A Collaborative Auto-Ethnography: A South Africa-China Community of Practice and Its International Collaborative Research Process

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Abstract

A South African university and a Chinese university embarked on a collaborative research project in 2014. The project was propelled by the introduction of Mandarin as a second additional language in South African schools and Mandarin taught as a foreign language to non-Chinese learners and mixed-blood learners (one parent is ethnic Chinese) in schools in China. A Community of Practice (CoP) was established as part of the existing research project in 2017. Based on our research process experiences as a CoP we were able to present a collaborative auto-ethnographic narrative. The focus was on the teaching and learning of Mandarin as a foreign language: Chinese characters. The benefits of the CoP for each country ensure the sustainability of the research project, with a renewed vision for future research. CoPs are enablers of collaborative comparative research whereby their combined experiences and conclusions are reflected in an auto-ethnographic narrative.

Keywords: Communities of Practice; platform agreement; collaboration; Chinese characters; auto-ethnography

Introduction

South Africa (SA) joined the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries in 2010 as the sole African member and is represented by the "S" in the amended acronym for the organisation, "BRICS." The aim of BRICS is to bring justice to the economic and financial system of the world (Budeli 2010, 75). Thus, for BRICS nations to expand collaborative research in common interest areas would "help the knowledge economy of all collaborating nations by sharing skills, resources and contributing to the economic and scientific advancement collectively" (Rensburg, Motala, and David 2015, 817). Parding et al. (2012, 285) cogently remind academics that, to be able to live in a globalised world, they need to learn from those "who are culturally, linguistically and geographically different" through collaborative international research.

In 2015, the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2015, 3) published the announcement that Mandarin had been listed as a second additional language (Grades 4–9) in the National Curriculum Statement Grades R–12. With the acquisition of Mandarin—and Mandarin characters in particular—being recognised as posing many challenges due to the "vast number and complexity of the characters" (ShaoLan 2014, 9), a South African university invited a residential university in China to embark on a collaborative research project in 2014. Since then we conducted comparative research on topics such as emergent literacy teaching and learning, teaching and learning Mandarin as a foreign language, and the teaching of Mandarin with a focus on Chinese characters. In 2017 both parties agreed that we operate as a Community of Practice (CoP)[1] within the existing collaborative research project. Both universities recognised the benefits that a CoP would bring, as China is faced with foreign learners who experience the same or similar challenges in its schools as those in SA schools. Our agreed aim in this paper is to reflect (as an auto-ethnographic narrative) the research process experiences as a CoP (in retrospect of our experiences in the earlier research studies conducted in this collaborative project), to identify the challenges, and to arrive at ways to overcome these challenges for both teachers and learners. Hence, the Communities of Practice theory undergirds this study.

We first present Wenger's theory of CoP, followed by the research method, our findings and our discussion, and the conclusions arising from our findings as a CoP, all regarding the process and sustainability of international collaborative research.

Wenger's Theory of Community of Practice

A CoP comprises three fundamental elements, namely a domain of knowledge whereby a set of issues are defined (in this case the common ground is the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language), a community of persons (drawn from the SA and Chinese

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[1] Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4).

universities concerned) who enjoy mutual respect and trust and who are concerned about the domain, and practice (the teaching and learning of characters by non-speaking Mandarin learners) which is shared and being developed, using enabling resources (such as frameworks, models, experts, best practices) effectively within the domain (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 27–28, 38).

Wenger (2008, 4–5) states that a social theory of learning is primarily social participation and that additional premises are *knowledge*, which refers to competence, *knowing*, which means actively engaging in the world, and *meaning*, which refers to being able to meaningfully engage and experience the world. Participation is not limited to local activities and interaction with local people, but also involves actively participating in social communities' practices and subsequently developing an identity relating to the community. Social participation comprises (and integrates) four components, namely *meaning*, as we talk individually and collectively about changing our ability to change our experience of life and the world meaningfully, *practice*, which is how we talk about those historical and social resources and frameworks as well as perspectives which we share in order to sustain our active mutual engagement, *community*, which is how we talk regarding "social configurations" where we can define the enterprise as worth it and where our participation is recognised as being competent, and *identity*, which concerns how we talk about the way learning can change us and create a personal history of us "becoming" within our community context. Communities of Practice integrate these components. Wenger states that the core of human learning involves negotiating meaning where one can become a certain person (identity) within a social context or multiple social contexts (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner 2016, 145).

