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Back to the Future: Legacies, Continuities and Changes in Educational Policy, Practice and Research

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**Signs of construction of a professional development
community in language education: a case.**

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Context for the Study

Project "**Languages and Education: constructing and sharing professional knowledge**" (2007-2010) (PTDC/CED/68813/2006 e FCOMP-01-0124-FEDER-007106):

• Communities seen as powerful settings for the development of a common working culture and the transformation of the work of teachers, teacher educators and researchers;

• Collaboration in professional development and educational research as a requisite for environments and networks of innovation and creativity in language education.

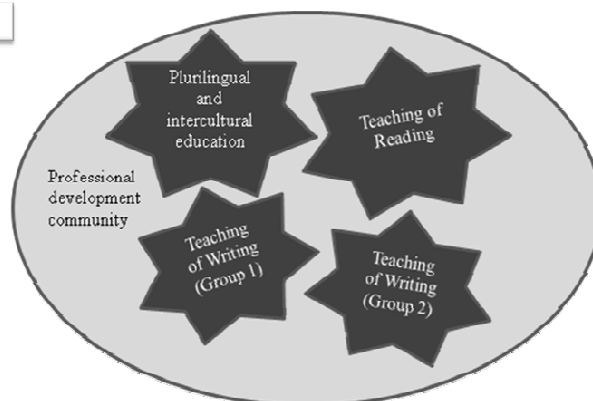*Professional Development Community* (PDC)

Learning environment inhabited by teachers, teacher educators and researchers in the field of language education.

Research aims:

1. To characterise language education professionals of the geographical area of intervention of the University of Aveiro.

2. To build knowledge about professional development communities (PDC) in language education;

3. To envisage future PDC development scenarios.

4. To contribute towards teacher education and research policies in the area of language education.

Educational dimension:

3 accredited workshops

School year 2008/2009
75 hours work
Blended learning
General Work Plan
7 plenary sessions (time for work in large and small groups)
4 Working Groups (WG)

Plurilingual and intercultural education

Teaching of Reading

Professional development community

Teaching of Writing (Group 1)

Teaching of Writing (Group 2)

Over the time, a concern…

Is it possible to identify signs of community edification?

Are we indeed cultivating a professional development community?

Dynamics mainly based on face-to-face interaction (regular meetings) *plus* **recourse to the *Moodle* Platform**:

"**Technologies and virtual interaction play a progressively more important role in this context** [communities]. Internet tools are being used to **reinforce familiarity and socialization** in-between face-to-face encounters, but also to enable the **sharing and circulation of knowledge** between community and each individual. This is believed to make continuous the experience of togetherness (Wenger et al. 2005), and add to the community's "interactive professionalism" (Formosinho & Machado, 2008) and culture of work (Lima, 2002)" (Andrade, Pinho & Melo, 2009).

Research question:

What signs of construction of a professional development community is it possible to identify in the *Moodle* platform (discussion forums and chats)?

