



Responding to obstacles to educational change: Can online professional learning communities of educators help alleviate inertia?

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The complexity and uncertainty that our societies face today invites us to rethink our notions of learning, schooling, and the broader question of the purpose of education. This paper discusses Jónasson's (2016) article "Educational change, inertia and potential futures: Why is it difficult to change the content of education?", in which he argues that these disruptions demand changes in education, namely in its aims, and in its content. Thus, today we may need 'new knowledge' that perhaps resides outside of the usual disciplines. Changes will need to involve teachers as 'the professionals that operate the System' (2016, p. 1). The aim of this paper is to provide a discussion around two of the nine categories of inertia that are seen to stifle change, and that Jónasson highlights in his article, *teacher education* (TE) and *lack of space and motivation for initiative*. It argues that specific conditions of TE may open up venues to address these constraints and support change and challenge current teacher education approaches that reflect these inertial constraints. The paper focuses on an online professional learning community (OPLC) gathering teachers from 50 European countries on an online platform developed under the umbrella of the Council of Europe's Pestalozzi Programme for teacher development. The data was analysed through an ensemble of tools considered well fitted to find patterns in a conversation formed by teacher-dialogues, first by observing and counting, then by qualitative inquiry (thematic analysis). The results show how the OPLC, by opening a space for educators to critically reflect on their practice with peers and facilitators, presents a model that may start addressing the two selected inertial constraints cited by Jónasson.

Keywords: teacher identity, teacher professionalism, teacher education, dialogic learning, learning communities, ecology of learning.

Introduction

The complexity and uncertainty that our societies face today invites us to rethink our notions of learning, schooling, and the broader question of the purpose of education. Jónasson (2016) argues that these disruptions demand changes in education, namely in its aims, and in its content. Thus, today we may need 'new knowledge' that perhaps resides outside of the usual disciplines; changes will need to involve teachers as 'the professionals that operate the System' (2016, p. 1). The aims of this paper are two: to provide insights around two of the nine categories of inertial constraints that are seen to stifle change, and that Jónasson highlights in his article, and to challenge current teacher education approaches that reflect these inertial constraints. The paper will first approach the inertial constraints that are *teacher education* (TE), and *lack of space and motivation for initiative*, and then,

in light of these insights, will discuss the questions with the issue of agents of change in view. It argues that specific conditions of TE may open up venues to address these constraints and support grassroots change and transformation.

The article focuses on a community of teachers who, after attending training on education for democracy and human rights, were invited by the programme to act as far as possible as autonomous professionals (Craft, 2000) to address these challenges. The article also relies on a previous study conducted in the framework of a doctoral thesis (Mompoin-Gaillard, 2021), research that was awarded a grant by the doctoral fund of University of Iceland. The research is a case study that explored developing forms of continuing professional development (CPD) by investigating the characteristics of the participation of education professionals from 50 European countries on an online platform developed under the umbrella of the Council of Europe's Pestalozzi Programme (PP) for teacher development. Educators who are gathered in this online space form both a community of practice (Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) based on engagement, belonging and identity and a community of inquiry (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison & Akyol, 2013; Garrison et al., 2000; Goodchild et al., 2013) based on questioning, seeking answers, recognising problems, and seeking solutions. Such communities are known to be plentiful, of different natures and authors have provided classifications and reviews of these online arrangements for CPD in teacher professional development (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Macià & García, 2017). Because the professional learning community is online and belongs to a teacher development programme, I have chosen to name it an online professional learning community (OPLC). The interaction between the participants in the community is an ongoing conversation at which the research spotlight is directed. Thus, the principal aim of the research was to understand the ingredients of conversational CPD that takes place between in-service teachers having a diverse cultural background but sharing the common aim of being able to promote various aspects of democratic principles and understandings within European schools.

Such a type of CPD as studied through the OPLC, hosts an ecology of learning rooted in conversation. By ecology of learning, I mean the space in which an individual's, or a group's learning occurs, constituted both by the physical (technological) and social space, including the interconnections and relations between the elements that comprise it. Such elements concern the technological settings, the actors and their behaviours, their thoughts and ideas, the artefacts, resources, processes and sets of contexts, cultural and historical, and the interactions that provide individuals with opportunities and resources for learning, development, and achievement. The overall concern of the research was to describe and understand the affordances of conversation based OPLCs that foster the establishment of an ecology of learning conducive to the development of democratic practices in educational settings.

The structuration of the conversation not only distributes teachers' professional education over an extended period and fairly continuously (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Jónasson, 2013; Korthagen, 2017) but also engages educators in a critical evaluation and reflection on the level of values and beliefs they hold on education (Biesta et al., 2017; Harris, 2010; Huber & Mompoin-Gaillard, 2011), and growth in the areas of democratic culture, enjoyment, commitment and identity (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Korthagen, 2017). Thus, teachers may find their agency, liberating their opportunities for critical evaluation and alternative, and future courses of action, and the OPLC, by opening a space for them to do this. Creating such a space may be part of a response addressing the two inertial constraints cited by Jónasson that were selected for this paper (i.e., teacher education and lack of motivation, space and initiative). Such unconventional forms of CPD are important in a context in which demands on teacher competences are increasing and rapidly changing (Jónasson, 2013). Through qualitative inquiry (thematic analysis) into teacher-dialogues in the OPLC, conditions for the creation of the 'space for initiative' are visited, and advantages of more agile forms of TE and Professional Learning and Development (PLD) are considered, namely for the development of education professionals' agency as well as for gathering strategic evidence for future policy.

Previous research: Contextualizing OPLCs as “professional development 3.0” engaging educators on the level of values, beliefs, identity, and affect

The Pestalozzi OPLC proposed a unique distinctive model of CPD since it came from a strong values base, where equity and social justice and the nurturing of a democratic culture are at the centre of the purpose of education. This is a defining element of the setting that distinguishes it from most “official” training that is most often oriented towards performativity and accountability. The OPLC relates to context that is unusual: there are no formal expectation as regards to outcomes, participation in the online community is entirely voluntary, without any accreditation or institutional reward for achievement. Therefore, the OPLC is exempt from strong constraints such as accountability, and standards so that participant engagement is informal, open-ended, self-paced, and self-organized. This setup supports the view that conversation in more informal settings can be an important device for teacher education. The Pestalozzi Programme recognized the need to foster collaborative professional learning (understood as the acquisition of content, data, tools, and methods) and professional and personal development (understood as growth in the areas of values awareness, mindfulness, enjoyment, commitment and building of positive and stable identity), both together constituting PLD (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016).

