

Critical Factors that Enhance the Effectiveness of Online Communities of Practice: EFL Coordinators' Patterns of Involvement - The Greek EL Teachers Cops Professional Development Paradigm

Katerina Kourkouli

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Abstract

The paper examines Greek EFL Coordinators' involvement in online Communities of Practice (CoPs) in terms of its impact on participating teachers' professional development. The study focuses on four online CoPs hosting 49 Greek EFL teachers as participants and four Greek EFL Coordinators, using an online platform named *Zgather* developed by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in the context of a national in-service professional development project in Greece. The study involves investigating the Coordinators' patterns of involvement and their trainees' response using a mixed-methods approach which combines quantitative and qualitative research as collective case studies of the four groups. Differentiations between the four Coordinators' reported patterns of involvement and teachers' reported effectiveness of their CoP training experience enables us to identify critical factors that contribute to the enhancement of effectiveness. A comparison of the Coordinators' and their trainees' responses per online CoP highlights the factors that have supported teachers' reported reconstruction of knowledge and practices and the reported effectiveness of the CoP training experience regarding their everyday teaching practice. The findings contribute to furthering our understanding of effective online CoPs implementation in the context of continuing professional development.

Keywords: professional development, adult training, online communities of practice, effective coordination, effective implementation, design and development principles

Introduction

Teachers' professional development is increasingly being seen from a lifelong learning perspective in terms of providing teachers with opportunities and incentives for professional development throughout their careers. Such

opportunities enable teachers to refresh, develop and expand their knowledge base and understanding of teaching as well as to improve their skills and practices (Schleicher, 2016). From this point of view, investment on teachers' professional development (PD) portrays as a priority of education policies directed at the development of human capital so that teaching and learning in schools is up to date and effective (Timpereley et al, 2008). PD can encompass a range of forms, from formal courses and seminars to workshops, online training, mentoring and supervision which can be fostered within institutions or through external providers such as higher education or other training institutes and can be financed by governments, employers and private agents or co-funding arrangements (Schleicher, 2016).

However, all competent authorities should be aware that the benefits of professional development depend on the quality of the initiatives, the feedback and the follow-up support they provide. To address the issue of ineffectiveness of teacher education initiatives (Navarro & Verdisco, 2000), interest is currently growing in alternative approaches to teacher education which encourage more informal ways of learning such as reflection, joint problem – solving, networking and sharing of expertise and experience (Schleicher, 2016). The paradigm shift gathering momentum with regard to the professional development of teachers over the past few years has been that of online professional Communities of Practice (CoPs).

This innovative model was implemented as an integral part for the collection and analysis of data for a doctoral research at the English Department of the National Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece in the context of EFL teachers' continuing professional development. The ELTeachers online CoPs were initiated, set up and officially launched in the academic year of 2014-2015. The investigation of the teachers' participation has confirmed that teachers can benefit from membership in supportive online CoPs and has also provided evidence on the central role that online CoPs can play in the teacher education field in Greece as an effective catalyst for the professional development of teachers. In addition, the study highlighted specific factors that supported teachers' reflection, their reported reconstruction of beliefs and practices and the reported effectiveness of the training experience in relation to their teaching practice (Kourkouli 2018a). Further research has also confirmed that ELTeachers online CoPs constitute a teacher training model that empowers teacher trainers themselves to engage in "reformed" training practice. It has also showcased the key role of the Coordinators'/teacher trainers' attitude toward the innovative model of teacher education for its feasibility and viability in Greece (Kourkouli, 2018b).

Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to complement the current research on design principles for effective online CoP teacher education implementation. In particular, leadership patterns of involvement and professional development activities implementation will be addressed in order to pinpoint specific conditions

that enhance the effectiveness of online Communities of Practice in the context of EFL online CoPs Coordination. The study focuses on four Greek EFL Coordinators and forty-nine EFL teachers participating in four online CoPs, using an online platform named *Zgather* developed by the NKUA in the context of a national in-service professional development project in Greece. Differentiations between the four Coordinators' reported patterns of involvement and the teachers' reported effectiveness of the CoP training experience per online CoP provides a field for exploration in order to pinpoint the specific conditions that contributed to the enhancement of effectiveness.

The findings contribute to furthering our understanding of design principles for effective online CoPs implementation in the context of EFL continuing professional development.

Literature review

Traditional teacher education context

Most teacher education programs have traditionally been based on the "deficit" model, which dictates that some sort of new knowledge or skill should be acquired by teachers (Day & Sachs, 2004). Under this model, the visiting "expert" makes use of lecturing and presentations to disseminate knowledge, while some sort of assessment procedure is implemented to validate learning outcomes (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). However, such short-term "spray-on" in-service PD seminars fail to provide teachers with the meaningful professional development activities proposed by current literature (Kourkouli, 2015).

