SIGNS OF CONSTRUCTION OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract.
The project "Languages and Education: constructing and sharing professional knowledge" (PTDC/CED/68813/2006 | FCOMP-01-0124-FEDER-007106) 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 learning community.

This investigation seeks to contribute to knowledge generation about professional learning 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 learning, language teachers, discussion forums

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1. INTRODUCTION

What are communities of professional learning? How can their construction be studied? Questions such as these inhabit the minds of many who have an 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. In this panorama, over the years many scholars have dedicated themselves to understanding what communities are, how they emerge, develop and become sustainable over time, as well as their potential in facilitating the professional learning 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"[1] reflected many of these interests, and was designed to achieve understanding of how to cultivate a professional learning community that comprised diverse actors in language education (researchers, teacher educators and teachers). The purpose of this project was materialised in the launching of such a community, which came into being 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 shared learning through participation in this community? Are we indeed cultivating a professional learning community?

The study presented in this article[2] pursues answers to such queries. Taking one of the thematic working groups as a representative case of the community's dynamics, we analyse the interactions of the *Moodle* platform (discussion forums and chat), as well as the shared documents, in order to identify signs of the emergence and construction of a professional learning community.

Therefore, after presenting the theoretical framework and the project "Languages and education", we describe how the study, seeks to contribute to knowledge generation about professional learning communities in language education. Bearing in mind the findings from the analysis of the *Moodle* platform, the article makes recommendations regarding the process of creation and nurturing of

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[1] *The project was developed in the context of CIDTFF (Research Centre "Didactics and Technology in Education of Trainers"), University of Aveiro, Portugal, and was financed by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (PTDC/CED/68813/2006 | FCOMP-01-0124-FEDER-007106).*
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such environments, and puts forward possible routes to follow-up networks or partnerships, which may enhance and nurture the culture of learning and collaboration initiated by the project "Languages and Education".

2.   PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

2.1 Communities and professional learning: what interconnections?

The emergence of a recognition of the importance of communities in the context of teacher education reflects a change regarding how knowledge is constructed in education. This change of perspective derives from socio-constructivist theories of learning (specifically authors such as John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner), from anthropological and cultural theories that stress the cultural and symbolic nature of knowledge and knowing (see Illeris, 2009), as well as from 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 is multidimensional, often conceptualised as personal (with an individual-cognitive dimension) and collective (social-interactive), 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 (the teachers' knowledge and beliefs) and their teaching practice, while others highlight the socio-interactive nature of such a process (Illeris, 2009; Pinho, 2008). Teachers' learning 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 a dynamic process of professional learning, 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 learning, 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 of 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 conceptualise knowledge construction in and around 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 parties to the 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 synergies produced through increasing professional dialogue among participants (teachers, researchers, educators, administrators, students...).

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

2.2 From the proliferation of terms to a working definition

The word 'community' has many connotations, depending on the context in which it is used. The research literature contains references to communities of practice, professional learning communities, research communities, virtual professional communities, communities of interest, amongst others. This creates problems if the word is to be used in a theoretically rigorous way. Amin & Roberts (2008) explain what they consider to be the term's lack of meaning:

> 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 settings 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 learning community that we have been working with, we took into account that it should combine characteristics of 'community' with those of 'professional learning'. Thus we sought to achieve precision in our understanding of these terms.

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: a) help each other diagnose and solve problems; b) get involved in discussions (about their situations, aspira-

tions, needs…); c) reflect upon and explore common concerns, issues, ideas; d) create relevant artefacts to their practice; e) share information, develop an intellectual capital and manage knowledge ("a body of common knowledge, practices, approaches"); f) value the community as a way to keep up with the rapid pace of change and create innovation in their work; g) develop a shared tacit and explicit understanding of their domain; h) treasure the time spent together, value joint enterprise and collaboration; i) cultivate processes such as coaching, apprenticeship; j) create bonds, personal relationships, and particular ways of interaction; k) foster diverse levels of participation and leadership, and promote negotiation (for instance, in the pursuit of interests); l) feel a growing personal satisfaction allied to a combination of energies; m) 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 by 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 on which the community members focused and about which they developed their *practice*. 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 learning*, this learning process 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 learning, following Guskey & Huberman, is a process by which teachers "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, as well as a process that is very much interconnected with the individual's professional identity (Pinho, 2008).

Among other aspects, a professional learning 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);

- Critically assess and recreate the research-based knowledge available, bearing in mind the contexts of action and the challenges posed by educational 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 commit both to social and personal transformation by means of their practices.