The PP model of PLD was aligned with Kennedy’s view (2005), that transformative models are open-ended and teacher-centred, and may provide means to support sustainable educational change through the development of deliberate professionalism. Such transformative models as the PP are critical towards the more closed and highly structured types that range from the traditional, expert-centred models of CPD, and the knowledge focused and contextually void training models that place the purpose in providing new skills for teachers to enable them to ‘deliver’ the curriculum to students. Korthagen (2017) coined the term ‘professional development 1.0’ to characterize traditional CPD models structured around theory to practice. He argues that the shift to ‘professional development 2.0’ models structured around practice to theory represents an advancement by bringing teacher learning closer to the actual practice of teaching. Korthagen (2017) advocates the passage to ‘professional development 3.0’ in which not only theory and practice are considered but also the teachers’ thinking, feelings, desires, ideals (what inspires them), and identities are recognized. He establishes learning communities of teachers as a means to achieve 3.0-class CPD.

... such an approach builds on the concerns and gestalts of the teacher, and not on a pre-conceived idea of what this teacher should learn. This may also be an explanation of the positive outcomes of communities of learners in which teachers collaborate, as scholars studying teacher change emphasize (see, e.g., Fullan, 2007; Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2007). (Korthagen, 2017, p. 400).

Biesta et al. (2017) further establish conversation and reflection-based approaches when they view teachers’ talk as “a most necessary condition for their achievement of agency” (p. 52). Harris (2010), citing Boyle, While & Boyle, also furthers this thinking when arguing that most forms of professional development ‘appear insufficient to foster learning which fundamentally alters what teachers teach or how they teach.’ (2004, p. 47). She points to the challenge to identify the features of training that are shown to be effective in bringing about change and suggests cycles of “challenge – experience – reflection” as a key principle that was enacted in the PP to prepare teachers for change.

The importance of integrating teacher thinking, feeling, belonging, and behaving is of particular interest when beholding Jónasson’s argument as I will demonstrate in the following sections. Listening closely to the ways in which teachers “richly contextualize their professional identities” (Cohen, 2010, p. 480) sheds light on how the co-regulation of the conversation shapes the range of possible meanings teacher professional identity might take on. Teachers’ understandings of their professional identity work in relation to their self-efficacy, capability and willingness to engage with educational change and innovation in their practice (Beijaard et al., 2000). Conflicting views about what is good pedagogy, or valuable content, results in teachers having to manage multiple

and sometimes conflicting pedagogical beliefs, for example: beliefs developed at home, in primary and secondary education, during the teacher education program as a student, and beliefs adopted while doing teaching-practice at school (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Even though dialogic activities have the advantage of prompting deeper reflection, their driving force may remain past-leaning, and therefore the challenge is to hold space for conversational professional development that is leaning towards the midterm and more distant future. In this paper, I investigate whether and to what extent OPLCs can be an arena for discussions on “educational vision, overview and fundamental knowledge about education, possible futures and the mechanisms of institutional change needed ... to take up these issues?” (Jónasson, 2016, p. 12).

Theoretical background: models of professionalisation addressing futures in education

Thus, this paper is placed within the larger debate around the types of TE that harbour transformative potential. It is interested in the elements of PLD that favour deeper modes of professional development through content, process and through more programmatic issues such as longitudinal approaches that may compose a response to obstacles to change and transformation in education. The study described and analysed concrete ways in which emerging technologies can be leveraged to support educators to effectively grow, plan, monitor, and adapt their own, their peers', and collective engagement for transformation in education. In this paper, the author will explore possible benefits OPLCs can bring in the light of two of the nine categories of inertias, described by Jónasson in his paper (2016) and explained in the next sections. The author asks whether and to what extent this setup may respond to: how 1) “teacher education”, and 2) “the lack space for initiatives oriented towards possible futures” that may stifle change.

Inertial constraint 1 “teacher education is conservative”: shifting to future models with OPLCs

Setting off from Jónasson's observation that “teacher education is conservative in nature” (2016, p. 8) the author argues that OPLCs, as described in the previous sections, may represent an interesting response to the situation. Conversation-based (or dialogic) professional development is for now quite marginal in the pre-service TE and CPD landscape and therefore can be considered as a non-conservative strategy. OPLCs are unusual and lack recognition in the education world, both from a policy and a practice point of view, not mentioning their relative scarcity in the education research field as well. The Pestalozzi OPLC could be considered as a futures-oriented arrangement, as previously presented, and therefore conversation-based teacher education is here suggested as an element of a response to the many arguments described in Jónasson's paper. The rationale behind the strategy of the OPLC was that teachers should not be led to think that they cannot act while others anticipate substantial changes in education policy or curricular reform. Obviously, it is not implied by this statement that members of an OPLC would necessarily possess all the needed characteristics, and be equipped with the “urge, status, authority, overview, and the competence” (p. 12) to discuss and implement substantial change. OPLCs can be seen as one aspect of what would be needed to address the ensemble of obstacles mentioned by Jónasson.

Also, Jónasson states that the capacity to teach interdisciplinary topics, such as computer programming, the nature of sustainability challenges or the introduction of ethics as a serious challenge for many areas of modern society, or multicultural issues, do not gain ground in teacher education programmes. These are unusual topics that do not easily find their place in subject-specific curricular development. Recognizing that “the design and implementation of school and college curricula is not a place for the faint hearted” (Ivatts, 2011), the OPLC can be considered as a potential response to the situation: it opened spaces of peer leaning in which teachers of different subjects were invited to collaborate on transversal, cross-curricular issues. The researched OPLC was focused on the issue of democratic education, that includes content and pedagogies that are fit for developing

student and teacher competences of an array such as students' critical thinking and participation in decision-making, and the inclusion of social, ethical, and cultural issues in our thinking about the purpose of education. Although the integration of such democratic concerns is gaining traction in the field, means to support teachers to deal with these and other controversial issues while practicing inclusive education, social justice, and equity in their practice, are not widespread. I argue that due to their potential in terms of shifting to new models of PLD and opening arenas for cross curricular conversations, OPLCs are worthy of being considered as models that should become less unusual and enter more mainstream research, policy, and practice.

