



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON AN INTERNATIONAL SCALE: COUNCIL OF EUROPE – PESTALOZZI PROGRAMME VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

Communities of practice as organisations of learning have developed different forms as: task-based, practice-based or knowledge based communities (Barab et al., 2004). The paper presents a case study of a successful community of practice developed under the umbrella of Council of Europe Pestalozzi programme for teacher development. The programme itself is transformative, enabling the combination of a number of processes and conditions of learning. One of the most important ways of supporting teacher learning and professional development for education professionals is through ongoing activities within the virtual community of practice (vCoP). This paper presents the opportunities and challenges inherent to such an endeavour.

Introduction

International trends on educational policies are shaped by the processes of globalisation and 'Europeisation' (AOO, 2019). It is in this time of constant dynamic interactions of global ideas about school practices and local school system that both local and global are changed. Nations continue to independently control their school systems while being influenced by this superstructure of global education processes (Spring, 2009). Within this global educational superstructure the following institutions and intergovernmental organisations emerged as relevant stakeholders: World Bank, Organisation for Economic Cooperation – OECD, World Trade Organisation – WTO, United Nations, UNESCO, European Commission and Council of Europe. This educational superstructure is characterised by global flows of ideas, institutions and people enabling development of global networks (Spring, 2009). Communication and information technologies allow easier exchange of information and ideas about education, its policy and practice.

In 1949 by 10 countries, the Council of Europe was founded to develop throughout Europe common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals (CoE, 2014). The primary aim of the

Council of Europe today is to create a common democratic and legal area throughout the whole of the continent, ensuring respect for its fundamental values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These efforts are being done within different areas such as political, social, educational arena. Under the umbrella of Council of Europe the Pestalozzi programme was developed as a training and capacity building programme for education professionals. Its aim is to carry the message of Council of Europe and its values – democracy, respect for human rights and dignity and the rule of law – into the practice of education (formal, non-formal and informal) and to support member states in the move from education policy to education practice in line with these values. The programme targets education practitioners because they are the ones who make a difference in day-to-day practice in the classrooms and all other spaces of learning (Pestalozzi programme, 2014). The Programme works using different approaches to achieve its goals: trains education professionals to become multipliers for Council of Europe values; develops the necessary transversal attitudes, skills and knowledge for sustainable democratic societies; promotes and models an appropriate and effective pedagogy; initiates, follows up and monitors a cascading process on the national level; networks education professionals – as a key profession – across Europe into a community of practice around the principles and values of the Council of Europe (Pestalozzi programme, 2014).

At the same time it maintains a network of trainers (trained by the programme; currently about 150) and an online Community of Practice (about 1,400 members). The paper presents an analysis of the Pestalozzi programme Community of Practice, its organisation and activities that enable professional development of teacher across Europe. The term community of practice has long ago surpassed its original idea of apprenticeship model where soft knowledge is transferred through the situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Today we can recognise three types of communities: task-based communities of learning, practice-based and knowledge-based communities of learning (Barab et al., 2004).

Structure and organisation of the virtual Community of Practice (vCOP)

Pestalozzi programme Community of practice is a virtual learning community; community of practice hosted by the NING platform. A platform is the technical support for what a community of practice does or can do. It includes the main activities, which shall be promoted, the spaces, which need to be created, and in which the activities can take place. These aspects are translated into technological features, which in turn are determined by the technical base adopted for the community. VCoP is a distributed community shared by different stake holders (teachers, headmasters, university staff, NGO staff, National Liaison Officers and other education professionals¹). In traditional educational situations, all learners are required to learn the same thing at the same time.

¹ Education professionals are all those who have an active part to play in the day-to-day practice of education.

*“Communities of practice have the following components that distinguish them from traditional organizations and learning situations: different levels of expertise that are simultaneously present in the community of practice; fluid peripheral to center movement that symbolizes the progression from being a novice to an expert; and completely authentic tasks and communication”
(Johnson, 2001).*

The core content of the vCoP is organised in specialised sub-groups/rooms linked to projects of the Pestalozzi programme. Participants in activities of the Pestalozzi Programme are invited to become members of the vCoP. This concerns participants in the training activities of the Pestalozzi Programme such as the modules for trainer training, the Summer School as well as the workshops and national events (if the organisers so wish). It also concerns the members of the network of national liaison officers (NLO) or participants in other activities such as research and development projects where they meet face-to-face. Last but not least this concerns the participants in local (national or regional) groups dedicated to the dissemination and cascading of the Pestalozzi Programme. These rooms are invitation only and deal with a specific set of ideas and members in order to successfully conclude the trainings/projects that are currently ongoing². After a few years the changes on the platform were made and open rooms were created as to insure further communication, cooperation and learning. Open rooms (public spaces) exist for the benefit of the community at large.

