

Professional Communities – Potentials and Limits of Blended Learning Scenarios

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ABSTRACT

The following paper deals with the development of professionalised action in the context of teacher education and training on the basis of a new group formation that we call 'Professional Community'. This involves the implementation of heterogeneous groups as face-to-face as well as virtual structures with the mission to generate profession related knowledge and skills on a meta-level of communication and interaction. The concept of the 'Professional Community' is supported by an extended empirical study, which puts the theoretical framework into a concrete context, with the purpose of testing its assumed potential.

Keywords

Professional Community, Communities of Practice, teacher, education, training, professionalisation, blended learning, virtual environment, guided interviews.

INTRODUCTION

Every professionalised job field is characterised by three fundamental tasks: first, to find efficient solutions to oncoming crises; second, to mediate between theory and practice; and third, to generate new professional knowledge relevant to the current situation on the basis of scientific thought.

All three tasks mentioned refer to a boundary running smoothly between the opposed but related fields of experience and innovation, intuition and theoretical thought, personal involvement and rational analysis. The boundary has to be kept open to both sides in order to provide for the necessary mobility of feeling, thinking and acting as a precondition of what is considered as the genuine asset of professionals.

Against this background, professionalised action can best be learned in a didactic setting that constitutes itself as a 'hybrid' entity producing two forms of intelligence, emotional and rational. In order to achieve this aim and to have the learning environment live up to its full potential, we conceive it as a face-to-face as well as a virtual community with both forms of communication profiting from each other and enhancing learning in its own way. These ideas are blended in the concept of the 'Professional Community' (henceforth 'PC').

The Centre for Teacher Education and Professionalism Research (CTEPR) at the Department of Educational Science, participates in the strategy project 'New Media' at the University of Vienna under the direction of Ilse Schrittmesser. One of the sub-projects is called 'Professional Communities – Potentials and Limits of Blended Learning Scenarios'. It involves research on the concept of PC as learning networks of people expanding their knowledge and competences in face-to-face as well as virtual learning environments.

During the 22-months course of the project the main focus of attention will be on elaborating on the theoretical framework in which the idea of the PC has to be placed. Furthermore we will examine the opportunities it offers as an appropriate learning environment for processes of professionalisation, e.g. in teacher education.

The practical part of our research study aims to ascertain empirical data about community processes, development of knowledge and competences in face-to-face and virtual community settings as well as efficient forms of didactic design for processes of professionalisation. Considering the idea that the

community members draw specific benefit from being part of a PC, our aim is to expedite the research on both existing and artificially created communities in order to empirically support the theoretical framework we have developed on the one hand and to find its intrinsic limitations on the other.

TERMINOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Originally, the term 'community' was used as an everyday expression in sociological contexts such as charities, neighbourhood assistance or fund raising. Over the last few years though, the word has been increasingly used with reference to internet and communication technologies and has finally emerged to be a fixed term in the field of e-learning. Interestingly enough, the English expression is also used in German, mainly because of the historically negative connotation of its translation 'Gemeinschaft' (Seufert, 2002), but also because of the increase of anglicisms in the German language.

The expression 'community' has a great diversity and is used in many different contexts such as work environments and in relation to leisure time and education. The variations range from 'Learning Community', 'Online Community', 'Virtual Community', 'Knowledge Community' and 'Dynamic Learning Community' to 'Communities of Practice' (henceforth 'CoP'). The present paper will exclusively deal with the term 'Professional Community'.

THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

The concept of a PC is to be seen in the context of education, precisely with regards to professionalised and professionalisation-needed professions due to the specific challenges they have to meet (e.g. judicature, medical therapy, education and science and research; Oevermann, 1999). According to Schritteser (2004), a PC is supposed to represent a self-reflective group, which is prepared to permit growing awareness of its own group processes in addition to its task of developing and ensuring professional knowledge and standards.

This approach goes back to experiences deriving from the field of organisational development, which historically still lacks systematic empirical research and has primarily relied on exploiting case studies (Heintel and Königswieser, 1997). According to what we know from those case studies, self aware and reflective communities act as particularly efficient learning networks in processes of organisational learning and staff development. This includes the awareness of and the capability to verbalize the informal role allocation within the group, the predominant communication patterns, potentials or inhibitions of the various group members etc.

The learning process is conceived as a combination of face-to-face and virtual communication, along with interleaved content and method. This we assume pools and stimulates scientific expertise (know-how) and professional competence (skills and tacit knowledge) and additionally fosters learning among the key players of the professionalisation process on various levels and in a particular manner.