Acknowledging that change in “education comes sluggishly, and that the process of curricular development is one that customarily mirrors societal change” (Mompoin-Gaillard, 2015a) - it will take time for schools to change the content of teaching and the methods employed to teach youngsters - the programme imagined devices to “piggyback” on the existing curricular structures. A set of competence-based tools were proposed as a foundation for education for democracy (Mompoin-Gaillard, 2015b) and served as part of the pedagogical framework. The indicators of the model were further translated into components that all education professionals whatever subject they might specialize in, need to develop in themselves and contribute to developing in learners. These components of competences span along dimensions of collaborative and cooperative skills and dispositions, self-awareness, social justice and human rights, intercultural communication and diversity, knowledge production and critical thinking.

Thus, OPLCs are huge opportunities to advance on these issues both with teachers and researchers. They may be guided by research on PLD pointing to the importance of grappling with teacher values and beliefs (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Harris & Lázár, 2011; Korthagen, 2017; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Mompoin-Gaillard, 2015a) in a lifelong learning perspective (Boyle et al., 2004; Day, 1999; Hammerness et al., 2005; Huber & Mompoin-Gaillard, 2011; Jónasson, 2013). Distributed settings such as OPLCs offer specific advantages: trusted peers are from ‘another work-space’, a different context than their ‘physical’ local context allows them to show up as vulnerable without risking losing face with their colleagues in their workplace. It is certainly possible to speak here not only of a “community of practice”, but also of a “community about practices”, and a “community of inquiry” (gathering stakeholders of the education equation, such as researchers, practitioners, leaders, and policymakers) which, for its part, took a questioning and reflexive look at teaching actions. It provided the participants with opportunities to clarify their questions for themselves and develop their sense of agency to transform their practices. This has a potential to address teachers' resistance to change. The activity in the OPLC pays its dues to the importance of teachers' exploring own and challenging personal theories or gestalts, seeing tensions between what they espouse and what they actually do in practice, between what they want to do and what they can do, and offers an environment that provides ‘careful encouragement’ (Harris & Lázár, 2011, p. 102).

OPLCs also offer the advantage of providing access to rich data on teacher discourse and representations or mental models, assumptions, beliefs and personal as well as academic theories, to address educators' readiness for change (Biesta et al., 2017; Harris, 2010). Such access to living data would, therefore, advance research and policy on the topic in new ways. This type of data is valuable for both qualitative and quantitative studies on teacher development. It also contributes to what Fullan & Hargreaves say about ‘scaling up of transformative professional learning and development’ and ‘retention of teachers in the profession’ (Fullan, 2006; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016).

Inertial constraint 2 “motivation and spaces for initiatives oriented towards possible futures”: OPLCs as motivational, resourced space

Within aspects of inertia, Jónasson points out a “lack of incentive or space to take the initiative oriented towards possible futures” (Jónasson, 2016, p. 9). OPLCs may be relevant devices for opening up possibilities for invention and innovation, with the present and futures in mind. By conceptualising conversation as an ecology of learning, I delineate a dynamic space that has – under certain conditions

- a transformative potential. If, as Biesta et al. (2017) argue, talk is an important resource for teachers, then, an online community where teacher PLD is done through talking is highly relevant. In a heuristic perspective, authors define conversation as a foremost driving process of learning (Gadamer, 2001; Sharples et al., 2016; Vessey & Blauwkamp, 2007) that allow teachers to explore the thoughts and actions and extend these explorations to possibly “move new understandings to future activity” (Sharples et al., 2016, p. 68). But, for participants to benefit from such PLD, they must engage in interactions in the OPLC, which is a time consuming yet meaningful activity. Thus, provision for engagement, providing time and technical means for educators to participate, is of the essence and should inform policy on teachers’ professional development. Rightly “the lack of time and incentive to explore research and follow a wide spectrum of modern development” (p. 9) is pointed out in the paper. If these were to have some priority, time and incentive would be preponderant for change to happen regarding both leadership and the teachers.

The author envisages that the OPLC model of CPD, as an agile and voluntary endeavour, would give the incentive back to practitioners and make the reflection of futures more available to all. This would not constitute a single effective response to the challenges presented by the need for futures thinking in education, but is a part, an ingredient of an ensemble of enabling activities. The role of conversation for the professional development aspect as described above, considers conversation to be a central and crucial activity and medium for learning. Jónasson points out that engaging constantly with new ideas, new thinking about education and dealing with the various inertias of change, when taken together, presents a formidable task even if the desire for change is present. Therefore, the question is: can this formidable task be taken on with more strength when done collectively, with distributed leadership - and other structures - that allow for the goal to be spread over topics, and shared by many practitioners? Each individual thus takes on some part of the competences, overview and fundamental knowledge about education, possible futures, and the processes of institutional change. This would address the pending issue that “very few people who are engaged in education have the wide-ranging overview”. In a collective, in learning communities, the wide-ranging overview can be attained through distributed knowledge of its members.

Teachers’ knowledge is not only the knowledge for teachers generated elsewhere, but also the knowledge of teachers gained from a range of sources and experiences, including their ongoing engagement with the practice of teaching itself (Biesta et al., 2017). An online community can be viewed as a system that attempts to “conduct an internal learning conversation that allows it to learn from experience, and adapt to its environment” (Laurillard, 2002, p. 215). The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-knows but is constantly shaping her/his values, knowledge, attitude, and behaviour. Laurillard (2000) posits that higher education, (and by extension teacher PLD), should not only give access to information but also include learners’ “engagement with others in the gradual development of their personal understanding [emphasis added]” (p. 137). Thus, the interaction with peers and with moderators is the fundament of learning in the OPLC and an important goal of this type of PLD is the creation of relationships in which participants feel connected and support each other in their efforts to learn and transform the way they teach, but also what they teach. Thus, the question is whether by grappling with both education aims and content, they will also tackle inertia by continuously reviving each other’s stamina, persistence, and resilience.

