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# Content Analysis of Members' Interest, Participation, and Use of a Virtual Community of Practice Associated With Intensive English Programs

Nell Rose Hill

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CONTENT ANALYSIS OF MEMBERS' INTEREST, PARTICIPATION,  
AND USE OF A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE  
ASSOCIATED WITH INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAMS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Nell Rose Hill

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2019

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This qualitative content analysis examined a virtual community of practice associated with Intensive English Programs: The Intensive English Program Virtual Community (IEPVC). A typology for virtual communities of practice (Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob, 2006) was used to examine the characteristics of the virtual community of practice. The IEPVC represents an active virtual community that provides information to its members, provides opportunities for members to share information, and advocates for the field of Intensive English Programs within the United States. The results of the study demonstrated that the IEPVC does represent the three main concepts of a community of practice: domain, community, and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

The study wanted to better understand what topics related to Intensive English Program administration were presented in the IEPVC and member perceptions of those topics; what participation tools were provided by the IEPVC and member perceptions of those tools; how members perceive their participation within the VCoP; and how members perceive their utilization of the IEPVC. The content analysis observed 254 artifacts within the virtual community, including webpages, presentations, word documents, and webinars. To better understand member perceptions of the virtual community of practice, the study collected responses from forty-two surveys and seven interviews.

Some key findings regarding member participation include:

- **Boundaries and Brokers:** Some members belong to multiple organizations and members invite others to join the IEPVC.
- **Brand awareness:** Some members recognize that their brand or university needs to be represented appropriately and positively.
- **Competition:** Members recognized that all Intensive English Programs are competing for a small group of potential students yet still are collegiate and show camaraderie.
- **Knowledge Hoarding:** Some members are resistant to share information because they feel that other members are not contributing enough.
- **Privacy:** Some members are resistant to share information due to lack of anonymity within the IEPVC.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

As a new leader for a newly established university Intensive English Program, I looked for a professional community to assist me in my daily responsibilities. I desired to be part of a community that could support me as I navigated the various responsibilities associated with Intensive English Programs. I hoped to find experienced leaders who would mentor me and provide guidance and feedback. I looked for a community that shared experiences and ideas about common practices in the field of Intensive English Programs. I wanted a community that advocated for Intensive English Programs and provided guidance and standards for Intensive English Programs, and I wanted daily access to this community. I was aware of the concepts of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) which emphasize a constructivist approach to learning that brings together novices and experts who share experiences, share knowledge, and collaborate on shared projects and goals. I was aware of online communities associated with teaching English and discovered some online communities specifically for Intensive English Programs. These online communities not only provided me with information on common practices and guidelines that promoted integrity in the field, but they also led me from a feeling of isolation to a place of connection and camaraderie.

The objective of this study was to examine an online community related to Intensive English Programs, observe the content within the online community of practice, and explore members' perceptions of their interest, participation, and use of the community. Communities of practice (CoPs) that exist online rely on information and technology communication that may also include face-to-face interactions (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006) and are called virtual communities of practice (VCoP). VCoPs represent members in various fields, including

education. For this study, I observed a VCoP that assists and supports Intensive English Programs. The members of the VCoP may work as faculty, staff, or in a leadership position within their respective Intensive English Programs. This study was most interested in the perceptions of the leaders or directors of Intensive English Programs. Intensive English Program leaders often have different titles, such as coordinator, director, or administrator. To provide consistency and clarity within this document, the title *director* is used to describe any leader of the Intensive English Program regardless of the members' specific position title. Directors of Intensive English Programs function as leaders and focus on many aspects of the program, including curriculum development, marketing, recruitment, program finances, and faculty development, and some directors teach in the program as well.

The specific goals of this dissertation were to understand how a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program directors represents the aspects of CoP and how a VCoP may assist Intensive English Program directors as they navigate through their daily responsibilities of a shared practice. In order to better understand virtual communities of practice, I conducted a content analysis of one VCoP associated with Intensive English Programs, observed the content provided within the VCoP, and explored members' perceptions of their interest, participation and use of the VCoP. Specifically, the content I observed in the VCoP included materials and documents present, the resources the VCoP provides to the members that relate to communities of practice, industry statements, and forum discussion topics. In order to better understand member perceptions, I presented a survey to the participants of the VCoP, and I conducted interviews. The responses retrieved from the surveys and interviews were analyzed to determine Intensive English Program directors' perceptions, participation, and reactions to the socialization practices in the VCoP.

## **Motivation for the Study**

The main motivation for this study was my personal experience working as a director for an Intensive English Program in a state university in the Midwest for three years (2013-2016). Though my background in teaching and curriculum instruction prepared me in many ways for the position, there were many unfamiliar concepts such as visa regulations and recruitment processes that were daunting to me. I wanted to learn more about Intensive English Program management, marketing, and recruitment. I wanted to learn more about Intensive English Program standards and common practices. When I was hired, I was hired based on my credentials in language education and my experience teaching English as a Second Language in an Intensive English Program at another university. My initial responsibilities included facilitating programming for multilingual students on campus who felt a need to improve their academic English. I began collaborating with the Writing Center, the English Department, and the Office of International Services, along with the School of Extended Learning, which was my home department. Within a few months, the director of the Office of International Services approached me about creating other academic programming related to international students.

Through university recruitment efforts, there was an immediate need for an Intensive English Program. I was asked to begin the processes required to implement an Intensive English Program. When I first began my position, many United States colleges and universities were looking to enhance international recruitment, and one way to achieve this goal was to create an Intensive English Program to attract students. At the time, 2014 and 2015, Intensive English Program enrollment was steadily increasing, with 49,233 students studying in Intensive English Programs in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2015). Historically, Intensive English Programs were proving to be profitable marketing models for universities, especially if



the university has programs that are of interest to international students. Even though I felt prepared and experienced in supporting the linguistic needs of English language learners, I felt much less prepared for all the responsibilities that came with starting a new Intensive English Program.

My main duties included curriculum development and pedagogy but also other administrative duties, such as budget creation and management, program marketing, website creation and maintenance, recruitment efforts, retention data, and admission processes. Since I was not as familiar with some of these new responsibilities, I began searching for professional development, peer support, and insight into the main concerns of Intensive English Program administration. Fortunately, the university where I worked provided financial support for me to attend annual conventions such as the local and national conventions of TESOL International Association as well as the local convention of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. Even though I did find information and camaraderie at these conventions, as a new Intensive English Program director, I also felt some isolation and alienation from more established Intensive English Programs. Inherently, Intensive English Programs are competitive. There are limited numbers of international students and a larger number of Intensive English Programs that are marketing to, often, the same group of students. When I reached out to other Intensive English Program directors at these conventions, many Intensive English Program directors were eager to share their practices and procedures, but there were some that were less open about discussing with me their practices, especially in terms of marketing and recruitment. The fact that I was new to Intensive English Program administration, and I was implementing a new Intensive English Program at my institution left me on the margins of the community. I could peek into the community, but I lacked full membership.

Since I had used list-serves and web sources in the past for other academic interests, I wondered if there were online resources or databases that might have appropriate and current information for Intensive English Program leaders. Handbooks on English language program administration suggested special interests groups associated with Intensive English Program organizations (Hamrick, 2012). In addition, Szasz's (2009) report on the state of the profession of Intensive English Programs indicated the use of list-serves as potential resources for Intensive English Program directors to share best practices and information about common topics of interest. I began by looking at the websites of NAFSA and TESOL and found member-interest groups related to Intensive English Program administration.

The member-interest groups contained postings of Intensive English Program directors all over the world. Many of the postings were questions about day-to-day practices and position responsibilities. I felt less isolated, and some of my questions and concerns were addressed in these postings. While reading the postings, I was interested in how these online communities worked. I wondered if a lexicon or corpus could be created from the common topics discussed that could be provided to Intensive English Program directors as a resource. I wondered if a close examination of the content within the virtual communities might bring insight on how members of online communities socialize and learn from one another, and how these communities assist the Intensive English Program director. A desire to observe and examine more closely a virtual community became the catalyst for this study.

### **Research Questions**

Motivated by my personal experience as an Intensive English Program director seeking professional assistance through communities of practice, I have created research questions to structure this study. The objective of this dissertation was to understand how a VCoP associated

with Intensive English Program directors may assist Intensive English Program directors as they navigate through their daily responsibilities of the shared practice. In this study, I conducted a content analysis to examine the topics of discussion within the VCoP, the materials shared, and the perceptions of members of the VCoP regarding their interest, participation, and use of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Programs. In order to accomplish this objective, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Which topics presented in a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration do members of the VCoP perceive as important?
2. Which participation tools provided within a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration do members of the VCoP perceive as useful?
3. How do members of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration perceive their participation within the VCoP?
4. How do members of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration perceive their utilization of the information within the VCoP?

### **Context of Study**

To begin, it is important to discuss the community that was studied and the participants in that community. Therefore, the next section provides background information on Intensive English Programs and Intensive English Program directors, including background information on the history of Intensive English Programs and characteristics of Intensive English Programs. It also includes commentary on the state of professional development for Intensive English Program directors.

## **Intensive English Programs**

Intensive English Programs are academic programs that assist students in studying academic English. The students often have different backgrounds and different types of residency status, but most students are international students and decide to study academic English in the United States. University-based Intensive English Programs have existed in the United States since 1941 with the formation of the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan. Since then, many universities have created Intensive English Programs or accelerated English programs to serve the English linguistic goals of international students (Hamrick, 2012; Kaplan, 1997). According to the Institute of International Education's 2018 Open Doors Report (2018a), Intensive English is the 8th top field of study for international students in the United States with over 25,000 international students enrolled in Intensive English Programs in 2017-2018. The Institute of International Education's catalogue lists over 800 Intensive English Programs in the United States and most are associated with a college or university (Institute of International Education, 2018b).

Intensive English Programs come in many shapes and sizes. Some are strictly for-profit, private institutions, and some are attached to public institutions. Though the Intensive English Program functions are similar, the schools themselves may have different goals. Private Intensive English Programs may focus solely on English language training, while other public institutions may also focus on specific disciplines such as Business English or English for Engineers. Intensive English Programs are like other academic programs with concerns related to enrollment and matriculation rates. Though some Intensive English Programs are attached to departments of English or Foreign Languages, others are stand-alone programs that coordinate with other departments. Furthermore, unlike other traditional, degree seeking, credit bearing

programs, many Intensive English Programs are housed in a variety of locations, including Schools of Extended Learning and Offices of International Services (Hamrick, 2012; Thompson, 2013).

**Curriculum.** Though Intensive English Programs are similar to other language programs at a university in that a language is being taught, they are called *intensive* for several reasons. Students in Intensive English Programs are required to be in class between 18 -22 hours per week, much more than the typical three to four hour a week credit bearing French or German language course. These requirements are based on the visa status of the international student. The Intensive English Program must be part of a Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP)-certified school and meet certain standards such as required class hours. The standard is 18 hours a week of classroom instruction typically meeting four to five days a week (Department of Homeland Security: Study in the States, 2018). There are limitations on online courses, and often Intensive English Programs contain a cultural awareness aspect that provides field trips and cultural enrichment activities as part of the curriculum. Intensive English Program courses primarily focus on reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Intensive English Programs can also have courses specific to grammar, pronunciation, and computer literacy. There are an increasing number of international undergraduate and graduate students who are permitted by the college or university to take some courses in the Intensive English Program at the same time as taking credit-bearing courses in their major program of study. These pathway or bridge programs create unique discipline-specific English courses within Intensive English Programs (Taylor & Bragg, 2012; Zhang, 2014).

**Admission regulations.** Since many Intensive English Program students are international students with student visas, Intensive English Programs are subject to federal regulations, and as mentioned, the Intensive English Programs must be authorized by the United States' Student and Exchange Visa Program (SEVIS). This necessitates cooperation between Intensive English Programs, admissions' offices, and international offices at universities. A student wanting to study within the United States must gain a student visa. The F-1 visa includes students desiring to be admitted into an English language program regardless of the type of school (university or college; private or public). According to the Department of Homeland Security, an English language program is for non-native English speakers who enroll in intensive English language training for the "sole purpose of increasing fluency in the language" (Department of Homeland Security, 2019, para. 6).

Another aspect to the admission process is how the student could be admitted into the program. Most programs are non-credit bearing programs where the student is admitted to the Intensive English Program often located within the university or college but not admitted into credit bearing programs within the university or college. In the past, some programs have granted conditional admission. In conditional admission, a student would not be fully admitted to the university, but once certain requirements are met by the student, the student could transition into being a fully admitted student. They would be admitted within a certain academic program, but not assigned any courses within that program or only assigned certain approved courses. Recently, changes were made to the regulations about conditional admission. Currently, conditional admission is not allowed. This means that the student cannot be admitted into a degree seeking program unless they meet all the required conditions of the university or college, including language proficiency for a program. However, students can be

admitted into approved pathway programs. Pathway programs must be approved by SEVIS and must meet certain criteria such as guaranteed admission into a degree seeking program for those students who successfully completed the pathway program (Department of Homeland Security, 2016; NAFSA, 2017). Some universities are moving to create pathway programs whereas others continue to have non-credit bearing Intensive English Programs with separate admission processes.

**Marketing and recruitment.** Since there is a limited number of students who want to study within the United States, Intensive English Programs often have specific marketing and recruitment goals. Though enrollment at a university or college does concern all departments, many Intensive English Programs are dependent on international recruitment efforts. In fact, there are national and international organizations that focus specifically on recruitment of international students for Intensive English Programs such as International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) and the Intensive English USA subset of the Institute of International Education (IIE).

**Legitimacy.** Though Intensive English Program stakeholders and organizations provide regulations, guidelines, and principles to assist in the credibility and legitimacy of the field, Intensive English Programs and their directors face challenges. Some of these challenges include negative perceptions of Intensive English Programs due to the fraudulent practices of some English language schools, as well as discrimination against non-native English speakers in general. In fact, some Intensive English Programs have come under examination by immigration officials and higher education stakeholders. Redden (2013, 2014) wrote several articles for *Inside Higher Ed* discussing various Intensive English Program immigration issues, including conditional admission and pathway programs. *Inside Higher Ed*, along with the *Salt Lake*

*Tribune* and *Utah Public Radio*, provided exposés on one Intensive English Program in Utah with questionable academic standards that employed undertrained professors (Huckabee, 2012; Maffly, 2012; Redden, 2012). *CNN* reported the indictment of several Intensive English Programs in California that were fraudulent programs created solely to provide student visas without ever providing instruction (Martinez & Vercammen, 2015). The *Accreditation of English Language Training Programs Act* (Fischer, 2012; Department of Homeland Security, 2018) is in place to promote and enforce ethical program standards for Intensive English Programs.

While the United States government and other stakeholders have expectations for Intensive English Programs, many students have high expectations as well. The student is looking for an Intensive English Program that provides security, legitimacy, effective outcomes, financial feasibility, and often fast results. Research on student needs and student concerns found that students desire Intensive English Programs to assist them in English language development, cultural understanding, contextual understanding, and disciplinary connections (Ananyeva, 2014). Intensive English Program students are often interested in programs that are familiar to them or to friends and family. Intensive English Programs may cater to these preconceptions and create recruitment goals to accommodate the student.

Due to Intensive English Programs' desire to maintain legitimacy and credibility, some Intensive English Programs seek accreditation. One accrediting agency, the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), evaluates post-secondary Intensive English Programs and provides accepted standards that the Intensive English Programs are required to meet for accreditation (Commission on English Language Program Accreditation, n.d.). Other organizations that do not provide accreditation but do provide guidelines and support include



TESOL, NAFSA, University and College Intensive English Programs (UCIEP), and one specifically for Intensive English Programs, EnglishUSA.

### **Intensive English Program Directors**

Intensive English Program directors are employed throughout the United States in both public and private institutions of higher education. Intensive English Program directors are often recruited from faculty or have prior experience in an Intensive English Program. Though program directors often hold graduate degrees in Teaching English as a Second Language or a closely related field, fewer have terminal degrees (Thompson, 2013), and even fewer have had prior administrative experience (Panferov, 2012; Thompson, 2013). Intensive English Program directors are assigned various titles and statuses. Some are faculty, whereas others are staff. As mentioned earlier, some Intensive English Programs are stand-alone departments, while others are part of an academic department. Some Intensive English Program directors have supervision over faculty hiring and control of independent budgets, while others coordinate with analogous departments. Intensive English Program directors often describe their duties as more managerial in nature than academic (Pennington, 1994; Szasz, 2009).

These program directors have varied responsibilities, including marketing, budgeting, recruiting, and retaining students, as well as creating curriculum, hiring faculty, and providing professional development. The next section discusses the responsibilities of Intensive English Program directors along with their perceptions of these roles and responsibilities and some of their professional development challenges.

**Responsibilities.** The responsibilities for Intensive English Program directors vary depending on the location and purpose of the program; however, research indicates that the following responsibilities are the most common (Bailey & Llamas, 2012; Christison & Stoller,

2012; Coombe, Anderson, McCloskey, Stephenson, & Liu, 2008; Eaton, 2009; Fox, 1988; Gawienowski, 2002; Katz, 1974; Pennington, 1994; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010; Stoller & Christison, 1994):

- Curriculum responsibilities including but not limited to curriculum development, course scheduling, textbook procurement, placement testing, and classroom assignments.
- Leadership responsibilities including but not limited to hiring and training of faculty.
- Advisory responsibilities including but not limited to assisting students with course schedules, placement testing, transferring credits, matriculation to credit bearing programs, as well as advising students with their personal and living experiences such as housing, banking, and transportation.
- Recruitment responsibilities including but not limited to internal and external marketing, partnership building, and armchair recruitment processes.
- Admission responsibilities including but not limited to all parts of the application process such as creating application procedures, reviewing applications, creating acceptance letters, and working with international departments on the current visa regulations.
- Budgetary responsibilities including but not limited to creating budgets for all elements of the program, including non-curricular related elements such as educational field trips or service-learning activities.

To gain a better understanding of Intensive English Program directors' perceptions of their responsibilities, several studies surveyed directors and recorded their perceptions. In 2012, members of University and College Intensive English Programs (UCIEP) responded to a survey that sought to ascertain the perceptions of Intensive English Program directors about their responsibilities and their positions. The survey not only focused on the responsibilities noted

from previous research (Matthies, 1984; Pennington, 1992, 1994; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010), but also included characteristics that Intensive English Program directors may need to accomplish their responsibilities. The survey identified several characteristics and placed these characteristics into three main areas: skills, knowledge, and personal qualities (Forbes, 2012). Under each of these three areas were five characteristics. The Intensive English Program directors felt that these characteristics were needed for the Intensive English Program director to be successful. The three main areas with the top five characteristics under each area, as reported by the Intensive English Program directors, are represented in Table 1. The survey responses provided an understanding of Intensive English Program directors' perceptions of their work and the skills, knowledge, and personal qualities needed for the position.

Table 1

*Intensive English Program Director Leadership Qualities*

Skills	Knowledge	Personal Qualities
Decision making skills	Financial structure	Ability to make difficult decisions
Effective communication skills	Intensive English Program standards	Ethical presence
Managerial skills	Institutional knowledge	Honesty
Ability to define and articulate vision, mission, goals of the program	Academic bureaucracy	Ability to prioritize
Leadership skills	Knowledge of other cultures	Being a team player

*Note.* Adapted from “Establishing an Accepted Skill Set and Knowledge Base for Directors of University and College Intensive English Programs,” M. Forbes, 2012.

**Professional development.** As Intensive English Programs are scrutinized in the public and government arenas, it is important for Intensive English Program directors to be aware of relevant topics and to be prepared to provide academically and ethically sound programs. A concern among Intensive English Program professionals is the need for greater professionalism and internal standards to create stronger and more credible programs. Over 100 Intensive English Program professionals self-reported that certain working conditions of faculty and administrators lacked professionalism and integrity (Szasz, 2009). Some of these claims were substantiated by observing the faculty and administrative duties that differed from the responsibilities of faculty and administrators in other departments, such as marketing skills and knowledge of visa regulations.

Lack of integrity and professionalism was also observed in some hiring practices of Intensive English Programs. The research indicated ethical concerns when some Intensive English Programs hired directors and faculty as part-time employees even when the required duties are comprehensive and extensive enough to be considered full-time (Szasz, 2009). Another hiring practice concern related to the practice of hiring more faculty who were native speakers versus non-native speakers of English (Moussu, 2010). Szasz (2009) discussed the necessity of consortiums and accrediting bodies to help elevate the status and integrity of Intensive English Programs and the profession of Intensive English Program administration. As indicated by the frustration of some Intensive English Program directors who felt unprepared for the many varied obligations for the position, the recommendation of many researchers (Forbes, 2012; Fox, 1988; Lam, 2014; Pennington, 1992, 1994; Reasor, 1986; Thompson, 2013) studying Intensive English Program directors was to offer continuing professional development. Pennington and Hoekje (2010) advised Intensive English Program directors to seek continuing

education courses in accounting and public relations and advised that training which included hands-on experience will be of most benefit. The Intensive English Program director would benefit from a community to turn to for guidance, support, and information.

### **Intensive English Program Professional Organizations**

Academic organizations often hire leaders from the faculty pool, and often, faculty do not feel that their previous educational background (Speck, 2003) or faculty experience prepare them for leadership positions (Hankin, 1996; Land, 2003). The Intensive English Program director may have similar reactions. Though many Intensive English Program directors have extensive experience with teaching and curriculum development, they may lack leadership experience or managerial experience that pertains to leading an Intensive English Program. Along with not feeling adequately prepared for the director position, some Intensive English Programs are isolated from other academic programs. Eaton (2009) pointed out that Intensive English Program directors are not always placed in academic departments. Host institutions may house Intensive English Programs in service or administrative departments, which may prevent opportunities for Intensive English Program directors to find peers or mentors. New Intensive English Program directors, like other new leaders in higher education, find the transition from teacher to director daunting, and they often feel unprepared. Academic leaders often lack support from home institutions and might find it difficult to find peers or mentors to communicate with and collaborate with to improve their work experience due to accessibility or availability (Bisbee, 2007; Raines & Alberg, 2003).

