

The 8th International Scientific Conference
eLearning and software for Education
Bucharest, April 26-27, 2012
10.5682/2066-026X-12-004

**BUILDING A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE - A CASE STUDY ON
PARENTS` COUNSELLORS IN ROMANIAN DISADVANTAGED AREAS**

Petre BOTNARIUC, Speranța ȚIBU

*Institute of Education Sciences, Department of Educational Counselling and Management, 37, Stirbei Voda, Bucharest,
Romania*

E-mail: c_speranta@ise.ro, bpetre@ise.ro

***Abstract:** The article analyses the development and performance of a virtual community of practitioners in the field of parents` counselling as part of a blended professional development program. Parents` counselling is an important piece of an integrated intervention program which aims to support schools, families and pupils in preventing school drop-out. By the mean of an online training platform (training.ise.ro) a virtual learning community was built in order to facilitate the communication between the practitioners, the peer learning and to support them through online tutoring and coaching for parents` counselling activities. We start by presenting the aim, structure, type of learning and coaching activities, then we analyse the developed community of practice against a set of social, psycho-pedagogical, technical and managerial criteria according to an integrated model adapted after Conole (2007), Lesser & Storck (2003), McDermott (1999), Palloff & Pratt (1999). Conclusions are drawn in respect with improvement measures of the virtual community in order to better support the recurrent parent counselling interventions.*

***Keywords:** e-learning, parents` counselling, counselling interventions in disadvantaged areas*

I. INTRODUCTION

This study has been carried out within the “Education Priority Areas – EPA” program (2011-2012) developed in partnership by UNICEF, the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports (MERYS), the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and a network of other relevant educational and social assistance organizations. The project is focussed on 103 schools located in socio-economical disadvantaged areas where the drop-out rates are very high (according to the data offered by the National Institute of Statistics). Under the programme framework a set of pro-active measures are implemented in these schools in order to challenge their traditional educational role, to open them to the outside world, to reunite children, parents and other members of community in a joint educational activity aiming at reducing the drop-out rate [1]. The approach named with the same title as the program is based on the principle of positive discrimination and has been implemented in Great Britain and France starting with the `60s. Besides the important dimension aiming at improving the teachers` pedagogical approach (“didactics”) and the development of the principals` management competencies (“management”), another important component of this complex methodological approach is the “parents` counselling”. A blended learning program has been developed within this component aiming at training and coaching a group of 37 school counsellor, in order to be able to offer counselling activities for parents` whose children are in risk of drop-out.

As part of the blended learning program devoted to counsellors, an online learning community has been established on the premises of the Moodle platform, within the Online Learning Centre of the Institute of Educational Sciences Bucharest.

The aim of our research was to investigate the opinion of the school counsellors involved in the parents' counselling activities within the EPA program in order to understand the way in which the online platform best supports their professional development, but on equal importance to learn about the weak points related to the online support. As the EPA program is approaching its middle term, our primary intention was to monitor the results obtained so far, in order to be able to further exploit the strengths and to ameliorate the weaknesses. According to this goal, our research can be included in the evaluative research typology [2]. Another perspective of this study is to offer relevant information for the development of the Romanian guidance and counselling community. Using ICT in guidance and counselling activities is a trend nowadays, but few training providers have included ICT in their training offer for guidance and counsellors and even fewer are using ICT as a medium for organizing the communication and learning process [3]. Building virtual learning communities in the guidance and counselling field based on a blended learning programme which combines face-to-face training and distance coaching is in its early beginnings, being preceded by insular initiatives like the virtual learning communities: "ICT skills for guidance and counsellors" and the "Gender dimension within the guidance and counselling curriculum" - both implemented by the Institute of Educational Sciences. Therefore the results of this study can be of interest not only for the EPA programme managers, but also for practitioners, researchers, training providers or decision makers who are interested in the development of the guidance and counselling community.

II. THEORETICAL FUNDAMENTS

The constructivist perspective underlines the fact that learning is mostly effective when learners are building and experiencing together. From this point of view, when building learning communities, participants should be actively involved in creating meaningful activities, while facilitating learning means taking care on what learners can analyse, investigate, share and create [3]. A community of practice means enthusiasm for learning together and synergy between learners [...] the role of a community of practice implies the intellectual and personal development of its members [4]. Learning communities are "groups of individuals linked by a natural wish of being together and a set of common ideas and aims" [5]:

- the relationships within such a community are build on practice,
- the authority occurs from the interaction between members with different levels of expertise,
- the specific objectives are more likely to be established by the learners and not by external members,
- communities are not based on working relationships and processes form an organizational perspective, but they develop their own processes,
- the legitimacy occurs from the interaction related to learners' current practice.

