12 How can teacher educators benefit from participating in a transient transnational community?

Mareike Oesterle[1]

1. Introduction

In the professional landscape of today's teacher education, the on-going expansion of activities into a global and digital context has provoked a significant change of the traditionally stable and well-established communities in higher education (Czerniawski, 2018; Sachs, 2001). Teacher education today needs to prepare students for changing tasks and roles in increasingly digital and dynamic societies. Teacher educators need to be able to teach future teachers how to prepare their students to actively participate in such societies. The engagement in transnational networks and third-party funded projects, such as the proPIC project, is becoming steadily more important. In recent years, teacher educators have relied more and more on international partnerships. However, as Swennen and White (2021) describe, there is still a gap of systematic research focusing on communities within and outside their own institutions, as well as detailed knowledge of how they work and collaborate. Looking at the complex challenges that teacher educators face, this gap is considerable. Based on an in-depth literature review, four main challenges can be identified.

First, society is changing vastly, primarily due to an overall and intense social, technical, and cultural change. Second, teacher educators face increasing critical working conditions in many contexts across Europe and beyond, with a rising number of administrative obligations and with temporary employments, which is as Van den Besselaar and Sandström (2017) point out, predominantly restraining

1. University of Education Ludwigsburg, Ludwigsburg, Germany; mareike.oesterle@gmx.de; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9458-7927

for women. Third is the traditional image of professionals who train teachers has shifted towards a more diverse and dynamic identity. As Lunenberg, Murray, Smith, and Vanderlinde (2017) describe, being a teacher educator does not merely mean teaching teachers but implies a highly multifaceted professional identity with many areas of responsibility. Fourth, and highlighted by many in recent years (see InFo-TED, 2019), is the general lack of systematic opportunities for teacher educators.

As part of a cumulative doctoral thesis, the consortium of the proPIC project was chosen as a single case study, investigating the development, potentials, as well as challenges of interacting in a transient transnational community of teacher educators. On the basis of Mortensen's (2017) theory on transient multilingual communities, I define transient transnational communities as "social configurations where professionals from diverse sociocultural [and national] backgrounds come together (physically/[virtually]) to engage in a temporary bounded activity which results in prior agreed-upon outcomes" (Oesterle, Schwab, Hoffmann, & Baldwin, 2021, n.p.).

As this essay presents findings from some aspects of my thesis, the guiding research question was the following: *what are the perceived benefits of participating in a transient professional community?*

Having been part of the project consortium myself, I decided to use an auto-ethnographic approach to collect my data, which gave me the opportunity to understand the project community from within. The qualitative data corpus of this first part comprises 11 semi-structured interviews; multimodal partner evaluations, for example, online surveys, and Flipgrids (a kind of video pinboard), as well as relevant project documents. Data was prepared by transcribing the interviews. Afterwards, MAXQDA was used to code and analyse it. Focusing on idiographic, as well as interactional phenomena in my data analysis, I intend to contribute to two themes in particular that, according to White and Swennen (2021, p. 2), have emerged over the past ten years: knowledge of the work of teacher educators; and the professional development of teacher educators. The complexity that teacher educators face in their

professional environments needs to be closely observed and analysed in order to develop new formats of research-informed practices that support them in their work and development. In line with Powell (2021, p. 63), I consider teacher educator collaboration as significant to offer potential learning opportunities. Further, it is crucial to integrate professional learning more thoroughly in the professional environment and workplace interactions of teacher educators. In this essay, interim findings will be presented.

2.   Interim findings

The data analysis shows that one benefit of participating in a transient professional community is the feeling of belonging that partners described and that they reported had a positive impact on their own well-being in contrast to their regular work situations in which they often feel isolated. Six participants also referred to the low hierarchies that they witnessed in contrast to rather steep hierarchies at their home institutions. One partner stated:

> "I think a lot of people get into these projects, because they want to get away from the normal hierarchies, and pressures of work situations, so it is a kind of tolerance and feeling of belonging which I think a lot of academics miss. Actually that's probably why we get involved in such projects, because we're kind of equals, no matter what position we have, we're in the academy, in the project, we're all equals, which I think is positive for everybody involved" (partner interview, 2019, Partner #8).

In line with Mann and Walsh (2017) who emphasise the importance of intellectual conversation and collaborative dialogue, the data show that professional learning is fundamentally a social process, based on and promoted through social relationships:

> "[a]s reflective practices are a very intimate activity, professional relationships are required. Social activities promote to tie up these relationships" (final partner evaluation, partner10, July 2020, Partner #10).

Highly relevant for promoting reflective practice among the teacher educators in this sample seemed to have been the fact that through describing and in a way 'justifying' their own professional practices over and over again during project meetings, the participants became more aware of them. One partner, for example, describes this very well:

> "'[a]t our university', sentences like that gave me the opportunity to reflect on our local circumstances and reflect on my own development in terms of what kind of teacher I want to be" (final partner evaluation, anonymous, July 2020, Partner #n.a.).

In extracts like these, in a way spoken self-reflections, the partners referred to their own teaching, mentoring, supervision, as well as their own learning. In most of the extracts, the partners also gave specific examples. In some cases this also included presenting some kind of evidence to go along with it (e.g. course materials, student outputs), as well as referring to literature and research studies and sharing these with the others. Based on those findings, one important value that was pointed out by the partners is that they learned a lot about themselves through participating in this transient professional community.

The following extract illustrates a potential challenge of working in such a community on the one hand, which on the other hand was one of the most significant potentials as well:

> "I still have the feeling that everybody has a different understanding of what a portfolio is, even though we did the last meeting, we talked about it, but conceptually I think they understand something completely different" (partner interview, 2019, Partner #12).

Here, the partner describes that even after two years, the differences that existed right from the start, in regard to the terminology and concepts, had become even more visible for him. So, on the one hand, the terminology and different concepts were a challenging issue, as language – not only if it is not one's first language – is complex and culturally, as well as in our case, institutionally rooted. In particular,

terms like assessment, evaluation, and feedback were highly dependent on the institutional context and conditions of our participants. Here, in such situations, the constant alternation between 'otherness' and 'sharedness' could be observed.

The next extract (Figure 1) is from the last face-to-face meeting in November 2019 and gives an example of reflective questioning. Partners were asking each other critical or prompting questions to better understand each other's beliefs and conceptions, to possibly make connections and engage in collaborative meaning-making. This example shows a data-led and theory-based discussion. It is data-led, meaning it is based on group work that took place before the discussion, in which the participants had a look at different data collected from the participating students in the project (e.g. extracts from e-portfolios, digital learning outputs). It is further theory-based, as for example as Partner #12 (blue) refers to Bloom, meaning Bloom's taxonomy that was further being documented as part of the project partners' e-portfolio. It thus portrays a suitable example of dialogic reflection.

Figure 1. Extract, Interim Findings[2]

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#partner10: I have a problem with this part [section of the developed assessment framework], I don't see that
this one is better than the other
#partner2: What do you mean?
#partner10: That seems to be better than the other, you get 80 to 100 and 60 to 80 here, but I think one can
get 100 on the evaluating and synthesising, it depends on the type of task that you ask them to do, do you
know what I mean?
#partner2: No
#partner12: I mean this is just based on Bloom's [Taxonomy], Bloom's the same
#partner10: I know
#partner12: So in the original Bloom's, it can be quite inter-changable
#partner10: Yeah
#partner12: If you're evaluating and synthesising you're more taking all of the available concepts, kind of
making sense of them, the creating and sharing is, you're going a step further
#partner10: No no I know, I understand perfectly well and I understand Bloom, what I mean is we have to tell
them to share and create to reach that, otherwise they're not going to reach that
#partner2: But they know that, they know that their products will be shared, that they have to create it and
that they will be shared, or what do you mean?
#partner10: Then you mean if they are sharing, then they get 100?
#partner2: No, but the sharing does not mean, just post something on Instagram, the sharing does imply to also
interact or think about organising, structuring your content in a way that it interacts with the consumer, you
know?
#partner10: Really? Do you agree with that? You don't have any problems with that? I would have lot of
problems
#partner2: No, but think about a webpage that is for example very interactive, you know
#partner10: But I can't grade it, you know because the fact of doing a blog or a webpage is that it's
interactive, you know, you're not adding anything, it's interactive, so how can I grade that?
#partner9: I don't think, if you only post a lot of text on a webpage it's not interactive
#partner10: No, of course not
#partner9: You have to do something more, you have to do it, you interact by using a lot of links and other
multimodal
#partner10: I know TR, but you've done that and then you're grading it? You see, what I am trying to say is
that for me it is difficult to grade it [based on the developed framework]
#partner3: I think it's a very important point about defining or understanding the 'terms' we use
(201911_proPIC_TPM4_recording 2b, Pos. 186-187)
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However, this example also reveals that partners did not always understand each other perfectly – either due to language difficulties or terminological contradictions or both. Nevertheless, it must be noted that these discussions never created a negative atmosphere, but that they demonstrated trust and positive working relationships that had been established. This was often mentioned in informal conversations but most obviously in the final project evaluation, in which all participants highlighted the supporting and open partnership that had been established. Discussions like these did not appear during the first two partner meetings, so it can be assumed that the community needed time to grow and become strong enough for critical conversations.

3.   Conclusions

Coming back to the question asked at the beginning, how can teacher educators benefit from their participation in a transient professional community; based on the data, I have identified four factors.

First, it can be highlighted that especially institutions acknowledge and support the participation in such communities, even though they are not research-oriented. This means allocating time, space, and possibly finances to maximise their potential usefulness.

Second, didactical content or guidelines should be developed to better scaffold reflective practices and activities that focus more on the content rather than on the management of such communities. This includes the exploration of effective tools for evaluation (e.g. a collaborative e-portfolio). In line with Groundwater-Smith (2017, p. xviii), I argue that fruitful communities are not emerging by chance, but need to be initiated and scaffolded.

Third, it seems to be crucial to explore and develop innovative and creative hybrid formats of working together. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular has provided new opportunities to collaborate and interact with each other. Accordingly, and based on the collected data, it can be stated that it is necessary to foster not only

active participation but further encourage and support professionals to actively shape and reinvent their future, most likely a hybrid, professional environment. This includes the creation of virtual spaces in which professional communities can be strengthened. Partners believed it to be relevant to simplify and unify the space of communication and work.

Last but not least, I consider that promoting more research in the field of transient professional communities in education is relevant in order to find out how teacher educators and the like work and how their professional practices can be improved.

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Promoting professionalism, innovation and transnational collaboration: a new approach to foreign language teacher education
Edited by Götz Schwab, Mareike Oesterle, and Alison Whelan

Publication date: 2022/07/25