COLLABORATION AND NETWORKED COMMUNITIES FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT: ESP-RO YAHOOGROUP

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Abstract

Lack of needs-coping ESP TT programmes as well as financial issues, represent a challenge for ESP teachers in their desire to enhance their professional development. A viable solution that meets both the requirement for autonomy and collaborative activities for upgrading the ESP teaching staff in the Romanian context could be represented by networked teacher communities (NC). With their flexible organization, collaborative and experiential character, NCs are focused on specific needs, representing a viable model for continuous TD (Kante, 2002). The ESP-RO yahoogroup was created to offer Romanian ESP teachers access to information on resources, events, to share ideas, experiences and expertise for mutual professional growth.

Communities of Practice (CoP) versus Team-working and Social Networks

This introductory section examines what Communities of Practice are, how they are different from team-working and social networks.

CoPs are groups that form to share what they know and to learn from one another regarding certain aspects of their work. Although the term is rather new, there are early examples such as the community formed by the copy-machine repair technicians at Xerox, which helped their specialists improve their efficiency and effectiveness in dealing with the problems they encountered. However, this was a voluntary, informal gathering and sharing of expertise.

Communities of Practice are organized around a practice, which is characterized by the following three qualities:

- joint enterprise – members are there to accomplish something on an ongoing basis, i.e. they have a mission;
- mutual engagement – members interact with one another, not just in the course of doing their work but to clarify the work, to define how it is done or change how it is done;
- Shared repertoire - the members have not only work in common but also shared methods, tools, techniques, stories;
- People have a sense of identity tied to the community;
- The practice is not formal: members learn how to do and become competent in the course of doing it in concert with others.

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The theory of learning at the basis of CoPs is based on the process called Legitimate Peripheral Participation, a process through which newcomers to the community learn from old-timers (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Although having much in common, CoPs are neither teams, nor social networks. Teams are focused on the outcome of a task and tie to a specific process or function with roles and tasks that may often vary whereas social networks (Facebook, Meebo) are interested in connections and relationships rather than in the domain and practice. To further distinguish CoPs from the latter, it is necessary to pinpoint that CoPs are also known as learning networks - thematic groups with stress being laid on "learning", i.e. they concentrate on how to do tasks.

Self-organizing CoPs pursue the shared interests of the group. They add value to universities by sharing lessons learned, acting as distribution points for best and emerging practices, providing forums in which issues and problems can be raised and resolved, and in general, learning from each other.

Distinctive **characteristics** of CoPs are:

[+Flow of information among members], [+identification and sharing of best practices], [+develop members' expertise], [+face2face interactions], [+virtual/electronic communication], [+specific roles and responsibilities are stable]

From SIGs to CoPs

This section will present key observations about learning that have implications for the design of learning networks.

Our traditional institutions are largely based on the assumption that:

- learning is an individual process that is best separated from the rest of our activities and that teaching is required for learning to occur. We arrange classrooms where students free from all the distractions of their participation in the world can pay attention to a teacher or focus on tasks.
- We assess learning with tests in which collaboration is cheating. The result is that much of our institutionalized teaching is perceived as irrelevant and learning is boring.

However,

- learning is not an activity that stops when we do something else; teaching may not cause learning. We learn all the time, whether or not we see our learning, whether or not we learn what is expected of us. Therefore we need to create circumstances that empower learning;

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- learning is fundamentally social. Working together is not cheating but at the very core of learning. Knowledge is constructed through collaboration and interaction in activities within a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky);
- Training is not just a matter of designing courses but of facilitating participation.

These concepts lie at the basis of modern learning communities whether we consider the way in which we teach our students or the way we learn and grow professionally.

More than ever XXIst century teachers need to be connected in order to make a difference and be relevant in their fields. Our own Personal Learning Network (PLN) consists of the people we **choose to provide us with knowledge and advice in becoming better and** may begin to wonder how we ever survived without them.

If Special Interest Groups (SIGs) keep people connected on a common field or topic (IATEFL SIGs on Autonomy, IT, Business English, ESP, etc.) with the function of collecting and sharing information of common interest, CoPs can represent powerful catalysts for enabling teachers to improve their practice.

On-going PD is a field where work is already being undertaken to develop CoPs to support teachers' Communities of practice such as the Webheads in Action, Enhancing lessons, Class 2.0, Class 2.0 EFL, etc. which allow teachers to collaborate, develop new knowledge and learn about new resources. The main mission of The Webheads in Action, for instance, is to learn collaboratively regarding technology-enhanced TEFL/TESOL. A variety of platforms from online forums (Elluminate, Tapped-in) to wiki-based environments, emails and other asynchronous tools have been used to help hundreds of EFL/ESOL teachers worldwide to make a difference in their PD by successfully employing the latest technology developments in their teaching.

Although teaching is a very personal and individual activity, teachers benefit greatly from links with other teachers both with colleagues in their own organization and with colleagues in the wider teaching community.

CoPs can migrate in their turn from the mainly informal status to a more formal basis as "Knowledge Communities".

ESP Teachers' Needs Evaluation

This section presents the results of a PD needs analysis of a representative group of ESP teachers in Romanian Higher Education and answers the question why CoPs can represent a viable solution for PD.