2.3 Development stages of professional learning communities

Communities are living things and one must not exclude *time* when considering their development. As Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) point 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 initiating 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 the developmental perspective of Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002), the stages' sequence is mainly representative of what happens in the community's building and nurturing, since variations can be found according to the specificities of each community. These stages are briefly schematised in the table 1:

Table 1. Community's Stages of Development (abridged from Wenger et. al., 2002)

	Stages	Description
Early stages	*Stage 1 Potential*	- It begins with a group of people interested in a significant topic for their practice/professional learning. 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: - 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	- 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. - A key 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 contribute to building solid foundations for 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*	- The main focus is the clarification of the community's focus, role, and boundaries, ensuring that it is not distracted 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	- Besides the importance of maintaining 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 openness (a solid foundation of expertise and relationships).
		- It requires receptivity, i.e. considering new opportunities for learning, and being 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 Transfor-mation	- This is a stage in which the community may: come to an end, by losing its members and slowly fading away; merging with other remaining communities or transforming itself, and enabling new communities or niches to emerge. 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 is 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).

3.   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. It assumed that collaborative research and professional learning 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 describe the motivations to participate in the project and the representations about teacher education, research, professional learning, collaboration and language education of language education professionals (primary school teachers, language teachers, and researchers/teacher educators) of the region around the University of Aveiro.

2) To build knowledge about professional learning communities (henceforth, PLC) in language education, in terms of the dynamics of their formation (organization, management, roles, etc.), as well as the provision of professional learning paths in the context of collaborative work.

3) To envisage future PLC development scenarios.

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

3.1 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 in decision-making about curriculum management and

pedagogy, and language education practices as a source of knowledge towards the construction of research know-how and knowledge.

- The professional learning 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, are crucially bound up with 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 the 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 methodology and teacher education dynamics, particularly the strategies to be considered in the workshops.

3.2 Project's design

3.2.1 Research Dimension

The development of the project was organised in several tasks, which involved both research and education assignments, as summarised in the table 2.

Table 2. Project's 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).

3.2.2   Teacher Education Dimension

In this context, the setting up of the project involved building a PLC 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 education[3]. 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 learning, i.e. to their research and language education practices. These sub-themes resulted in collaborative research projects which would be carried out in schools. Figure 1 intends to illustrate the interrelationships between the professional learning community and the several thematic and self-interest groups.

In summary, the training and collaborative professional learning was carried out in relation to the work (i) in the PLC (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).

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[3] *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/).*
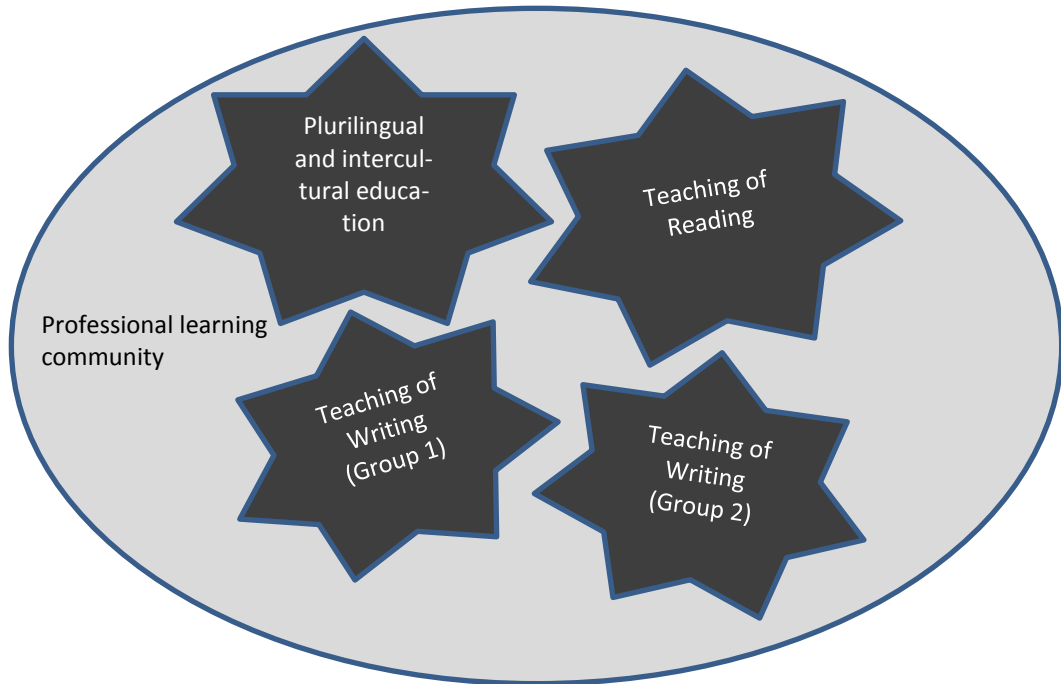
Plurilingual and intercultural education