„It is expected that the learning experience and outcomes to be higher in the educational situation assisted by ICT" provided that the e-learning experience is properly designed and implemented when in-time and on-topic learning support and feedback is assured [6,7,8]. Jones, Keller, Tolmie și Boyle [9] underline the basic principles for building a virtual learning community:

- "the online learning community congeals around a set of supporting formal learning activities",
- the strategies for developing the intrinsic motivation should take into account the ARCS model which implies relevance, trust, satisfaction, curiosity, challenge, creativity and control of the proposed activities,
- the success of the online mediated communication is influenced by internal factors such as: „the number of participants in the learning group, learners knowing each others, the previous experience of the learners in such groups, the need be the "owner" of the tasks, the members' need to communicate".

An analysis of virtual collaborative projects undertaken by teachers [10] reveals that „many projects remain at an early stage of collaboration or adaptation of learning activities. The collaboration is reduced to presentations of schools and posting of materials in twinspace, websites or blogs ..

(while) the materials tend to be results of the initiatives or individual interests and not a product of teamwork”.

Related to guidance and counselling practitioners, as explained earlier, fewer initiatives offered them the opportunity to change their learning style and perspective within an authentic virtual learning community. A survey on the guidance practitioners’ needs [11,12,13] reveals: the lack of training opportunities for developing the counsellors’ ICT skills (knowledge transfer between the practitioners); the fact that in the practitioners’ opinion, the training provision remains behind the rapid development of the new technology. The same study [11] points out supplementary skills needed by guidance counsellors in their activity like: collaborative skills, (self)assessment skills, problem solving skills, synthesis skills, effective writing communication skills, effective time management skills, online tutoring, the use of new technology in counselling (e.g. Ipad, clickers), skills for developing resources for different target groups. These are complemented by the general roles of education staff in virtual environments [6]: design of educational activities, organisation of the instructional process and context, prevention of interruption and distractions, provoking thinking, challenging previous knowledge/prerequisites, stimulating debates, decision and asking for opinion and proposal of themes and tasks.

III. SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE EPA PARENTS’ COUNSELLING VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

The online learning community has been established at the beginning of the EPA program, with the following goals [14]:

- information and resource sharing,
- reflecting upon the own learning outcomes and on-going peer learning,
- communication and knowledge sharing,
- administrative support.

A special area devoted to teachers/principals/counsellors has been created (named “back to school”) and a distinct one has been devoted exclusively to counsellors (named “counsellors’ circle”). Both areas comprise sections dedicated to parents’ counselling component: general discussion forums, thematic discussion forums, resources, monthly reports. The platform administrator prepared in the first month of the project the access of all counsellors to both areas and dedicated forums, as well as specific documents related to technical aspects.

2 national experts had been in charge with facilitating the online learning activities on parents’ counselling component, while the programme manager and the administrator respond to general, administrative and technical questions. The national team congealed the informal discussions in the “virtual coffee shop”, uploaded relevant resources, gave feedback in the thematic forums, offered suggestions to the schools and offered administrative and technical support.

According to an internal report submitted after three months from the beginning of the programme [14] the forum devoted to the planning of the schools activities with parents within the “back to school” area has been visualised on 2350 times, being the most visualised forum on the platform. The “coffee shop” has been visualised on 1272 times while the thematic forum devoted to discussions on parents’ counselling activities has been visualised on 760 times. Related to the “counsellors’ circle” area, the socialisation and administrative forums have been the most visualised forums, as well as the areas dedicated to the monthly reports of the counsellors.

The overall results showed an intense activity over the first three months in the areas dedicated to parents’ counselling activities and therefore it raised the interest in finding more about the counsellors’ opinion related to the online learning activities dedicated to this component.

IV. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

4.1. The instrument for collecting data

The online quantitative survey made use of the SurveyMonkey facilities (www.surveymonkey.com). One five-point Lickert scale type questionnaire was used for collecting the data. The 40 close questions were focalised on the *socio-pedagogical, psychological and technical items*, as they are described in the integrated model for analysing virtual learning communities - adapted after Conole (2007), Lesser & Storck (2003), McDermott (1999), Palloff & Pratt (1999) - Table 1. Two additional open questions were included, respondents being offered here the space to present examples of concrete on-line support and suggestions for improvement.

4.2. Target group, response rata and data analysis

The questionnaire has been addressed to all counsellors involved in the parents' counselling component under the EPA programme. It has been sent online twice to all counsellors and at the end we received 30 responses out of 37 investigated persons, meaning a 81% response rata. Results have been analysed using Descriptive Statistics.

V. INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

5.1. The role of the e-learning platform and the user's involvement

The most important role of the e-learning platform in the view of beneficiaries is related to the communication between practitioners as well as to the feedback obtained from facilitators (over 90% of the respondents appreciated much and very much these aspects). On the other hand, the support for continuous self-evaluation seems to be the aspect which brings the poorest satisfaction, alongside with the facilitation of the sub-groups, the exchange of resources, mentoring and efficient management of knowledge. The platform is seen more like a communication tool, useful for sharing information and experiences and less as an analytical tool used for in depth learning and for measuring the progress in learning.