Observations of academic directors indicated that directors often suffer stress, frustration, and isolation (Riley & Russell, 2013). One common recommendation to academic leaders is to seek out mentors and to attend and participate in local and national associations that focus on

program integrity. For Intensive English Program directors, there are several such organizations. These organizations provide professional development, provide information on current standards in the profession, and provide opportunities for sharing professional experiences.

**TESOL.** A well-known organization for English language teaching professionals, including Intensive English Program directors, is TESOL International Association. This organization had its first meeting in 1963 and its first official conference in 1964. TESOL International Association's vision statement is to "become the trusted global authority for knowledge and expertise in English language teaching" ("Mission and Values," n.d., para. 2). TESOL International Association at the time of this study had 21 interest sections. Two of these interest sections relate to Intensive English Programs. One is called *Program Administration* and the other is called *Intensive English Programs*. The goals include strengthening leadership skills and providing a space for information exchange. TESOL International Association has a yearly conference and supports local TESOL chapters around the country. Membership includes access to a robust online presence that comprises of an online discussion board, document access, and access to the organizations' two refereed academic journals: *TESOL Quarterly* and *TESOL Journal*.

**EnglishUSA.** EnglishUSA (n.d.-a) started in 1986 and the goals of EnglishUSA are to provide support, standards, and advocacy for intensive English programs in the United States (EnglishUSA, n.d.-b). Membership is semi-restrictive in that it requires an application and proof of accreditation. However, there is no on-campus visit, and the accreditation requirement allows some flexibility and accepts programs that are under the governance of a regionally accredited institution (EnglishUSA, n.d.-c), such as the current accreditation of the college or university in lieu of a separate program accreditation. EnglishUSA provides annual conferences. The website

provides information about the organization, and members can participate in discussion forums on the website.

**NAFSA.** Another organization that is of value to Intensive English Program directors is NAFSA: Association of International Educators. Founded in 1948, NAFSA (n.d.) initially provided professional development for university advisors who guide and assist international students. Over time, the professional development opportunities have extended to any university program, including Intensive English Programs, that may serve international students. Membership requirements do not include an application or onsite visit but does include an application fee. Membership provides access to a robust website with three networking opportunities: professional networks, member interest groups, and Network.NAFSA (an online community). Each of these three opportunities have community groups related to Intensive English Programs and Intensive English Program administration.

**UCIEP.** University and College Intensive English Programs (UCIEP) is a consortium of Intensive English Programs at the university or college level located within the United States. UCIEP (n.d.) began in 1967 with 13 Intensive English Programs, and its goals include promoting professional standards for Intensive English Programs and providing quality English instruction for students. This would include hiring professionally trained instructors. UCIEP desires to be a leader in university-governed Intensive English Program and values integrity, excellence, collaboration, and collective wisdom. Membership includes an extensive application process, including an onsite visit by current UCIEP members. At the time of this study, the current UCIEP membership was approximately 80 Intensive English Programs within the United States. UCIEP provides annual meetings for its members and professional development.

**CEA.** The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA) is a nationally recognized accrediting association for Intensive English Programs inside and outside the United States. CEA (n.d.) evaluates post-secondary Intensive English Programs and provides accepted standards that the Intensive English Programs are required to meet to be considered accredited by this association. This organization has been providing accreditation since 2003. At the time of this study, CEA currently had accredited over 300 Intensive English Programs. CEA's mission is to promote integrity in English language teaching and protect the interest of students as they progress in their English language development. The accreditation process includes an application, self-study report, and a site visit. CEA's main goal is to accredit Intensive English Programs that are already fully established. It is unclear how CEA supports new or newer Intensive English Programs.

As noted, these professional organizations can assist Intensive English Program directors with much needed professional development; however, there are some variables that may prevent Intensive English Program directors from using these sources, such as lack of funds to travel to the conferences or purchase the membership, or lack of resources to meet membership requirements.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Intensive English Program directors want to succeed in their profession and want their programs to succeed. The problem is that on this path to improved professional and program performance, discussions about crucial concerns relating to Intensive English Programs may not be readily available to Intensive English Program directors. More importantly, many of these concerns are extremely nuanced and contextual. Intensive English Program directors seek information and the ability to share information that may improve the performance of the



Intensive English Program, as well as to develop a collective knowledge that can be used to inform government policies about international students, inform professional accreditation policies within accrediting bodies such as CEA, and inform pedagogical practices discussed in academic organizations such as TESOL. Therefore, it is important that Intensive English Program directors have access to the most current information about Intensive English Program guidelines and international student study in the United States.

As mentioned earlier, consortiums and accrediting bodies have been created to promote program standards, program evaluation, and professional development. To assist Intensive English Program directors in finding information, building relationships, and brainstorming new initiatives for their perspective programs, these organizations can be helpful. Continuing education courses sponsored by these organizations are beneficial; however, Intensive English Program directors may want immediate access to professional development sources. Also, these courses may not meet the contextual needs of the director because they may focus on general rather than specific practices. At the same time, when Intensive English Program directors do seek out graduate programs and courses for continuing education, those courses may have a more pedagogical and theoretical focus on language acquisition over leadership roles and administrative practices. Though several organizations hold annual national and regional meetings, and even though many directors do see the value in meeting face-to-face and networking through annual conference attendance, time and financial constraints may prevent some Intensive English Program directors from attending. Even if time and financial constraints are not an issue, Intensive English Program directors may seek immediate answers to the day-to-day challenges they face. These concerns are even more relevant to new Intensive English Program directors as they begin their professional journey.

Therefore, the Intensive English Program director is left to search independently for readily available resources to learn about Intensive English Program leadership responsibilities and day-to-day practices. Intensive English Program directors may explore traditional avenues of support such as published articles and scholarly texts. Though there is abundant research on information sharing for students and faculty (Cullen, Kullman, & Wild, 2013; Hung & Lee, 2012) and resources on professional development for administrators in general, there are fewer resources that focus on Intensive English Program directors' socialization practices. One reason for the limited research in this area may be due to the dual aspects of Intensive English Program directors. Some Intensive English Program directors continue to have academic responsibilities, including teaching and curriculum development along with managerial responsibilities such as hiring of faculty, budget management, and recruitment efforts. While resources for Intensive English Program directors may seem plentiful, the barriers to access, including cost, time, and exclusivity, have left some without easy access to support and information. Intensive English Program directors need a place to learn more about their profession. Intensive English Program directors need a place where information is shared, a place with limited barriers that allow directors to feel a sense of belonging, and a place where directors can also learn and improve in the profession.

### **Communities of Practice**

Intensive English Program directors may find assistance in their day-to-day work responsibilities in communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice are groups of people who want to improve their shared practice. They engage with one another about their shared concerns on a regular basis. Though CoPs have existed for as long as there have been communities learning together, more specific discussions on CoPs began with

the work of Lave and Wenger as they observed several apprenticeships. Lave and Wenger explored the notion that learning is a “process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 15). Lave and Wenger (1991) were interested in the social theory of learning which states that learning comprises of community (learning as belonging), identity (learning as becoming), meaning (learning as experience), and practice (learning as doing) (Wenger, 1998, pp. 4–5). To explore their theory of learning, Lave and Wenger observed several apprenticeships. For example, as they observed Yucatec Mayan midwives in Mexico, they noticed the social practice of learning which included explicit learning such as the language and tools of the practice as well as the implicit learning of the practice or the unwritten rules of thumb, recognizable intuitions, and the shared world views (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) noted that CoPs have a shared repertoire of sources which include personal experiences, specific ways of addressing issues depending on the domain of interest, and interaction amongst the members that demonstrated a process of learning together (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2010).

Research on communities of practice has soared since Lave and Wenger’s initial research and has made its way into discussions in various disciplines, including education, business, and government (Eckert & Wenger, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Li et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998, 2010; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Wenger (2010) prescribed three main characteristics for communities of practice which could be observed in a community of practice. These characteristics include the following: (1) a shared domain of interest, (2) a place where joint activities and discussions occur, and (3) the members of the community are practitioners. Wenger asserts that membership in the shared domain includes those who are dedicated to the domain of interest and who have a shared competence. Inside a

CoP, a person might observe sharing of knowledge, solving problems, creating new knowledge, and inventing new practices. Members of a CoP may have conflicts and disagreements, but problem solving still occurs. Members may be new to the domain or an expert in the field, and some members lead, while others may follow. CoPs demonstrate both formal learning (explicit learning) and informal learning (implicit learning) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2010, 2011; Wenger et al., 2002).

### **Virtual Communities of Practice**

Though initial research focused on CoPs where members of the community met face-to-face and worked within a physical location, recent research studied CoPs that do not have a specific location and where the participants do not meet face-to-face. However, even with this variance, a shared repertoire may still exist. These communities are called virtual communities of practice (VCoP) (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). VCoPs do have similar characteristics as CoPs, yet they differ in one main component which is technology. Researchers note that, due to the nuances with VCoPs, more studies that clarify the similarities as well as the variations between CoPs and VCoPs should be conducted (Daniel, 2011; Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob., 2006). Wenger (2010, 2011) acknowledged that technology provides a space for CoPs, but does not guarantee that a CoP exists. The VCoP should demonstrate certain characteristics and concepts that are associated with CoPs to be considered a CoP.

A more thorough discussion on the history and foundational concepts of CoPs and VCoPs is discussed in Chapter 2 as part of the literature review. This study analyzed a VCoP to discover the socialization process in the VCoP in relationship to CoPs, to ascertain how information is shared, and to examine perceptions of Intensive English Program directors that are members of the VCoP.

## **Research Approach**

This study was a highly reflexive qualitative content analysis with the researcher as participant-observer. Participants included members of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Programs. Content analysis (Altheide, 1987; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004; Richards & Morse, 2012) was an appropriate vehicle for the exploration of VCoP members' interest, participation and use of a VCoP. Content analysis is the "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes and patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). In this context, I am a participant-observer as a former director of an Intensive English Program who turned to VCoPs for information in the early stages of my tenure in the leadership position.

Content analysis is an empirically grounded method that examines data "in order to understand what they mean to people, what they enable to prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. xviii). I examined data samples from one virtual community of practice. I observed the content within the VCoP to determine what was communicated, what artifacts were presented, and what communication support systems were provided in the VCoP. Members were surveyed and questioned to ascertain their perceptions of the virtual community of practice.

The data samples included Intensive English Program mission statements, discipline position statements, documents related to visa regulations, common marketing strategies, and all communications provided by the VCoP to the member. To understand the perceptions of the participants of the VCoP, I administered a survey to members of the VCoP and conducted interviews. The feedback from the participants served to help understand the members' interest

in, participation in, and use of the VCoP and how the VCoP assisted the Intensive English Program director in his or her day-to-day activities.

The community of practice under study consisted primarily of leaders of Intensive English Programs; therefore, the study focused on a group of people with the same occupation and same interests coming together to discuss common problems. Intensive English Program directors come to the community of practice for various reasons (meet colleagues in the same profession, obtain ideas on solving problems in the work place, or a desire to share stories about their work), and their communications link to concepts of learning through engagement in a practice. Socialization practices within a community of Intensive English Program directors included accounts of personal experiences, shared official documents, and discipline-specific terminology. Through the content analysis, I examined communication that was provided to the members that gave insight into the responsibilities and concerns of Intensive English Program directors. It provided information on what the community finds as hot topics or most common problems in the Intensive English Program setting. The interview also provided communications from members about their socialization practices within the VCoP. I discuss the data collection methods and my methodological approach further in Chapter 3: Methodology.

### **Significance of the Study**

The rationale for this study was initially drawn from my desire to improve myself as an Intensive English Program director and to become more aware of the current concerns of Intensive English Program directors. I also hoped that the information gained from this study may assist other Intensive English Program directors. Though there is much research on cultivating VCoPs, there is less research on members' perceptions of VCoPs and how a VCoP may assist the member in improving the members' academic program and improving the

members' job performance. There is also limited research on the isolation that some Intensive English Program directors may feel and how a VCoP may assist Intensive English Program directors in feeling less isolated and more connected to the practice within a competitive community.

Another value of this study was to examine a community of practice with some unique aspects (a virtual community in the field of Intensive English Programs). As this study examined a virtual community of practice associated with Intensive English Program administration, it was valuable to see the relationship between the concepts that Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) presented and the virtual community of practice associated with Intensive English Programs. The examination of the VCoP revealed themes related to other theories, specifically ones that Wenger (1998) presented to be associated with the social theory of learning such as social structure, identity, situated experience, practice, power, collectivity, subjectivity, and meaning. One purpose of this study was to see how information is shared and to ascertain the perceptions and reactions to this information by members of a community of practice. Some information that was discovered during the research included observations of VCoP members' various participation levels and the value of VCoPs as resourceful spaces for members in an isolated and competitive field.

The study provided insight into how a VCoP assists Intensive English Program directors in their daily professional tasks. This study highlighted current challenges as well as rewards of Intensive English Program administration, and how a VCoP assists the Intensive English Program director in being better prepared for the duties and day-to-day challenges of Intensive English Program administration, and the study demonstrated the practical implications of VCoPs.

## **Overview of the Dissertation Chapters**

This chapter offered a brief overview of the study and the following chapters contribute in greater detail to this overview. Chapter 2 includes the literature review and discusses communities of practice and virtual communities of practice. It demonstrates that there are limited resources for Intensive English Program directors as well as provides the importance of information sharing amongst Intensive English Program directors. The literature review also provides examples of case studies related to CoPs and VCoPs which informed this current study. This examination of current literature demonstrates the need for a content analysis of an Intensive English Program virtual community of practice. Chapter 3 includes the methodology section in which I discuss content analysis in greater detail and explain the context, research design, data sources, and collection methods of the study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the research, including the data collected from the content of the VCoP, responses to the survey, and the interview transcripts. Chapter 5 presents an analysis of the results and a discussion on key findings.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The objective of this dissertation was to understand how a virtual community of practice (VCoP) associated with Intensive English Programs assists Intensive English Program directors as they navigate through their daily responsibilities of the shared practice. To better understand how virtual communities of practice may function as communities of practice (CoP), it is important to consider the original concepts of CoPs. Though the initial conversations on CoPs did not include VCoPs, more recent discussions about CoPs moved to include VCoPs due to the wide-spread use of the internet and digital tools. This chapter provides a historical perspective of CoP literature and the evolution of the notions of CoP that led to conversations of VCoPs.

After discussing how VCoPs have evolved to be part of the discussions on CoPs, it is important to also review the characteristics of CoPs. As part of the study, I observed ways in which the VCoP represented the characteristics of CoPs. It is also important to look at current research about VCoPs that represent the concepts of CoPs. Thus, this chapter reviews literature of VCoPs in relation to characteristics of CoPs.

Since this study is focused on Intensive English Program directors as members of a VCoP, it is important to review relevant literature of VCoPs related to Intensive English Programs, education, and professional development. This literature represents the main themes of discussion that are present in VCoP literature associated with professional development and education. Though there is VCoP literature on administrative responsibilities in various fields, including business and technology, discussions of administrator responsibilities in education are less abundant. This chapter looks at those few studies as well.

## **Foundational Concepts of Communities of Practice**

Since Lave and Wenger's (1991) work about communities of practice was first published, research using CoPs as a driving force is found in numerous fields and thus, definitions of CoP are abundant. Initially, Lave and Wenger (1991) defined CoP as "a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). Later, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) broadened the definition to "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" (p. 4). Eckert (2006) defines CoPs as a "collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor.... [they] emerge in response to common interest or position and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the world around them" (p. 683). In the prologue of Amin and Robert's edited collection, Duguid (2008) states that a CoP is "a group of people bound together by their interest in a common working practice" (p. 1). More recently, Wenger (2011) provides a definition of CoPs as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). While these definitions have some variations, common attributes are clear: people with shared interests come together to improve their world.

The concepts of community of practice originated in discussions about social learning (Bandura, 1971; Bourdieu, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). While observing the learning and math practices of apprentice tailors in Liberia, Lave (1988) noticed aspects of learning transfer. Lave was curious about formal and informal learning. This led Lave to create a math project to observe everyday mathematical practices in various settings. The observations gave a different

perspective on problem solving than was found in a school setting. Lave observed informal learning, as students shared mathematical practices when doing practical activities such as shopping and budgeting.

Orr's (1986, 1990) ethnographic study of Xerox service technicians also observed social learning behavior and noticed formal and informal learning. Per Brown and Duguid's (1991) analysis of Orr's (1986, 1990) research, the Xerox service technicians' manual that was presented to the technicians during formal training did not address all the potential complications when repairing Xerox copy machines. Through collaboration and narration, new knowledge was constructed. Collaboration assisted the technicians in solving problems that the documentation from the training courses did not. These examples of social learning behavior led Lave and Wenger, as well as other researchers, to conduct detailed observations of communities of practice. These observations informed Lave and Wenger as they discussed the concepts and characteristics represented in CoPs. The following sections explain these concepts and characteristics.

### **Situated Learning**

Lave (1988) observed *situated learning* when examining the mathematical practices in everyday situations presented to shoppers at the supermarket. The shoppers' use of mathematical practices included transferring knowledge from formal schooling while learning informally within the context of a supermarket. Lave (1988) was interested in the explicit, written knowledge one may learn in school along with the tacit, informal knowledge that one may learn through observation and practice within a situated learning experience. Lave and Wenger (1991) continued discussions about learning, social situations, and social interaction. This led to their pivotal book on communities of practice: *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*

(Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) wanted to “rescue the idea of apprenticeship” (p. 29), and through observations of several apprenticeships, they discussed the process in which novice apprentices participate with expert apprentices. They observed situated learning as learning that takes place in the same context as it is practiced or applied and observed co-construction of knowledge by participants in a community. Situated learning is the relationship between knowledge and active participation in learning that knowledge.

### **Legitimate Peripheral Participation**

As part of their research on situated learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) observed five different apprenticeships: midwives of Yucatec, tailors of Vai and Gola, naval quarter masters, meat cutters, and recovering alcoholics. Through their observations, Lave and Wenger discussed the central characteristic of situated learning as a process called *legitimate peripheral participation*. Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) focuses on how a newcomer participates in a community of practice and the relationship between members of the community as they learn. The newcomer may find ways to learn from the experts, to engage with the experts, and to become a full participant. Lave and Wenger (1991) clarify that legitimate peripheral participation is not a pedagogical strategy but a way of understanding learning, and that community is at the core of LPP. LPP within a community includes discussions on power, access, transparency, identity, and the members development in the community. To explain LPP more clearly, Hildreth and Kimble (2004) described the three words individually: legitimate, peripheral, and participation. *Legitimate* refers to power and authority, *peripheral* is related to the individual’s social relation to the community and not necessarily the physical relation, and *participation* is the interaction with the group, including historical and future action in the community.

## **Mutual Engagement, Joint Enterprise, Shared Repertoire**

Lave and Wenger (1991) hoped to discuss not only the traditional notions of apprenticeship as the novice and expert relationship but also learning as “participation and identity transformation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 11) within a community of practice. However, Wenger felt that the concepts of identity and community were not fully explored in the initial work on communities of practice, and thus, Wenger (1998) expanded on concepts of communities of practice in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Wenger wrote about negotiation of meaning and the interaction of two processes of meaning making: *participation*, such as engaging in activities, conversations, and reflections and *reification* which includes production of physical artifacts, such as tools, methods, stories, and documents. According to Wenger (1998), meaningful learning must include both participation and reification. Some attributes of participation include living in the world, acting and interacting, membership, and mutuality. Aspects of reification may include documents, points of focus, forms, instruments, and monuments. Participation is a social process as well as a personal experience, and reification is a result of the social process but also may shape our personal perceptions of the world.

Wenger (1998) explained components of a social theory of learning: *meaning* (learning as experience); *practice* (learning as doing); *community* (learning as belonging); and *identity* (learning as becoming). When discussing aspects of community, Wenger presented three main characteristics of CoPs: *mutual engagement*, a *joint enterprise*, and a *shared repertoire*. *Mutual engagement* is concerned with the social complexity and relationships of the community. Mutual engagement would occur through discussions, reactions to dilemmas, and exchanges of ideas. Wenger defined mutual engagement as members who engage in regular interaction. This is

usually face-to-face, but Wenger recognized that face-to-face interaction is not necessary to create engagement.

*Joint enterprise* (Wenger, 1998) focuses on negotiated concepts related to the community's practice and mutual accountability. Wenger (1998) provided three points about joint enterprise: (1) a collective process of negotiation, (2) defined by the participants, (3) stated goals as well as mutual accountability. This would include joint goals of the community where these goals are determined by the group itself as well as any mandatory or explicit goals from a larger authority, such as a supervisor, accrediting body, or professional consortium. Mutual accountability considers accountability towards the community and the community goals. Wenger indicated that joint enterprise does not imply joint agreement. Members of the community may disagree. The important aspect is that the members are collectively working through the process of making the engaged field livable.

A *shared repertoire* (Wenger, 1998) in a community of practice would include stories, terminology, gestures, and symbols associated with the community. The community members have a shared history that provides a sense of belonging. The shared repertoire assists in language socialization because there are communal terms that assist in expressing meaning. In a CoP, the community has resources for negotiating meaning. These resources or shared repertoire include: "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts" (Wenger, 1998, p. 83).

### **Domain, Community, Practice**

The initial studies of CoPs focused on observing the social interaction within apprenticeships or workplace situations that had developed over time. Wenger, along with other researchers (Wenger, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) began to envision

ways CoPs can be nourished and managed to improve CoPs and benefit the members. In *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), it is recognized that some CoPs will continue to exist without any cultivation; however, the goal is to consider ways that CoPs can be fostered. The three main foundational dimensions of CoP represented in Wenger's early work: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, are discussed here as *domain*, *community*, and *practice*.

When these three dimensions are working together, the CoP becomes an ideal social structure for developing and sharing knowledge (Wenger et al., 2002). The *domain* is what brings people together. It is the issues that are of interest to the community. It is the common ground. Domain guides questions and actions and organizes the knowledge shared. The *community* represents the members and the social interactions. The community interacts regularly about the shared concerns. The community learns together, builds on each other's ideas, has a sense of common history, and shares a group identity. Participation varies as members may be beginners or experts in the domain. The *practice* is the shared knowledge that the community is developing. This would include tools, information, stories, language, documents, theories, rules, and principles.

