

Research on the Construction of Professional Learning Community of English Writing Teachers in Colleges and Universities

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Abstract—A professional learning community is an effective approach to teacher development. The paper firstly presents relevant theory of a professional learning community, and then reports the exploration of a professional learning community of university English writing teachers. The study shows that this practice can improve the research and teaching ability. Some suggestions are proposed to improve the construction of the community.

Keywords—a professional learning community; teacher development; English writing teachers in colleges and universities

I. INTRODUCTION

The Outline of the National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) states that it is necessary to "train a large number of international talents who are internationally savvy, understand international rules, and can participate in international affairs and international competition." Against this request, college English is facing a new round of reform. After the promulgation of the "College English Teaching Guide", all colleges and universities are in full swing to carry out college English teaching reform suitable for school conditions, explore the connotative development of college English, and actively promote the reform of the curriculum system in order to achieve the goal for cultivating talent of national and university.

After several rounds of research visits inside and outside the school, the School of Foreign Languages of our school began a new round of college English curriculum reform in 2017 with classified goal, classified category and multi-method. The purpose is to realize the three teaching objectives of foundation, improvement and development, and to open three major courses, namely compulsory courses, limited elective courses and optional elective courses, which

reflect the teaching philosophy of dual subjects through task-based, cooperative, and inquiry-based teaching methods. These reforms have brought new challenges to college English teachers, and put forward higher requirements for teachers' teaching ability, technical level and scientific research ability. Therefore, whether teachers can achieve their own professional development becomes the core factor for the smooth progress of this reform.

At present, most articles on college English reform focus on the objectives of the curriculum, teaching content, curriculum design and student needs [1] [2] [3] [4], while few studies explore how college English teachers achieve their own development and promote teaching reform in the new situation. Therefore, promoting the professional development of teachers in the reform and upgrading the level of teaching and research should be an urgent need to study. This paper first briefly expounds the theory of teachers' professional learning community, and then focuses on the practical exploration of the college English writing teacher community in promoting teacher development, and finally proposes reflection.

II. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING TEACHERS

There are contradictions that restrict or hinder the professional development of college English teachers in colleges and universities:

A. *The Heavy Teaching and Low Investment in Scientific Research*

College English teachers are engaged in heavy language teaching. The main goal is to improve the language skills of college students, including English listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. They are not related to their

academic interests and research topics, and their research investment is insufficient.

B. Teaching Alone and Collective Learning

College English teachers often study alone, less observe the teaching of others, do not want others to observe their own teaching, and it is difficult to have a lot of time to concentrate on learning and discussion. In the long run, the problem of rigid teaching methods is prone to occur.

C. The Contrast Between Initial Enthusiasm and Burnout After Entering the Working Environment

When first joined the working environments, most teachers were full of passion and inspiration to be an excellent teacher. However, it's easy to enter the development bottleneck resulting in job burnout due to heavy teaching load, inadequate effective training and continuous learning, the knowledge structure stereotype, few update in knowledge, weaker the research ability, worry on future development, and thin developmental motivation.

D. The Gap Between High Expectations and Underdevelopment

The high expectations of the society, the high demands of the schools and the high expectations of the students put forward higher and higher requirements for the teachers' knowledge, professional level and teaching ability, which cause anxiety for the professional development of teachers.

E. The Contradiction Between the Evaluation of Assessment and the Evaluation of Teaching

Under the current evaluation mechanism, due to the lack of scientific research results, the assessment of college English teachers is not smooth, and the promotion is extremely difficult, which has seriously hampered the enthusiasm of college English teachers.

At the moment when the professional development of college English teachers is in dire straits, it is extremely urgent to explore practical and effective teachers' professional development. Studies have shown that establishing Professional Learning Community for College English Writing Teachers is an important means to promote the professional development of teachers, to improve the quality of teachers and to ensure the quality of students' development and education [5] [6] [7]. Danhong Fan [8] defines the teacher learning community as follows: The Professional Learning Community for College English Teachers is organized spontaneously by teachers based on common goals and interests, and aims to promote teacher professional development through cooperation, dialogue and sharing activities. The group is composed of learners (i.e. teachers) and their helpers (including education experts, school leaders, subject teachers, talent teachers, etc.), and its members often communicate, exchange, and share various learning resources during the learning process together to complete certain learning tasks, which have formed interpersonal relationships between the members of the community that influence each other and promote each other.

In the Professional Learning Community for College English Teachers, members share the successful experience in classroom teaching practice, exchange thoughts and ideas, influence each other, and create a good cooperation culture. In communication and dialogue, teachers can experience professional value and development value and cultivate an intrinsic development power.

