Pass the port(o) to the right - Building a Community of Practice for Portuguese Professors to Profess

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Introduction

Professors have never been teachers - universities tend to address this in a variety of ways – such as for example establishing centres for teaching and learning. Although all would agree that providing excellent teaching is key to the student experience professors are judged first on research and teaching often comes below in terms of time and resources. Excellent professors who bring in a great deal of research funding often find that teaching classes gets in the way rather than is the pleasurable experience that it should be. Of course some professors are excellent teachers but for others teaching can be a less than pleasurable experience that is seen as getting in the way of working towards their academic goals. This is a long running problem but it undermines the essential role of the Professor: to profess. And we would argue that not only do professors need to profess to their classes but also and often more importantly to each other.

Of the older universities, such as the University of Cambridge in the UK, professors were expected to attend dinners in full academic dress and the university porters ensured that they were then actually locked in the dining hall for the entire evening (from 6:00 to midnight). Professors were encouraged to profess through a many course meal (a real luxury at the time) and liberal applications of alcohol (the bottles of aged port is passed to the right). The modern university has no real equivalent tradition. While the modern professor may be thinner and less prone to gout, there is a real loss of an academic community within an institution. How to address such an issue in the modern age?

This paper intends thus to highlight the importance of creating a community of practice to discuss collaborative/cooperative teaching and learning strategies and ICT tools that can maximise the interaction between students and lecturers.

Setting the scene

Taking advantage of the reorganization of HE in Europe, the University of Aveiro/UNAVE ('Professional Training and Research Association of the University of Aveiro') choose to organize Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Modules which have been running since 2005. This initiative aims to help faculty members with essential skills/competences in areas such as curriculum design and university pedagogy, collaborative learning, and the adoption of ICT/Internet technologies (Figure 1).

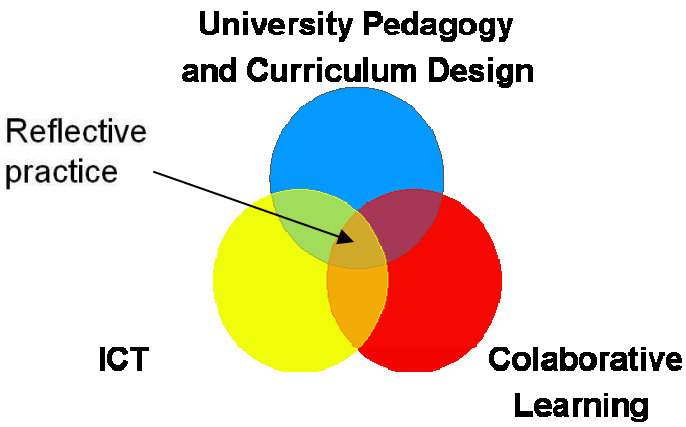


Figure 1 Thematic subjects of the modules (Huet, Tavares, Costa & Ramos, 2006)

The interaction taking place at the intersection of these three dimensions attempts to promote academics' reflection on teaching and learning as well as academics with tools for achieving high quality teaching standards (Huet, Costa & Tavares, 2006). Each module of the staff development program runs for 2 months with a 50-hour workload and is organised on a blended-learning approach, thus being comprised of face-to-face (f2f) and Internet-supported distance activities.

In this paper we will focus our attention on the 'Collaborative Learning in Higher Education' (CLHE) Module that ran between December 2008 and January 2009. 20 academics from 14 HE institutions participated in the CLHE Module. Bearing in mind some constrains involved in this module, such as busy schedules and geographic dispersion (80% of the participants lived over 60km away from Aveiro), it was suggested a b-learning approach, with 21 hours in f2f sessions and 29 hours in virtual environments which were offered on a flexible schedule. The participants would have the opportunity of managing their remaining 29 hours of distance learning depending on their schedule.

