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SUP4PCL Case Study: Alexandria University University of Northampton



AU Case Study
Alexandria University and University of
Northampton

Leading Change through Peer Communities of Learners: A Case Study between Egypt and The United Kingdom

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List of Acronyms

Partners Acronyms

AU	Alexandria University
UON	University of Northampton

Other acronyms and abbreviations

COP	Communities of Practice
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
FOE	Faculties of Education
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEIHE	Middle East Institute for Higher Education
PAT	The Professional Academy for Teachers
PCL	Peer Communities of Learners
PD	Professional Development
PLC	Peer Learning Communities
STEAM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
SUP4PCL	School-University Partnership for Peer Communities of Learners (Title of this ERASMUS+ Project)

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Preface

The partnership is the result of an Erasmus+ project that was awarded to the Middle East Institute for Higher Education at the Graduate School of Education in the American University in Cairo entitled School-University Partnership for Peer Communities of Learners (SUP4PCL) in November 2016. The partnership was created within a context where Egypt has shown a keen need for reform at the school and university levels and where Faculties of Education have acquired the reputation of operating in an ivory tower divorced from the practical field of school improvement. A continued debate has called for the abolition of faculties and schools of education at the undergraduate level and the relegation of their work to the graduate level; hence, the eternal struggle between sequential and concurrent teacher education programs. The partnership was therefore viewed by Egypt's Supreme Council of Universities and Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research as a welcome step in the direction of creating cost-effective means of stimulating a reform environment. For several decades, the international reform community has recognized the importance of school-university partnerships and the creation of Professional Development Schools (PDS) in offering an effective method of creating collaboration, continuous professional development, research, and pedagogical innovation. The proponents of this approach have claimed that it can simultaneously reform school practices and teacher education programs. It is the intention of the SUP4PCL consortium in Egypt to introduce such an approach with the support and creation of Peer Communities of learners (PCLs) at the university, school, and cross-cultural levels.

Due to some bureaucratic delays, it is only in late February of 2017 that the partnership was enacted with the first Kick-off meeting of the project. During this initial first phase, partnership teams were being constructed within the eight institutions of the consortium; Ain Shams University ANSU, Helwan University HU, Alexandria University AU (from Egypt), University of Limerick UL, (from Ireland) Martin Luther University (from Germany), University of Northampton UON, University of Leicester ULEIC (from UK), and the American University in Cairo AUC, coordinating the consortium from Egypt. Moreover, the various institutions with very diverse cultural and political backgrounds were beginning to know each other. The early stages of consolidating this layer of the partnership were animated with meetings and much mobility to learn about each other in live natural environments. During this preparatory preliminary phase, another layer was added to the partnership namely that between Egyptian Faculties of Education and Professional Development Schools (PDSs). The first step in that direction was a signed Memorandum of Understanding MOU between the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the Ministry of Education and Technical Education. Under this protocol, three faculties were to partner with a total of 15 public governmental schools at a ratio of 5 to each faculty later to expand to a total of 45 schools at a ratio of 15 schools per faculty. The MOU was followed by signed letters of agreement with the Ministry of Education local directorates. After some months, more closeness was established between the partners through exchange visits, activities, communication and meetings in the summer of 2018. Halfway through the project, another dimension to the partnership was added, namely a twinning process was introduced with the following arrangement: AUC twinning with ULEIC for quality assurance and monitoring purposes, AU with UON twinning for capacity development and the write up of case studies, similarly for the same purposes HU twinned with MLU and ANSU with UL. Finally, in 2019 yet another dimension was added to the partnership with the clustering of PDSs thus allowing for these to expand to 45 with a ratio of 15 per each Faculty of Education (FOE). The various case studies of this project will cover all the layers and dimensions of the enhanced and expanding partnership.

All the participants in the expanding partnership/consortium reached consensus on a research framework with set questions shaping the work of each of the case studies. Together, the various case studies constitute a level of triangulation that supports and assures the integrity of interpretation, especially that the collection of data was done at different points in time by different research teams in similar settings. The total data generated from this project has the potential of being utilized for grounded theory and to further refine concepts and comparative approaches to school-university partnerships, and Peer Communities of Learners PCL.

Malak Zaalouk



Chapter One: Introduction

The “School and University Partnership for Peer Communities of Learners (SUP4PCL)” is an ERASMUS+ funded project. It established partnerships between a number of Egyptian and European Educational institutions to create Professional Communities of Learners (PCLs). Each Egyptian University was twinned with a European partner university. In this case, Alexandria University (AU) was twinned with the University of Northampton (UON). During the lifetime of the project, AU formed a team to lead the project’s work packages. This team formed a core PCL that worked closely with a parallel team from UON. This case study set to explore and examine the process of the PCL’s formation, evolution and development and aimed to capture variables that impacted the establishment and sustainability of PCLs within the Egyptian context.

AU Context

Describing the faculties of education (FoE) context, Alexandria University, is an essential requirement for setting the background for the AU case study. Identifying the PCL context at AU constructed a frame for understanding the PCL’s evolution and impact. The PCL at AU was affected by the FOE’s vision, mission, strategic goals, and overarching context, especially by the structure of the academic departments and relationships amongst the faculty members. The following points provide key information about the FOE at AU:

- The Faculty of Education was founded at the beginning of the academic year 1966-1967.
- Faculty vision: The FOE is a pioneering educational institute that leads the development of effective educational practices at both national and regional levels.
- Faculty mission: The FOE is committed to ensuring quality in preparing and developing professional teachers and in developing a concise body of knowledge that leads to the continuous improvement of educational practices.

- Faculty strategic goals: The Faculty works to ensure the on-going development of the educational system, prepare qualified researchers, contribute to the authentic knowledge, and offer a variety of programs and activities to serve the community.

Furthermore, the FOE’s vision, mission, and strategic goals portray the faculty’s interest in activating the partnership between the faculty and schools. At the same time, the FOE’s goals and values support cooperative work among staff members inside each department and across the different departments.

The FOE has fourteen departments, including seven educational departments, three language departments, three natural science departments, and one social studies department. These departments provide Undergraduate Educational Programs for Kindergarten, Primary stage school, Preparatory and secondary stage school. Moreover, they provide Post Graduate Educational Programs for General Diploma, Professional Diploma, Special Diploma, Masters and Doctor of Philosophy Degree (Ph.D.) in Education.

In the academic year 2019-2020, the FOE has 309 faculty members and 120 demonstrators and assistant lecturers. The total number of students this year (2019-2020) is about 11 thousand undergraduate students and 700 post-graduate students.

FOE facilities include a Centre of Educational Services, a branch of the Professional Academy for Teachers (PAT), eight Computer labs, A STEM Education lab, a Measurement and Evaluation Centre, a Quality Assurance Unit, an Action Research Unit, and an Education for Sustainable Development Centre. These facilities provide activities and programs for developing the capacities of students, staff members, demonstrators, assistant lecturers, teachers and all stakeholders. These activities and programs have a leading role in achieving a partnership with schools, forming PCLs whether in the FOE or in schools and preparing mentors.

Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework

Defining Professional Learning Communities

Peer learning communities (PLCs) or peer communities of learners (PCLs) is usually defined as professional communities that generate knowledge within their own boundaries (Underwood & Joshevska, 2019). It is a term that is often used interchangeably with communities of practice (COP). COP is commonly defined as practice-based communities with a shared knowledge-base developed through social interaction (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019). Moreover, sharing knowledge through social interaction forms the basis for understanding the nature and functions of PLCs or PCLs. COP is a model that was influenced by Wenger (1998) and was adopted by many professional community studies (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019). The COP model was adopted for this case study that aimed to explore the impact of PLCs by studying the practices of teachers and lecturers of both schools and universities. Hence, for the purposes of this study, PCLs, PLCs, and COP will be used interchangeably.

Affirmation, Empowerment, Professional and Community Development

COP is an affirmation and empowerment model. In this model, the community members, at first, have peripheral roles, in which they are more receivers of the knowledge. After that, these members develop their skills and gain knowledge that contribute to their professional development. Consequently, they start to hold central positions within the community.

The more experienced and central members of the community offer explanations and show appreciation for the new peripheral members, which provide a level of affirmation. Over time, the affirmation and appreciation empower the new members to become more deeply involved within the community, which enables them to move towards more central roles (Wenger, 1998; E. Wenger-Trayner, & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Thereby, members, overtime, move from a starting (peripheral) position to that where they are themselves developing and defining the knowledge of the community (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). At the same time, the “peripheral” members acknowledge and reinforce the expertise of more experienced members by learning from

them (Underwood & Joshevska, 2016). However, this model does not describe the subsequent development of the community members, who have achieved a central position of mastery and have the main role to affirm and shape the knowledge of others.

From the current debate, it is impossible to determine whether the achievement of mastery is an end in itself, or whether it subsequently evolves into a proactive search for other additional or alternative communities. It is further impossible to decide whether the professionals seek out other extended communities to continue the cycle of knowledge and affirmation (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019) although some research has begun to explore this (Underwood & Joshevska, 2019).

Benefits of Community Membership

It has been shown that teachers strongly benefit from community membership (Underwood, 2017; Joshevska, 2016). These benefits include increased resilience, creativity, empowerment and the sharing of expertise. Professional communities, where knowledge is shared and co-constructed, contribute to teachers’ professional identities and professionalism. Hoyle (2008) and Joshevska (2016) have both included affiliation to a community of practice as a factor in the definition of ‘extended professionals,’ teachers whose professional contribution intentionally extends beyond classroom practice, in the context of a broader professional community.

Based on this idea of extended professionals, it would appear that most collegial teachers are often the most resilient (Baker-Doyle, 2012). Notwithstanding strong individual identities, many teachers simultaneously find it helpful to share stories, which, in turn, contributes to transforming individual experiences into a collective process (Biesta, 2012; Lingard, 2009). Research has also shown a tendency amongst experienced teachers to be members of several professional communities, both local and disparate, simultaneously (Nishino, 2012).

Teachers may identify foremost with the local community, due to the depth of shared practice and meaning (Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011). However, professional gains in terms of improved practice or affirmation may also be limited. This limitation can be corrected through engagement with a broader extended community (Lee,

2011). Belonging to communities beyond the boundaries of the workplace can have an added positive impact on the community members by developing their affirmation and creativity and may lead teachers to better value themselves and their professional role (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019).

Challenges and Limitations of Community Membership

Notwithstanding these benefits, others have raised concerns regarding enforced or contrived collegiality (Frost, 2015; Hargreaves, Boyle, & Harris, 2014). Moreover, this ideal of collegial working is not always possible in reality. There are some countries where the development of practice through observation is possible, such as those using lesson study approaches, but most teachers have relatively little opportunity to share knowledge through observation. In many countries, teachers are frequently observed during their training, but not beyond. Past the earliest stages of training, teachers rarely teach together.

Since many teachers work alone in individual classrooms, they are observed only once or twice a year; therefore, the profession possesses an unusual degree of isolation (Pedder & Opfer, 2013). Although schools do often try to create opportunities for peer observation or other shared learning, such phenomena are few and far between (White, 2013). Past their initial training, teachers' professional learning and identity creation, therefore, take place in isolation, rather than collegially (Taber, 2009).

Several researchers have suggested that this issue of isolation might be addressed by approaches involving positional leaders allowing for the emergence of valued communities and facilitating non-positional leadership (Avidov-Unger, 2016; E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This does not account for the workplace context of emergence for these communities, which is often tightly and formally structured (Hoyle & Wallace, 2009). This issue has been addressed beyond the communities of practice model, in research on the risks of contrived collegiality (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) and on the significance of non-positionality in Frost's (2015) definition of teacher leadership. Both of these critiques warn against the consequences of enforced collegiality, including potential stress and negative impacts on teachers' self-efficacy.

Beyond these structural limitations, there are also conceptual limitations to the possibility of collegial knowledge-building. Since teachers' knowledge is complex, it cannot easily be shared with others (Guzman, 2009). One might, however, circumvent this by seeing extended communities of teachers as communities of empowerment and affirmation rather than practice (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2017).

From this perspective, the individuals, who we are building relationships with, also become less important. Individual teachers may hold more significance as representatives of a broader community enabling teachers to contextualise their own role and value, rather than as specific individuals with specific practice to share or meanings to co-create (Paik, Ganley, Luschei, Kula, Witenstein, Shimogori, & Truong, 2015). Our own professional identities may be impacted and defined by these 'boundary encounters' (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015) between colleagues who are distinct enough to challenge us but relatable enough to give meaning to these challenges. However, this impact does not necessarily produce or require a community of practice (Paik et al., 2015).

Creating and Recognising Boundaries in Communities

For professional communities to become visible, they must have boundaries (Hart, Aumann, Wenger, Aranda, Heaver, & Wolff, 2013). Communities by definition are exclusionary, their boundaries define membership (Stoll & Louis, 2007). Although this is a broadly accepted principle, the literature on community boundaries is highly contested. The community of practice model emphasises the importance of flexibility and permeability (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Whilst, teacher leadership models of professional learning communities often emphasise the importance of allowing space for concepts of membership to emerge from the members themselves (Frost, 2014; Hill, 2014). Both models present challenges for the creation and management of professional teaching communities. They suggest that formal, engineered 'communities of practice' may end up bearing little reference to the actual communities that emerge (Underwood, 2016).

Several researchers have suggested that this issue of contrived collegiality might be addressed by approaches involving positional leaders allowing for the emergence

of valued communities and facilitating non-positional leadership (Avidov-Unger, 2016; E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This does not account for the workplace context of emergence for these communities, which is often tightly and formally structured (Hoyle & Wallace, 2009). This issue has been addressed beyond the communities of practice model, in research on the risks of contrived collegiality (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) and on the significance of non-positionality in Frost's (2015) definition of teacher leadership. Both of these critiques warn of the consequences of enforced collegiality, including potential stress and negative impacts on teachers' self-efficacy.

One defining characteristic of PLCs is the idea that the boundaries of a community can be broader than formal communities, such as those created by a single employer (Chigona, 2013). Communities of practice are often defined simply as mutually-recognised groups of people who share practice, here understood as a collection of knowledge, skills and meanings that is both personal and co-created (Cashman, Cunniff-Linehan, Rosser, E. Wenger-Trayner, & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Hart et al., 2013). The creation of practice, therefore, creates a community, in a mutually reinforcing process, illustrating the ongoing relationship between practice, community and identity (Harden & Loving, 2015). The boundaries of a community of practice can, therefore, be defined by mutual recognition and shared knowledge of practice, rather than by workplace proximity, although the process of recognition still implies the interaction of some kind (Joshevska & Kirandziska, 2017).

The understanding of any professional community must be rooted in an understanding of the nature of its boundaries, as defined by its members. Some boundaries may be self-explanatory and accepted by all, such as belonging to a workplace or not. However, other boundaries may involve approaches to practice, perceptions of good teaching, or pedagogical values (Ramahi, 2015). An initial deductive framework for understanding might be built from these three considerations: proximity, values and practices. Beyond this, it might be interesting to explore who is responsible for creating boundaries in given networking contexts and whether boundaries emerge as the community develops or are part of its structural design. Both might be true. Different boundary definitions may coexist harmoniously, or cause tensions between members (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019).