Qiufang Wen [9] summarizes the four elements of the theoretical framework for constructing professional learning community for College English teachers: first, members (leaders and community members): Leaders have strong leadership, professionalism and dedication. Members have high initiative and great differences. Second, goals: In order to make each teacher a qualified college teacher, the construction goals are divided into two types: implicit and explicit. The implicit goal refers to cultivating the self-development ability of each team member. The explicit goal refers to the near-visible and measurable target. Third, intermediary: Abstract intermediaries refer to problems, issues, or research focus that team members have discussed, negotiated, and refined. Specific intermediaries refer to objects that are visible and tangible. Fourth, mechanism: In emotional interaction, team members build a sense of security, equality and satisfaction. Cognitive interaction uses the concept of social constructivism to collectively build the professional knowledge of foreign language teachers through sharing, communication, discussion, and debate.

The professional learning community has three attributes [10]. First, professionalism: It can promote the professional development of teachers, and improve the quality of teaching and professional quality of teachers. Second, learning: Learning is not only the foundation and the way of the professional learning community, but also the purpose for the members to work together. Third, cooperation: Cooperation is the most basic model of a professional learning community. Through cooperation, teachers undertake tasks, support each other, share experiences, and ultimately achieve the goals pursued by the organization.

III. PRACTICAL EXPLORATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY OF COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING TEACHERS

At the beginning of the reform, in order to effectively build a continuously developing faculty, the English Department divided the teachers into eleven professional learning communities according to the curriculum system. The author has volunteered as the person in charge of the writing professional learning community (hereinafter referred to as the Community) because of the experience of engaging in English writing teaching and research for a long time. The group members have a strong interest in English writing teaching and have joined the community. The community has a total of 7 members, including 2 with senior titles and 5 with intermediate titles. The members have obtained master's degrees, and the time spent on college English teaching ranges from 5 to 23 years (see "Table I"). The members are female teachers, and the teaching burden is heavy. The number of weekly hours per semester is 12-16. At the same time, given that the high development cost of

pursuing doctor degree and the long investment period, it is difficult to take responsibility for caring for the family. Therefore, each member faces a similar dilemma in the development of post-employment teachers.

TABLE I. COMMUNITY MEMBER INFORMATION

Participant	job title	Teaching age
Teacher 1	Associate Professor	15
Teacher 2	Associate Professor	23
Teacher 3	lecturer	10
Teacher 4	lecturer	16
Teacher 5	lecturer	5
Teacher 6	lecturer	6

A. Management System

The members of the community are young teachers of college English. They are familiar with each other, can communicate honestly, cooperate sincerely, honest in drawbacks, and are willing to learn from other members with enthusiasm. Improving the scientific research ability and theoretical level can promote the professional development of college teachers, and teaching teachers can only improve their teaching ability and improve the quality of classroom teaching through continuous research and study. After the establishment of the community, after deliberation, it is determined that the overall goal of the community is to improve teachers' ability to write English and improve their research ability.

In order to achieve the overall goal, the goal has also been embodied:

- to study the monographs of writing teaching and research; to systematically study scientific research courses;
- to link with teaching practice to write and share reflection; to collect and learn foreign language writing related to foreign language writing teaching; to apply for teaching projects;
- to complete teaching and research papers with published level;
- to construct four-semester writing courses in college English reform;
- to draft writing and college English writing lesson plans together;
- to make lesson-introduction;
- to learn and use technical means.

The effectively building of a community requires all members to voluntarily participate in group learning at their own expense. Therefore, our members have enacted the Regulations on the Administration of Writing Teachers Community, using the system to urge members to be self-disciplined and consciously enforce the regulations. At the same time, the team leader unified management and designed a series of forms. The "Team Member Information

Sheet" records the teaching workload, teaching effects and scientific results of each semester, and forms a constructive evaluation of the members to promote development. The "College English Writing Teaching Team Teaching and Research Learning Record Sheet" records the reflections of members after scientific research to acquire scientific research ideas. The Writing Community Meeting Record Table records the ideological confrontation and speculative sparks in each group study. The Teaching Reflection Table is used to reflect on the teaching effects after each classroom teaching.

At the same time, the network environment provides a convenient organization form for the community. In addition to organizing regular group activities, the community uses WeChat group for online communication to realize timely information transmission and communication and QQ group to upload learning materials, reflective logs, activity records, etc. This is not affected by time and space to maintain the enthusiasm and continuity of professional development of teachers.