Teaching of Reading

Professional learning community

Teaching of Writing (Group 1)

Teaching of Writing (Group 2)

Figure 1. Organization of the professional learning community.

4.   THE STUDY

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 the teaching of writing: opportunities for professional learning".

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 conditions for the emergence of consensus about the didactics of writing; to turn those common views into a foundation for 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).

One of the reasons for the selection of the teaching of writing as this group's domain of professional learning was related to the recognition by teacher educators, researchers and the teachers who enrolled in the PLC of a lack of systematic

work both in the research and didactic fields on the topic, as briefly explained in the following section.

4.1.1   *Teaching of writing: an overview*

The research on the teaching and learning of writing has been an expanding field, mainly since the mid 90s of the twentieth century. In Portugal, some official documents (M.E., 1991; ME, 2001) have indeed shown the recognition of writing as a relevant domain worthy of a systematic work in the language class, and not only a means of transmitting and evaluating contents in all subject areas. In 2003/2004 the new programmes of Portuguese Language for the Secondary level also considered the need to work on writing within workshops and/or a laboratory approach, in order to make it possible for students to work with texts with the mediation of his/her peers as well as teachers.

In these documents, there is also the acknowledgment of the complexity of written production and therefore of the need to introduce and develop specific and systematic work on the teaching of writing in the different educational levels:

> "official documents postulate that learning how to write does not only mean writing compositions of a literary nature but, essentially, producing written texts constructed according to text genres, inscribed in referential social practices" (Pereira *et al.*, 2009: 93).

However, this new approach in the teaching and learning of writing was not becoming part of teachers' practices, as seen in projects and international exams on students' literacy (cf. Pisa, M.E. & G.A.E., 2001). These results prompted the implementation of teacher education programs that aimed to develop teachers' professional knowledge and practice on the didactics of writing (Amor, 2004; Barbeiro & Pereira, 2008; Pereira, 2007).

Pereira *et al.* (2009) identify three main axes in the research field of the teaching/learning of writing in Portugal nowadays, and that need to be considered in the context of teacher education and teachers' professional learning. Axis 1 – "*Facilitation of the (textual revision) process of writing"-* , which is concerned with the study of the intervention conditions that may encourage writers' abilities to improve their texts. Thus, students are given the opportunity to analyze their texts thus stimulating their metalinguistic and meta-discursive awareness (Aleixo, 2005; Barbeiro, 2003; Pereira, 2008). In this sphere, cooperative and collaborative dimensions acquire an important relevance. Axis 2 – The *Subject and the Relationship with writing* – corresponding to the development of research projects concerned with the relationship established by individuals (either teachers or students) with the writing process. Studies show that students' representations of writing become more negative as they become older, even becoming an attitude of repulsion in Secondary education (Pereira, 2000). The data also show that there is a clear connection between witting practices and the construction of students' identity, and that these results have to be considered when teachers are planning writing activi-

ties inside and outside the classroom. Axis 3 – *Teaching practices and text genres* – considers the importance of studies on teaching practices of writing and the trans-formation of those practices, enclosing studies related to the observation of class-room practices and data collection of subjects' opinions. Within this axis there is also the didactic concern with the development of activities by teachers that help students to understand that texts are produced according to their specific genre.

The ultimate thought on the teaching of writing is that there should be used a global didactic module (Pereira *et al.*, 2009) which could integrate these 3 axis, where different methodologies may be used, but where writing is systematic work, either using didactic sequences, cycles of writing, writing workshops, or other strategies in a more complete and holistic approach to the teaching of writing.

Some of these pedagogical approaches were part of the group's work over the workshop mentioned before.

4.1.2 Group's work organisation

As Pereira & Cardoso (2010) explain, this working group followed the "Languages and Education" project's principles. It centred their work on 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 taking part in 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 worse/better writing tasks developed (many of those practices were posted in the *Moodle* plat-form);
- 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 criti-cal evaluation;
- Personal writing tasks.