This 5th edition was reformulated based on the participants' comments and suggestions of the previous editions. The suggestions pointed towards the design of teaching and learning strategies to promote collaborative learning using e-learning platforms and assessment instruments to assess collaborative interactions between students. Following these suggestions, the module was redesigned aiming instead specifically to create a community of practice between members of staff to discuss the above issues. The concept of 'learning by doing' was considered when designing the methodology of the CLHE Module.

At the end of the Module participants were expected to achieve the following learning outcomes:

(i) to identify new forms of learning and their implications for the future of teaching, learning and supervision of research in Higher Education;
(ii) to point out the advantages and/or disadvantages of promoting collaborative/cooperative learning in face-to-face or distance environments;
(iii) to get familiar with open source tools available on the internet aiming to optimise the teaching, learning and supervision of research in HE;

(iv) to be able to use communication strategies in virtual teaching and learning environments, being able to understand the benefits of using on-line learning communities as a support for face-to-face teaching;
(v) to define a strategy for the development of an e-learning community using on-line tools available at the WEB (e.g. collaborative writing, social bookmarking, blogs, microblogs, social software and aggregating tools),
(vi) To evaluate the participation of students in learning communities.

The activities were planned to actively engage the participants with the broader objective to establish learning partnerships inside the work group. Some of these activities implied the discussion of some topics in the f2f sessions as well as in the discussion forums and blogs. For the online interaction it was used a social platform available online (NING) that allowed several aggregations of different content and web based applications. This was suggested as our Virtual Learning Environment because it gave the possibility of collaboration on gathering and presenting articles, best practices and exchanging knowledge. This tool also allowed users to produce content in blog posts and to discuss in forums and chat rooms.

The participants' assessment was carried out by the active involvement in module discussions and as part of the final group work that consisted of defining a strategy for the development of an e-learning community using on-line tools available on the Web. More details of this activity will be explored in the next section.