Community Boundaries and Building Practitioner Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in one's personal capacity to organise and affect the actions needed in order to produce the required outcomes (Bandura, 1994). It is considered to be a self-perception, rather than an objective measure of effectiveness (Ross & Bruce, 2007) and it can influence the choices practitioners do make within their practices (Takahashi, 2011). Bandura (1994) further suggests that there are three particular sources of self-efficacy:

- mastery experiences achieved by personal success and satisfaction
- vicarious experiences achieved by observing others in similar positions such as peers
- verbal persuasion achieved by hearing affirming, supportive feedback from credible sources

However, personal emotional states also contribute a significant part to community members' self-efficacy as the emotional state affects one's judgement of capabilities.

There are different opinions relating to the idea that affiliation to a professional community that potentially confers self-efficacy, as discussed earlier (Gleeson & Tait, 2012). This also concerns boundary creation, since the perceived value of different communities can affect the ways in which people choose to become affiliated to them (Dogan, Pringle, & Mesa, 2016). It is often assumed that affiliation to a professional community is a positive experience for members, providing the audience of peers required for the self-affirmation of professional knowledge that is lacking in isolated teaching practice (Stoll & Louis, 2007).

This fits in with definitions of PLCs that value opportunities to 'perform' one's professional skills in front of knowledgeable peers in order to become identified as a member of a professional community (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This does not exclude the possibility of potential damage to self-efficacy by enforced collegiality, if teachers have difficulty engaging or do not feel that their professional knowledge and expertise are being acknowledged (Orr, 2012).

Given these two observations, that community membership can enhance self-efficacy but that some teachers' environments are not conducive to this enhancement, one might consider the benefits of working collegially within a broader structure beyond the school, in order to improve collective efficacy without threatening teachers' self-efficacy (E. Skaalvik, & S. Skaalvik, 2007). The elective nature of involvement in more broadly defined communities, an international teaching community, for example, may also confer greater benefits compared to a workplace community, which by definition one is immersed in every day (Chigona, 2013).

The flexibility of such relationships may allow teachers to preserve their individualistic practices within their institutions whilst building collegiality in another dimension of their professional experience. It may also allow less individualistic teachers in other environments to temper the isolation of their institutions by contextualising their practice in a wider valued and valuing community (Wallace & Hoyle, 2012).

Building Community Relationships

According to foundational research into professional communities, there are two main forms of professional connections: 'strong ties', where information and ideas flow and circulate freely but are often recycled, and 'weak ties' where information tends to be new but less freely-circulating (Granovetter, 1983). Although the past forty years' of technological advances have radically altered the nature of communities, this division still holds in recent research, conducted over a timespan that factors in increasing Internet use (Castells, 2009; Matthews, Crampton, Hill, Johnson, Sharma, & Varsavsky, 2015). The development of the Internet has, however, brought some changes to theoretical models. Earlier research focused on exact geographical distances (Homans, 1961), emphasising the impact of geographical location on our personal ties (Granovetter, 1983). Several writers have since challenged this given changes in technology use. They argue that the perceived environment now has a greater impact (Castells, 2009; Matthews et al., 2015).

Relationships, both personal and professional, are now possible regardless of geographical distance (Kelly & Antonio, 2016). Given the ease of online communication, it is possible to transcend national boundaries in order to go in search of communities we

identify with (Matthews et al., 2015). The increased choice may be a positive motivation to connect with alternative colleagues and communities. Less positive motivations may include a lack of affirmation within one's own workplace community (Underwood, 2016, 2017). This motivation does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with a motivation to self-identify as a member of a global professional community. Some teachers may simply prefer working with individual colleagues throughout the world (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019).

Teacher Engagement in Professional Communities

Different professional communities may be differentiated as follows: (1) formally recognised but professionally insignificant communities; (2) communities of affirmation; (3) communities enabling the development of practice; (4) Pre-structured with strong imposed rules, non-optional communities, such as a workplace; (5) broader communities outside the workplace, providing space for flexibility and creativity (Underwood, 2017). These categories are not mutually exclusive. This typology may be useful in helping us to understand how teachers perceive and engage with different professional communities (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019).

Any community of teachers that exists beyond the workplace can potentially involve mutual engagement in practice, implying learning or developing teaching strategies (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019, Underwood & Joshevka, 2019). The wider context of teaching, including government policies and practicalities, such as class size and school layout, may limit the potential for engagement in the detail of classroom strategies (Manzon, 2014). Without this shared meaning, the development and recognition of a professional community become very challenging. In spite of the possibilities of disparate communities, shared meaning may be one aspect which is best developed within a context of geographical proximity, rather than remotely (Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak 2019; Underwood & Joshevka, 2019).

Research has shown a tendency for teachers to belong to several professional communities, both local and more disparate, at any given time, to different degrees and for different purposes (Nishino, 2012). As discussed previously, teachers may identify foremost with the local community, due to the extent of shared

practice and meaning (Kinman, Wray, & Strange, 2011). However, the risk of belonging to only local community is that the professional gains in terms of improved practice or affirmation may also be limited.

This limitation can be corrected through engagement with a more broadly defined extended community (Lee, 2011). Disparate communities may sustain and develop affirmation and imagination as opposed to the practice. Belonging to a community that exists beyond their day-to-day experience may lead teachers to better value themselves and their professional role (Joshevska, 2016).

If extended communities of teachers are seen as communities of empowerment and affirmation rather than practice, infrequent contact or the lack of directly transferred practice becomes less significant (Underwood & Kowalczuk-Waledziak, 2019). From this perspective, individuals are building relationships which also become less important. Individual teachers may hold more significance as representatives of a broader community enabling teachers to contextualise their own role and value, rather than as specific individuals with specific practice to share or meanings to co-create (Paik et al., 2015). Our own professional identities may be impacted and defined by these 'boundary encounters' (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015) between colleagues who are distinct enough to challenge us but relatable enough to give meaning to these challenges. However, this impact does not necessarily produce or require a community of practice (Paik et al., 2015).

Research into one extended, international community of teachers, conducted between 2010 and 2017, produced a typology of four kinds of knowledge within professional communities (Underwood, 2017): (1) knowledge of strategies, i.e., sharing specific lesson plans or activities; (2) knowledge of practice, i.e., approaches to planning and designing lessons; (3) knowledge of purpose, i.e., pedagogical, ethical or cultural values predating lesson design; (4) knowledge that affirms, i.e., acknowledgement that one is a skilled professional, acquired through interaction with an audience of peers. This typology illustrates the different types of knowledge that can be shared within

professional communities. Furthermore, the typology also provides information about the value teachers attribute to each type of knowledge.

Conclusion

To conclude, a broad spectrum of challenges exist with regard to developing and sustaining different professional communities, depending on the type of community in question: local or global, small or large, intentionally created or spontaneously emerging. The idea of an international community of teachers might best be understood as a community of shared affirmation, as opposed to a community of practice. This would change its definitions of success, the significance of its activities and its role in teachers' working lives, as well as the challenges to its development (Underwood & Kowalczuk-Waledziak, 2019; Underwood & Joshevska, 2019). Such a community's strength might lie, not in shared meanings, but in the opportunity for each member to independently develop and clarify their own (Underwood & Kowalczuk-Waledziak, 2019; Underwood & Joshevska, 2019).

The key to understanding how the PCLs develop within an Egyptian context will be explored within the next sections through the specific research methods, findings and discussion. The themes identified within the literature above will form part of this analysis, especially at the beginning, but how they are shaped within the context of Egypt will also suggest other themes.

The writing of this conceptual framework has been heavily shaped by the following articles by one of the authors and co-writers from other projects: Underwood and Joshevska (2019), Underwood and Kowalczuk-Waledziak (2019). The purpose of these articles was to provide a widely usable conceptual framework for projects involving studying professional communities that these three authors were conducting. These three authors agree to have their previous articles used and integrated into subsequent projects in this way.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Background and Questions

The project's research questions were:

- *How does the SUP enhance the development of PCLs at the university level?*
- *How has the PCL impacted on the transformation of professional learning practice at the university level?*
- *What are some of the tensions between beliefs/values and practice?*

These questions focus specifically on the university level's impact. The first question asks specifically how the partnership enhanced the PCL's development. The second question looks at the impact of the PCL on changes to professional learning practice. Considering the embedded cultural aspects within developing partnerships and communities of learning, it is perhaps not surprising that there might be tensions and these are the focus of the third question.

Overall Design

The initial stage of data collection for this study aimed at examining the context of the PCLs at AU. This marked the starting point for understanding the existing PCL's culture where the SUP4PCL project was implemented. Findings from this stage provided the background information and frame of reference for answering the three main research questions.

The AU team members conducted a qualitative study in March- April 2018 to examine and understand the PCL's culture at the FOE. Interviews were conducted with a sample of sixteen staff members, which included heads of the different departments. The structured interview protocol, which was prepared and used by the AU team, covered the following aspects of PCL: concept and availability, formation, areas of interest, impact, challenges, support and development. The interviews revealed interesting findings related to the previous six aspects. These will be discussed in the findings section.

The interview questions were as follows:

1. *How do you understand the concept of PCL? How do PCLs evolve?*
2. *What types of PCLs are there in your department? Are these formal or informal?*
3. *What are the domains of collaboration through PCLs in your department? Do you have PCLs that evolve around any of the following?*
 - a) *Teaching*
 - b) *Assessment / evaluation*
 - c) *Research*
 - d) *Social relationships*
 - e) *Others*
4. *In your opinion, what is the impact of PCLs at the individual department and at faculty levels?*
5. *What are the challenges that you face in forming and sustaining PCLs?*
6. *What are your suggestions for overcoming these challenges?*

The second concurrent stage for data collection consisted of four complementary sources of data. These sources were:

1. In December 2018, focus group discussion with AU team members (Appendix 1) , who formed the AU professional community of learners (PCL).
2. In June 2018, reflective journals (Appendix 2) written by the AU team members.
3. In November 2019, a vignette written by a member from AU's PCL towards the end of the project, which captured the impact of the PCL on this member.
4. In December 2018, a focus group discussion with students (Appendix 3) , who are enrolled in the Math and English Initial Teacher Education undergraduate programmes. These groups were taught by the AU members and were encouraged to form their own PCL.

A summary of the data sources used in this study is presented in table one below.

Aim of data collection	Data source	Date	Participants
Examining the PCL culture and practices at AU	Structured interview schedule	March- April 2018	Sixteen faculty staff members including heads of departments
Answering research main three questions	Focus group discussion with AU team members who form the PCL	December 2018	Ten AU faculty staff members who form the AU PCL
Answering research main three questions	Filled in reflective journals	June 2018	Ten AU faculty staff members who form the AU PCL
Answering research main three questions	Vignette	November 2019	One AU faculty member who is a part of the AU PCL
Answering research main three questions	Focus group discussion with two groups of student teachers enrolled in Math and English Initial Teacher Education undergraduate programme at AU	December 2018	Two groups of five student teachers each

The overall design of data collection for this study is divided into two clear and separate stages of data collection (Newby, 2014). These stages were concurrent rather than successive in order to triangulate (Flick, 2014). Data sources of this study present two forms of data, that were equally weighted when reaching conclusions. One of these stages of data collection involved data from the student teachers and lecturers involved in and affected by this project. This data contextualised the focus group discussions and is a form of data in its own right (Silverman, 2013). The second form of data collected was from the written reflections of the participants from the staff members. These written reflections were collected from the journals kept by the PCL's members and a vignette written by one of them.

This study is an entirely qualitative study. The primary form of data collection were interviews and writings. A significant reason for our decision to construct an entirely qualitative design was that we aimed to explore in-depth how the participants experienced the process and impact of building PCLs. Our aim was to build a comprehensive understanding and reach conclusions that illustrate how PCLs evolve and develop at the university level within a specific context. Our aim was not to seek large samples or to generalise findings.

Therefore, it seemed to us that there would be a strong likelihood of collecting data where the participants would replicate each other and where little new understanding would be gained, if we used a highly structured process (Flick, 2014). Specifically, it seemed to us that quantitative results based on a large sample would be unlikely to yield a significant new contribution to knowledge beyond that already gained by research referred to in the previous section (Bryman, 2016).

Data Analysis

The process of analysing the focus group discussions was in several respects similar to that used when analysing the journals. In both cases, initial themes were coded in the margin by hand and these were then systemised into categories, which were used to inductively code. This process of initial coding was based on models of analysing interview data described by Charmaz (2012), Rubin and Rubin (2012) and Silverman (2014). These initial themes in the margin of the transcribed text was a simultaneous process of open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2012; Dirks & Mills, 2015). An example of this initial coding process can be seen in table 2, where notes were taken within journals. The data is linked to comments in the first round of coding. The data and associated comments are linked by colour.

Table 2

First stage analysis: Examples of the data with initial coding notes

Data sample	Initial open coding
<p>1.1. How sufficient and effective are the means of communication used?</p> <p>Early- at the first stage of the project</p> <p>Originally, we started off by using the WhatsApp group but it was problematic as we did not follow any clear rules for using it, the personal got mixed with the professional in a way that caused many team members to feel offended.</p> <p>Hierarchy was another issue that caused communication at this early stage of the project to be problematic, Senior members had expectations that were not communicated clearly to the PI and I think they felt offended as their expectation of “hierarchical superiority” was not met.</p> <p>Right now, we use different means of communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emails mainly by the PI to make public announcements & share materials & resources - WhatsApp group created by the team and used informally - Phone calls - F2F meetings <p>How sufficient & effective?</p> <p>It seems that the core team has a better understanding of project development- there is more communication among the core team and they are more involved in local & international meetings. There are more phone calls & WhatsApp communication among the core team & with the PI.</p>	<p>Initial need for structure and rules</p> <p>Initial need for boundaries between professional and personal. Community boundaries as formal where individual status was important to some.</p> <p>Implicit expectations of deference based on seniority at the beginning. Early offense by expectations of professional boundaries and position/identity.</p> <p>Later in the project developing different means of communication based on purpose with rules/structure</p> <p>Boundaries changing. WhatsApp accepted as part of the team- created collaboratively rather than being imposed?</p> <p>Still separation between formal and informal communication, but informal is accepted/ acceptable within the group.</p>

Table 2

First stage analysis: Examples of the data with initial coding notes

Data sample	Initial open coding
<p>1.2. How do I feel about my current relationship with my colleagues in the PCL?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On a personal level, I feel my relationship with my colleagues in the PCL is better. I believe we have developed trust and respect among ourselves as a team - Personally, I have learned to better clearly communicate my intentions and thinking to other members in the team and avoid making assumptions that because things are clear and valuable for me, they must be clear and valuable for others. - I am learning to listen better to others with the intention of understanding and appreciating/learning from a different point of view. - I am also starting to feel the potential added value to doing things with others. 	<p>Trust and respect based on personal relationships rather than hierarchy or deference.</p> <p>Community engagement becoming part of the community- supporting and developing others by improving personal communication.</p> <p>Knowledge building within the community? Making things clear and explicit.</p> <p>Reciprocity in being within the community- listening to others as well as being listened to. Acceptance and affirmation within the community.</p> <p>Increasing value for collaboration and collaborative practice</p>
<p>2.1. How far is cooperation among us as members in a PCL getting better?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - few team members have stopped contributing to the PCL- they do not attend meetings or try to follow up or take any responsibilities - when team members are assigned tasks, they complete these in groups and the contribution of individuals is acknowledged 	<p>Withdrawing from the community.</p> <p>Trust and affirmation within the community.</p>
<p>2.2. How far do I sense a mutual trust among the members of the PCL?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I think we have developed a better sense of trust among us compared to how we started off. When there is a task to be done, this is assigned to different members with the confidence that it will be done in a good way. - I think trust is also a personal thing- some people tend to trust others and assume goodness in human nature, others are more cautious and take time- the matter of trust for me is relative. 	<p>Building trust</p> <p>Trust from a shared purpose.</p> <p>Trust building as a possible barrier to the community?</p>

The next stage involved the selection of extracts that had been coded with the same or similar titles. These were placed in a table with two columns, a process based on that used by Charmaz (2012) and Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). At this stage, over-arching concepts that could accommodate what was said by the interviewees were sought and noted in the column on the table next to the extracts. This involved repeated paraphrasing, summarising and re-naming (Silverman, 2015). During the process of analysis, we compared across groups of teachers as well as across the entire sample of participants (Bryman, 2016). An example of this initial coding process can be seen in table 3.