Related to the own involvement in the online activities, over 90% of the respondents declare that they know and accept in a high and very high degree the aim of the online activities. On the other hand, respondents declare that their involvement on the platform and in the discussions is not high or very high, but a medium one. 6 to 13% of the users share little of their own opinions on the platform and are using less the platform as a knowledge sharing opportunity.

5.2. Tutoring support and functionality (technical aspects) of the platform

Almost 100% of the respondents consider that facilitators post clear and professional responses. Nevertheless the responses do not seem to bring enough arguments, implications are not analysed and they are not profound enough.

Related to the technical aspects, counsellors succeeded in accessing the own account, downloading the documents and communicating through the forum even if difficulties have been reported by some respondents. One of the less accessible functions of the platform was the one referring to uploading documents.

Examples of specific support provided by the platform:

Sharing ideas and impressions about the difficulties encountered by the ZEP schools helped me to better adapt to the school realities and to develop my own activities.

I appreciate the communication and the feedback from peers and from the project team (especially questions addressed to the project coordinators) related to misunderstood aspects.

The help of peers helped me to go through difficult situations (encountered because of the socio-economic poor development of schools).

Sharing resources and using the posted resources helped me to find out more about how to interact with parents, they gave me inspirations for the activities with parents: themes, methods, resources, examples from training sessions.

I found out good practices in other schools.

It was helpful in planning, reporting and monitoring the counselling activities with parents.

The platform enables connexions with professionals on different areas.

I gain a new attitude related to the school team.

The platform supports the promotion of diverse educational cultures.

5.3. Suggestions for a better learning community

In the users' opinion, there are some steps to be done to improve the learning space and process (related to the parents' counselling area on the platform). In their opinion, it is necessary to increase the space for uploading digital resources over 10 MB (e.g. videos, photos) and reduce the level of confusion/complexity by better organizing the information: there is a need for a space devoted solely to parents' counselling domain, without information about other courses (it can be confusing if all kind of information are offered in the same space). New topics for each main subject, or bigger categories should be organized, as well as centralizing all information about a subject in the same place (under the same topic).

Another suggestion was related to a better facilitation for sharing resources and best practices: the feedback is needed after each activity posted on the platform and a positive feedback is more welcomed rather than a formal and "dry evaluation"; professional comments should be oriented more towards the methodological approach rather on personal level.

Practitioners expressed their need for diversity of the materials and resources: there should be added more specialized resources for illiterate parents and proposals of special programs designed for parents (e.g. what kind of activities can we implement in the week dedicated to non-formal activities). A special section for posting the products of activities should be designed as well as an online debate forum on relevant themes.

Taking into account the survey findings and the suggestions made by the counsellors, an action plan can be made according to the model used:

Table 1. Intervention grid for assessing and developing Virtual Learning Communities. Conole, 2007; Lesser & Storck, 2003; McDermott, 1999; Palloff și Pratt, 1999

Intervention grid for assessing and developing Virtual Learning Communities (cf. Conole, 2007; Lesser & Storck, 2003; McDermott, 1999; Palloff și Pratt, 1999)			
Criteria	Assessment		Intervention
	Yes achieved	No not achieved	Planned actions
<i>Socio-pedagogical issues</i>			
clearly defined aim and accepted by members	yes		negotiation of aims and objectives
members eagerness to share experience	yes		socialising and knowing each other
effective internal leadership	yes		identifying conflicts and choosing a mediator
well defined and known code of conduct	yes		making explicit and obtaining members consensus
members can assume a wide range of roles		no	analysing and relaxing authority norms

clarity of participants roles	partial		clarifying participants' roles, facilitating communication through periodical face to face meetings or audio-video techniques
members right to solve issues among themselves	partial		analysing and relaxing authority norms
opportunity to organise and facilitate subgroups		no	obtaining technical facilities, developing ICT skills
available time and space for building interrelationships	yes		strategic planning for medium and long term, beyond project lifetime
common set of norms, standards and language	yes		identifying ways of communication of norms, cultures and language
efficient knowledge management	partial		focusing initial activities around common interests, continuing with developing subgroups for specific themes
level of personal involvement and responsibility of members		no	encouraging the community leaders and central groups to organise and maintain community and find interesting topics
external visibility and contact with external experts	partial		encouraging community leaders and central groups to facilitate contact with external experts
access to technology	yes		identifying alternative means of access
harmony level between the members	partial		negotiation of objectives and conflict resolution
<i>Psychological issues</i>			
control of awarding systems (intrinsic and extrinsic)		no	involvement of members in setting the award systems and criteria to assess involvement
approach to learning: superficial/deep	partial		promoting interactions between members, encouraging expressing own ideas, critical peer-evaluation, clear communication of ideas to others
awareness of affective factors	yes		improving the level of openness towards using ICT and encouraging technophobes
engagement of members in collaborative tasks	partial		integrating the learning environments in larger socio-economical contexts and integrating formal with non-formal and informal learning contexts, encouraging cooperation
<i>Technical issues</i>			
availability of space for meeting and communication between the members	yes		identifying available spaces (google docs, wikis, blogs)
availability of technical means for identifying experts and communication with them	yes		obtaining technical facilities, developing necessary digital skills