Also impeding change and transformation, Jónasson’s paper underlines how the demands and pressure on the school system are steadily increasing, and consequently, the tasks for the leaders at all levels, multiply. Therefore, analysing tensions teachers may experience when trying to implement new ideas is of crucial importance and the author here argues that conversational peer learning may represent a space in which to deal with such tensions. Conversing in the OPLC, participants discussed the challenges and tensions faced in their institutional frameworks and expressed how they might not be able to experience the same – or similar – democratic cultures in their schools. They might meet power-over structures that may make their intentions to move to power-with, or co-active power, rather than coercive power (Parker Follett, 1924; Smith, 2002), impossible. Teachers work in complex environments to which they come back after an experience in CPD; then commences an “interplay between their ideas as trainees, the ideas of the tutor and the ideas from their department”

(context, institution, school, ministry, etc.), and these “create competing demands on teachers” (Harris & Lázár, 2011, p. 101).

One challenge is to build conditions conducive to the empowerment of teachers in their own practices and contexts, with regard to a common project, collectively negotiated and objectified by rigorous research approaches. (Mottier Lopez, 2015, p. 8) [non-official translation by the author].

The research on the Pestalozzi OPLC focused in part on the perceived transformation of practices and teachers’ mental models of what may constitute a democratic practice. The exchanges revealed a negotiation of praxis, in the face of institutional hegemonies (see *Table 1*) and societal injunctions that create a double bind (Bateson, 1972) to which they react with negative emotions. An example of such conundrums is the contradictory injunction between the values of inclusiveness and equality (present in most education laws of the member states) and the institutionalisation of testing and the standardisation of education. The discursive tension, beyond the dissonance it provokes, acts as a cognitive constructive controversy (Charlier & Daele, 2006; Daele, 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 2009), leading the participants to agree on objectives for the promotion of democracy and to seek the means of achieving more democracy in educational systems which are not inherently democratic. Thus, they address a “blind spot” in the system’s principles (Mompoin-Gaillard & Audran, 2020), namely, the question of democracy in education, and its different dimensions: obsolescence of curricular content, assessment standards promoting mistrust and perpetuating social injustice, lack of intercultural sensitivity, lack of practices reducing the effects of poverty and social discrimination, ethos its relationship with policy and practice, to state a few. Several tensions were observed revolving around reckoning the role of stakeholders:

- the ability of teachers to act for a particular vision of education; the fruit of a reflection on its societal goal;
- the limited capacity of students who act on their situation; the intervention of parents who, through their support strategies, reinforce the injustices;
- the integrity of educational leaders who sometimes have their own preoccupations more in view than the well-being of children.

Thus, the OPLC allowed for interactions, extended over time, provided opportunities for exchange in such a way that they were sufficient to enable participants to develop interpersonal knowledge and stable relations and this has implications for building online communities in general. As the threads of discourses from the past remain in the present, they may complicate the dialogic process in conversational types of teacher education and PLD. Discourses from within and from outside, from the present and other times and places, meet and clash (Bakhtin, 1981) with those discourses embodied in the members. Space is needed for teachers to unwind such knots and the moderators have an important role to help engage teachers in the review of past threads to create new thoughts that offer new possibilities of being and doing. Thus, conversation matters, and it stretches beyond dialogical structures. It is a “meta process of how we bring forth the world” (Scharmer, 2016, p. 290) and it becomes transformational when it involves personal connection, defined as authentic sharing and listening, dialogue attending a “deeper space” (adding up to “collective presence” (Scharmer, 2016). This process is similar to the experience of flow, meaning that conversation can be seen as a way of enhancing our lives by improving the quality of our experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) with others.

The OPLC as a “space for initiatives oriented towards possible futures” is resourced by peer interactions, guided by moderators (or facilitators), and is an intertextual and intercontextual site. It requires investment in the quality of the facilitation of the conversation. Moderators’ facilitation will affect whether such a space becomes transformative. The opportunity to reflect in a structured way was an emphasis of the Pestalozzi Programme. This aimed to enable trainees to see the value of promoting democracy in education since lack of time to think deeply enough about the issues would certainly result in them failing to engage with difficult issues. Teachers, who have little time for reflection,

will often go directly from the question “what did I think” directly to the question, “what did I do”, thus avoiding or missing the questions “what did I feel?” and “what did I want?” (Korthagen, 2017, p. 394). If their engagement in conversation in such an OPLC brings them to consider the ethical and affective dimension of their practice, it may help not to “skip the deeper understanding of the meaning of the situation under reflection” (Korthagen, 2017, p. 394) as well as the larger question of the purpose of education. Supporting deeper reflection and self-awareness, with the guidance of moderators, encourages transformative action. The assumption behind this being that teachers will become more effective if all the questions are considered (Korthagen, 2017) including values, feeling and emotion. The membrane between personal and professional development often becomes porous when values and ethical bearings are at stake, and processes involving identity formation are at play through dialogue and friendly confrontation with colleagues. These characteristics point to the usefulness and adequacy of educators’ participation in communities of learners through collaborative work. Such communities are to be studied in context, considering the ideologies that underlie the discourses.

This conception of the potential of learning communities conceptualizes conversation as an ecology of learning that, *in certain conditions*, is conducive to engagement and professional development. Participants who engage in such online conversation practice critical skills of giving feedback, scaffolding with each other’s inputs, at times getting into flow. They may develop a voice in a community environment that is safe enough to help be prepared to question their own knowledge and views. Conversation “educates for critical inquiry and civic participation across lines of ‘difference.’” (Weis & Fine, 2001, p. 521). This creation of knowledge through interaction and collaboration is placed in the realm of conversation and therefore learning takes on meanings such as joining new communities and partaking in new conversations for new meaning making, thus shifting our relationship to others, and possibly shifting within ourselves.