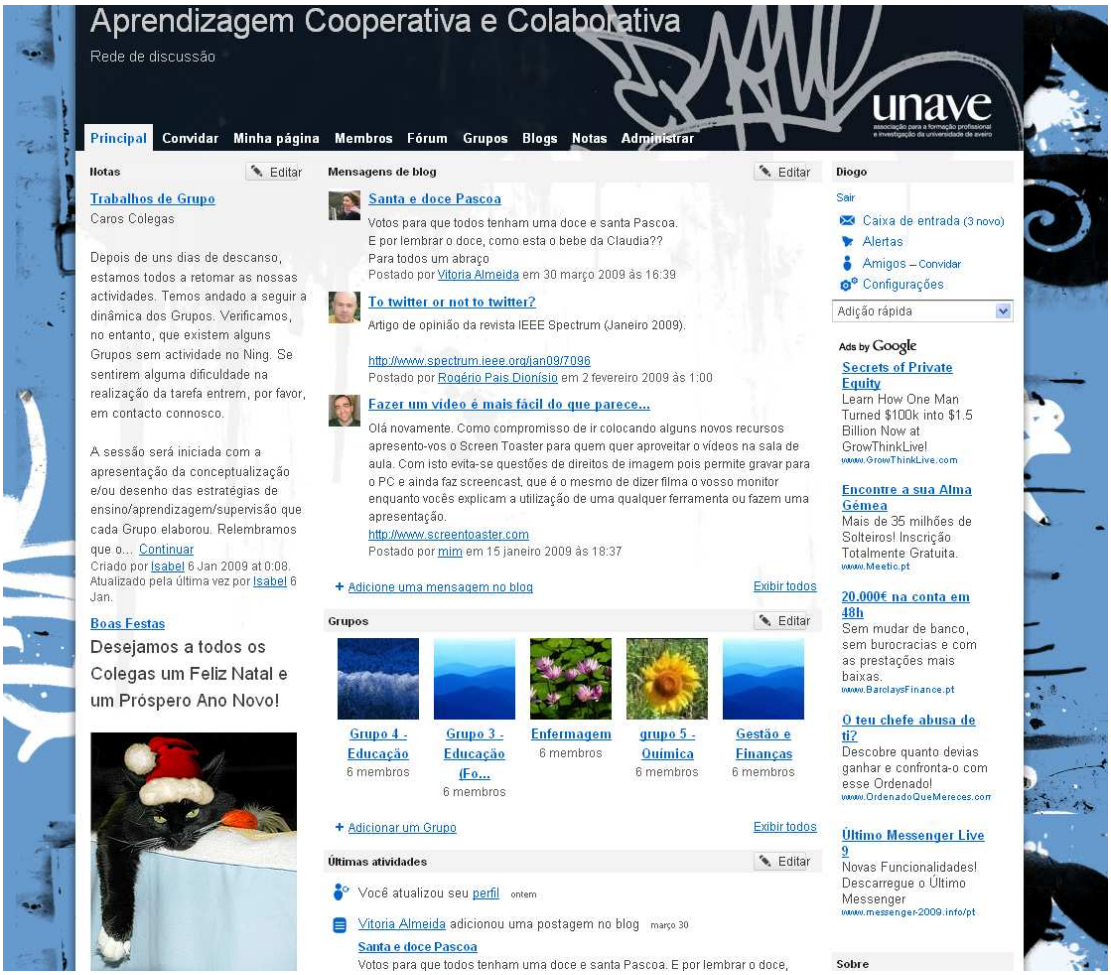
Our Virtual Learning Environment

Wenger (1998) and Costa (2007) sustained the idea that communities of practices are characterised by being constituted by individuals that have the objective of sharing common interests and endeavour on practices that benefit and increase the quality and innovation of teaching practices. With this objective in mind the CLHE Module had the objective to engage academics in building a community of practice. The f2f sessions were the starting point to achieve this goal. Nevertheless, it was essential to go beyond these contact hours and start to build an on-line community where participants could share and exchange experiences within existent timelines. Therefore, we developed a platform adapted to the participants' need to communicate and interact with each other and so allowing them to create their identity and their place in the community. We choose to develop this community based on NING, a free social platform that is being used in Portugal to provide virtual learning environments, in schools and universities. NING is a social platform oriented to create communities around one specific interest but it is very reliable for education purposes.

One of the most important characteristics that NING has is personalization. It is possible to personalise the homepage organising modules of information depending on how the system administrator wants to present the information. For instance, if we want to give a more important role to a specific blog post or to a chat room we just need to drag the module and drop it out on the location we want.

Hew & Hara (2007) suggest that when starting a community of practice we should be concerned with creating a 'friendly' environment where participants can see their colleagues and share and discuss ideas. In that sense, we have tried to give a "feature state" to all the participations on the blog posts and on the discussion foruns. Therefore, we invite the participants to make contributions that are linked to their faces which are easily visible in the homepage. The homepage had also the members' pictures and a list of recommended links for web pages and papers (Table 1).

Table 1 Platform NING used in the CLHE Module



It is also possible to customise the participants' personal pages giving them the power of aggregating content from other resources outside the platform or allowing them to format their page layout. This means that the users can have personal learning environments inside the Learning Management System (LMS) that support this specific module.

For those who have the objective of boosting a community of practice NING also congregates all the platform activities in the first page which allows participants to see dynamism and news when they visit the platform. It also allows the possibility of following by e-mail or by RSS all the discussions subscribed. Finally, because the strategy adopted in the Module was to create working groups to develop team work, we created groups inside the NING with specific discussion forums only available to the participants of a specific group.

Building the community of practice on collaborative learning

After promoting some discussion on the implications of the Bologna process with relation to teaching, learning and supervision in HE, the importance of promoting f2f and distance collaborative learning strategies to promote a student-centred approach to learning was put forth. From the first, participants were asked if they promoted or used collaborative strategies in their teaching activities. One of the most discussed

topics was the organisation, follow-up and assessment of group work. The large number of students in class was pointed out as one problem that needs to be careful thought in order to engage students in collaborative learning. Another problem was the difficulty on choosing and using appropriate technologies and tools to facilitate some of the collaborative learning and teaching strategies. Taylor & McQuiggan (2008) also point out the difficulty of getting instruments to access online delivery courses.