Table 3			
<i>Second stage analysis: Examples of the data with coding categories</i>			
Broad areas from diary questions	1 st coding themes	Examples	Possible categories
Communication	Initial need for rules and structure.	group but it was problematic as we did not follow any clear rules for using it, J2/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer communities • Structure and rules
	Initial need for personal/professional boundaries		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positions
	Expectations of position	the personal go mixed with the professional in a way that caused many team members to feel offended J2/30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships
	Position of hierarchy		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust and respect
	Position of responsibility		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values
	Culture of hierarchy	PI did not manage the WhatsApp group in a professional manner due to lack of experience & lack of communication and openness among the team members J2/32	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reciprocity
	Changes to communication becoming more informal		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affirmation and acceptance
	Communication developed based on the purpose	the expectation of “hierarchical superiority” was not met J2/36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge building
	Communications becoming more informal boundaries changing	Senior members had expectations J2/35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-efficacy • Non-participation
	WhatsApp group created by the team and used informally J2/39	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to participation 	
	J2/38-41		
	There are more phone calls & WhatsApp communication among core team & with the PI J2/45		

Table 3

Second stage analysis: Examples of the data with coding categories

Broad areas from diary questions	1 st coding themes	Examples	Possible categories
Relationships	<p>Culture of hierarchy</p> <p>Change to relationships becoming more informal boundaries changing.</p> <p>Developing trust and respect</p> <p>Community membership becoming a member Empathy for team members.</p> <p>Knowledge building within the community</p> <p>Reciprocity within community</p> <p>Community membership withdrawing from the community</p>	<p>There are more phone calls & WhatsApp communication among core team & with the PI J2/45</p> <p>we have developed trust and respect among ourselves as a team J2/48; better sense of trust J2/70</p> <p>learning to listen better to others with the intention of understanding and appreciating / learning from a different point of view J2/52</p> <p>I have learned to better clearly communicate my intentions and thinking to other members in the team and avoid making assumptions that because things are clear and valuable for me, then they must be clear and valuable for others J2/49-51</p> <p>I am also starting to feel the potential added value of doing things with others. J2/54</p> <p>few team members have stopped contributing to the PCL- they do not attend meetings or try to follow up or take any responsibilities J2/65</p>	

Table 3

Second stage analysis: Examples of the data with coding categories

Broad areas from diary questions	1 st coding themes	Examples	Possible categories
Shared values and principles	Community affirmation and acceptance	when team members are assigned tasks, they complete these in groups and the contribution of individuals is acknowledged J2/68	
	Shared sense of purpose	I felt that most of the time it is valued (my opinion) J2/85	
	Trust-building as a possible barrier	assigned to different members with the confidence that it will be done in a good way. J2/71 assume goodness in human nature, others are more cautious and take time- the matter of trust for me is relevant J2/73	
Valuing differences	Hierarchy as a barrier to community participation	people express their views openly in our meetings but I think some members feel that they have less experience so that they do not share their opinions J2/81-83	
		I believe that also the hierarchy could be a barrier to everyone sharing their opinions J2/83	
Decision making	Community membership need to feel self-efficacy	everyone in the team needs to feel confident about their skills and knowledge even if this is their first experience in working in a project like this J2/92	
	Peripheral participation	not everyone is fully involved, hierarchy J2/88	
	Community affirmation and acceptance	they also need to feel that their opinions are needed and valued J2/93	

Table 3

Second stage analysis: Examples of the data with coding categories

Broad areas from diary questions	1 st coding themes	Examples	Possible categories
Support within the community	Relationship building and enabling Professional support	caring - organizing and planning meeting - sharing with others - planning research work J2/97-100 J2/102-105	
Personal impact			
Professional impact			
Supporting the work of the PCL			
Challenges			
Others			

Finally, by cross-comparing the journals and transcripts, the original themes that we had identified when writing the conceptual framework remained secure. However, nuanced, emerging codes that underpinned these gave more depth to the analysis, these were in turn synthesised into categories, which were used as tools to enable various dimensions of comparison, as described above. Those themes identified with the literature from the previous chapter then became more widely seen within the specific Egyptian context with broader, more encompassing themes. Individuality and community, for example, were seen within the themes of communication and relationships as well as values and valuing differences. Therefore, the analysis led to a range of broader themes:

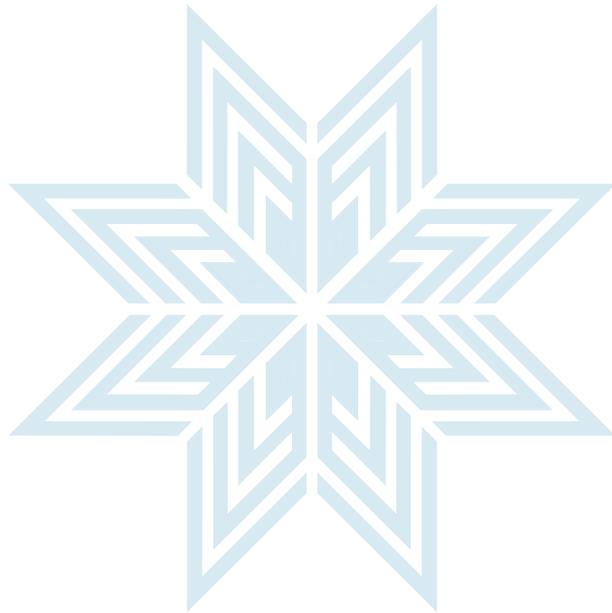
- *Communication and relationships*
- *Values and valuing differences*
- *Professional and personal impact: Affirmation and empowerment in the community.*
- *Leadership and mentorship*
- *Knowledge sharing, building, and reflection*
- *Challenges and solutions*

These six themes are explored further in the findings and discussion.

Ethics

This project has been written and the research for it conducted in reference to the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2018). The interviewees were asked to provide consent regarding the use of the focus group transcript and written work for this paper and possible further

publication on three occasions: in writing prior to the focus group; orally after the focus group had been completed and finally in writing again on receiving a draft of this project. In this way, we ensured that we had 'informed' and 'continuing' consent (Bryman, 2016). All the interviewees were sent a copy of this paper and offered the chance to comment if they wished to.



Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from several data sources. It starts by discussing the findings from the structured interviews that aimed to examine and identify key features of the PCL's culture at AU. This is followed by presenting findings from the data sources that aimed to answer the research main three questions.

The culture of PCL at AU: Findings from the Interviews with AU Faculty Members

The structured interviews with the sixteen AU faculty members, which included heads of departments, revealed interesting information about the prevailing culture of the PCL at AU. The following is a summary of key findings:

- The concept of PCL was an ambiguous concept for staff members at AU. Staff members could not link the PCL concept to other related concepts such as professional learning, professional development, and educational transformation.
- There are different types of PCLs in all departments, but they differ in nature from one department to another. The starting point in the formation of PCLs was neither a problem nor a common goal, but it was about performing tasks or professional duties related to teaching and evaluation. Therefore, the initially formed PCLs at AU tend to be compulsory, temporary and formal.
- The PCLs are formed through teaching, preparation of teaching and learning materials, exams, participation in projects, seminars and supervision of MA and Ph.D. theses. There were also PCLs that are formed through the will and free choice of their members and these form around doing joint academic research.
- Some of the PCL's good practices include peer observation, group investigation among post-graduate students, undergraduate students PCLs through social media and monthly meetings with department members to plan for teaching and evaluation, problem-solving and enhancing students' performance.

- Social communications among staff members present a good opportunity for cooperation, trust and learning social skills.

- Although the PCL culture was not found to form an inherent part of the FOE overarching culture or practices for professional development, few staff members seemed to believe that PCLs could have a positive effect on the individual, the department and the institution, and could contribute to the establishment of the institution vision, shared language and values. Few members also agreed that values such as respect, cooperative work, changing the individual's culture, transmitting good practices and discovering individuals who can become mentors could be promoted through PCLs.

- Some of the important challenges facing the formation and activation of PCLs at AU are the lack of cooperative work culture, workload, limited facilities; unavailability of space, limited resources, lack of communication and poor motivation for teamwork.

- Some interviewees suggested that PCLs at AU can be supported through spreading the culture of PCL, developing problem-solving and teamwork skills, encouraging the idea of conducting collaborative seminar and research projects across the different departments.

The Evolution and Impact of PCLs at AU: Findings from the Journals, Focus Group Discussions and Vignette

Participant reflections on the partnership and communities of learners were captured in personal journals and focus group discussions. The themes arising from the analysis were combined as coding revealed several main themes across both data sets: communication and relationships, values and valuing others, the professional and personal impact, leadership and mentorship, what was evident from the analysis is that these were themes that cut across all of the research questions. Building effective lines of communication and relationships, for example, was an important theme for enhancing the development of the PCL as well as impacting on professional learning. Building communication and relationships was also an important aspect of the tensions between beliefs, values,

and practice. Therefore, in this chapter, we explore the main themes as they were exemplified through the participant journals, while the focus group discussion will be the focus of the next chapter. The discussion will draw the themes and analysis together in terms of answering the research questions.

Findings from the Journals

Communication and relationships

Within this section, consideration of communications takes into account the pragmatic elements of developing lines of communications that are practical and flexible to meet the needs of the community. However, also important are the implied cultural values within different methods that can blur the distinctions between what is, and should be considered formal and professional, or informal and private. Aspects of trust and respect also become important influences when developing methods of communication that can impact positively or negatively on developing relationships within a community of practice.

I feel that having emails and meetings are not quite sufficient. We need to have more means of communication such as WhatsApp or Facebook group, but at the same time keep it strictly for exchanging information or discussing work progress. (Journal 1, 06/18)

What emerged from the journals was the importance of opening different methods of communication for the PCL to be effective. However, developing effective communication was also bound up with forming relationships over time. Groups might use more formal communications, such as emails, phone calls, and meetings, but some more immediate means were considered important too. Having flexible lines of communications such as WhatsApp meant that messages could be passed more immediately and easily when community members are busy. But informal links and communications take time to adjust to for some more than others. This is particularly the case regarding cultural sensitivities and hierarchies. WhatsApp is regarded as a means of communication between close friends and colleagues, but it takes time to build that kind of closeness of relationships. What is hinted within the quote above is this need to keep the personal and professional separate.

Originally, we started off by using the WhatsApp group, but it was problematic as we did not follow any clear rules for using it, the personal got mixed with the professional in a way that caused many team members to feel offended. The hierarchy was another issue that caused communication at this early stage of the project to be problematic. (Journal 2, 06/18)

Having clear ground-rules that were adhered to for communicating while keeping the personal and professional separate was important, especially at the beginning of forming the PCL. As is suggested above, cultural norms of professional status and hierarchy were a tension felt, particularly in the early stages. Later, as trust and respect were developed with the working relationships these cultural and hierarchical differences were accommodated and adjustments made. This is perhaps where forming effective communication and building relationships are intertwined in that both rely on each other, but neither can be formed without the other. They go hand-in-hand. This point of communication influencing relationships and vice versa was illustrated by another PCL member.

Various tools and ways have been used to maximize communications, allowing for effective and intensive interaction and collaboration. These included emails, WhatsApp, phone calls and weekly meetings. Regular communications have positively influenced my relationship with PCL members. More confidence, trust and collegiality, and respect are encouraged and promoted. (Journal 6, 06/18)

The comment here echoes the points made by other PCL members. Various tools and channels of communication are perceived to be essential for team members to function as active participants in a professional learning environment. Effective and sufficient communication is key for promoting interaction and collaboration within the team and also for boosting confidence and trust-building as well as social relationships among team members. It also suggested maybe the regularity of communications between team members.

Group discussions through Skype, an online forum, Google Drive, activation of the Facebook- page, and deepening of the human aspects among all team members through WhatsApp as they increase our communication, and can be used to share ideas or experiences that we communicate to them through the project field. (Journal 4, 06/18)

Having regular and flexible lines of communication may be central to cementing the relationships that then build trust and collegiality. So finding ways of increasing communication was viewed as essential. What is valued here are the opportunities that make connections between the community members' ideas and experiences. There is a strong sense of sharing and valuing each other as well as the project ideals. This value will also be discussed further below, but here it signifies a building of a relationship that might blur the boundaries between the purely professional relationship and one that is more about personal friendship.

On a personal level, I feel my relationship with my colleagues in the PCL is better. I believe we have developed trust and respect among ourselves as a team. Personally, I have learned to better clearly communicate my intentions and thinking to other members in the team and avoid making assumptions that because things are clear and valuable for me, then they must be clear and valuable for others. I am learning to listen better to others with the intention of understanding and appreciating/learning from a different point of view. I am also starting to feel the potential added value of doing things with others. (Journal 2, 06/18)

That more personal collegiate relationship that borders friendship is one built on mutual trust, respect and acknowledgement of each other's' feelings (Lingard, 2009). Here, there is an interesting point about the varied needs of the team members. Some members felt that they needed more face-to-face communication channels. However, this team member prefers using remote online tools to feel more connected to the team. The use of technology seems to offer solutions and options for fluid and supportive communication among team members. The comment suggests that to make professional learning communities more successful, learning about and accommodating the different learning styles and needs of the individual members is important. Finding a balance between individual and collective preferences and needs is key to building effective and functioning PCLs.

Trust, respect, and collegiality were crucial elements to this developing community relationship. Learning how to

communicate effectively with team members, was also an important reflection regarding personal development. As teams form stronger bonds, adjustments are made. This includes a growing awareness of the needs of others and sensitivity or empathy towards all team members. Communicating clearly and effectively personal intentions and ideas were part of this growing awareness, with the reflection on a need for actively listening to the viewpoints of others. Learning to appreciate others, learning from them and developing value for working collaboratively enables each participant to further develop and cement their relationships within the community. This in turn also feeds back into the development of increasing trust, respect and value towards each other.

What emerges is the importance of the team and how this has not only been a team that shares knowledge, but equally significantly, a team that affirms each other increasingly as time moves forward. This affirmation and knowledge sharing, though, comes from building communication and also the relationships between team members. Particularly, evident were the benefits of working alongside colleagues in developing reflective practice.

“After these months, I started to feel somewhat relaxed and at ease with some of my colleagues, much better than before when I felt totally out of place” (Journal 1, 06/18).

I feel good and satisfied, but again I am speaking about my team at Alexandria University. I hardly have any form of communication with other university team members. I am also happy that for the last few months, we have come to a better understanding of each other. In the beginning, there was some stress leading to arguments and misunderstandings among the members. But things have evolved in a much better way now and our meetings are relaxed and enjoyable. (Journal 5, 06/18)

Communicating with other colleagues within the University was not generally part of practice and took time to build effective and established relationships. As time moved on, the team became increasingly important in developing and sharing knowledge as well as encouraging and affirming team members as participants. These aspects of knowledge development and affirmation will be discussed further.

Having experienced these new reflective practices, members of the team saw the benefits. Working more collaboratively by communicating as a team did not necessarily come easily, especially at the beginning. It took some time for the community members to come to a better understanding of each other. During this time there might be some feelings of disconnect, particularly with colleagues who felt they had less experience than others. Partly, this initial stress and misunderstanding were perhaps related to a need to build effective working relationships between the colleagues who all participated with different values, needs, and ideas but also could not necessarily meet as often. Accommodating these different needs between team members became an important part of developing and establishing effective working relationships. This is perhaps where flexible communications and developing new lines of communications became important in establishing and maintaining links within the community. Developing these communications and relationships could be challenging, though, considering practical and cultural issues.

Values and valuing differences

As suggested by the comments in the previous section, values and valuing differences come with the growing respect for the community members that arise from their developing relationships. Trust and respect are important aspects of developing a sense of shared values and of valuing differences between community members. How that mutual trust is built and develops is key to understanding these values, practices, and beliefs within the community. One aspect of understanding this development in a shared sense of goals and values is that of developing cooperation among the team members.

“Members are now more helpful and share their knowledge and give advice to one another, things that seem to be missing in the past” (Journal 1, 06/18).

Cooperation and cohesiveness are mounting steadily among AU members and are manifested in a variety of ways to fulfill different purposes. The formation of varied groups to develop the required materials or collect the accumulated documents relevant to the project is one variant of this cooperation. (Journal 6, 06/18)

There is a gradual improvement in the level of cooperation between us, and we participate in the

distribution of tasks required by team members and the initiative of some team members to prepare tools to contribute to the collection of information required to achieve the objectives to be achieved for the project. (Journal 4, 06/18)

It is clear from the journals that over time, members achieved greater cooperation than they felt at the beginning. This seemed to be a relatively new experience as community members were not used to this level of cooperation. One aspect of this was the sharing of knowledge and advice to others. Another was in the variety of ways that members worked together for the common goals of the project. Cooperation developed as members worked more closely together and gained an understanding built on a relationship based upon mutual trust, respect, and collegiality. However, this was not easy for all members of the communities as some appeared to be more peripheral within the community membership.

“In the beginning, there was a total lack of trust. Now, within those who attend the meetings regularly, more trust is built” (Journal 1, 06/18).

“Few team members have stopped contributing to the PCL- they do not attend meetings or try to follow up or take any responsibilities” (Journal 2, 06/18).

From the team members that contributed regularly, their participation became increasingly positive with regards to building the relationship and mutual trust. Maintaining regular contact and participation, though, was key to this development. It is also clear that some participants reflect more challenges to participation than others.

It is not clear from the information within the journals the exact numbers of members that did not continue as a proportion of all the community members. Of the nine reflective journals, two suggest that at least some members stopped participating altogether. With another two, such as journal 1 above, where members did not participate as fully as others. There could also be a range of reasons for team members withdrawing from participation or taking a smaller role with less regular contact with the group. Some of these reasons might have to do with workload or changes in commitments. However, for others trust remained an issue that was challenging to overcome.

I believe that getting closer and sharing responsibility for accomplishing tasks have allowed for building more mutual trust among the majority of group members. However, few members have not yet built a sufficient level of trust with their colleagues. This is due to the cultural context in which intrapersonal styles tend to dominate our workplace. Unfortunately, they have not yet developed an adequate perception of the value of creating a network of professionals. (Journal 6, 06/18)

Where trust was developed, team members became more tightly bound and committed to the community. But where there was insufficient trust within the group, then team members did not develop the same level of involvement. Developing trust within the community was, therefore, an essential aspect of maintaining group collaboration and commitment. However, developing that trust remained a barrier and challenge for some, especially where cultural aspects dominate over the possibilities for creating a community of professionals.

Trust is a critical factor in building a PCL that is able to continue to develop and provide opportunities for its members to grow. Trust is developed among members who have a high sense of commitment to the community; they attend regularly and want to contribute to the team. As trust develops, the team is able to voice and have shared guiding principles for their work that did not exist clearly at earlier stages. Consequently, the team is able to share knowledge and provide support to each other.

I do not think we discuss decisions fully in our meetings- it might be because not everyone is following the flow of information closely- not everyone is fully involved, - hierarchy- etc. I feel that sometimes it is like, you know better so make the decision for us, everyone in the team needs to feel confident about their skills and knowledge even if this is their first experience in working in a project like this- they also need to feel that their opinions are needed and valued but I am not sure how we can do this. (Journal 2, 06/18)

Team members' differences are also valued and considered to be an addition to the collective experiences of the community. The culture of hierarchy forms an evident obstacle at this stage, especially for junior members fully having a voice or sharing in decision making when this might mean contradicting their more senior colleagues.

It could also be that at this stage the community needs to find ways to provide more support and affirmation to less experienced members so as to empower them to find their voice and make it heard. There is a question of what it is that makes a PCL effective and inclusive when it comes to mentoring other colleagues.

As with the previous comment, developing this sense of trust and value can take time and persistence. With some PCLs there is the risk that members are not as fully involved as they might wish and so take a less active role or stop attending, becoming increasingly peripheral as members of the community. Commitment, trust, and cooperation emerge as core intertwined values that impact the formation and functioning of the professional community in a dynamic way. As the team develops a stronger sense of trust, it is able to function more as an effective professional learning community. However, different members seemed to develop this sense of trust according to their own pace and experiences. People who have a high sense of commitment are keen to attend all meetings and contribute to all tasks. With this also comes a commitment to developing shared core principles and values.

“Of course our interaction has contributed to setting up some principles that guide our work. For example, how can we conduct school visits, how we write the training materials and how we can write school's reports” (Journal 3, 06/18).

“During our interaction, we have some rules including commitment, seriousness, and accuracy; in the accomplishment of the tasks required of us” (Journal 4, 06/18).

“Interaction within this PCL allowed for the gradual development of a number of guiding principles including commitment, collaboration, respect and confidence of one's peers. Moreover, openness and sharing experiences are also encouraged and promoted” (Journal 5, 06/18).

Working within the effective community meant that shared core principles were developed. For some, these principles and values involve the practical elements of developing teaching materials. For others, there was a deeper reflection on the guiding values and principles of collaboration between team members, such as

encouraging openness and respect that then led to a culture that valued the sharing of experiences from all members. However, as suggested above, this can be a gradual process of continued reflection, especially if the PCL is to enable and empower less experienced members to participate fully. However, this process of developing shared principles has remained a work in progress for other groups.

“It formed a somewhat clear shared guiding principle, though it is shared among some and not all the members” (Journal 1, 06/18).

“I think we need to ask ourselves about what shared principles each of us assumes” (Journal 2, 06/18).

This might be an aspect that develops over a longer time with reflection and as the needs arise. It is interesting that the sharing of principles was sometimes felt to be unequal among all members of the group. It may also be the case that some group members make assumptions about the guiding principles without questioning them. This leaves open the question of how differences of views between PCL members are recognised and valued.

“There is respect for the views of team members by allowing us to put forward our ideas and views on what is being discussed” (Journal 4, 06/18).

As I mentioned earlier, in the beginning, the relationship among the team members was kind of tense. But with time, things have got much better. Hence differences in views are valued and respected, and this is evident in the fact that there is no dominant voice or vision in our meetings or our other forms of communications. We all speak freely and with openness. (Journal 5, 06/18)

“In our PCL in AU, members’ views are valued and taken into consideration to a great extent. We voice our concerns and opinions freely until we reach a consensus and shared understanding” (Journal 6, 06/18).

Some community members suggested that there was an acceptance of views put forward by all colleagues. These differing opinions were encouraged, respected and valued. It is clear that this understanding took some time to achieve and was developed as a result of increasing trust and positive relationships between

colleagues. Having a strong relationship between team members meant that colleagues felt able to express their views so that there was a genuine development of consensus and shared understanding. There was a clear feeling of empowerment and affirmation within the community from those members who felt valued and accepted for their views, even if they ran contrary to those with greater experience. However, it is also clear that encouraging this equality might take some time to develop with other team members.

“Differences among members are valued and are accepted through the agreement of the majority. Yet still, this issue of academic hierarchy is always taken into consideration when expressing a different opinion” (Journal 1, 06/18).

“It seems that there is a sort of respect for different views. But the decisions were always taken by the experts” (Journal 3, 06/18).

“Perhaps at the beginning of any dialogue there will be a welcome suggestion of different views; Unfortunately, this is often dealt with by endorsing a single, often for the greater and the more experienced view. In this case, that view is not being discussed” (Journal 7, 06/18).

The acceptance of views might be limited to some community members. Differing views were still accepted and encouraged within a culture of debate around the opinions, especially at the beginning of discussions. But ultimately, the final decision was often taken by the more experienced member who is often regarded as the ‘expert’. For some, though, even this initial debate might at times serve as only endorsing the one view of the more experienced person. In this case, it was felt that ideas were perhaps not always sufficiently challenged and reasoned through. Hierarchy and a tendency of deference towards members of a higher position or more seniority might then limit debate. This might, in turn, lead some members to avoid voicing contrary views or questioning the perceived wisdom of others. In these circumstances, achieving greater empowerment and affirmations with the community would be more challenging or limited.

“I am satisfied with the way decision making is made, but I still believe that some wouldn’t dare contradict their professors, something culturally specific” (Journal 1, 06/18).

People express their views openly in our meetings but I think some members feel that they have less experience so that they do not share their opinions- I believe that also the hierarchy could be a barrier to everyone sharing their opinions. I feel that sometimes it is like you know better so make the decision for us. (Journal 2, 06/18)

Some still believe their contributions are valued but defer to a hierarchy of experience to make decisions for the group. This may lead to challenges building the trust needed to develop a sense of affirmation and empowerment within the community that would enable all members to contribute regardless of their experience.

“Everyone in the team needs to feel confident about their skills and knowledge even if this is their first experience in working in a project like this- they also need to feel that their opinions are needed and valued but I am not sure how we can do this” (Journal 2, 06/18).

“Further distribution of roles and responsibilities needs to be stressed so that a sense of partnership is nurtured” (Journal 6, 06/18).

“More opportunities to accept different points of view and respect for others’ opinions, even if they are different, or less important than those of others” (Journal 7, 06/18).

Affirmation and empowerment were valued as important to build within the community, even if it was difficult to achieve. It might take time, if only because it requires a change of cultural views which is challenging to achieve. There were signs that these changes were being made. Participating in the community was leading to a development in the relationships and trust between members as colleagues. The suggestion of partnership is an interesting one because it implies empowerment and affirmation for all colleagues in the community regardless of their position.

Professional and personal impact: Affirmation and empowerment in the community

As suggested in the previous section, achieving affirmation and empowerment in the community was valued although also recognised as challenging to achieve given the prevailing culture of deference (Underwood & Joshevska,

2019; Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019). However, changes towards accepting and valuing all members had been experienced to at least some extent by the PCL members. The impact upon the community members was seen at both personal and professional levels, and this impact also led to increasing affirmation and empowerment for those colleagues.

“I feel highly valued and that I am treated as an academic equal by other highly skilled academics” (Journal 8, 06/18).

Feeling respected and valued among others in the community, as mentioned above, is part of that which provides affirmation and empowerment for those members. It is what encourages members to develop their voice within that community and express views to participate in debates as a valued equal. This is an impact that could be felt at both a personal and professional level since it develops the community members’ personal skills in participating as well as their professional understanding and knowledge. Feeling encouraged and empowered to make effective contributions to the community is, therefore, an important aspect of this development that can be considered as an impact. Journal reflections indicated community members felt they had made valuable contributions in different ways (Underwood & Joshevska, 2019; Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019).

“Commitment and willingness to learn and punctuality” (Journal 1, 06/18).

“I share and contribute with ideas learnt from my work as a teacher and a member in previous projects” (Journal 5, 06/18).

For some community members, their considered strengths lay in providing support through their commitment and willingness as well as through their previous experiences and roles. These roles were supportive of the team as a whole, recognising that these previous experiences are valued and valuable. Other community members wrote:

“Caring, organizing and planning meeting, sharing with others, planning research work” (Journal 2, 06/18).

“I take part in facilitating communications and connections to support our PCL.”

“I also help in archiving documents of the teamwork.”

“More time is devoted to building sound relationships with my colleagues.”

“I am keen on attending the weekly meetings, when possible.”

“I cooperate with my colleagues to accomplish the assigned tasks collaboratively” (Journal 6, 06/18).

For others, their contributions have been recognised as supporting community members personally in building relationships or facilitating community developments such as meetings. Organising and facilitating the project goals and tasks was also important within the community as a whole. The suggestion of caring, sharing and cooperating or collaborating within the reflections is interesting because it implies an interpersonal role of promoting relationships within the community. These aspects of the members’ main strengths are an expression of where these members feel most confident in making their main contributions and roles. Part of the impact for these members will be if they have been empowered to take on other roles within the community (Frost, 2015; Underwood & Joshevska, 2019; Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019).

I think it depends on the task at hand- sometimes a member provides moral support for the team- other times a member provides support in his/ her area of expertise....those who care and feel a real sense of responsibility are effective in providing support. (Journal 2, 06/18)

What this reflection suggests is that community members take flexible roles depending on the needs of the community as a whole. However, there are some members who seem more confident giving a caring and supportive role than others. This is recognised and accepted as part of the community since it is also about accepting people’s differences and personalities. This is part of the acceptance, affirmation, and empowerment that develops the community as a partnership. The impact for these members will also be felt in terms of what they have gained both personally and professionally.

“On a personal level, I have improved my communication skills and time management skills. I have learned about new topics” (Journal 2, 06/18).

“I have learned some new terminologies as PCL, Mentorship and coaching, and have gained some experiences from my colleagues during our meetings” (Journal 3, 06/18).

I really gained a lot of things personally and professionally. On a personal level, I got closer to my colleagues who belong to different specializations. On the professional level, I benefited from my colleagues through sharing information and experiences as we repeatedly worked collaboratively to accomplish our shared goals. (Journal 6, 06/18)

The impact here is evidently on the members’ personal, interpersonal and professional skills. These colleagues have developed in the ways that they interact and communicate as a team, which indicates that the impact has been in furthering the relationship and commitment to the community. The impact has also been on their professional development in terms of the knowledge and understanding that has been shared within the community. This is an aspect that will be discussed further below as knowledge creation and knowledge sharing was also a key theme from the community development.

The impact for these participants is developed at both personal and professional levels and these are often intertwined. Soft skills of providing support, communication and time management are developed alongside the professional roles. The participation in the community has been mutually beneficial for themselves as well as others.

Supporting others within the community builds bridges and collegiality by sharing ideas and practices as a teacher, researcher, colleague and ultimately friend. Taking part in the community has led to sharing ideas and practices through mutual reflection. There is growing collegiality where members gain a sense of affirmation from shared reflective practice with other members. This, in turn, leads to personal empowerment that builds personal self-efficacy in developing their own and others’ roles. Practitioners that might normally work in isolation have experienced this collegiality and empowerment so that it should continue and be developed in new ways (Joshevska & Kirandziska, 2017; Underwood & Joshevska, 2019; Underwood & Kowalczyk-Waledziak, 2019).

“I made use of some of the material of our workshops in my teaching as well as in mentoring and coaching with my colleagues in the English Department where I work” (Journal 5 06/18).

Participation in this PCL enabled me to gain more confidence as a trainer and teacher educator. It also enhanced my knowledge and skills regarding different topics that constitute the core of the forthcoming training at schools. Collaboration with such a unique and committed team is a valuable opportunity to learn and refine my professional practices as a teacher educator. I also played different roles and attended a number of academic meetings and workshops that allowed for promoting and developing my capabilities. (Journal 6, 06/18)

These team members echo much of what has been said above. The personal and professional levels of impact are intertwined. Evident is the belief that participation within the community has developed personal self-efficacy in terms of increased confidence in their professional effectiveness. There is growing affirmation through that participation, and this affirmation has led to the empowerment of the individual to develop themselves and others. So, it is interesting that these team members talk about becoming more confident adopting different roles with mentoring and coaching colleagues (Joshevka & Kirandziska, 2017; Underwood & Joshevka, 2019).

The building of bridges between colleagues with a sense of collegiality was also felt by this person with colleagues becoming closer and developing the community through collaboration and reciprocity. The process of community involvement is a process of learning and sharing knowledge. The gained knowledge relates to strategies and practices within their job as an educator. The knowledge provided by this participant to the community is more varied and nuanced and includes being an expert audience to others’ expertise and in doing so affirming their professional identity and confidence. There is a shared purpose as they work collaboratively to achieve common goals, but all colleagues benefit from the development of their professional knowledge and skills.

Along with the building of collegiality, there is a growing respect and value for each other within the community as members shared different roles, taking the part of mentor and mentee as needed. The roles are

not necessarily taken according to perceived hierarchy but adopted to benefit the group as a whole. Taking the range of roles has boosted this person’s confidence and led to a sense of empowerment.

The impact upon professional practice was a common theme among many community members. Many expressed a genuine value for the opportunity to improve their knowledge and ‘performance’ with pedagogical practices such as group activities and allowing greater access to collaborative approaches within classes.

Leadership and mentorship

For the PCL to work effectively, leadership that is focused on developing people as equals and peers is valued as important. This is recognised through a leadership where decisions are taken collaboratively.

“I need to hear from the team members to learn about their needs and expectations for leadership” (Journal 2, 06/18).

This includes the leaders themselves recognising that decisions about the needs and expectations of the group should be collaborative and involve all the team members. There is an acceptance that everyone has a contribution to add in the decision-making process and those contributions are valued.

By coming to a collective decision, the outcome was regarded as the best solution that would achieve success. This is a style of leadership that is more democratic and affiliative because it considers that building relationships and forming strong people-centered teams is of primary importance. Building relationships within the community is valued as important for everyone at all levels.

“Senior professors urge their ex-students to express their opinion frankly and lessen the formality among them” (Journal 2, 06/18).

“More participation in decisions. Giving chances for voting” (Journal 3, 06/18).

“Further distribution of roles and responsibilities needs to be stressed so that a sense of partnership is nurtured. I feel satisfied since important decisions are negotiated until we reach a consensus as a team” (Journal 6, 06/18).

This also means that those in more senior and traditionally formal positions encourage those with less experience to express their views openly within a culture of open debate and criticality. Community members particularly valued leadership that empowered the team to participate in decision-making activities and perhaps voting on decisions where that was practical or appropriate. It was important for team members to feel that a consensus had been reached democratically. A comment made also earlier, suggested nurturing a partnership. Members recognise and value the contributions that each person has to bring and that learning from each other is mutually beneficial. Community members recognise that the group leaders value and promote the acquisition of new skills by acting as mentors to colleagues but are also willing to acknowledge their own personal development through a process of being mentored. This is a form of leadership and mentorship where reciprocity is highly regarded and a key principle within the PCL.

Knowledge sharing, building and reflection

As mentioned earlier, knowledge building, sharing and developing a capacity for reflection were one of the main impacts of the PCL for members.

“I got to learn about new fields which I have not known before” (Journal 1, 06/18).

“I made use of some of the material we shared in my teaching, with my students as well as the members of my department” (Journal 5, 06/18).

“It also enhanced my knowledge and skills regarding different topics that constitute the core of the forthcoming training at schools” (Journal 6, 06/18).

For some members of the community learning about new ideas, was valued for the development of aspects of practice. Knowledge building and sharing meant that practice could be enhanced by developing concrete resources for students and shared with colleagues. There is a reciprocity in the collaborative nature of this knowledge building and sharing. Within the community, the real resources could be shared that would improve practice, but knowledge and skills could also be shared with others through future training events.

“We need to take this to a higher level related to our teaching (e.g. colleagues working together on planning courses or topics in courses- sharing successful practices for teaching and researching)” (Journal 2, 06/18).

“I think my participation in PCL is useful in my professional development where it opens up several chances for learning especially from colleagues, online research, and guidance from others as well as from failures and success” (Journal 3, 06/18).

Members of the community also recognised and valued the opportunities that this knowledge building and sharing could offer. These opportunities could mean further collaboration over different aspects of practice. So, colleagues could work together to produce plans for teaching different courses and topics, recognising the variety of strengths that each community member had. Sharing best practices was also then possible. This assumes that the PCL is working to the benefit of everyone, and particularly the students. It rejects a culture of competition in favour of cooperation. It also reveals how important it is for team members to develop shared or at least agreed upon visions and goals. Once these are in place, it becomes easier for team members to interact and share knowledge and experiences.

“This journal is one example of teamwork, of the good interaction and shared vision among the team members” (Journal 5, 06/18).

“Experience in research into communities and knowledge sharing. It has provided interesting reflective insights... A rich reflective experience that enables me to understand other aspects of my professional life better” (Journal 8, 06/18).

For this person, the process of writing reflective journals in itself has contributed to clarifying visions and shared values among at least some team members. The act of reflecting on the PCL in a directed way though the journals have highlighted aspects such as shared goals and values. This could be a point to consider when looking at the practicalities and possible activities that help in forming professional communities and heightening the awareness levels of its members. Reflecting on the PCL had broadened and deepened thinking outside their usual traditional culture where practitioners tend to work in isolation. But it also leads to reflecting upon other aspects of practices and professional life.

Challenges and solutions

Some challenges have already been suggested within the previous sections above. One of these was in overcoming the embedded cultural views of adopting flexible and different forms of communication. However, these were resolved over time as team members start to build deeper relationships.

Hierarchy was another issue that caused communication at this early stage of the project to be problematic, Senior members had expectations that were not communicated clearly, and I think they felt offended as their expectation of 'hierarchical superiority' was not met. Right now, we use different means of communication:

- Emails mainly by the PI to make public announcements and share materials and resources
- WhatsApp group created by the team and used informally
- Phone calls
- F2F meetings

It seems that the core team has a better understanding of project development- there is more communication among the core team, and they are more involved in local and international meetings. There are more phone calls and WhatsApp communication among the core team and with the PI. (Journal 2, 06/18)

Some of these challenges occur at their early stages in the formation of the PCL and these include practical issues such as communication. In addition, there are the practical elements of communication, such as technological problems when some forms of communication do not work, but these can be resolved over time and ways found around such problems. However, there are clear issues that arise from the professional use of some forms of communication that blur the lines between formal and informal. Setting rules and creating clear boundaries between the personal and professional with these seems to be a critical factor in making communication smooth and clear but also acceptable to all. Expressing the expectations of all team members and ensuring that there is a clear understanding of these expectations is a priority from the beginning. It was a clear expectation especially of those in leading positions, that these boundaries and guidelines should be set and enforced early so that the

community could be saved the risk of possible conflict or offense. Over time, these expectations became easier as community members became closer as colleagues and deeper relationships were developed.

Trying to break the ice among all its members and trying to encourage all to participate. The main challenge is having the 12 members' active participants and reducing the high sense of formality by which they deal with one another and finally, forgetting all about academic hierarchy. (Journal 2, 06/18)

"Interaction within this PCL allowed for the gradual development of a number of guiding principles including commitment, collaboration, respect and confidence of one's peers. Moreover, openness and sharing experiences are also encouraged and promoted" (Journal 5, 06/18).

The hierarchy was another issue that was highlighted here but occurred to some extent in all journals. One main challenge was overcoming the hierarchical structure that reinforces expectations. It is about reducing the sense of formality and finding ways to encourage everyone to contribute equally. As is suggested here, it is breaking that ice of the initial stages that can be challenging. It is therefore important to invest time into building the relationships that enable trust within the team to develop. With the building of trust through effective communication, PCL members form more powerful relationships that are deeper and collaborative.

Issues of perceived hierarchy, and the challenges these posed, were raised by nearly all the participants. This was not a problem blamed on those in positions of hierarchy. However, it was a reflection on people's own perceptions of hierarchy and the power distance that existed within structures they already worked in. This participant also describes how through involvement in this project, empathy, respect and understanding regarding the resolution of workplace challenges emerged. Engagement led to change in a way that impacted even beyond the boundaries of the project.

"The need to apply accounting and oblige all members to perform what they are assigned, and not be confined to the work, and not limited to those who show commitment only."

“The abundance of administrative complexities; whether in the college, the university, or the ministry’s agency.”

“There is no fixed place for meetings, and often the places available do not meet the requirements.”

“Meetings and workshops are often inappropriate because we are busy with lectures and other workloads.”

“We are overloaded with the work we do and other members who are not attending meetings” (Journal 7, 06/18).

“On-going relationship building, considering the pressures of the professional workload of all involved” (Journal 8, 06/18).

As discussed above, many of the challenges were resolved over time as the PCL community members became closer as colleagues and began to feel more like friends. However, achieving this friendship and collegiality is in itself one of the challenges in a PCL given the workload of everyone involved. The community could develop and create confidence and affirmation, but it took time from the members in the first place to set this virtuous spiral into motion. It was apparent in the journals mentioned above that some community members were more active than others, with some members drifting away completely.

So, trying to get all participants to be active and work informally when working with their colleagues was a real challenge. As already mentioned in previous sections, there was a perceived lack of commitment from some team members, especially because this then meant that jobs were not completed, with the consequence that the job then fell to someone else. Workloads were already full, so the need to make up for other team members was a source of irritation. Many of the journals suggested that there were challenges with the additional workload, paperwork and complicated administrative work. The availability of time and space to hold meetings also arose. The additional lack of commitment on the part of some members was consequently putting others under greater pressure. There were suggestions for improvement here, such as boosting team members’ commitment by holding them accountable for their lack of commitment, but also creating more space for sharing and talking about different points of view as well as accepting and tolerating member differences.

Continuity; this is the major problem of many of the projects I took part in. Once the project is over, the majority of people (whether trainees, school teachers...etc.) tend to sort of forget all about it and go back to their old systems, practices...etc. Hence my main concern is to find ways to guarantee the continuity of the implementation of the values of our PCL work, to really make it. (Journal 5, 06/18)

One final challenge is that of sustainability. Starting the PCL is one thing but keeping it alive when the project is technically finished is another challenge. It will take further commitment to making longer-term changes that are required for maintaining the practices of the PCL. This is a challenge that is faced by many projects, not just this one. It requires practitioners to adopt changes to their beliefs, expectations, and practices that are already deeply embedded. There may be a core group of members that are willing to maintain this way of working when they see and experience the positive successes that are possible, and these people may be the key to making the change more sustainable.

Findings from the AU PCL Focus Group Discussion

Ten AU team members participated in the focus group discussion in December 2018. The interview schedule was prepared and conducted by the University of Northampton (UoN) team. The analysis of data revealed six main themes, which are:

1. Communication and relationship
2. Values and valuing differences
3. Impact: Affirmation and empowerment in the community
4. Leadership and mentorship
5. Knowledge sharing: Reflection and knowledge building
6. Challenges and solutions

The following section presents key quotes from the interview that illustrate these themes. The section also presents comments and discussions of these quotes and their corresponding themes.

Communication and relationships

But as the time actually goes on, I have seen how it {the project} is developing and becoming more concrete and focused I have to say, and we have a shared language I have to say. Even the outsiders like us have the language and the frame and I think that we are doing a good job. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Hala)

Developing effective communication in professional learning communities can be a challenging process. For this community, it took them time to develop the “shared language” they need to have access to clear ideas and frames of work. It seems that the process becomes more challenging when the community has “outsiders”; these could be the members with different experiences and academic backgrounds, or simply the ones who started off with feelings of alienation from the rest of the community.

I feel much more relaxed now, at the beginning I didn't like this tension I thought that they were too tense – too formal. But I think there is much development; I see they are much closer now to one another as an outsider. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Doaa)

This comment also shows that establishing relationships between members of the learning community requires time. In addition, according to academic hierarchy, age and experience are two factors that greatly influence any kind of formal interaction in Egyptian institutions, thus creating an atmosphere of formality that may hinder good communication between the members. This quote also shows how the participation and cooperation in multiple tasks have helped in strengthening the relationships among the learning community members and breaking the ice over time.

In the beginning, I felt a sense of alienation because I have not been part of other projects. I know most of them because we are from the same department but with time things became clearer and I started to feel part of the team and it was like a family and I am a member there. I feel there is support and that my efforts are appreciated, and this support keeps pushing me forward. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Eman)

This quote describes the changes in the feeling of a PCL member from alienation to acceptance and

integration into the learning community, then finally to a feeling of belonging to a family. This shows that relations between PCL members grow gradually and need time as there are differences between them. Such relationships play a role in supporting and sustaining progress and erasing any sense of alienation.

Values and valuing differences

It was done mainly orally; we have not written a document about stating our vision or stating the values that we have. This will be done in progress. This will be written down and documented later on. But in our regular meetings, we tend to share values and vision but it is not written yet. We have values like cooperation, building trust, transparency, and these are shared amongst the group members and often voiced by all of us. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Mona)

As the PCL evolves, shared values and the team's vision start to be clear and get established. This comment suggests that agreeing on shared values and vision is a process that needs time and a strong sense of collective trust to evolve and be in place. Cooperation, trust and transparency are core values that hold the team together and make it effective and functioning. Individuals have their own core values that they bring to the community; when these are in agreement with the values of the rest of the community, it tends to become coherent more quickly and with fewer chances of conflicts.

“Those are the main values of PCL because mutual trust, respect, those ones usually evolve when discussing problems that have no ready-made solutions” (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Salem).

The comment above highlights the core values of the community with “mutual trust” voiced in the above quote and by different members of the community again and again. This suggests that for this community trust is a cornerstone without which the community cannot proceed and function effectively.

We started here sharing ideas with how to overcome their obstacles. Every single one of us has lots of suggestions and every single suggestion was appreciated. We discuss it and we choose good practices not the best one because there is

no best practice which fits everywhere. So, we started mentoring each other – this means I give an idea, we discuss how does it work? How can you explain it? Can you give more examples? We post one on paper, we start discussing it. Those discussions and negotiations of good practices were a very unique process because we started appreciating each other, listening to each other, accepting differences, respecting differences. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Salem)

Faced by the need to overcome obstacles at schools and an understanding that there is no “one size fits all” solution when it came to working with schools, members of the community learned to seek help and support beyond themselves. Community members thus got involved in this “unique” process of teaching each other about possible good practices they can adapt. They experienced “active listening” and learned to appreciate others, accept and respect differences and be open and willing to learn from a different repertoire of thoughts and experiences. One key outcome of learning to value “differences” is that it opened up opportunities for mentorship among all members and confirmed that each can contribute to the community in his/ her unique way.

We have a very serious cultural problem of not working together so I think this project has been an icebreaker because then without mentioning names somebody else from another department would say why do not we come and join this project? We are all in this together in this, ok? let’s do something together. Do you know? And now we are thinking together more, joining this, so I think this was an icebreaker. On a professional level, I have to say I think it brought out potentials in people and I am not thinking of them because she is my friend and colleague who is an amazing person and an incredible professional who is always underestimating her abilities. In the beginning, she was very suspicious. So this was a good chance for even seeing enough potentials that we are not aware of. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Hala)

The quote above illustrates the case of changing values within this professional learning community and the surrounding workplace community. This learning

community has learned to work collaboratively and has come to appreciate this mode of work over the tradition of the workplace that promotes individualistic work modes over collaborative ones. This new value of collaborative work has been introduced and is attracting others from outside the community. The community members have learned to see potentials in each other and this has opened up opportunities for more collaboration and for more robust joined work.

Impact: Affirmation and empowerment in the community

For me when I think about impact, you have a very interesting question: is it help, support or enabling? I think both, and for me, it came from failing to do things and being very aware, it was not private, it was shared, and then getting the support and help of everyone to make you succeed. And this is not common in our context. You do not get people to praise you when you do something good. It is not very common that you find people push you to be better so I got a chance in this group. I also got a lot of help and support to do things in a very good way. And I could see/feel the success and for me, this meant I felt more self- confident. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Dina)

This quote describes the process of affirmation and empowerment as one that involves high levels of reflection, self-awareness and openness. The community provides a safe and supportive environment for its members to acknowledge it when they fail to do things in the right way and supports them to turn this failure into success. The community celebrates the success of its members and thus boosts their self-confidence and sense of agency. For this member, failing to do something carries risks within a public environment like a community. In this case, though, the supportive ethos of the PCL meant that the member was encouraged to improve and empowered through a sense of agency. It is interesting to note that affirmation within a community seems to precede and lead to empowerment.

Furthermore, this extract also reveals that success is a participatory process based on the cooperation between the learning community members, and not related to a specific individual. It also shows the effect of the learning community on pushing people to succeed

through support and reinforcement, thus boosting confidence and changing people's views towards a more positive image of joint work.

Also, I think as a member of AU PCL I learned a lot about problem-solving. We face some problems and we learn how we can solve these problems. In our AU PCL. When we go to the school to make some professional development program in the Summer, the school was closed because we have a general examination of secondary school and we can't reach the teachers to conduct the professional development program. That was a problem. We think about how can we solve these problems, what are the alternative solutions. Also in our project, in our PCL we learn about crisis management. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Samy)

The quote above represents an example of an impact on this professional learning community. Members had to use and refine their problem-solving skills to overcome the challenges they faced in accomplishing work with schools. The participants approached problems in a collaborative rather than an individualistic way; they discussed the problem together and were able to come up with solutions and this had also taught them about crisis management.

Unfortunately, culture is more competitive than collaborative. I think that the view between us was more competitive, but we changed to more collaboration and more trust, we found this in preparing the materials and when we trained the schools/teachers and so on. I think this will be effective outside the institution, outside the culture of college in general. So personally, I have benefited and I have benefited from the academic professional levels. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Noor)

The quote presents a vivid testimony of the impact of the PCL on moving away from the competitive culture of isolation, working alone to the more trusting culture of collaboration and learning and developing together. This has an impact on the personal and professional lives of the community members.

It helped me to become emotionally secured in particular. This is a concrete example. Emotionally secure means that I can take risks. I am not hesitant

to do new work. I am not hesitant to plan and go to the school site and work with teachers whom I do not know. I am now more daring, braver to do things that I have not chosen to do before. This provides emotional security for me. This is the emotional part. As for the professional part, I can do things that I have not done before. I am doing some sort of teamwork with my group. I am very successful in doing this now and I am refining my skills regarding the teamwork/new topics I have not read about before. Sharing materials that I have not used before professionally and emotionally. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Mona)

There was an alteration in the feelings of this participant towards being more emotionally secured; changing from being hesitant to a person who is willing to take risks and experiment more. The change was not only on the emotional level but also professionally where there is more work in teams, more new topics to read about and more materials to share and develop.

Leadership and Mentorship

We can say at the beginning of the project and the decisions played by Dr. Samy and Dr. Dina as PI. At first, we can discuss these decisions, but I think they are taken by them. I think that when we approached the project, we can give our voice and they can listen to our views/recommendations maybe. Then we can share all these responsibilities and take decisions as a group or as a PCL. I think this is the difference between the first points and now. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Noor)

The quote above highlights changes in leadership style within the professional community; it has moved from an autocratic leadership style to a more democratic and distributed one. This member describes how this change came about by having different voices heard and by sharing in decision-making and in taking responsibilities. The change in leadership style has brought about a strong sense of ownership and collegiality among community members. Consequently, one of the assets of such a project is that the concept of leadership in the team has been perceived as a mutual distribution of roles, and there is no such thing as a senior leader.

I just want to comment on what Doaa said giving Samy the credit for supporting a young member to be the PI. Again this is very unusual in our context. Because usually leading positions are given to people who are higher in status, who have titles of, who are full professors; so for a full professor to even accept the title of PI to be given to junior staff, this is totally uncommon in our context. Let alone that he is very fully supportive and works very hard for this PI to be successful. So again this is a very new practice it is not common. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Dina)

The importance of the above quote cannot be ignored. It highlights a significant change in the Egyptian culture, which is having a junior member in a more powerful position than the senior one. This is very uncommon in our context. In spite of the fact that she is the PI, yet she plays the role of a mentee in certain situations where the professor offers her advice and support.

Moreover, one can deduce the kind of leadership in this community; it is democratic as participants consult each other. To have this kind of leadership is rare as usually, those in a higher position do not involve other members in essential decisions. They decide on what they think is better for the group and think for them, so to have such democratic leadership is an excellent practice on how all leaders should act. Indeed, the PI is thought to be only a title given in the project.

This is something we are a bit sensitive about coming into our culture. I think one important thing also in mentoring we have been giving here is breaking the hierarchy. I really disagree with the idea of experienced/inexperienced. We learn from our students, some of the presentations of our students we learn from. So it is very important in this idea of mentoring to reconsider this idea and to be more relaxed and be more observing. I believe, one of the most important things because this is what really takes people out of their comfort zone really, to feel observed/mentored. But at the same time, it can empower you. This is a very important issue and I think we have to really work more on it when it comes to the teachers, how to mentor each other without underestimating/degrading, again in schools there is a very serious issue of hierarchy. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Hala)

Here, there is a comment about other cultural issues regarding the idea of a junior and a senior, an experienced individual and a less experienced one. One great achievement about this project is that it narrowed the gap between the two parties, focusing more on the idea of learning and sharing different experiences no matter how experienced the individual is, or what position they hold.

The quote highlights how mentoring can be very challenging in a culture that values hierarchy. However, it also discusses how mentoring can also be very empowering once you understand what it is and why people need mentoring. The above extract reflects key values that make mentoring successful; these are being open to new ideas and the possibility of learning from others and being observant and relaxed. This connects to the theme of values and valuing differences within a professional learning community; community members need to see their differences in experience, knowledge, etc as an asset that adds richness and opens opportunities for learning. Members need not only to be open but also to be curious and inquisitive and ready to explore possibilities and different views. The idea of stepping out of one's comfort zone comes up again in this quote to confirm an awareness that people develop and grow once they step out of their comfort zone. Being a member of a supportive learning community makes this possible and less daunting for its members. This community member uses classroom observation as an example of an activity that creates opportunities for mentoring at college and at schools where the same cultural obstacles exist.

As a mentor, I think that I play an important role with some colleagues. I go to school to train some teachers in another school like Gardenia school. I do some training with teachers in training material like STEM like Egyptian Knowledge Bank, like Edmodo. My colleagues think that I am more of an expert than them to do this training. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Salma)

It is evident here that this member of the team had a sense of empowerment, which was reflected in the various training sessions she was encouraged to give and the high sense of self-esteem felt through her words. In addition, this quote also shows how work was distributed among the team members. Anyone who excelled in a certain field was given the opportunity to lead the rest, something which was accepted by all, thus creating a collaborative atmosphere.

As a mentee, I always seek help from Dina and Mona, whether I understood the topic correctly, am I on the right path or not? So there is always guidance from both of them. And of course, El-Shimaa has helped me a lot in forming an Agenda for the PCL. They are always there for guidance. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Doaa)

In this extract, the participant, being the least experienced in the field, was a mentee. She explains how her colleagues have guided her academically. It is clear that there was a sense of cooperation among participants, supporting each other. This sort of cooperation and support is a real change among staff members as it reflects some change in the Egyptian culture. Usually, people would be reluctant and hesitant when it comes to asking for clarification, reassurance or help, especially from those who are younger. Their own self-image would hold them back. Fortunately, this attitude has changed within the journey of the project.

Knowledge sharing: Reflection and knowledge building

Those are the main values of PCL because mutual trust, respect, those ones usually evolve when discussing problems which have no ready-made solutions ... how can we overcome them ... we start telling the stories because every one of us has their own story, what works in my school might not work in your school. We are not just listening to stories, we are sharing ideas, we are building on each other. What I say or raise at the beginning might not give a solution, but another colleague might pick up a point which builds on what I say so I think it is like a cumulative process of sharing good practices. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Salem)

The comment above draws a powerful image for knowledge building inside the community; that is an image of a patchwork. In completing tasks and solving problems, team members come together for ideas and support. Individuals' initial ideas and pieces of knowledge get threaded into a larger patchwork of more comprehensible and collective pieces of knowledge through the process of sharing, critiquing and adapting that is supported by values of respect and trust.

We had to learn about the Egyptian Knowledge Bank because teachers were interested in this so we taught ourselves about this. We had each other to learn more about this. And then we went to the

schools and taught the teachers about this. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Samy)

In this quote, the member provides a specific example of knowledge sharing. Many members of the team had to learn about a new tool based on the teachers' needs to be able to introduce it to them efficiently.

Before the project, I used to reflect just mentally without writing any reflections. After being engaged in the project I started to, after taking the tools that invited us to reflect, I started to write my reflections and see how can I change my practices this helped me to help complete steps and concrete ideas about how to change my practices. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Mona)

This quote illustrates a change in the attitude of reflection from a simple reflection into a deeper one that involves taking notes, using tools, and searching for solutions that will eventually lead to a development in educational practices (Akbari, 2007). Reflection emerges as a systematic practice within this community.

It also illustrates the use of reflection as part of the teaching process of that member, but by the students, not her. However, after working on the project, there was a change in her mindset, as it forced her to evaluate the whole process and to plan ahead.

Challenges and solutions

But for me, the issue was that the objectives were not all very clear. And also, the work was demanding in terms of time, so I was always pressed for time and I always had short notice before being given a task. But with time I felt that this has dramatically changed and now I am very clear about the objectives and I am very clear about the tasks and what I like is that everyone has a role in the team and everyone has specific responsibilities and we rotate things and I think that there is more support for members in the team. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Rowan)

Obstacles at the beginning were that the objectives were not very clear and that time limits and deadlines for completing tasks were very demanding. However, getting support from each other, assigning specific roles and responsibilities, and rotating roles have brought dramatic changes to the PCL in terms of members

feeling more confident and less stressed about, and this, in turn, makes the work less demanding.

In the beginning, I felt a sense of alienation because I have not been part of other projects. I know most of them because we are from the same department but with time things became clearer and I started to feel part of the team, I felt that it was like a family and I have become a family member in this family. ... everyone has a role and everyone is responsible for a task and what was really new for me is that working together towards a new value that we were learning from each other and usually it wasn't like only junior learning from senior but there were times when I felt that also seniors were learning from juniors and this was very new in this context and again I feel there is support and my efforts are appreciated and I feel like the support keeps pushing me forward. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Mona)

Feelings of alienation by some members was a challenge for this community. This junior member felt a sense of alienation at the early stages of the community's evolution as she felt that she had less experience than the rest of the team. This was intensified by the hierarchical culture that equates seniority to status and expertise and expects juniors to follow and consent. Collegiality and affirmation in the community helped this team member overcome alienation and contribute as an active agent rather than a passive follower. The community then felt like a "family" and she was a family member with a strong feeling of bonding and belonging.

I have different feelings because I always felt out of place. Because I neither had the role in any project before, I do not belong to the methodology department. Maybe Hala at least participated in a project before, but I have no previous experience, I

have not met with most of them in control in exams so mostly are new to me. I always felt that I would not be of any addition. Yes, I am committed, I am a hard worker but knowledge-wise I know the least. But when I started participating I became closer to them. Although I do not like the idea that I am always the person who brings cakes...definitely they have been helpful to me. Most of them are very dear to my heart. Dina forced me to do things, which I had never done before. I never thought of training teachers, I always kept to my department. Dealing with teachers, having to prepare topics that I have not heard of like PCL or lesson plan or whatever. Any of these titles, terminology never knew of so I had to exert more effort. I feel much more relaxed now. (AU PCL Focus Group Discussion, December 2018, Doaa)

This quote echoes this sense of alienation mentioned in the previous extract. Being inexperienced in the field, not belonging to the same department and not knowing most of the members in the AU team were the challenges faced by that member. Yet she pointed out the factors that helped her overcome those obstacles, namely her colleagues' help and the PI's encouragement to step out of her comfort zone to train teachers. Moreover, the above words highlight the positive influence of the project on that member such as getting closer to colleagues, gaining self-confidence and learning new topics.

Findings from the Vignette

The following section presents the personal story of a member of the AU team. The story is written in the form of a vignette that illustrates how PCL's evolution and impact took place at AU. This vignette was written towards the very end of the project (November 2019). The vignette is followed by comments.

When I was invited to attend a two-day workshop in April 2017, I had no clue what the whole thing was about. Then I found myself travelling with people I hardly knew to attend training in topics I have not heard of. A totally bizarre situation, yet it somewhat broke the ice. I didn't feel at all at ease and always felt an outsider. I came from a different department and had neither previous knowledge of most of their methodology topics nor participated in projects before. At the beginning, and during our regular meetings, I saw that gap and always tried to avoid expressing myself so as not to embarrass myself. I realized that the way things are done in my department differs from theirs. Here, hierarchy and seniority are very evident, which to me was shocking. They seemed to be distant, dealing with one another formally (using titles all the time) and showing some lack of trust; again something totally opposite to what I am used to with my colleagues (friends) in the English department. The junior staff hardly voiced their opinions in the presence of their professors. I could tell that academically I won't be of any help, so I tried to influence them positively through social gestures, which seemed to work out in the end and made us somewhat closer. With time, such a feeling of alienation started to lessen when we started working together in giving training sessions. Some of the topics to be covered were not new to me after all. I might not have known the term, but at least we carry out what we preach in the department. We had PCLs and Mentorship.

I can claim that the turning point was when the PI "forced" me to prepare presentations and train school teachers. The first time I went into the class, I was terrified. However, after finishing my presentation and seeing the satisfaction of the teachers, I gained some confidence; "I am not bad after all", I told myself. I definitely stepped out of my comfort zone, using Arabic in presenting and addressing a different audience from my students. Academically, reading about new topics to prepare my presentations was essential, so I got to learn new things. Consequently, I started to loosen up and feel more comfortable in their presence as I finally believed I have something to offer them even if, to me, it was not academic. They might learn commitment, hard work, trust, respect, and humbleness.

