-deliberately. It starts eroding the structure of the professional community. It is heightened by political, military, social or cultural sources. For instance, in the context of this study, the political and the social situation has drastically changed after the bloody conflict that hit the society leading to massive schism. The loyalty has become to the militia, the ideology, the party, and the tribe. All these affect the relationships of the entire society. With regard to the existence of a professional CoPs, what was happening in schools mirrored what was going in the society. For instance, some teachers within the sample had conflicting political views as a result of the conflict. It seems difficult to have mutual engagement if there is none, like the situation of some teachers in the context. The traumatic political and social conflicts brought to the communities did not finish with the end of the military actions which ended after the killing of the tyrant Gaddafi, the defeat of his troops and the fleeing of his loyalists. Moreover, the impacts of the deadly military actions flourish more when people tend to express their intention to join a diversity of political parties or associations or express their attitudes towards the opposite sides. These potential members of the community would not effectively interact and participate in the community activities. They may be excluded or marginalized or they may leave the community entirely (Colley et al., 2007) when they could not tolerate the situation. They may also be behind preventing the newcomers to join the community. In situations like these, developing identity and belonging are questioned. The existence of such antagonism within a CoPs is not easy to overcome. People have become protective of themselves and they protect those who they know; a matter of having tribal, political and social loyalty. In this case one asks whether there a professional CoPs can exist. If there are any, do such members participant in community activities? Do they learn, develop identity, have mutual engagement, joint enterprise and share accountability? The data revealed that the antagonism precluded the formation of a CoPs completely and this may continue for decades because of the social and cultural perspectives associated with antagonism. The conflict and its direct effects on the whole life of the Libyan people created a horrific schism which is politically, ideologically and socially rooted. The scene outside the school was transmitted to schools spontaneously and tension could be felt everywhere.

Arguably Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), did not put into consideration that antagonism can exist and preclude the development of a professional community. This is simply because Wenger's theorization was based on western values which are divergent from the Libyan and Middle Eastern ones where the trilogy of the political, social and personal values merges to enrich antagonism. Wenger only made the conflict simple and limited it to certain areas that would not affect the development of a professional community.

Some of the issues exacerbated by the conflict are the increasing antagonism, reserve the researcher experienced during data collection stage. They demonstrated the direct impact of the conflict on all aspects of life. The following vignettes narrate some of the researcher's experiences that elaborate how the conflict has changed people's behaviours.

### **Vignette 1: Reserve**

One of the puzzling issues was that people were on their guard. People were guarded in everything they said or did and suspicion can be noticed everywhere. Many became guarded when hot issues, particularly, political or of relevance to certain militias, were under debate.

There were instances when the researcher sat waiting in the staff rooms in the schools included in this study where she saw teachers sitting without saying a word. They would often stand in the corridor or the front yard. Once the researcher asked two of them why they did not sit in the staffroom and relax. They stated that they wanted to avoid clashes with other teachers when certain political hot subjects were discussed. In one school, some teachers stated that such political debates had forced the former headteacher to leave the school because she was attacked by some teachers. They considered her as a foe as she was a supporter of the old regime. They did not value what she had done for the school while she was a headteacher although "she was a good person" as one expert teacher stated.

Teachers' reserve included also the way they dealt with inspectors and administration. Teachers guarded themselves to the extent that they did not complain to the head of English language inspection during visits to discuss their problems. Ahmed; the head of Tripoli inspection office stated that:

*Ahmed: I went to a school today and I talked with teachers and asked them if they have any notes about inspectors and their behaviours with you. We try to help and even school administrations are cautious. I told them I was not coming to evaluate them or investigate them. I told them if there is a gap we try to amend it and the treatment should be good. Some are still cautious (focus group).*

Teachers had reserve because they could not find a connective community to support them. Some of the NGTs were unaware of their rights to complain and many were appointed on temporary contracts. Some of them might have experienced hard situations when they voiced their views. Thus, they avoided complaining to protect themselves. The head of the inspection interpreted it as “courtesy” because he was in a better situation than those teachers. They also thought of what might happen in the future if those they complained about found out. Although they might be from different CoPs, mutual engagement and the integration were missed and reserve was the one used safe guard.

The researcher remembered going to the Educational Development Centre many times to meet the manager by any means because there were no guarantees to have an appointment. His assistant was clever in finding excuses, and she had to be patient. With her tenacity, she met the manager who welcomed her, but without shaking hands as (he might be religiously conservative) and expressed his interest in the research after hearing the brief account presented. People interrupted the meeting many times, which the assistant could have avoided; however, she carried out the interview without fear. Every corner looked at her suspiciously, which frightened her most of the time. She knew he was so busy. Therefore, she asked him a few questions and for evidence represented in documents of the plans for teacher training. The reserve included the employees in the department of training where they welcomed her, but insisted on having a legal letter signed by the manager himself in order to issue a copy of the centre plans for training.