The Study

Teaching of Writing

Workshop: "Collaborating in practices of teaching of writing: opportunities for professional development".
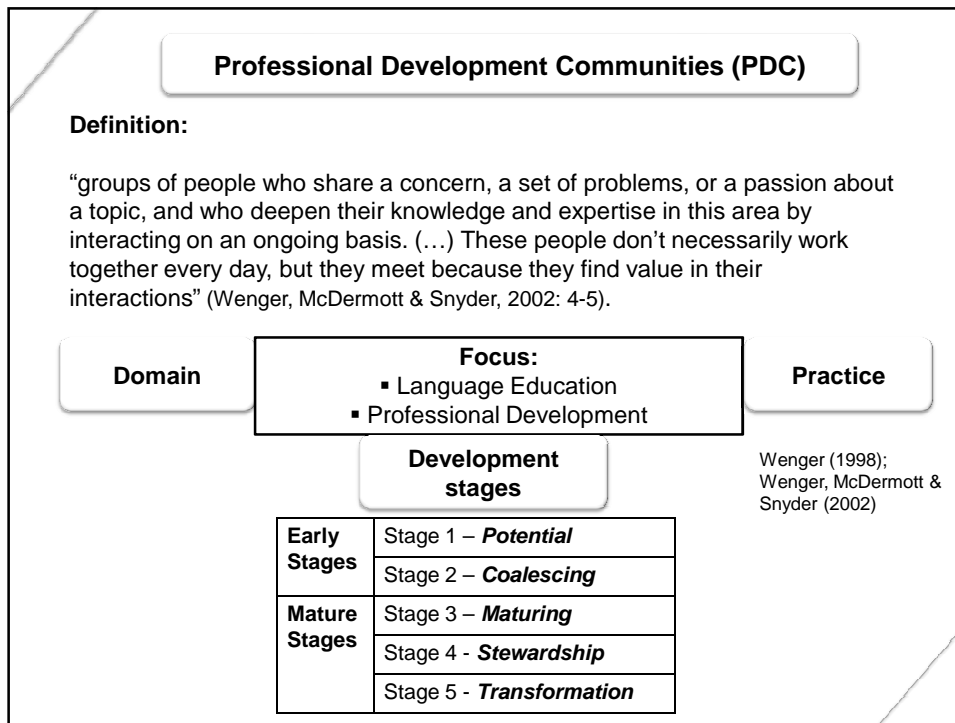**Exemplificative case of the CPD**
(Stake, 2000)

Groups' main aims (Pereira & Cardoso, 2010)**:**
• 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.

Work Group	Number of members	Number of messages
Plurilingual and intercultural education	36	136
Teaching of reading	29	52
Teaching of writing (group 1)	38	88
Teaching of writing (group 2)	39 (3 tutors/teacher educators from the university)	533

Moodle Platform – 18 Discussion Forums

Professional Development Communities (PDC)

Definition:

"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" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002: 4-5).

Domain

Focus:
- Language Education
- Professional Development

Practice

Development stages

Wenger (1998);
Wenger, McDermott &
Snyder (2002)

Early Stages	Stage 1 – *Potential*
	Stage 2 – *Coalescing*
Mature Stages	Stage 3 – *Maturing*
	Stage 4 - *Stewardship*
	Stage 5 - *Transformation*

Categories:

Collaboration	Marks of: recognition of the value of collaboration, mutual commitment and involvement in group tasks, existence of joint action in the development of artefacts, ideas, etc.; collective sense of purpose.
Sharing and shared repertoire	Echoes of: Sharing and the building of a set of communal resources (Wenger, 1998; Vaughn, 2007).
Communication and interpersonal relationship	Signs of: existence of small talk (Gorodetsky, 2007) with the objective of socialisation and strengthening the group as a unity; existence of affection and cohesiveness; trust building and sense of belonging; netiquette (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008).
Learning and knowledge	Hints of: a cognitive and meta-cognitive dimension (Pozzi et al., 2007); an atmosphere of reflexivity and criticism through collaborative discussion; meaning making and conceptual transformation (Gorodetsky, 2007).

Content analysis (Bardin, 2000) | Interpretative analysis

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Findings

Collaboration

❑ **Recognition of the value of collaboration** 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); "*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)

❑ **Tacit understanding about collaboration** and a **shared discursive repertoire** on collaboration (dialogue, cooperation, sharing, exchange of ideas, analysis of practices, mutual help...).

❑ **Representation about the roles** within the group (who gives feedback, organises the work...).

❑ **Collaboration becomes practice** through:

▪ 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;

▪ mutual commitment and common accountability between the group members, according to the idea of sharing;

▪ 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;

▪ creation and development of common intervention plans;

▪ group discussions;

▪ collective reflections and research work;

▪ the enrolment in the research and data analysis procedures.