### **Virtual Communities of Practice**

Though observations of communities of practice have focused on communities that have regular face-to-face interactions, not all CoPs have communications with face-to-face settings. These communities use technology to communicate and share knowledge. The following section discusses literature related to virtual communities of practice and characteristics of VCoPs.

## **Distributed Communities of Practice**

With the increase of technological developments, communities can share knowledge through a variety of communication modes. *Distributed communities of practice* (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) refers to CoPs that have community members that do not meet in one central location, and instead use email, websites, and other forms of communication to share knowledge. Wenger et al. (2002) noted that there may be challenges that are present in distributed CoPs that are not readily present in traditional face-to-face CoPs. However, they also recognized that the challenges do not prevent distributed CoPs from “agreeing on domain, developing strong personal bonds between members, or building a robust practice” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 123). With new technologies being created that make virtual communication more accessible, more and more distributed CoPs exist.

## **Characteristics of Virtual Communities of Practice**

Observations and discussions about distributed CoPs and the terms “online CoP” or “virtual CoP” have increased since the initial observations of CoPs (Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Wentling, & Reed, 2006; Ardichvili, 2008; Nichani & Hung, 2002; Wasko & Faraj, 2000, 2005). Often, research about VCoPs looks at how VCoPs portray characteristics of CoPs. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) recognized that CoPs take many forms, but that they all have fundamental characteristics. These characteristics include variations in size, life span, location, boundaries, and member diversity. Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006) and later Hara, Shachaf, and Stoerger (2009), expounded on these characteristics and applied them to VCoP research. After a review of 18 VCoPs, Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006) created a typology of VCoP structuring characteristics. The typology included four main areas of discovery: demographics, organizational content, membership characteristics, and technological environment. The aspect



of technological environment was added to the original characteristics presented by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002).

Table 2 represents the original characteristics described by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) compared to the expanded characteristics of Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006). Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob wanted to provide a useful framework to describe and understand VCoPs. For this study, the typology of Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob was used to describe various VCoPs.

Table 2

*Characteristics of CoPs Compared to Typology of VCoPs*

Wenger et al. Characteristics of CoPs		Dubé et al. Typology of VCoPs
Short lived to long lived	Demographics	Orientation, life span, age
Spontaneous to intentional, unrecognized to institutionalized, inside and across boundaries	Organizational Context	creation process, boundary crossing, environment, organizational slack, degree of institutionalized formalism, leadership
Small to big, homogeneous or heterogeneous, co-located to distributed	Membership Characteristics	size, geographic dispersion, selection process, enrollment process, prior community experience, stability, information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, cultural diversity, topic relevance to members
	Technological Environment	degree of reliance on ICT, ICT availability

*Note.* Adapted from “Cultivating Communities of Practice of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge,” by E. Wenger, R. McDermott, and W. Snyder, 2002 and “Towards a Typology of Virtual Communities of Practice,” by L. Dubé, A. Bourhis, and R. Jacob, 2006.

Amin and Roberts (2008) were also interested in how VCoPs function as CoPs. They state that the description of CoPs as “relatively stable communities of face-to-face interaction between members working in close proximity to one another” (p. 355) was moving too far from

the original concepts of communities of practice. Amin and Roberts distinguished between varieties of CoPs and explained that virtual communities vary greatly in participation norms and activities to that of face-to-face CoPs. They continued that most virtual communities of practice shared expertise, trust, and mutual engagement, yet virtual communities are not in the “business of generating new knowledge through virtual interaction” (Amin & Roberts, 2008, p. 363). Even with this critique in mind, Amin and Roberts (2008) recognized that there may exist online communities that build on social interaction, negotiate meaning with trust and reciprocity, and co-construct new knowledge. They concluded that all forms of communities of practice should be viewed “without prejudice” ( p. 367) and recognized as multifaceted and productive spaces of situated knowledge.

Murillo (2008), through a mixed method approach, set out to determine if CoPs can be entirely virtual. Murillo compared VCoPs to the constructs of Wenger’s dimensions of communities of practice. Through a comprehensive study of a Usenet discussion network that included a content analysis as well as participant survey responses, Murillo’s results demonstrated that the concepts and dimensions of CoP were represented in the VCoP. The research showed some concerns about VCoPs, including the lack of face-to-face interaction which could lead to weaker ties and less sharing of knowledge (Murillo, 2008). However, Murillo claimed that the study demonstrated that CoPs can emerge within the social areas of the internet and that CoPs are not limited to face-to-face interactions.

### **Digital Habitats**

Wenger discussed the notion of distributed CoPs and virtual CoPs in greater detail in *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technologies for Communities* (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). Digital habitats are CoPs that include technology. The digital habitat may be a significant portion

of the CoP or, in some cases, the digital component may be the whole habitat. *Digital Habitats* mostly focuses on how technology can assist CoPs. The text provides guidance for creating and cultivating digital habitats for CoPs and provides a guidebook for technology stewards within traditional CoPs. However, along with this information, an example of a VCoP is presented. The community examined by Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) was a group of people that either had a medical disorder or cared for someone who did. The main tool for communicating was through an electronic mailing list, also known as a listserv. The communications in the listserv demonstrated that the social learning within the listserv exemplified the three dimensions of CoP: domain, community, and practice. Members of the listserv learned from and with each other, learned through formal and informal activities, and learned from inside the community as well as outside the community. There was diversity and engagement, as the online nature of the community allowed for participation between members all around the world. There was an element of legitimate peripheral participation, as not all members were active in posting communications, while others displayed leadership skills.

The discussion on digital habitats is most closely related to discussions on virtual communities of practice. Though some communities have sole representation in a virtual or online environment, many are a hybrid of online and face-to-face. This study examined the content presented in a VCoP associated with Intensive English Programs and showed how members participated and used the information and examined face-to-face interactions between members that evolved through communication tools provided by the VCoP.

### **A Survey of VCoP Literature in Education**

Literature that discusses virtual communities of practice is increasing as technology developments arise that make it easier for communities to share knowledge virtually. The next

section represents themes demonstrated in literature related to virtual communities of practice and education.

### **Professional Development**

Wenger (2010) states that communities of practice are mechanisms of support and assistance for educators. Since Intensive English Program directors are often isolated from other academic departments and have limited training and resources related to their administrative responsibilities, resources to assist Intensive English Program directors are extremely beneficial. Intensive English Program directors understand the value of professional development and seek it out in various forms. The Intensive English Program director is also aware that many day-to-day activities are contextual with a high level of currency. Therefore, the traditional aspects of professional development which have focused on an expert delivering information divorced from the practical applications of Intensive English Program work (Houle, 1980) are not as beneficial. More recent studies of educator professional development recognize the need for professional development to be “ongoing, sustained, and self-directed” (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 1998, p. 554) and to move toward constructivist notions of learning (Richardson, 2003).

Sherer, Shea, and Kristensen (2003) acknowledged VCoPs as sources of professional development for educators. They recognized that VCoPs create a professional development atmosphere for educators that is sustainable, better connected, highly visible, and well documented. Studies on VCoPs as professional development sources in education have flourished. The next sections discuss CoP concepts present in research about VCoPs. The research also provides insight on the benefits of VCoPs as a professional development resource for educators.

## **Participation**

Initially, discussions on legitimate peripheral participation focused on several forms of participation and recognized that each level of participation was beneficial to the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) provided more detail to the notion of LPP and mentioned three levels of participation: core, active, and peripheral. The core member would be active in the discussions and even create discussion topics and the agenda for the community. The active member of the CoP attends meetings and participates occasionally. The peripheral member may attend meetings but is not active in the discussion. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) state that this level of participation, though minimal, can still lead to learning and sharing in communities.

These same levels of participation are noticed in VCoPs. Hew and Hara (2007a), when studying communications and interview responses from members of a listserv of literacy educators, found that reciprocity was a contributing factor in higher levels of participation. They noted that a sense of collectivism and personal gain were other reasons why members participated. They also discovered barriers to participation including members feeling inadequate in their knowledge to participate or lack of time to participate. Bostancıoğlu (2016) observed participation levels of English language teachers that were using a long-standing online community of practice: WebHeads in Action. Bostancıoğlu identified that participation increased when the participants felt part of a community identity, the topics discussed were relevant to the work, and the community had online etiquette norms. Intensive English Program directors arrive to the community as newcomers or experts or in between. All will have varying degrees of knowledge and experience related to their day-to-day responsibilities. Intensive English Program directors are seeking assistance and the participation level may vary depending on their needs.

As noted in the research, barriers to participation exist. These barriers include time constraints (Hew & Hara, 2007a, 2007b), the competitive nature of certain groups (Ardichvilli, 2008), and confidentiality concerns (Hew & Hara, 2007b). This study showed that the same barriers exist within the VCoP in particular in relation to competitiveness. This study also showed barriers due to time constraints and confidentiality concerns.

### **Knowledge Sharing**

One benefit of VCoPs is the ability to share knowledge in an accessible way. Intensive English Program directors are interested in sharing knowledge with others and finding answers to questions they have about their day-to-day activities. Hew and Hara (2007a), while observing participation activities of literacy faculty in a VCoP, also observed what the faculty shared. This included several types of knowledge that were categorized as book knowledge, and, more commonly, practical knowledge. The practical knowledge came from personal experience as well as institutional practices. Pino-Silva and Mayora (2010) looked at two VCoPs of English language teachers and observed that the shared knowledge included insight into the practices of teaching English as well as experiences with specific instructional approaches. Wesely (2013) observed language teachers sharing knowledge using Twitter. Participants shared knowledge through collaboration and discussion even though, at times, there was conflict. The language teachers could ask questions of more expert teachers, and the expert teachers would provide answers and insight about those concerns.

MacGregor and Vavasseur (2015) observed interaction between principals and middle school teachers in an online professional development community. Through a content analysis approach, MacGregor and Vavasseur found five aspects of knowledge sharing. Participants asked questions and shared content ideas, pedagogical knowledge, resources, and opinions. In

this study, Intensive English Program directors also shared knowledge about the day-to-day responsibilities and asked questions about specific contextual experiences.

## **Identity**

Wenger (1998) emphasized that within a CoP, practice and identity are connected. He stated that members of a CoP define themselves by the practices they are engaged in and their sense of belonging within the community. Cho (2016) conducted a membership categorization analysis on bilingual preservice teachers in a VCoP. The results showed that members' identity was demonstrated in their language, their positionality in the community, and their recognition amongst the community members. Cho noted that members' identities included teacher identity, student identity, bilingual identity, and heritage language identity.

One aspect that some Intensive English Program directors feel is isolation. As previously mentioned, Intensive English Program directors are often part of stand-alone programs or housed in departments that are not connected with language or even academics. Intensive English Program directors feel alone and unsupported by their local colleagues. Wesely's (2013) research of foreign language teachers on Twitter noted that many teachers came to the VCoP looking to overcome the feelings of isolation and many expressed gratitude at finding camaraderie and community within the VCoP. Wesely (2013) also noted that the VCoP became a sounding board for faculty to express their individuality and individual situations and felt comfortable sharing struggles with a group that was removed from the local administration or local constraints. The collegial relationships and the information shared become meaningful and useful to them.

## **Boundaries and Brokers**

Wenger (1998) recognized that CoPs are often discussed as isolated entities within a specific group of practitioners. However, Wenger explained that CoPs not only function as

communities within a specific group but also between groups outside the community, groups that are closely connected. Eckert and Wenger (2005) discussed brokering, or a way for participants in more than one similar CoP to share information. Brokers may also assist members to participate in other CoPs. Nishino (2012) investigated the professional development of an English language teacher as the teacher participated in multiple CoPs. Nishino observed brokers within these organizations that not only led new members to other organizations, but also brought in new approaches to affiliated CoPs.

Though knowledge sharing exists within communities, knowledge sharing existed between communities as well. Fontainha, Martins, and Vasconcelos (2014) observed several VCoPs of economic educators. The observations included information about participation and knowledge sharing. Some participants brought knowledge in from other similar VCoPs. Fontainha, Martins, and Vasconcelos also noted that the leadership changed within the VCoPs depending on the subject matter. This suggests that certain members from other related VCoPs may provide expertise on certain topics. Duncan-Howell (2010) surveyed 98 educators that participated in VCoPs. Of those 98, 9% reported that they participated in only one educational VCoP and 55% reported that they participated in more than one educational VCoP. This current study was interested in examining the VCoP members' participation in other VCoPs related to Intensive English Programs.

### **Innovation**

My research found limited studies on VCoPs and professional development for administrators, specifically for Intensive English Program directors. However, one study evaluated the opinions of 21 university administrators and their perceptions of VCoPs (Özmen, 2013). Özmen (2013) reported that 83% of the administrators felt that VCoPs were a vehicle for



innovation and that it was important for administrators to seek out and find innovative ideas to improve their work. Yet, some barriers to innovative collaboration included lack of trust in the VCoP environment and lack of administrative competency.

Concepts of communities of practice have evolved over time to include concepts of virtual communities of practice. For this study, I looked closely at the three dimensions of CoPs as discussed in *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Wenger et al., 2002). These include the domain: the topics of interest related to Intensive English Programs; the community: Intensive English Program directors and the participation level of the community; and the practice: how the directors used the information found and shared in the VCoP. I also looked for themes from the literature, including professional development, identity, knowledge sharing, and participation, within the present study on VCoPs and Intensive English Programs.

### **Chapter Summary**

From the research studied on communities of practice, virtual communities of practice, and Intensive English Program directors, the following general conclusions were drawn:

- Concepts of communities of practice have evolved over time to include virtual communities of practice.
- Communities of practice and virtual communities of practice have fundamental characteristics.
- Virtual communities of practice can be sources of professional development.
- Successful virtual communities of practice create opportunities for sharing knowledge, innovation, have members who are motivated to participate, who trust one another, and may participate in more than one related virtual community of practice.

- Though there is some research on virtual communities of practice associated with the field of education and administrators in education, there is limited research on the relationship between virtual communities of practice and Intensive English Program directors.

From these observations, further study provided insight into how VCoPs function, what characteristics VCoPs have, and how VCoPs work as sources of professional development. A thorough investigation of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Programs provided current and in-depth understandings of the issues and concerns of Intensive English Program directors, what participation and reification may occur within a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration, and how Intensive English Program directors perceive the VCoP in the study. The results of such an investigation may be beneficial to current and future Intensive English Program directors and those interested in virtual communities of practice.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand how a virtual community of practice associated with Intensive English Program directors represented the notions of communities of practice and how a virtual community of practice may assist Intensive English Program directors as they navigate through their daily responsibilities of the shared practice. To achieve this purpose, a qualitative content analysis of one virtual community of practice associated with Intensive English Programs and Intensive English Program directors was conducted. I examined artifacts found in the virtual community of practice. Characteristics and concepts of communities of practice in relation to the virtual community of practice were examined. Members of the community were surveyed and interviewed to determine member perceptions of the value of the VCoP as a resource for Intensive English Program directors as they seek to improve their respective Intensive English Programs as well as find answers to their day-to-day questions about Intensive English Program practices and procedures.

#### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

For this study, I observed content within a virtual community of practice related to Intensive English Program directors. Content analysis was an appropriate technique for this study for several reasons. Content analysis in qualitative research is used to not only make “replicable and valid inferences in the data” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18), but to also make inferences through “systematically and objectively identifying characteristics in the text” (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 57). Content analysis is not only an empirically grounded method; it includes analysis of text and symbols in all forms of media, including computer text analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). This study looked at texts created with the use of technology.

There are various approaches to qualitative content analysis, including discourse analysis and ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987; Krippendorff, 2004). This study followed a problem-driven content analysis design (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 340). This type of design states that the researcher feels that problems may be solved through analysis of text. This study was concerned with the problems that Intensive English Program directors face in their daily work responsibilities and where the Intensive English Program director may find answers to these problems. Another problem-driven concern is how virtual communities of practice work and how information is shared through virtual communities of practice. In this study, the content analysis contained the following qualitative requirements: a close reading of textual matter, interpretation of texts in relationship with a particular community, and acknowledgement that the analysis followed an interactive hermeneutic approach with the analysts own understandings influencing the interpretation of the text (Krippendorff, 2004).

### **Research Procedures**

Content analysis is a qualitative research technique to make inferences through observation of texts. The texts included three parts: the artifacts and documents presented in a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program directors, survey responses of members from the VCoP, and transcripts of interviews with members of the VCoP. The chosen VCoP asked to be given a pseudonym. The pseudonym is: Intensive English Program Virtual Community or IEPVC. The artifacts and documents within the IEPVC included industry statements, newsletters, and any written information provided to the members of the IEPVC that is relevant to Intensive English Programs. Based on Krippendorff's (2004) description of problem-driven content analysis and McMillan's (2000) description for conducting a content analysis when analyzing online content, here are the 5 components for this research:

1. Research questions
2. Sample selection (IEPVC's website, survey responses, and transcripts of interview responses from IEPVCs' members)
3. Defining codes- coding units (smallest unit to be coded, for example: a word) and context units (material around the coding unit, for example: a sentence).
4. Coding- this process included training a coder and coding the content which is looking for patterns that answer the research questions. It included deductive coding (drawn from the researcher's theoretical ideas about the data) and inductive coding (drawn from content itself as theories emerge). A coding manual was created with steps for the coding process. The coding manual was used by me and another trained coder that is familiar with Intensive English Program administration.
5. Analysis- interpretation and inferences gained from the data in relation to the research questions. This included narrating the answers to the research questions.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions assist the analyst to read texts with purpose. Krippendorff (2004) contends that research questions must have these characteristics: believed to be answerable, demonstrate possible answers, discuss current inaccessible phenomena, and allow for validation as well as invalidation. The research questions for this study and the corresponding data sources for each question are represented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Research Questions and Corresponding Data Sources*

Research Questions	Data Sources
Which topics presented in a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration do members of the VCoP perceive as important?	Documents and other artifacts in the VCoP. Survey responses from members of the VCoP. Interview responses from members of the VCoP.
Which participation tools provided within a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration do members of the VCoP perceive as useful?	Documents and other artifacts in the VCoP. Survey responses from members of the VCoP. Interview responses from members of the VCoP.
How do members of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration perceive their participation within the VCoP?	Survey responses from members of the VCoP. Interview responses from members of the VCoP.
How do members of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration perceive their utilization of the information within the VCoP?	Survey responses from members of the VCoP. Interview responses from members of the VCoP.

**Sample Selection**

Since the research questions focused on two specific sets: Intensive English Program directors and VCoPs, it was necessary for me to find a data source that pertained to both areas. It was important that the data source was structured in a way to provide enough data to respond to the research questions. The VCoP selected for this study is a respected organization that provides leadership in the field of English language acquisition and in Intensive English Program

administration. This section explained the rationale for the data choice, the criteria for selection, and described the final choice of data source.

When choosing the relevant content for this study, several factors were considered. As an Intensive English Program director, I was aware of organizations that assist Intensive English Program directors in their day-to-day activities. These organizations often have face-to-face conferences, workshops, and an online presence. To begin, I reviewed several organizations associated with English language instruction, Intensive English Programs, and Intensive English Program administration. These organizations assist faculty, administration, and support staff in all aspects of international education. The predominate organizations related to Intensive English Program administration include TESOL, UCEIP, EnglishUSA, NAFSA, and the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL). These organizations assist faculty, administrators, and international student support staff in creating appropriate academic and program standards and provide academic services to assist international students in their goals to improve their English language proficiency.

These organizations have mission statements and membership guidelines. Through researching each organization's public website pages, I created a table indicating an overview of the qualities of each of these organizations. The table is based on research by Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006), Pino-Silva and Mayora (2010), and Murillo's (2008) examinations of functioning VCoPs. The information presented in the table was gathered from a review of the main home page of each VCoPs' website (see Table 4). These VCoPs also have membership only sections, and thus provide a measure of security and trust for the members who participate.

Table 4

*Evaluation of Website Homepages of CoPs and VCoPs Related to Intensive English Program Directors*

Organization	Mission Statement	Membership Access	Interest Groups Online and Face to Face	Organization Age, Size, and Main Target Audience	Moderator
NAFSA	Yes	Membership fee	Both – called member interest groups (MIGs)- 33. Pertinent MIG to this study: Intensive English Programs	Founded 1948, 10,000 members, USA	MIGs have moderators and MIG guidelines.
TESOL	Yes	Membership fee	Both – called interests sections (IS), 21 of them are listed. Pertinent IS to this study: Program Administration	Founded 1968, 13,300 members, International	ISs have chairs and IS guidelines
IATEFL	Yes	Membership fee	Both, called special interest groups (SIGS), about 15 of them are listed. Pertinent SIG to this study: Leadership and Management SIG	Founded in 1967, 4000 members, International	SIGs have volunteer committee members and guidelines.
UCIEP	Yes	Application and membership fee	Online presence is unclear from website. Mission statement does indicate forum discussions for Intensive English Program directors.	Founded in 1967, 74 University or Colleges, USA only	Unclear, possibly a listserv.
EnglishUSA	Yes	Application and membership fee	Online presence includes blogs and possibly a listserv for members though this is unclear from the website. Face-to-face meetings are indicated for Intensive English Program directors.	Founded in 1986, 400 members, USA only	Website with pertinent information for Intensive English Programs and has face-to-face meetings, and discussion boards.



In considering a VCoP for this research, I looked more closely at three of the VCoPs. These three VCoPs are given the pseudonyms VCoP 1, 2, and 3. From my initial observations, I felt that Intensive English Program directors would be interested in these VCoPs, and I felt that the members would include Intensive English Program directors. To further evaluate the three VCoPs, I used a typography analysis provided by the research of Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006) which did extensive analysis of VCoPs. Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006) focused on VCoPs with certain characteristics, including that the VCoP was associated with an organization where the shared information was more structured, that the organization was not a marketing tool, and that the participation was not mandatory. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) mention that most effective VCoPs need some face-to-face contact, thus I included that in my criteria.

Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006) created a typology of other more detailed characteristics of VCoPs which I began to analyze in relationship to the VCoPs. This typology is based only on the public access information gathered from the main home page of all organizations (Table 5). Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob's (2006) main premise is that not all VCoPs are alike and that each one has its own set of challenges. Though all three VCoPs seemed promising for my research, after further evaluation of the three VCoPs mentioned, I chose one. I chose the VCoP based on several factors. These factors included that the members of the VCoP were from Intensive English Programs that are located within the United States, the VCoP had a virtual community that could be accessed through the public as well as member only sections, and the VCoP had a large member population. It was also, necessary that the VCoP served primarily Intensive English Program directors though the VCoP may also serve other faculty and staff who work within Intensive English Programs.