Methods

The platform, on which the OPLC operates, contains hundreds of spaces for discussion that were accessed after a process of obtaining all permissions from the institution and the involved participants. The estimated number of fora is more than 5000. Participants gave their accord for the use of the data for education research purposes. Hence, the amount of available data is massive. The data is composed of asynchronous discussion threads, and other multi-modal texts and images spread out through a vast number of spaces. Participant profiles are diverse: a variety of actors are at play, such as teachers, academics, teacher educators, school heads, administrators, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) staff.

Two different samples were selected. One sample, containing altogether 536 postings in two moderated discussion threads (MDTs), was used for the research. These postings were used to analyse respectively: the features and structuration of the interactions, and the motivational factors in relation to participants’ initial engagement and how they sustain their engagement over time. The second sample, containing 162 postings, was used for investigating the participants’ discourse relative to perceived transformation of practices, and teachers’ mental models relative to what constitutes a democratic teaching practice. They are respectively sample 1 and sample 2 (*Figure 1*).

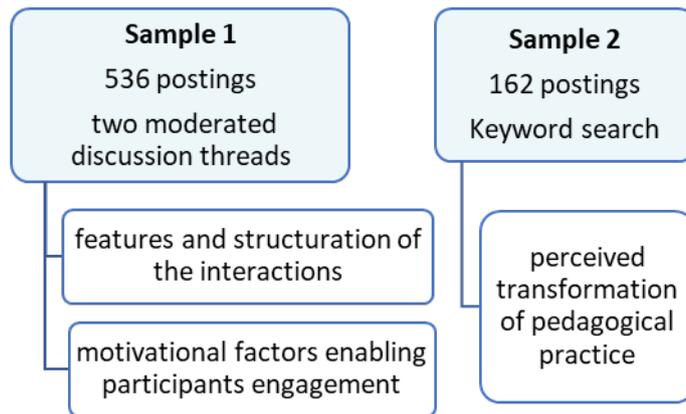


Figure 1 The data samples that were used for the study of the online professional learning community (OPLC); close to 700 postings in asynchronous discussion threads were analysed.

The OPLC was studied within a systemic perspective. The researcher used a systemic perspective to conduct an ecological analysis that allowed to uncover the relational properties emerging from online interactions, “involving affordances of diverse objects such as technology, resources, cultural and historical artefacts, actors, and their behaviours, thoughts, and ideas” (Mompoin-Gaillard, 2021, p. 27). Also, because all participants in the programme are representing their national context and are professionals having capacity to implement pedagogical approaches in their schools and higher education institutions, they each bring, through their stories and discourse, their national and local education contexts in the programme.

The data was analysed through an ensemble of tools and a multiphase approach considered well fitted to find patterns in the conversation. First the researcher observed and counted, in two moderated discussion threads (sample 1), the interactions in terms of size, density, duration, individual involvement, pace, topical persistence, turn taking and ties (or network analysis). Then, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) of both samples was conducted. The process was inductive in the first phase and then enriched by the literature review, and the epistemological approach was interpretative. Such a combinational methodology was well suited for examining participants’ actions as contextualized events because they can give rich and holistic descriptions as well as emphasizing the experience of participants and the social settings in which they occur. More on the method, coding and themes can be found in the thesis (Mompoin-Gaillard, 2021, pp. 109–131).

One limitation for this paper is that the cited study (Mompoin-Gaillard, 2021) did not focus as such on the topic of education futures. However, the line of thinking is that the unusual setting and innovative conceptualisation of PLD that OPLCs represent can bring interesting ideas to the question of change, transformation, and education futures. Also, the subject of futures was brought about in participants’ discourse as they critically reflect on their practice, and inquire about problems and their possible solutions, thus substantiating that the activity within the OPLC is in fact future oriented.

Results and discussion

After contemplating how OPLCs may address these inertial constraints, the paper now moves to consider the important question of “who will do the job?”. The author sides with Jónasson in seeing that it is an over-optimistic view to consider that curricular development can be successful through a top-down process, involving institution-grade entities such as ministries, local authorities, or even the global education superstructure (UNESCO, OECD, EU Commission, COE) (Spring, 2009). This paper explores the other view that changes must and can be driven by the schools themselves, including the school leadership and the teachers. But how?

Coming back again to Biesta et al.'s (2017) characterisation of teachers' talk as "a most necessary condition for their achievement of agency", they also admit that some talk seems to support the ways in which teachers make sense of their practice, whilst other types seem to interfere with and distort what they feel matters and should matter in education. These differences play a role in the achievement of agency, impacting future action; for example, if a teacher felt more able within the environment of her own classroom, she could also feel less able (powerless) within the wider context of the school. The results showed that the achievement of teacher agency is the result of a complex interplay of "individual capacity and *collective cultures and structures* [author's emphasis]" (Biesta et al., 2017, p. 52). Will community members access and harness the necessary urge, competence, to act? How will they negotiate power, status and authority (p. 12) to impact their contexts? According to Elmore, "cultures do not change by mandate; they change by the displacement of existing norms, structures, and processes by stakeholders, and the process of cultural change strongly depends on modelling the new values and behaviour that you expect to displace the existing ones [author's emphasis]" (Elmore, 2004, p. 11). But this may happen at the community level and not in participants' school or classrooms, or in the classroom but not at school level.

