

Virtual communities of practice in the future of education

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Introduction: *Docentes en línea*, a Virtual Community of Practice

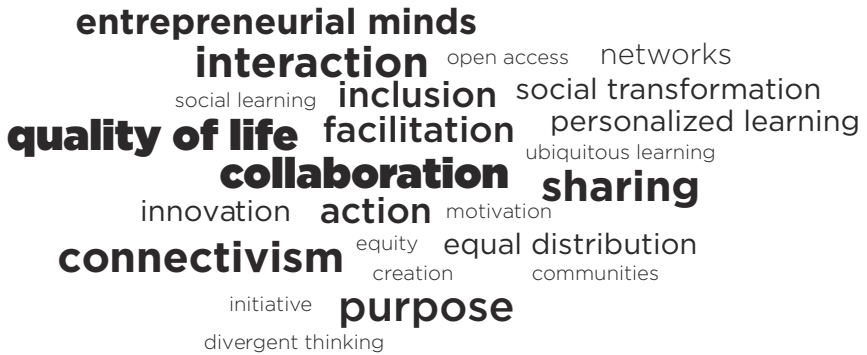
The authors of this chapter are founding members and part of the directing staff of *Docentes en línea* (Online teachers, *Del*), a virtual community of practice (VCoP) belonging to the Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina (National University of La Plata, UNLP), which was created in 2012 and began its public activity in 2013. The term *community of practice* (CoP), coined by Lave and Wenger in 1991, has more recently been defined as “...groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). They aim at making tacit knowledge explicit and can, like in our case, be a knowledge stewarding community (Dale, 2009).

Leaving aside the discussion of finer points as to their characteristics, VCoPs (also called Online CoPs) are CoPs that make use of technology, and are therefore in need of technology stewarding, which Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) define: “As more communities choose technologies to help them be together, a distinct function emerges to attend to this interplay between technology and the community: we call it *technology stewarding* to suggest how these individuals take responsibility for a community resources for a time. Technology stewarding adopts a community’s perspective to help a community choose, configure and use technologies to best suit its needs. Tech stewards attend both to what happens spontaneously and what can happen purposefully, by plan and by cultivation of insights into what actually actually works” (p.24). How we perform this function will become clear later in the chapter.

Figure 1 presents a synthesis of Del’s vision of the future of education. To explain in more concrete terms how we try to contribute to making this future come true, it is necessary to give some details about our status in Argentina as an educational project, especially because Del shares the basic characteristics mentioned above with other communities of the same kind, but can be said to depart from the usual features of a VCoP because of some reasons that will become clear in the following paragraphs.

Del is an *extension project*, a kind of educational initiative which is traditional in Argentinian universities and which is currently defined by the UNLP as a planning tool through which the knowledge and experience of all staff members (i.e., not only faculty members), and the students and graduates of any university share with the community their efforts to transform society and

Figure 1. The future of education, according to Del, as a word cloud.



culture, to disseminate knowledge and develop technology and the community in ways that allow society to improve its standard of living (UNLP, 2018). In practice, an extension project allows for the least traditional educational activities and, therefore, promotes innovation, variety and a positive outlook for what we believe education should become. Therefore we found this format an apt tool to enable the departure from mainstream, formal education which we expected to achieve with our VCoP (Enrriquez, 2018).

At present, Del is managed by a group of 19 teachers, students and graduates of the UNLP, a state-owned university². Extension projects in our university are always a dependency of the School its director belongs to. Because of this, Del belongs to the Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación (School of Humanities and Education Sciences, FaHCE), which offers five-year teacher education courses in over 20 disciplines. In fact, most of its members conduct studies in the field of education or have already finished degree and/or post-degree studies in this field.

In the first years of our activity, our main function was that of complementing the professional development program that Argentinian

² Most major Argentinian universities are state-run and do not charge any kind of tuition to undergraduates, while the fees for post-degree studies tend to be low. This is due to the fact that the Argentinian educational system has a clearly social outlook which prioritizes the basic human right to education for all citizens.

teachers had access to in their own workplaces, or the post-degree courses that the Ministry of Education and other public institutions offered. Yet, in the last few years, and due to changes in national education policies, many of those opportunities have disappeared, and this has given a new significance to our project, which at present helps replace the previous offer. Even though this lack of clear policies for teacher formation cannot be welcome, it may have a positive side: the partial void it creates may give rise to alternative initiatives that push the boundaries of traditional education and help create new tendencies. At a time when the existence of the Internet cannot but facilitate this process, Del, like several other manifestations of the existence of entrepreneurial minds, provides an opportunity to try out, shape and reshape what may well become future learning tools for all kinds of learners. We hope that our work can be a realization of the fact that “everything ‘revolutionary’ taking place in learning has already happened at different scales, in bits and pieces, at different places,” because we think we have already put into practice the idea that “The full impacts for ourselves and our organizations will be realized when we develop the courage to learn from each other’s experiences and accept the risk and responsibility in applying a futures orientation in our praxis” (Moravec et al., 2015).

Part of the community leaders at Del, including all the authors of this chapter, are also members of an ongoing research project which belongs to the Instituto de Investigación en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales, (Humanities and Social Sciences Research Institute, IdIHCS), a joint dependency of the FaHCE and the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (National Scientific and Technical Research Council, CONICET). Our project is meant to explore the ways and the extent to which knowledge is generated in VCoPs by studying the activity in Del, our own VCoP, and to observe how it can contribute to self- and peer-assisted learning beyond formal education institutions through the co-construction of new knowledge. Considering that Del has approximately 18,000 members, and about 10,000 visits per month, we also analyze if it is possible to perform our activity successfully with a high number of participants whose exchanges take place almost exclusively online.

The experience gained in these two projects forms the basis for our conclusions, and it has shown that teachers cannot become agents of change until they themselves have changed as learners.

Del was founded with the purpose of aiding teachers, teachers in training, and researchers in finding meaningful ways of incorporating technology into their professional and learning activities, following the premise that this use only makes sense when it adds new possibilities to teaching practices, or improves them. In other words, we have been convinced from the beginning that what matters most about new technologies is to understand how they can have a positive impact on learning (Moravec et al., 2015) This is why we have never followed the already dated tendency to equate the ability to incorporate technology in our teaching practice with only learning how to use digital tools and apps, but have focused on developing teaching methods and theory. In this sense, we fully endorse and have always put into practice the idea that “the network is the learning” (Siemens, 2007) and that, therefore, “Our traversals across networks are our pathways to learning, and as the network expands, so does our learning.” (Moravec et al., 2015).

We believe that CoPs, whether virtual or offline, can help transform the future of education in several ways which are closely connected with the principles of Manifesto 15 (Moravec et al., 2015), which is also included as an appendix in this volume . There are two main reasons why we think so. First, CoPs can provide an opportunity for professionals and workers to acquire new knowledge through situated and informal learning. Second, teachers who learn in this kind of environment are more likely to become “nerds, geeks, makers, dreamers, and knowmads” who will help “build cultures of trust in our schools and communities” (Moravec et al., 2015) and find new ways of teaching their students how to learn outside, or besides, if need be, traditional and institutionalized methods.

What we will describe below shows that for the last five years we have been breaking some rules, both clearly understanding why we do so and, recently, also analysing our own performance in doing so. It also shows that we do not see technology as an answer (Moravec et al., 2015), but as a tool that provides opportunities to give new answers if we pose the right questions.

A VCoP in an educational institution?

Following Enríquez (2018), it is important to note that both CoPs and VCoPs are, in principle, generated and managed by peers rather than being created by an educational institution, which implies the need to follow its regulations besides creating their own and modifying them when necessary. Yet Del, which has this kind of institutional origin, has always been recognised as a VCoP by the board in charge of the evaluation of extension projects at the UNLP, as well as by other experts. We also consider ourselves a genuine VCoP, for the reasons that will become clear in the next paragraphs. Table 1 illustrates some ways in which, according to the same author, Del (a project which we might call an institutional VCoP) differs from communities organised by groups of professionals.

Gray (2004) argues that it is possible for VCoPs to develop a common identity by means of digital tools, and that this allows people with unusual or emerging practices to find a space where both experienced and beginning practitioners form their individual and collective identity. The knowledge produced in this way is based on expertise and is social, taking place in the way described by Siemens (2007) in connectivism. Therefore, we need to concentrate our efforts on helping individuals to make use of these resources and to create their own learning paths as they help others by sharing their personal knowledge and experience (see esp. Moravec et al., 2015).

How Del's members exchange and co-construct knowledge

Our institutional website is the starting point of our activity. It includes information about the nature of our project and a section called “Brújula” (compass), which shows the different paths members can follow to participate in our exchanges according to their specific interests and needs.

This website also contains a *Biblio- and Webgraphy*, which has a collection of links to different documents and websites related to the use of ICT in teaching and learning. Its contents range from the methodological, didactic and theoretical framework which supports the use of ICT in education to information about available digital tools and concrete experiences of their use

Table 1. Del's vision.

Like other CoPs...	Unlike other CoPs...
Del was created by a group of professionals belonging to an institution with common interests.	Del is an extension project that belongs to the administrative structure of a university.
A CoP is a disorganised, horizontal organisation.	The leading group can only be made up of staff members and students of the UNLP, and some of them form the institutional directing staff. The rest of the participants are freelance or belong to any other educational institution around the world.
We exchange professional knowledge (expertise, practice) and experiences.	The leading group is in charge of the knowledge stewarding and of reaching the objectives proposed in the project that the University has approved.
Our activity is occasionally complemented by a limited offer of formal courses.	These developments and/or post-degree courses are offered by a university which also issues the usual certificates of course attendance/completion.

in the classroom. This collection is constructed daily with the suggestions and links sent by members of the community.

We also have an institutional blog called *Didáctica y TIC*, besides different social networks which are used to share our publications and news, such as Facebook, Twitter (@linea_docentes), Instagram, LinkedIn, Google+, Scoop.it, and Red de Docentes de Iberoamérica OEI. We also share our contents and publications on Slideshare, RedDOLAC (Red de Docentes de América Latina y el Caribe), ResearchGate, and Academia.edu.

When we began our activity in 2013 we found that, in spite of our efforts to explain the way in which it was possible to exchange knowledge in our spaces,

the notion of CoP was a novelty to many of those interested in joining us and their comments made it clear that they needed more details about how to participate. Our initial response was to offer a brief online course about CoPs, and to continue to listen to the members' needs and interests. Thus, to encourage participation, we decided to organize our activity around one central topic each month, through the publication of articles in our blog written by the community leaders or other invited specialists. We called it "Tema del mes" (Topic of the month) and encouraged members to leave comments or contributions about it. This, we thought, would make it easier for new members to understand how to learn from other members and to share their own expertise with the rest of the community. We have also invited specialists for interviews since August 2017 and have published these interviews in a new section of our blog, which we called "Entrevistas" ("Interviews").

Our expectation when we decided on the use of these spaces was to publish contents in our blog and to use social networks mainly to invite their users to take part in the debates in our institutional spaces but, as it is usual in these kinds of communities, the interests and preferences of the members led us in a different direction. The majority of them began to post comments in our social networks, and this motivated the inclusion of some new ones, the most recent of which is Instagram.

Each user has the same rights and possibilities to open a new debate or suggest another way of thinking, thus breaking down any possible hierarchical barrier. As real *knowmads*, they feel motivated to start or expand conversations and share information, moving smoothly as natural networkers. The leading team monitors these debates and intervenes to ensure that all exchanges follow netiquette.

This natural flux of ongoing conversations show us the way to organize future topics, always by following the lead of the needs and interests of our members because that is the nature of CoPs and, more than that, because we consider that this flexibility and adaptability are what ensures their efficacy of CoPs and makes them meaningful. We fully endorse the idea that the education of the future must leave behind the stagnation and adherence to old habits that has put it in such a need of change today. We are also convinced that a freer, more

learner-oriented way of learning will help us realise the idea that it is necessary to encourage learners to be creative and innovative, so that they make a positive impact on the lives of all human beings (Moravec et al., 2015) In the meantime, while there is no other option for most learners than to continue attending more or less traditional schools, an initiative like ours can help to encourage innovation and evolution in teachers, which is an excellent first step to help learners gain the same habits.

As already noted, our sites receive around 10,000 visits per month, which represents a much higher number of participants than some theorists would find advisable. Yet, our practice and the amount of information we have been able to analyze in the first year of our research project show a sustained activity that seems to demonstrate that our work does bear its fruits. Our working hypothesis is that this co-construction of new knowledge takes place because Del breaks down into smaller “sub communities” in each of our social networks, as all of them have a relatively stable number of members who organize debates and exchanges among themselves, while others do the same in parallel on the other spaces of our VCoP. Even if these subgroups are still numerous, the fact that they represent only a fraction of the community makes the number of participants in each exchange much more acceptable.

The members of Del, just as any other Internet users, make use of the possibilities offered by Web 2.0 and generate new ways of learning by creating a VCoP that meets our interests and lies within our possibilities. So it is true for our community that “We cannot manage knowledge [...] *Knowledge* is about taking information and creating meaning at a personal level. We *innovate* when we take action with what we know to create new value” (Moravec et al., 2015).

In this sense, as our work philosophy fosters a hands-on kind of activity that allows the development of individual entrepreneurial skills, we believe that we have been providing a way for many teachers, students, and researchers to experience the truth in the idea that “The thrill of jumping off a cliff by deciding to do so yourself is a high you will never have if someone else pushes you off of it” (Moravec et al., 2015).

All the above describes the many ways in which our activity is that of a VCoP, and the fact we belong to a University and must follow its regulations makes us one of the possible kinds of genuine online communities. In addition,

since the first days of our existence, many professionals and students have participated in our activities because they consider that the fact we belong to the UNLP guarantees the quality of our project. This appreciation of a traditional educational institution seems to contradict the general spirit of Manifesto 15, but even if this is so, it is a reality which has to be considered at present.

This community is, in our opinion, our individual realization of the fact that the future has already arrived, and our attempt to distribute it more evenly by making the fruit of our efforts accessible to all Internet users, since all our publications are open access.

Glocal transdisciplinary audiences: *knowmad* audiences?

Along its life, