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185 - Signs of Construction of a Professional Development Community in Language Education: A Case Study

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Abstract: The project “Languages and Education: constructing and sharing professional knowledge” evolved around the development of a community-based environment organised in thematic working groups of teachers, educators and researchers. The research purpose was to study the construction of such community, as well as the professional development trajectories of its members.

The community’s dynamics were mainly based on face-to-face communication through regular meetings. Notwithstanding, the *Moodle* platform, particularly the discussion forums were used to bridge the gap in-between meetings. This study analyses the interactions (discussion forums and chat) and the documents shared in the *Moodle platform* of one thematic working group, in order to identify signs of emergence/construction of the aspired professional development community.

This investigation seeks to contribute to knowledge generation about professional development communities in language education, and puts forward possible routes to follow-up networks or partnerships which may enhance and nurture the culture of collaboration initiated within the project.

Keywords: communities, professional development, language teachers, discussion forums

INTRODUCTION

What are communities of professional development? How can their construction be studied? Questions such as these inhabit the mind of many who have interest in figuring out the most relevant settings for teacher education and educational innovation. As Zeichner (2008) points out, settings for teacher preparation and education are diverse, and involve universities, schools and communities, and teacher education programmes. In this panorama, over the years many scholars have dedicated to understanding what communities are, how they emerge, develop and become or not sustainable over time, as well as their potential to the professional development of its members and the benefits to organisations where they live in (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Westheimer, 2008).

Research in this field has also focused on how technologies and internet tools contribute to the “experience of togetherness that extends through time and space” (Wenger *et al.*, 2005: 2) within communities, since they strengthen familiarity and socialization in-between face-to-face encounters, fostering the experience of togetherness and sense of belonging and identity within the community.

The project “Languages and education: constructing and sharing professional knowledge”¹¹⁰ shared many of these interests, and intended to understand how to cultivate professional development communities made of diverse actors in language education (researchers, teacher educators and teachers). The purpose of this project was materialised in the launching of such community, which gained existence during a whole year (2008/2009). During that period, one of the most frequent questions among the core group of the project was: is it possible to identify signs of community edification? Are we indeed cultivating a professional development community?

The study presented in this article pursues answers to such queries. Taking one of the thematic working groups of the community as an exemplificative case, we analyse the interactions of the *Moodle* platform (discussion forums and chat), as well as the shared documents, in order to identify signs of emergence/construction of the above-mentioned professional development community.

Therefore, after presenting the theoretical framework and the project “Languages and education”, we describe the study carried out, which seeks to contribute to knowledge generation about professional development communities in language education. Bearing in mind the findings, the article makes considerations regarding the process of creation and nurturing of such environments, and puts forward

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possible routes to follow-up networks or partnerships, which may enhance and nurture the culture of learning and collaboration initiated with the project “Languages and Education”.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITIES

The proliferation of the theme of communities in the context of teacher education roots in the paradigm change regarding how knowledge is constructed in education. This change of perspective emerges of socio-constructivist theories of learning (and authors such as John Dewey, Leo Vygotsky or Jerome Bruner), of anthropologist and cultural theories, which stress the cultural and symbolic nature of knowledge and knowing, as well as of situated learning theories, which highlight the relevance of the context and situated experience in learning processes (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Cochran-Smith & Lytle explain about teachers’ learning,

“it is assumed that the knowledge teachers need to teach well is generated when teachers treat their classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation at the same time that they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others [and themselves] as generative material for interrogation and interpretation” (1999: 272).

Teacher professional learning/development is multidimensional, often conceptualised as a personal (individual-cognitive dimension) and collective (social-interactive) process, rooted in the school context, or in the context of action, and therefore deeply intermingled with teachers daily activities (Marcelo, 2009). Some authors stress such learning as related to change in cognition (knowledge, beliefs) and teaching practice, while as others highlight the socio-interactive nature of such process (Illeris, 2009; Pinho, 2008). Teachers’ development is dependent on the individual’s active role, and connected to processes of renewal and improvement of knowledge and action, heightened by teachers’ self-involvement and commitment, and sustained by reflection, experimentation and dialogue with others (Day, 1999: 16, 19). Through such processes assumptions can be examined, beliefs challenged and professional practice strengthened (Allard *et al.*, 2007: 312). In such dynamics of professional development, Marcelo (2009) argues, different types of opportunities and experiences (formal or informal, natural or planned) are implicated and shape teachers’ professional identity.

In this realm of teachers’ professional development, collaboration and collaborative settings, such as communities, are pointed out as valuable strategies and contexts for enhancing teachers’ knowledge construction and improving teaching practices (Allard *et al.*, 2007; Vescio *et al.*, 2007; Westheimer, 2008). Such settings can become spaces for meaningful practices, accessing to resources, opening horizons, building new trajectories and identities, or getting involved in innovative actions, discussions and reflections. Simply put, communities are considered settings where teachers would engage “their own knowledgeability” (Wenger, 2009: 215), “assume responsibility for colleagues growth” (Aubusson *et al.*, 2007), as well as develop a culture of intellectual inquiry (Fullan, 2001; Westheimer, 2008: 761).

Moreover, the above mentioned paradigm shift is also visible in the way researchers face knowledge construction in and about teacher education, realising the importance of working with teachers and of establishing new relationships and approaches between educational research and practice, as ways to overcome gaps and favour mutualism (in the sense of fostering the benefits for both parts in interaction). As Westheimer (2008) points out, the idea of community is closely connected to overcoming professional isolation and alienation, as well as to the cyclical nature of knowledge co-construction and the synergic effect related to the increasing of professional dialogue among participants (teachers, researchers, educators, administrators, students...).

But what are communities of professional development? How can they be defined and characterised?

From the proliferation of terms to a working definition

Many are the specifications associated to the term ‘community’. When looking at the literature on the theme, we find references to communities of practice, professional learning communities, research communities, virtual professional communities, communities of interest, amongst others. This multiplies the problems to conceptualise community. Amin & Roberts (2008) explain what they consider to be the impreciseness of the term:

“The status of the term as a keyword of new thinking on the sources of learning and knowledge generation seems to rest upon a certain loss of the original awareness of context and habitus (Mutch, 2003), careless use of the word community (Lindkvist, 2005; Roberts, 2006), and speculation on the

link between situated practice and learning or innovation outcomes (Handley et al., 2006). Thus, social practices of all kind in all sorts of collaborative setting and all manner of learning and knowledge outcomes are becoming folded together into one undifferentiated form” (2008: 355).

The term can therefore become an umbrella for many forms of acting in teacher education and research. As regards the notion of professional development community, we took into account that it should congregate characteristics of ‘community’ and those of ‘professional development’.

According to Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, communities can be seen as

“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. (...) These people don’t necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interactions” (2002: 4-5).

According to these authors, members of a community

- Help each other diagnose and solve problems;
- Get involved in discussions (about their situations, aspirations, needs...);
- Reflect upon and explore common concerns, issues, ideas;
- Create relevant artifacts to their practice;
- Share information, develop an intellectual capital and steward knowledge (“a body of common knowledge, practices, approaches”);
- Value the community as a way to keep up with the rapid pace of change and create innovation in their work;
- Develop a shared tacit and explicit understanding of their domain;
- Treasure the time spent together, value joint enterprise and collaboration;
- Cultivate processes such as coaching, apprenticeship;
- Create bonds, personal relationships, and particular ways of interaction;
- Foster diverse levels of participation and leadership, and promote negotiation (for instance, in the pursuit of interests);
- Feel a growing personal satisfaction allied to a combination of energies;
- Develop a common sense of identity, belonging, confidence and empowerment (e.g. to take risks), and direction or mission.

Moreover, communities make knowledge “an integral part of their activities and interactions, and they serve as a living repository for that knowledge” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002: 9). They are aware that disagreement, debate and controversy are important processes for such knowledge generation. Also, communities are viewed as a setting for both commonality (homogeneity) and diversity (differentiation among members), since “each member develops a unique individual identity in relation to the community” (*idem*, 2002: 9).

Wenger (1998) considers communities are characterised for having a particular *domain*. In the case of the community referred to in the project described in the next section, this domain of knowledge is language education, i.e. the broader topic the community members focused on and developed their *practice* about. It is their “*raison d’être*” or the common ground for action, as well as the setting for the community’s identity. This *practice* is, as Wenger, McDermott & Snyder explain, “a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents that the community members share”, or put differently, “the specific knowledge the community develops, shares, and maintains” (2002: 29) and that helps the community to deal with the domain.

When referring to a community of *professional development*, this development is also at the very core of the community’s concern. In this sense, the community is not only devoted to knowledge generation about their specific domain, but also committed to the creation of opportunities for its members to develop professionally. Professional development, as Guskey & Huberman explain, is “a ‘development process’ that allows teachers to expand and elaborate their professional knowledge base” (1995: 7). Day (1999) considers it a lifelong learning process that allows the individual to keep up with change, review and renew their own knowledge, abilities and perspectives, very much interconnected with the individual’s professional identity (Pinho, 2008).

Among other aspects, a professional development community creates opportunities for its members to

- Have their educational/professional practice as a source of reflection and theory generation, thus become theory builders (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1994);
- Validate new theories and ideas, putting them in action and assessing their feasibility, and thus develop new repertoires of/for practice;
- Reflect about themselves (their mission, identity, professional project, themselves as professionals, their representations, their prior and current life experiences), and collaboratively discover new ways of be(com)ing;
- Develop an inter-contextual and situated knowledge, namely based on the ability to interpret their worlds (Freeman, 1996), and how they respond to their context of work (Tsui, 2003);
- Get involved in supervision processes (self-supervision, hetero-supervision and co-supervision) (Vieira *et al.*, 2006);
- Foster reflexivity, criticality, enlightenment, interpretative dialogue, supported by collaboration, cooperation or collegiality (Day, 1999; Schön, 1983);
- Get involved in research, inquiry (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) or evidence-based problem solving (Cochran-Smith, 2002);
- Develop their professional autonomy and empowerment (Raya & Lamb, 2008), and to commit both to social and personal transformation by means of their practices.

Development stages of communities

Communities are living things and one must not exclude *time* when considering their development. As Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) mark out, communities have a natural cycle of birth, growth and death, and the transformations that occur during that process are neither smooth nor stable. According to the authors, such development encloses stages that go from starting to sustaining the community. Thus, there are early stages of development, such as planning and launching the community, and more mature stages, which involve growing and sustaining it. Summarising, the authors mention that

“As members build connections, they coalesce into a community. Once formed, the community often grows in both membership and the depth of knowledge members share. When mature, communities go through cycles of high and low activity, just like other living things. During this stage, communities often take active stewardship of the knowledge and practices they share and consciously develop them. As communities evolve through these stages, the activities needed to develop them also change.” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002: 68).

In this evolving process, the community experiences challenges or tensions that can be seen either as problems or conflicts, or as opportunities to create alignment among members and foster the community’s growth.

In developmental perspective of Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002), the stages’ sequence is mainly representative of what happens in community’s edification and nurturing, since variations can be found according to the specificities of each community. These stages are briefly schematised in the following table:

Table 1: Community's Stages of Development (abridged from Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002)

	Stages	Description
Early stages	Stage 1 Potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It begins with a group of people interested in a significant topic for their practice/professional development. This group tends to be the community's core group, which introduces the idea of forming a community to others. • People direct their attention to the prospect of creating a community and create relationships in view of a potential community. • As a sense of shared domain and passion develops, and systematic interaction emerges, members are driven by the value they get from having common interests, similar problems, and common knowledge needs. • This planning stage is characterised by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discovery and imagination ("discovering what you can build on and imagining where this potential can lead"); - creation of preliminary community's design and definition of a work plan, by identifying the community's focus, the topics and projects that captivate the community members; - Identification of potential coordinators and leaders (the community coordinator plays a critical role in helping the community evolve to the next stage).
	Stage 2 Coalescing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The community is officially launched as it hosts community events, activities that foster members' relationships, awareness of common interests and needs, and trust, which is paramount at this stage. • The community combines already a good understanding of what already exists with a vision of future paths. • The main effort is to generate enough energy for coalescing and to reinforce the value associated with knowledge sharing. • Determinant in this incubation period is the "development of deep insight into each others' individual practice (...) and a collective understanding of the practice as a whole" (p. 85). • Coalescing also involves nurturing the community by means of a series of activities which will concur to solid foundations of the community. The leader and coordinator play a relevant role. • This is the stage in which the community shows its viability.
Mature stages	Stage 3 Maturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The main focus is the clarification of the community's focus, role, and boundaries, assuring it is not distracting from its core purpose. • There is a shift from the simple sharing of ideas and insight to the organisation of community's knowledge and its progressive stewardship. • Members develop a stronger sense of the community and the need to be more systematic in defining its core practice. • There is a simultaneous expansion of the community's domain, membership and practice. It involves the identification of gaps in knowledge and the development of a learning agenda, the organisation of a knowledge repository. • It's a very active stage for community coordinators and support staff, since many tensions emerge and the community needs to be reorganised and its energy sustained.
	Stage 4 Stewardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Besides the importance to maintain the community's energy, liveliness and freshness, this stage's main concerns are: to maintain the relevance of the domain to its members, to keep the tone and intellectual focus of the community lively and engaging, to keep it on the cutting edge. • In this stage it is crucial that the community develops the ability to have a balance between a strong sense of ownership of the domain and the openness (a solid foundation of expertise and relationships). • It requires receptivity, i.e. considering new opportunities for learning, and be open to and soliciting new influxes of ideas, approaches and members. Important in this process is not to widen the community's boundaries excessively and risk diluting its focus.
	Stage 5 Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a stage in which the community may: come to an end, by losing its members and slowly fade away; merge with other remaining communities or transform itself, and enable new communities or niches to edify. It may split into distinct communities or become institutionalised. • How these processes flow depends on the coordinator's and core members' judgment call: whether to have a 'soft ending' (avoid conversation about the community's future and let it naturally drift apart) or to keep the community alive (decide how to live on, which parts of it to foster, and the genuinely relevant issues to its members).

PRESENTING THE PROJECT "LANGUAGES AND EDUCATION"

The project "Languages and education: constructing and sharing professional knowledge" was a research project about teacher education developed between 2007 and 2010, and assumed that collaborative research and professional development in language education are powerful means of developing a working culture capable of transforming the work of teachers, teacher educators and researchers, as well as a prerequisite for environments and networks of innovation and creativity in (research in) language education. This project's main objectives were:

1. To characterize language education professionals (primary school teachers, language teachers, and researchers/teacher educators) of the geographical area of intervention of the University of Aveiro, with respect to motivation and representations about teacher education, research, professional development, collaboration and language education.
2. To build knowledge about professional development communities (henceforth, PDC) in language education, in terms of construction dynamics (organization, management, roles, etc.), as well as regarding professional development paths in the context of collaborative work.
3. To envisage future PDC development scenarios.
4. To contribute towards teacher education and research policies in the area of language education.

Main theoretical axes

The project had three main fundamental theoretical axes, as presented below (cf. <http://linguaseeducacao.web.ua.pt/>):

- The qualitative transformation of linguistic education practices is enhanced when those involved carry out research into their own activities and build new understandings based on the research they have done. Recognition is given to the role of research for decision-making in language education, and language education practices as a source of knowledge towards the construction of research know-how and knowledge.
- The professional development of teachers, teacher educators and researchers was seen as a priority, and it was thought that language education practices which are most able to transform participants, contexts and communities in general, depend on the ability of these educational actors to enter into dialogue with social changes, educational institutions, language learning contexts and then learn to integrate these new theories and practices into their own repertoires.
- Communities, which function as spaces where collaborative relationships and sharing take place (Day, 1999), as well as locus of construction of new professional identities (Wenger, 1998), may become change environments around joint projects in language education.

These action principles informed and structured the projects' design in its two dimensions: research and formative.

Projects' design

Research dimension

The development of the project was organised in several tasks, which involved both research and education assignments, as summarised in the following table:

Table 2: Description of the tasks

Tasks	Description
Task 1	01.10.2007/ 31.03/2008 Characterisation of the target public (teachers of pre-school and primary education, language teachers of all teaching levels, teacher educators and researchers of the team).
Task 2	01.10.2007/ 31.03.2008 Organisation of the collaboration/education/research structure (design and accreditation of thematic workshops; development of research/observation instruments).
Tasks 3, 4, 5	01.04.2008/ 31.07.2009 Setting off and development of the professional learning community (of language teachers, educators and researchers distributed through the thematic workshops) and data collection.
Task 6	01.06.2009/ 31.10.2009 Organisation of the data.
Task 7	01.11.2009/ 31.05.2010 Data analysis and discussion of the findings.
Task 8	01.06.2010/ 30.09.2010 Organisation of a national scientific meeting (for dissemination of the research results and definition of future collaborative projects and initiatives).

Formative dimension

In this context, the setting up of the project involved building a PDC consisting of teachers of various levels of education (from the early years of schooling to secondary education), teacher educators and researchers with the purpose of (i) promoting the development of a culture of collaboration between research, teacher education and the practices of language teaching; (ii) contributing to the personal and professional development of its members; and (iii) stimulating reflection on language education practices, with a view to its improvement/innovation.

This collaborative environment was organized around thematic working groups (WG), based around three topics on language education: reading, writing, and plurilingual and intercultural education¹¹¹. These courses took place during the academic year 2008/2009 and accounted for 75 hours of work (face-to-face and autonomous) and were adapted to the blended learning method using the Moodle platform. The face-to-face sessions ran for 7 sessions and were scheduled and distributed throughout the year. They were designed to be a sharing space not only within the WGs but also between the different groups.

In each WG, members were organized in small sub-groups focused on sub-themes, which they jointly considered relevant to their professional development, i.e. to their research and language education practices. These sub-themes resulted in collaborative research projects which would be carried out in schools. The following figure intends to illustrate the interrelationships between the professional development community and the several thematic and self-interest groups:

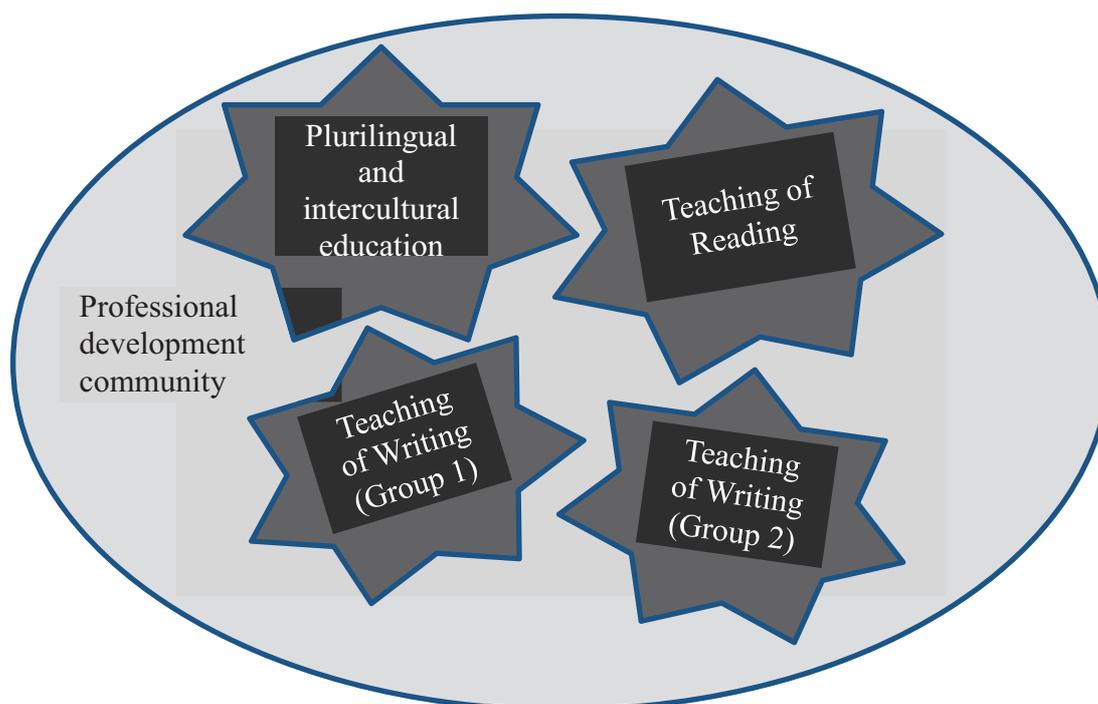


Figure 1: Organization of the professional development community

In summary, the training and collaborative professional development was carried out in relation to the work (i) in PDC (a meeting place where groups gathered, among other activities, to give presentations of the work undertaken, attend conferences and engage in debates on topics of interest to the community members), and (ii) within the WG context (where the professional learning objectives and joint work plan to be developed was defined, a process interspersed with moments of theoretical and practical reflection).

THE STUDY

The context – Working Group “Teaching of Writing” (2)

The study presented here has a specific context featuring one of the working groups involved in the “Languages and Education” project, which was organised around the workshop “Collaborating in practices of teaching of writing: opportunities for professional development”.

The group took the responsibility to engage in collaborative learning in order to develop their professional knowledge in the context of a Didactics of Writing. All members were language teachers (of Portuguese, English and/or French, from the 2nd and 3rd cycles of Basic Education and Secondary Schooling).

The main aims of the group were: to create enhancing conditions for the emergence of consensus about the didactics of writing; to turn those common views into a foundation to the conception of didactic devices and materials to the different school levels, as well as to the diverse involved educational contexts and institutions (see Pereira & Cardoso, 2010).

¹¹¹ For each of these three themes, there were three workshops with a work plan approved by the Portuguese Council for Scientific-Educational Continuing Education (<http://www.ccpfc.uminho.pt/>).

As Pereira & Cardoso (2010) explain, this working group followed the “Languages and Education” project’s principles. It centred their work in the promotion of the capacity to collaborate based on a meaningful and systematic inquiry, in a dialogue with the members’ contexts of action, in order to lead to intervention processes in schools. The group went through the formative stages common to all groups making part of the project, but developed its own dynamics. These involved:

- The sharing, analysis and questioning of experiences of teaching writing, which could consist of the planning, carrying out and evaluation of a recent writing activity, a paradigmatic writing activity, the description of the worse/better writing tasks developed (many of those practices were posted in the Moodle platform);
- Readings about the topic: writing and didactics of writing;
- Identification of guiding didactic principles of the teaching of writing and about the skills underlying the writing competence;
- Development of intervention projects within the teaching of writing and critical evaluation;
- Personal writing tasks.

In the Moodle platform, this group organised their work around the following 18 discussion forums:

Table 3: Description of the Discussion Forums

Nr.	Title	Description
1	<i>General forum</i>	General news and posts
2	<i>Who are we?</i>	Characterisation of the group (personal and professional profiles; questions focused on personal research practices and research interests).
3	<i>Working plans</i>	Presentation of the groups working plans to be carried out collaboratively.
4	<i>Journals</i>	Sharing of didactic practices of teaching of writing that were food for thought: reading and comment of the excerpts.
5	<i>Readings “Food for thought”</i>	Sharing and suggestion of reading material (by the researchers/teacher educators) (aim: knowledge expansion).
6 + 7	<i>1st and 2nd Written reflections</i>	Sharing of free-writing and guided reflections.
8	<i>Critical appreciation of articles / books</i>	Repository of synthesis, reflections, schemes, critical analysis, reading notes.
9	<i>Guiding principles</i>	Discussion of the principles guiding the developed work plans.
10	<i>Research structure</i>	Presentation of the used research device.
11	<i>Example of an intervention plan</i>	Selection of an intervention plan, which was paradigmatic of the work carried out within the workshop.
12	<i>Analysis of initial versions and analysis grids</i>	Sharing and report of the main results obtained from the analysis of the students’ initial texts.
13 + 14	<i>Materials of Portuguese Language / Materials of Foreign Language</i>	Suggestion of exemplificative materials to be presented in the plenary session.
15	<i>Analysis of final versions</i>	Sharing and report of the main results obtained from the analysis of the students’ final written productions (focus on changes)
16	<i>Reactions from students and teachers</i>	Sharing of the reactions of both students (about the didactic interventions) and teachers (about the developed work).
17	<i>Global appreciation of the workshop</i>	Shared reflection of the contributions and constraints of the professional development community and suggestions for future work.
18	<i>Abstracts for the brochure and Posters</i>	Posts of the abstracts and posters to get feedback (comments, suggestions...)

Methodological design

The present study analyses the interactions (discussion forums and chat), as well as the documents shared in the Moodle platform of the formerly described thematic work group, taking it as an exemplificative case (Stake, 2000) of the community developed under the project “Languages and Education”. As a partial study, which needs to be complemented with further studies and the analysis of other data concerning that group’s dynamics, it was guided by the following research question:

Which signs of construction of a professional development community is it possible to identify in the group's Moodle platform (discussion forums and chat)?

Methodologically, the present study resorts to a content-focused analysis (Bardin 2000), and adopts a descriptive and interpretative approach, also taking into account the characteristics of communities pointed out in the literature. In order to proceed with the content analysis, there were created 4 categories: (i) collaboration, (ii) sharing and shared repertoire, (iii) communication and interpersonal relationship, and (iv) learning and knowledge.

In the category “collaboration” there are the marks of recognition of the value of collaboration, mutual commitment and involvement in group tasks, existence of joint action in the development of artefacts or ideas and a collective sense of purpose. “Sharing and shared repertoire” relates to the echoes of sharing and the building of a set of communal resources (Wenger, 1998; Vaughn, 2007). Under the category of “communication and interpersonal relationship” are signs of existence of small talk (Gorodetsky, 2007) with the objective of socialisation and strengthening the group as a unity, as well as the marks of affection and cohesiveness within the group, trust building and sense of belonging and the netiquette (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008). The fourth category, “learning and knowledge”, corresponds to the hints of a cognitive and meta-cognitive dimension (Pozzia *et al.*, 2007), an atmosphere of reflexivity and criticism through collaborative discussion and the meaning making and conceptual transformation (Gorodetsky, 2007).

Findings

We will present our findings according to the four established categories, trying not only to show the signs which appear in the data analysed, but also some “voices” of the participants in the course.

Collaboration

As far as collaboration is concerned, one may identify marks of recognition of the value of collaborating for the innovation of practices and development of writing skills/competences of the students, where the participants share a common general aim, giving them a sense of identity:

“(...)I am really looking forward to cooperate and dialogue with my colleagues”. (F1, M8, Tuesday, 4th November 2008, 13:14)¹¹²; “Hello everyone, Very tired, but still aware of our main purpose... to write about our teaching of writing. For us to reflect later on. Cheers.”(F1, M21 - Wednesday, 6th November 2008, 19:04).

The attitude towards collaboration seems to be consensual within the group, as there are no online marks of discussion about what is collaborating or collaboration, although there is a shared linguistic repertoire on collaboration, for instance: dialogue, cooperation, sharing, exchange of ideas, practice analysis.

“I am totally for cooperation and sharing, for the saying “union makes us strong”. In order to prove this, I state an author [...] The only progress is that of mutual help and complementarity. The only change is the change of perspective (Anthony de Mello, Verdades de um minuto, Paulinas) (F1, M20 - Tuesday, 4th November 2008, 10:25)”.

Despite this lack of explicit thought on what is collaborating, one may easily identify the representation the participants have on the roles within the group. When analysing the forums, though there is no role distribution, there are always the same participants to be responsible for giving feedbacks or for writing the abstracts or creating the posters.

However, there are certain tasks and processes which show that collaboration becomes a practice amongst the group, for instance:

- the schedule of meetings and of work sessions both face-to-face and online (chats);
- the organisation of the collaborative work and information about the evolution of the work that is being undertaken;

¹¹² Legend: F+number (Forum and number); M+number (Member+number); followed by the date and time in which the excerpt was posted in the discussion forum.

- mutual commitment (Wenger, 1998) and common accountability between the group members, according to the idea of sharing (for instance: “*the grid was created together in a small group. Each one adopted a document to her group of students.*” - F3, M11 - Sunday, 29th March 2009, 14:44);
- the processes of negotiation;
- distribution of leadership (for instance in the coordination messages);
- the support to the learning process within a didactics of writing – through feedback, including clues to the development of the work and about the model of didactic sequence. In this particular process of feedback, there is a clear tendency to a vertical supervision (the feedback is always requested to the teacher educators), giving place to a loss of horizontal intra-group supervision within the small groups;
- creation and development of common intervention plans, where the teaching practice is shared and there are individual and collective reflections through the work;
- group discussions;
- collective reflections and research work;
- the enrolment in the research and data analysis procedures.

As far as collaboration sustainability is concerned, one can notice that there is a concern with the continuity of the collaborative work already started. Suggestions concerning the possible paths for collaboration in the near future can be found in forum 17, as well as regarding the possible expansion of interpersonal networks already created within that year. The participants also anticipate future scenarios, giving suggestions based on their experiential knowledge about the construction of the professional development community.

“I think it is a pity to stop the dynamic which has been created. (...) now we may try to correct some aspects which we consider that can be improved (...) it would be important to undertake some meetings to share ideas. The paths taken until the middle are so important as the complete route; and we get a better idea of what is going on” (F17, M15 - Wednesday, 8th July 2009, 19:19).

Sharing

Sharing occurs at diverse levels and this may be a hint of the construction of common repertoire of resources (Vaughn, 2007; Wenger, 1998), and of shared professional practice. There are evidences of sharing of several elements:

- (i) references to bibliography, *sites*, *blogs*, as well as documents, mainly related to writing, the theme of the group, both spontaneously and asked by the participants;
- (ii) “inspiring” literary quotations and “sayings” on writing (in the reflection platforms);
- (iii) strategies and didactic materials (either in draft or in final versions) and practices for developing writing skills:

“I was peeking out the materials of our group and I saw the grid. I liked it very much and I will certainly use it in my classes in Portuguese Language class. (...) It also makes us reflect upon what we write in worksheets (...) Thank you for sharing!” (F3, M13 - Sunday, 10th May 2009, 20:26”);

- (iv) personal contributes, motivations and expectations concerning teacher education and the community, as we may read from the following statements:

“my major aim is, as always, to learn through the exchange of experiences. [...] In this workshop, I would like (...) to analyze my practice, because I feel that I already develop much work with my pupils, since their accomplishments are notable. However, I never sat down to write about it and I think time has come!” (F2, M11, Monday, 15th December 2008, 14:14”);

“In this workshop I hope to learn more, perhaps to do some (...) to share experiences, to correct “mistakes”... I really want to learn about teaching my students writing skills, so that they see writing activities as a pleasure and not as a duty!” (F2, M17, Friday, 12th December 2008, 09:12”);

(v) tensions and anguishes towards the tasks to be undertaken, as well as pedagogic questions or doubts in terms of students:

“The ‘unrest’ now is this: I am a teacher, but how may I be a good teacher? I still do not know how to teach my pupils how to write! To correct essays is a drama.” (F2, M2 - Tuesday, 3rd March 2009, 22:30);

(vi) constraints in terms of time, context or personal life; (vi) problems and successes related to teaching practices:

“I have some difficulty in making my pupils to write... (...) they have plenty difficulties in the learning of writing” (F1, M7 - Thursday, 13th November 2008, 15:07);

I had to share with you what I am feeling... some days ago I suggested my pupils to create an acrostic in English (...) and it worked so well!!! (...) I am delighted!” (F1, M17 - Thursday, 20th November 2008, 12:19);

(vii) personal and professional information (for instance through self-characterisation) and (viii) sub-group plans and materials under constructions and correspondent reformulations.

Moreover, members value this sharing and consider it an enriching way to create bonds and to find common interests, views and foster alignment.

Communication and interpersonal dimension

Regarding communication and interpersonal dimension, there are signs which are characteristic of community edification. We refer to the existence of “small talk” (Gorodetsky, 2007) with the aim of breaking the ice (in an initial phase), socialisation, reinforcement of the sense of group, and also of motivation for the work that is to be done, showing clear group cohesion (typical of coalescing).

In the initial phase, and because the participants did not know each other, forum 1 became the place to get some information about the others and a first step to create bonds and start to develop a common confidence, in a clear complement to the face-to-face interactions.

During the project, there was a positive reinforcement and motivation for the work, mainly from the teacher educators (as a sign of vertical supervision, again). There are hints of incentive to the sharing of doubts and of opinions about how the group work is evolving:

“If there are any doubts, expose them, share them... If any group wants to set a time to come to my office at the University, you may do it (...) We ask you to upload your didactic planning on moodle, for sharing and mutual help. (...) The idea is that groups share ideas, materials, doubts... and we may give some orientations to each group which may also serve for other groups.” (F3, M14 - Friday, 30th January 2009, 17:15).

In order to support and sustain the flux of communication amongst the members, one may notice the existence of some technologic strategies of enrolment (for instance, the “calls for participation”, the “user-friendly language” or the operational information). The role played by some members, either as facilitators, informants, animators or group-speakers, also helped to cultivate communication.

The interpersonal dimension is thus motivated by means of tasks which aim to foster the mutual knowledge and the development of sense of belonging.

Learning and knowledge

The analysis under the third category, learning and knowledge, focused mainly on the collaborative sphere. This is enhanced by means of “dialoguing activities”, which indicate the presence of a joint cognitive and metacognitive dimension (Pozzia *et al.*, 2007).

The collective/collaborative discussion in the forums happens in a reflexive atmosphere, but due to the blended nature of the work, there are hints that such cognitive and metacognitive dimensions have occurred more intensely outside Moodle platform, in the working sessions. As we see for instance in forum 4, there are messages which would open up the path for the development of a greater attitude of questioning and to

the sharing of divergent opinions, or even the negotiation of different visions about the feedbacks given. As this excerpt clarifies,

“Last Saturday it was consensual the recognition that, despite the dynamic nature of our moodle, there are more individual messages than feedbacks, mainly in diaries. We reflected upon the importance of being read and of receiving comments... And so, we are sensitive to the need to promote retroaction. We agreed that each one of us would try to give feedback at least to one diary [...] it helps us to rethink our practices and to find new paths and principles...” (F4, M14, Tuesday, 25th November 2008, 15:46).

The existence of significant personal and professional meaning construction may be witnessed mainly in forums 4 and 5, as we may see in the following quote:

“I have already seen the website you have indicated and I was surprised (...) I really need to go under a ‘recycle’ and to be more aware to what is going on outside the school books, affection and competences, tutorials or lesson planning” (F4, M13 - Sunday, 9th November 2008, 21:25).

However, it is more difficult to trace conceptual mutual/shared transformation online.

Regarding learning and knowledge construction and using the perspective of Pozzia *et al.* (2007), one can identify two spheres: the group’s cognitive sphere and the group’s meta-cognitive one. In the first one, group’s cognitive sphere, there are signs in terms of (i) *revelation* (acknowledgment of problems related to the teaching and learning of writing; presentation of opinions – for instance on collaboration), and (ii) *resolution* (search for common solutions for identified problems of teaching and learning; implementation of proposals in real situations and evaluation/reflection about developed work). In the second one, the group’s meta-cognitive sphere, there are signs in terms of reflection about the learning process, the professional development and the community (for instance in forums 6 and 7) and also hints of divergence and/or controversy (Dorodetsky, 2007; Tillema, 2007)

One of those moments of tension took place in a chat session, in which the group discussed the focus of the work to be carried out, namely the choice of the textual genre that would generate the planning of the intervention projects. As the following excerpt clarifies, this was a moment of divergent views, which implied the negotiation of interests and existence of flexible attitudes within the group. The following extract is a sign of it:

*“- We would like to know if it is possible to work another type of text, besides the argumentative one. [...]
- I think that we are not all in agreement [...]
- not even within the sub-groups! [...]
- well...our suggestion is not binding [...]
- we will mature the idea and then figure it out... [...]
- but are people more inclined to the argumentative? [...]
- I think that... if we do not share the textual typology, the methodology should be compulsory [...]
- well...and I think it will be... at least there was not controversy about methodology [...]
- it is a pity, the resistance... [...]
- but in such huge groups the unity is extremely difficult”* (Chat session).