This group complemented the face-to-face working sessions with the use of the *Moodle* platform, organising its discussion forums according to the pace and differ-ent phases of their work, as presented in table 3:

Table 3. Description of the discussion forums

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

4.2 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 illustrative 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 learning 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. The second one, "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, the building of trust and a sense of belonging and 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). This category includes hints of professional learning about the teaching of writing.

5. FINDINGS

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

5.1 Collaboration

As far as collaboration is concerned, one may identify marks of recognition of the value of collaborating in order to innovate practices and to develop students' writing skills/competences. Participants seem to share a common general aim, which gives 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)[4]; "Hello everyone, Very tired, but still aware

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[4] *Legend: F+number (Forum and number); M+number (Member+number); followed by the date in which the excerpt was posted in the discussion forum. All quotations were translated to English from the Portuguese.*

> of our main purpose… to write about our teaching of writing. For us to reflect later on. Cheers. (F1, M21, 6th November 2008).

The attitude towards collaboration seems to be consensual within the group, as there are no online marks of discussion about what collaborating or collaboration is, although there is a shared linguistic repertoire (Vaughn, 2007) about the topic of 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, 4th November 2008).

Despite this lack of explicit thought on what collaborating is, one can see that the participants had a clear understanding of their roles within the group. When analysing the forums, though there is no role distribution, there are most of the times the same participants who are responsible for giving feedback 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;
- 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, 29th March 2009);
- the processes of negotiation;
- distribution of leadership (for instance in the coordination messages);
- group discussions;
- collective reflections and research work;
- the engagement in research and data analysis procedures.

Collaborative feedback and support for the learning process within a didactics of writing, namely regarding clues to the development of the work and about the model of didactic sequence, was a constant in the forums. This resulted from the creation and development of common intervention plans, where the teaching practice was shared, together with individual and collective reflections about the work.

Since the group's primary concern was how to analyse, rewrite and improve the students' written productions, the teacher educators suggested that each subgroup should choose a textual genre within the argumentative text, not disregarding that text production should be inserted in a communicative situation, with a specific aim and awareness of an interlocutor or audience. As they put forward in the forum 3 – *Working plans*:

> The idea is that we have a common methodology of action and research, which could be a teaching sequence with the following stages: (i) in group: work with "mentor texts", as models of the textual genres to be worked with students (...). The idea is to deconstruct those texts to reflect about their composition and, consequently, about successful criteria for writing of a good text; (ii) in class: initial production by students of the chosen textual genre; (iii) in group: analyse the texts produced by the students (...). We create grids in order to analyse the texts at several levels: discursive, textual, phrasal, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic; (iii) in class: work the writing process, putting in practice different ways of planning, putting in text form, and revising/rewriting. (...) There are, therefore, many strategies as a resource. (...) We think that by adopting a common working methodology, we would assure the needed unity within our group (...) (F3, M21, 3rd December 2008).

Bearing in mind the process of feedback, there seems to be, at least in the *Moodle* platform, a certain tendency to a vertical supervision (the feedback is mostly requested of the teacher educators), which may have given place to some loss of horizontal intra-group supervision within the small groups. Yet, it is not possible to say that this was always the case, namely in the face-to-face interactions during the working sessions, in which the more horizontal intra-group supervision may have taken place.

As far as sustaining a collaborative culture is concerned, from the very start people were mindful of the desirability to develop and maintain collaboration. Suggestions concerning the possible paths for collaboration in the near future can be found in forum 17, where the participants were meant to leave their comments on the workshop dynamics, as well as make suggestions regarding the possible expansion of interpersonal networks already created during that year. The participants also anticipated future scenarios, giving suggestions based on their experiential knowledge about the construction of the professional learning 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, 8th July 2009).

5.2 Sharing

Sharing occurs at diverse levels and this may be a hint of the construction of common repertoire of resources (Vaughan, 2007; Wenger, 1998), and of shared professional practice. There is evidence of sharing of several elements:
1) 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;
2) "inspiring" literary quotations and "sayings" on writing (in the reflection platforms), thus fostering shared reflection about the group's understanding of writing and themselves as teachers if writing;

3) 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, 10th May 2009);

In this domain, teachers shared their practices in the teaching of writing over time, telling their colleagues the most common strategies they usually resorted to:

> In the last years I have managed the classroom work of writing with my students in a much more conscious way both for me and them. Let me explain: (1) I write with the students on the blackboard when the class is big, but in my notebook when the group is smaller (...); (2) the text written on the blackboard is the object of cuts, arrows, comments, lines (I rarely erase them) – in a first phase, the students react badly to this strategy. They don't like having their notebooks "dirty" (…); (3) I make them reflect about what has been produced/written, underlining connectors, punctuation, and other aspects I want to work, with different colours; (...) I always write something about "how to improve your text" (...).I also congratulate them for the progress and editing (F2, M11, 14th December 2008);

4) personal contributions, 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 the time has come! (F2, M11, 15th December 2008);

> 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, 12th December 2008).

