

The ETF Community of Innovative Educators: reflections after four years of collaborative learning

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Abstract

The paper presents some reflections on how to support community and network-based learning dynamics among educators, as emerging from the work of the Community of Innovative Educators of the European Training Foundation. In its four years of life, the community has reached over 1600 registered members, organised 48 interactive webinars on different aspects of teaching innovation, collected 127 blogposts and 124 innovative teaching and learning practices, and has fostered the involvement of its members in the co-production of tools to support teaching innovation. We critically reflect on the most important strategies to make sure that within such communities participation transforms into engagement, and engagement produces learning, despite all the constraints and differences that are typical of such communities. We analyse how shared goals, interactivity, diversity, flexible support, awarding mechanisms, and co-creation dynamics contribute to a healthy and growing learning community.

Keywords

Community, educators, teaching innovation, co-creation, network-based learning

The ETF Community of Innovative Educators

In line with its mandate to support innovative and equitable transitions of skills development systems in the EU neighbourhood and beyond, in 2022 the European Training Foundation has launched its Community of Innovative Educators, with the objective of supporting teachers and trainers “to help each other to innovate”.

The initiative is part of a set of activities that aim to help different stakeholders, from educators to policy makers, to make their teaching more innovative. This work stemmed from a literature review in different areas of teaching and learning (digital technology, new roles of educators, new learning environments, ...), and from the analysis of case studies documenting several types of innovation, and along the way several tools targeted to educators have been produced. A first example is READY (Reference model for Educators' Activities and Development in the 21st-century), a reference model that aims to offer a structured way to identify the professional practices and development needs of 21st-century educators, transforming them from gatekeepers to gate-openers to knowledge, skills and attitudes. Another example is the set of “Teacher booster” videos, a series of awareness-raising films on how teachers from all over the world are tackling the challenges of distance learning and how they are incorporating key competences into it. A final example is the Scaffold card deck, a set of easily implementable strategies that supports educators in integrating key competences in their teaching. While these tools are important to foster the capacity of teachers and trainers to innovate, the ETF strongly believes that only through partnerships and collaboration the use of these approaches can be meaningfully uptaken by educators, that is why we have been channelling all these activities through the community.

In four years of work, the ETF Community of Innovative Educators has reached the number of over 1600 registered members, organised 48 interactive webinars on different aspects of teaching innovation, collected 127 blogposts and 124 innovative teaching and learning practices in a searchable database, and has fostered the involvement of its members in the production of tools to support teaching innovation. This large number of activities was possible thanks to the fully open and connected approach of the community: while some of the work is organised by the community itself, a number of activities are co-organised with national or international stakeholders, while blogposts are often produced by the community members themselves. The Community collaborates in fact with governments, projects and networks in the ETF partner countries, as well as with numerous international organisations and initiatives such as the UNESCO teachers Taskforce, the European Association for Teachers Education, and the Lifelong Learning Platform.

Phases of community-based collaborative learning

In line with the phases of social networks development (Watts 2004), the first two years of the Community life were dedicated to growth and outreach, working through regional facilitators, organising online meetings where the interests of potential members were explored, and connecting with national communities on teachers and teaching innovation. A milestone in this process was the ETF 2022 New Learning Award, a call for innovative practices that can serve as inspiration for educators and policy makers in the EU neighbourhood and beyond. The response of the Community to the call was overwhelming: more than 800 practices from 50 countries were received, ranging from small grassroots activities to large innovation projects. Through a selection process, the 10 most innovative cases were invited to an event in Torino to discuss with innovation supporters such as ILO, UNESCO and Cedefop how teachers' innovation should be fostered in the future. Most importantly, this process made possible the creation of an initial shared knowledge base of the Community, now collected in the ETF database of innovative teaching and learning practices. Even if literature shows that having such a shared knowledge base is fundamental (Asrar-ul-Haq and Sadia 2016), our strategic emphasis is on connections between people: through the community activities, members learn through other members and the access they provide to learning and collaboration opportunities (Ryberg et al. 2025). An important step during the outreach phase was the creation of a team of community ambassadors, with the mission to promote the Community among educators in their countries, suggest innovative practices to be shared, and propose webinars and other activities. The 42 ambassadors from 19 countries have been invaluable in getting messages to educators, given the challenges in reaching on-the-ground teachers in different languages and very different environments. All ambassadors have been awarded Open Badges recognising their role.

In the following two years the focus moved from growth to engagement, and we did so by establishing thematic New Learning Clubs: these are groups of educators and other practitioners from different countries who join forces voluntarily to work on a specific theme related to learning innovation for a defined period of time, sharing their practices and learning from each other how to improve their teaching approaches. The work of these Clubs is typically happening through online meetings along a period of 9 months, and at the end of their lifecycle, each club produces an output (a joint curriculum, a video, a report, guidelines, etc.), that is then presented to the whole Community through an open webinar. To date, four New Learning Clubs have been supported: on STEAM innovation; on teaching with Artificial Intelligence; on adults upskilling and on Teachers Professional Development. All the active members of the clubs have been awarded Open Badges to recognise their participation. In line with Networked Learning approaches, within the Clubs' discussions, we have encouraged the emergence of critical approaches questioning power and equity dynamics within skills development systems and promoting emancipation, trying to move from challenges identification to addressing injustices and to empower teachers and trainers as transformative agents (Jandric and Boras 2015). After four years of work, we can realistically say that the ETF Community of Innovative Educators has established itself as a platform for a range of educators to learn from each other – and for the ETF to learn about changing practices, trends, innovations and issues in education on the ground and at system level. The plan is to keep on supporting the community, creating new links with existing teaching innovation ecosystems with the aim to engage both leading innovative educators and those who do have an interest in starting to apply new ways of teaching.