Episodes like this are considered essential in learning processes and crucial for the alignment within the group and the development of members’ as well as the coordinator’s conflict management capacity.

Until now, we pointed out what we considered to be the signs of community cultivation in the context of the analysed group. But, as mentioned in the introducing sections of this study, attention is needed regarding the specificity of this community. In other words, was it a community of *professional development*?

We believe it is valid to respond positively. In fact, the forums of this particular group indicate the existence of opportunities with potential for its members’ professional development within a Didactics of Writing. The group’s dynamics involved:

- Focus on practice – it was the starting point for the outline of learning goals and the didactic work to be developed; the practice was a generator of reflection, and therefore a reflexive practice as a shared process;
- Valorisation of theory (in dialogue with practice) (for instance, forums 1, 4, 5, 8);

- Focus on the individual, as well as on the collective sphere/path;
- Reflexive and experimental nature of the work, based on the analysis of cases through the sharing and communication of practices concerning the teaching of writing;
- (de/re)Construction of representations and of tacit knowledge (in a learning process which started from the tasks, accomplished didactical practices and constructed interactions) (for instance, forums 3, 4, 16);
- Centrality given to the planning together and the collaborative work, in a logic which fosters collective creativity (for instance, forums 3 and those related to the final plenary);
- Focus on the context and construction of inter-contextual knowledge (sharing of experiences/practices of teaching of writing and processes of transferability) (for instance, forums 3 and 4);
- Mobilization of the emotional sphere (recovery of the “circumstances, actions and experiences of affective nature”, Pinho: 2008) (for instance: forums 2 and 4);
- Focus on the learning process and the students’ results (for instance, forum 16);
- Introduction of research processes (in its technical and critical dimensions);
- Promotion of dialogic communication (which concurs to a social knowledge construction), and concern with the creation of spaces for common decision and “distribution” of roles...

DICUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the discussion forums, as well as the chat session, indicates that such interaction spaces follow the general structure and steps of the education workshop, and of the strategy for the larger professional development community, which the group was part of.

The big number of discussion forums is a hint of the core group’s (coordinator and supporting staff, i.e. teacher educators and researchers) awareness of the importance to create sites where negotiation and debate may occur, as well as the mobilisation of the members around the development of tasks, the group’s work plan and agenda. As such, these spaces were important to enhance coalescence, as well as a sense of direction and identity. They were also relevant to reinforce the stewardship of the group, and the management of tensions and challenges its members were facing as they walked their path, mainly through face-to-face meetings.

What this study makes clear is that, as also pointed out in the revision of the literature, communities are living beings, and as such have their life cycle. *Time* is a major ally in cultivating communities. This group in particular, which was part of a larger professional development community, mainly emerged as a “community” itself within a specific context: the one of a research and teacher education project, which had a specific time of existence.

As an exemplificative case of what happened in the professional development community associated to the project “Languages and Education”, it combined some of the traits of the stages of development described by Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002). Steps were carried out in order to plan, launch, and nurture the community. Within the time span of its existence, strategies were designed to assure engagement and avoid dropping out (although it occurred at the beginning), and thus ensure the community’s stability. Preliminary designs for the group/community were created and restructured over time. Finding common ground for its members as well as a passion that would drive them to walk forward together was cultivated more strongly at initial moments, and nurtured as the work developed. Members found value in collaborating, and this was accompanied by them seeing new possibilities for their work as teachers and teacher educators. Events (such as plenary sessions, colloquiums) and spaces helped to “anchor” the community. The community’s practices were documented, and a repository of knowledge was generated. Finally, leadership was fundamental and seemed to be legitimised by the community members, either implicitly or explicitly.

In some sense, it showed signs of vitality, with its members looking for possible ways to transform the bonds created and give way to other ways of be(com)ing. As part of the broader community, we know that some of its core members keep on working together, either in more informal or formal ways. For instance, some of the group members got involved in another project about the Didactics of Writing (see Pereira & Cardoso, 2010).

A major conclusion is that the professional development community launched within the project “Languages and Education” sowed the seeds of future communities in language education in the dynamics of the higher education institution. We would say that this project was an opportunity to facilitate the networking between teachers, researchers and language educators involved in the project and its professional development

community. People got to know better each member's culture of work, and most importantly developed knowledge about how to work together and collaboratively.

Bearing in mind the study's findings and discussion, we conclude with considerations regarding possible routes to follow-up networks or partnerships which may enhance and nurture the culture of learning and collaboration initiated with the project "Languages and Education". Steps should be taken to capitalise on the bonds and relationships developed so far, namely by developing other projects and involving other contexts and settings.

In other words, besides more informal collaboration between the project's actors, it is important that new teacher education settings emerge, such as inter-institutional networks: inter-schools networks (involving and managed by school teachers themselves, as an opportunity to get to know each others' contexts and departments and to create synergies between them), as well as school-university networks or communities (reinforcing the bonds and relationships between researchers, teacher educators and teachers).

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