The concept of the XXIst century rounded teacher has significantly changed. Acquisition of Eurocompetences necessary to face ESP teaching at undergraduate, Master and CLIL levels

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presuppose continuous upgradable ESP teacher development, training teachers to use technology creatively and effectively, offering alternative e-learning instruments in TT programmes, membership in communities of practice and efficiency and information through ESP teacher networking.

Since unlike in secondary school system, most Romanian universities provide WWW access in the course rooms they, teachers have already been trying to apply the New Technologies to prepare their students.

Furthermore, there is a perceived shift in delivering instruction from CBE (computer-based education) or CALL (computer assisted language learning) to NBE (network-based education) which involves the emergence of groupware platforms, shared expertise, and cooperation. Teacher- and student-empowering, these strategies have come to represent a necessity that is dictated by the process of massification, the students' outside commitments (earning degrees online), the digital native status of the XXIst century students.

However, blended learning involves the use of the regular classroom-based learning with Web-based resources and tools such as Wikis, blogs, podcasts, synchronous voiced chat, Web 2.0 technologies such as tagging, user-generated content, which can be daunting to many teachers.

Lack of needs-coping ESP TT programmes as well as financial issues, represent a challenge for ESP teachers in their desire to enhance their professional development. As the results of a survey conducted in 2008 on a group of ESP teachers reflects (Pop, 2009: *In Search for Relevant Needs-Coping ESP Teacher Training),* there is no optimal overlap between pre-service and in-service ESP teachers' education and professional development on the one hand and the real needs this profession faces in the digital era, on the other. The survey group included 70 ESP[1] respondents (N = 70) from private and state Romanian universities (15 academic centers) from the following relevant range of specialist fields: economics, law, medicine, technical, mathematics, philosophy, geography and tourism, psychology, marine).

A large number of Romanian ESP teachers already take great responsibility for upgrading their technology knowledge and skills informally through self-training and experimentation, research and reflection, as well as financial investment in IT-TT courses for personal needs. Although most of the surveyed Romanian ESP teachers are either MA or PhD students (42.8%), or hold a PhD (47.14%), most of them lack in-service or continuous development courses (68.57%) and expressed their need and desire to attend such PD courses.

As the survey results point out, the gap between ESP theory and practice in TT is optimizable. A "green" and financially viable solution that meets both the requirement for autonomy and collaborative activities for upgrading the ESP teaching staff in the Romanian context and add value to ESP, could be represented by the CoPs. With their flexible organization,

[1] ESP is taken to refer not only to English but also to French, German, Spanish, Italian that are taught to non-philological specializations in HE

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collaborative and experiential character, NCs/CoPs are focused on specific needs, representing an appropriate model for continuous TD (Kante, 2002).

In the chapter entitled "Adopting Communities of Practice as a Framework for Teacher Development", Rana Yildirim strongly suggests that a CoP approach to teachers' PD is more beneficial than the so-called traditional learning opportunities envisaged by in-service TT models in creating powerful learning environments where teachers can find opportunities to share, cooperate, understand and support each other, become aware of their weaknesses and strengths (Kimble, 2008).

To this purpose, the ESP-RO yahoogroup was created to offer Romanian ESP teachers access to information on resources, events, to share ideas, experiences and expertise for mutual professional growth.

Marketing ESP-RO yahoogroup: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ESP-RO

ESP-RO Yahoogroup grew informally around the needs of developing an ESP exploratory project aimed at enhancing the quality standard in HE-ESP: **"Strategies for Optimizing the Quality Standard in Higher Education ESP"** , the first international workshop on topics of foreign language education for non-philological specializations in Romanian HE reflecting on strategies with potential impact on the quality of foreign language services as far as education, teacher training (TT) and research are concerned.

The group was founded in January 2009 with the aim of developing a national network of teachers of ESP, offering every member a network of teachers with similar interests, opportunities for sharing ideas, problems and experience, news on ESP-related events, email notices on events and important news as well as opportunities for professional development.

The idea was to start small, keep things simple and informal and if indispensable and valid, it can be coached and nurtured towards a CoP that will produce over time shared resources. The group has currently 62 members, teachers of English for Specific Purposes in Romanian Higher Education with the area of ESP as the focal point. Posts on newly published books, calls for papers and online events have been made and Ivana Simonova PhD from University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic and Teresa Almeida D'Eca, Lisbon, Portugal, main coordinator of Webheads in Action CoP, have shared files on ESP IT-enhanced learning. The long-term goal is to stimulate interaction, socialize new members and provide a forum of discussion on ESP developments.

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Conclusion

Learning in a community is particularly challenging in times of financial embarrassment, of e-learning and capitalization on CoPs for improvement of experience and knowledge. However, CoPs do not just happen. It takes time and work to sustain them, to generate interest in joining from prospective members. The ESP-RO yahoogroup (**http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ESP-RO**), created to offer Romanian ESP teachers access to information on resources and events, to share ideas, experiences and expertise for mutual professional growth is in place and can develop into a CoP if the expressed needs of ESP teachers may impose it in the future.

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