Because of the above identified problems the second phase of this module was dedicated to the exploration of e-learning concepts (like Open Courseware, Edupunk or Personal Learning Environments) and how to effectively use technology to support teaching and learning strategies mainly collaborative ones. Every time we presented a new tool we tried to suggest ways to use it on teaching and learning, discussing different approaches and ways to interact with the students. Since the beginning of the module several tasks where presented to the participants with the purpose of getting feedback on different approaches and feelings on different subjects. Even if the participation at the platform NING was not very expressive, the quality of the interventions was very good. The written outputs were very constructive and sustained usually by the literature and personal experiences.

The groups where created in order to complete the module final work which was the design of a collaborative learning strategy using tools and concepts discussed throughout the module. The 20 participants were divided in six groups depending on their interest (Chemistry, Nursery, Education – Future Lecturers, Education, Management and Finances and Informatics and Telecommunications) as suggested by Shön (1992). The results from the group work were presented by the group members in the final session. The strategies adopted were varied, focusing on different teaching and supervision strategies.

Initial and follow-up study

If change is to be effective, academic staff, students and other players need to be convinced about the purpose and benefits of such change. Therefore, two questionnaires were delivered to the 20 participants of the CLHE Module aiming to analyse (i) the initial expectations and prior knowledge of the participants, (ii) the final expectations, and (iii) the Module impact on their teaching practice.

The initial questionnaire was delivered in the first face-to-face session, while the follow-up questionnaire was delivered after 2 months of the end of the module.

The majority of the respondents have between 5 to 11 years of teaching experience in HE. Two respondents were not members of staff: one was the responsible of an e-learning structure and the other had the responsible of running a psychology lab.

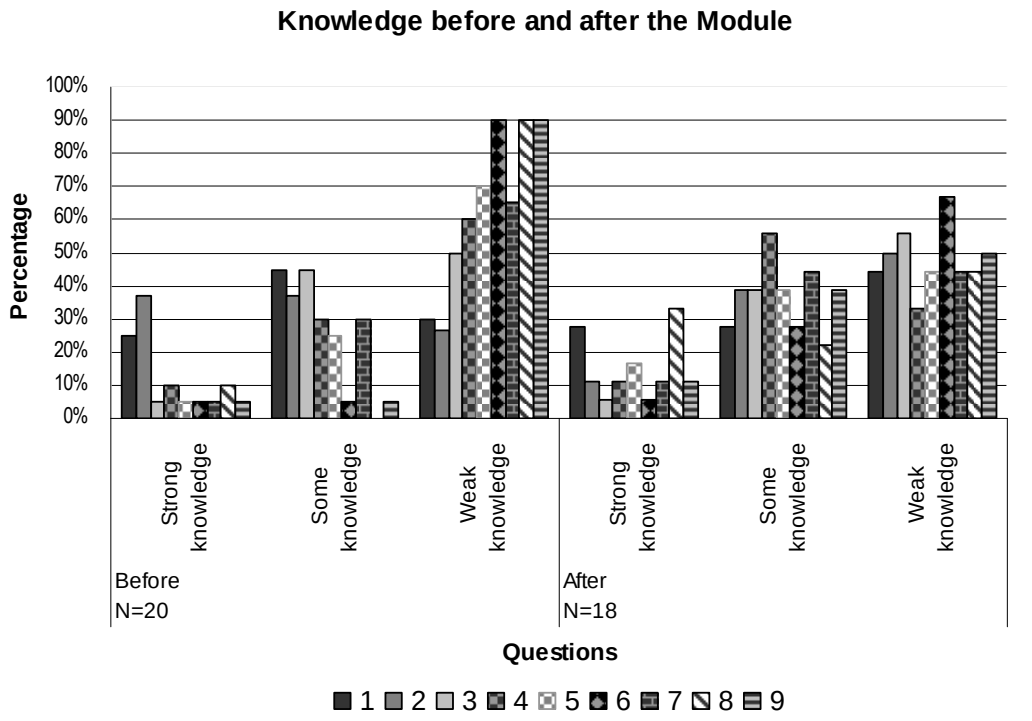
The initial questionnaire was constituted by two parts. The first one had the purpose to evaluate the participants' knowledge and knowhow of topics that could be more or less developed in the module and it consisted of 9 items. This information was very relevant since allowed us to redesign the activities and some of the learning outcomes. The second part had the objective to evaluate the initial expectations and was constituted by 11 items.

