

## Designing an Online Community for Language Teachers

### ABSTRACT

*This article presents an endeavor to create an online learning community for European language teachers in higher education. The approach presented here is based on the premise that knowledge is produced through processes in the interactions between people. The aim of the authors has been to get first-hand experience of community building, both in terms of digital choices and reflecting on community goals, while working within a transparent and dynamic small community of practice, the goal of which was to design an online community for language teachers.*

### KEYWORDS

*higher education, collaborative learning, language teaching*

### Introduction

TAMK Language Centre organises together with Jyväskylä UAS Language Centre the 2nd Erasmus International Week for Language Teachers in May 2015. Therefore, a Ning platform called Language Teaching Tomorrow was set up. The title indicates the ultimate goal of the project, which is to create a prosperous and productive community for language educators in the future. The purpose of the Ning platform is to offer a forum where teachers can network, discuss language teaching related issues, start common projects, and share resources and ideas. The platform will be piloted by the organizers and participants during the International Week.

### Creation of Platform

As a collaborative team with a common goal, our aim was to get first-hand experience of community building, both in terms of digital choices and reflecting on community goals, while working within a transparent and dynamic community of practice. According to Etienne Wenger, “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger 1998).

We engaged regularly, reflecting on the development of this practical project, bearing in mind that its purpose was to implement the Ning community in the long term, inclusively, with the possible backing of the educational institution. Our communication was both random and negotiated, posting questions and answers on different communication platforms (from the TAMK Moodle to Google+, as well as through the course blog and even on the experimentation blog).

It is through the narration of this experience that an example of how the application of new ideas and transparent collaboration may be regarded as a key element in professional development today, particularly in the field of education. Throughout this process, there was a degree of “teaching presence” as the team initiated discussions, shared meanings and helped one another to troubleshoot technical issues whenever they appeared.

Decisions had to be made in regard to the choice of both a short and long term platform, so different alternatives were explored and debated asynchronously through the various communication platforms mentioned above. Overall, reaching agreement was easy, whether suggestions were added or dropped along the way. Sharing personal meaning, connecting ideas and focusing discussion through risk-free expression were our typical contributions.

### **Model of Collaboration**

Initially, we first met on an online course, Collaborative Learning, offered by TAMK. After we had decided to create an online community for language teachers, we all connected ideas, resources, and contributed with their different skills.

Despite the positive outcomes of this project, there are two delicate issues which need to be addressed when undertaking such a collaborative project. One question is whether this specific process was fluid because all three of us shared similar professional interests and experiences and were able to understand project objectives and contribute to it. Digital ecosystems may be “fragile” at times when individuals have neither met nor worked together face-to-face. Nevertheless, this “fragility” may be overcome by nurturing connections with a determination to be transparent.

Another issue is one of leadership and the various degrees of ease and/or difficulty of distance. In this particular case, there was no intentional artificial pyramid of authority, with all of us contributing when and with what we could. As a case in point, while one team member worked in another country and institution, two team members belonged to the same institution (TAMK). Does the fact whether participants belong or not to the same institution bring about stronger or weaker connections when working on an online project of this nature? In this particular case, owing to the transparency of the process, this was not relevant at all.

As a conclusion, it can be stated that transnational online projects are indeed possible to achieve when transparency, respect and shared interests connect. In this project, transparency of communication, transparency of ideas and resolving technical problems which emerged, were the key ingredients to achieving the final design and construction of the community of learning.

### **Structure of Platform**

The platform includes eight sections and it covers a range of themes - not only dealing with language learning but also 21st century pedagogic theories and skills. The sections are Home, Blog, Tasks, Discussion Forum, Photos, Web Pulse, About, Members (see [Language Teaching Tomorrow Community 2015](#)).

The structure was set up in order to achieve the engagement of participants. Interactions and interdependency will be fostered with some activities which may bring the participants to contribute actively in the community:

- Awarding badges for contributions to the community. For instance, a badge to everyone who contributes to sharing a digital tool and explaining how they use it in their teaching.
- Discussing web tools and apps and how the participants use them in their teaching; the pros and cons of particular tools or apps. This provides a rich resource for any

participant who are either beginning to integrate digital technology in their teaching or for anyone who would like to learn about a new tool or approach with digital tools. Geared specifically towards language teachers in higher education, a personalised learning experience is offered.

- Adding a page referred to as “Web Pulse”, which regularly updated, highlights different events happening online, thus providing a free service to the members for professional development. These include events such as webinars, MOOCs, special weeks (e.g. Open Access Week) as well as localised workshops and conferences.
- Calls to Action - for example, how to solve a particular issue or problem which arises in classrooms or in an online teaching/learning context, and the sharing of approaches (e.g. use of visuals in digital learning activities). These could be initiated and addressed for instance through webinars posted on the blog stream.
- A poll on how often the participants use the blog during the first three weeks and how often they think they will keep participating in the community will be set up. This provides data and feedback for improving the platform and what the community may offer when it is open to a broader community at a later date.

### **Technologies and Apps**

Ning offers fairly good compatibility with mobile devices and it offers a wide variety of collaborative and social tools, ease of participants’ login and contributions, not to mention Ning support. Various external applications have been chosen, which offer more functionality for the whole community. For instance, in one of the pre-tasks for the international week, Padlet is used. Padlet offers a space for collaborative discussions and sharing of, for example, photos, and it can be easily embedded into web pages.

### **Questions and Future Prospectives**

Once the project is completed, it is time to reflect actively again and brainstorm assumptions in regard of the future of this, as yet, community to be. Technically, the usability of the platform in mobile devices needs to be further tested.

Then there is the human side - one assumption being that the community needed to be initially cultivated and kept “alive” by the administrators. All members are aware that one main challenge could occur after the International Week was over. The characteristics of cyclical births and deaths in online communities is recognized here. It is to be expected that there will be a positive momentum the week before the International Week, during the week (slower though, but the participants of the week will log in for updates) and then again after the International Week is over (hopefully the participants will post feedback, images and so on).

After that, it would be up to all participants how much they contribute towards building a learning community and how much they realise the wealth of learning which being part of a community may bring - this last aspect would keep them interested in returning. It is accepted that there will also be slow phases when participants are busy with marking, grading and caught up with a range of daily professional demands and responsibilities. It should also be taken into account that this community will act as a springboard for other networks and activities (e.g. for the different languages). So the Ning is like a community base which allows other activities and inquiries to take place within.

Knowledge and knowing does not happen in a vacuum, hence knowledge building will be dependent on the interaction of participants and how that may be managed and maintained. Although a community is built and fostered by all members, there will always be tasks which need to be coordinated and carried out by particular individuals. Hence, the Ning administrators will need the initiative to keep the community updated with web events, welcome new members and help them connect with others, as well as contribute to sharing questions for the community.

A vibrant online community needs to be monitored for its activity and performance, both in terms of quantitative and qualitative contributions. The role of the community manager also needs to be considered so that the online community remains a vibrant and engaging space for all participants.

## References

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Henri Annala  
Senior Lecturer,  
International Coordinator



Tarja Haukijärvi  
Head of Language Centre, Senior Lecturer



TAMK Language Centre

<http://languageservices.blogs.tamk.fi/en/>

Ana Cristina Pratas



United Arab Emirates

<http://cristinaskybox.blogspot.fi/>

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