Tensions emerged among participants between their intention to develop a democratic practice and the environment in which these practices occur; that is, schools and education systems in the member states, that are for the most part sub-democratic contexts¹. Facing challenges to their individual and collective efficacy, and comparing their situation in their national contexts, participants at times realized how similar their situations were across diverse educational and institutional parameters and they strongly believed that they could mobilize their collective effort to bring about social transformation. In this they are like what Bandura (1994) refers to as tenacious actors: "Realists may adapt well to existing realities. But those with a tenacious self-efficacy are likely to change those realities" (p. 77). Thus, tenaciously, educators in the OPLC encouraged each other, not merely by sharing resources and ideas, but more importantly by stating - and restating - their capacity to exercise choice and express their freedom by inhabiting the 'gaps' in their systems: the interstices between their systems injunctions and the commitment to their educator's will. In a value-based community such as the studied OPLC, the mutual care, reciprocity and trust between participants, and the continuous interaction, uphold educators' urge, self-confidence, and self-efficacy for change. Such endeavours echo other parts of the research's findings concerning participants' engagement as a motivated activity: autonomy, accountability and control are important factors of their motivation to engage in transformation. Hence, the study demonstrated how feelings and motivation play an essential role, even if this is – and has been – a neglected area of education research in the field of teacher education (Hargreaves, 1998; Korthagen, 2017). Still, authors who have been interested in the matter have pointed to relations between the degree of fulfilment of participants' basic needs and the quality of their intention to change their classroom behaviour (Evelein et al., 2008; Korthagen & Evelein, 2016).

Visible in the data, the OPLC participants represented not only their 'own' culturally informed voices, but also started articulating what can be seen as a 'microculture' and 'community voice', expressing a viewpoint and using words by which the group and others can recognize itself. Central to making this possible, the conversation attributes also demonstrate, once again, the issue of belonging and how the way we see ourselves (identity) and the world is to a large extent informed by significant others, including individuals and groups. If the microculture came about in the conversation, the conditions in which this occurred are noteworthy. People of different sub-cultures (linguistic, professional, occupational, institutional, and political) came together to share their meanings and emerge with new meanings. In doing so, they encounter the problems that come with trying to do that, before even being confronted with the problems they need to solve in their contexts. Being removed from their particular circumstances, participants may engage with issues without trying to reach a foreseen outcome or solution. It becomes a constant situation of learning creatively in conversation in which

¹ by this the author means that school and systems-wide structures of education remain for the most part hierarchical and not horizontal, and teacher voice is scarce in the decision-making processes

people share meaning, values and develop a common purpose. It is thus important to understand whether, how and to what extent such an approach allows for a teacher education process that educates for uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity and opens a path for new possibilities.

Following Biesta et al.'s (2017) argument, this research found that teachers' talk exists in an ecology that comprises policy, research, and other discourses about education. In conversation, teachers may nourish their 'ideological becoming' (Bakhtin, 1981) thus sustaining their readiness for change. The social and critical political views, expressed relative to social justice and discrimination, sustain an activist presence and participants' engagement has a perceived effect on their practice. However, one cannot say for sure because they might not actually be doing the practices they tell us about, or perceive that they are doing things, more than they actually are. The present discussion is, therefore, limited to the perceived impact: how participants themselves demonstrate impact in their discourse. To end the discussion, it is worthy to point out the many references in the conversation to 'belonging to the community', through expressions by which practitioners identify themselves as 'Pestalozziers', 'Pestos and Pestas'. This nicknaming is a tangible activity that reinforces the author's construal of the emerging collective identity, the formation of evolving individual professional as well as personal identities and the sentiment of collective agency, which, beyond the activist discourse, denotes participants' activist identity.

The tension between the will to move to co-active power and the prevailing culture of bureaucracies and administrations reveals this PLD program's agonistic (Sant, 2019) or activist approach to education for democracy, which afforded teachers a sense of freedom and autonomy, a powerful sense of belonging to an agentic community, in which the expression of dissent divergence and conflict was seen as most formative. This principled position did not encounter similar power-with intention at the institutional level. Ministries of Education of the member states, and the changing management of host organization - the Council of Europe - did not in the end show enthusiasm at observing such educator freedom. For, what can be the use of a liberated teacher in system that values hierarchical structures over truly democratic ones? Possibly, for the institutional leadership, this image of a liberated and agentic educator presents more of a threat than an opportunity to improve European education systems. The PP was a different style of PLD affording a central place to the question of values and "opened up the profession to wider questions about the common good" (Biesta, 2015, p. 82). Such tensions, between autonomous forms of professional development, the 'collaborative cultures' (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 6) and orientations that they harbour, and the institutions who sponsor them, can arise.

This is an excellent illustration of Jónasson's proposal on inertial forces. For some administrators, agentic approaches can be disconcerting and what is developed by these collaborative cultures may not always correspond to administrators' own preferences as they often 'overlook or overrule the complex, creative, and compassionate realities of what makes excellent teaching' (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012, p. 11). Thus, this paper might also be considered to address some of the other inertias observed by Jónasson, namely system stability (education as institution with strong legacy, laws, regulations, and traditions), standards, and evidently vested interests.

The framework of OPLC challenges technicist ideas that bolster most current programs of teacher CPD. In these, professional learning is often viewed like student learning — something that is deliberately structured and increasingly accepted because it can (to some) more obviously be linked to measurable outcomes (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016), with "these outcomes connected to teacher quality, performance, and impact, just like student learning is often understood as student achievement" (p. 3). Instead, the framework allows to focus on the structures, the relationships, and the overall ethos that becomes essential to assist teachers to develop beyond learning, to examine their beliefs and identify new, next practices that are consistent with their changed beliefs.

This paper has highlighted several components useful to consider when analysing how OPLCs can represent a response to inertial constraints. *Table 1* summarises the major components.

Table 1. Components of the ecology of learning for online PLD in an OPLC that specifically address inertial constraints

Components	How they address inertia and obstacle to change in education
Time	The OPLC allowed for interactions extended over long periods of time, in a lifelong learning perspective. Policies making time for teachers to engage are needed.
Urge	Participant in OPLCs continuously revive each other's stamina and persistence. Resilience is helpful for addressing inertial forces, that are continuously present
Reflection	Teachers become more effective if all the questions are present, including values, feelings and emotion. OPLC can be safe enough spaces for vulnerability.
Distribution of "the formidable task" among many actors in one space	Teachers of different subjects can collaborate on transversal and cross-curricular issues. Knowledge is distributed among participants and 'in the making' thus producing better coverage and overview issues present in the problem space.
Collective structures	Teachers in communities can come to believe that they can mobilize their collective effort to bring about social transformation. OPLCs grow tenacious actors, agent of change.
Double bind situations and tensions	Through their exchanges, teachers negotiate praxis in the face of institutional hegemonies and contradictions They get resources to create spaces in their own contexts to align their praxis and their values.
Rich data	OPLCs gather discourse from policy, research, and practice. The online platforms offer access to important data that give valuable insights into what is happening in the classroom, in the teacher, in the students, for research and policy. This type of data represents real 'voices from the field' and this realness should constitute an important part of the "evidence" within evidence-based policymaking.