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The online platform is user friendly and became an instrument of frequently use for counsellors. According to the initial objectives, the platform reached its intention: counsellors enter here to communicate with peers and to find inspiration and good practice in other school with similar problems. The feedback obtained from facilitators is mainly oriented towards clarification and for addressing administrative issues.

Even if the basic established objectives are achieved, counsellors expressed the need for further improvements, oriented towards the need for in-depth learning, for an active instrument and learning environment which offer not only information, but an active engagement of the participants in finding and creating things together. In this respect, efforts should equally focus on better organization of the contents and storage space of the platform, going further from the informative feedback to a formative one, lowering the authority in order to enable participants to take over the responsibility of their own learning process. Leaders should be encouraged to organise the community and find interesting topics or sub-groups should be created (not only at the general level of the project, but inside the parents' counselling area), with the aim of debating relevant themes. Encouraging leaders to moderate discussions/debates of these sub-groups could be an alternative.

Direct contact should be intensified and periodical Skype meeting could be an option, taking into account the limited time and budget of the programme. Qualitative resources should be further uploaded in order to better guide the counsellors' activity and they should better address the characteristics of parents included in the programme's target group. Self-evaluation instruments should be available in order to allow learners to self-evaluate their progress.

Acknowledgements

This paper has been supported in part by EU grant: NCP-VET-CO (LdV/PAR/2009/RO/017). The contents of this article are solely the responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

References

- [1] ****The participation to Education of the Roma Children. Problems, Sollutions, Actors.* (2002). The Minsitry of Education, The Institute of Educational Sciences, The Institute for Research on the quality of Life. Bucharest: UNICEF.
- [2] Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- [3] *** (2009) *Competențe TIC2. Instrumente TIC și formarea practicienilor de orientare care utilizează computerul.* București: Editura Afir.
- [4] Palloff, R. M.; Pratt, K. (1999). *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace – Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom.* San Francisco.: Jossey Bass Publishers.
- [5] Lesser, E. L.; Storck, J. (2001). *Communities of practice and organizational performance.* In: IBM Systems Journal: Knowledge Management. Volume 40, Number 4. (<http://www.research.ibm.com/journal/sj/404/lesser.html>).
- [6] Istrate, Olimpius. (2011). *Current Issues of Digital Education.* In: Vlada, Marin (ed.) ICVL. Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Virtual Learning. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Publishing House.
- [7] Istrate, Olimpius. (2011). *Education Staff Working in Elearning Environments: Skills and Competences.* In: Roceanu, I. (Ed.) The 7th International Scientific Conference eLearning and Software for Education. Bucharest: Editura Universitară
- [8] Istrate, Olimpius.; Velea, Simona. (2011). *Professionalism in the Education System Today.* In: Vlada, Marin (ed.) ICVL. Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Virtual Learning. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Publishing House.
- [9] Conole, J. et.al. (2007). *Collaboration.* In: Grainne, C. et alii. (eds). *Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research.* New York: Routledge.
- [10] Velea, Simona. (2011). *ICT in education: responsible use or a fashionable practice. The impact of eTwinning action on the education process.* In: Vlada, Marin (ed.) ICVL. Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Virtual Learning. Bucharest: University of Bucharest Publishing House.
- [11] Balica, Magda (2009). *Perspective de abordare a învățării adulților și educația la distanță.* În: *Revista de pedagogie* Nr. 7-9/2009. Dezvoltări recente în domeniul Educației și formării profesionale Bucharest: ISE.
- [12] Botnariuc, Petre & Silvia Fat (2011). *Developing the ICT Skills of Guidance and Counselling Practitioners in Romania. Analysis of the National Context.* In: Roceanu, I. (Ed.) The 7th International Scientific Conference eLearning and Software for Education. Bucharest: Editura Universitară.
- [13] Istrate, Olimpius. et alii (2010). *E-Skills in the Knowledge Society. Contribution of Intel Education Programs.* In: Roceanu, I. (Ed.) The 6th International Scientific Conference on eLearning and Software for Education. Bucharest: Editura Universitară.
- [14] Balica, Magda. (2011). *Internal Report "Communication on the ZEP platform".* Bucharest: IES.