Table 5

*Analysis of Three VCoPs Related to Intensive English Programs*

Structuring Characteristics		VCoP 1	VCoP 2	VCoP 3
Demographics	Orientation	Operational	Operational	Operational
	Life Span	Permanent	Permanent	Permanent
	Age	Potentially began in 2009	Potentially began in 2011	Potentially began in 2012
	Environment	Website	Website	Website
Organizational Context	Boundary Crossing	Unable to determine	Unable to determine	Unable to determine
	Degree of Institutionalized Formalism	Institutionalized	Institutionalized	Institutionalized
	Size	Approximately 900 members.	Approx. 700 members.	Approx. 500 members.
Membership Characteristics	Geographic Dispersion	Medium	High	Medium
	Members' Selection Process	Closed membership	Closed membership	Closed membership
	Members' Enrollment	Voluntary	Voluntary	Voluntary

*Note.* Typology adapted from “Towards a Typology of Virtual Communities of Practice,” by L. Dubé, A. Bourhis, and R. Jacob, 2006.

After choosing the VCoP that best fit my requirements, I reached out to the organization. I requested permission to examine the archived material within the VCoP as well as permission to ask members to participate in a survey and interview. I was provided a site approval letter. As mentioned, due to the organization's request for anonymity, I created a pseudonym for the chosen VCoP. The pseudonym is Intensive English Program Virtual Community or the IEPVC. The community is given this distinction for the rest of the research.

I began by looking at the content within the IEPVC during the months of May to September of 2018 to ensure that enough content would be available while at the same time being current and viable. At the time of the study, the IEPVC had approximately 450- 500 members, a number which creates a large sampling pool. The criteria for participation in the survey and interview was that the participant was 18 years of age or older and was a member of the IEPVC. I reached out to the members two different ways. One was an invitation to participate in the survey and subsequent interview through a message placed inside the main forum discussion board. The second was sending out emails to members of the IEPVC.

### **Defining Codes**

The next step included defining coding units and context units. To define these units, I looked at the research questions and the literature review which focused on characteristics and concepts of CoPs and responsibilities of Intensive English Program directors. This guided me as I defined the coding and context units. The coding unit is the smallest unit to be coded, for example, a word, while the context unit is the material around the coding unit, for example, a sentence (McMillan, 2000). For this study, the archived content within the VCoP was the primary context unit. First, I collected data that is currently archived in the VCoP. This included documents, newsletters, and industry statements that are embedded in the VCoP. For

categorizing the coding units, I referred to the research questions which focus on terms related to CoPs as well as Intensive English Program director responsibilities.

To ascertain how the VCoP assists Intensive English Program directors in professional development and to understand Intensive English Program directors' perceptions of the VCoP, I conducted a survey and interviewed those who volunteered during the survey process. The survey was sent to all members of the VCoP regardless of their participation level which was around 500 participants. The survey questions are provided in Appendix A. The responses to the survey were categorized into coding and context units. On the survey, I asked survey respondents to provide their name and email if they wished to participate in an interview. Seven survey respondents provided consent forms to participate in an interview.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) provide steps to prepare for the active interview. First, the questions should relate to the study's overall research questions, then the potential participant should be fully informed of the intentions of the researcher, next the interview questions should be created while recognizing that during the interview, the process should be in more of a conversational manner and that the questions may be abandoned entirely. Interviews should be recorded or videotaped and transcribed to be prepared for content analysis.

The interview questions for this study were informed by the research questions and the survey responses. The information that was gathered from the interviewees was a collaboration of knowledge construction between interviewer and interviewee. The questions for the interview were semi-structured and allowed for flexibility in response and for follow up questions. Due to the various locations of the participants, the interviews were conducted by phone. The interview responses provided a better understanding of the perceptions of the Intensive English Program directors about the VCoP as well as the Intensive English Program director's relationship with

the VCoP, whether casual or active. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them. The interview questions are provided in Appendix C.

## **Coding**

The fourth step is the process of training coders and coding the content. Coding is the development of a clear and comprehensive group of categories or codes. It is the process of looking for patterns in the data that answer research questions (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). These codes were developed deductively as well as inductively. Deductive coding is drawn from the researcher's theoretical ideas about the data. For this study, I was looking to see if the VCoP presented concepts that have been discussed in research on CoPs. I was also interested in how the VCoP represented knowledge construction related to Intensive English Program director responsibilities. Inductive codes are drawn from the content itself as theories emerge from the content. As mentioned earlier, there is also a distinction between coding units and context units (Krippendorff, 2004; McMillan, 2000; Saldaña, 2009). Coding units are the smaller units: words and phrases. The coding context would include an entire section of the content.

To assist with coding, a coding manual was created. This manual would include the step by step instructions on the coding process. This assisted with reliability and validity of the coding process. This was used by me and another trained coder. Below is the coding manual that was used for this study:

1. Research questions are the main guide. *QSR International's NVivo* qualitative data analysis software was used to assist in the coding process.
2. Content to be analyzed: the artifacts and documents presented in the IEPVC's website, including industry statements, newsletters, and any written information provided by

IEPVs to its members that is relevant to Intensive English Programs, survey responses, and transcription of interview responses.

3. First reading: Descriptive coding was the process of summarizing in one word or short phrase (coding unit) the basic topic of each passage of data (the artifacts and documents presented in the IEPVC website , including industry statements, newsletters, and any written information provided by the IEPVCs to its members that is relevant to Intensive English Programs, survey responses, and transcription of interview responses).
4. Second reading: Focused coding searched for significant descriptive codes to develop categories (context units).
5. The context unit was analyzed to understand the relationship to the entire VCoP.
6. This coding process was conducted between May 2018 and September 2018.
7. Review of the content to determine if all was categorized properly.
8. To avoid coder fatigue, each coding session did not exceed two hours in duration without a pause.

To address interrater reliability, I trained a second coder to also code the data. This coder was familiar with CoPs and Intensive English Program administration. The coder coded a portion of the data. I followed the percent agreement model and the Kappa coefficient using the software *NVivo* to help determine interrater reliability.

### **Analysis**

The fifth step included a detailed analysis, including interpretation and inference that can be gained from the data in relation to the study's research questions. For this study, the archived content within the VCoPs was the primary and initial document source. It is from the analysis of

those sources that concepts, concerns, and topics emerged and used to create the final survey and interview questions. The responses to the survey and interview questions were also analyzed.

### **Overview of the Research Design**

The following list presents a brief description of each step that was carried out in the research. A more detailed discussion of each step is provided within Chapter 4.

1. The initial content analysis observed the archived content. The content was analyzed using the coding manual. The software, *QSR International's NVivo*, assisted in this process.
2. Once an analysis was made, a survey was designed and disseminated to all members of the VCoPs. The survey design collected demographic as well as perceptual data. *Qualtrics* was used as the survey medium.
3. One of the survey questions asked for volunteers for further inquiry. From those volunteers, semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone. The interview responses were recorded and transcribed.
4. Field notes were kept throughout the process.
5. All data was combined for recursive analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Gatson (2011) maintains that research of online communities, such as this exploration of the IEPVC “are often written by consummate and acknowledged insiders in the communities of interest” (p. 514). While it is not uncommon for researchers in online communities to be grounded in the community they explore, this positionality is not without controversy. Gatson (2011) contends that online research can be as rich (or as shallow) as the research and researcher

may allow. The methods and approaches of the researcher rather than the medium determine the strength and validity of the study.

Nonetheless, the nature of the internet and of those viewing postings and other interactions in VCoPs and other online venues present some unique challenges. In 2012, the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) released *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0)*. AOIR provides general ethical principles for those conducting online research, including that the greater the vulnerability of the community, the greater the obligation of the researcher. The committee suggests that “ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgment attentive to the specific context” (Buchanan & Markham, 2012, p. 4).

As a participant-observer, I selected, filtered, interpreted, and evaluated the content (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). Though Schwartz & Schwartz (1995) stated that the participant observer can be revealed or concealed, Fine (1993) stated that “covert observation is a debate about informed consent” (p. 10). Thus, even though I am a legitimate member of the community, I informed the community of my observations. While observing the VCoPs, I focused on concrete descriptions of the events with minimal participation (Pelto & Pelto, 1970).

The first source of data I collected and analyzed was topics within the IEPVC which presented little risk to individual contributors and members of the VCoPs. The second source of information came from survey responses and interview responses. The findings from the survey were presented in the aggregate. Some survey questions were open ended responses. Those responses were quoted directly, but the source of the quote remained anonymous. The final source of data for the project presented the biggest risk to participants as it involved interviews with members of the VCoP. To protect the identities of the participants, I used pseudonyms. As



part of the dissertation process, I received approval through the Institutional Review Board for my research.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) create an atmosphere for sharing information and provide resources for members of the group. This study examined one VCoP, the Intensive English Program Virtual Community (IEPVC), to observe the content within the community and to gather information on the members' interest, participation, and use of the community. To do this content analysis, I viewed and analyzed artifacts within the IEPVC to determine the concepts presented in the IEPVC as well as the participation tools presented in the IEPVC. These artifacts included documents, newsletters, industry statements, forum discussion topics, and presentations. The study also aimed to understand member perceptions of their interest in the IEPVC, their participation within the IEPVC, and their utilization of the information within the IEPVC. To gain insight on these issues, I collected survey responses from members of the IEPVC and analyzed those responses. I also conducted interviews with members of the IEPVC and analyzed those responses. To begin, a summary of the content is provided.

#### **The Virtual Community of Practice**

The data gathered from the Intensive English Program Virtual Community's website was collected during a five-month period from May to September 2018. The data included analysis of 254 sources. The artifacts were separated into types to assist in the coding process. These artifacts included 71 webpages, 52 presentations, 21 Word Documents, 7 PDF files, 13 newsletters, nine webinars, and six industry statements. The type of artifact along with the number of each examined artifact is represented in Table 6. The total number of examined artifacts was 303.

Table 6

*Number of Data Sources by Type (N = 303)*

Type of Source	<i>n</i>
Webpages	71
Presentations	52
Survey responses	42
Hyperlinks to other associations	41
Word Documents	21
News articles	18
Forum discussion webpages	14
Newsletters	13
Webinars	9
Interview transcripts	7
PDF Files	7
Industry statements	6
Member generated survey results	2

*Note.* Data collected from May to September 2018.

### **The Participants**

At the time of this study, the Intensive English Program Virtual Community (IEPVC) had 433 memberships. Each membership represents one Intensive English Program. To be a member of the IEPVC, the IEPVC asks potential members to fill out an application stating that the prospective Intensive English Program meets certain requirements. The application asks the potential member for contact information about the Intensive English Program and the director of the program. The application also has questions about faculty, administrative structure, facilities, curriculum, and marketing material. The application asks the potential member to read the standards of the IEPVC and agree to meet those standards. Finally, the application asks the

member to present a copy of the program's accreditation. Once the application is completed and reviewed by the IEPVC, and the membership fee is paid, membership may be granted.

One main component of these requirements is that the Intensive English Program must be in the United States. Another is that each Intensive English Program must have accreditation from a United States based Intensive English Program accrediting organization or be under the umbrella of an institution with regional accreditation. Other criterion states that the students of each Intensive English Program should be primarily adult students that meet in class for a minimum of 18 contact hours of English language instruction per week. Each Intensive English Program must have a director that oversees the program, faculty, and staff, and the Intensive English Program must have a curriculum with instructional levels and student services.

As part of this research, 42 members of the Intensive English Program Virtual Community responded to my survey. Since my research wanted to focus on the perceptions of Intensive English Program directors, I asked the survey participants some demographic questions, including the participants' title within the Intensive English Program, leadership responsibilities, and years in the field (see Table 7). When asked about the participants' position title, 73% of the survey participants reported holding the title of director, while 14% had the title of administrator. Other titles indicated by the survey participants included assistant director, academic director, faculty, and staff.

I also asked survey participants if their position included leadership responsibilities. All survey participants indicated that their position included leadership responsibilities. When asked about years of experience working in Intensive English Programs, 52% of the Intensive English Program directors had more than 10 years of experience working in Intensive English Programs and 38% had between 5-10 years of experience working in Intensive English Programs. The

responses demonstrated that all participants had leadership responsibilities and the majority (90%) had more than five years of experience in an Intensive English Program.

Table 7

*Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants (N = 42)*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Position title</b>		
director	31	74
administrator	6	14
faculty	2	5
assistant director	1	2
academic director	1	2
staff	1	2
<b>Leadership responsibilities</b>		
Yes	42	100
No	0	0
<b>Years of Experience</b>		
More than 10 years	22	52
5-10 years	16	38
2-5 years	3	7
0-2 years	1	2

*Note.* Totals of percentages are not 100 for every characteristic because of rounding.

Of the 42 survey respondents, seven of them consented to an interview. To help with the anonymity of the seven participants, I used pseudonyms. I have chosen the following pseudonyms for each participant using the letters of the alphabet: Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, Participant E, Participant F, and Participant G. When referring to the interview participant, I used the given pseudonym.

The first interview question asked the participant to identify his or her position title. Of the seven interview participants, five reported their title as director of an Intensive English Program. One reported his or her title as assistant director and one reported his or her position

having two titles, one of director of the Intensive English Program and one as lead teacher within the program. These results concur with the findings from the survey that most participants have the title of director. As mentioned earlier, for consistency within this study, I use the term *director* to indicate the leader of the Intensive English Program regardless of the participants' reported title. Table 8 demonstrates the length of each interview, the type of university and position title of each interviewee along with the interview participants' self-reported participation level.

Table 8

*Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants (N=7)*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Position title		
director	6	86
assistant director	1	14
lead teacher	1	14
Type of institution		
public	4	57
private	3	43
Reported participation level		
peripheral to active	3	43
peripheral	2	29
active to core	1	14
core	1	14
Length of interview		
30-45 minutes	4	57
15- 30 minutes	2	29
less than 15 minutes	1	14

*Note.* Totals of percentages are not 100 for every characteristic because of rounding.

## Overview of the Coding Process

As discussed in Chapter 3, I followed a problem-driven content analysis when examining the Intensive English Program virtual community that started from research questions and proceeded to find answers to the research questions within suitable texts. Based on Krippendorff's (2004) description of problem-driven content analysis and McMillan's (2000) description for conducting a content analysis when analyzing online content, here are the 5 steps that were followed for this research:

1. Created research questions.
2. Collected a sample selection of artifacts from the Intensive English Program Virtual Community.
3. Coding units and context units were defined.
4. A coding manual was created with steps for the coding process.
5. Analysis, interpretation, and inferences were made from the data in relation to the research questions.

After creating a coding manual, I trained one other coder. This coder was familiar with virtual communities of practice and Intensive English Programs. While using a coding manual, I coded all the data within the content, and the second coder coded a sample of the content. The second coder's coding was used to assess the reliability of the coding manual. A Cohen's kappa coefficient was computed to assess the degree of agreement between me and the second coder. The comparison revealed that the two raters exhibited the appropriate reliability per conventional academic standards:  $K = .89$ .

## Typology of a Virtual Community of Practice

To begin, I examined the artifacts in the IEPVC in relation to the typology of virtual communities of practice discussed in the work of Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006). The typology has four main characteristics: demographics, organizational context, membership characteristics, and technological environment. Demographics refer to the format or orientation of the virtual community of practice and how long the VCoP has been in existence. The organizational context of the VCoP includes the origins of the VCoP and the organization of the VCoP, including any leadership positions in the VCoP. Membership characteristics examine how many members are part of the VCoP, how to join the VCoP, and any diversity amongst the members of the VCoP. The typology also examines the technological environment of a VCoP, which comprises the technological aspects of the VCoP, including member technology literacy and the technology format of the VCoP (Table 9).

Table 9

### *Typology of a Virtual Community of Practice*

Structuring Characteristic	Concepts
Demographics	orientation, life span, age
Organizational Context	creation process, boundary crossing, environment, organizational slack, degree of institutionalized formalism, leadership
Membership Characteristics	size, geographic dispersion, selection process, enrollment process, prior community experience, stability, information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, cultural diversity, topic relevance to members
Technological Environment	degree of reliance on ICT, ICT availability

*Note.* Adapted from “Towards a Typology of Virtual Communities of Practice,” by L. Dubé, A. Bourhis, and R. Jacob, 2006.



## **Typology of Intensive English Program Virtual Community of Practice**

As I examined the Intensive English Program virtual community of practice, I looked for the same characteristics as described by Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006). In this next section, I describe each structuring characteristic and the concepts within each structuring characteristic. I then provide examples from the IEPVC to determine the aspects of the IEPVC to the typology.

### **Demographics of the IEPVC**

The first structuring characteristic examines the demographics of a virtual community of practice. The next section explains each concept related to the demographics of the IEPVC.

**Orientation of the IEPVC.** A VCoPs orientation can be either strategic or operational. A strategic VCoP supports the “overall mission and orientation of the organization” (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006, p. 75). An operational orientation focuses on the daily operations of the members with a specified mission and purpose. The IEPVC has a mission statement which indicates the goals of the IEPVC which are “to provide support, standards, and advocacy for intensive English programs” and “to be the recognized voice of intensive English programs in the USA.” The IEPVC emphasized that it is a trade organization that serves the members as well as the public. The IEPVC “provides increased access to membership information, the most recent and relevant news” and “information about immigration, visas, accreditation, and more.” This information from the content of the IEPVC demonstrates that the orientation of the IEPVC is operational.

**Life span of the IEPVC.** The life span of a VCoP can range from a temporary (exist for a short period of time for a specific purpose) to a permanent life span (no time frame in mind) (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). The IEPVC has been in existence for over 30 years, and it has an on-going process for information sharing through webinars and forums. Therefore, the IEPVC

would be considered permanent.

**Age of the IEPVC.** Within the typology of Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006), the age of a VCoP can be young (less than a year) to old (more than five years). As stated, the IEPVC has been in operation for over 30 years. However, the website and the virtual components have been in operation for less time, approximately 10 years. The website has undergone a redesign and integration in the past three years. A VCoP can be considered old if it is in operation for more than five years. Therefore, the age of the IEPVC can be considered old.

**Level of maturity of the IEPVC.** Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) described five stages of community development within a community of practice. These stages show an evolution of the community. The potential stage is the beginning formation of a COP to the transformation stage which indicates that the community is going through a major change and renewal. Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006) applied these stages of maturity to VCoPs as well. The IEPVC, due to its longevity and stability, has gone through several stages already: potential (loose network of Intensive English Program leaders discussed starting an organization for Intensive English Program leaders); coalescing (the community officially launched with assigned leadership and mission statements); maturing (the community created standards for membership); stewardship (the community created a website and continued to support its members with certain industry challenges; and transformation (a rebranding occurred, a website redesign, and an influx of members). Therefore, I describe the IEPVC as having evolved through all the stages.

## **Organizational Content of the IEPVC**

The next structuring characteristic discusses the organizational content within a virtual community of practice. The following section explains each concept related to the organization of the IEPVC.

**Creation process of the IEPVC.** The creation process refers to the origin of the organization and if the VCoP was created deliberately from a top-down management stance or spontaneously by several interested members forming a group (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). Within the IEPVC, there are several webpages that discuss the history of the IEPVC. Within those webpages, the origins of the organization are presented. The organization started with only a few members which were leaders within Intensive English Programs throughout the United States. These members came together while attending another organization's conference to discuss forming an organization to support the needs of Intensive English Programs. These members soon created a mission statement, bylaws, and officers were elected. Over the next few years, an official organization was chartered. This indicates that the IEPVC started in a spontaneous fashion with interested administrators of Intensive English Programs from all parts of the United States coming together and then moved into a more deliberate and intentional organization with a board of directors, standards, a strong mission statement, and an executive director. The IEPVC recognized that it has evolved over time, as stated in a newsletter: "many professional organizations follow a similar trajectory in their development. It begins as a grouping of individuals who have a common interest in professional development, advocacy, and standards. As the profession matures, its members look for ways to ensure that its members uphold the standards." Therefore, the IEPVC can be considered spontaneous.

**Boundary crossing of the IEPVC.** Boundary crossing is a key component of VCoPs, as the nature of technology often provides easier access to a community as well as access to other communities to promote “collaboration, learning, and information sharing” (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006, p.76). The IEPVC also desires to create collaboration with other organizations with similar interests and goals. The mission statement of the IEPVC states it “values engagement, integrity, excellence, and collaboration.” The IEPVC has four joint statements with three other organizations who are also interested in the work of Intensive English Programs. This IEPVC would be considered as having a high level of boundary crossing.

**Environment of the IEPVC.** The environment is related to the organization’s “economic environment, culture, and subculture, management style, and political context” (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006, p.76). The organization’s environment can be considered facilitating, neutral, or destructive. The IEPVC encourages the members to contribute to the forums, and it provides explanations on how to use the website, the member’s profile, and the forums to encourage more participation. The IEPVC also has two to three face-to-face meetings a year to discuss the topics of concern and encourages members to present at these face-to-face meetings. The IEPVC advocates for Intensive English Programs within the United States. One mission statement of the IEPVC states the desire to “provide advocacy for the wide variety of Intensive English Programs on the national and international stage.” The IEPVC demonstrates an environment of a facilitating culture.

**Degree of institutionalized formalism of the IEPVC.** The degree of institutionalized formalism pertains to how a VCoP has been integrated into an organization. This can range from unrecognized to formally institutionalized (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). The IEPVC is an organization in and of itself and is not integrated into another organization. However, the IEPVC

is one of several organizations interested in and supporting Intensive English Programs. There are other organizations that also serve the needs and concerns of Intensive English Program directors. I wanted to determine if the IPEVC was recognized as a credible source for those working in Intensive English Programs and within the community of organizations that serve Intensive English Programs. To determine this, I examined the IEPVC to see what formal operations were in affect such as bylaws, board members, mission statements, standards, and marketing tools. All of these were provided within the IEPVC. The IEPVC also provides standards of membership, which states that the potential member must be accredited, must meet certain standards of curriculum, faculty requirements, and have periodic self-evaluations. The original founding members of the IEPVC wanted “a stronger, more visible national presence, one that would be able to establish standards for the field and provide credibility for the profession.” The IEPVC has created joint statements with other organizations that focus on the needs of Intensive English Programs. The IEPVC has a logo that members can use in promotional material. This would indicate to any students interested in the Intensive English Program that the Intensive English Program has met the standards of and is a member of this organization (IEPVC). The IEPVC has a funding source from membership dues as well as affiliated member dues.