Far from CPD models based on the image of the teacher as a "lone wolf", and closer to researchers who question the validity of this stereotypical image of the teacher (Day, 1999; Engeström, 1994; Huberman, 1995), the author proposes a move to models of CPD viewed as a process in which the teacher is:

- intensively connected in multiple online relationships and interactions,
- intentionally engaged with the values that underlie those relationships,
- co-creating a micro-culture in the community,
- over extended periods of time,
- in and through action,
- in and out of school,
- in association with invention, innovation and change processes.

Such continuous engagement in professional relationships thus favours the preparation of individuals as change agents and therefore constitutes a response to teachers' resistance to change (Huber & Mompoin-Gaillard, 2011). Harris and Lázár (2011) point to two forces that impede change in education and may shed a light on teachers' resistance to change: erosion, when new patterns erode over time as they are "washed out" by the tide of old patterns (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981), and inertia, when forces of habit are stronger than the forces of transformation (Jónasson, 2016; Virta, 2002). By addressing these areas, it should be possible to work with teachers, at all stages in their careers to invite them to re-evaluate their values, beliefs, and assumptions, and support them in developing the self-confidence and desire for change which in turn should help move them towards a different, more agentic, and futures-oriented position.

Finally, it is important to tell the whole story. The doctoral research that was the basis of this article was done under the supervision of Pr. Jónasson and the author of this article wishes to recognise how conversation quickly became the basis of this supervisory relationship. As a result of the conversation, Jónasson's vision of complexity, which transpires so clearly in the stated article (Jónasson, 2016) was foundational in the achievement of the doctoral work. The author found in the collaboration the needed support for the validation of adopting a wide perspective and epistemological breadth to acknowledge and deal with the complexity of issues pertaining to the study of OPLCs and their affordances for professional learning. This option was chosen because professional development as seen in this work, in the OPLC, and in the Pestalozzi community on the whole, involves many aspects of learning but may also involve developing other sides of our self, such as consciousness, cooperation, collective intelligence, reflecting on the human condition and reviving teachers' love for their work for example. These endeavours in teacher development are those that carry the potential to turn schools into 'moral communities' that share a democratic ethos.

It is the author's hope is that this paper might contribute to addressing some modest part of Jónasson's warning of the inertial constraints that prevent change in education. OPLCs are worthy to consider as models that should become less unusual and enter more mainstream research, policy, and practice. It is not a comprehensive solution but a proposal that has been found good enough to make an effort and invest in. It offered responses to the question of how continuing engagement in OPLCs might help alleviate some of the obstacles by supplying the careful and continuous encouragement educators need to face issues of complexity, and inertia in education.

Brugðist við tregðu til breytinga innan menntakerfa: Geta fagleg lærdómssamfélög kennara á netinu dregið úr tregðu til breytinga?

Útdráttur:

Samfélagið stendur frammi fyrir margvíslegri flækju og óvissu sem hvetur okkur til að endurskoða hugmyndir um nám, skólagöngu og tilgang menntunar. Í greininni er fjallað um skrif Jóns Torfa Jónassonar (2016) um menntabreytingar, tregðu til breytinga og hugsanlega framtíð. Hann heldur því fram að breyta þurfi markmiðum menntunar og inntaki náms. Þess vegna leitar hann svara við því hvers vegna erfitt sé að breyta inntaki náms. Þetta sé mikilvægt að skilja vegna þess að það kunnir að vera skynsamlegt að innleiða „nýja þekkingu“ sem gæti átt heima utan hinna hefðbundnu námsgreina. Hann bendir á að kennarar verði að vera með í breytingaferlinu því þeir eru fagfólkið sem sér um útfærsluna á vettvangi (2016, bls. 1). Markmiðið með greininni er að skapa umræðu um tvo af níu flokkum Jóns Torfa um tregðu til breytinga. Þeir eru annars vegar kennaramenntun og hins vegar skortur á rými og hvata til frumkvæðis. Hér er rökstutt að skapa megi sérstakar aðstæður kennaramenntunar með því að móta vettvang til að takast á við umræddar hindranir og ýta undir breytingar. Þetta er mikilvægt þar sem kröfur um fjölbætta hæfni kennara aukast hratt (Jón Torfi Jónasson, 2013). Greinin fjallar um faglegt lærdómssamfélag á netinu (OPLC – online professional learning community) á vegum Evrópuráðsins. Þar koma saman kennarar frá ólíkum löndum og mismunandi skólastigum sem virka sem sjálfstæðir fagmenn, eftir því sem kostur er,