In fact, the impetus for teachers to value the idea of collaboration and sharing was deeply rooted in the challenges and difficulties emerging from their classroom practice. As one of the teachers clarifies,

> I'm having difficulty in fostering my pupils' writing. I have two 5th grades in English and two 7th grades in French- level 1. All the four classes (...) have serious learning difficulties both in the oral component and in writing, mainly in writing (F1, M7, 13th November 2008);

Moreover, other issues motivated teachers to enroll in this course, particularly their interest in understanding the reasons that may underlie the fact that writing is disregarded in classroom work. One of them challenged her colleagues to reflect upon it:

> Why is the writing workshop so often suggested in the course books, but procedurally so ignored? Worth reading: Cassany, Daniel (1993). Reparar la escritura, Barcelona: Graó; (1995). La cocina de la escritura, Barcelona: Anagrama, D.L; (2005). Expression escrita en L2/ELE. Madrid: Arco/Libros (F1, M20, 28th October 2008).

Others recognized that improving their didactic repertoire in the teaching of writing was a reason for developing professional knowledge together with other colleagues:

> Day after day I feel the need to better guide them [students], demystifying the act of writing, i.e. of planning, writing with them and for them, to cross off, to go back, to think in a loud voice, to correct – not at home, but in front of the students – many times resorting to ICT, to highlight the positive aspects in the peers' texts after these having been read to all class, to praise the individual progresses and improvements, to reinforce the idea that in a next task they should mobilise and connect everything...and to see them excited and motivated. That would be worth for! (F2, M8, 2nd March 2009).

Sharing also occurred when participants refer to:

5) tensions and anguish about 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, 3rd March 2009);

6) 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, 13th November 2008);

> 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, 20th November 2008);

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

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

5.3 Communication and interpersonal dimension

Regarding communication and the interpersonal dimension, there are signs which are characteristic of community construction. We refer to the existence of "small talk" (Gorodetsky, 2007) with the aim of breaking the ice (in an initial phase), socialisation (*Hello! Above everything, I would like to wish you all Merry Christmas!*, F1, M9, 25th December 2008), reinforcement of the sense of group identity, 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 (the group's *general forum*, for general messages and posts) became the

place to get some information about the others and a first step towards creating bonds and starting to develop a shared confidence, clearly complementing the face-to-face interactions:

> Hi! Well...maybe we will feel the need to reconstruct a grid of our own!... By the way: there are many news in the Moodle – Writing B! Show up! (F1, M14, 24th October 2008).

During the project, there was a positive reinforcement and motivation for the work, mainly from the teacher educators (again a sign of top-down supervision). 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 di-dactic 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, 30th January 2009).

In order to support and sustain the flux of communication amongst the members, one may notice the existence of some technological 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, initiators of discussion 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 development of sense of belonging.

5.4 Learning and knowledge

The analysis under the fourth 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 the *Moodle* platform, in the working sessions. For instance, in forum 4, entitled *journals*, teachers had to write about their didactic practices of teaching of writing, and had to read each one's reflections and comment on them. Participation in this task was being scarce and consequently, after a joint working session, a call for participation was launched, as this excerpt shows:

> Last Saturday it was consensual the recognition that, despite the dynamic nature of our moodle, there are more individual messages than feedback, 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, 25th November 2008).

In fact, before this alert, there were 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 feedback given.

The existence of significant personal and professional meaning construction may be witnessed mainly in forums 4, 5 and 8 (see table 3), where the teachers had to share teaching practices, share conclusions or reflections, as well as critical appreciations emerging from their reading of literature about teaching of writing, 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 - 9th
> November 2008).