Composition of a Professional Community

A PC in the academic context consists of students, facilitators, researchers, experts and practitioners. In dealing with the concept of a PC in the course of the research project, one focus of attention is on teacher trainees who go through their pedagogical education and practical training. This involves interacting with their lecturers (facilitators), induction tutors (practitioners) and researchers at the university. In a fully developed PC all members can temporarily switch roles within the group or even hold multiple roles. For example, students can become researchers who participate in a real empirical project. The same can be said for people from outside the university who act as quasi-clients for field studies, however by doing so they develop their own professionalism (e.g. schools engaging in their own institutional development on the basis of action research and being supported in this activity by researchers and students from the university). Experts may also be people who offer subject relevant expertise in certain fields of educational science and share their knowledge and experiences with other members of the group, possibly on an online discussion board or in the course of an 'expert-chat'. Practitioners can be teachers who work at schools and participate in the PC in their role as facilitators tutoring the students' practical training sessions. (Figure 1)

Tasks of a Professional Community

The PC is assumed to generate new profession relevant knowledge and skills on different levels by enforcing a consequent exchange: subject relevant and process relevant understanding, as well as tacit proficiency and reflexion on a meta-level. Ideally, all members involved benefit in different ways (Schrittesser, 2004).

Furthermore, an increase in the quality of scientific research and higher education is expected from the establishment of such PCs. Students are integrated into the group step by step, which means they start off at the periphery (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as novices in the role of ‘lurkers’ and move towards the core of the community as their competence improves. This will occur in parallel with their career progression; joining research teams and later becoming members of the scientific community or successful practitioners. Ideally, their experiences will then contribute to the professionalism and scholarly training of future professionals in higher education (Figure 1).

Characteristics of a Professional Community

To describe the characteristics of a PC, we compare it to a well-known and widely used type of community: the Communities of Practice (CoP), defined by Etienne Wenger (Wenger, 1998). On the one hand, those two community-concepts have aspects in common, such as the situated learning-approach (Lave and Wenger, 1991). On the other hand, there are significant differences, which we would like to describe as follows:

Virtuality

CoP do not necessarily have a virtual structure, whereas PCs are clearly defined as representing both, a co-present as well as a virtual structure - mostly within a blended learning environment.

The Creation of the Community

Another attribute that distinguishes PCs from CoP is the way they are initially formed. CoP are not formally implemented but evolve as emergent practices. Therefore, unlike PCs, CoP usually do not have a clear beginning or end (Wenger, 1998), whereas PCs serve one or more specific purposes and are therefore intentionally implemented.

Task of the Community

In contrast to PCs the members of a CoP gather because of a common goal (joint enterprise), but they do not have a specific mission. PCs have the explicit task to generate professionalised knowledge and professional competences.

Group Structure

Another distinguishing characteristic relates to the way the two groups are structured. The members of CoP do not have predefined roles but rather acquire their roles due to their activities and by gaining acceptance from other members (Wenger et al, 1998 refer to “Identities, which are cultivated”). Communication processes can be seen as the basis for the development of roles: individuals evolve to be more or less active group members, moderators, experts etc.

The structure of PCs is characterised by predefined roles. Due to the participation of facilitators, students, fluctuating practitioners, experts and researchers a specific allocation of roles seems impossible to avoid. However, these roles can be switched in the course of the process.

Control-mechanism

Basically, the theoretically ideal CoP can be described by using the metaphor of a wildflower (Reinmann-Rothmeier, 2001). The flower thrives and prospers without non-natural influences only sprouting because of the actualities of the present environment. Since the well-being of the flower depends on its natural environment the plant might perish in the event of unfavourable conditions. Therefore the development of a CoP is neither predictable nor controllable, which may turn out to be a major drawback in certain organisational contexts.

In contrast, PCs are not only determined by their natural development but also by external interference. Using a similar metaphor one could describe a PC as a cultivated wildflower. To achieve a prospering plant it is of utmost importance to determine which and how much external influence and support is needed and allowed, in order not to derogate its natural growth.

Assuming that the framework is transparent to all participants and the group's tasks are made clear, Heintel and Königswieser (1998) attempted to deal with this issue mentioned above in the context of face-to-face groups within organisational development processes. The self-management principles of groups based on Heintel and Königswieser focus on reflexion through introspection, bringing up the group as such for discussion and receiving feedback.

By enforcing this kind of meta-communication, groups may increase their awareness of internal relations, inhibitions and personal aims. Thus they do not act purely naturally but manage and control themselves. According to this idea we define the characteristic of external and internal management of a PC.