Going to the inspection office was encouraging in terms of the people the researcher met there; they were inspectors, and heads of inspection offices on the level of the whole country. They looked at her suspiciously and had reserve too, although some of them knew her as a former colleague. It was difficult to get some documents referring to the activities conducted by the inspection office. She had to ask and repeat the questions many times many times. Everyone seemed to think she might use what they said or what she might get as evidence against them. As a conclusion, reserve exists earlier to the conflict yet it is exacerbated by the conflict in Libya, the situation and culture. This trilogy works together and inhabits the formation of CoPs. The consequences of the conflict might last decades to be eradicated and no one could predict what is coming next.

### **Age Barrier**

Age was another factor that hindered mutual engagement of some NGTs in the sample of this study. In the context of this research and from social and cultural perspectives, young people have to respect their elders in terms of interacting with them and even more in the way of asking for help. The culture here plays a significant role in establishing relationships among members of the same community. Under the umbrella of respect, younger members may not sit or chat or have meals with older members even on social occasions. Such restriction on relationships does not promote the development of mutual engagement. To the contrary, it results in a lack of it to the extent that teachers would not sit in the staff room. The NGTs had to show respect for older and experienced teachers as some of these colleagues were their former teachers too. For instance, Amall, Eve and Nawal confirmed that the age barrier limited communication between NGTs and their colleagues. For other teachers like (Rab),

age difference was an excuse for keeping formal relations with colleagues in general. This hindered acquiring the “knowledge and skills related to work requirements”(Felstead et al.,2005, p.360), formation of relationships and consequently affected the mutual engagement of those teachers and created opportunities for misunderstanding. Age According to Wenger (1998) can be a barrier to achievement of CoPs and those teachers will not be able to overcome the “demands and challenges of everyday work experience and social interactions with colleagues” (Felstead et al., 2005, p.360).

These teachers might have experienced hard times during the conflict which had its impact on them to the extent that they became unwilling to integrate. They might perceive integration as an intrusion into other’s privacy. Evidence from the observation suggests that some NGTs had limited contacts even with NGTs, which might relate to their personality; possibly they were less sociable or they might have experienced a lack of responses from their colleagues. This lack of communication might also relate to the schism between supporters of the new and the old regimes. Moreover, it was noticeable that both Amall and Rab (teachers in the same school) used to come on time, go to class and then leave the school. The researcher also had to wait or search for them when there were appointments. The observation data suggest that they limited their mutual engagement upon their own decisions. This would make it difficult for them to achieve an advantage of the community cited by Lave & Wenger and Wenger (1991 ; 1998) namely, people successfully learn without the help of formal education (Hughes, 2007).

This view of the age barrier may have pushed teachers like Eve and Sam to resort to self-socialization (De Lima, 2003) and to isolate themselves from other members of the community. They might not be interested in integration or escaping from other social burdens. Their possible marginalization is suggested in the statements below:

*Eve: I felt that I was a stranger because they are older than me and they know each other well (1).*

*Sam: Because I know no one there, I felt that the place is strange and I know no one so I went home (1).*

Observing Eve and Sam showed that they were seriously dissatisfied with their situation as teachers and wanted to leave the professions.

*Eve: My ambition is more than this; I do not want to spend my life in teaching only. I think I want to do something. Honestly, it does not (go with) me (fit) as a profession (2).*

Likewise, Sam stated repeatedly, “teaching isn’t my interest at all”. Both Eve and Sam’s attitudes towards teaching might be affected by their previous ideas about teachers and the social status of a teacher as a person who works hard, but is paid little. They perceived themselves as ambitious and teaching is as a hindrance.

Moreover, if these NGTs did not find the appropriate conditions for mutual engagement, the Possibility of integration became limited and self-isolation became a preferred strategy.

Moreover, Eve became hesitant and avoided asking others' help. She did not find an encouraging atmosphere that would stimulate her interaction and reduce her hesitation. She stated:

*Eve: Sometimes I want to ask and then I say who says that the students understand from this teacher (2).*

She might not have that much experience on how to engage with colleagues. Hesitation might be related to her personality, difference in age or experience or the anxiety of asking. She might have doubt about her colleagues' qualification and capabilities. On the other hand, the expert and experienced colleagues might assume she did not need their help at all. There was no community that encouraged her to integrate, to learn and contribute to her development.

### **Nepotism**

The Libyan society originally consists of tribes distributed all over the country now. However, some tribes still settle in their original regions and their members still keep in touch with them and pay their moral respect in different manners. The strong relationships between members make neutrality unachievable in most cases. Thus, sharing of knowledge as emphasized by Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), and Brown and Duguid (2002) and (1991) is affected by the status of the individual in a community if existed. It is reasonable to speculate that the conflict triggers nepotism and other social barriers to hinder the community from functioning as theorised by Wenger (1998). Therefore, members do not find chances to collaborate to solve common problems, share best practices and support each other. This can be noticed in seeking opportunities looking for jobs or help in general. It seems that the conflict activates all these issues to the extent that one will not be able to recognize whether the person talking is highly educated or just a normal one from the lay out.

### **Conclusion**

It was noticeable that all the mentioned above were exacerbated by the conflicts in all its manifestations; the political, the social and the cultural .They worked together as complete abstraction that precluded CoPs from functioning. For the NGTs in the Libyan context and in other similar ones, the potential means for gaining professional development in the workplace would be through formal training under the educational organizations.

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