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 identity two spheres: the group's cognitive sphere and the group's meta-cognitive one. In the first one, the 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). An illustrative exchange that was conducive to collective knowledge construction about the teaching of writing can be traced in the following interactions. As referred to before, in forum 4, teachers shared their teaching practices about writing. Some of these exchanges contributed to the groups' cognitive capital. Bearing in mind the concern with the teaching of writing in her classes, one of the teachers shared some of the strategies resulting from her practices and readings about the topic:

> I found: code for correcting the written text – through settled signs I point to students
> the kind of mistakes, which enables self-review of the text based on the consciousness
> raising of the language functioning and text architecture (...); model – I would select an
> excerpt of the read and analysed text in class and suggested to the student that s/he
> rewrote based on a change imposed by me; segmentation in diverse phases – I used
> this strategy to try to make students aware of the several moments and processes of
> production of a certain text (...); joint correction – I projected, in a slide, the copy of
> texts or excerpts of students' written productions (...) and I corrected the texts togeth-
> er with the class (...) (F4, M15, 18th November 2008).

This was the starting point for one of the teacher educators/researchers to try to systematise some of the principles of the teaching of writing:

> Then you came to some principles: the need to make students more participative in the text correction/review (...); use the read texts in class as models (...); explicit work on the process of writing (...); collaboration in the process of writing and rewriting is crucial (...). A very important "detail": you show us how your conceptualisation is being reconfigured with your practice!!! That is, the theory sustains the practice and the practice reformulates theory... I believe that's how it should be in Didactics: the research dimension is there to lay the ground for practice, and the professional dimension should propose new problems and issues to research (F4, M10, 19th November 2008).

Following this exchange, other teachers and teacher educators put forward new strategies, which are complemented with quotations from readings about the topic, namely the following one, which consists of a reflection by a teacher educator after a suggestion made by a foreign language teacher,

> In fact, as [you] are suggesting, "The use of L1 in the activities of teaching and learning second languages had traditionally been seen both by researchers and teachers as something to avoid". Yet, Guasch opens other possibilities: the recourse to the L1 can be seen as a strategy to generate and elaborate the contents that are to be part of the text, in order to initiate the first draft of text that is in one's mind, which will be later on translated to the L2. [the author] concludes that "The available studies sustain the assertion of the positive incidence of the use of L1 in the processes of written composition in L2. The ones that take more profit from this strategy are those with an initial domain of the second language" (F4, M14, 18th November 2008).

Regarding the group's meta-cognitive sphere, there are signs of reflection about the professional learning process, the professional knowledge construction and the community. In forums 6 and 7, dedicated to the posting of written reflections, among other issues teachers refer to and reflect upon:

- The advantages of some of the strategies for fostering professional learning, namely collaboration;
- Their own difficulty in writing a reflection and/or a critical appreciation of a publication:

> As soon as you sent your feedback, I read it carefully, but I must admit that since then I didn't have the opportunity to reread and review my critical written appreciation in view of your suggestions...I will have to sit and see topic by topic your guidelines (it seems to me that there is much to polish) (F6, M8, 30th April 2009).

- Their professional learning in articulation with the several steps taken so far, as well as the difficulties they were feeling:

> As a teacher, I have learnt that the writing process demands a joint, collaborative work between teacher and students in the classroom (F7, M12, July 2009);

> The work that I have been developing with my group has contributed enormously to my professional learning, since it makes me feel that I'm not alone and that there are several forms of facing problems [related to teaching of writing] (F6, M4, 27th February 2009);

> (...) the lack of time for face-to-face interaction (...). This deficit in time both at individual and collective levels, has been a serious challenge to our capacity of persistence and complementarity, so that no one gives up (F6, M20, 26th February 2009).

Some of these resurfaced during the face-to-face sessions, and became the object of joint discussion. It is possible that more critical dialogue took place, namely about the research-based knowledge about teaching writing, about the didactic strategies used or the challenges or difficulties teachers were facing when planning and working with their classes. Yet, the forums do not provide consistent information about this, which possibly occurred in the face-to-face sessions. As such, this study would need to be complemented with other partial studies about the dynamics of this group, namely with the analysis of data such as the transcriptions of the in-presence working sessions, the reports of the intervention projects and the teachers' personal written reflections. These data could be an asset to identify the knowledge the group succeeded in developing about teaching writing and how it was developed over time.

In the meta-cognitive sphere, there are 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 shows, 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 with 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 develop 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 group under consideration. But, as mentioned in the introductory sections of this study, attention is needed regarding the specificity of this community. In other words, was it a community of *professional learning*?