In Greece, the educational model implemented is mostly convergent with the traditional one described above. Under the authority of the Ministry of Education, in-service teacher education policy is highly centralized while in-service teacher education programs mainly take the form of non-compulsory three-hour seminars organized by the Instructional Coordinators, selected by the Greek Ministry of Education in order to coordinate, supervise, provide advice and training opportunities for appointed teachers in their geographical jurisdictions. Little reference is made to the methodological procedures followed for the realization of the goals set or provision of guidelines on the mode of training to be adopted. Because the current teacher education practice in Greece is neither aligned with the international official bodies' adult and teacher education policy recommendations nor with the current international literature on effective adult and teacher education, the proposal put forward is for the identification of design principles and conditions for a more meaningful and promising form of adult and teacher professional development (Kourkouli, 2018b).

2.2 Policy recommendations on effective professional development for teachers: a shifting perspective

According to TALIS results (OECD's teaching and learning international survey, 2009) a significant proportion of teachers worldwide report that professional development does not meet their needs while the main reasons for unfulfilled demand are the conflict with their work schedule and the lack of suitable development opportunities. This suggests a need for better support for teachers to participate in professional development but also for policy makers to ensure that the development opportunities available are effective and meet the teachers' needs (OECD, 2009a: 48). OECD's review also stated "effective professional development is on-going, includes training, practice, feedback, and provides adequate time and follow-up support. Successful programs involve teachers in learning activities that are similar to ones they will use with their students and encourage the development of teachers' learning communities..." (OECD, 2009a: 49).

Another major finding is that indicators of participation in networks and mentoring have significant and stronger associations with teaching practices in a majority of countries and that PD activities that take place at regular intervals and involve teachers in social and collaborative contexts also have significantly stronger associations with teaching practices than regular workshops and courses. In addition, professional development is implemented at school level in many countries, fostering greater collaboration among teachers and having a more general impact on school quality (OECD, 2009b: 117). A frequent criticism of many professional development programs is treating teachers' PD as an activity distinct from teachers' daily work (Education Commission of the States, 2004).

In terms of policies recommendations, Schleicher (2016: 46-47) has concluded that "effective" teacher professional development activities that have an impact on teachers' instructional practices are those that take place in schools and allow teachers to work, over time, in collaborative groups, on problems of practice. Including teachers in the decision making appears to be another step in the right direction (Cordingley et al., 2015).

In the same light, the Council of the European Union (Council conclusions of 20 May 2014 on effective teacher education) also agrees that in both initial teacher education and continuous PD contexts, PD should apply adult learning principles based on communities of practice, online learning and peer learning. As a result, it invites the member states to promote the development of PD frameworks that reinforce collaboration and exchange of peer practices as well as to further explore this potential with a broad range of stakeholders in the development of teacher education programs. Furthermore, it invites member states to use the funding opportunities in EU instruments to support their PD policies and make use of the ET 2020 structures under the Open Method of Coordination to develop successful policies on effective teacher education programs. Finally, it invites the Commission

to build communities of teachers by making use of existing platforms with a view to promoting cooperation with peers across the EU as well as partners, networks and other organizations which can offer experience and know-how on designing effective teacher education programs.

2.3 Online Communities of Practice – a new approach in teacher education

Researchers too are in full agreement with the policy recommendations delineated above. The analysis of teacher education has shifted to a conception of teachers learning and developing within a broader context of community (Shulman & Shulman, 2004: 7), where teachers “try out new ideas, reflect on outcomes, and co-construct knowledge about teaching and learning within the context of authentic activity” (Butler et al., 2004: 436). Sociocultural perspectives of learning support that knowledge is socially constructed and interconnected to the contexts in which it is used (Putnam & Borko, 2000) and learning is an active process whereby learners get acculturated in a given community through dialogue and collective problem solving. In this view of learning, teachers engage in critical reflection on practice with peers and more experienced members to discuss practical problems, get feedback so that, through this interaction, they can scaffold to knowledge restructuring (Whipp, 2003). A shift of focus is therefore dictated from formal training to training in practice and to ongoing learning.

The Community of Practice (CoP) model can accommodate the proposed policy and research recommendations on effective adult and teacher education. According to Wenger et al. (2002: 4), CoPs’ three main components are a) domain, the common ground on which participants share information and ideas, b) community, the result of belonging and mutual commitment shared by a group of people who establish positive relationships among themselves and c) practice, the materials, tools and knowledge that the community develops and possesses.

Participation in online CoPs can reduce feelings of disconnectedness or isolation (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Gray, 2004), facilitate knowledge sharing, knowledge creation across time and space and acknowledge the role of trainees as co-learners and co-producers of knowledge (Lai et al., 2006: 24-26). Teachers are also able to focus on specific work – related problems in order to gain “knowledge of practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The U.S. Department of Education’s National Education Technology Plan calls for the use of social networking technologies to create online CoPs with the aim to ensure that professional educators have access to the content, resources, data, information, peers, and expertise they need to be highly effective (Booth, 2012: 2).