Collective learning, which arises from people of different backgrounds engaging and interacting together in the world, in turn results in practices becoming established. Such practices become the property of a community that is sharing an enterprise—and this culminates in a Community of Practice (Wenger 2008, 45) which develops a "common sense of identity" (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 5). Learning is thus a social process (over time) within a cultural as well as a historical context and CoPs can take place in "any domain of human endeavour" (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner 2016, 140). People who have a systems view of a landscape actively work to achieve new learning and, as such, they reconfigure the landscape by bringing together new partners across traditional boundaries for learning. Communities of Practice are thus cultivated as interventions in the landscape that take place through example, through networks and through projects and, ultimately, learning partnerships are forged and new identities and capabilities are created. People are brought together (heterogeneous learning partnerships) from different locations with a view of transforming practice. The present research has been convened by systems conveners who have unlocked "unexplored spaces, forging promising partnerships, building bridges, resetting boundaries, challenging established colonies, and creating new settlements" (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015, 100). Importantly, CoPs

identify those who need the specific knowledge for the type of work they do and find ways to connect them to other CoPs so that they can ultimately "steward" the knowledge together (which is dependent on a measure of informality and autonomy) (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 7, 12).

Having to reconfigure a landscape during times that are changing rapidly, a convener needs to face practices that are long established, boundaries that are enduring, institutions that are complex and stakeholders who are powerful and adamant in their desire to stick to the status quo. The foundation of collaboration is to build relationships and create a common language—a process that is time-consuming. Nevertheless, it is important for the convenor to prove that participation in the project is of high value and worthwhile, considering the time invested. Thus, short-term results represent a move towards long-term change and keep the people working together, reconfiguring their identity and ultimately becoming part of the reconfigured landscape (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015, 98, 100, 104, 105). Therefore, by learning together and accumulating knowledge, they become bound informally (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 5).

In addition, a Community of Practice is one way to expand the agency of academics and the research community by adopting "a more active role in promoting collaborative research, running joint projects and holding shared academic and education dialogues and events" (Tavakoli 2015, 49). International collaboration, however, does tend to have higher costs, e.g. travelling costs, than collaboration over short distances (Jeong, Choi, and Kim 2014, 521). Often researchers are reluctant to engage in international collaboration as they have less time due to various internal and external factors, for example teaching responsibilities and the need to conduct research (Jeong, Choi, and Kim 2014, 522). Younger academics may be more enthusiastic to be involved in international collaboration (as it tends to be more productive and of a higher quality) than experienced researchers who no longer need academic achievement for promotion purposes (Jeong, Choi, and Kim 2014, 523). A university's academic excellence can be increased as a result of international collaborations' positive effects (Jeong, Choi, and Kim 2014, 530). Brew et al. (2013, 103) stress the importance of understanding "the interface between those aspects of working and researching together which derive from who we are as academics with particular orientations, work roles, aspirations and career trajectories, and those which derive from the institutional and national systems in which we work."

Research Methodology

The Research Questions

1) What are the challenges and successes/opportunities of the team members from South Africa and China as a Community of Practice during the collaborative research project?

2) How effectively does an auto-ethnographic narrative reflect the research process experienced by a CoP during this collaborative research project?

3) Based on the outcomes of the CoP, is the collaborative research project sustainable?

The aim of the project is to reflect on learning experiences in an effort to "assess our experiences, actions and work in the research process" (Parding et al. 2012, 287) as a CoP, within a West-East collaborative research context. The empirical foundation of this article consists of written reflections of the research team as a CoP and presents itself through a collaborative auto-ethnographic narrative as a qualitative research method. As Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang observed, "Through the process of collaborative auto-ethnography, we have found convergence of our experiences and the strategies we employ to survive and thrive" (Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang 2015, 546). Moreover, "collaborative auto-ethnography can be an important tool whereby scholars can create community, advance scholarship and be empowered to effect changes at their institution" (Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang 2015, 547). Auto-ethnography "examines the researchers' own experience in a cultural context … that reality is multifaceted, and the role of culture and context is crucial in understanding human experience. The reader is engaged through the evocation of emotion and the stimulation of reflection" (Peterson 2015, 226). "CAE combines the benefits of auto-ethnography (addressing the connectivity between self and society), multi participant studies (involving voices of multiple participant-researchers), and collaborative work (drawing upon interactive and corroborative energy of researchers)" (Chang, Longman, and Franco 2015, 376). The collaborative research context is explained first, followed by the data collection and the analysis.

The Collaboration Research Context

Central to this article is the collaborative research process whereby a South African team and a Chinese team explored the teaching and learning of Chinese characters by non-Chinese speakers in primary schools in South Africa and China (each team in their own context).

In South Africa, the research site was conveniently selected. It is a private school in the Gauteng province that offers Mandarin as a language of teaching and learning for the Chinese learners and Mandarin as a second additional language for non-Chinese learners (who are in the majority). The non-Chinese learners comprise white (whose home language is either English/Afrikaans/a variety of other languages) and black South African learners (whose languages include a variety of African languages). The school caters for learners from pre-school to Grade 12. The SA research team comprised a research team leader (professor emeritus) as well as two full-time professors, all of whom are attached to Unisa.

The team leader developed the data collection materials, namely the individual learner interview schedule, the learner focus group interview schedule, the learner

questionnaire, the teacher interview schedule, and the parent questionnaire. These were made available to the Chinese team who adapted them according to their context.

The first phase of the newly drawn up platform agreement was initiated at the beginning of 2017 and ended in October 2017 at the culmination of a conference. Academic discussions took place at the Chinese university campus during a workshop and there were school visits and the submission of a co-authored article and two collaborative (South African and Chinese) co-authored articles.