B. Enhancing Scientific Research Capabilities

College English teachers have a large amount of teaching workload, usually lacking the time to input theoretical knowledge. It is difficult to combine theory with practice. Their reflection towards teaching is often fleeting and perceptual to reflect on teaching and is often fleeting. The disconnection between theory and practice has always been considered as a dysentery that is difficult to break in teacher learning, which hinders the effectiveness of teacher development. Therefore, it's necessary to systematically learn the teaching theory knowledge, master the latest theories and cutting-edge dynamics in all relevant fields of language teaching to help teachers to effectively, critically reflect on teaching practice, to help teachers to achieve lifelong learning, and to take professional development routes. The professional community uses a variety of ways to improve the research level of its members.

1) *Studying series theory course*: The Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press has created a university foreign language teaching platform (Unipus) for university English teachers, enabling front-line teachers to conduct developmental learning at home. Among them, U lectures teacher development online series courses are supported by language experts to help front-line teachers to examine practical problems in teaching, and encourage teachers to improve their research level and ability in solving problems. The courses related to foreign language writing teaching and research methods are carefully selected (see "Table II"). Due to the inconsistent teaching time of members, the method of individual learning of group members plus team sharing reflection was taken. Reflection is the most direct way of teaching, an important part of teacher development. It helps teachers to analyze their own teaching, and consider whether there are other ways to achieve the purpose of teaching. Teacher development is the process of continuous reflection and exploration in teaching [11]. After learning

the same course, members will closely combine theoretical learning with teaching experience and write a deep reflection in time. During the collective discussion, through

the intense and sincere discussion, the theoretical level of members has been improved, and the benefits of communication and collaboration have been realized.

TABLE II. ONLINE SERIES OF COURSES FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

	course
1	Corrective feedback in language teaching and second language acquisition
2	College English Writing Teaching
3	Motivation Strategies in Foreign Language Writing Teaching
4	Inquiry-based learning: developing students' ability to learn independently
5	Teaching View under the Background of Curriculum Reform: Contrast and Reflection
6	English Teacher Identity: Philosophy and Research
7	Language, Data and Research: Papers Published by Scholars
8	Foreign Language Vocabulary Teaching and Research
9	Writing contest full clearance
10	Foreign Language Teaching Research and Teacher Professional Development
11	Qualitative research in foreign language teaching: methods and cases
12	How to analyze the syntactic complexity of a composition
13	Design and Practice of Classroom Teaching in College English Thinking Course Writing

2) *Learning a monograph on foreign language writing:*

It is difficult for individual teachers to insist on reading monographs on the difficult. However, group study can ensure the smooth completion of learning. Ken Hyland's latest monograph in the writing field was chosen to be studied, *Teaching and Research Writing*. Members choose a chapter based on their research interests, and finish reading within the specified time, select key points, and share reports when they make group learning. Group task-based learning has greatly improved the efficiency of the original individual learning. In the three-month group study, members have a complete and clear understanding of the latest methods and cutting-edge dynamics of writing teaching and research, and have preliminary thoughts on their own research.

3) *Learning core journal papers:* In order to understand the academic dynamics, the members collected and organized the core papers on teaching and research on foreign language writing in a task-based manner and shared them in the QQ group. The leader classifies the collected papers so that members can check them at any time during teaching and research.

4) *Conducting action research:* At the same time of a large number of theoretical studies, community leaders guide teachers to try new ideas in teaching, use new methods, let learning activities be implemented, members critically analyze daily teaching cases, find specific teaching problems, actively carry out action research, and strive for teaching and research projects.

C. *Improving Teaching Ability*

The ultimate goal of the improvement of scientific research level is to improve the teaching level of college English teachers and improve the efficiency of college

English writing classrooms to guarantee the quality of teaching. The community has completed the following work.

1) *Constructing a four-semester college English writing course system:* Curriculum construction is an effective way to improve teachers' teaching ability. The curriculum is constructed as a set of purposeful and executable plans that stipulate the objectives, contents and methods of training, and the strategies and evaluation methods for specific implementation [12]. By constructing a college English writing curriculum system that cultivates multi-level English writing ability, formulates different teaching objectives, and develops students' English writing ability in a targeted manner to improve students' writing ability, improve the quality of English writing classroom teaching, and enhance teachers' ability in teaching and scientific research. The college English writing course is divided into the following three levels (See "Table III"):

a) *Cultivating the top-notch English writing ability of the ESS:* Students in the College English Test Class. The students in the ESS class are from the non-English major undergraduate students. After several rounds of tests, they have special English skills and the potential to participate in the competition and win award on behalf of their school. High-intensity training is conducted in the form of workshops. The evaluation method adopts a combination of 70% (practice, homework and practice) and a final evaluation of 30% (test) in the formative evaluation to achieve the ability to evaluate.