The final questionnaire had the same two parts since the objective was to monitor the acquisition of knowledge at the end of the Module in the 9 items and the final expectations. In addition, the final questionnaire had three more parts, aiming to evaluate (i) the impact of the Module in their professional life, (ii) the design and use of

learning Communities with their students or colleagues, and (iii) the positive and more negative aspects related to the organization of the Module.

The participants' knowledge related to cooperative and collaborative learning and the use of ICT to mediate the teaching and learning process was moderate and weak before the starting of the module. As we can see in Table 2 this situation changes after the delivery of the module.

Table 2: Graphic of the participants' knowledge before and after the Module

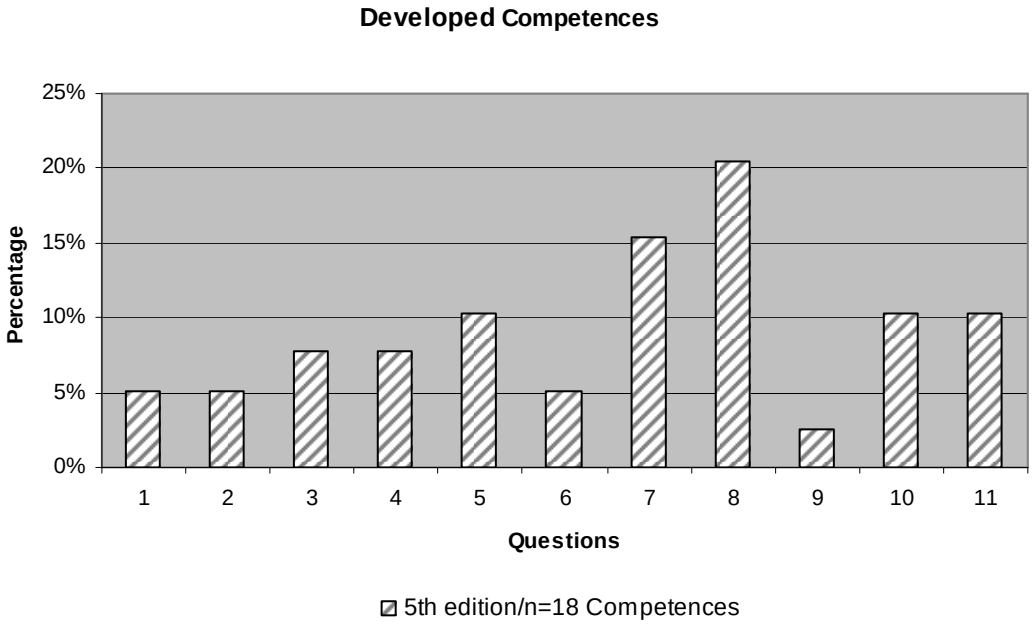


1. BolognaProcess: background documents
2. Implications of Bologna in teaching, learning and research supervision
3. Cooperative and collaborative learning
4. Implications of the Web 2.0 in teaching
5. Implications of the Web 2.0 in research
6. Implication of internet tools and social plataforms (NING, Facebook, ELGG) in HE
7. The Blogs as tools for information dissemination and production of knowledge
8. To work collaboratively using microblogs (Twitter)
9. The Personal Learning Environments