In China, one international primary school for non-Chinese learners—organised by Chinese and operated by non-Chinese—was selected. Mandarin is offered as a foreign language and taught by native-born Chinese. The learner body of this school is mixed, with returned overseas Chinese, mixed-blood learners with one parent ethnic Chinese, and learners with non-Chinese parents. The learners who were observed and interviewed were selected from the latter two groups. Besides the benefits of their long-standing relationships with the local community, it was convenient for the Chinese team to conduct comparative studies in local public schools on teaching Mandarin as mother tongue to Chinese nationals.

The Chinese research team comprised a team leader and a professor whose field of expertise includes the development of the SA education system and seven full-time academics (professors), all of whom are attached to the same university. With its origins in a long-standing teacher training institution, the university has since been transformed into a foreign languages university which is actively reaching out to the world. The School of Educational Science at this university is actively involved in pre-service and in-service teacher training with a global vision for primary schools.

The joint activities during the collaborative research project included feedback from meetings held with the two teams (via email), developing a shared platform agreement, monitoring the research activities, co-authoring articles, presentations and co-presentations at the conference in China, academic discussions, visits to Chinese research schools, and lectures delivered to Chinese students during the South African team visit to China in October 2017.

Data Collection and Analysis

The use of collaborative auto-ethnography requires a number of researchers to write their individual auto-ethnographies and, simultaneously, based on their findings, to contribute these to a collective analysis (Kafar and Ellis 2014, 131, 134, 137). Similar to Taylor, Klein, and Abrams (2014, 8, 16), we used a number of qualitative methods—for example, individual narratives, reflections on the narrative, team discussions, field notes and e-mail communications, all of which supported our collaborative auto-ethnography and ensured trustworthiness in our research process and findings. In this way we could make sense of both theory and research by means of collaborative analysis

of the texts. Through a process of "writing into each other's narratives" we were able to support each other and make meaning together. The situated learning theory (SLT), where learning is considered as social participation in CoPs and which resonates with Wenger's theory of CoP, really begins explicitly or implicitly by means of such learning processes as "observation, dialogue, storytelling and conversations" (Sense 2015, 288).

For the purposes of this study, it was decided unanimously by all team members that the South African team leader and the coordinator for the Chinese team would take the lead in writing the collaborative auto-ethnography and include the rest of their members' selected reflections (where appropriate) to substantiate/complement/enhance their narratives as a participatory effort (CoP) and as a means of triangulation. This does not suggest that the narrative concentrates on these two individuals, but rather that it is about both them and their colleagues (co-authors) with whom they conducted the research and with whom they co-presented their papers at the Zhejiang International Studies University conference in October 2017. The narrative elucidates the international collaborative research project process as it illustrates the challenges and successes of a CoP. It does so by focusing on how the collaborators arrived at the envisaged outcomes and their vision for the newly drawn up agreement platform for the period 2017–2020. This approach allowed for deeper insight into the process of an international collaborative research project for the benefit of future collaborations.

The team leader of the South African team and the coordinator for the Chinese team were the first point of communication (via e-mails). Each of them would meet face-to-face with their respective teams as the need arose to share their reflections, observations, field notes and so forth, all in an effort to contribute to the analysis of the findings and the collaborative auto-ethnography.

"Auto-ethnography obscures aspects of subjectivity and cultural experience by allowing the researcher to immerse himself or herself within a particular culture in order to draw connections from his or her own personal life to the lives of others or extend understanding about a particular culture or society" (Ferdinand 2015, 71)—or in this case, the South African-China CoP. Qualitative data-coding techniques were employed—a method which is used in ethnography—and included individual as well as group coding. The individual codes were compared and the commonalities and divergences and correspondences were discussed amongst the team members as a part of the meaning-making process (Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang 2015, 537). Recurring themes (derived manually) arose from this process (Snoeren et al. 2016); as did, ultimately, common themes (Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang 2015, 537), which were organised chronologically (manually) (Snoeren et al. 2016). Subsequently, guided by the chronologically arranged themes, the co-constructed narrative was written and checked by the two teams for the reflexivity of their voices as part of a CoP. Once there was agreement from both teams, the collaborative auto-ethnography was finalised. During the visit to China the two team members were handed the draft product for a final check as a means of triangulation, a "strategy for strengthening the internal validity

[and] confirming findings through the use of multiple perspectives" of the qualitative research (Wilson 2009, 120). The trustworthiness of data is tied to the trustworthiness and competence of the researcher collecting and analysing that data and is demonstrated by means of procedures of verification and validation in order to "establish the quality of analysis" (Patton 2002, 570).