Contrary to the constraints of a co-located CoP, online CoPs offer participants the facilitative synchronous and asynchronous technology to share information and collaborate online, to practically reach out to everybody even in geographically isolated areas and powerful resources to provide work – embedded support for

teachers' ongoing learning (Karavas & Papadopoulou, 2014). Empirical research studies (Vescio et al., 2008) have also confirmed that well-developed CoPs can have a positive impact on the professional development of teachers.

2.4 Developing effective online Communities of Practice – the vital role of the Coordinator

Online CoPs can accommodate adult training in any line of business. But success cannot be achieved by simply building an online platform, inviting trainees to sign in and wishing that they will interact in meaningful ways. A number of design principles have been identified in the literature (Schwen & Hara, 2003; Stuckey & Smith, 2004; Wallace & St-Onge, 2003; Schlager & Fusco, 2004; Barab et al., 2003) with an eye to supporting sociability and participation, attracting diverse membership, providing for different roles, including suitable technology and blending online with offline activities (Lai et al., 2006). Specific issues related to defining the appropriate “social and technical architectures” to a given community have been addressed such as: identification of audience, purpose, goals, vision, activities, technologies, group processes and roles that will support the community's goals, piloting and launching the community to a broader audience, engaging members in collaborative learning and knowledge sharing activities, creating an increasing cycle of participation and contribution as well as assessing activities to inform new strategies and models for the future (Cambridge et al., 2005). A list of motivating factors and barriers lifting strategies include promoting members' sense of belonging to the community, building interpersonal trust as well as initial and follow-up IT training (Ardichvili, 2008).

The issue of effective coordination is identified and discussed in various studies but continues to portray as a relatively uncharted area, particularly as to the specific characteristics, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge base, activities, tools and presence attributes Coordinators should exhibit during their involvement in online CoPs teacher education programs. Best practices for generating and facilitating online discussion range from developing clear guidelines and expectations for discussion to striking a balance of trainees and Coordinators' interaction (Maddix, 2012). Wenger (2009: 10) characterizes the Coordinators of CoPs as “social artists” whose social energy and trust – building skills are a major factor for the success of the online CoP. Coordinators' knowledge of cultural, social and organizational issues (Gray, 2004), their ability to build alliances and foster trust (Bourhis et al., 2005) as well as intellectual and technological skills (Gairin-Salan et al., 2010) have also been recognized as important agents of success. Booth's study (2012) underscores the importance of effective moderation in online CoPs while Kourkouli (2018b) showcases that Coordinators engage in “reformed” training practice themselves as a result of their involvement in ELTeachers online CoPs, providing teachers with more meaningful professional development activities than in the traditional teacher training models. In addition, Coordinators report their own perceived benefits such

as gaining useful insights into their trainees' teaching practices and overcoming time, place and sharing constraints. Finally, the study highlights the key role of the Coordinators' attitude towards online CoPs for the feasibility and viability of this teacher education model in Greece and worldwide.

Since online CoPs must be carefully designed and developed in order to successfully fulfill their potential, it is within this and future papers' scope to cast more light into the vital role of the Coordinator and pinpoint specific factors associated with increased teacher learning and effectiveness, as well as with appropriate design and development principles that can pave the way for an improved teacher education paradigm in Greece and worldwide.

Method

3.1 Methodological approach

The purpose of this study is to investigate Greek EFL Coordinators' involvement in online Communities of Practice (CoPs) in terms of its impact on the participating teachers' professional development in order to pinpoint the specific conditions that contributed to the enhancement of effectiveness.

In this light, we selected the most suitable methodological approach to address the following research question:

Which are the specific conditions associated with the teachers' reported enhanced effectiveness of the CoP training experience for their teaching practice, in the context of the ELTeachers online CoPs implementation?

3.2 Study context

In order to respond to the research question stated above, we¹ made a difficult decision in the direction of reliability. We gathered the necessary data by developing our own authentic online CoPs, not with a focus group of the English Department NKUA acquaintances, but with the appointed Instructional Coordinators for the English language, operating in different geographical jurisdictions all over Greece who volunteered to enter the project without remuneration.

They are responsible for training and assessing all state – school appointed teachers working in their jurisdiction. Coordinators communicated our invitations through the competent Directorates of Primary Education in order to recruit EFL teachers working in their jurisdictions with real needs and everyday problems to enter the project without remuneration as well. For the online ELTeachers CoPs formation, we used the 2gather platform developed by the NKUA which combines features of

¹ The project and research were realized thanks to my PhD supervisor, Dr. Evdokia Karavas, Associate Professor at the English Department, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, who initiated and supported me with feedback throughout this endeavor.

Learning and Content Management Systems with those of Social Networking Services. The platform integrates the following facilities useful to a CoP: a) homepage b) discussion spaces to foster discussions through a closed forum for every CoP, c) private and public messages), d) member directory with a profile – avatar and a short bio note for every participant as well as their online status), e) chatrooms, f) media library, g) activity streams) and h) groups and sub-groups (Karavas & Papadopoulou, 2014).