❑ **Concern with the continuity of collaboration in the future** (suggestions)

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Sharing

❑ **Sharing** occurs at several levels and indicates the building of a *communal repertoire of resources* (Vaughn, 2007; Wenger, 1998). There is evidence of:

- references to bibliography, *sites, blogs*, as well as documents, mainly related to writing, both spontaneously and asked by the participants;

- "inspiring" literary quotations and "sayings" on writing (to reflect upon);

- strategies and didactic materials (either in draft or in final versions) and practices for developing writing skills;

- personal contributes, motivations and expectations concerning teacher education and the community;

- tensions and anguishes towards the tasks to be undertaken, as well as pedagogic questions or doubts in terms of students;

- constraints in terms of time, context or personal life;

- problems and successes related to teaching practices;

- personal and professional information (for instance through self-characterisation);

- sub-group plans and materials under constructions and correspondent reformulations...

Communication and interpersonal dimension

❑ Existence of "**small talk**" (Gorodetsky, 2007) - 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).

❑ **Early stages (Stage 1 – Potential)** - In face of no prior knowledge of each other, the forums became a site for strengthening ties and trust building, and thus complement face-to-face interactions. Development of an "interpersonal glue";

❑ **Over time**
- Growing positive reinforcement and motivation to the work (mainly, by the teacher educators)

- Incentive to the sharing of doubts, and information about how the work was developing

- Participation and involvement in this technological environment ("calls for participation"; "user-friendly language");
- Sustainabillity of communication flow enhanced by the role assumed by some participants (facilitators or informants; animators; spokesperson).

Learning and Knowledge

❑ Presence of a joint **cognitive and metacognitive dimension** (Pozzia *et al.*, 2007) – although, due to the work's blended nature, such dimensions have occurred more intensely outside the Moodle Platform.

❑ Difficult to trace conceptual mutual/shared transformation online.

❑ **Cognitive sphere:** signs in terms of

(i) *revelation* (acknowledgment of problems related to the teaching and learning of writing; presentation of opinions – for instance on collaboration);

(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);

❑ **Metacognitive sphere:** 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.

❑ **Moments of tension, divergence/controversy** (management of disagreements when selecting the textual genre around which the group's projects would evolve) – **Chat session:**

> "- 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 in 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"

❑ Essential in learning processes;
❑ Crucial for the alignment within the group and the development of members' as well as the coordinator's conflict management capacity.

Some conclusions

❑ The WG followed the general structure and agenda designed for all WGs – but emerged as a 'community' on its own.

❑ It combined some of the communities' stages of development:

> - Steps carried out to plan, launch, and nurture the community. Strategies to assure engagement and avoid dropping out, and 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 and spaces helped to "anchor" the community;
>
> -The community's practices were documented, and a repository of knowledge was generated;
>
> - Leadership was fundamental and seemed to be legitimised by the community members, either implicitly or explicitly.

❑ Opportunities with **potential for its members' professional development** within a Didactics of Writing:

> - Focus on **practice**;
>
> - Valorisation of **theory** (in dialogue with practice) (forums 1,4,5,8);
>
> - Focus on the **individual**, as well as on the **collective** sphere/path;
>
> - **Reflective** and **experimental** nature of the work;
>
> - (de/re)Construction of **representations** and of tacit knowledge (forums 3,4,16);
>
> - Centrality given to the **planning together** and the collaborative work, in a logic which fosters collective creativity (forum 3 + forum final plenary);
>
> - Focus on the **context** and construction of **inter-contextual knowledge** (forums 3 and 4);
>
> - Mobilization of the **emotional sphere** (forums 2 and 4);
>
> - Focus on the **learning process** and the **students' results** (forum 16);
>
> - Introduction of **research processes** (in its technical and critical dimensions);
>
> - Promotion of **dialogic communication** (which concurs to a social knowledge construction);
>
> - Concern with the creation of spaces for **common decision and "distribution" of roles**…
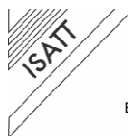
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Thank you!

Obrigada!

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