From the analysis of the data we were able to arrive at five themes which encompassed the challenges and successes of a CoP in the collaborative research. In so doing, we could proceed with the collaborative auto-ethnography, identify the lessons learned, and make recommendations for the next phase of our research. We needed to throw caution to the wind by recognising the challenges of "geographical, cultural and linguistic distance" of a CoP (consisting of researchers from two different countries), factors with which we needed to contend (Parding et al. 2012, 285). Similar to Parding et al. (2012, 288), our aim was to highlight aspects of the complexities of the South African-Chinese collaboration context as a CoP yet remain able to apply them in other geographically distant and cross-culturally collaborative research contexts. The collaborative auto-ethnographic narrative is presented by means of chronologically arranged themes: *transition, making the shift: a platform agreement during the establishment of a CoP; communication; research arrangements and activities and team responsibilities; reached outcomes of the platform agreement.*

Ethics

Ethical clearance was granted by the South African university to the South African team in 2016. This process took place simultaneously with the establishment of the agreement platform (for the period 2017-02-15 to 2019-02-15) as an extension of the original Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) granted in 2014.

The Collaborative Auto-Ethnographic Narrative

The collaborative auto-ethnographic narrative was co-constructed and presented by the leader of the South African team (A) and the coordinator of the Chinese team (B).

Transition, Making the Shift: A Platform Agreement during the Establishment of a CoP

A: I first became interested in initiating an international collaborative research project in 2013 when BRICS was brought to my attention via an e-mail. Realising the importance of this marriage between the countries, especially South Africa and China, I e-mailed colleagues at the Zhejiang International Studies University whom I had met a number of years earlier. I proposed a collaborative research project and soon we agreed on a title, namely *South Africa–China Collaborative Research on Teachers' Literacy Perceptions and Classroom Practices in Primary Schools*. We initiated the project in 2013 and legitimised it by means of an MoU drawn up by both parties and registered at the two universities in 2014.

The first phase of the project was concluded in 2016 with seven articles published in a special edition of an accredited journal. With the completion of the first phase of the MoU and the inception of the new platform agreement in 2017, four of the six SA team members had met their goals and were released from the project. One new team member joined in 2017 and another in 2018. Thus, the SA team currently consists of four team members.

However, since the South African Department of Education included Mandarin as a second additional language in the education language policy in 2015, I was propelled to conduct independent research, aside from the original project, in 2015, which was published as an article titled "Teaching and Learning of Mandarin as a Foreign Language in South African Schools" (Nel 2016). In the wake of this independent research, significant findings motivated the collaborating researchers (from the original project) to shift the focus of the initial project by drawing up a new platform agreement in 2017 as an amendment to the original MoU. We agreed to conduct pioneering research, as a Community of Practice (CoP), on the status of non-Chinese primary school learners learning Mandarin as a foreign language, with an emphasis on Chinese characters. These experiences can be interpreted as a CoP offering much potential for flexibility and in this way broadening and extending our horizons and taking different "offramps en route" to our initial MoU aims and objectives. Montgomery (2010, 71) asserts that, as time passes, a CoP changes through history and cultures and that the "longer-standing participants" are experts and guides to the newcomers as they support them and help them to become part of the community.

To date, two articles have been written in which our findings were captured. The first, entitled "South African Grade 5 Non-Native Learners Learning Mandarin as a Second Additional Language with a Focus on Chinese Characters" (Nel, Krog, and Lebeloane 2019), was authored by the three South African researchers and the second, entitled "A Comparative Study on Teaching and Learning Chinese Characters by Primary School Non-Native Chinese Learners in South Africa and China" (Nel et al. 2019), was co-authored by both the South African researchers and the Chinese researchers.

B: When we received the invitation to join a collaborative research project with our South African partners in 2013, I realised that it would be a great opportunity for us to do something special in many ways. As for me, I always want to step forward from my previous studies of South African education and open the door for comparative studies on Sino-South African basic education, which may even lay the groundwork for possible future comparisons among basic education systems of BRICS countries. At the university level, this collaborative research project can be included in our university's grand cross-disciplinary research agenda called "Zhejiang Culture connecting to the world" and will enable talks and cultural exchanges between basic education in Zhejiang Province and the outside world. At the institution level, as is suggested by our team leader, this collaborative research may not only provide an external perspective for us to look into the Chinese experience of basic education and to look for solutions to

Chinese educational reforms from South African experiences, but also provides a great opportunity to bring together faculties with different academic backgrounds from the School of Educational Science to build the unique research capacity of this institution. In addition, as was agreed by all participating members, the experience of this joint research project may help to develop their abilities to participate in international academic exchanges, including the ability to write academic papers in English, which is a very big challenge for many Chinese scholars. With the consensus on the promising potential of this collaborative research project, the Chinese team was summoned, and support was received at both institution and university level.

The visit of the South African team to China in 2013 promoted understandings between both teams, and personal connections were made during this visit. The direct outcome of this visit is the MoU signed by the two institutions and registered at the universities from both sides in 2014.