Lessons learnt on community-based learning

Collaborative learning is at the core of the ETF Community of Innovative Educators, in fact one could say that the community itself is a self-managed networked-learning community, that “involves processes of collaborative, co-operative and collective inquiry, knowledge-creation and knowledgeable action, underpinned by trusting relationships, motivated by a sense of shared challenge and enabled by convivial technologies” (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2020). From a theoretical viewpoint, the work of the community is based on connectivism, that puts the accent on helping members to understand where the knowledge is and how to reach it through interaction, and on rhizomatic learning, that focuses on participants agency and learning as a continuous quest for relevant knowledge (Blaschke et al. 2021). Starting from these theories, that guide the design of webinars and other knowledge sharing activities, it is important to critically consider the main challenges that come with implementing methods for knowledge sharing within learning communities, such as the different working and learning preferences of members, also connected to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the need to sustain sustaining active participation and engagement over time, the fact that methods and strategies must be adapted to

the growth of the learning community, and the need to ensure that shared knowledge remains relevant and aligns with the community's objectives.

In line with the findings of the literature review of Zamiri and Ali (2024), yearly reviews of the Community developments have consistently shown some clear strategies that seem to be appropriate in promoting collaboration, engagement, and shared learning among educators:

- Shared Goals and Interests must be maintained: it is important to keep the community focused on its goals, making sure that the shared interest of participants are seen as a common ground for collaboration that can be structured through different thematic activities (in our case the New Learning Club) but always towards a greater objective.
- Interactivity is key but not for all. interaction is a fundamental aspect of learning communities, and when participants actively engage with others we have always observed positive dynamics that often have developed beyond the community boundaries. Still, it is important to leave space for members that just want to observe and learn without actively engaging, such as the “quasi innovators”, educators interested in learning about innovative approaches that do not feel ready for implementation. The important thing is that the following three conditions coexist: collegiality, shared professional capital, and time for collaboration (Hargreaves, 2019) and that the complex interplay between centres and margins (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2020) is safeguarded.
- Diversity of Participants is a richness. The ETF Community of Innovative Educators brings together participants with diverse backgrounds, experiences, languages and styles of interaction. This diversity can often slow down activities and sometimes can seem to hinder the possibility of members used in international environment, but must always be valorised as a richness, made of varied viewpoints and approaches to teaching and learning innovation. This has also to do with building trust: if we want them to share knowledge and experiences, participants need to feel confident that their contributions will be respected and used respectfully.
- Flexible support must be provided. Due to the differences just discussed, diverse support mechanisms must be put in place to be able to engage both innovators (in our case the participants who submitted a practice and the Ambassadors) and simple participants; all should feel comfortable expressing their ideas, asking questions, and seeking assistance. This is important also when monitoring engagement. This confirms the findings of a number of research (see for instance Nguyen & Ng, 2020) that claim that community development is composed of non-linear, iterative, and recursive processes. Also, the idea is that by offering different engagement methods such as live events, webinars, practices collection, written documentation, and collaborative projects—communities can accommodate different working and learning styles.
- Recognise and award efforts. In a community mostly based on voluntarily contribution, recognising the participation and the efforts of members is paramount. For this, we have established a system of Open Badges to recognise the different levels of contribution to the community activities (Innovator, Pioneer, Ambassador); interestingly enough, the download rate of the issued open badges has been higher than the average for this kind of digital credentials, showing the importance attached by members to their activities within the community.
- Encourage co-creation. Another way to motivate participants is to support them in being co-authors of the knowledge produced within the community: this has been done in our case by fostering co-design and co-production of two shared products in the field of STEAM and teaching with AI within the respective New Learning Club, as well as through the promotion of co-designed sets of activities within the Clubs and beyond.

With these conditions in place, during the four years of work of the Community we have observed not only an increased level of engagement, but also a change in the perception of the collaboration activities of the community. This is very important since, as noted by Khasawneh et al. (2023), effective and sustained teachers collaboration requires a shared understanding of the objectives of the collaboration but also mutual respect, trust and open communication among members. More than the actual level of innovation of the shared knowledge, what has made the community relevant for its members has been the attitudes and beliefs about collaboration of the members, that have a significant impact on their propensity to engage in collaborative activities.

The story of the New Learning Club on Teaching with Artificial Intelligence (AI) is paradigmatic in this sense. Immediately after its launch, this initiative has raised a lot of expectation and has aggregated more than 200 participants, aiming to learn how AI can be integrated into daily teaching. During the lifetime of the Club, two

things happened that resonate with the lessons learnt presented above. First, after a first 9 months of cooperation that ended up with the co-creation of a set of guidelines for teachers on AI literacies, the group kept on growing and this called for a change in the animation strategy: what we did was to transform the group in a mechanism where top AI in education experts could respond to the questions by educators, including novice ones: this raised a lot of interest with very participated webinars and high engagement. Second, the Club has been able to connect with other initiatives in the field of AI for teaching, becoming the gateway for those educators who are not used to work in international initiatives to access them: these links were created with the Digital Education Hub of the European Commission and with the AI Pioneers project, among others.

In conclusion, the four years of life of the ETF Community of innovative educators have shown that, in order to tap into the incredibly rich knowledge and capacities that exist in such a large and multicultural community, it is fundamental to let participants in the driving seat, so that the agenda of the community is shaped by them, be persistent and ready for growth of certain activities but not of all, build on personal connections and stories, foster co-design and co-creation processes in an open and realistic way, and finally be open to partnership with the many existing initiatives working towards the same objective. The challenge is well known in networked-learning community (Gourlay in Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2021): opening up collaborative learning opportunities across different contexts, disciplines and cultures, respecting the different ways of engaging and the different ways of 'being' in education.

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