STEPS IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Since the start of the project in March 2005 we have developed an elaborate research design, which includes both the implementation of a PC and its cultivation, and also the observation and analysis of group processes, knowledge management and the potential for learning and professionalisation. Parts of the project have already been realised, with others yet to be implemented, such as the extended empirical study to support the theoretical framework.

The phases and aspects of the research project are described as follows:

Subject of Research

The concept of the PC is put into practice in the course of the 'Modellcurriculum', which is a specially arranged curriculum for above average teacher students. This involves being part of a group of students, which is formed at the beginning of the first semester of teacher training and remains constant for eight semesters. This means that those students go through all fifteen modules of their teacher training together, unlike standard students, who choose their courses and classes individually and independently.

Initial Situation

The initial situation of the project is a study, comparing statements from students who went through the first pass of the 'Modellcurriculum' with some of their colleagues who completed teacher training the common way according to their individual pace and talents. By means of guided interviews and questionnaires we tried to address the issue of satisfaction and benefits of social structures relevant for students in the 'Modellcurriculum', comparative to those in the regular training. The data was evaluated and interpreted using the method of 'qualitative content analysis' (Mayring, 2003), which involves the categorisation and contextualisation of the text material ascertained during guided interviews.

By and large, the results of the guided interviews represent the idea of the theoretical concept of the PC and give occasion to research and investigation.

The Results of the Initial Study

In order to give a brief insight into the outcome of the study, we present a selection of the most relevant and convincing statements in relation to one of six topical categories of the guided interview.

The category 'experiences within the Modellcurriculum-group' was characterised by four sub-aspects: 'personal impression within the group', 'relationship with facilitators', 'formative group processes' and 'reflexion about the group'.

The students agreed upon various advantages of the consistent group situation when questioned about their 'personal impression within the group'. They described the atmosphere as very positive and even 'intimate'; mentioned a great communal spirit and the feeling of solidarity; and pointed out energetic communication as well as friendships beyond university life. This harmonious environment supported trust among the members of the group and self-confidence, which made it easier for a number of students to give presentations, state their minds and even admit personal weaknesses.

The 'relationship with facilitators' was described as mostly 'relaxed and collegial', compared to other didactic settings at the university. However, the students were aware of the fact that their facilitators, especially if teaching the group during one of the later semesters, were sometimes to face challenging situations due to the advanced group process. For example, one noted situation involved the students' team spirit and familiarity encouraged them to stand up as a unified strong-minded entity to oppose a lecturer's style of teaching. Unlike in common academic teaching settings, the issue was made the subject of discussion and analysed with all members of the group involved in order to find a way acceptable for both the students and the facilitator.

Referring to 'formative group processes' the students expressed displeasure about the fluctuation of group members. They sensed a temporary lack of communal spirit after the group had been 'shuffled', followed by the desire to reallocate internal roles and build up intimacy. Moreover, a lot of effort was necessary for new students – referred to as 'strangers' – to become accepted and eventually integrated into the existing group.

Although the first pass of the 'Modellcurriculum' was not constituted as a PC yet, the 'reflexion about the group' had already been a focus in order to support the students' capability to observation and analysis with regards to professionalised action in their future field of work. During the interviews the students pointed out that the group as such was made a subject of discussion many times throughout their curriculum and the regular 'reflexion meetings' at the end of each semester were 'enjoyable' and 'informative'.

The generation of professional knowledge and competence requires more than 'reflexion about the group'. Therefore we take the next step in the course of the research project, which is described in detail in the following chapter.

Pilot Phase

From the winter semester of 2005 onwards, the implementation of PCs in teacher education will be pursued continuously. This means that the already existing 'Modellcurriculum'-group, who has just begun its third semester, has been transferred into a PC. Two 'Modellcurriculum'-groups have started their teacher training as a PC from the outset. In order to keep the members - apart from the students who are informed during classes - updated on information and to cultivate the community it is necessary to hold staff-meetings regularly. Those meetings will also offer the opportunity to facilitators, researchers and experts to discuss the potentials and limits of a PC in the university context, on both a formal and informal basis.

Work in Progress

In the course of the research programme, we focus on two aspects in particular:

First, we are interested in the development of the Professional Community as a *social learning system* requiring cultivation; here we especially analyse the effects of our *design* on individual and networked *processes of professionalisation*. One of the questions we ask in this context is, for example: How do the face-to-face community and virtual structures contribute to the capacity of both empathic understanding and rational analysis? Respectively, what are their intrinsic limitations?

Second, we focus on the Professional Community as a blended *knowledge structure* that supports the development of knowledge in a way that it can provide answers to urgent practical questions. Here we ask, for example: what concepts of knowledge do we refer to when we conceive the Professional Community as a *knowledge-building community*? How can these concepts be linked with skills?