The IEPVC assisted in the formation of other organizations, such as an accrediting agency specifically for Intensive English Programs. The IEPVC sees itself as having a level of integrity and legitimacy. One value of being a member of the IEPVC is “the increased credibility of professional affiliation with a nonprofit organization with a long history and integrity.” Two interview participants discussed the value of being a member of the IEPVC. One interviewee, Participant C, stated that “It was strongly recommended to us that we pursue membership in

[IEPVC]. They said that this [IEPVC] is top notch as well. The fact that we're members lends a sense of stability and integrity to our program. That's foundational." Another interviewee, Participant E, stated that though the respective Intensive English Program primarily uses another organization's VCoP, Participant E states that "we have our name on the website and we're affiliated with them [IEPVC]. I do know their board members. So, at that level just kind of professional with their leadership." The information about standards, integrity, and member benefits along with responses from the interview participations demonstrated that the IEPVC is integrated in the profession of Intensive English Programs and is institutionalized.

**Leadership within the IEPVC.** The leadership structure of a VCoP can be clearly assigned with appointed leaders or continuously negotiated where leadership roles are not clearly defined or assigned (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). Within the IEPVC, there is a webpage that gives information on each current elected member of the board. The positions include president, president elect, secretary, treasurer, and vice presidents for standards, advocacy, and outreach. There are also word documents that indicate responsibilities of each board position. The IEPVC has a full-time facilitator as well. Some responsibilities of a leader include that the leader would "align activities with the goals of the organization's strategic plan." This information indicates that the IEPVC has a leadership structure that is clearly assigned.

**Organizational slack of the IEPVC.** According to Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006), a VCoP needs to have resources in place to assist the member in learning. The level of resources available can be low to high and is referred to as organizational slack. The resources available to the IEPVC members are extensive. The website of the IEPVC includes over 190 documents that refer to resources for the member with a section for member only resources. The IEPVC states benefits associated with membership including: "access to current news affecting the Intensive

English Program field, critical information about immigration laws, student visa policies, accreditation.” The IEPVC has forums that members can use to gain insight, share information, and ask questions. The IEPVC hopes the forums would be a strong resource for the members and that the members would engage in the forums as much as possible. The IEPVC created that space for members to share knowledge. Therefore, the organizational slack or availability of resources to the IEPVC members is high.

### **Membership Characteristics of the IEPVC**

The third structuring characteristic discusses qualities related to the membership within a virtual community of practice. The next section explains each concept related to the membership characteristics of the IEPVC.

**Size of the IEPVC.** Each VCoP has members and the number of members may be small (only a few members) to medium to large to very large with over a thousand members (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). The number of members in the IEPVC fluctuates slightly throughout the year ranging between 450 and 500 members. The IEPVC has membership drives each year to try to gain more members, and current members must renew their membership each year. The IEPVC does indicate that during times of turmoil within the industry, specifically when enrollment numbers have decreased within Intensive English Programs, fewer members renew their membership due to lack of funds in their respective programs. The size of the IEPVC would be considered medium.

**Geographic dispersion of the IEPVC.** This refers to the location of each member. If the members are all from the local area, then the dispersion would be lower. If members are located within one large country with different time zones, then the geographic dispersion would be medium. If the members are located throughout the world, then the geographic dispersion would

be high (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). The members of the IEPVC must be part of an Intensive English Program located within the United States. Some reasons a VCoP may have lower geographic dispersion would be that it is more difficult to meet face-to-face or to have synchronous meetings due to different time zones. At the time of this study, the IEPVC had nine webinars that were presented at a specific time; however, after the webinars were presented, they were archived and available to members to access anytime. Also, the forums are available for access to members at any time of day as well as all the other resources available on the website. The IEPVC has face-to-face meetings through-out the year. This would indicate that the IEPVC's geographic dispersion is medium.

**Membership selection process of the IEPVC.** A VCoP may have an open membership policy where anyone can join with no requirements or restrictions or a closed membership policy with an application process where certain predetermined requirements must be met by the potential member (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). The IEPVC requires potential members to complete an application and demonstrate proof of accreditation by one of the certified accrediting bodies for higher education and/or Intensive English Programs. The application includes answering questions about the members' Intensive English Program format, including curriculum, faculty requirements, student contact hours, and if there is an established director. The membership does come with a membership fee. The membership must be renewed each year. There is language in the bylaws that states that the IEPVC can revoke membership if the member does not abide by the established requirements of membership. Though the IEPVC's membership is closed, a potential member can request a guest account which would provide access to the IEPVC's resources for a limited time period.



**Membership enrollment process of the IEPVC.** The enrollment process for potential members can range from voluntary, where a member enrolls in the organization as desired; to strongly encouraged, where the organization provides opportunities, accessibility, and marketing material to encourage new members to enroll; to compulsory, where potential members interested in the particular field feel that membership is necessary or they may feel forced by the VCoP or other members of the VCoP to enroll (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). The IEPVC does have marketing material to encourage new members and to encourage renewal each year. The IEPVC creates resources, including webinars, that discuss how the resources provided by the IEPVC can assist the member. However, each Intensive English Program within the United States is not required to be a member of this organization. There are many reasons why an Intensive English Program may choose not to become a member, including not having the funds, being a member of a similar organization or having different goals for their respective Intensive English Program. Therefore, the enrollment process for this IEPVC is voluntary.

**The IEPVC members' prior community experience.** Within a VCoP, each member may have prior experience as part of a community of practice or a virtual community of practice. The range of community experience can be none (the member has no prior experience within a VCoP), to medium (the member has some prior experience being part of a VCoP), to extensive (the member has extensive prior experience) (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). A member of the IEPVC does need to have some experience within the community of Intensive English. One example that illustrates this need is that the application for the IEPVC asks the member to provide accreditation. It takes time for a stand-alone Intensive English Program to receive accreditation. Even when the program is under the umbrella accreditation of an associated college or university, it takes some time for the Intensive English Program to be formally

recognized and to become a SEVP certified program.

Though the IEPVC does have some face-to-face meetings, the member should also have some prior experience with virtual communities of practice. New members from new Intensive English Programs are encouraged to look at the membership requirements and prepare their Intensive English Program for membership. As indicated earlier when discussing the attributes of the members, over 50% of the members that responded to the survey have over 10 years of experience within an Intensive English Program. Therefore, the IEPVC members' prior experience is medium.

**The IEPVC members' ICT literacy.** All VCoPs have some technology aspects. Some VCoPs communicate only through a virtual environment whereas others have some face-to-face interactions along with virtual interactions. The VCoP may have resources to assist members who have less experience with technology, while other VCoPs may provide fewer resources. According to Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006), it is important to understand if the member needs to have a high level of ICT literacy (member has familiarity with navigating a virtual environment), a medium level of ICT literacy (member has some familiarity with navigating a virtual environment), or a lower level of ICT literacy (member has little familiarity with navigating a virtual environment).

Recently, the IEPVC worked with a consulting firm to improve their technology presence. The goal was to "improve member engagement." During one webinar, the presenter mentioned the goal to "pull people to the website." Another webpage stated that the members would be encouraged to "contribute to online resources." This indicates that members do need to have access to the internet, technology, and at least some ICT literacy, including knowledge of how to access and maneuver through a website and a discussion forum. The IEPVC provides

resources to assist members in understanding the technology and how to use the tools on the website. One resource is a webinar about creating profiles. Another is a webpage that gives specific instruction on how to use the website, including information on how to use the three communication tools: profile, forums, and connections. The content demonstrates that members would need a medium level of literacy in technology information and communication.

**The IEPVC membership stability.** A VCoP membership can range from a stable membership with permanent members to moderately stable where permanent membership varies slightly year after year to a more fluid membership with membership status that is often in flux over time (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). The IEPVC has membership dues that must be renewed each year which could lead to some instability in the permanent memberships. There are other organizations that also provide similar benefits to the members which may lure members away. Also, members may feel that the IEPVC does not meet their needs for the price of the membership. One interviewee stated that another organization serves the respective Intensive English Program more successfully than the IEPVC, but the interviewee does still see the value of being part of this IEPVC. Monthly newsletters welcome new members to the organization. Newsletters in 2017 and 2018 recognized about 20 new members each year. Therefore, the IEPVC's membership is moderately stable.

**The IEPVC's cultural diversity.** Cultural diversity is concerned with how different cultural perspectives can affect the dynamics of a VCoP. It can also be related to the different professional experiences. Cultural diversity that is homogenous has members that are from the same area, culture, language, and profession. Cultural diversity that is heterogeneous has members that are from various cultures, live in different areas, may speak different languages, and have various professions. Diversity could also be within the two dimensions of homogenous and

heterogeneous (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). Though this IEPVC appears primarily homogeneous because all the members are from accredited Intensive English Programs within the United States, the Intensive English Program directors may be from different cultures. Though this study did not collect demographic information on the directors' cultural background, two members that were interviewed indicated that they had worked as a faculty member or a director overseas. Therefore, some members may have diversity in language and in cultural background. The IEPVC reported that 56% of the members work in university-based programs whereas the other 44% work in either private, joint, or multi-sites. Each Intensive English Program may have different program designs, goals, and a different student population. From this information, this IEPVC displays a medium cultural diversity.

**IEPVC topic relevance to members.** Topic relevance within a VCoP relates to the topics discussed within a VCoP and if those topics are of interest to the members and relevant to the members' daily activities (high relevancy) or if the topics discussed focus more on the organization's overall concerns and less on the day-to-day activities of the members (low relevancy) (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). Within the IPEVC, many topics are presented that relate to Intensive English Programs such as visa policies, professional development, program management, and enrollment. The IEPVC states that it provides "current news affecting the Intensive English Program field, critical information about immigration laws, student visa policies, accreditation, and more." Therefore, the topic relevancy for the IEPVC is high.

### **Technological Environment of the IEPVC**

The final structuring characteristic considers the technology environment within a virtual community of practice. The next section explains each concept related to the technology environment of the IEPVC.

**Degree of ICT reliance within the IEPVC.** According to Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006), a virtual community of practice must be “predominantly using ICT to be called ‘virtual,’” (p. 81). VCoPs use technology differently depending on the VCoPs goals and needs. All the virtual content within the IEPVC was centrally located on the website with access to participation tools such as discussion forums within the website. It is important for a VCoP to have some face-to-face interaction as it will create a more effective VCoP. The IEPVC provides face-to-face meetings a few times a year. The board members do meet as well. Along with the conferences hosted by the IEPVC, the IEPVC encourages members to attend booths that are hosted by the IEPVC at other affiliated organizations’ conferences. In a statement to members, the IEPVC encouraged members to have “in-person opportunities to network with each other at our [other organizations’] booths.” However, not all members attend those conferences. The IEPVC wants all faculty and staff of an Intensive English Program, not just the director of the Intensive English Program, to have access to the resources within the IEPVC. Therefore, membership includes opportunities for several employees of each Intensive English Program to create a member profile that would assist the member in communicating with other members. This information illustrates that the IEPVC has a medium reliance on ICT.

**ICT availability within the IEPVC.** The ICT availability relates to the variety of ICT available to the member. The VCoP may have different means of interacting virtually. The VCoP can provide different virtual spaces for the members to “meet and discuss synchronously or asynchronously, store documents, [and] hold electronic presentations” (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006, p. 81). Low variety would only have, for instance, some documents within a website. Medium variety would include a discussion forum, and high variety would have for example synchronous and asynchronous discussions, webinars, networking opportunities, and archived

information. The IEPVC provides the following varieties of asynchronous participation tools: four different forums; member idea box; membership profiles and member directories to connect with other members; Facebook and Twitter. The IEPVC also has some synchronous discussions such as webinars. This information led me to distinguish the IEPVC as having a high variety of ICT availability. The structuring characteristics and concepts of the IEPVC are presented in Table 10.

Table 10

*Typology of a Virtual Community of Practice Incorporated With the Intensive English Program Virtual Community*

	Structuring Characteristics	<i>The IEPVC</i>
Demographics	Orientation	Operational
	Age, Life span	Old, Permanent
	Level of Maturity	Evolved through all levels of maturity
Organizational Context	Creation Process	Spontaneous
	Boundary Crossing	High
	Environment	Facilitating
	Degree of Institutionalized Formalism	Institutionalized
	Leadership	Clearly assigned
	Organizational Slack	High
	Membership Characteristics	Size
	Geographic Dispersion	Medium
	Membership Selection Process	Closed
	Enrollment Process	Voluntary
	Members Prior Community Experience	Medium
	Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy	Medium
	Stability	Moderately stable
	Cultural Diversity	Medium
	Topic Relevance to Members	High
Technological Environment	Degree of ICT reliance	Medium
	ICT Availability	High variety

## The IEPVC Member Responsibilities

To gain further insight into the daily activities of the Intensive English Program director, the interview participants were asked what responsibilities they had working as directors in an Intensive English Program. Each director works within a different contextual environment which dictates different responsibilities and priorities for the director. For example, programs that are smaller may need to focus more on recruitment and marketing while larger programs may need to focus more on faculty professional development. The interview participants reported many different responsibilities that I have listed here with examples.

- *Student focused services*: student orientation, student matriculation from the Intensive English program into a degree seeking program at the university, assisting students in connecting with the community, and cultural awareness programs
- *Program management*: staffing issues, program strategic planning, scheduling and assigning courses, classroom size management, and budget implementation
- *Faculty management*: recruiting and hiring faculty, providing professional development to faculty, faculty observations and evaluations, and dealing with faculty conflicts.
- *Enrollment management*: admissions, marketing and recruitment, student record retention, and visa issues
- *Curriculum development*: course design, textbook evaluation and implementation, and assessment and placement.
- *Networking* with other departments at the institution, other Intensive English Program stakeholders, and community members
- *Teaching, research, and scholarship*



These results support the previous research on Intensive English Program directors' reported responsibilities (Bailey & Llamas, 2012; Christison & Stoller, 2012; Coombe et al., 2008; Eaton, 2009; Fox, 1988; Gawienowski, 2002; Katz, 1974; Pennington, 1994; Pennington & Hoekje, 2010; Stoller & Christison, 1994). The responsibilities that were reported in previous research include the following. The italicized words correlate to the categories reported in this study.

- *Curriculum* responsibilities
- Leadership responsibilities relating to *faculty management*
- Advisory responsibilities relating to *student focused services*
- Recruitment responsibilities related to *enrollment management*
- Admission responsibilities related to *enrollment management*
- Budgetary responsibilities related to *program management*

This current research enhances the previous research by providing more detailed information about current responsibilities, recognizing the value of networking, and that some Intensive English Program directors also have responsibilities related to language instruction, research, and scholarship. One interviewee explained that the director responsibilities are all encompassing and include “all parts of [Intensive English Programs]: academic, recruiting, enrollment management, student services, and student conduct, record retention. So, it is overseeing all parts of the institute.” Another interviewee reported a “long list” of responsibilities, including curriculum development, monthly faculty meetings, scholarship engagement, and thinking of innovative ways to promote and market the program. This demonstrates that the responsibilities of Intensive English Program director continue to encompass many aspects of managing a program and that the director wears many hats.

## Topics of Interest

While examining the content of the website and the title of forum discussions, 10 topics emerged. These 10 topics were mentioned frequently within the content. To better understand the importance of these topics to members, I asked the survey participants to rank these topics from extremely important to not at all important. The responses to this survey question are represented in Table 11.

Table 11

### *Response to Survey Question Number 4*

Topic	<i>Extremely important</i>	<i>Very important</i>	<i>Moderately important</i>	<i>Slightly important</i>	<i>Not at all important</i>
SEVP and visa issues	57%	26%	10%	7%	0%
Enrollment management	48%	29%	17%	2%	5%
Curriculum and instruction	40%	36%	24%	0%	0%
Pathway programs	36%	33%	24%	7%	0%
Testing	29%	36%	33%	2%	0%
Faculty hiring and professional development for faculty	29%	60%	12%	0%	0%
Program budget	24%	38%	19%	14%	5%
Attendance policy	19%	29%	33%	14%	5%
Tuition, fees, and refund policies	14%	38%	33%	12%	2%
Students working on campus	7%	7%	19%	43%	24%

*Note.* Total of percentages is not 100 because of rounding. Survey question number 4: “For each of these 10 topics related to Intensive English Programs that are presented or discussed on the website or forums in [IEPVC], please indicate how you rate the importance of each topic?”

As represented in the survey responses, participants ranked visa issues and enrollment management as the top two extremely important topics. More than 75% of survey participants felt that these topics were very important or extremely important. Both topics relate to student

enrollment. Programs with low enrollment or lower enrollment may have struggles in other areas, such as budget concerns and faculty hiring concerns. More than 75% of survey participants also ranked curriculum and instruction as very important or extremely important. A creative and innovative curriculum with strong instruction will attract students and assist with the reputation of the program. It is important to note that there were no survey participants that ranked curriculum and instruction as less than moderately important. This indicates that curriculum is a topic of importance for program directors. Pathway programs were ranked as very important or extremely important by 69% of survey participants. Pathway programs are programs that allow Intensive English Program students to transition smoothly from an Intensive English Program which is often non-credit bearing to a credit bearing, degree seeking program. Pathway programs are certified by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). Pathway programs are becoming more valuable to Intensive English Programs due to the recent changes on conditional admission. The topic about students working on campus received the lowest rankings with 24% of the survey participants stating it was not an important topic at all and 43% ranking it as only slightly important. Depending on the visa status of the student, there are limitations for student employment within the United States. For this reason, some program directors may not focus on student employment. Another reason for the low ranking may be that other offices on campus such as an International Office serve students who are able and interested in working.

The interview participants were also asked about topics that were important to them in their daily activities working within an Intensive English Program. All interview respondents emphasized that the topics of immediate importance often changed depending on the current contextual situations for each individual Intensive English Program. The most frequently

mentioned topic of importance focused on enrollment. Interview participants were asked, “In relation to Intensive English Programs what topics are important to you in your daily activities?” Participant D’s response reflects similar responses from all interview participants. Participant D responded by stating, “I’ll go with level of importance, and one would be maintaining student enrollment and that means continuing to promote and recruit students to our program to maintain program size.” Participant B had a similar response, “The unfriendly politics at this moment and dropping enrollment.” Both comments correspond to the survey response that enrollment management was an important topic with 77% of survey respondents stating that enrollment management was either very or extremely important.

Another topic of importance mentioned by the interview participants was effective curriculum and instruction. This is indicated in the sentiments of Participant C, Participant D, and Participant F when responding to the question about topics of importance in their daily activities:

Participant C: “Most important, I say, is the effectiveness of my program.”

Participant D: “Maintaining a high standard of curriculum delivery and curriculum development for students.”

Participant F: “Big one is just making sure that we're providing best practices for delivering instruction.”

As mentioned earlier, all the survey participants responded that curriculum and instruction was either moderately important, very important, or extremely important. Therefore, the survey responses and interview responses both represent that curriculum and instruction is an important topic for Intensive English Program directors. This indicates that Intensive English Program

directors want information about curriculum in order to improve and enhance the efficacy of their program.

### **Participation Tools**

In order to better understand legitimate peripheral participation, which focuses on how a newcomer participates in a community of practice and the relationship between members of the community as they learn (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I wanted to first see what participation tools were provided by the IEPVC. These participation tools could assist members in participating and learning within the community. In virtual communities of practice, these participation tools could include listservs, email conversations, forums, live webinars, and some face-to-face opportunities. While conducting the content analysis of the IEPVC, I looked for virtual tools that had one main characteristic: the tool allowed members to interact with other members virtually. Five virtual participation tools emerged from the content: *forums, webinars, messaging, networks, groups and connections*.

The first tool is the *forums*. The forums allow members to post questions and comments about a certain topic. Other members may respond with answers, insight, or more questions. The IEPVC has four main forums available to members, and each group has forum moderators. One forum is a general open discussion forum. The other three align with certain topics of interest to members: curriculum and assessment; recruitment and marketing; and products and services. Members are encouraged to ask questions, share anecdotes, and share knowledge in the forums. Members can also distribute surveys to the membership and are encouraged to share the results within the forum. As of September 2018, there are results from two member-generated surveys shared within the IEPVC.

The second participation tool is *webinars*. The IEPVC provides webinars where members are presented information about certain topics. During the synchronous streaming of the webinars, members that participate can make comments and/or ask questions. After the completion of the live webinar, the webinar is archived for asynchronous viewing by members who did not attend the synchronous event. Within the IEPVC, there were nine webinars archived between May and September 2018. These webinars represent various topics of interest to members including: Intensive English Program advocacy, textbooks, pathway programs, and marketing and recruitment. The webinars are presented by members, associated members along with members of the board.

The next three participation tools allow members to connect directly with other members. *Messaging* provides access for members to send private messages to other members. *Networks* provides access for members to interact with other members that are part of social networks such as *Facebook*. *Groups and connections* provide members the opportunity to create groups with other members and make connections based on interests.

The IEPVC provides face-to face opportunities for members to participate as well. The IEPVC offers multiple options for engagement and communication with and among member programs, alumni board members, associate members, affiliate non-member stakeholders, and students. Members are invited to attend annual meetings and workshops where they can share and gain knowledge from other stakeholders. Members are encouraged to volunteer as part of the board, at associated conference booths, or to make presentations at conferences. Along with the executive board, there are ad hoc committees, and members are invited to participate in these committees. Therefore, the IEPVC provides various ways for members to participate virtually and face-to-face.

Though the analysis of the content provided me with information about the available virtual participation tools, member perceptions of the tools was not evident. Therefore, several survey and interview questions were created about the virtual participation tools. To determine if participants were aware of these tools, an initial question asked about familiarity with each tool. The survey results showed that all survey participants were familiar with all the participation tools. Webinars and forums were more familiar to survey participants than messaging, networks, groups and connections (Table 12).

Table 12

*Responses to Survey Question Number 5*

Response	%
Webinars	37
Forums	36
Connecting to members through messaging, networks, groups and connections	26
None of the above	0

*Note.* Total of percentages is not 100 because of rounding. Survey question number 5: “Select any of the tools below provided by the [IEPVC] with which you are familiar?”

The survey participants were then asked to indicate the level of usefulness for each tool with which they were familiar. Interestingly, though the survey participants reported not being as familiar with the tools for connecting to members, 33% of the survey participants reported that the tools related to connecting to members were extremely useful, a percentage which was higher than forums in which 25% of survey participants stated they were extremely useful and webinars in which 24% of survey participants stated they were extremely useful (Table 13). Also, all survey participants reported that connecting to members was at least slightly useful, while 3% of survey participants indicated that forums and webinars were not useful at all.

Table 13

*Responses to Survey Question Number 6*

Tool	<i>Extremely useful</i>	<i>Very useful</i>	<i>Moderately useful</i>	<i>Slightly useful</i>	<i>Not at all useful</i>
Connecting to members through messaging, connections, networks, and/or groups	33%	30%	30%	8%	0%
Forums	25%	36%	33%	3%	3%
Webinars	24%	39%	21%	13%	3%

*Note.* Total of percentages is not 100 because of rounding. Survey question number 6: “Please indicate how useful each tool is in your daily activities working in an Intensive English Program.”

However, when looking at the other reported rankings of usefulness, 94% of survey participants reported that forums were moderately to extremely useful, a number which is comparable to the 93% of survey participants who reported that connecting to members was moderately to extremely useful. Though other survey questions asked the members about their use of forums and their general use of the IEPVC, these two survey questions did not ask members how they use any of the participation tools mentioned. It only measured the members’ perceptions of the usefulness of the participation tools.

Though the survey participants were not asked about their usage of these participation tools, interview participants were asked specifically about which tools they used, which tools were useful to them, and how they were useful to them. Six out of the seven interview participants stated that they use the participation tools. One interview participant reported not using any of the tools, while another interview participant reported very frequent use of the tools. Six of the interview participants stated that they use the forums and find them useful. Three of the interview participants stated that they use the webinars and find them useful as well as find



the forums to be useful. The interview participants' responses were comparable to the responses from the survey participants. The interview participants also mentioned the face-to-face conferences as valuable participation tools. The responses from both the survey and the interviews demonstrated that most of the members feel that all the participation tools are useful, with forums indicated as a valuable tool. This is reflected in the comments from some of the interview participants.

Participant A: "I'd probably say the forums are the most important tools that I've found."

Participant B: "I would say they're all helpful. The forum is private. You know I'm sitting at my desk and I'm privately getting information. The webinar is what expands the horizons then the face-to-face conferences that they have or workshops that they have are the opportunity to also gain some knowledge."

Participant D: "It is valuable hearing what other institutions are doing and the challenges they are facing...questions that other programs are having that we share and seeing what others are saying in response to that is most helpful."

Participant G: "I just, I honestly, I don't go that often anymore [to the forums] now that you asked. I go a lot less frequently than I was in the past."

Participant G reported using the forums more frequently in the past. Recently, the IEPVC changed the format from listservs to forums. This transition was described by some interviewees as cumbersome and made the forums less accessible. The member can set up notifications and receive an email notification that tells the member when someone has posted to the forum discussions. However, not all members, as in the case of Participant G, have set up the notifications. Participant G also indicated having trouble logging into the website which was also preventing the member from using the participation tools.

## Member Participation

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) discussed three main participation levels within a VCoP: a *core member* **frequently** creates posts and responds to posts; an *active member* **occasionally** posts or responds to posts; and a *peripheral member* **does not post or respond** to posts but **does read** posts. To ascertain member perceptions of their participation within the IEPVC, the survey respondents were asked to self-identify their participation within the forums based on Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder’s (2002) definitions of participation levels. Survey participants were asked how often they read information in the forums or on the webpages of the IEPVC. The frequency choices ranged from never to very frequently (Table 14). Since all survey participants reported that they read the forums or the webpages of the IEPVC at least very rarely, this demonstrates that all survey participants are at least peripheral members.

Table 14

*Member Reported Perception of Frequency of Reading Within the Website and Forums of the IEPVC*

Participation	Peripheral member					
	<i>Very frequently</i>	<i>Frequently</i>	<i>Occasionally</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Very Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Reading	33%	24%	28%	5%	10%	0%

The survey participants were also asked about their participation level within the forum. The survey participants were asked how frequently they posted questions or responses within the forum. As represented in Table 15, only 2% of the survey participants posted to the forums very frequently. Though a few occasionally posted (26%), the largest percentage (31%) of the survey participants reported never posting to a forum. Though all survey participants reported reading the forums or webpages, not all reported posting within the forum. This indicates that 31% of the

survey participants identified as peripheral members, 26% identified as active members, and 2% identified as core members.

Table 15

*Member Reported Perception of Frequency of Posting or Responding to Posts within the Forums of the IEPVC*

Participation	Core	Active to core	Active	Peripheral to active	Peripheral
	<i>Very frequently</i>	<i>Frequently</i>	<i>Occasionally</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Very Rarely</i> <i>Never</i>
Posting to forum	2%	10%	26%	17%	14% 31%

The interview participants were also asked about their participation level using the same terminology: peripheral, active, and core. Of the seven interview participants, two self-identified as peripheral members (29%), three as peripheral to active members (43%), one as active to core member (14%), and one as a core member (14%). These results correspond to the responses within the survey. More members self-identity as peripheral or peripheral to active than any other participation level. This indicates that though members are going to the IEPVC to gain information, read questions and responses to questions, watch webinars, and read joint statements provided in the IEPVC, less are actively engaging in the IEPVC. The barriers to participation vary depending on the member. Hew and Hara (2007a) and Bostancioğlu (2016) discussed some of the barriers that members may have such as lack of time, feelings of inadequacy, lack of interest in topic of discussion, or knowledge hoarding. For my research, I was also interested in the reasons why members hesitate to participate more actively.

The interview participants that self-identified as peripheral members were asked what prevented them from posting or responding to posts. The varied responses included reasons why

they would not post or respond to posts and what information they would not post. Here are some reasons interview participants were reluctant to share information in the forum:

- insecure about knowledge of topic
- have nothing to add to the conversation
- shyness or personality trait that does not lean toward sharing in a public format
- worried about tarnishing their program name
- not enough time
- feeling that the members are not reciprocating enough
- lack of anonymity
- concerned about sharing financial information about the program
- concerned about sharing information about faculty or staff issues

It is important to recognize these reasons. Leaders within the IEPVC may consider ways to assist members in overcoming these barriers. Each forum does have a moderator. The moderator could post ideas or concepts to help members feel more comfortable in sharing ideas. Though some concerns may not be able to be addressed, for example, lack of time and lack of anonymity, these reasons for low participation can inform the IEPVC as well as moderators in the forums.

This information is also beneficial to other members as they share information. Members can encourage other members to post. Member generated surveys allow for a quick and anonymous response to questions. One interviewee, Participant A, presented a survey about student application fees. Participant A stated that it was easy to create a survey and members could respond anonymously, and that the responses were overwhelming, “And when I asked, I got so many responses.” The member was able to use these responses when making decisions about application fees in his or her program.

Another interviewee, Participant F, shared the number of forum discussions that the interviewee participated in and how many responses were given to each initial post. Of the 10 discussion threads the member initiated, the lowest number of responses were three with the highest number of responses at 22. This demonstrates that though there are more members identifying as peripheral members than active members, interaction between members does exist and information is being shared within the forums.

### **Member to Member Interaction**

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) contend that VCoP members often create relationships that develop over time. A virtual community of practice is “a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 34). To better understand how the IEPVC members interact with one another, I asked survey and interview questions that addressed member to member interaction, whether virtual or face-to-face. To begin, I wanted to know how members were interacting with one another. In a survey question, I asked members in what format they interacted with other members. Participants reported that they had member to member interactions in face-to-face situations as well as virtual situations (see Table 16).

Table 16

*Responses to Survey Question Number 9*

Interaction	%
IEPVC face-to-face conferences	37
Forums	28
Messaging members	25
None of these	9
Through other partner organizations	5

*Note.* Survey question number 9: “How have you interacted with other members of [IEPVC]? Check all that apply.”

The results indicated that many members have some type of member to member interaction. The IEPVC provides various forms of member to member interactions that will help a member have choices and various opportunities to learn from colleagues and for members to build relationships over time. The interview participants were asked the same survey question. The answers provided a few more specifics into how members interact with one another (Table 17).

Table 17

*Responses to Interview Question Number 11*

Interaction	<i>n</i>
IEPVC face-to-face conferences	2
Messaging members	2
Forums	1
Through IEPVC Facebook page	1
Through other partner organizations	1

*Note.* N = 7. Interview question number 11: “In what ways do you interact with other Virtual Community of Practice members?”

The interview participants provided more detailed information about their member to member interactions. In these three sample responses from interview participants, members had face-to-face connections with other members that either were reinforced in the forums within the IEPVC after meeting face-to-face or began in the virtual community of practice.

Participant A first met another member at an IEPVC conference. Then they reconnected through the forums. They began privately emailing one another, and now are working on a project together. This example demonstrates that members can learn together and build relationships (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

When Participant B's Intensive English Program was working on accreditation, members from the IEPVC through face-to-face and virtual communication assisted the Intensive English Program in this process. The relationship grew as the members worked toward a common goal. This example demonstrates members working on a common goal and showing mutual commitment (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Other interviewees shared experiences with members of other communities as well.

Participant F is part of a local consortium of Intensive English Program directors. One director in the local face-to-face consortium is also a member of the IEPVC. Participant F states that there is overlap in their professional relationship as they share knowledge and information through both organizations as well as virtually in the forums. These comments from interview participants indicate that some members have developed relationships with other IEPVC members overtime. This also demonstrates the concepts of boundaries and brokers (Eckert & Wenger, 2005; Nishino, 2012) and how members can belong to more than one CoP or VCoP and that members from both organizations can collaborate and share information.

In order to better illustrate the varied member interactions, Figure 1 demonstrates that slightly more than half (53%) of the survey participants interact with other members virtually through the IEPVC, while slightly less than half (42%) interact with members in face-to-face settings provided by the IEPVC.

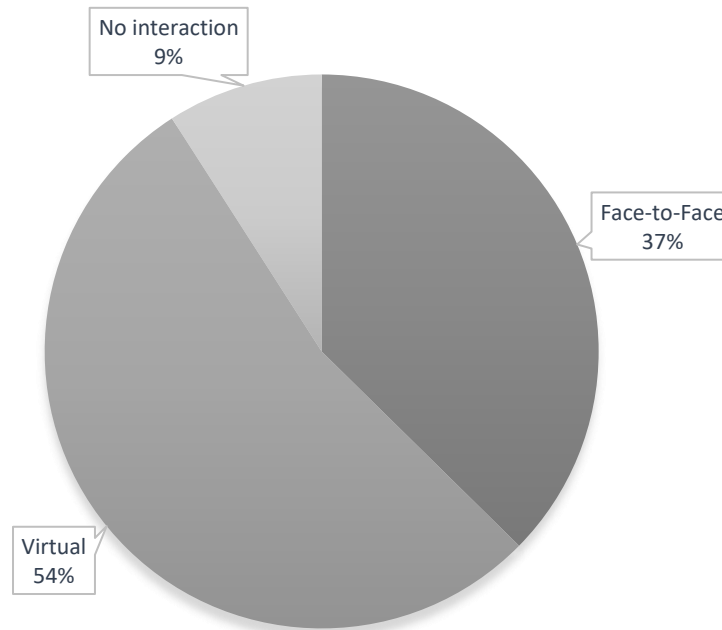


Figure 1. Percentage of face-to-face and virtual member to member interactions within IEPVC.

### **Member Use of IEPVC Information**

The participants were asked about how their interactions with IEPVC members, whether face-to-face or virtual, in the IEPVC assisted them in their work responsibilities as an Intensive English Program director. These were open ended questions, and the responses varied. After analyzing the comments, there were five categories that emerged. These were *knowledge sharing*, *professional development*, *identity*, *networking*, and *accessibility*. Each of these categories are important aspects reported in communities of practice and other virtual communities of practice. Three of the five categories, knowledge sharing, professional



development, and networking is discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter. However, there are two categories that are further explained here: identity and accessibility.

Identity, as described by Wenger (1998), means that learning changes us and creates identities for us relating to our communities. Identity also relates to the identity of the organization, not just the individual. The organization creates a persona based on the mission of the organization, the domain, and the practice. Identity relates to the connectivity between the members. Like a family, the members have “practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, and stories” (Wenger, 1998, p. 6) that bring the family together and give the family a family culture or identity. Some of the artifacts within the IEPVC are the industry statements and the webinars. Some rituals or routines that IEPVC study participants reported are admission processes including placement tests and orientation. Some practices that study participants reported are teaching strategies, including target language emphasis, and hiring practices. The IEPVC also has an identity, and the members within create identities. As the member moves from a peripheral member to a more active member, the member’s identity may evolve. Members can create profiles which allows for members to identify themselves and connect with other members.

Accessibility is another characteristic discussed by participants. Wenger (1998) states that communities of practice need to provide access to its members. The IEPVC does provide access through a website. Some of the website is open to the general public while also having member only resources, such as the forums. Since the IEPVC is online, it is also important to make sure the members know how to sign up and access the information. The IEPVC does provide explanations and webinars related to access, such as how to create a member profile, and how to use the forums.

The five categories that were discussed by the members are represented in Table 18. Each category is specified with direct quotes from the survey and interview participants. Of the 42 survey participants, two participants indicated that their interactions with IEPVC members were only marginally helpful in their day-to-day activities as Intensive English Program directors, while most of the participants stated several ways that the IEPVC aided in their day-to-day activities. The quotes are positive remarks on how the IEPVC works for the member, how the member uses the IEPVC, how the IEPVC provides information on important topics to the Intensive English Program director, and how the IEPVC is accessible to the members.

Table 18

*Utilization of IEPVC*

Category	Sample quotes from study participants
Knowledge Sharing	<p>“I was able to get valuable information from that knowledge community.”</p> <p>“The answers received helped me identify trends in the field and thus take decision on the matters mentioned.”</p> <p>“It helps to either find answers to questions others have asked or get answers to my own questions.”</p> <p>“When something happens, and you know people can begin to discuss it on the forum and you get to hear other people's perspectives or how they're impacted or engaged with that particular topic.”</p>
Professional Development	<p>“I've also found the professional development conference to be extremely useful.”</p> <p>“Professional development and even in professional development just expanding your horizons.”</p>
Identity	<p>“They make me feel like part of a larger community.”</p> <p>“Everyone in this community understands what I do and the questions that I ask. I don't have to give a long explanation prior to seeking information, and, in turn, information and responses are tailored to this field. I don't have to figure out what part ‘might’ be relevant. It all is.”</p>
Networking	<p>“Networking with colleagues and connecting to sponsors or stakeholders.”</p> <p>“We're not isolated on an island. There's connections that you can have in that one spot you can hear about how things are impacting these other agencies, or we may get reports from here is a topic that we're talking about.”</p>
Accessibility	<p>“I also posted one question to a forum, and quickly got about 20 responses.”</p> <p>“I just scroll through these topics and if something is relevant to my day at the moment then I'll click on it read it.”</p> <p>“It's been helpful to be able to search the forums for answers to similar issues I may have, as they come up.”</p> <p>“It's a way to get some quick answers to some hard problems”</p>

## Themes

While examining the content within the IEPVC, I found several themes related to the concepts of community of practice. Some of these themes were presented in the literature review in Chapter 2, while others emerged from the analysis of the content. These themes were categorized by the three main concepts of communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002): domain, community, and practice. The following concepts and themes are as follows:

- *Domain*: advocacy, legitimacy, competition and knowledge sharing
- *Community*: privacy, isolation, networking, camaraderie, competition, and professional development
- *Practice*: changing Intensive English Program practices and resource management

### Domain

The first area is domain. The domain is the issue that brings a community together. It is the common topics of interest of the members and asks members to consider legitimacy and influence (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Two themes emerged from the content analysis that related to the domain of the IEPVC: advocacy and legitimacy.

**Advocacy.** One theme that emerged from the content discussed the IEPVC's advocacy role for Intensive English Programs. The IEPVC provided information to members that assists them in their local advocacy efforts. A webinar described the importance of advocating to local government as well as the United States congress on behalf of Intensive English Programs. The webinar provided advice and instruction on how to communicate with the government. The webinar discussion leader pointed out that it is important to help government leaders understand what Intensive English Programs do and who they serve. The IEPVC explained that, in certain

political climates, it is valuable to create clear language when discussing the concerns of Intensive English Programs. One example is that of immigration. The webinar encouraged members to correctly explain Intensive English Programs' typical student population because "anything that we talk about will be linked to immigration, so we really need to make sure that we separate very clearly what type of immigration we're talking about. We're talking non-immigrant, and we're really talking about something quite different from Border Protection." The aspect of advocacy is represented in the IEPVC, and the information provided to the members not only assists the member in understanding the goals of Intensive English Programs but also how to discuss these goals with other stakeholders. The IEPVC provides resources dedicated to advocacy information, including advocacy toolkits and templates for writing to members of congress or other government leaders. The executive board includes a vice president for advocacy. IEPVC works with other affiliated organizations to assist in advocacy efforts for Intensive English Programs. Participant E shared the value of these combined efforts:

I'm on the board for advocacy on [another affiliated organization], so we do talk a lot to the board members for advocacy on [IEPVC]. You know we do joint statements and different things. I would say yes; we are very active with [IEPVC] in advocating for our field. I am very aware of what they're doing and looking at that information.

This comment demonstrates that members value advocating for Intensive English Programs and see the importance in bringing Intensive English Programs to the forefront of other stakeholders.

There is limited discussion on advocacy in communities of practice research (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009; Wenger, 2010). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) mentioned that a community of practice should not just focus on advocacy or lobbying for the organization. They continue that it is important that the

community of practice represents all aspects of the three concepts. Wenger, White, and Smith (2000) discussed the “domain outside” (p. 418). An example of the “domain outside” is a member of the community leaving the community to make presentations. This is similar to the advocacy efforts of the IEPVC. Though the IEPVC does focus on advocacy, it is not its only focus.

**Legitimacy.** The founding members of the IEPVC were concerned with legitimacy for Intensive English Programs. They outlined goals to create a “visible national presence, one that would be able to establish standards for the field and provide credibility for the profession in national and international contexts.” The first IEPVC newsletter was intended to demonstrate the professionalism of Intensive English Programs and become an artifact for the “beginnings of the Intensive English Program profession.” The IEPVC discussed standards and policies that every member should follow to assist in providing legitimacy and credibility to the individual Intensive English Programs and to the profession. Each IEPVC applicant must complete an internal program evaluation by answering specific questions about IEPVC policy to see if the member’s Intensive English Program meets those standards.

Some interview participants discussed the value of being a trustworthy and credible Intensive English Program. Membership in the IEPVC can assist with this credibility as Participant C stated: “So just the fact that we’re [members of the IEPVC] lends just a sense of stability and integrity to our program.” The IEPVC states that membership to the IEPVC will give the Intensive English Program credibility by having a “professional affiliation with a nonprofit organization with a long history and integrity.” These examples show that it is important for the IEPVC to be a trustworthy source of information and to be a prominent figure for Intensive English Program stakeholders.

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) recognized that a “well-defined domain legitimizes the community” (p. 27). The IEPVC affirms and reaffirms its purpose through communications with its members and other stakeholders. The members look to the IEPVC to legitimize their own Intensive English Programs and the credibility that the IEPVC provides to its members and resources in the IEPVC allow the member to find answers to many questions.

**Competition and knowledge sharing.** One reason why a member may be reluctant to share information within the IEPVC relates to a perceived sense of competition between the member institutions. The IEPVC member population includes private and public institutions. As mentioned before, by nature, there is an inherent competition between each institution as they are all marketing to the same population. However, some members feel that this is not an active issue and that camaraderie and professionalism is the norm. This is represented in the comments from Participant G:

And I find that most people, that the huge majority of individuals in the field in similar positions to mine were all very empathetic to one another. Now the situation is that everyone is experiencing at the time but also very supportive. And it's not an overly competitive area. It's not like people are out kind of cutthroat trying to gain students from other programs. I'm sure that that goes on somewhere, but for the most part people are helpful, cordial, professional, and I really enjoy working with colleagues and be able to interact with them in that way.

However, a few members may not share knowledge because they may not want to divulge intellectual property, or they feel knowledge is not shared reciprocally. This sentiment is represented in the comments of Participant E:

They have so many proprietary programs, and I don't feel they are responding or providing their information. So, I'm concerned that the proprietary institutes are taking advantage of the university-based programs and utilizing information and data and ideas that we provide without being transparent on their end. And because of that I've moved away from the [IEPVC].

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2000) discussed knowledge hoarding or the members desire not to share for various reasons. Members may feel that they have exclusive ownership of the domain and the knowledge within it and do not want to share the trade secrets. They discuss "knowledge police" which is when an organization feels like they have to police all members of the field. Though the IEPVC does want to be the leading organization in the field of Intensive English Programs, there is limited evidence that the IEPVC is hoarding evidence. Though there are some resources that are for members only, an interested potential member can request temporary access.

### **Community**

The second area is community. Community represents the group and how they learn together. It represents the social interactions and trust amongst the members (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Six themes emerged from the content analysis relating to community: privacy, isolation, networking, camaraderie, competition, and professional development.

**Privacy.** Wenger, White, and Smith (2008) state that members want intimacy and privacy when sharing material. Interview participants reiterated this desire for privacy. However, within the IEPVC, member responses are not anonymous. When creating posts or responding to posts within the forums, the Intensive English Program director's name and institution are



indicated. Some members were concerned with sharing the name of their university when posting within the forums. This has led some members to use private messaging instead of the open forums, even though the forums are only available to members and not open to the public. The following comments from two IEPVC members illustrate this desire for further privacy.

Participant A stated:

Because many people don't feel comfortable putting out their institution information for everyone. And since our institutional names are tied to our accounts...I've been hesitant to respond for that very reason. So, some of the time I've been taking it offline, and a lot of times people will say feel free to email me directly. So, I've done that a few times, and that I've had people do that to me many times, particularly around you know if you're asking for monetary amounts.

