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Online Socialization and Teacher Professional Development for inclusion: Study of Four Self-Training Digital Devices in France.

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Abstract: In order to foster inclusive education and design a platform to train teachers in Europe, this article analyzes French online platforms for teacher professional development. We interviewed the designers of four French platforms: *GPS*, *Neopass@ction*, *T-Prof*, and *Prof-Chercheurs*. We asked them about the elements of Engeström's activity theory and the pedagogical foundation which guided their design choices. We analyzed each platform and compared their approaches to socialization, organization and vision of professional development that the designers followed. This research shows that it is essential to consider both the content of the activities during the construction of a community and the diversity of the actors who can join it, and invites us to broaden online socialization with the aim of quality professional development.

Introduction

In 2018 and 2019, the European Union initiated 41 university consortia to explore ways to create diverse models for inclusive education across Europe. The challenges include a broad array of economic, cultural, and practical considerations that each consortium is intended to address in its own way. The Eutopia Alliance is one of these consortia and has the stated goal of becoming “an open, multicultural, confederated operation of connected campuses¹.”

The current Eutopia study draws on an earlier Eutopia meta-study by Van Peteghem and Consuegra (2021) which identified 10 indispensable aspects of teacher training for inclusiveness, three of which are primarily government policy, while the remaining seven might be implemented as part of a training platform. These seven are 1) Mainstreaming inclusion training throughout the teacher education curriculum; 2) Community-based learning; 3) Life-long learning; 4) Collaboration; 5) Safe spaces; 6) Self-reflection; 7) The use of digital technologies.

The current study is an attempt to take advantage of teacher education projects already in operation in France that may provide a more broadly applicable model for achieving these seven approaches. We consider that to articulate diverse local institutions and European training we need a hybrid in-person/online approach. This study is concerned with the online side of that hybrid approach. We look at the four platforms *Neopass@ction*, *GPS Educ'*, *T-Prof*, and *Prof-Chercheurs*, and approach them from the standpoint of Wenger's Community of Practice and Engeström's Activity Theory, as providing an appropriate basis for analyzing online communities.

In the following pages we will explain this theoretical framework and the surrounding literature, and provide a summary of our methods and results. In our conclusions, we identify several specific requirements we feel are important for any inclusive hybrid teacher training program to be implemented across Europe.

¹ <https://eutopia-university.eu/>

Theoretical Framework

We follow Donnay & Charlier (2006)'s definition of professional development. It implies a dynamic and recurring process, intentional or not, by which, in his or her interactions with others, a person develops his or her skills and attitudes. It is also important in this definition that these transformations are upright to their educational values and professional ethics, and thereby enrich and transform the teacher's professional identity.

Two theories are regularly used in the literature to explain the professional socialization of teachers online: the theories of Wenger (Community of Practice) and Engeström (Activity Theory). As explained below, we feel that both systems combine well to provide an analysis of hybridization and community.

In 1998, Wenger developed the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP). He defined CoP as groups of people who share a common concern or an interest for something they do and learn how to do it better by interacting regularly together. These CoP are distinguished from learning structures such as work groups, project teams or network groups (Wenger et al. 2002) and are characterized by: 1/ mutual commitment; 2/ a joint enterprise (with reference to a common objective and its possible evolution over time); and 3/ a shared repertoire linked to the production of common resources (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, Wenger's work on the social role of these communities leads him to develop a social theory of learning that connects the learning process to each of four other components: practicing an activity, belonging to a community, constructing an identity for a future, and constructing meaning associated with the experience (Wenger, 1999).

In 2001, Engeström proposed the third generation of Activity Theory (AT). AT explores human activity according to a comprehensive and systemic representation of collective activity considered in its context. AT represents each system of activity schematically, identifying different poles: subject, object, tool, community, division of labor and rules. The object pole is also connected to outcomes. The subject is defined as the individual or the collective engaged in an activity. The object is what motivates the subject's activity and gives it direction. The artefact/tool is a conceptual, material or digital element that produces a mediating effect between the subject and the object of its activity. The expected result depends on the need that the subject wants to meet. The community (local or remote) is the organization in which the subject's activity is included. The division of labor designates the roles that ensure the distribution of tasks related to the activity. Rules are the policies, norms, and *habitus* that manage the subject's actions.