The whole project amounted to a monumental effort of setting up, publicizing, piloting, organizing launching as well as kick-off events, face and skype meetings, tutorial workshops as well as informing and training the Coordinators on the innovative teacher education method, the specific platform and available tools. The investigation lasted from April 2014 – June 2015. Each online CoP was composed of one Coordinator and as many teachers - volunteers as they could recruit, working in the broader geographical area of the Coordinators' jurisdiction, sometimes a whole Prefecture. The CoP training schedule and material was based on reported teachers' needs and was given to most Coordinators as a "guidebook" for further development. Coordinators posted one monthly activity in each CoP's forum divided in two fortnight sections with strict deadlines and specific ground rules designed to multiply interaction, foster reflection, development of open discussion, connection with teachers' everyday practice, provision of feedback and open interaction among the participants (Kourkouli, 2018a).

In other words, the whole project amounted to the first ever attempt in the EFL state education Greek context to implement an innovative model of teacher education with appointed Coordinators training volunteering appointed state school teachers. This participation plan was meant to increase the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Participants

Following Cambridge et al.'s example (2005), we assigned the roles as follows:

Administrator–Leader: Katerina Kourkouli, researcher at the English Department of the NKUA, responsible for the setting up of the 4 online CoPs under investigation.

Coordinators: 4 state EFL Instructional Coordinators assigned their own online CoP (A' CoP, K' CoP, C' CoP and I'CoP named like this for anonymity reasons) who consented to answer the "after" the CoP involvement questionnaire and provide all necessary information, data and clarification requested by the researcher. One of them, C' CoP's Coordinator opted to co-act as a Coordinator alongside an EFL teacher acting as a Deputy Coordinator.

Participants: 49 EFL state school teachers working in the primary education who participated voluntarily throughout the training period, in their authentic contexts, fulfilled the criteria in terms of workload and projects submitted specified by the

CoP program and answered the “after” questionnaire (16 teachers for A’ CoP, 15 for C’ CoP, 12 for K’ CoP and 6 for I’ CoP). (Kourkouli, 2018b).

3.4.Data sources

In order to address the research questions, two questionnaires were constructed as tools for data collection and analysis administered “after” the teachers and the Coordinators’ CoP involvement. The Coordinators’ questionnaire aimed to capture their respective patterns of involvement in the online CoP they were assigned while the teachers’ questionnaire administered “after” their participation per online CoP aimed to capture the participating teachers’ reported effectiveness of the CoP training experience. A comparison of the Coordinators’ and their trainees’ responses per online CoP highlights the specific conditions that have supported the teachers’ reported reconstruction of knowledge and practices and the reported effectiveness of their CoP training experience regarding their everyday teaching practice.

Both questionnaires were constructed based on the study of variables that capture common experiences of people. In particular, the use of the Microsoft Excel 2007 Data processing programme accounted for the descriptive nature of this research and qualitative crosstabulation for the establishment of associations between variables (Dornyei, 2007: 228).

The sampling plan for this project yielded a total of 4 Coordinators’ questionnaires compared with 49 Teachers questionnaires in July 2015.

Instrument

The Coordinators’ questionnaire elicited information through mainly clozed-ended item types using factual, behavioural and attitudinal questions. In effect, Part I aims to build a profile of the respondents who participate in this research while Part II focuses on the online CoP course itself by exploring the topics covered, the presence of training practices used which are regarded conducive to teacher development as well as the specific professional development activities Coordinators provided their trainees with “during” their CoP training. Finally, we investigate the Coordinators’ attitude towards the innovative model of teacher education for its feasibility and viability in Greece.

The teachers’ questionnaire elicited information through mainly clozed-ended item types as well, using factual, behavioural and attitudinal questions. In effect, Part I aims to build a profile of the respondents who participate in this research, while Part II seeks to investigate the impact of the online CoP through the tracing of perceived teachers’ knowledge and practice restructuring as well as perceived benefit and reported effectiveness of their training experience in relation to their teaching needs and practice “after” their participation in the CoPs.

Presentation and discussion of results

In this section, we will present the results and discuss them critically based on the research method described and the theoretical framework delineated above.

Personal and professional data

All four Coordinators participating in this research are female, three of them have 2-5 years of experience as Instructional Coordinators while one of them 0-1 year. Half of them report having received formal training concerning the area of teaching English to young learners, whereas the other half report no such training. Most of them (75%) have not been involved in an organized Community of Practice but are motivated into familiarizing themselves with it.

As for the trainees, the majority of the respondents are female teachers (91%) teaching English to young learners of the first and second grades of primary school (61%), 26% of the respondents hold a postgraduate degree in English teaching with a further 10% in some other field. A small percentage of 22% report no teaching experience with young learners while almost 39% report more than three years teaching experience with the target age group. In addition, 70% report having attended some type of training course, day seminar organized by the Instructional Coordinators and the NKUA or self-training in relation to teaching English to young learners. The vast majority (90%) had never participated in an organized Community of Practice before.