The research theme suggested by our South African partners at that time was relatively broad. Various pieces of research on different topics under the same theme were conducted by each side independently, with e-mail communication facilitating the coordination of progress, the sharing of findings and the reviewing of articles. Finally, papers from both sides introducing experiences in the respective countries were published together in a South African journal, *Per Linguam*, and a Chinese journal, *Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University*. This realistic arrangement turned out to be a very good start for my colleagues to build up confidence to work together on the same theme, especially for those who had never previously worked collaboratively with foreign scholars. Besides, it also provided us with a good opportunity to learn from our partners about primary school education in South Africa and their way of doing qualitative research.

As is envisaged in the MoU, the second phase of the collaborative project will be more focused. However, as suggested by our South African partners, the theme shifted to studies on teaching Mandarin as a foreign language for non-Chinese primary school learners both in South Africa and in China, and also teaching Mandarin as the mother language for Chinese learners in primary schools in China, with particular focus on teaching and learning Chinese characters. The change of research theme is based on the interests of both sides. In China, we see more and more non-Chinese people come to China to learn Mandarin, and we have more and more teachers going abroad to teach Mandarin. There are quite a number of studies which have been conducted on the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language; however, most of the studies are targeted at adult learners. It can already be seen that there are more chances for our primary school teachers to go abroad through all kinds of exchange programmes, and more primary schools are introducing Mandarin as a foreign language worldwide, including South African schools. Conclusively, we see the value of doing comparative studies on teaching Mandarin as a foreign language and as the mother language in primary school, and teaching Mandarin as a foreign language in both the Chinese and South African

contexts. However, the different backgrounds and professional demands can be challenging during collaboration. It is fundamental that the partners have a common philosophy and commitment to the particular issue being studied. Initially a legal document served as a commitment from both sides but presently it has been transformed to work in progress and all partners (transdisciplinary partnership) have great benefits not only for children but also for "families, students, faculty, clinicians, teacher education" etc. and the world (Silverman, Hong, and Trepanier-Street 2010, 467).

Communication

A: Kivrak et al. (2014, 642) found that, in projects with multicultural team members, as is the case in the present research, difficulties with language and communication, trust and relationships (personal) are barriers that are critical to the success of sharing knowledge in the project. However, language has not been a great challenge in this project as the coordinator of the Chinese team has a good command of the English language and the well-established relationship between us has just made things so much easier. It is important, as Kivrak et al. (2014, 648) postulate, that the language skills of the participants need to be evaluated before embarking on international projects and that language training should be offered in order to improve their communication skills. The challenge has been the two team members having to relate e-mail messages to the rest of the team members, to reach a consensus, and to relay the message back to the team leader enquirer. At times the team members were not available, due to academic duties and the like, and time is of the essence. This was a time-consuming exercise and has caused delays in the research process; however, we as team leaders made every effort by persisting in responding to e-mails as soon as possible and have nevertheless been able to keep the continuity of the project intact and to meet our commitments as close as possible to the set dates.

B: I work for the Chinese team both as a researcher and as the coordinator. Most of the communications between the two academic teams are made between the South African team leader and me through e-mails. My experience of the communications with my South African contact is that they have been straightforward and fluent and that I can expect quick responses. My prior experience in studying education development in South Africa helps me understand their research proposals and research context. However, my experience with my colleagues is more complicated. The size of the Chinese team is much larger and more diversified than the South African team. Everyone carries a heavy teaching load and their English proficiency varies. All these factors add to the difficulty of making decisions and, sometimes, may result in delayed responses.

I usually brief my colleagues on my communications with my South African contact by e-mailing them my summaries in Chinese with the original e-mail communications in English attached for reference. I report to our team leader and she discusses a preliminary plan with me and our lead researcher and decides to call the whole team

together to have a thorough discussion when convenient. Usually, I prepare documents sent by our South African partners, including research tools, agreements, and proposals, in print and with key parts translated into Chinese for all participants. I report on the current progress, clear up any confusion and provide my suggestions, while our team leader introduces preliminary plans and chairs the discussions.

Language difference is recognised as one of the major challenges for this collaborative research project. To address language barriers, I serve as language intermediary. Besides this, we regroup our team into small groups when co-authoring and reviewing papers in English and when interviewing non-Chinese learners according to a mix of expertise and language abilities. To improve our team members' English writing abilities, our team leader successfully arranged seven one-hour sessions of an academic writing in English training programme for all participating members. This was done in 2014 with the support of the Teacher Development Centre and School of English Studies at our university. Along with the advancing of this collaborative research project, many of my colleagues have improved their English proficiency significantly. During the last visit of the South African team to us in October 2017, three of my colleagues successfully reported in an internal seminar in English without language assistance.

We can thus interpret these communication experiences as one of the most important aspects in the CoP process as so much gets lost along the way seeing that each language uses different nuances and so on to express meanings gleaned from the research data. Using a number of ways to communicate an idea can clarify it significantly. It is also necessary to consider the differences in the makeup of the two contexts and how these affect equalising the playing field and the generalisability of the outcomes.