We rely on Engeström and Wenger to characterize each platform because their theories are intended to describe collective and systemic human activities in local contexts and, as Donnay & Charlier explain, there is a link between AT, CoP and professional development that our literature review explores.

Literature review

In France, the link between teachers' professional development and socialization has been made by several authors. Dubar (2005) considers that professional identity is both the foundation of socialization and the result of it. He explains that the construction of teacher identity depends on the communities to which they belong, because their representations of the world and of themselves are elaborated collectively during exchanges. It is during this mutual recognition, in socialization, that their professional identity evolves. Trust et al. (2016) show that the availability of online platforms facilitates the creation of teachers' professional networks and of both professional and personal development of teachers. However, online teacher communities meet specific and flexible needs where the size of the community (more power vs. more intimacy) is a determining factor in the type of exchanges. Additionally, the fact that these exchanges are written (not oral) promotes reflexivity and professional development (Lantz-Andersson, 2018). Several French platforms such as GPS were design for all these points (Lehner and Nordmann 2021). Thus, we need to understand how the platform designers imagine teachers using collaborative online platforms to train each other, and how platforms should evolve to foster professional development for inclusion.

Beauné et al. (2019) studied 22 French communities of teachers. Some were online, in-person or, primarily, hybrid. They show the roles of collectives in the evolution and construction of professional identity and conclude, among other things, that identity construction and professional evolution via online networks require, at some point, a face-to-face encounter. However, with the pandemic, online-only communities are becoming more frequent. In this report, an article by Baron and Zablot (p194-206) proposes a theoretical study of the dynamics of these teaching communities based on three theories: Wenger, Oström and Engeström. The

authors explain that Engeström's activity theory, which is useful for studying a system of activity and a teachers community, has two limits for their own research: 1) it does not make it possible to define the system and the institution, in particular the very complex and hierarchical French system, and 2) it does not highlight the agentivity of the actors in the community. For the first point, they suggest using Oström's work on institutions and group dynamics, and for the second point, supplementing Engeström's model with Wenger's approach to the constitution of the community and the place of the teacher. Since our study requires an understanding of how professional development takes place, and thus the agentivity and development of socialization, we propose to keep Engeström's and Wenger's models: the first to understand how teaching communities function on platforms and the second to identify how this can lead to one's professional development. Since we consider the institution as an exogenous parameter we don't need to use Oström's model to study it.

Following this previous work, and specifically this last one which was the biggest French study about French teachers communities, we question how the platform designers conceived and organize online socialization to improve the teachers' professional development, using Engeström's AT theory and Wenger CoP theory.

Methods

After two years of a research seminar studying *dispositifs*² to train teachers, we identified four French platforms designed by researchers providing a hybrid and collective teacher training. For each platform, the study had three steps, following a qualitative approach. In step one the designer gave a two hours' lecture on their platform in a research webinar we organized in 2020/2021. In step two we examined the platform. In Step three, we conducted interviews with the designers' platform for three of them and by a researcher-expert for the fourth one (Neopass@ction).

In this last step, based on the concepts and theories mentioned above, we constructed a grid of questions and analysis of these platforms using Engeström's activity theory (2001). We studied the "socialization" aspect through the "communities", "rules" and "division of labor" as defined by Engeström. We completed our grid with questions arising from our reading of Wenger, namely the existence/nonexistence of a shared repertoire, practices and learning. In addition, we proposed several questions to clarify the nature of the institutional framework and the consequences of that framework on the online platforms and the rules that apply to them. Finally, we added questions on the pedagogical background of the platforms' designers and on their vision of what should be professional development for teachers.

We conducted semi-structured interviews using that grid. Interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours. We systematically shared our data collection table with the interviewees in order to provide them with our analysis of the situation. This exchange provided an opportunity to complete and correct any misunderstandings. We then sought to identify the link between the platform, socialization, and teachers' professional development. For this last point, we compared the designers' definition with those of our theoretical frameworks.

Results

Presentation of the four platforms

What the four platforms have in common is that they were designed by trainers, not teachers, and that they allow the teachers who use them to collectively analyze real situations and to reinvest those analyses in their classrooms.