Description of results

The second part of this presentation focuses on the online CoP teacher education course itself. In effect, it seeks to pinpoint the impact of the Coordinators' reported implementation of strategies, activities and training procedures per CoP, through the tracing of perceived teachers' knowledge restructuring, teachers' reported change of their teaching practices as well as perceived benefit and effectiveness of their training experience in relation to their teaching needs and practice. In other words, it highlights the specific conditions that have supported the enhancement of effectiveness of their training. To this end, we have compared Coordinators' self-reported implementation of strategies, activities and training procedures to the following four indicators of effectiveness per CoP: 1.extent to which new insights into teaching have been gained per CoP, 2.perceived usefulness of the teachers' involvement for their everyday teaching practice per CoP, 3.extent to which teacher development needs have been met per CoP and 4. Frequency of usage of new ideas presented after the CoP course.

In response to the research question:

Which are the specific conditions associated with the Teachers' reported enhanced effectiveness of the CoP training experience for their teaching practice, in the context of the ELTeachers online CoPs implementation?

As can be seen, in Tables 1 and 2 below, concerning the specific process followed for deciding on the training topics during the ELTeachers online CoPs training course, K CoP's process, based on the existing self-study teacher training e-course of the English faculty of the National Kapodistrian University of Athens, has been found to be highly effective with regard to knowledge restructuring. In fact, 50% of the teachers participating in K. CoP have reported gaining of new insights to a great extent, followed by 38% of the A. CoP's teachers who report gaining of new insights to an equally high extent. A. CoP's Coordinator reports identification of the training topics based on needs analysis whereas I.CoP's and C.CoP's Coordinators' choice appears to be the least effective of all. Following the good practices of other Coordinators in selecting the training topics results in fewer teachers reporting a high degree of knowledge restructuring (33% and 27% respectively).

Table 1: Specific process followed for deciding on the training topics for primary school teachers during CoP		
A. CoP	K. CoP	C. CoP & I. CoP
based on needs analysis and identification of topics	based on the existing self-study teacher training e-course of the English faculty of the NKUA	following good practices of other Coordinators

Table 2: Extent to which new insights into teaching have been gained after CoP involvement				
	C. CoP	A. CoP	K. CoP	I. CoP
A great deal	27%	38%	50%	33%
Up to Some extent	73%	50%	50%	50%
A little	0%	6%	0%	17%
Not at all	0%	6%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

In terms of perceived usefulness of the teachers' involvement in the online CoP for their everyday teaching practice, the picture remains more or less the same. K CoP's topic identification process, based on the existing self-study teacher training e-course of the English faculty of the NKUA, is perceived to be very useful for the teachers' teaching practice by 83% of the respondents, followed by 81% of the A. CoP's teachers who responded the same. Adopting the good practices of other Coordinators in selecting the training topics has been found very useful by 67% of the I. CoP and 47% of the C. CoP (see Table 3).

Table 3: Perceived usefulness of Teachers' involvement in CoPs for their everyday teaching practice				
	C. CoP	A. CoP	K. CoP	I. CoP

Very useful	47%	81%	83%	67%
Moderately useful	53%	19%	17%	33%
Slightly useful	0%	0%	0%	0%
Absolutely useless	0%	0%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Regarding the third indicator of effectiveness, the extent to which teacher development needs have been met as a result of the participation in the CoP training course, 58% of the K. CoP teachers respond to a great extent, followed by 56% of the respondents in A. CoP. Adopting the good practices of other Coordinators is reported to meet teacher development needs to a great extent by only 33% of the teachers in I. CoP and 20% of teachers in the C. CoP (see Table 4).

Table 4: Extent to which teacher development needs have been met after CoP involvement (regarding everyday teaching practice)				
	C CoP	A CoP	K CoP	I. CoP
A great deal	20%	56%	58%	33%
Up to some extent	73%	44%	42%	50%
A little	7%	0%	0%	17%
Not at all	0%	0%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Finally, the identification of topics based on needs analysis (A. CoP) as well as based on the existing self-study teacher training e-course of the English faculty of the NKUA (K. CoP), have been found to be most effective in terms of reported change of teachers' actual teaching practices. More specifically, 38% of the teachers in A. CoP report implementing newly received knowledge in every single lesson followed by 34% of the teachers in K. CoP reporting the same. Adopting other Coordinators' implementation schedules is considered a less effective strategy by the majority of the respondents (see Table 5).

Table 5: Frequency of usage of new ideas presented after CoP involvement				
	C.CoP	A. CoP	K. CoP	I. CoP
In Every Single lesson	13%	38%	34%	33.3%
Once a week	40%	38%	58%	33.3%
Once a month	40%	24%	8%	33.3%
Once a never	7%	0%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Differentiations in topic coverage emerges as another condition for the enhancement of effectiveness of the online CoP training course. As can be seen in Table 6 below, topic coverage is significantly linked with reported reconstruction of

knowledge base and practices as well as with the reported effectiveness of their training experience in relation to teachers' teaching practice.