Research Arrangements and Activities and Team Responsibilities

A: In November 2016, when the SA and Chinese teams had arrived at a decision to shift the focus of the project, we met with the principal and deputy principal of the school to request that we be allowed to conduct research at the school and to explain the aim and process of the research. It was agreed that we would start making the necessary arrangements in January 2017 and begin with the research process in February 2017. At the end of 2017, an acclaimed researcher joined us on the project as a Chinese team member had drawn up a new research proposal for the next phase of our research and her expertise was required. According to Parding et al. (2012, 291), time is of the essence if researchers want to conduct worthwhile research which will result in updated publications of good quality results. However, it is not always possible that the arrangements can be synchronised seeing that the two contexts were so different and the Chinese leader had more challenges to face and overcome (as explained below) before being able to take the project forward together with the SA team.

B: From 2013 to 2018, we have seen this collaborative project move forward progressively. During this time, a pattern has emerged for participating in this project

for the Chinese team. For a group of researchers from different fields to work together as a team over a long term, a reputable and decisive team leader plays a vital role. The Chinese team leader, who is both an academic leader in psychology and an administrative leader in our institution and who has broad connections, recruits researchers, mobilises resources from the university, hosts internal discussions, builds and maintains connections with our research base schools together with our leading researcher, and looks for solutions to language barriers. Our leading researcher, who is an expert in teaching Chinese in primary schools, serves both as the lead researcher and academic consultant for the rest of the team. As the international coordinator, and with my personal experience in doing research for education in South Africa, I communicate directly with the South African team and provide suggestions from my point of view to both teams. With the information collected from the South African team, our team leader usually calls me and our leading researcher together to check all possibilities, structure the research framework, and prepare for discussion with all participating members. My colleagues, with their different academic backgrounds, contribute their own perspectives and research methodologies when brainstorming, and take on different research responsibilities in the project.

As for the research project concerning teaching and learning Chinese characters, the whole team was divided into two groups and there are some overlaps between participating members. Headed by our lead researcher, group one studies the experience of teaching and learning Chinese characters for Chinese learners in a public primary school. Headed by our team leader, group two studies the experience of teaching and learning Chinese characters for non-Chinese learners in a private international school. The whole team sat together several times to discuss and adapt observation, interview and questionnaire tools provided by the South African team. Our colleagues who are familiar with primary school education and Chinese language teaching provided their insights and our psychology colleagues added questions related to their interests and volunteered data processing services. According to Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner (2016, 158), "the practice of educational research … is undeniably interdisciplinary," which means that a great number of us "work at the boundaries of various disciplines and professional communities of practice."

I noted everything down and did the paperwork for actual modification. As agreed by all, group one went to a public primary school to conduct class observation and interviews first as a pilot study. Based on their experience, we modified our research tools again. Group two went to observe classes together. However, when it came to the interviews and the questionnaire survey, the researchers were divided into four sub-groups. Sub-group one was tasked with the mission of interviewing two Chinese language teachers in Chinese. The other three sub-groups were tasked with the mission of interviewing and providing the questionnaire survey to non-Chinese pupils. The language used for communicating with those pupils was either Chinese or a mix of English and Chinese, depending on the choice made by the pupil being interviewed (some pupils were very much willing to use Chinese in our case). When they returned,

each group sent me the organised and digitised data they had generated, and I put everything together and shared it with all participating members for further data processing and research. Although a number of modifications had to be made by the Chinese team to suit the Chinese context, the MoU/platform agreement was the rudder that steered the CoP.

Reached Outcomes of the Platform Agreement

The topics of the platform were presented as follows:

1. The teaching and learning of Mandarin as a second additional language in a South African school: Chinese characters.

2. The teaching and learning of Mandarin as mother tongue in a Chinese public primary school: Chinese characters.

3. The teaching and learning of Mandarin as a second language in two international primary schools in China: Chinese characters.

4. Comparative studies based on learners learning Mandarin as a second language and as mother tongue.

5. Comparative studies based on learners learning Chinese characters when learning Mandarin as a second language and as mother tongue.

Regarding the outcomes reached by the SA team, number one listed above was explored in 2017 and this is the third article in which the research outcomes are being recorded.

The vision for the project was co-created by both parties and telling the narrative from both perspectives was an invitation to share in its creation and to negotiate a common aim. Focusing on the practical aspects of the research project (with its challenges considered as opportunities), and on what was relevant to both parties, enabled them to share reflections and learning. Having shared knowledge means that one becomes more knowledgeable about the other party's practices which are related to one's own (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015, 106–7, 111). As Parding et al. (2012, 288) found in their study, we were likewise able to "illuminate specific aspects of our experiences" in an effort to highlight as well as problematise the complexity of our projects where there was geographic distance as well as "double cross-culturality." Our findings can also be applicable to contexts which are similar.

B: Regarding the outcomes reached by the Chinese team, number two and three listed above were explored in 2017 and preliminary findings were communicated to our South African partners in an internal seminar during their visit to us in October 2017. Data collected during the visits to a public primary school for target two in 2017 were further analysed in 2018 and will serve as a preliminary study for target four and five. Based on data collected during our visits to a private international school in Hangzhou and our

South African partners' visits to a Chinese school in Pretoria, a co-authored comparative article has already been drafted.