We believe it is valid to respond to this question positively. Bearing in mind some of the characteristics of these communities as presented earlier in this article, in fact the forums of this particular group indicate the existence of opportunities with potential for its members' professional learning within a Didactics of Writing. The group's dynamic involved:

- Focus on practice – it was the starting point for the outline of learning goals and the didactic work to be developed; practice was a generator of reflection, and therefore a reflexive practice as a shared process of learning. This is considered crucial for professional learning by Lytle & Cochran-Smith (1994) or Day (1999), as well as the following item;

- Valorisation of theory (in dialogue with practice). For instance, in forum 5 – *Texts* – teachers wrote down the bibliographic references they would read about teaching of writing and notified the teacher educators about their choices for a critical reading appreciation, as the following quotation illustrates:

  > I have also chosen my readings – very egocentrically I must say... – I say egocentrically because I tried to conciliate my learning needs about the teaching/learning of writing and my present research interests, which are related to Portuguese as Non-Mother Tongue) (F5, M10, 6th November 2008).

- Focus on the individual, as well as on the collective sphere/path. As Wenger (1998) and Wenger *et al*. (2002) clarify, the balanced dynamic interconnected relation between these two spheres of a community is essential to its wellbeing;

- 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 (as also pointed out in Day, 1999). In forum 4, teachers had to share what they considered to be a good practice or strategy in the teaching of writing. These would be later commented on and discussed in the face-to-face interaction;

- (De/Re)Construction of representations and of tacit knowledge (in a learning process which started from the tasks, accomplished didactic practices and constructed interactions). At the end of the project, teachers had developed new understandings of their teaching practices, realising the existence of other ways of dealing with the teaching of writing:

  > Gradually, this work fostered our consciousness regarding all process of (teaching of) writing, while considering our concern in constructing and deconstructing texts (a less common practice in our daily life as teachers). In other words, do what our students are themselves expected to do (F16, M14, 12th June 2009);

  > (...) as teachers of writing, we understood that, being writing so complex, each textual genre implies specific competences and knowledge and, among these, it is necessary to elect some to work with the class. We cannot pretend to wear out in a single textual production all savoir and savoir-faire at stake (F16, M14, 12th June 2009).

- Centrality is given to the planning together and the collaborative work, in a logic which fosters collective creativity. In forum 3, teachers shared their collaboratively developed planning and teaching materials, and both teachers and teacher educators commented on and made suggestions to each other both in the forum and later on in intermediate working sessions. Also, in forums 9 to 18 (see table 3), which were dedicated to the collaborative work in-between working sessions around the planning and preparation of the group talks, there are hints that members searched for alignment in terms of didactic principles for the teaching of writing, the choice of the intervention plan to be presented as the most representative of the group's work during the year, the selection of the students' initial and final written productions;
- 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), as advised by Freeman (1996) and Tsui (2003);
- Mobilization of the emotional sphere – recovery of the "circumstances, actions and experiences of an affective nature" that are significant for a professional learning perspective (Pinho, 2008) about the teaching of writing. As an example, in forum 2 – *Who are we?* – one of the teachers reports on her learning trajectory as a student, recalling the moment in which she became aware of the characteristics of particular types of texts:

  > Reporting to my 12th grade, I think it was at that time that I had the consciousness of how to write an argumentative text and a text of literary analysis. Probably in that day my senses were more alert, and I remember my colleagues, my teacher and the class in which it happened, in which I realised how that textual typology worked (F2, M11, 14th December 2008).

- Focus on the learning process and the students' results. In forum 16, teachers share with the group their students' reflections and comments on the work developed during that school year, and propose ways of organising that feedback and presenting it in the final plenary session of the project "Languages and Education". They also reflect upon the implications of students' (non-)improvement for the future:

  > These conclusions can only interrogate us as teacher of writing, in the sense of continuously adopting, adapting and creating work proposals to learn how to write that make clear for students the meaning(s) of writing activities. In fact, the meaning given by the student to the task of writing will result in his/her greater or lesser mobilization to deal with the recursive nature of the writing process with more confidence and dedication (F16, M14, 12th June 2009).

- Introduction of research processes (in its technical and critical dimensions);
- Promotion of dialogic communication (which coincides with a social knowledge construction), and concern with the creation of spaces for common decisions and the "distribution" of roles.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

At this point it is important to reiterate that this is a partial study in the sense that it looked at one of the sites – the *Moodle* platform – where the dynamics of the working group in question took place. This platform was used as a channel to keep up the contact and facilitate communication in between working sessions. This means that unlike online professional learning communities, this group mainly interacted face to face. As such, many of the clues about the construction of a professional learning community need to be complemented and crisscrossed with future studies and data. Notwithstanding, we believe that the present study may be of interest to understanding how professional learning communities emerge.