Open rooms are accessible to every member without invitation and where you find discussions and exchanges of interest to the whole community. There are 4 open rooms:

- Reception – for welcoming, guiding and orienting new members through different actions; including announcements and updating members on recent developments;
- Coffee shop – Open group for informal discussions and exchanges beyond the purely professional;
- Professional development – for moderated discussion on topics of professional interest;
- Cascading – for a structured exchange of information and mutual support regarding the dissemination and cascading on the local, regional and national levels.

Invitations are made by the Secretariat except in the case of local groups for which either a moderator or another active member of the vCoP is designated group administrator. Each person responsible for a group of members supports the activities and actions of the members of the group. When signing in for the first time each member is asked to provide some information about them which will be displayed on their page (My Page) and which is also the basis for the function member search. It contains information about the professional background, the involvement in the Pestalozzi Programme, languages spoken and centres of

² For example: action research, teacher manifesto, core transferal attitudes skills and knowledge, think tanks, joint master degree

interest. Each member also disposes of a full mailbox feature and can use the blog feature of the platform to share information and resources.

This NING base will be supplemented by the use of appropriate further technical tools to create an integrated web of appropriate and adapted features: the creation of a ‘hub’ will serve as an interface between the (closed) Community of Practice (on NING) and the wider interested public of education professionals.

How is the Pestalozzi vCoP a community?

One might consider what allows us to call the Community of Practice a community? Members of the vCoP share, through the platform, stories of their practice, of what happens in the classroom when they try out new methods and design new lesson plans transforming the training into informed and competent actions through their practice. In the process of sharing their stories, participants, members of the community, start developing a common body of knowledge and ‘lore’.

“The first characteristic of practice as the source of coherence of a community is the mutual engagement of participants. Practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another. (...) Practice resides in a community of people and the relations of mutual engagement by which they can do whatever they do” (Wenger, 1998).

Members of the vCoP, in the process of learning with their peers, in their workplace, negotiate meanings about what their joint enterprise is. A common ‘language’ has developed also with a shared ‘lexicon’, that is not merely a jargon but rather a ‘repertoire’ (Wenger, 1998), that helps negotiate meaning across languages and understandings. Co-developing of answers to issues of educational practice by discussing, exploring and developing workable solutions together with practitioners and other partners are at the heart of the community.

The vCoP of the Pestalozzi Programme seeks to promote and provide opportunities for collaboration through community building. It develops a community model for supporting learning and promotes learner engagement with members and in educational settings in Europe and elsewhere. It engages members in learner-centred, pro-motive interaction to foster connection and a sense of belonging. Participants voice their feeling of belonging and identity:

“I would describe it as a very strong and rich experience that empowers the linguistic and cultural competencies. It provides opportunities to learn from different people, and is based on the same principles which I personally support and try to live and work by in my daily life”. (Z, Teacher and PHD student, Croatia)

This member expresses what Wenger (1998) calls the ‘negotiation of meaning’ in CoPs: “*Practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life*”. Learning is not something one starts and stops; it is a continuous process of recommenced negotiation. There is no guarantee for this negotiation to be harmonious and we do not intend to imply that the communication in the community is always smooth. The relationships between members show different dynamics. If there are predominantly collaborative, there is much space for ‘grit’. As in all online social media, the form of communication, through mostly short posts imposes a frame upon the interaction of members. All social media platforms have a design that shapes the interaction that can take place in that given space.

Learning together, knowledge construction, co-development of answers

The vCoP of the Pestalozzi Programme seeks to promote and provide opportunities for collaboration through community building, knowledge construction, learning (by doing and telling) and learning together. Depending on the role played by the individual as a member of the wider team, learning within a community can be either a positive and proactive or a passive experience, where the collective wisdom of dominant members of the group shapes other individuals’ understanding of the community and its roles (Kennedy, 2005).