Table 6 : Topics covered during CoP with Primary school Teachers				
	C. CoP	A. CoP	K. CoP	I. CoP
Teaching Practices appropriate to young learners		x	x	x
Teacher's role in the very young learner classroom		x	x	x
Young learners' characteristics		x	x	x
Utilization of educational technology		x	x	
Dealing with individual learner difficulties		x	x	
Classroom management	x	x	x	x
Using the suggested material in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades		x		x
Reflection as an integral part of the teaching process		x		
Peer lesson evaluation		x	x	
OTHER (Individual-collaborative lesson plan development/ Multiple intelligences/)	x	x		

In particular, covering the topics of teaching practices appropriate to young learners, teacher's role in the very young learner classroom, young learners' characteristics, utilization of educational technology, dealing with individual learners' difficulties, classroom management and peer lesson evaluation, are reported to have resulted in gaining of new insights into teaching to a great extent by 50% of the K. CoP teachers (see Table 2 above). The same topic coverage is perceived as mostly useful for teachers' everyday teaching practice by 83% of the K. CoP (see Table 3 above), while 58% of them report that their teacher development needs have been met to a great extent (see Table 4 above) and 34% state implementing newly gained knowledge in every single lesson as a result of their online CoP training course participation (see Table 5). Adding the topics of using the suggested material of the school book, reflection as an integral part of the teaching process, multiple intelligences and individual as well as collaborative lesson plan development in the A. CoP is also associated with high percentages of reported effectiveness, in terms of gaining of new insights (38%, Table 2), highly perceived usefulness of involvement (81%, Table 3), addressing the teacher development needs to a great extent (56%, Table 4) and high frequency of usage of new ideas (38%, Table 5). In contrast, less topic coverage in I. CoP and C. CoP is related with lower reports of perceived effectiveness (Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6).

Concerning the professional development activities implemented, that is the methods the trainers employed to provide new input, findings show that

collaborative and exploratory learning constitute effective professional development activities. In fact identifying teachers’ needs, giving feedback to teaching problems, involving them in sharing problems and exploring solutions with colleagues, in sharing resources and good practices as well as in putting a new approach into practice and in reflecting on practice could account for the higher percentages of reported effectiveness in K.CoP and C. CoP (see Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 & 7).

	C. CoP	A. CoP	K. CoP	I. CoP
Giving Lectures				
Involving teachers in sharing problems with colleagues	x		x	
Involving teachers in observing colleagues classes				
Involving teachers in exploring solutions with colleagues	x	x	x	
Involving teachers in sharing resources and good practices with colleagues	x	x	x	x
Identifying teachers' needs		x	x	x
Involving teachers in putting a new approach into practice		x	x	x
Giving feedback to teaching problems		x	x	x
Involving teachers in reflecting on practice		x	x	x
Giving follow-up training on new ideas/techniques				

Employing more effective reflection practices with teachers “during” the CoP portrays as another condition for the enhancement of effectiveness. More specifically, writing reflective lesson plans combined with reflective discussion in a collaborative environment constitute a training practice associated with increased reports of effectiveness in K. CoP and A. CoP (see Table 8). The significance of reflective practice in the context of the online CoPs as a major professional development activity for this sample is further corroborated by the relevant literature delineated above (Whipp, 2003; Butler et al., 2004).

	C. CoP	A. CoP	K. CoP	I. CoP
Reflecting on their own		x	x	x
Discussing with colleagues in a collaborative environment	x	x	x	x
Keeping journals				x
Writing reflective lesson plans		x	x	

The issue of effective coordination identified and discussed in the literature is also corroborated by the finding below (see Table 9). In particular, Coordinators

participating actively in all stages of the online CoP training course and exhibiting a stronger teaching presence (Anderson et al., 2001) in terms of design, organization, facilitating discourse and direct instruction score higher in all indicators of effectiveness delineated above. In contrast, the C. CoP Coordinator who reports not participating actively, assigning the workload to a Deputy Coordinator acting under her wings, exhibiting weak organizational, intellectual, social and technological skills scores lower in all four indicators of effectiveness, that is 27% of the respondents for knowledge restructuring, 47% for perceived usefulness, 20% for meeting development needs to a great extent and only 13% for frequent implementation of received knowledge (Tables 2, 3, 4, 5).

	C. CoP	A. CoP	K. CoP	I. CoP
Yes		x	x	x
No	x			

Finally, the comparison of data depicts an association between the Coordinators' opinion on feasibility and viability of online CoPs with the teachers' reported effectiveness of the CoP course on their professional development. As Table 10 shows, the 3 CoPs' teachers (A. CoP, K. CoP, I. CoP) who reported a greater deal of effectiveness of the CoP course, were coordinated by Coordinators who were overly positive in their opinion on the feasibility and viability of CoPs as a teacher education model in Greece.