og takast á við fyrrgreindar áskoranir. Umræðan hér byggist á rannsóknargögnum úr samtalsþráðum innan netsamfélagsins sem greindu mynstur í samræðum kennara. Fyrst með því að telja ákveðin einkenni samtalsins og síðan með því að þemagreina inntakið. Skoðuð viðhorf þátttakenda um framtíðina og umræður þeirra um kjöraðstæður sem þeir töldu styðja æskilega þróun. Netsamfélög eins og þessi geta verið mikilvægur hluti af faglegu námi kennara og starfsþróun þeirra og líta má á sem vistfræðilegt námsumhverfi vegna þeirra fjölmörgu ólíku þátta sem fléttast inn í þetta umhverfi og skipta máli. Innan slíkra samfélaga á sér stað þekkingarsköpun og fagmenntun kennara mótast á löngum tíma. Samfélagið styrkir gildi og viðhorf kennara sem rista oft djúpt og styðja við lýðræðislega menningu í skólastarfi en einnig ánægju og skuldbindingu kennara sem smám saman styrkir svo sjálfsmynd þeirra sem fagfólks. Niðurstöðurnar sýna hvernig netsamfélagið opnar rými fyrir kennara til að ígrunda starf sitt á gagnrýninn hátt með jafningjum og leiðbeinendum. Þannig samfélag getur orðið fyrirmynd sem tekur mið af ofangreindum tveimur af níu atriðum sem Jón Torfi nefnir um tregðu til breytinga. Þetta krefst ákveðinnar stefnubreytingar í starfsaðstæðum kennara sem felst í að gefa þeim tíma til að ígrunda starf sitt í samfélagi starfssystkina. Netsamfélagið gerir ráð fyrir samskiptum sem teygja sig yfir langan tíma, í anda starfsþróunar tengda starfi. Þátttakendur þessa netsamfélags byggðu upp þrautseigju með stuðningi jafningja og í öruggu rými. Þeir gátu talað opinskátt og tókst að halda við eigin seiglu, sem reynist gagnleg til að takast á við þá tregðu til breytinga, sem iðulega finnst. Kennarar hafa meiri áhrif í slíku samtali ef spurningar þeirra eru sýnilegar, þar á meðal þær sem lúta að gildum þeirra og tilfinningum. Jafnframt eiga kennarar í ólíkum námsgreinum samstarf í netsamfélaginu um þverfagleg málefni og byggja með þeim hætti brýr á milli faggreina og skólastiga. Þar er rætt efni sem birtist í stefnum, rannsóknum og af vettvangi. Þátttakendur í samfélaginu kynnast hugmyndum um ný verkefni í skólastarfi og því sem vitað er um breytingastarf sem aftur fléttast saman við þeirra eigið þróunarstarf. Breyting á verkefnum og þekkingu á breytingaferli er þannig miðlað á milli þátttakenda og er samtímis í stöðugri mótun og gefur fyrir bragðið betri og dýpri umfjöllun og yfirsýn á flókin málefni. Kennarar úr ólíkum áttum öðlast trú á sameiginlegt umboð sitt til að koma á félagslegum umbreytingum. Þannig styrkja lærdómssamfélög á netinu þrautseigju kennara og gera þá að frumkvöðlum breytinga með því að ræða um störf sín og komast að sameiginlegri niðurstöðu þvert á ríkjandi hefðir og kerfislegar mótsagnir. Þeir fá stuðning og hugmyndir til að skapa sitt eigið rými og stilla saman starfshætti sína og gildi. Frá sjónarhóli stefnumótunaraðila veita fagleg netsamfélög eins og þessi aðgang að mikilvægum „lifandi“ gögnum sem gefa dýrmæta innsýn í það sem er að gerast í kennslustofunni, í hugum kennara og hjá nemendum. Þetta getur verið góður efniviður fyrir rannsóknir og til stefnumótunar því þarna eru raddir fagfólksins á vettvangi. Efniviður sem speglar því mikilvægan raunveruleika, m.a. fyrir stefnumótun. Þannig rökstyður höfundur að hægt sé að koma til móts við áhyggjur Jóns Torfa af tregðu til breytinga. Lærdómssamfélög á netinu verða sífellt algengari og hluti af rannsóknarflórunni, stefnumótun og starfi vettvangs. Netsamfélög leysa ekki allan vanda en eru þess virði að rækta. Hér er a.m.k. eitt svar við spurningunni um hvernig virk þátttaka í lærdómssamfélögum á netinu getur unnið gegn hindrunum og veitt kennurum þá hvatningu sem þeir þurfa til að takast á við flókin vandamál og vinna gegn tregðu til breytinga.

Efnisorð: Fagleg sjálfsmynd kennara, fagmennska kennara, kennaramenntun, samræðu nám, lærdómssamfélag, vistfræði náms, fagþróun kennara, umbreyting í skólastarfi

About the author

Pascale Mompoin-Gaillard, PhD, is a social-psychologist, researcher in the fields of education, pedagogy, and professional development. She has been involved for 30

years in adult education, and for the past 15 years specifically in teacher education. Her PhD (2021) focused on professional learning communities harnessing conversation as an ecology of learning. She has co-authored several handbooks of which the *European Reference Framework of Competences for a Democratic Culture* (RFCDC), and the *TASKs for Democracy* handbook (Council of Europe, 2018), dedicated to student and teacher competence. Today she lectures, writes, and leads communities of practitioners on topics such as experiential and transformative learning, collective intelligence, online learning, and social justice. Organisation: Learn to Change, Change to Learn, education NGO.

Um höfund

Pascale Mompoin-Gaillard, PhD, er félagsálfræðingur og stundar rannsóknir á sviði menntunar, kennslufræði og starfsþróunar. Undanfarin 30 ár hefur hún sinnt fullorðinsfræðslu og síðastliðin 15 ár hefur hún mest fengist við kennaramenntun. Doktorsrannsókn hennar, sem hún lauk 2021, beindist að samtali þátttakenda í faglegu lærdómssamfélagi í ljósi vistfræði náms, sem undirstrikar hve margir ólíkir þættir skipta máli. Hún er meðhöfundur nokkurra handbóka, þar á meðal *European Reference Framework of Competences for a Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) og *TASKs for Democracy* handbook sem Evrópuráðið gaf út 2018. Þessar bækur snúast um hæfni nemenda og kennara. Auk þess að flytja fræðsluerindi á fjölbreyttum vettvangi leiðir hún nokkra samstarfshópa sem hverfast um nám á netinu, félagslegt réttlæti og nám sem byggist á reynslu og leiðir til þróunar. Hún leiðir frjáls félagasamtök á sviði menntunar: Learn to Change, Change to Learn.

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Pascale Mompoin-Gaillard. (2022)

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Netla – Vef tímarit um uppeldi og menntun: Sérít 2022 – Framtíð og tilgangur menntunar: Sérít til heiðurs Jóni Torfa Jónassyni, prófessors emeritus

Sótt af http://netla.hi.is/serrit/2022/heidurs_jon_torfa/15.pdf

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24270/serritnetla.2022.85>