We have seen how the community creates and supports a sense of belonging, federating good will around a shared enterprise. The shared enterprise that builds the Pestalozzi community is a shared vision of what the purpose of education should be. Teachers are motivated to change practices from a traditional stance to learner centred approaches. Because today’s education systems tend to focus on the maintenance of a broad knowledge base and the preparation of young people for the labour market, while lacking investment in the personal development of the individual and the preparation of young people to become active citizens in our societies, the teachers involved in the vCoP believe that educators have an important role to play today to change the vision of education. They strive to answer the challenges posed today to our democracies by phenomena such as discrimination, violence and violation of human rights. Democratic governance of schools, education for democratic citizenship and intercultural competence are at the centre of the issues that are part of the everyday conversations that teachers hold on the platform.

The learning takes place among peer educators through experiences, through self-directed learning and though reflective and critical friendships. Members take advantage of their workplace learning for their professional development and to create their own professional identities. Teachers are thinking about learning and teaching while engaged in specific actions in actual contexts.

“This is very important and a different way of looking at things from traditional learning models, as it takes emphasis away from knowing how to teach and places it firmly on doing teaching.(...)it is also very intuitive; fitting

with the common sense view that knowledge is demonstrated through informed and effective action.” (St.Clair, 2008).

The knowledge thus created is always ‘knowledge in the making’ and is never accepted as an end product.

A large part of the conversations that happen online, revolve around telling stories of teaching and getting feedback from peers. Teachers therefore learn critical skills of giving effective feedback, developing a voice in an environment that is ‘safe enough’ to help be prepared to question our own knowledge and views. This creation of knowledge through interaction and cooperation is placed in the realm of informal learning vs. formal learning in traditional educational institutions. Such an approach allows for a teacher education process that educates for uncertainty, ambiguity and opens a path for new possibilities.

“The shift to capacity-based models works well for educational research, where insight tends to come from many people working in different settings, rather than a few Einsteins” (St.Clair, 2008).

The role of stewards in facilitating knowledge construction

As the participants move into the open spaces and start conversing with peers they have never met, the role of the community stewards becomes crucial:

“(…)as a newcomer’s stories become accepted (s)he becomes a legitimate member of the community. In turn, this contributes to the knowledge of the community” (Habhab-Rave, 2008).

The stewards of the vCoP are selected by the Secretariat following a call for interest and their role is to facilitate and moderate the vCoP. Stewards are members who have integrated the core of the vCoP. Their role is manifold, and they are instrumental to guiding the path for newcomers. In particular the stewards play the following roles: establish human presence, participate in coordination of the vCoP, Lead meaningful and goal oriented dialogue, participate in online actions, help members move forward (Figure 1).