According to another interviewee who is affiliated with an Intensive English Program at a well-known and highly respected institution, there is an acute sense of brand awareness. Therefore, the member is concerned about how their comments may be received. There may be a negative perception attached to the member or the member's institution if the member has a response that may seem uneducated or unprofessional. Participant B stated:

I mean I don't want to come across like a clown. I mean not that I would be making jokes, but that I would be responding earnestly, but perhaps the answer was already found, you know, and then I look like I'm not on top of my game.

Other IEPVC members might think the member is “just not with it” and “because I carry the university name,” the member may be reluctant to share information. Similarly, another member sometimes does not participate within the forums if there is a chance that the member's comments may “cast my university in a negative light.” These comments demonstrate that one of

the barriers to sharing knowledge is the concern that the member's brand might be compromised. It also demonstrates that members are concerned about how they might look to other members. The member wants to sound professional and intelligent, and sometimes when a member is asking a question, the member might reveal weakness or ignorance. The IEPVC does provide privacy with private messaging, but the forums are open for all members to view. It is important for a VCoP to consider how to help promote participation while also providing some level of privacy to the member.

**Isolation.** Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) examined how VCoPs can reduce the feeling of isolation. Most of the interview participants within this study stated that the IEPVC did assist them in feeling less isolated. The following quotes highlight a participant's feelings on isolation. Speaker A stated that the IEPVC does:

Help with feeling less alone with the issues that we're experiencing. Because I think people who are more likely to weigh in are not the ones who have a booming enrollment, and you know, skyrocketing budgets and unlimited resources. It's the people who are in the situation like me trying to grow a small Intensive English Program or declining enrollment or piecing together their different programs. So, it's definitely helped with feeling you know just a feeling of solidarity... This is what everyone is experiencing. You know this is across the U.S. and not just us. So, it really does help not feeling so isolated and alone.

Speaker D feels that a "lack of isolation is fostered and produced through the frequent discussion boards. It is one of the main websites I'll visit to find information...it speaks to what I need to know." Speaker F states that the IEPVC "definitely helps to diminish the feeling of isolation even if you don't like interact or respond to whatever...just being able to see those topics. I click

on and read it... it gives you a feeling of connectivity to others.” These responses to questions about isolation demonstrate two main ideas: members do feel isolated, and the IEPVC assists with feeling less isolated. The members feel part of a community and expressed a feeling of solidarity and connectivity even when only reading the information provided in the IEPVC.

**Networking.** Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) discussed networking as a process of connecting with others, interacting informally and formally, and getting to know fellow members. One mission of the IEPVC is to “offer multiple options for engagement and communication with and among member programs.” The IEPVC states that it values engagement and collaboration. The IEPVC mission statement continues by stating that members “have all come to value what we learn from each other.” The IEPVC provides different opportunities for the members to learn together. There are conferences and workshops throughout the year that provide opportunities for members to collaborate and network. On the website, the IEPVC states that it “support(s) the needs and concerns of Intensive English Programs” and provides opportunities for professional development and networking.” The IEPVC also has opportunities for collaboration with other organizations. Some benefits of being part of this VCoP are to be able to “collaborate with accrediting bodies to support and promote quality standards for intensive English programs in the USA” and to “increase the visibility of intensive English programs in the USA through collaborative efforts with related organizations.” Within the IEPVC webpages, the IEPVC provides links to eleven organizations that work within the field of international education. The IEPVC has created four joint statements with other associated organizations.

Participant C stated that all the “connections to the other professional organizations that are involved with our field” is beneficial. This member knows other Intensive English Program

directors that are not part of the IEPVC, and they will “call me and ask me questions about our field in general. I find myself using these tools to talk to them about it.” These examples represent that networking does exist in the IEPVC, that the IEPVC nurtures mutual connection, and that the IEPVC works with other stakeholders to further assist Intensive English Programs and their directors.

**Camaraderie.** Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) and Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) recognized that camaraderie is an inherent part of a community of practice. This study sought to more fully explore camaraderie and asked interview participants how the IEPVC resources, including the discussions within the forums, assisted in creating a sense of camaraderie for the members. Participants said that the IEPVC does create a sense of camaraderie. Participant B stated that the feeling in the forums is that there is:

no bad question... if you are wrestling with something, you're wrestling with something, it's real to you...and how people jump in and quickly respond. That to me is fantastic...there has been the feeling that in the forum, that there's no dumb question...your program is going through something and you're going through it and bring it to the table. Let's see if anybody else has anything to offer.

Participant D stated that the camaraderie is virtual. The participant continued:

It is through screen to self -virtual work that I can understand what others are doing, struggle's and challenges that they are facing that also echo my role in our program that knowing that that's what they're posting and sharing, the resources that are there to help us an affinity has brought forth camaraderie.

The message from these members is that the IEPVC brings people together to share struggles, strengths, weaknesses, challenges, ideas for improvement, and a place to feel connected with others. The IEPVC does provide these aspects to the members.

**Competition.** Artifacts within the IEPVC, including webpages, webinars, and presentations, recognize that competition exists between Intensive English Programs and between countries as all are competing for the same group of people: English language learners. One presentation noted that one “top priority or very important issue” for Intensive English Programs is “competition with other programs.” However, when one IEPVC board member discussed giving ratings to each Intensive English Program based on the program’s quality, the rest of the group felt that it was more important to “bring all Intensive English Programs together to talk about quality programs and serving students, not to compete for ratings.” One interviewee, Speaker A, noted their Intensive English Program has “a lot of competitors” in the area, while another, Speaker G, stated that the field is “not an overly competitive area.”

Brevitti and Ford (2017) discussed the concept of competition amongst Intensive English Programs. Inherently, Intensive English Programs, like other colleges, are recruiting from the same pool. However, the pool for most Intensive English Programs is small. Therefore, some members may feel more competition than others. The IEPVC does recognize that competition exists and is a concern of some members. While at the same time, most members discuss a feeling of camaraderie over a feeling of competition as indicated by the reluctance to rate programs. Instead the IEPVC provides recommended standards and requires all members to abide by those standards to help ensure that all programs are high quality.

**Professional development.** Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) discussed how CoPs can foster professional development. The IEPVC provided professional development through webinars and conferences. One of the conferences that IEPVC offered focused specifically on professional development. One study participant valued the professional development conference over other affiliated organization's conferences because it is geared specifically to Intensive English Program directors, faculty, and staff. The participant felt that, though other conferences have part of the focus on Intensive English Programs, IEPVC's focus is entirely on working and teaching within an Intensive English Program. Participant E continued:

[IEPVC] strives to take that component and that's the focus. So, I would think I would like to send instructors to their conference actually over [other organization's conferences]. But I think our instructors will probably get more value from [IEPVC]. That's what everybody there will be doing because it's related to what they're doing...I think it would be a great professional development opportunity for teachers.

Another interview participant agreed and added that IEPVC fulfilled the professional development needs of all employees within an Intensive English Program. While other organizations may help the faculty with the teaching and linguistic applications, IEPVC can also assist with the other responsibilities of running an Intensive English Program such as recruitment, marketing, enrollment, student services, and application processes and the other work of the Intensive English Program staff. Participant F stated:

I had been thinking about our program administrators. We have a student adviser, we have an administrative associate, we have program managers, we do curriculum, and then we have me, as the director. So, for the program managers and myself, we come from a

MATESOL or applied linguistics background and [other organization conferences] works for us because of the content that is there. But when you look at our administrators who were advisors and just you know doing that day in and day out work that they engage with the students...Where's the professional development for them? That just doesn't fit into [other organizations]. So, I've been wondering like where they can do some professional development, and I thought [IEPVC] is one of them.

Communities of practice can provide professional development to its members. The IEPVC also provides its members with professional development. As one member noted, the IEPVC provides professional development specifically for staff, faculty, and directors within an Intensive English Program, and there are few if any large organizations that serve that purpose. The conferences provide professional development to the members, and the IEPVC archives many of the presentations for members to reference.

### **Practice**

The third and final area is practice. The practice represents the tools of the community, the shared documents, the community standards, and the language and stories (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Two themes emerged from the content analysis related to practice: changing Intensive English Program practices and resource management.

**Changing Intensive English Program practices.** IEPVC provided current information in the field of Intensive English Programs. Members can share with each other how they manage their Intensive English Programs and their insight into the common issues related to Intensive English Program administration. The Intensive English Program director may look to the IEPVC for guidance and may change or create practices based on advice from other members. The

following participant made changes in their Intensive English Program based on member responses within the IEPVC. Speaker G states that at their institution, they were not allowed to:

work with any sort of recruiters, headhunters, or anything like that... it's been kind of nice working with or hearing from other IEPVC members who have not necessarily gone through the same thing, but how they have dealt with recruiters and being able to show that to the [director] and other folks who would make those kinds of decisions...I don't know if we would have even gotten that far, had the motivation to get that far, had it not been for, you know, just hearing from colleagues.

The member was able to get information from the IEPVC to help change the program's recruiting practices. As one survey participant mentioned "The answers received helped me identify trends in the field and thus take decision on the matters mentioned." The IEPVC assists members in making decisions about their Intensive English Programs, and members may even change past practices to meet more current trends or best practices. The IEPVC and the member engagement make this possible.

**Resource management.** The IEPVC provides information on best practices through webinars, presentations, and forum discussions. The IEPVC provides a clean and well-organized website that is updated and managed regularly. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) described a successful community of practice as one that stored information accurately and provided easy access to its members. The IEPVC does this. The IEPVC also provides new information at least once a month with monthly newsletters. It also adds webinars and presentations from the most recent conferences.

The website that is the primary vehicle for the information in the VCoP is well maintained. Links work and information is presented in a clear and easy to read manner. There is



a guide on how to use the website and information on who to contact if a member has issues with the navigation of the website. There is a website manager, and the forums also have moderators. These aspects help the IEPVC to be more professional and to store the valuable information in an easy and accessible manner.

The themes presented in this previous section emerged from the content analysis. The themes demonstrate aspects of communities of practice and research on virtual communities of practice. The IEPVC does represent all the main concepts of communities of practice: domain, community, and practice. The answers to the research questions also demonstrate that the IEPVC does represent concepts of communities of practice.

### **Key Findings**

I created each research question with the three main concepts of community of practice in mind; therefore, the research questions are presented and discussed based on each concept: domain, practice, and community.

#### **Domain**

The *domain* is what brings people together. Domain represents issues that are of interest to the community. It is the common ground. Domain guides questions and actions and organizes the knowledge shared. The first research question relates to the concept of domain.

1. Which topics presented in a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration do members of the VCoP perceive as important?

The findings from the analysis showed that the IEPVC does represent a domain that discusses issues of interest to its members. The survey participants rated 10 frequently discussed topics from the IEPVC from “not at all important” to “extremely important.” All survey participants rated the following topics as at least slightly important: SEVP and visa issues, curriculum and

instruction, pathway programs, testing, and faculty hiring and professional development. Survey participants rated SEVP and visa issues as important topics among the 10 presented topics with 57% of the survey participants rating it as *extremely* important. The topic of least importance was students working on campus, with 24% of survey participants stating that it was *not important at all*. Enrollment management, program budget, attendance policy, and student tuition were also rated as at least slightly important by most members.

The interview participants were asked a similar question about topics of interest, and the responses matched the survey results with visa issues, enrollment management, and curriculum and instruction as specific topics of interest. One interview participant described the value of the topics as follows, “I just scroll through these topics and if something is relevant to my day at the moment then I’ll click on it read it.”

These findings showed that the IEPVC organizes knowledge in one place: a website. The website has webpages, forums, newsletters, presentations, webinars, and industry statements that represent the issues of interest to Intensive English Program directors. As one member stated, “I was able to get valuable information from this knowledge community.” Another member stated that the IEPVC is “a way to get some quick answers to some hard problems.” Members see the IEPVC as a resource that contains knowledge in the area of Intensive English Programs and the IEPVC participants said they valued having access to this knowledge.

The findings showed that member input guides the questions and content that is provided in the IEPVC. Members provide presentations that are stored in the virtual community. Members lead webinars and serve as board members. Members answer survey questions presented by the community, and discussions and presentations are created based on information gathered from the survey. The board has members serving on committees focused on advocacy and outreach.

The IEPVC provides the avenue for various types of information related to Intensive English Programs to be shared.

### **Practice**

The *practice* is the shared knowledge that the community is developing. This would include tools, information, stories, language, documents, theories, rules, and principles. The second question aimed at understanding how the participation tools provided in the IEPVC are useful to the members.

2. Which participation tools provided within a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration do members of the VCoP perceive as useful?

These findings showed that the IPEVC provides three main tools to aid members in participation: forums, webinars, and ways to connect to members directly. The findings showed that all survey participants and interview participants were familiar with all the participation tools. All participants reported that connecting to members through messaging, networks, groups and connections was at least slightly useful, with 33% of survey participants stating that is was extremely useful. Survey participants also reported that forums and webinars were useful, with 25% stating that forums were extremely useful and 24% reporting that webinars were extremely useful. Similarly, interview participants stated that forums, webinars, and messaging tools were useful. One participant stated that “It's been helpful to be able to search the forums for answers to similar issues I may have, as they come up.” The IEPVC does provide participation tools for members to use that help them share information with one another.

The findings also demonstrate that the IEPVC provides principles and best practices in the field of Intensive English Programs. The application to become a member of the IEPVC asks members to self-evaluate based on certain criteria. The website also provides a page called

standards for programs and lists all the requirements to be a member as well as best practices. These principles are available to potential and current members as they navigate their daily responsibilities and work on improving their program.

The findings showed that the IEPVC provides certain terminology that is specific to Intensive English Programs. For example, the IEPVC provides links to government websites about the Student Visitor and Exchange Program (SEVP) and visa types and visa policies. This information is not necessarily common knowledge in other academic fields or to a new Intensive English Program director who may have previously focused on curriculum and instruction and not recruitment and admissions. Other shared information in the IEPVC relates to recruitment and recruiting agents. This may also be unfamiliar terminology to new Intensive English Program directors. Presentations within the IEPVC discuss international student scholarship organizations such as the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission and how to use agents for recruitment.

I also wanted to know how the members were using the information found in the IEPVC. Therefore, the next research question asked about use of the IEPVC.

3. How do members of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration perceive their utilization of the information within the VCoP?

The findings indicated that 29% of survey participants used the resources and information within the IEPVC frequently, 54% stated occasionally, and 17% rarely. All survey participants indicated that they used the resources within the IEPVC at least sometimes to assist them in their daily responsibilities as an Intensive English Program director. Only one of the interview participants reported that the IEPVC was not that useful.

These findings showed that though the IEPVC does provide information about important topics and provides tools for participation, members are only using the IEPVC occasionally. The

reasons for this vary. Some participants reported that there are other organizations that assist them in their responsibilities. Other participants indicated that time prevented them from using the information more readily. However, some participants did say they used the IEPVC often, and that the information assisted them in their daily activities.

These findings revealed that the IEPVC has information that would be of interest to Intensive English Program directors but not as many members are actively using the IEPVC. The IEPVC does provide information on how to use the website and it provides participation tools. One webinar about making the most of the IEPVC specifically demonstrates how members can use the website and participation tools. This illustrates that the moderators and board members of the IEPVC want the members to use the resources available to them.

## **Community**

The *community* represents the members and their social interactions. The community interacts regularly about shared concerns. The community learns together, builds on each other's ideas, has a sense of common history, and a group identity. Participation varies as members may have varying degrees of expertise relating to the shared concerns. The final research question relates to members' perceived participation in the IEPVC.

4. How do members of a VCoP associated with Intensive English Program administration perceive their participation within the VCoP?

These findings showed that participation varies among the members. Though all study participants reported that they did at least read the information provided in the IEPVC, fewer participated in the forums or used other participation tools. Only 12% of the respondents reported that they frequently or very frequently participated in the online forum by posting questions or responses. This finding could indicate that even when members do not participate

fully, they still may be gaining information. Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) use the term lurkers to describe members of a virtual community who do not actively participate but instead passively participate. They describe lurking as a “crucial process by which communities offer learning opportunities for those on the peripheral” (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009, p. 30). In this study, the term *peripheral* was used to describe those who read the information but did not post any questions or responses. In this study, more participants reported reading the information than participants who reported posting questions or responses to the forum. However, participants on the periphery indicated that they did gain information from the IEPVC even though they may have participated less frequently than others.

These findings also showed that the members learned together. Participants said they learned together through forum discussions, private online communications, and face-to-face opportunities at conferences offered by the IEPVC. As one study participant remarked, “We’re not isolated on an island. There are connections that you can have in that one spot, you can hear about how things are impacting these other agencies, or we may get reports from here is a topic that we’re talking about.” Members participate in the IEPVC, share, and learn together virtually and face-to-face. The IEPVC has two conferences a year with regional workshops throughout the year. The next workshop in 2019 specifically addresses the needs of *new* Intensive English Program directors as they move from teaching to administration.

These findings showed that members in the IEPVC do build on each other’s ideas. As members present ideas in the forums, other members may add to the discussion or provide anecdotes or cautionary tales. One interview participant wanted to know more information about student fees. While the member understood the idea of student fees, she was unaware of all their

various possibilities. Through conversations with the other members, she was able to make a clear decision on whether to implement student fees.

Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss legitimate peripheral participation. This concept represents how a novice member may become an expert member. One interview participant's Intensive English Program was seeking program accreditation. The member worked with other members in the IEPVC who had already gained program accreditation. This collaboration demonstrated that the IEPVC does provide opportunities for members to move from novice to expert. It also shows the level of camaraderie amongst members.

This chapter also presented a thorough examination of the IEPVC in relation to the concepts of virtual communities of practice. This chapter presented themes related to communities of practice and virtual communities of practice that emerged from the analysis of the IEPVC. This chapter presented members' perception of their interest, participation, and use of the IEPVC. This chapter presented the answers to the research questions of the study. Chapter 5 analyzes the themes that emerged from the content analysis, presents observations and suggestions for the IEPVC as well as members of the IEPVC, discusses my positionality within the research, and presents future research plans.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

While working as an Intensive English Program director, I had multiple responsibilities. At times, these responsibilities were daunting. Though there are many resources that focus on professional development for academics and directors, there are fewer resources available to Intensive English Program directors especially novice Intensive English Program directors or directors that are part of newer Intensive English Programs. As one of these directors, I sought out resources that had easy, quick, and affordable access that also offered a level of anonymity. Anonymity was attractive to me as I was a new Intensive English Program director, and I felt vulnerable and inadequate. I also wanted valuable and current information in the area of Intensive English Program administration. Virtual communities of practice met those requirements and became a resource to me in my daily responsibilities as a novice Intensive English Program director.

One virtual community of practice that focuses primarily on Intensive English Program directors and the responsibilities and challenges that Intensive English Program directors face became the subject for this study: The Intensive English Program Virtual Community (IEPVC). One goal of this study was to examine how the IEPVC functioned as a virtual community of practice. Specifically, the study compared the content within the IEPVC to the typology of a virtual community of practice (Dubé, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). Another goal of this study was to examine the IEPVC in relation to concepts of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, White & Smith, 2009). In order to accomplish these goals, I examined the content within the IEPVC, and I asked members of the



IEPVC to provide their perception of their interest in the IEPVC, their use of the IEPVC, and their participation in the IEPVC.

This final chapter begins by discussing themes that were presented in the findings of this study based on the data collected from the content within the website of the IEPVC, member responses to survey questions, and member responses to interview questions. This chapter also discusses suggestions for the IEPVC, members of the IEPVC, and stakeholders in the field of Intensive English Programs. The chapter ends with ideas for future research and final thoughts.

### **Discussion of Themes**

As a former Intensive English Program director, most of the information gained from the analysis of the IEPVC was familiar to me. However, there were a few key themes that emerged from the analysis that were surprising and interesting. These included the concepts of brand awareness, competition, knowledge hoarding, boundaries and brokers, and privacy concerns.

#### **Brand Awareness**

The idea of brand awareness became apparent in the interview process of this analysis. Some interview participants made it clear to me that their institution had a reputation to keep, and the interview participants shared the pressure they felt to always protect their institutions' brand. Because they are worried about protecting their brand, the members may feel reluctant to share information in the IEPVC in case the question or responses may not seem professional enough or may be received in a manner that puts the host institution in a negative light. Brand awareness may prevent some members from participating and sharing knowledge. To counter that, the IEPVC may want to provide more anonymity in the forum. However, Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) argue that virtual communities of practice thrive on relationships of trust. Therefore, there is value in members providing their name and institution affiliation.

## **Competition**

Another interesting finding focuses on competition among members. From personal experience, I had some concerns about competition in my interactions with other directors of Intensive English Programs; however, members in this study indicated that they felt more camaraderie than competition. Yet, several webpages, webinars, and presentations in the IEPVC recognize that competition exists between Intensive English Programs within the United States as well as between Intensive English Programs in other countries such as Canada and Australia. In essence, all Intensive English Programs are competing for the same group of people: English language learners. One presentation from the IEPVC noted that one “top priority or very important issue” for Individual Intensive English Programs is “competition with other programs.” One interviewee noted their Intensive English Program has “a lot of competitors” in the area. While another interviewee noted that the field is “not an overly competitive area. It's not like people are out kind of cutthroat trying to gain students from other programs. I'm sure that that goes on somewhere but for the most part, people are helpful, cordial, professional.” Competition would be considered a trait for this type of community and that trait might prevent knowledge sharing by members.

## **Knowledge Hoarding**

Another finding was the concept of knowledge hoarding. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) discuss members who hoard knowledge by either preventing potential members from joining or not sharing knowledge with other members. I was surprised by one participant's concern about sharing information with some of the other members who are part of proprietary institutions. These proprietary Intensive English Programs are usually for-profit and privately-owned programs. This interview participant felt that the IEPVC has too many proprietary

programs and the participant feels that the proprietary programs are using the information found in the IEPVC without sharing their own ideas. The participant did not provide specific evidence for the claim; however, the participant felt that some members only gather information and do not participate. Therefore, the participant decided not to share information in the IEPVC.

From my findings, it is apparent that not all members share information, but even the peripheral participants indicated that they still learn from the IEPVC. Hew and Hara (2007b) found that members of a VCoP share information for several reasons. One reason for sharing information is for personal gain (sharing in hopes of getting something in return). In this case, this participant may not want to share information because it is unclear how or what the participant will gain from the IEPVC.