b) *Developing the academic English writing ability of students in Class A:* After the 2017 students are graded, some students are selected into class A because of their high level of English. These students have a good foundation in English. Therefore, the teaching goal is to develop their international academic communication skills, improve their

ability to directly study and work in English, and have strong international exchange and competitiveness in the professional field. The teaching content includes thesis and academic English writing, adopting the teaching method based on the subject content, organically integrating the writing skill training and the knowledge content in the teaching process, and promoting each other to realize the trinity goal of knowledge structure, thinking training and English writing skills. The evaluation method adopts a combination of 60% (formation, practice, and classroom presentation) and 40% (thesis) of the final evaluation to achieve the evaluation.

c) Cultivating the ability of students in class B to apply English writing skills: Students in Class B aim to improve their English writing skills and writing test-taking skills. Through a large number of literacy and vocabulary activities, students' vocabulary and grammar can be improved, and they can learn different genre of writing, understand writing techniques, and strengthen their writing output to their students' writing ability. The evaluation approach takes the form of a formative assessment of 50% (homework and exercises) combined with a 50% (test) summative assessment.

TABLE III. COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING COURSE SYSTEM WITH MULTI-LEVEL ENGLISH WRITING ABILITY

Level	teaching objectives	Teaching content	teaching method	Evaluation means
1	Cultivate top-notch English writing talents Improve students' writing ability	Contest composition	Workshop	Formative assessment 70%+Final evaluation 30%
2	Cultivate international academic communication skills Improve ability to work in English	thesis Academic English writing	Content-based teaching (CBI)	Formative assessment 60%+Final evaluation 40%
3	Develop students' English application ability and test ability	Basic writing Practical English writing	combination of reading and writing Enhanced output	Formative assessment 50%+Final evaluation 50%

2) *Learning means:* Writing corrections has always been a part of the problem of English writing teachers. On the one hand, it is time-consuming and laborious to make corrections. Teachers have no time to arrange essays for students. The writing training opportunities are seriously inadequate. On the other hand, the evaluation information and feedback are not timely, and the writing ability cannot be improved. Therefore, it is necessary to use the advantages of modern network technology to improve the efficiency of correction. The writing correction network (www.pigai.org) is an online system that automatically corrects English composition with a computer, which can provide timely feedback, comment by sentence and online modification. Based on natural language processing technology and corpus technology, the online automatic composition correction system offers timely score, improvement suggestions and content analysis results by analyzing the distance between the student composition and the standard corpus [13]. The community learn the usage of the correction network and promoted it to the teaching and research section, which greatly reduced the amount of corrections for teachers and improved the composition review.

3) *Improving the teaching ability of young teachers:* The community encouraged the young teachers of the team to actively participate in the lecture presentation competition of the college. During the preparation, the members listened carefully to the lectures of the participating teachers, shared their experiences, and pointed out the shortcomings. After competition, the community summed up the issues in time to prepare for the next competition.

4) *Preparing teaching materials together:* The Community has prepared a series of materials for the College English Writing Course. The China University of Geosciences (Wuhan) University English Writing Survey Questionnaire surveys students' needs for writing classes. It also make essay tests for students of 2016 and 2017 to understand students' English writing skills. In accordance with the unified writing format, the Community completed the teaching materials for English writing in the first year of the 17th grade after the reform.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper explores the ways to improve the research and teaching level of college English teachers by building a professional learning community for college English writing teachers. In practice, the following reflections are shown: first, schools and colleges should provide more institutional and fund support to create a good environment for teachers' professional development, and provide opportunities for various forms of learning. Schools and colleges should also paying attention to the emotional needs of teachers, so that teachers can relieve stress and actively get out of development difficulties. The single evaluation of the results of scientific research that are easy to quantify is not enough, what also worth attention are the hard work of teachers in teaching and research, and comprehensive evaluation to teachers. Second, teacher development is a cyclical adjustment. Although the community can stimulate the enthusiasm of teachers and arouse the motivation of teachers, internal motivation and self-awareness are the most important forces for teacher development, not just the external environment. Third, it takes a long time for the community to establish, run, and operate the community to achieve the desired goals. The responsible person should

strive to improve his academic level and management ability, actively and effectively organize activities, and promote the development of team members in many aspects.

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