The research results and experiences are meant not only to improve the programme of teacher training in higher education, but also to enforce networked and lifelong learning throughout the university.

THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

In formally implementing a PC as a network of people who are involved in processes of professionalisation at the University of Vienna, with teacher education and training representing the pilot project, we try to form a group that exists as both a face-to-face and a virtual structure. We shall describe the scenario on the basis of one of the 'Modellcurricula', which is in its first semester and currently consists of 20 students. The group is supposed to attend the Modules 1a and 1b: Module 1a is constituted as a blended learning

scenario combining face-to-face meetings with online-phases throughout the semester; Module 1b was held as a pure presence course lasting two full days on one weekend at the beginning of the semester. The virtual space is exclusively used to provide documents.

In the face-to-face setting in Module 1a the PC strongly resembles a traditional class attending a university course, following previously scheduled dates, times and locations. However, the circle of people is extended in so far as the students are in direct contact with practitioners within small field research sessions throughout the semester. The assignment is to systematically observe their teaching at schools and interview them about personal experiences in the students' future professional area. This is an example for multiple roles of PC-members: students temporarily work as researchers.

The web-based learning environment is housed by the internet platform 'WebCT Vista', which is the web course tool mainly used and administrated at the University of Vienna. The online setting involves the module related environments for single semesters as well as the virtual space provided throughout the eight semesters of teacher education and training.

The Virtual 'Roof'

All members of the PC have access to this virtual environment, which can be imagined as a 'roof' sheltering individual, course related, learning environments (Figure 2). This virtual space will be open to all members (including facilitators, practitioners, experts and researchers) of the community throughout the eight semesters of teacher training and even beyond, independent of individual courses and their appending learning environments. This way, there will always be virtual space where group members can 'meet', exchange information, analyse their learning processes and reflect on their actions as professionals (Oevermann, 1999), which we consider one of the most important aspects of professionalism.

Ideally, the students who will eventually be competent practitioners will continue to attend the virtual environment and still benefit from the PC as a social learning network in terms of lifelong learning.

In order to enable exchange and reflexion, the community members are encouraged to use the communication tools provided on WebCT Vista. A discussion board, called 'MC Café' (Modellcurriculum-Café), is open for asynchronous communication and the 'MC Chat' enables people to have synchronous conversations. Both tools are managed by e-moderators, usually facilitators. The members of the PC, especially the students, are trained in the use of web tools and certain didactical methods related to these ways of communication. Additionally, personal portfolios are provided for the students in order to present and archive individual as well as cooperative products created within modules. Furthermore, a research-journal is included in the personal portfolio, where the students are encouraged to verbalize their observations of personal learning and researching. They then shall analyse their actions, reflect on their personal processes and development throughout their education and training in order to support professionalised action.



Figure 1

INITIAL CONCLUSIONS AND REMAINING TASKS

The results of analysing our first collection of empirical data (see above) has so far confirmed our hypothesis that groups, being significantly facilitated and purposefully designed, can influence the students' learning positively and thus support their professionalisation. Even though the parameters of the design are still to be defined further, some of them have already proved successful in this first 10 months of our research work:

Above all, the group forming process must be kept in mind by the designer(s) of the environment and, more and more, by the community members themselves. In order to achieve this, community members need not only space for communication on subject matter or for informal communication, but also opportunities to express how they feel as a person in the community, how they experience the communication patterns of the community and how this might influence their knowledge building respectively the formation of their professional skills.

Furthermore, the learning network we have been involved in establishing has proved successful insofar as it brings people together from different specialist areas of the profession and is an appropriate means to close the gap between theory and job practice. As a consequence, this learning network offers opportunities for profound changes in professional job fields as well as in professional education by making products of research visible and shareable on the one hand, and creating new, 'custom-made' practical knowledge on the other. Through this we move away from teaching 'pre-packaged' knowledge to solving the problems with which professionals are confronted in practice – without ever losing touch with the scientific knowledge basis of the profession.

Remaining tasks: the research design used for the observation and evaluation of group processes in the PC has yet to be further elaborated. The question here is how group processes and their contribution to learning in general and professionalisation in particular can be made visible. Analysing the communication patterns produced in the virtual learning environment might be one approach to establishing what makes the PC successful. Another promising approach might be the creation of an observation group in the face-to-face settings throughout the eight semesters of study with changing members.

Along with a further enhanced research into online and face-to-face group processes, the network of researchers, experts, practitioners and students which has been created on a face-to-face and online basis is to be evaluated in the course of the next winter term (2006/2007). For this purpose we intend to make dyadic and group interviews within and across the various practices.

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