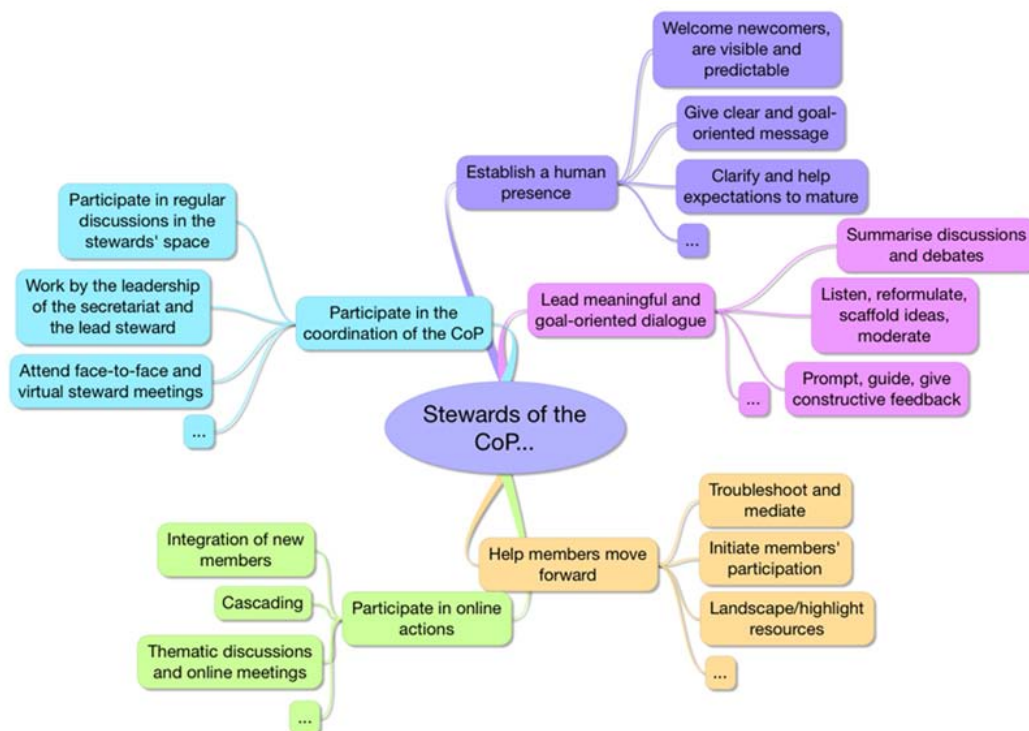


Figure 1. The role of the stewards of the vCoP

Community life-cycle in a designed online space

Every community has a natural lifecycle. Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins and Shoemaker (2000) state the following stages of community development: initial bonding, early membership, and late membership. In the initial bonding, new comers join the vCoP platform when they are either recruited by one of the local dissemination groups (this is a minority) or they arrive through the channel of the Council of Europe application process, when they apply to a face-to-face training event or course. When a new comer arrives, (s)he meets coaches and peers in a closed room. From the beginning and during the early membership, the new member will also have access to the open rooms of the platform, but observation shows that in the majority of cases, it is only in a second step that *certain* members will ‘latch on’ to the concept of the vCoP and perceive a benefit, for themselves, to participate in the open spaces.

When a member joins, (s)he is part of *the periphery*. However, in communities of practice, peripheral roles play an important part in the community of practice “*by developing and using skills that require collaboration and mixing different types of expertise*” (Johnson, 2001). As (s)he engages into the courses and online activities and completes the course (s)he has then a choice to move to *the core* of the community by starting to share resources and stories of ‘doing teaching’ or to remain in the periphery either as a ‘*lurker*’³ or by leaving the community altogether. It’s worth noting that the vast majority of members never delete their account, but

³ A lurker is a member who consults and reads on the platform, even uses the content in their teaching, but does not contribute to the commons by posting content

this is not a show of their fidelity, as we have no ways of measuring the frequency with which members visit the platform.

The members who arrive in the vCoP through a co-located event (where they meet their peer ‘in the flesh’) tend to share a common identity amongst themselves within the wider community. For the first months of their participation they will mostly interact, face-to-face and online, in a context of blended learning, with other practitioners who have applied to a training session and thus share common concerns or interest for a theme. Finally, in the phase of late membership members feel safe and free to join different rooms and start opening their own discussions on topics of interest. Thus getting involved in design and creation of community of practice and taking ownership of the ideas and issues present in the communities, contributing to knowledge production by taking on different roles of moderators, critical friends or participants in different discussions e.g. <http://is.gd/PestProg>.

Looking ahead

The Pestalozzi vCoP seeks to promote community building, collaborative knowledge construction, individual learning and learning together. It was developed to enable continuing development of education professionals across Europe and globally. It is important to recognise the need to develop and share knowledge in a distributed environment and international context. Also, the face-to-face encounters help the evolution of the community to be quicker and stronger (Hildreth et al., 2000). There are a number of benefits of this on-line community of practice. Usually continuing professional development has pressures at national and school levels.

*“These arise from demands for increased quality and the need to implement the National Curriculum as well as the impact of public reporting and inspection in education. On the other hand there are needs of individual teachers who may wish to act as far as possible as autonomous professionals”
(Craft, 2000, p. 5).*

Successful communities are able to sustain themselves over multiple generations of members without becoming brittle. They grow their collective knowledge-in-use „practice“. As communities continue to exist over time, embracing new members, switching roles, creating tools and expanding activities, they are in fact learning from their experience (Riel & Polin, 2004). The vCoP will continue to function as an invitational community and it will be part of the task of the stewards and the secretariat to decide what to make available for the wider public through the different channels. It is important that the vCoP remains a closed, invitational space, in order to continue to dispose of a safe learning space where practitioners are comfortable relating their ‘mistakes’ and ‘failures’. The opening to the public would possibly constitute a threat to this safe space. If the community opened its gates to the wider public the vCoP might lose its quality of protected ‘trust zone’ thus preventing the type of peer

learning that takes places in it. The Pestalozzi vCOP can be seen as one of the more successful communities of practice, but still there are issues and questions that need to further addressed:

- There is a case to consider regarding spaces for professional groups i.e. teachers, teachers of a particular subjects, teacher trainers, school heads, school psychologists, parents, etc. but to date the closed rooms correspond to projects, not interest groups.
- Additional research is needed to understand why certain members adhere and others don't: it would be very interesting to provide insight on what characteristics push some practitioners in the programme towards reflective practice in the vCoP compared to others.

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