GPS stands for "Gestion Professionnelle des Situations" and deliberately uses the acronym of the "Global Positioning System" in order to emphasize that it is an orientation for teachers in their profession. The GPS protocol was designed in 2016 by the EMA laboratory at CY Cergy Paris University, but the [GPS Educ'](#) platform did not become public until January 2022. As of 2019, it was being tested under the university's Moodle and was accessible by registering with the designer. The stated objective is to offer empowerment training among peers, inspired by institutional pedagogies (Lehner and Nordmann, 2021). The trainee teachers are put into groups of two to four and must choose a complex situation from the experience of one of them. Then, by following a protocol that leads them to question themselves, they must collectively write up this situation and propose solutions.

[T-Prof](#) is an online game simulation platform which was created in 2018 by the company T-Lipps, with the support of the EMA lab. At each stage, a teacher-in-training has a choice of three options and the scenario

² "*dispositif*" has no translation in English and we use it as Foucault (1994) defines it which is a melting pot of discourse, institution, architecture, decision, law, mechanisms, etc. So an online platform can be part of a *dispositif*.

adapts to their responses. The objective is to learn professional techniques and to gain flexibility by separating oneself from the preparation sheet. It is a playful approach aimed at transforming the unexpected into a favorable event. This platform, especially intended for teachers in training, should strengthen their professional development (Saujat, 2004; Elalouf et al., 2012).

Set up and hosted within the Learning Planet Institute (formerly the CRI) in 2020, [Profs-chercheurs](#) is a platform based on participatory action-research. The aim is to find reusable methods for collective work and the empowerment of the collective itself according to the ICAP³ framework (Chi and Wylie, 2014). The objective here is to collectively propose solutions to a concrete problematic situation, to implement them and to evaluate those proposals according to a scientific approach. The rules are essentially linked to four steps to be respected: 1/ explore, 2/ observe, suggest, 3/ implement, describe, synthesize, 4/ communicate, review. The integration of the evaluation process into the approach aims at continuous improvement.

[Neopass@ction](#) is the oldest of the platforms presented: developed at IFE in 2010, it is based on video training and cross-confrontation (Ria, 2015). The production of the video vignettes is done thanks to teachers in training who agree to have a camera in their classrooms for several days. Then short extracts are presented on the platform alongside video commentary by the teachers-in-training themselves, experienced teachers, and researchers. These videos are accessible to teachers and trainers at Instituts Nationaux Supérieurs du Professorat et de l'Éducation (INSPE).

Socialization on Platforms

The four approaches systematically consider group work and the existence of communities of practice from the point of view of social participation. However, the four approaches wish to create different identities. The objective of *Profs-chercheurs* is to construct the identity of the teacher as researcher, while *GPS Educ'* and *Neopass@ction* aim to construct a reflective professional identity (Schön, 1983). These three *dispositifs* thus target the development of a teacher-reflective identity to varying degrees. *T-prof*, on the other hand, aims at building a teaching identity by internalizing professional gestures. However, the digital platforms associated with their approach do not necessarily include community aspects: while reflection on socialization was planned from the outset for *Profs-chercheurs*, it only appeared later for *GPS Educ'*. As for the other two systems, their designers explain that socialization is essential but that it takes place during the training and is not something the platform tries to induce.

Our study of sociability, based on the "communities", "rules" and "division of labor" poles of Engeström's activity theory, highlights a distinction between the *GPS Educ'* and *Profs-chercheurs* systems on the one hand, and *T-profs* and *Neopass@ction* on the other. Indeed, the first two are based on sharing practices and meanings by proposing communities dedicated to this purpose, while the other two essentially allow sharing resources. The guidance of trainers and users also depends on the platforms: *GPS Educ'* and *Profs-chercheurs* have a very precise protocol for trainers and communities. These two platforms are based on an analysis of situations that are directly experienced by the participants, whereas *T-profs* and *Neopass@ction* rely on situations experienced by other teachers, leaving trainers free to use these resources. Thus, the creators of *GPS Educ'* and *Profs-Chercheurs* intend that the protocol governing those platforms generates a community of practice for the teachers. On the other hand, on *T-profs* and *Neopass@ction* socialization is not part of the design of the platform and is delegated to the training site. The teachers who use *T-profs* or *Neopass@ction*, although they have a shared repertoire, do not necessarily constitute a community of practice and do not socialize via the platform. In contrast, *Profs-Chercheurs* calls each group of actors working on a shared problem a "community". These groups work with common resources on a common object in a mutual commitment, which makes them communities of practice (in the sense of Wenger, 1998) or project groups, depending on the duration of the commitment.