	C. CoP	A. CoP	K. CoP	I. CoP
A great deal		x	x	x
Up to Some extent	x			
A little				
Not at all				
Total				

Implications for educators' PD practice and research

The European Commission (2016) working group has identified a number of inter-related themes on which peer learning could focus which include workplace learning in a lifelong learning strategy, basic skills in the workplace both of employed and unemployed people, Public Employment Services (PES), validation of learning outcomes in workplace learning, workplace learning and economic growth, employers, activation of older workers, SMEs as learning workplace and vocational skills development. Obviously the domain of implementation is infinite. OECD has recognized "professional learning communities" as professional development approaches suitable for fostering beneficial adult learning for governments to

encourage staff to engage in professional development through the provision of incentives as a result of the need for better support for teachers to participate in professional development but also for policy makers to ensure that the development opportunities available are effective and meet the teachers' needs (OECD, 2009: 48).

Online CoPs have proved to be effective vehicles of collective learning, knowledge creation and reconstruction of trainees' beliefs and practices within different organizations (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Vestal, 2006; Kourkouli, 2018a). More and more systematic studies have been aiming at measuring the effectiveness as well as identifying a number of principles and conditions and factors for designing and implementing effective online CoPs as delineated above (Ardichvili, 2008; Kourkouli, 2018a; Kourkouli, 2018b). While it is important to recognize that every organization and community is different, the truth is that online CoPs can accommodate adult training in any line of business.

The professional development of teachers is also one domain of application for the online CoPs adult education paradigm which has been gathering momentum over the past few years all over the world in addressing the problem of ineffectiveness of the traditional teacher training programs (Lieberman & Mace, 2010). The issue of effective coordination and implementation is addressed particularly as to the specific topics, beliefs, attitudes, activities, tools and presence attributes Coordinators should exhibit during their involvement in online CoPs teacher education programs. In particular, effective leadership practices and effective professional development activities implementation have been addressed in order to pinpoint specific conditions that enhance the effectiveness of online Communities of Practice in the context of EFL online CoPs Coordination.

Identification of training topics, based on needs analysis as well as the existing self-study teacher training e-course of the English faculty of the National Kapodistrian University of Athens, has been found to be highly effective with regard to all indicators of effectiveness. A fuller coverage of the training topics available range and implementation of teacher development activities regarded conducive to teacher development can also account for the higher percentages of reported effectiveness. Employing more effective reflection practices with teachers "during" the CoP portrays as another condition for the enhancement of effectiveness. The vital role of the Coordinator for cultivating and sustaining knowledge sharing and trust is further associated with the overall report of effectiveness. In particular, Coordinators participating actively in all stages of the online CoP training course and exhibiting a stronger teaching presence (Anderson et al., 2001) score higher in all indicators of effectiveness designated above. In order to better showcase the role of the Coordinators' attitude towards the innovative model of teacher education for its feasibility and viability in Greece, the comparison of data depicts an association between the Coordinators' opinion on feasibility and viability of online CoPs with

the teachers' reported effectiveness of the CoP course on their professional development.

The findings contribute to casting more light into this vital role and pinpoint more factors associated with increased teacher learning and effectiveness as well as furthering our understanding of design principles and effective implementation of online CoPs in the context of EFL continuing professional development. In addition, they provide a platform for more research to be conducted by other educators in the same direction.

References

- [1] Anderson, T., Rourke, L., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in computer conferencing context. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5(2), 1-17.
- [2] Ardichvili, A. (2008). Learning and knowledge sharing in virtual communities of practice: Motivators, barriers and enablers. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 10(4), 541-554.
- [3] Ardichvili, A., Page, V. & Wentling, T. (2003). Motivation and barriers to participation in virtual knowledge sharing teams. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 7(1), 64-77.
- [4] Barab, S.A., MaKinster, J.G. & Scheckler, R. (2003). Designing System Dualities: Characterizing a Web-Supported Professional Development Community, *The Information Society*, 19(3), 237-256.
- [5] Booth, S. (2012). Cultivating knowledge sharing and trust in online communities for educators. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, (47)1, 1-31.
- [6] Bourhis, A., Dube, L., & Jacob, R. (2005). The success of online communities of practice: The leadership factor. *The Electronic Journal of Knowledge Management*, (3)1, 23-34.
- [7] Butler, D.L., Lauscher, H.N., Jarvis-Selinger, S. and Beckingham, B. (2004). Collaboration and self-regulation in teachers' professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(5), 435-455.
- [8] Cambridge, D., Kaplan, S. & Suter, V. (2005). Community of practice designguide. A step-by-step guide for designing and cultivating communities of practice in higher education. Retrieved from: <https://goo.gl/oKnVsh>
- [9] Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S.L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. In A. Iran-Nejar & P.D. Pearson (eds.), *Review of research in education*, 249-305. Washington, DC: AERA.
- [10] Cordingley, P., Higgins, S., Greany, T., Buckler, N., Coles-Jordan, D., Crisp, B., Saunders, L. & Coe, R. (2015). *Developing great teaching: lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development*, Project Report. London: Teacher Development Trust.

- [11] Council conclusions of 20 May 2014 on effective teacher education. (2014). Official Journal of the European Union. Retrieved from: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52014XG0614%2805%29>
- [12] Day, C. & Sachs, J. (2004). Professionalism, performativity and empowerment: discourses in the politics, policies and purposes of continuing professional development. In C. Day & J. Sachs (eds.), *International handbook on the continuing professional development of teachers*, 3-32. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- [13] Diaz-Maggioli, G. (2004). *Teacher centered professional development*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- [14] Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [15] Duncan-Howell, J. (2010). Teachers making connections: Online communities as a source of professional learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 41(2), 324-340.
- [16] Education Commission of the States (2004). *Professional development, pros and cons: What does the evidence say?* Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.
- [17] European Commission (2016). Working group on adult learning. ET 2020 Newsletter. Retrieved from: <http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/et2020/201611-newsletter-et2020.html#WGVocational>
- [18] Gairin-Sallan, J., Rodriguez-Gomez, D. & Armegol-Asparol, C. (2010). Who exactly is the moderator? A consideration of online knowledge management network moderation in educational organisations. *Computers and Education*, 55(1), 304-312.
- [19] Gray, B. (2004). Informal learning in an online community of practice. *Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1), 20-35.
- [20] Karavas, E. & Papadopoulou, S. (2014). Introducing a paradigm shift in EFL continuing professional development in Greece: the development of online communities of practice. In D. Hayes (ed.), *Innovations in the continuing professional development of English language teachers*, 179-206. London: British Council.
- [21] Kourkouli, K. (2015). Investigating the effectiveness of training procedures employed in Greek EFL state induction teacher education courses. *Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning*, 6(1), 6-24.
- [22] Kourkouli, K. (2018a). "Investigating the impact of Greek EFL teachers' participation in online communities of practice as a means of professional development", *European Journal of Education*, 1 (1), 56-75.
- [23] Kourkouli, K (2018b). Investigating greek EFL coordinators' involvement in online EITeachers communities of practice as a means of professional

- development. *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research*, 5 (3), 41-55.
- [24] Lai, K.W., Pratt, K., Anderson, M. & Stigter, J. (2006). Literature review and synthesis: Online communities of practice, research division. Dunedin: Ministry of Education, New Zealand.
- [25] Lieberman, A. & Pointer Mace, D. (2010). Making practice public: Teacher learning in the 21st century. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1), 77-88.
- [26] Maddix, M. (2012). Generating and facilitating effective online learning through discussion. *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry*, (9)2, 372-385.
- [27] Navarro, J.C. & Verdisco, A. (2000). Teacher training in Latin America: Innovations and trends. Washington D.C: Education Unit Publications. Inter-American Development Bank.
- [28] OECD. (2009a). The professional development of teachers. In *Creating effective teaching and learning environments: First results from TALIS*, 47-78.
- [29] OECD. (2009b). Teaching practices, teachers' beliefs and attitudes. In *Creating effective teaching and learning environments: First results from TALIS*, 87-122.
- [30] Putnam, R. & Borko, H. (2000). What do new views of knowledge and thinking have to say about research on teacher learning? *Educational Researcher*, 29(4), 4-15.
- [31] Schlager, M.S. & Fusco, J. (2004). Teacher professional development, technology, and communities of practice: Are we putting the cart before the horse?. In S. Barab, R. Kling, & J. Gray (eds.), *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning*, 120-153. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [32] Schleicher, A. (2016). OECD. Teaching excellence through professional learning and policy reform: Lessons from around the world. International summit on the teaching profession, Paris: OECD Publishing.
- [33] Schwen, T. M., & Hara, N. (2003). Community of practice: a metaphor for online design? *The Information Society*, 19(3), 257-270.
- [34] Shulman, L.S. & Shulman, J.H. (2004). Know and what teachers learn: a shifting perspective, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 36:2, 257-271.
- [35] Stuckey, B & Smith, J. (2004). Building sustainable communities of practice. In P. Hildreth, & C. Kimble (eds.), *Knowledge networks: Innovation through communities of practice*, 150-164. York, UK: Idea Group Publishing.
- [36] Timperley, H. (2008). Teacher professional learning and development. In J. Brophy (ed.), *The Educational Practices Series – 18*. Brussels: International Academy of Education & International Bureau of Education.
- [37] Vescio, V. Ross, D. & Adams, A. (2008). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practices and student learning, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 80-91.

- [38] Vestal, W. (2006). CoPs in progress: AQPC and Texas Medical Association. *Knowledge Management Review*, 9(1), 8-9.
- [39] Wallace, D. & St-Onge, H. (2003). *Leveraging communities of practice for strategic advantage*. Burlington: Elsevier Science.
- [40] Wenger, E. (2009). Social learning capability - our essays on innovation and learning in social systems. In *Sociedade e Trabalho booklets: Social innovation*, 12 - Separate supplement, 15-35. Lisbon: MTSS/GEP & EQUAL.
- [41] Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- [42] Whipp, J. (2003). Scaffolding critical reflection in online discussions: Helping prospective teachers think deeply about field experiences in urban schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 54(4), 321-333.