### **Boundaries and Brokers**

While researching communities of practice, I read articles about boundaries and brokers (Eckert & Wenger, 2005; Nishino, 2012). I was eager to see if the IEPVC also engaged in boundary crossing. Boundary crossing is when the virtual community of practice works with other organizations or members have membership in more than one organization. Brokering is when members in one virtual community of practice invite members from other organizations to join another virtual community of practice. While doing the content analysis, concepts relating to boundary crossing or coordinating with other organizations were abundant. The IEPVC has several joint statements with two other organizations. The IEPVC encourages members to present and attend other organizations' conferences. The IEPVC actively works at creating collaborative opportunities for members of multiple organizations. I also learned from the interview process that members are active in more than one VCoP. In fact, one interviewee

remarked that his participation was greater in another similar organization related to Intensive English Programs than his participation in the IEPVC.

### **Privacy**

Another interesting theme that emerged from the analysis was that of privacy. VCoPs do provide for privacy if the member is a peripheral member, but once a member engages in the online forum discussions, anonymity disappears as each post has the member's name attached. This may be another reason why some members choose to remain peripheral. As mentioned earlier, there is a level of intimidation to posting one's thoughts online to be seen by all, especially in such a professional setting. Another aspect related to privacy was the finding that most members prefer engaging with other members through private communications. I thought that the preferred way to communicate would be through the forums. Though the forums were popular, survey and interview participants said that connecting with members one-on-one was a more valuable tool to them. As with brand awareness, members may feel concerned about putting their name on a message board for anyone to see. However, all participants seemed to want to use the forums to gain information. This contrast between wanting to read the information but being shy about sharing the information is one struggle that virtual communities of practice face.

### **Observations and Recommendations**

My main purpose of this study was to understand how the IEPVC assisted Intensive English Program directors as they navigated their day-to-day responsibilities. As a former Intensive English Program director, I remembered my own use of the IEPVC to assist me in my day-to-day responsibilities. Now, from the researcher perspective, I have a greater understanding of the IEPVC, its purpose, goals, and tools. The findings presented in this research indicate that

the IEPVC is a valuable tool for Intensive English Program directors. There are several aspects that members utilize and find beneficial, including the webinars, forums, industry statements, and current up-to-date information on topics of interest. The IEPVC demonstrates the attributes of virtual communities of practice and provides support and advocacy to members. This study may benefit the individual members, provide pragmatic suggestions for the IEPVC, and provide information to stakeholders in the field of Intensive English Programs.

### **Individual**

An Intensive English Program director may find excellent benefits from the IEPVC. Some benefits may arise based on the members' level of interest and participation in the IEPVC. The following section discusses benefits of membership in the IEPVC and provides suggestions to Intensive English Program directors as they consider using virtual communities of practice.

### **Participation**

The IEPVC provides many avenues for participation in the community of practice, virtually and face-to-face. The conferences provide face-to-face opportunities to build relationships and gain knowledge to help the director in the day to day responsibilities. The IEPVC also provides opportunities for discussions in online forums and private messaging. These virtual participation tools are valuable to members who are unable to attend the conferences or new directors who may not feel comfortable asking questions in a face-to-face setting. The members who choose to share their ideas and questions in the forums assist all the members whether they are peripheral, active, or core members. IEPVC members will gain greater insight into the best practices of the field of Intensive English Programs by participating in the forums. The more participation within the forum, the more insight and knowledge can be gained. Institutions are varied and multiple points of view will assist a director who may feel

isolated. Though members, including myself, stated several reasons for not wanting to post within the forums, such as intimidation, time, and knowledge-hoarding, the community will benefit when more members post points of view and provide varied examples of experiences and challenges that Intensive English Program directors face. Members may consider participating more in virtual communities of practice.

### **Boundaries**

As mentioned in my initial chapters of this study, there are several organizations that assist Intensive English Programs. When I was a director, I was a member of three organizations. Each organization assisted me in my day-to-day activities and provided quick and easy access to valuable information. Like me, several members reported being part of more than one community associated with Intensive English Programs. The IEPVC has created joint industry statements with some of these affiliated organizations. The IEPVC also encourages members to attend other conferences that support Intensive English Programs. Though not all members will be able to be part of more than one community of practice due to time and financial constraints, virtual communities of practice provide more flexibility for directors to participate in more than one community. It would be valuable for members to learn about these other organizations and consider joining them or reading about what they provide. The IEPVC provides information about many organizations that support and advocate for Intensive English Programs. Members may consider being part of more than one virtual community of practice.

### **Document Storage**

As a researcher for this study, I examined documents within the IEPVC. I examined over 300 documents including presentations, word documents, PDF files, industry statements, and webpages. While, working as a director, I did not take the time to read many of the documents

provided. Though not all directors will need the information provided in the documents, some directors, especially new directors, may find the information valuable. The documents focus on all aspects of Intensive English Programs including professional development for teachers, discussions on textbooks, and recruitment and retention. The IEPVC is a treasure trove of information that is conveniently stored in a website database. IEPVC members would benefit from not only using the participation tools such as the forums to gather information and answers to questions but also the information provided within the website. Members may consider reading and reviewing the archived documents provided in the virtual community of practice.

### **Camaraderie**

As a new Intensive English Program director, I felt like a novice in the field. I felt isolated, intimidated, and overwhelmed. I also felt the competitive nature of the field. The IEPVC became a source of knowledge and a storehouse of answers. As I read posts by other members, I began to feel, as other members have reported, more connected to the community and that my concerns were common concerns and common struggles. As mentioned, members have reported that the IEPVC does assist in feeling a sense of camaraderie. As members use the IEPVC, they may feel less isolated, feel more connected to the community, and feel a desire to be a more active participant in the community.

### **Pragmatic**

The IEPVC demonstrates aspects of a strong virtual community of practice. It is evident that the organization is mindful of the concerns and needs of Intensive English Program directors. This next section offers some practical suggestions that leadership in the IEPVC may consider as they continue cultivating the virtual community of practice.

## **Technology**

Some members reported difficulty accessing the website, the forums, or getting emails about forum posts. Some members reported that it was easier to access information and to respond to forum posts when the organization utilized a listserv. The IEPVC does provide information on how to reset passwords and provides contact information if members continue to have difficulty logging into the site. The IEPVC also provides a webinar that explains how to use the forums and other member tools, instructions on how to change preferences including notification settings, and how to subscribe to a forum list in order to be notified by email each time a member posts to the chosen forum list. Even though these tools are provided by the IEPVC, some members indicated having technical difficulties with the transition from the listserv to the website. The IEPVC may consider providing more training or communication to members on how to best utilize the website, how to set up preferences including notification settings, and how to subscribe to forums.

## **Anonymity**

The IEPVC requires members to create member profiles. These profiles need to provide some minimal information about the member, including the member's name, email address, and institution. Therefore, when posting or responding in the forums, members' names and institutions will be identified. Some members stated that they do not post or respond to posts due to this aspect. Some members stated that the lack of anonymity prevented them from posting due to concerns about brand awareness, privacy issues, or lack of confidence in posting. Though there are other reasons why members do not post or respond to posts, lack of anonymity is one of them. There are valuable reasons why the IEPVC does not allow anonymity in the forum discussions. The IEPVC may consider making those reasons more transparent to the members.



The IEPVC may consider ways to address these concerns without compromising the IEPVCs desire to have member communications remain identified.

### **Member Participation**

The results of the study demonstrated that most members are either peripheral or peripheral to active in their participation within the IEPVC, and in particular within the forums. The IEPVC provides opportunities for members to participate within the IEPVC whether virtually or face to face. Members utilize private messaging to connect as well. The results showed that there is a complexity to how the members use the IEPVC and that the members find the IEPVC to be useful even when the member is only reading the information and not engaging in the conversation. The IEPVC encourages members to participate in their conferences and to present or volunteer at these conferences. The IEPVC also has opportunities for members to meet at other affiliated conferences. These aspects are excellent ways for members to connect and grow as a community of practice. To help strengthen the virtual community aspect, the IEPVC may consider ways to encourage more members to move from peripheral to active. IEPVC may consider providing a webinar or conference session that discusses professionalism within the forum as well as a discussion on how the forum discussions are meant to be ways of bonding with and learning from one another, and not a source of competition or a venue for comparison.

### **Societal**

This study included a content analysis of a virtual community of practice. The methods and findings represented in the study may provide insight to other researchers of virtual communities of practice as well as Intensive English Program stakeholders. The following section addresses some of these insights.

## **Typology of a Virtual Community of Practice**

The findings presented a typology of a virtual community of practice. This typology, based on the research of Dubé, Bourhis, and Jacob (2006), is another example of an analysis of a virtual community. Researchers may find this example valuable as they research other virtual communities of practice. This study provided analysis of all the structuring characteristics including the technology environment. This study may also provide insight to facilitators of virtual communities of practice as they work on creating a successful and sustaining virtual community of practice.

## **Topics of Interest**

The findings discussed member perceptions of topics of interest. The two most valued topics of interest were non-academic: visa issues and enrollment management. This information along with other findings on important topics to members in the field of Intensive English Programs may assist stakeholders in the field of Intensive English Programs to provide more information and advocacy on these most valued topics.

## **Advocacy**

The IEPVC connects with other organizations that are involved with English language learners. The IEPVC creates joint statements with several of these organizations. The IEPVC has an advisory council and provides valuable resources related to advocacy including information on contacting political officials. Members of the IEPVC discussed concerns related to the current political climate. Virtual communities affiliated with English language learners may consider implementing or enhancing concepts of outreach and advocacy. Some virtual communities related to English language learners have an international focus. Though this IEPVC focused on Intensive English Programs in the United States, the IEPVC did provide some documentation

about language programs outside the United States. It may be valuable for all English language programs to have a more global perspective in order to enlarge the conversation, gain new insight, and create collaborative efforts.

### **Academic Programs**

Recently, the IEPVC has a new workshop that addresses the needs of *new* Intensive English Program directors as they move from teaching to administration. This is an excellent addition to the IEPVC as it shows an understanding of the concerns and needs of new directors. Academic programs in applied linguistics and other related disciplines may consider offering classes to graduate students that can also prepare them for leadership positions. Often academic leaders do not have business or managerial courses in their graduate studies. Often these leaders learn from experience as was in my case. Graduate programs may consider implementing courses or workshops that assist students in the leadership responsibilities that they may encounter in their academic careers.

### **Future Research**

This study represented an analysis of a virtual community of practice. However, the analysis did not include analyzing the discussion threads within the forums. One future study that I plan to do is to examine the discussion threads within the forums in a virtual community of practice. The content within discussion threads would provide more insight into the information shared and how the information is shared. Members in a community of practice share tacit and implicit knowledge, anecdotal stories, cautionary tales, and personal stories that share knowledge and practices. An analysis of discussion threads will provide a fuller understanding of the concept of community. An analysis of the discussion threads may provide more information about certain linguistics terms associated with a community and how the community negotiates

ideas and shares knowledge. An analysis of the discussion threads would also help build on the knowledge gained from the present study and provide more understanding of virtual communities of practice.

Although in this study, I did ask interview participants about their interactions with other members, it would be valuable to ask members to describe their participation evolution (novice to expert) within the virtual community. As a researcher of virtual communities of practice, it would be interesting to gain more information about legitimate peripheral participation within virtual communities of practice. It would be helpful to ask these members how other members within the virtual community assist them in moving from novice to expert. The results would build upon the research of virtual communities of practice specifically relating to legitimate peripheral participation.

Another valuable future study would consider the concept of identity. In this study, I did ask interview participants how the virtual community helped the participants gain a sense of camaraderie and helped them feel less isolated. However, a study that focused solely on members' identities within a virtual community would be valuable. Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) discuss a community's common identity and how members of a virtual community can "explore, define, and express" (p. 516) a common identity. It would be interesting to examine the members' perception of their own identity before joining the community and how that sense of identity may evolve after being part of a virtual community. It would be interesting to see the different roles that members have as part of a community and how those roles may affect peoples' sense of identity. As part of such a study, I would examine more closely the organization's group identity and how the members of the organization may contribute positively or negatively to that group identity.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to interview the current leadership and facilitators of a virtual community. Though I did examine the information provided by the facilitators of the website, I did not specifically ask participants if they were part of the board. In another study, it would be beneficial to interview more core participants such as board members, future and past, any other facilitators, the original members of the community, executive directors, frequent newsletter contributors, forum moderators, participants who frequently post in the forums, and webinar presenters to inquire on how they became a member and why they participate in the virtual community in a leadership position. This would add to the information in the present study and provide more insight into the concept of community and participation.

### **Final Thoughts**

The main purpose of this study was to better understand members' interest, use, and participation in a VCoP. A secondary purpose was to determine if the chosen VCoP demonstrated concepts of virtual communities of practice. Those goals have been discussed in this chapter. This study provided information to the IEPVC, to Intensive English Program directors, and adds to the conversation on virtual communities of practice.

The study provided information to the IEPVC about its members, including information about topics of interest to its members, member participation levels, member concerns about knowledge sharing, and how members use the VCoP. This information can be used by the IEPVC to cultivate and nourish its virtual community of practice.

The study provided information to other Intensive English Program directors who are interested in joining a VCoP. The study provided information about one VCoP, how it functions, and the artifacts available, such as webinars and industry statements. The study provided information about how potential members can use the forums, and the study provided potential

members a review of the VCoP by current members and the perspective that current members have about virtual communities of practice.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the IEPVC does represent a VCoP, that the IEPVC is a strong resource for members of the Intensive English Program community, and that people in a VCoP can learn from one another. The study added to the conversation on virtual communities of practice and demonstrated that virtual communities of practice can be a space where members can learn, participate, gain knowledge, and use resources to assist them in navigating through the day-to-day responsibilities of being an Intensive English Program director.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Consent Form and Survey Questions

My name is Nell Rose Hill. As a graduate student of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, my dissertation research explores the interest, participation, and utilization of a virtual community of practice that serves Intensive English Programs. The information gained from this study may help us better understand virtual communities of practice and help us better understand how members participate in a virtual community of practice. You are invited to complete this survey and if desired, you are invited to participate in an interview about your experiences with the virtual community of practice (Virtual Community of Practice). The following information is being provided to you to assist you in making an informed decision. You are eligible to participate because you meet the criteria: (1) You are at least 18 years old and (2) you are a member of Virtual Community of Practice.

**Purpose and Benefits of this Study:** The purpose of the study is to explore member interest, participation and use of Virtual Community of Practice as a virtual community of practice. Upon completion of the study, we hope to gain a better understanding of virtual communities of practice and how members, specifically how Intensive English Program administrators, use virtual communities of practice. There are no direct benefits from your participation in this study.

**Your Involvement in this Study:** You will answer questions in this survey. The survey will take about 10 minutes. At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you wish to participate in an interview. If you choose to participate in an interview, you will be sent to a separate survey disassociated from the initial survey responses which will collect your contact information.

**Privacy:** The data collected from the survey will be held anonymously. No participants will be identifiable. The data collected from the interview will be held confidentially. Identifying numbers will be given to each interviewee which will not be presented in the results of the analysis. The data will be analyzed at a group level for both the data collected from the survey and the interview process. The data including electronic survey results and interview transcripts as well as any consent documents will be stored in a secure location (a password protected hard disk). The collected data will be stored for up to three years per federal regulation 45 CFR 46.

**Potential Risks:** No risk beyond the minimal risks of daily living will be involved. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to choose if you want to participate in this survey or not participate. You are free to choose to provide your name and email to participate in the interview or not. You can withdraw at any point during the survey simply by closing the survey and your data will be discarded. The digital data will be stored in a password protected hard disk. When the study is finished, the study results may be presented at conferences and/or published in academic journals. The information will only be used for academic purposes. Your completion of the survey implies your consent. Your data would not be able to be withdrawn after submission as there would be no way of knowing which

data belonged to which individual. Thank you for your consideration and assistance with this study. If you have any questions about this process, please contact me at jrps@iup.edu.

Nell Rose Hill  
Graduate student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Faculty Sponsor: Sharon Deckert; sdeckert@iup.edu

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).

Q1 What is your position title?

administrator (1)

director (2)

coordinator (3)

curriculum advisor (4)

assistant (5)

faculty (6)

staff (7)

other (please specify) (8) \_\_\_\_\_

Q2 Does your position include leadership responsibilities?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q3 How many years of experience do you have working in an Intensive English Program?

0 to 2 years (1)

2 to 5 years (2)

5 to 10 years (3)

More than 10 years (4)

Q4 For each of these 10 topics related to Intensive English Programs that are presented or discussed on the website or forums in [Virtual Community of Practice], please indicate how you rate the importance of each topic.

	Extremely important (1)	Very important (2)	Moderately important (3)	Slightly important (4)	Not at all important (5)
SEVP and visa issues (1)					
Pathway programs (2)					
Curriculum and instruction (3)					
Testing (4)					
Tuition, fees, and refund policies (5)					
Attendance policy (6)					
Program budget (7)					
Faculty hiring and professional development for faculty (8)					
Students working on campus (9)					
Enrollment management (10)					

Q5 Select any of the tools below provided by [Virtual Community of Practice] with which you are familiar?

Forums (1)

Webinars (2)

Connecting to members through messaging, connections, networks, and/or groups (3)

None of the above (4)

Q6 Please indicate how useful each tool is in your daily activities working in an Intensive English Program.

	Extremely useful (1)	Very useful (2)	Moderately useful (3)	Slightly useful (4)	Not at all useful (5)
Forums (x1)					
Webinars (x2)					
Connecting to members through messaging, connections, networks, and/or groups (x3)					
None of the above (x4)					

Q7 In the past 3 months, how frequently did you read the information on the website or in the forums presented in [Virtual Community of Practice]?

Very Frequently (1)

Frequently (2)

Occasionally (3)

Rarely (4)

Very Rarely (5)

Never (6)

Q8 In the past 3 months, how frequently did you post questions or responses in the forums on [Virtual Community of Practice's] member website?

Very Frequently (1)

Frequently (2)

Occasionally (3)

Rarely (4)

Very Rarely (5)

Never (6)

Q8 Please indicate how frequently you use the resources and information provided in [Virtual Community of Practice] to assist you in your daily responsibilities working within an Intensive English Program?

Very Frequently (1)

Frequently (2)

Occasionally (3)

Rarely (4)

Very Rarely (5)

Never (6)

Q9 How have you interacted with other members of [Virtual Community of Practice]? Check all that apply.

Through discussions in forums (1)

By messaging other members (2)

At Virtual Community of Practice conferences and/or events (3)

Other (4) \_\_\_\_\_

None of these (5)

Q10 In what ways have your interactions with other [Virtual Community of Practice] members assisted you in your work in an Intensive English Program?

Q11 Thank you for your responses to this survey. If you would be willing to do an interview with the researcher to further discuss your interest, participation, and utilization of the resources provided by Virtual Community of Practice, please select yes. This will lead you to another survey where you can add your contact information.

Yes (1)

No (2)



## Appendix B

### Interview Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study focused on a virtual community of practice for Intensive English Program leaders. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate because you are a member of Virtual Community of Practice.

The purpose of this study is to examine Virtual Community of Practice members' perception of their interest, participation, and use of the website, forums, documents and all information and community resources available through Virtual Community of Practice. The information gained from the study may help us better understand online communities of practice and how they assist members in their daily work activities. The interview will include questions about your interest in the topics discussed on Virtual Community of Practice, your participation within the community forums in Virtual Community of Practice, and your use of the information provided in Virtual Community of Practice.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or Indiana University of Pennsylvania. No risk beyond the minimal risks of daily living will be involved. There are no direct benefits from your participation in the study. The interview will be recorded and will take approximately 60 minutes. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying my dissertation chair or me at jrps@iup.edu. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence. The information obtained in the study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement below and return to me through email.

Nell Rose Hill

jrps@iup.edu

Graduate student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Composition and TESOL program.

Dissertation chair: Sharon Deckert; sdeckert@iup.edu

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730).

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:**

I have read and understand the information on the form, and I consent to volunteer to be a subject in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Please fill in the information and provide an electronic signature.

Name

Signature

Date

Format for interview: Phone, Skype, or Google Hangouts?

Phone number, Skype or Google Hangouts account number?

Best date and time for the interview (please provide two options).

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Interview questions may include follow up questions as necessary.

1. What is your position title?
2. What are your responsibilities in your Intensive English Program (IEP)?
3. What topics are important to you in your daily activities working in an IEP?
4. How do you use Virtual Community of Practice to assist you in relation to these topics?
5. Virtual Community of Practice has some forums, webinars, and other ways to connect with members. Which tools do you find useful?
6. How are they useful to you?
7. The next few questions are about your participation level within Virtual Community of Practice. Do you consider yourself a core member (create discussion posts and actively respond to the posts), active member (occasionally posts or responds to posts), or peripheral member (do not create discussion posts or respond to discussion posts but do read them and other information within the virtual community of practice), none of the above, or other?

Based on the response to question 7, I will ask one or more of the following questions:

- a. [If core or active member] What questions or topic discussions have you shared in Virtual Community of Practice's forums?
  - b. [If core or active member] What responses have you shared in Virtual Community of Practice's forums?
  - c. [If peripheral member] What prevents you from posting or responding to posts?
  - d. [If active, core, or peripheral member] How do the forum discussions assist you in your work responsibilities?
8. How do the resources in Virtual Community of Practice's website, including documents, newsletters, industry statements, and discussions within the forums assist you in feeling less isolated and more connected to the IEP community?
  9. How do you think the resources, including documents, newsletters, industry statements, and discussions within the forums assist in creating a sense of camaraderie amongst other IEP leaders/faculty/staff?
  10. What information, if any, within Virtual Community of Practice's website, and forums may have changed your practices? Would you please provide some examples?
  11. In what ways do you interact with other Virtual Community of Practice members?
  12. In what ways have these interactions with other Virtual Community of Practice members changed your practices? Would you please provide some examples?
  13. How have these relationships with other Virtual Community of Practice members developed over time?
  14. Do you have any other thoughts about your interest in, participation, and utilization of Virtual Community of Practice's website and participation tools?
  15. Do you have any questions about this study or the survey or interview process?