Professional Development Perceptions

The designers of *GPS Educ'* consider professional development in the sense of reflexivity. For the creators, it is a question of helping future teachers overcome their own preconceptions. The objective for the designers is "the evolution of the future practitioner's viewpoint over time", and to do this within a group via a "progressive transformation of ways of thinking and then acting"⁴.

³ Interactive, Constructive, Active, and Passive

⁴ The interviews were in French and the original words were « l'évolution du regard du futur praticien dans le temps, [...au moyen d'une] transformation progressive des manières de penser puis d'agir ».

T-prof focuses on classroom management, which is a recurring concern of teachers-in-training (Ria, 2009). The designers of *T-profs* consider that "to become a professional is to be situated in a cluster of paradoxical injunctions." Professional development is seen here as "acquiring a capacity for improvisation": the implementation of professional gestures to manage the classroom.

When asked about their definition of professional development, the designers of *Profs-Chercheurs* responded that it is assessed and defined from question 31 of the OECD Talis survey (2018). This question focuses on teachers' sense of competence. The objective for these designers is to empower the teachers as researchers so as to feed the teachers' sense of efficacy according to the "ICAP" model of empowerment. The platform's designers believe that teachers' sense of efficacy improves both their ability to become researchers and their teaching ability.

Finally, for *Neopass@ction*, it is a question of developing the ability to talk about the profession. In order to do this, the platform proposes rich situations, which can be sources of debate, around subjects invisible without the video -- for example body posture or movements in the classroom. Luc Ria, the researcher-designer behind *Neopass@ction*, explains on the website that novices will integrate into a community by recognizing themselves in the videos, and progress by analyzing the transformations of a peer's activity.

However, our interviewee points out that, in the absence of a facilitation protocol, the use of the platform does not lead to a definition or a shared understanding of what professional development is, except for the direct participants in the experience who are filmed and who have interactions with the *Neopass@ction* team.

Discussion

Wittorski (2008) suggests three distinct views of professional development: 1) "making" a professional through training ("professionalization - training"), 2) constructing an autonomous social group ("professionalization - profession"), and 3) supporting work flexibility ("professionalization - work efficiency). Sociability influences constructing one's professional identity. Indeed, as Wenger (1998) explains, active collaboration in the practices of a social community is linked to the construction of identities related to it. Furthermore, referring to Donnay & Charlier (2006) and Wittorski's definitions, professional development, as a process of transformation in interactions with others, also differs according to how one socializes.

Following this analysis, what links can be identified between socialization on online platforms and teachers' professional development? We consider two criteria that characterize differences in online socialization: 1) the existence of rules of use via the platform and 2) the institutional context within which the platform is designed.

The emphasis on socialization and rules of use serves to generate a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Conversely, the absence of rules of use generates only a shared repertoire. Thus, *GPS Educ'* and *Profs-Chercheurs* organize socialization through rules for the trainer (i.e. community leader) and a highly structured approach. These rules and structures give participants a sense of community that can be observed in the evaluations at the end of the course carried out on *GPS Educ'*, and in the way in which the participants of *Profs-Chercheurs* are designated. Indeed, any group working on the same "challenge" on this platform is called a "community". However, this sense of belonging seems to be constrained to the activity itself in the same way as a temporary work group.

In terms of identity, if we take up Wittorski's typology (2008), the designers of *Profs-Chercheurs* aim primarily to enable teachers to be researchers of their own practice and, in this sense, to achieve "professionalization-efficiency"; whereas for those of *GPS Educ'*, the stated objective is "professionalization-training". In spite of this difference, these two platforms do result in the construction of a collective (called "community" by the designers), a group whose durability we cannot yet assess since the platforms are recently developed. Furthermore, these two platforms have the particularity of being open to other educational actors (medical, management, inspection, parental, etc.). This way of associating other educational actors with the teaching professional group presents possible new perspectives on the situations analyzed. In both cases, the analyses are co-written, co-constructed and always analyzed by peers. As a result, these two mechanisms tend to develop a broader socialization and to develop the sense of a larger "educational community" including partners. According to Dubar (2005) and Donnay & Charlier (2006), these broader interactions should modify the positioning, identity and professionalization of the teachers, possibly leading to a "professionalization-profession" (group recognition).