Besides the above-mentioned seminar, and with the aim of communicating and inspiring studies on teaching and learning Chinese characters for non-Chinese learners in both countries in accordance with the platform agreement, we convened an "International Conference for Chinese Characters Teaching and Learning" in 2017 in Hangzhou in which members from both teams, delegates from research base schools from both countries, outside presenting experts, and interested Chinese language teachers and researchers participated. We took this opportunity to announce the establishment of the Institute for China-South Africa Comparative Education Studies of Zhejiang International Studies University as the new institutional foundation for our team to participate in this collaborative research programme as this will open more possibilities for the future.

Topics four and five will be explored during the next phase of the project and having them listed partly ensures the sustainability of the project. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002, 6–7) assert that it is difficult to stay abreast of a fast-changing world if CoPs are not in place to focus on critical areas. Thus, the process starts by having strategic goals, which in this case are the topics listed above, and which include the core competencies and processes as well as the most important activities (also listed above). Carr et al. (2013, 110) emphasise the importance of, amongst other things, a clear purpose, goals and expectations.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this Community of Practice is based on Wenger's theory of CoP where the emphasis is on participation. In the *Agreement for International Scientific Research Cooperation Platform*, the purpose was worded as follows:

> The University of South Africa and Zhejiang International Studies University recognize the benefits to be gained by both institutions through collaborative research that strengthen academic relationship between both institutions and the value of the platform in facilitating teaching and learning development in basic education of the respective countries.

This study contributes to the CoP theories (literature) applied to the collaborative research project pertaining to the teaching of Mandarin in both contexts. Amongst others, it is useful to researchers facing practical and organisational problems in an attempt to enhance their international activities.

With the research questions in mind, our collaborative research endeavours spurred on the establishment of a Community of Practice. With Wenger's (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 80–81, 91) key functions for coordinators also in mind we believe, as the two team coordinators (who have a long-standing academic relationship since the

early 2000s and had visited one another's universities more than once. The rest of the Chinese team have limited English proficiency), that we were able to primarily link the teams and furthermore to help the CoP to focus on the domain, for relationships to be maintained and the practice to develop. We were also able, inter alia, to cross boundaries, facilitate and plan community events such as the SA team's visit to China and participation in their conference and assist in building the practice (knowledge base, lessons, best practices) and establish strong, lasting relationships.

By qualitative synthesis, the lessons learned are identified and generic factors (in this case the teaching and learning of Chinese characters) are generated which can be used for the development of an effective approach for teaching Chinese characters to primary school level non-Chinese speakers (Patton 2002, 500). We discuss how each country's unique experiences converge into a collaborative auto-ethnography and how it serves as a valuable resource for international research collaborators to consult when embarking on a collaborative research project. Research can inform practice, but it cannot subsume practice (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner 2016, 149).

In terms of the researchers observing Chinese character teaching lessons and interviewing the Chinese teachers in the South African and Chinese contexts, we concur with Tavakoli (2015, 49) that the knowledge and experiences which the teachers and researchers gain through a CoP are invaluable. Therefore, joint communities and activities should be encouraged that will consequently lead to research and practice foci being brought together. Anderson and Freebody (2012, 374) further the notion of CoP (praxis) with regard to teacher education, as it links education practice and theory and establishes reflective practice.

As we reflect on our experiences as a CoP, we are able to add to, concur with and complement the body of knowledge, as well as use it as a reference to substantiate our conclusions. Both South Africa and China—as BRICS member countries—have benefited from this collaborative research project in more ways than one. As education reform is a priority for both countries, particularly the teaching and learning of Mandarin (with an emphasis on Chinese characters) served as a compass towards a common goal and resulted in the unifying of a Western and an Eastern academic institution. With the platform agreement in place and accepted by both the universities' authorities, the project was formalised (having goals, outcomes and responsibilities outlined). In addition, it gained a credible status at university and institutional level as it also required ethical clearance from the universities' ethics committees to conduct the research. This agreement is also registered on the SA university's research project system. The long-standing relationship between the South African team leader and the coordinator for the Chinese team, combined with the fact that the Chinese coordinator is proficient in the English language, eliminated the language barrier. It did, however, place a heavy demand on the Chinese coordinator to translate communiqués and other documents for his team members. He is also conversant with the SA research context which started the project on a good footing and mutual understanding.

The Chinese team comprised more members drawn from different levels of seniority, from different academic fields of education, expertise, academic backgrounds and research experience. This was enabling as resources were easily accessible and multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary interaction was possible as the members could contribute a variety of perspectives and research methodologies. Other members were able to offer data processing services and the university was able to convene a conference and accommodate the SA team in October 2017. The support of the Teacher Development Centre and School of English Studies in providing English academic writing sessions was enabling for the Chinese researchers as they gained the necessary confidence to make presentations and contribute to the writing of English journal articles which could be submitted to international journals. Had the researcher been involved with different knowledge areas, we believe the communication problems may have been different, for example the interference of different terminology. The research responsibilities could be delegated to the team members who could invest their expertise in particular research areas, which in turn could be harnessed as composite data. By so doing, the university's research capacity and their confidence to work collaboratively increased and opportunities to be included in foreign exchange programmes were made possible. Based on all these advantages, the ultimate outcome was the establishment of the Institute for China-South African Comparative Education Studies of Zhejiang International Studies University.