In the case of this particular group, 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 learning community, of which the group was a part.

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 of creating 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 reinforcing the stewardship of the group, and the management of the tensions and challenges its members were facing as they found their pathway, mainly through face-to-face meetings.

In line with Wenger (1998), Wenger *et al*. (2005) and Wenger *et al*. (2002), professional learning communities seem to succeed when there is the possibility for their members to come together and discuss about a common purpose, to create a common ground for debate and construct a vision that moves them forward together. In this process and as our analysis pointed out, the role of particular core members seems to be crucial, particularly when they play leadership roles with a strong impact in the reciprocity between the members of the community, or the mutual accountability regarding the common tasks.

In this setting, as Wenger (1998) points out, the *domain* or the "*raison d'être*" of this group played an important role in bringing different actors together and fostering collaboration. As a common interest of both teachers, teacher educators and researchers, this domain granted the group a particular identity, and made possible the creation of shared meaning-making. Learning and researching about teaching of writing somehow became a meeting point for the members of the group. Therefore, the teaching writing became a locus for interaction and an opportunity to discuss and try out didactic perspectives in a more contextualised way.

What this study makes clear is that, as has also been pointed out in the literature earlier in this article, communities are living beings, and as such have their life cycle (Wenger *et al*. 2002). *Time* is a major ally in cultivating communities. This

group in particular, which was part of a larger professional learning community, mainly emerged as a "community" itself within a specific context: that of a research and teacher education project which had a specific timeframe in which it needed to be completed.

The group analysed in this article is somewhat representative of the dynamics that occurred in the context of the project "Languages and Education" and displayed some of the traits of the stages of development of professional learning communities described by Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002). Steps were carried out in order to plan, launch, and nurture the community within the domain of teaching of writing. Within the time span of its existence, strategies were designed to ensure engagement and avoid dropping out (although it occurred at the beginning), and thus maintain 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 go 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 in the teaching of writing 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, as the analysis shows. Finally, leadership was fundamental and seemed to be legitimised by the community members, either implicitly or explicitly.

In some sense, the group 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 learning community launched within the project "Languages and Education" sowed the seeds of future communities in language education, which is import bearing in mind that one of the research structures of University of Aveiro – the Research Centre "Didactics and Technology in Education of Trainers" – intends to promote partnerships with other educational institutions and stakeholders in order to develop more collaborative research and intervention practices. 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 learning community. People got to know better each member's culture of work, and most importantly developed knowledge about how to work together and collaboratively.

This is important because many times the world of the academy and that of schools seem to be disconnected, not only in terms of (collaborative) knowledge construction about language education, but also with respect to the sharing of the particularities and dynamics of both contexts. As such, the cultivation of a culture

of shared intellectual inquiry (Fullan, 2001) is a plus when we talk about professional learning communities that involve multiple stakeholders in language education. This is not only crucial to seduce and empower teachers to look at their classrooms as "sites for intentional investigation" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), but also to create more contextualised learning and research environments for teacher educators and researchers. Yet, bearing in mind the results of this study, further research needs to be carried out in order to understand to what extent communities such as the one presented can become settings for innovation in language (teacher) education and research.

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 by 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-school 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). These implications are also shared by many of the work group members analysed in this article, who in the final written reflections posted in the *Moodle* platform, put forward several suggestions for the continuity of the work just initiated: besides the greater collaboration between schools and the university, they consider it important to develop teacher education initiatives within the school context. As such, they also believe it is of utmost importance that school cultures change in order to ensure that teachers have common hours in their schedule to work together on projects relating to the teaching of writing.

The present study highlights that one aspect that makes a difference when one talks about professional learning communities is, whether they grow informally or voluntarily as a result of less structured dynamics of its members, or whether they are formally created. In the case of communities that are formally created, and considering their natural cycles of development described by Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002), it seems important to consider that many times good will is not enough and that to create a sustainable professional learning community whose foundations lay in a short-lived project is not an easy task. Moreover, coalescence, membership growth and shared knowledge depth require of communities made up of diverse stakeholders and that intend to innovate in the field of language education the overcoming of ephemeral contexts of existence. This seems to be a step so that their members, which belong to different professional contexts and with par-

ticular thinking and working cultures, may develop new structures of thinking, meaning and action about language education.

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