Participants were also asked about the reasons for enrolling the Module, which we associated with the initial expectations. The initial expectations were strongly related with the opportunity for discussing and reflect on teaching strategies to engage students in collaborative and cooperative work. After two months, participants admitted to having achieved higher competences in questions 5, 7, 8, 10 and 11 (Table 3). These competences are the next: (Q5) to acquire practical knowledge that helped to improve their teaching practice; (Q7) to have more knowhow in the use of ICT in education; (Q8) to be able to create and mediate a learning community; (Q10) to contribute to the improvement of teaching quality in their institution; (Q11) to be able to help colleagues in developing learning communities in their institutions. The less developed competences are: (Q1) to reflect on teaching as promoting students' academic success; (Q2) to exchange ideas with colleagues (at the f2f sessions)

regarding the topics addressed at the Module; (Q6) to be able to prepare teaching strategies aiming to promote more autonomous learners; (Q9) to be able to evaluate students' participation in learning communities; (Q3) to understand the implications of teaching in the students' learning process; and (Q4) to reflect on the Bologna Process and the implications for teaching.

Table 3: Graphic of the acquired competences



The reason for the low percentage of acquired competences (expressed both in Table 2 and 3) was pointed out in the suggestions for future editions of the module: the few f2f sessions were not enough for exchanging and discussing ideas with the colleagues regarding some of the addressed topics in the module, more specifically the ones related to the use of on-line tools to develop e-learning communities and to evaluate the participation of students in learning communities. In future editions more f2f sessions will be needed.

Overall, the satisfaction for the module was very satisfactory. A total of 78,78% of the participants would recommend their colleagues to attend future editions of the module.

After 2 months of the module terminus, 7 participants stated that they developed on-line learning communities with their students. One colleague designed a Curricular Unit based on the NING platform and designed evaluation instruments to monitor students' on-line interactions. The impact of the module in the teaching practice is taking some effect but lecturers still need more time for developing these skills. A continuous support and evaluation is essential if we want a successful use of ICT in Higher Education.

Final considerations

In many HE institutions, no special attention is given to the training of academic staff on issues related with teaching and learning. Training is usually focused only on scientific skills. However, HE is changing rapidly, facing new challenges both at institutional and at individual levels. Due to the increase in national and international competition,

institutions are struggling to diversify their target-audiences, offering attractive programs for lifelong learning namely for professionals, unemployed, and elderly. Also distance education programs, made possible by the popularization of communication technologies, are receiving special attention from an increasing number of HE institutions, because they are a natural evolutionary path that may foster an increase in the number of students, namely international students.

Information and communication technologies are paving their way in HE, but, often, their adoption is based on very amateur approaches. Lecturers who get involved with technology-mediated learning face a number of challenges. As mentioned by Bright (2008) 'they are grappling with a way of teaching in which they have no experience as learners, and while feedback processes may be available for monitoring and analysing the face-to-face lecturing environment, few systems are in place in most institutions to give supportive feedback to staff about their teaching effectiveness in the online environment' (p.75).

Technologies are tools, which bring a huge amount of potential to diversify and enrich the teaching and learning processes and environments. But training on methodologies and on the effective and efficient exploitation of the technologies is mandatory for institutions to have the chance to influence the quality of approaches adopted. Furthermore, and to try to cope with the speed of this continuous change – almost every month a new interesting tool or technology is deployed - also a continuous offer of training programs is mandatory.

Although with different objectives, training programs must be deployed or all the stakeholders: decision makers, academic managers, teaching staff, but also students. Students are commonly forgotten, because everyone considers that their innate capability to adopt new technologies, but efficient integration in learning also requires training.

What is the role of the professor in the modern univeristy? Traditionally the professor would be furthering human knowledge but throughout the long European tradition this was often a collective experience. There was a real buzz around interacting with key senior professors. For junior professors meeting and talking to a famous professor has all the cache of being backstage after a concert. One of the authors, who was at the University of Cambridge remembers clearly the change in the dining hall when Stephen Hawkins entered. Students and professors became quiet in an effort to overhear his conversation (assisted with the help of an applified speaking device). Was he mentioning a new black hole he had discovered that morning? Was the world a richer place because he was working to uncover its farthest flung secrets. It was hard to know, but we knew we in the dining hall were richer because he had joined us and taken part in professing to his students and colleagues.

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