In 2019, the AU team became much closer, when some members dropped out. The junior staff were given more responsibilities, so they felt empowered, which was reflected in the way discussions were held in our meetings. Each one of us had the freedom to express herself freely and was acknowledged by the PI and the other members. The commitment we showed in attending weekly meetings reflected a strong sense of belonging, which resulted in a friendly atmosphere. All this had a positive effect on me; hence, willingly, I offered to write the schools' case study. Doing so was totally new to me, yet the collaboration I had with my colleagues resulted in a satisfying outcome. Applying my knowledge in teaching essay writing and doing research papers, and being meticulous, made me feel that I can be an asset to the group. I was further encouraged by the positive feedback I got from my colleagues. Fortunately, each one of us did her best to finish her task perfectly due to a strong sense of belonging. Having our colleagues sit with us and comment on what was written was fruitful. Examining things from another perspective was very useful and helped me to look at the context differently.

Meeting with school clusters was also beneficial to me. Their motivation was an incentive for developing professionally. I felt the change that took place in these schools. They were willingly meeting regularly to prepare for their action research, another thing I knew nothing about. Helping them in writing their research questions and selecting the passages they would use in the pre-test was also beneficial to me. This whole experience of going to schools and dealing with teachers can be considered an eye-opener, as I had no previous contact with them. I realized that they are more of victims, burdened with work and training, and what is worse, having no voice.

Finally, I can say that this project was beneficial for me personally and academically. Definitely, if given the chance, I would repeat that experience. (November 2019, Doaa)

Comment

This vignette describes one of the PCL members' sense of alienation and inexperience in the field, as she did not belong to the same department of almost all the project team members. Hence, she was not familiar with most of the academic terminology they used. Besides, she did not participate in any project before. According to her own words, she avoided participation in any discussion and expressing her opinion at the beginning, which showed a lack of confidence at that stage. Yet, the change occurred with the evolving and growing relations among the team members, which resulted from the regular meetings over time. This indicates the important role of relations in understanding, modifying views and gaining self-esteem. This also reflects that establishing good relations in PCLs requires time, patience and effort from all the members.

This team member also refers to a significant cultural issue regarding the idea of hierarchy in the Arab context, that is the gap between a junior and a senior scholar, an experienced and a less experienced one, which may intimidate the younger or junior staff and hinder their participation in any discussion in the presence of the senior members. This, in turn, leads to a lack of confidence and trust. Through some social gestures, she describes her supportive role, which was meant to break the distance and narrow the gap between the two parties, the junior and senior. This indicates that every member in a given PCL can have a special role and influence the team in different ways. Besides, it is important for the community members to see their differences in experience and knowledge, which actually enriches the group and opens up opportunities for learning and helping each other.

Moreover, she describes the role of the project principal investigator (PI) in mentoring and supporting her, especially when she experienced a lack of confidence. This happened through encouraging her to perform different tasks, which she actually carried out successfully. This also helped her to step out of her comfort zone. This shows that team members need mentoring, which can be of help and a source of empowerment.

She played different roles in the AU PCL; she was a mentee as she explains how the PI and the team guided her academically, providing support, assistance, reinforcement, encouragement, and modification from

different perspectives, and this had a positive impact on her. This reflects how PCL provides a safe and supportive environment for its members by supporting them in the right way and helping them to turn failure into success. This, in turn, creates confidence and changes people's views in a positive way.

She also played the role of a mentor during the schools' Professional Development (PD) activities, action research, and school case study writing. This reflects that every member may play different roles in PCL when given the opportunity and means to do so.

She also describes the development of some values in PCLs like cooperation, trust, transparency, commitment, sharing leadership, active listening, appreciating others, respecting differences and being willing to learn from different thoughts and experiences. She played a role in establishing some of these values, which evolved and grew stronger over time.

The vignette draws a coherent image of knowledge building for this member as she gained new knowledge, participated in writing research, trained teachers in schools, supported action research in schools and completed many other tasks. This knowledge building happened as a result of a long journey of collective work and cooperation among all team members.

Findings from the Undergraduate Student Teachers' Focus Group Discussions

This section draws on data from focus group discussions conducted with two groups of students enrolled in the undergraduate programme at AU. The aim of the interviews was to explore the impact of the AU evolving PCL on the students they teach. These two groups, in particular, were instructed and supported by the AU team members to form their own PCL as a means for professional learning and development. The interviews aimed at exploring the evolution and impact of these PCLs. Similar themes that emerged from the AU team members' focus group discussion were evident in this data. The following presents an analysis and discussion of this data.

Communication and relationships

From my own point of view, I think that a professional community is a community in which people help each other. So like our community

whenever someone has a certain thing to share he does not think about it twice, but in our good professional community, we help each other. And sometimes at some points, I feel that we want to succeed together so we do not have this sort of envy towards each other that I want to succeed I do not want other people to succeed. No, we want to succeed together but here no we work together and we succeed together and that's it.

It is about being supportive, being helpful, being sincere, giving feedback to each other if I find you have a negative thing I have to tell you. It is for your sake as a friend to help you and give you feedback/support. (Student Teachers' Focus Group Discussions, December 2018, a student enrolled in the English Teacher Initial Education Programme)

This quote highlights an important component of an effective professional community which is collaboration. Offering help and support is the main asset of the community described, where sharing is done automatically without any hesitation, driven by sincerity. Such an attitude stems from the strong ties present amongst the members of that community and their unified target to succeed and graduate from the department as a team. Seeing themselves as one team is also important, as it fosters a positive and supportive attitude in contrast with the negative competitive feelings colouring other students.

It is interesting to note how the involvement of the AU team member teaching this group in a PCL has impacted on the students they teach.

Impact: Affirmation and empowerment in the community

This empowered me during the practicum. I became more confident; I stood with confidence in front of the students. It is helped me to be a good teacher in the future because it helped me to stand up and face the students and talking and teaching my subject. Also, it helped me to know all the content of my subject because for example making a presentation about trigonometry. I learned from this a lot of content of my subject and the history of my subject, the history of trigonometry and it helped me a lot to be a good teacher in the future.

I used technology applications to learn more about my content area and how to apply it. Different technological applications helped me to teach trigonometry and diagrams and shapes. I didn't use a PowerPoint earlier that's why I learned how to use PowerPoint/form shapes through that program. (Student Teachers' Focus Group Discussions, December 2018, a student enrolled in the Math Teacher Initial Education Programme)

In the above quote, the student describes the great positive impact of being part of a professional community. The knowledge sharing and knowledge building this student experienced during working with colleagues as a PCL on the different course tasks has transferred impact that went beyond just learning course content and performing well.

First, this student gained self-confidence, being able to face her students and teach them without fear. Second, this empowerment helped her professionally, enabling her to master her content area, and to teach it using aids, for example, diagrams and shapes. Third, she was encouraged to use a PowerPoint presentation to present the information to her students. In her opinion, all that would help her become a better teacher in the future.

Leadership and mentorship

I heard once a quote, 'a leader is a dealer in hope'. It concerns my role as a source of hope. Not everyone in my team gets the first dispersion of negative energy. So when someone feels or does not get the same point that I need either we change it or train hard. And it is harder than normal. As they said, we use objective criticism. We do not criticise each other by hurting the feelings of any other words that, e.g. 'you're stupid, you are not doing this well' because it will not help me find anything or get the better of this person in front of me. So we used to use objective criticism.

During the phase of research, each one has been allocated/has been given a role to play during research and then when they started the real work each one has taken a duty/responsibility according to his/her ability. (Student Teachers' Focus Group Discussions, December 2018, a student enrolled in the Math Teacher Initial Education Programme)

Here, the leader of that professional community, being “a source of hope”, explains the kind of leadership they followed; it is mostly democratic as the whole group share in the process of decision making. Within that community, criticism is always objective, in an attempt to avoid hurting each other’s feelings. This is done by providing encouraging words and positive feedback. Besides, when something goes wrong or misunderstanding occurs, the reaction is positive as they work harder. Moreover, various roles have been distributed among the members of the group, assigning duties and responsibilities for each member.

Knowledge sharing: Reflection and knowledge building

I think it feels like a social relationship among us. We started to know how we think and it also makes us see how other people think and how we are different and how we can make benefits of this difference because I remember at some point I was discussing my moment of practice with one of my colleagues and he started to share his own moment of practice. The main thing is how he dealt with a critical issue about grammar that I do not really like myself so I started to feel his conversation really made me see a point that I have never met before, I have never come across before and I started to take benefit of this and search about this and how can I modify what he said and turn it into something that I can use it myself as a teacher, so I find this amazing and brilliant.

When we prepare a lesson we feel that we are going to rock, we are perfect, there is no single mistake. But sometimes when it comes to the practical part you feel that the students give you blank faces, they can’t understand what you really want them to do and sometimes they feel like ‘why are we doing this’ so you feel like ‘I have been spending hours preparing this and you can’t even understand’ so at some points it a little bit disappointing ... So at some point, I try to take their own ideas and reflect it on my own preparation so it is not only me, it is me and them as well. (Student Teachers’ Focus Group Discussions, December 2018, a student enrolled in the English Teacher Initial Education Programme)

In this PCL, student teachers were sharing their moments of practice or examples of good teaching practices each experienced. This is a form of reflection on their own teaching experience. It makes them consider some of the things that they practice, and see things from different perspectives, which finally ends up as an eye-opening experience. Most importantly, they realise the importance of being different and how through differences they complement and help each other. In the second quote, the speaker reconsiders and revisits his/her teaching experience despite the initial frustration at the failure of the class despite the hard work and preparation. He/ she is courageous and confident enough to involve the students in evaluating the class. Most importantly, the speaker is willing to take the students’ feedback as guidance to improve the teaching process and hence help the students. Thus, the above quote represents a kind of evaluation of the whole experience.

Challenges and solutions

Issues of time and place. A place to meet and time because we already had lots of things to do so it was very bad for them.

To make 5 persons in the same way/same character/nearest character as possible – it needs a lot of work. Maybe it considered as hard work but for brain working it considered easy because instead of thinking by 1 brain you think in 6 brains or 6 mentalities. (Student Teachers’ Focus Group Discussions, December 2018, a student enrolled in the English Teacher Initial Education Programme)

According to these focus groups, few challenges were faced. Other than time and place, having many people with different personalities and perspectives working with one another was a significant obstacle. Yet, they considered it an asset and a form of enrichment because they realised that it is always better to put many heads together.

Conclusion

To conclude, this section has tackled in detail the six main themes that have arisen from the collected data. They were supported by the participants’ quotes and commentaries.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

It is at this point that we return to place the findings within the context of the literature and research questions.

- How does the SUP enhance the development of PCLs at the university level?
- How has the PCL impacted on the transformation of professional learning practice at the university level?
- What are some of the tensions between beliefs/values and practice?

This discussion will explore each of these questions, in turn, to draw on links with the literature and the Egyptian cultural context.

The School-University Partnership and Development of the PCL at the University Level

Effective communication is vital in the development of a PCL as it has the potential to impact building relationships, trust, and engagement within the community. Although the challenges could be technological, linguistic and cultural, with modern technological solutions, such as WhatsApp and the internet: it is possible to make connections to others across considerable distances. However, it is important to consider the people, with whom to work collaboratively with, and to build an effective peer community of learners.

Although there are technological solutions to facilitate communication, some culturally significant factors, such as the level of formality, professionalism, and hierarchy can impact it. Therefore, it was important, from the beginning, to set boundaries to have clear expectations in order to communicate effectively. As suggested by Hart et al., (2013), boundaries are crucial because they set the basic guidelines and serve to define membership of any community (Stoll & Louis, 2007). Defining the boundaries for communication would, therefore, act to set guidelines for those inside and those outside the community. For some, this might be about separating the professional from the personal. In this case, the 'insider' or 'outsider' could differentiate between the professional and personal roles that people

hold for their lives and for different people or the members of the community. The partnership between the schools and the university maintains flexibility in communication, which means that members could participate even when they were unable to attend the meetings physically due to the pressure of workload.

Communication also involves having a common language that can take time to develop. The community needs access to clear ideas and frames of work. There was a suggestion that this might be more challenging when there are 'outsiders'. Language can encourage community involvement, but lacking access to the shared language can act as a barrier to participation and reinforce the 'outsider' feelings of distance and alienation from the rest of the community. Strengthening communication could be key to developing relationships, but an atmosphere of formality may also serve to hinder this. Enabling different members of the community to participate, considering the variety of experiences and backgrounds, was central for the school and university partnership to encourage participation that bridged the boundary between the formal and informal.

Effective communication was also a key influence on the building of relationships since it was crucial for participation. However, the building of relationships also contributed to improving communication between members of the community through increased participation in group activities as the members worked more closely and shared a common language. There is a clear connection between communication with a shared language and building effective long-lasting relationships. This could be because people naturally seek relationships with those whom they feel most closely attuned to personally and professionally (Kelly & Antonio, 2016).

Building relationships that value all people within the community, regardless of their individual paths, is crucial to foster collegiality and commitment. Building relationships between community members were helped with tasks that encouraged engagement, participation and especially cooperation. These tasks built effective long-term relationships by breaking the ice over time. These enabled members to move from possible initial feelings of alienation towards community acceptance and integration. Eventually, relationships developed over time and strengthen the sense of belonging. These relationships then have a greater chance of longer-term commitment and sustainability.

Affirmation within the community (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015) takes a central role in building relationships, which are characterized by mutual trust and commonly held values. The school and university partnership developed this affirmation overtime where senior colleagues encouraged less experienced members to participate. When members were empowered to collaborate in an atmosphere that values the expertise of all, participants become more deeply engaged within the community. Studies of communities of practice suggest that members begin by taking a peripheral role to gain understanding and acquire knowledge from the community, but gradually, over time, they begin to take more central roles when being the providers of knowledge to the community (E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Within the PCL new and less experienced practitioners are empowered to contribute to the community. They are accepted, valued and encouraged by other more experienced colleagues. This fosters a sense of collegiality and community membership that is based on affirmation and the development of self-efficacy.

There is a clear route for the professional development of new members of the community; the more experienced members train them and take more challenging roles. However, what the literature is less certain of is what happens next to those members, who are in the central roles within the community. Within the SUP4PCL community, it was clear that some members have achieved that trajectory of movement to more central roles. Some members also left the community to take up more senior roles within other communities, making way for others to fill in the positions left behind. In this respect, attainment of mastery is not an endpoint but a stepping stone towards other extended communities to receive further affirmation and knowledge. By contributing to the PCL, these members become 'extended professionals' (Hoyle, 2008; Joshevska, 2012) as they contribute to the professional development of others within the community.

Traditionally, PCLs at AU were formed to fulfil particular tasks connected to teaching and evaluation. As suggested above, they tended to be compulsory, temporary and formal. This could mean that there were fewer opportunities to develop collegiality based upon professional development in the way that the school-university partnership model was based upon.

Hargreaves et al., 2014 and Frost, 2015, both suggest that enforced or contrived collegiality in PCLs may not result in the ideals of sharing knowledge through collaboration, at least partly possibly because there is a different purpose behind these types of PCLs. PCLs based on evaluation will have a quite different purpose to those that are based on a collaborative and non-judgemental approach to improving practice. In these cases, reflective practice may be more solitary and mainly based on personal experiences (Taber, 2009).

The school-university partnership succeeded to bring opportunities to work collaboratively, where all members were valued as having individual strengths to develop professionally and differences were appreciated. The project favoured equality, in which the traditional hierarchies were replaced by recognising experiences and strengths of all community members equally. Fair distribution of roles and responsibilities was highly valued under this partnership model where members received mentoring to enable them to develop towards more central posts within the community. The potential problem of contrived or enforced collegiality was overcome because members choose to commit to the projects. Furthermore, approaches within the SUP and PCLs relied on positional leaders creating opportunities and space where the non-positional leadership could emerge and flourish (Avidov-Unger, 2016; E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Moreover, opportunities were created for supported reflection on the practice between a wider group of professionals within the school and university community (White, 2013).

Impact of The PCL On the Transformation of Professional Learning Practice at the University Level

It is clear that affirmation encourages engagement of individuals within the community and this, in turn, promotes further participation and collegiality. Individuals take different roles and become more deeply embedded in the group. By contributing to the group, through the sharing of knowledge, ideas and resources, these members become part of the transformation of professional learning practice. When community members have attained a more central position, each individual's development fosters the professional development of all members. However, the trajectory of those who are already in the position of having achieved mastery is not clear from the literature. This could be a key point for the impact on the transformation of professional practices within the community at the university level.

What seems to have happened with this community is that those achieving more central positions have moved to take up similar or higher positions within other outside communities. For the individual and their professional journey, finding other communities to participate in allows them to seek further challenges, experiences and sources of inspiration (Frost, 2014). This does not necessarily mean that those individuals leave the community behind. Individuals are likely to be members of multiple communities for a variety of reasons and may choose to continue relationships, especially those where bonds of trust and friendship have been formed. The boundaries between different communities may also overlap or be broader than others created more formally (Chigona, 2013).

This process of change within the community is a kind of renewal and has the potential to keep particular communities developing in terms of the strengths, knowledge, and skills that others bring in. This allows other new members to be brought into the community for the process to be continued for others. However, it is also true that these new members will also need to feel the sense of belonging and affirmation that comes from the membership. This would be particularly true for extended communities where the boundaries are not necessarily defined by the particular workplace but include others from 'outside' (Wenger, 1998; E. Wenger-Traynor & B. Wenger-Traynor, 2015). Being part of a larger community with a broader vision has the potential to empower teachers to see themselves as belonging to that community.

If PCLs are traditionally formed around the professional duties of teaching and evaluation which are compulsory, they may not achieve the level of collaboration and knowledge construction, especially if they are also temporary and formal in nature. The purpose of the PCL is important here as well as its nature. PCLs can be formed with different purposes; they might be based on preparation for the teaching and learning resources, including exams and marking or participation in research projects. Whether these are compulsory or temporary, they may not achieve the same as those where members have a choice and free will to participate. The agenda will be set by the priorities of others, generally from positional leaders. This may leave little room for more democratic forms of non-positional leadership to empower others within

the group and enable the affirmation of those members. What is also important is that the community is valued by the members and that it is perceived to have value as this may determine how its members choose to shape their role within the community (Dogan et al., 2016). If members do not engage with the values of the community or do not feel valued for their expertise and professional knowledge, then there could be the potential for damage to self-efficacy (Orr, 2012).

Defining the boundaries of the community is also key for them to be understood by the community. Some boundaries involved practices such as using forms of communications, but others are about the purpose and nature of the community. How the purpose is perceived, such as the extent to which it is focused on approaches to teaching and learning practice or affirmation and development, will enable practitioners to view their own position and identity within that community. Different members will also have personal priorities within these boundaries. Sharing of practice and developing reflective practice was one key aspect of all members.

PCLs at the university already combined good practices, such as peer observation and group investigations, within their postgraduate and undergraduate student communities. Social media and monthly meetings with department members were common for planning teaching and evaluation, problem-solving and enhancing student performance. However, this good practice could also be extended within the possibilities to engage in reflective practice through the support within PCLs that is based on choice, partnership and collaboration. The social communication that students engage in could also be a source of support and affirmation for staff members. Engaging in different forms of social communication provides opportunities for cooperation, trust and developing social and professional skills. Within professional communities, this might require some consideration of boundaries, especially given cultural sensitivities around the separation of personal and professional lives and identities.

Initially, few numbers of the staff understood or believed that PCLs had the potential for a positive effect on individuals, departments or institutions through the development of a shared vision, values and language. The ideals of respect for all views, regardless of position

or status, collaborative reflective practice, changing cultural practices and developing individuals through peer mentoring and coaching were new concepts but ones that were considered worthwhile and potentially powerful and effective. Forming and activating PCLs take time, space and changes to the workplace culture to allow for non-positional leadership to be adopted. There are challenges to this with workloads, limitations of facilities and cultures that are more formally based on hierarchy.

Tensions Between Beliefs, Values, and Practices

Even when a community is perceived positively, collegiality does not necessarily result from the sharing of practice. Enforced or contrived collegiality may mean that the community fails to thrive (Hargreaves et al., 2014; Frost, 2015). There are some potential tensions or barriers to the community development that relate to beliefs, values, and practices particularly if the members do not develop the relationships built upon trust and reciprocity. There are central core values and beliefs that the community share. Members need to feel that they are stakeholders in developing and upholding their profession while having the values of respect, trust, cooperation, promoting good practice and supporting individuals to develop professionally. Embedded within these values are cultural norms and practices that can create potential barriers or tensions within the community.

Developing effective communications and working relationships within the community needed to overcome the embedded cultural expectations of perceived hierarchy and seniority. It was important to set out and make clear expectations and ground-rules. Professional status and hierarchy presented a potential barrier to the empowerment and affirmation of all members and took some time to overcome. Deference based upon assumed positions of the hierarchy might limit personal empowerment and the development of self-efficacy for all members. Respect based upon equity and value for differences between individuals and their wealth of experiences is more likely to foster communities where everyone contributes to the knowledge of the whole and benefits from the mentorship of others to take up different roles. This can still be achieved where positional leaders create space where valued collaborative communities can emerge through non-positional leadership roles (Avidov-Unger, 2016; E. Wenger-Trayner & B. Wenger-Trayner 2015).

Within the university few members initially believed that PCLs had the potential to positively affect individuals, departments, and institutions through establishing a shared vision, language and values. Few members at that time saw the potential of the PCL to promote values, change cultures or transmit effective practices, or lead to the development of individuals through mentorship. By the end of the project, though, members now saw these possibilities for change, but also that this change is not an easy or quick process. Cultures are embedded with values and expectations that are taken for granted and assumed. Space was created for non-positional leadership to be facilitated, but this still takes time to develop for all members. This takes trust and the development of effective relationships but this can be challenging where communities are based within formal structures such as hierarchies (Hoyle & Wallace, 2009).

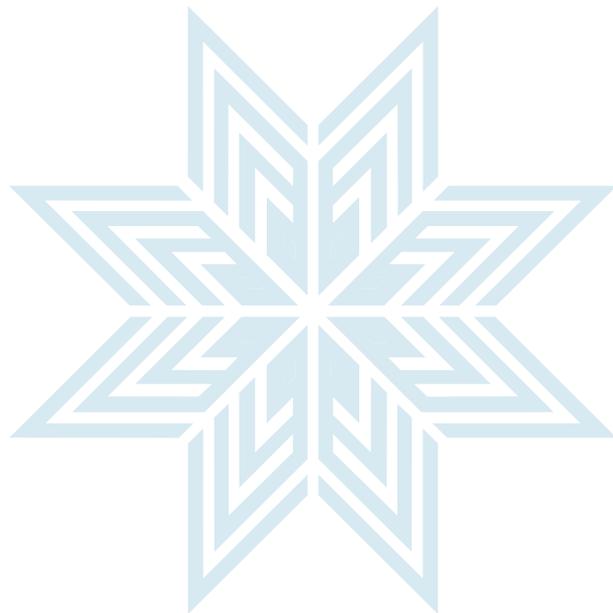
Commitment to the community, trust, and relationships were inter-related. Increased commitment in terms of completing group collaborative activities led to the development of trust and respect for members of the community. Building relationships that help to develop mutual trust and respect is important to enable the team to begin working collaboratively. However, collegiate ways of working may not come easily to some as much as others even within the same community. Working collaboratively for a common goal or values is not a common approach in many Egyptian Universities and schools where individualism tends to predominate, along with a sense of competition rather than cooperation. Therefore, engagement in such communities outside the usual structure of the workplace may provide ways that practitioners can join together aside from the usual isolation and competition in order to work within communities that they value and believe have value (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005).

Within a culture of formality and hierarchy, some community members might feel a sense of alienation and lack of belonging within the community. This may be especially the case where communities sit within cultures that promote isolation and individualism since opportunities for collegial learning are more limited. Experiential and reflective practice is therefore more likely to occur in isolation than collectively (Taber, 2009). What was important for these members is that they were assisted to move from that alienation to acceptance and integration into the community. This is through the socially constructed part of professional identity which

builds self-efficacy through interactions with other professionals over time (Pillen, Den Brok, & Beijaard, 2013; Teleshaliyev, 2014; Wenger, 1998). However, as self-efficacy is socially constructed, the actions of others can impact upon its development either positively or negatively (Chalari, 2017; Reicher, 2004). Negative experiences may lead a community member to withdraw from the community if it is not affirming (Leeferink, Koopman, Beijaard, et al., 2015). Affirming relationships with peers, though, enable members to further define themselves positively within the community and become more deeply embedded (Stanley, 2012).

Building relationships that were more akin to friendships as a kind of extended family, were important because

of the emotional, as well as professional, support that is offered. Rots, Kelchtermans and Aelterman (2012) suggest that self-efficacy is strongly dependent on the nature of these social interactions as well as the context. This could be particularly important since the usual working practices of workload, time, space and competing commitments meant that members needed to overcome considerable obstacles in order to participate fully in the community. Overcoming these contextual barriers would be important for members' engagement. If members do not feel affirmed, or their practice is not supported, then they might withdraw from the community.



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Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview schedule

Consent and ethics:

If you are here, we are assuming you have given consent for anything you say to be used in the write-up of the case studies that is the research output and that will be a public document. Do be aware that we can anonymise your name but the institution is not anonymised on a case study of this kind and with a small team like this anonymity is more a courtesy than a reality in a way, therefore. But if you are very happy to be here then simply stay here and we will accept that as consent.

We are going to do a case study in, a focus group in 4 sections:

- 1. evolution of the case study*
- 2. impact of the case study*
- 3. evolution/impact of mentoring*
- 4. evolution/impact of reflection*

Then try and go back and link those to concepts of community

What I would really appreciate is when discussing things, give concrete examples those are the most useful data for writing and analysing later, so illustrate with stories and examples. It is extremely helpful. If you make any kind of extended statement, say your name either at the beginning or at the end because that will make it alot easier for our transcriber to transcribe, and talk for equal amount of time.

A. Evolution of the case study

- 1. How do you see the community having evolved over the last year or two?*
- 2. So if you go back to the very beginning of building the community, what was that first meeting? How did the community effectively begin?*
- 3. What were those early objectives and values that were shared at that first stage?*
- 4. Have you got concrete examples of that process of change? Of someone (or a school) that was reluctant or a school that began the process of shifting belief. Ok can you give a concrete a story or example of a school or individuals where you saw that happen?*
- 5. How did this, in terms of the community inside the university, how did this reflect on the evolution of this community? As you started to push these values out? To paraphrase, as the community evolved, part of its evolution was pushing this out into schools but I want to understand how that then reflected back on the building of the community here.*
- 6. Where would you say you are now as a community and have those values/objectives shifted/changed in any way?*
- 7. Going back to that question, where is the project now and have the values/objectives shifted?*

Ok I'm going to end that topic of the evolution of the PCL. I'm aware that all the topics overlap because to some extent that is an overlapping answer. Now to know the impact of PCL, and I'd like to think of impact in four ways:

1. on yourself – personally/professionally

2. on this little community that is the community that is the hub of the PCL COMMUNITY

3. on university/wider community in any sense

4. any other form of impact not covered by those 3

8. There are two things that are coming up: inspiration and help. These are different things. Do you find that the impact of PCL is simply support and advice or is it enabling you to be more creative as professionals?

Help = would imply that you are getting more support/advice than you currently do.

Inspiration = would imply you're being enabled to be more creative. (asked to repeat)

9. The next section is mentoring. How have you mentored and how have you been mentored yourself?

10. Forms of leadership – what different forms of leadership are emerging? Those in the more formal leadership positions don't answer first. Just describe how leadership works in your terms within this PCL

11. What are also your experiences of being leaders (those who aren't being lead)?

12. Any final comments?

Appendix 2: Reflective journal

Journal number:

Date:

Introduction

- The reflective journal provides a personal forum for each AU team member to express and document thoughts, feelings, ideas and perceptions about his/ her participation in the AU team as an emerging PCL.
- The journal has 20 entries covering five dimensions; these are: 1) communications and relationships, 2) shared values and principles, 3) valuing differences and decision making, 4) support and impact, and 5) challenges.
- This journal is to be written on monthly basis; however, the first journal is to cover the AU team members' thoughts and feelings since the beginning of the project till the end of May.
- When writing your journal, it is very important that you write freely and openly, you provide examples to illustrate your points of view and provide ideas for making AU team PCL a more effective one.

Thank you for your participation

1. Communications and Relationships

- 1.1. How sufficient and effective are the means of communications used?
- 1.2. How do I feel about my current relationship with my colleagues in the PCL?
- 1.3. What are my suggestions for improving our means of communications as a PCL?

2. Shared Values and Principles

- 2.1. How far is cooperation among us as members in a PCL getting better?
- 2.2. How far do I sense a mutual trust among the members of the PCL?
- 2.3. How has our interaction as a PCL contributed towards the formation of shared guiding principles for our work?

3. Valuing Differences and Decision making

- 3.1. How is differences in views among members of the PCL valued?
- 3.2. When discussing issues as a PCL, How far do I feel that my opinion is value?
- 3.3. How far do I feel satisfied about how decisions are made in the PCL?
- 3.4. What are my suggestions for improving PCL management of differences and decision making?

4. Support and Impact

- 4.1. What are my best contributions and skills for supporting the PCL?
- 4.2. What are the opportunities I have had to play the role of a mentor/ mentee?

4.3. Who have had the most effective role in supporting the work of the PCL?

4.4. How far have participating in this PCL contributed to my learning and developing?

4.5. What is the impact of being a member in this PCL on my professional practices?

4.6. How do I assess the value of having a PCL?

4.7. What are my suggestions for improving the role of leadership in supporting the PCL work?

5. Challenges

5.1. What percentage would represent our success as a PCL so far? What factors has contributed to this success?

5.2. What are the key challenges for the progress of the PCL work?

6. Others

6.1. What are other comments I have about my participation in this PCL?

Appendix 3: Student teachers semi-structured focus group interview schedule

1. Tell me about the community of students you are in at the moment and how it works together.
2. How did you become a group?
3. Tell me a little bit about the kind of things that you worked together on.
4. Do you have different roles within this community when you are working together?
5. How did you assign these roles? Did you choose them?
6. How do you support each other on a more human level?
7. Where did you learn to make your community like this?
8. If you had any big obstacles to overcome, and if so, how did you do it as a community?
9. How has being part of this community developed you either professionally or personally?
10. How would you like this community to move forward into the future?
11. Can you see yourself continuing to support each other informally in the future as a group?

Thank you very much.

Project number: 573660-EPP-1-2016-EG-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP
Project title: School-University Partnership for Peer Communities of Learners

(SUP4PCL)

Project website: SUP4PCL.aucegypt.edu

The SUP4PCL Partnership: Foundational Principles

The Partnership is about Change and Transformation

The Partnership is a Collaborative and Collegial One

The Partnership Constitutes a Community of Learners

The Partnership is a First Step in Long Lasting Relationships and Friendships

The Partnership Respects Diversity, Multiculturalism and Internationalism



With the support of the
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