The institutional context is important for understanding the way teachers socialize within each platform. In particular the institution can limit who has access to a given platform, and users can fear repercussions from their institution for things they have written, or fear being recognized if their questions are public. For example, to use *Neopass@ction* one must have an official teacher's email address; and for *T-prof*, one must be a member

of INSPE or else pay a fee. These controls are not necessarily harmful in themselves as they can bring a sense of belonging and security to users. But the designers of *GPS Educ'* feared self-censorship and wanted to welcome broader groups so they moved their platform outside of the institution into an independent website in 2021, although participations by some students remain compulsory. Conversely *Profs-Chercheurs* has almost no teachers-in-training in its communities because it's not mandatory in any courses. The designers of the four platforms agree that the way participants behave on a platform depends on the freedom they feel they have and on the participants involved in the collective reflection.

The transformation from socialization to professional development involves transformations in identity, as Dubar (2005) explains. "The construction of teaching professionalism [...] [therefore] presupposes both integrating the school world with forms of socialization specific to it and professionalizing oneself by formalizing experiential knowledge, analyzing one's practice, and thinking about forms of transposition adapted to school audiences" (Perez-Roux, 2011). These two dimensions are articulated differently depending on the platform, so that different socializations transform both the way teachers professionalize themselves and the vision they construct of their profession. Whether or not the platform constrains the online interactions of its users, the designers of these four platforms are unanimous about the importance of group work for teachers' professional development.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study identifies two major elements of a hybrid *dispositif* for collective teachers' training for inclusion.

First, we identify that the local institution should lead the online platform in order to maximize the number of participants. However, to increase empowerment, safety and diversity of the participants, it's better if the platform itself has some autonomy from the institution, such as self-management. Thus we recommend some partnership between the local institution and a group of teachers, to keep both advantages.

Second, to encourage socialization, the platform should include specific processes rather than assuming users will socialize independently. Anticipating and fostering online socialization appears to be an important platform feature for better professional development.

This study shows that dynamic communities such as *GPS Educ'* and *Profs-chercheurs* are important for professional development. Furthermore, Thomazet and Merini (2014)'s work on intertrade space, shows that it is important for teacher's professional development and a key element for an inclusive school that the teachers work together with all people involved in the educational process. Thus, we recommend inviting parents, social workers, doctors etc. onto our platform to participate in collective reflection on children's education.

It remains that in order to achieve the creation of a professional teaching ethos (Jorro, 2013) through socialization, it will be necessary to observe in the longer term whether the empowerment of teachers in peer-to-peer training through communities of practice actually allows for a professional shift and not a simple reassurance in practices that are ultimately not questioned. It therefore seems relevant to us to continue this reflection, on these initiatives that envisage professional development via an expanded online socialization.

As mentioned above, of Van Peteghem and Consuegra's (2021) 10 essential elements, we identified seven that could be part of an online platform. Of those, all but the first were implemented on at least one of the studied platforms. The remaining element, "mainstreaming inclusion throughout the teacher education curriculum" represents an open question. We were not able to find any case in our research in which the platform does not isolate the "inclusion" topic.

All the other points were implemented in different ways. The use of digital technologies is much more advanced in *T-Prof* which uses simulated online games. *GPS Educ'*, and *Profs-chercheurs* are designed and used for life-long learning. Self-reflection is a major concern for platform's designers: they use self-confrontation through video (*Néopass@ction*) or writing (*GPS Educ'* and *Profs-chercheurs*). The way each platform aims to provide a "safe space" issue is interesting as two of them (*neopass@ction* and *T-prof*) claim to provide it by being private and institutional whereas the two others claim the opposite, being open and independent from national institutions. As outlined earlier, Thomazet and Merini (2014) showed that openness improves inclusion.

For future research, in order to design our European platform, we will have to tackle multilingualism. During a preliminary cross-campus experiment we are leading now, we proposed the use of video and/or writing to students and, up to now, students chose the writing process because it makes translation easier. We have to study technical options of Learning Management Systems as only some of them are natively designed for translations and multilingualism.

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