The SA team, by contrast, was much smaller, and made up of three members from different departments and of different levels of seniority. However, they had good working relations and were able to compromise when the need arose and to stand in for one another when university demands were high. Despite less university support, the team members became more independent which was empowering as they gained collaborative skills and broadened their research and academic writing skills as well as their experience as co-authors. The editing services of the university were of great assistance as the co-authored articles (by SA and Chinese authors) could be edited by them and prepared for submission to international journals for publication. In both contexts the more experienced researchers were able to pave the way for the less experienced researchers to have the opportunity to gain insight into the different education systems for purposes of academic movement, opportunities and promotion.

Carr et al. (2013, 109–10) found that communication and building relationships are the most challenging when establishing and maintaining an international collaborative research team but, at the same time, "were the most important keys to success." They can thus be used "as points from which to move forward" (2013, 109–10). This also means that tools such as Skype, e-mail and other technology are imperative to successful communication. The success factors in this study were, inter alia, personal characteristics of the teams such as interest and motivation, expectations which were realistic, honesty, commitment, a positive attitude, taking risks, being professional and resourceful, and perseverance. Structural support, such as financial resources, technology and the like, enables members to be fully engaged. In the present study, most

of the above success indicators were present and, consequently, the team members' expectations were met with successful outcomes. To ensure the continuation of the platform agreement, new areas of knowledge need to be explored as the CoP has reached maturity and the core group members continue to play a pivotal role. The role of the key domain needs to be defined and, with regard to the key community issue, there should be no distraction from the main purpose: the key practice issue should focus on the organisation of the community knowledge and its stewardship and a systematic definition of the core practice needs to be put in place (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 97). It is important for the coordinator and core group members to identify opportunities for new challenges, to expand or shift the focus, to integrate new perspectives and to help to meet the changing demands. The community needs to be given a voice when it is given a core part in an organisation; its members, ideas and practices need to be rejuvenated; renewal workshops need to be held in an effort to reaffirm the commitment of the members to the community and to develop new visions; new people need to be recruited (two new team members joined the SA team in 2017, 2018) as the core group may burn out and new leadership needs to be developed; new members need to be mentored and to forge new relationships outside the community as the community's focus needs to be refreshed (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 105–8).

Finally, to answer the third research question, What are the implications for the sustainability of a CoP during the continued collaborative research project?, Wenger (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 96–97) explains that a CoP at a maturation stage experiences many changes. New members join and bring new ideas and, hence, the CoP goes through high and low energy levels which require its members to determine how they need to face the new challenges, adjust and sustain the CoP. Intentional barriers can be created for entry into a CoP. Issues such as gender, class, race and the like will cause such barriers (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner 2016, 154). A mature community needs to continually measure its value and its health as coordinators and it also needs to continue to connect the people and to help and coach. The depleted SA team has subsequently recruited two new members who bring with them new areas of expertise and research methodological skills. They have been briefed on the collaborative research project history as well as the new platform agreement and have been included as members of the research team.

Etienne Wenger-Trayner's theory of Communities of Practice was based on his ethnographic work and he refined it by means of his own practice with academia, NGOs, government bodies and private industries. The idea is that a good theory will not be static but will be revised when new empirical data is available or other theoretical perspectives challenge prior conceptualisations (Farnsworth, Kleanthouse, and Wenger 2016, 157). "Boundary-breaking encounters" can happen during a research project and can be challenging as a result of geographical, cultural as well as linguistic distance. However, simultaneously opportunities are made available for "new and rich understandings of research" (Parding et al. 2012, 285). As academics in a globalised

world, we need to find ways to learn with as well as from others where the researchers and the participants are "culturally, linguistically and geographically different" (Parding et al. 2012, 285). Of course, as there are bridges to international collaborative research there are also barriers. Communities of Practice are relational and concepts such as "trust, respect and shared repertoires, time, places and space" are needed for them to develop (Parding et al. 2012, 291).

During the SA team's visit to ZISU in October 2017, the two teams met and discussed the way forward, considering and presenting new areas of research. We agreed on a research proposal for 2018 and beyond, titled *Analysis of influencing factors in Chinese phonetics learning from the perspective of cognitive psychology*. The research was duly conducted in 2018 and data is currently being analysed and findings written up for publication purposes.

In our study both countries rendered a small set of data. It can thus be concluded that the findings are valuable for the teaching of Mandarin as a second additional language in South African schools and Mandarin taught as a foreign language in schools in China. Although the research contributed to our research experiences, it calls for more research about the experiences of researchers from other countries (on a larger scale) to which it is possible to add our experiences of successful collaborative research on a smaller scale.

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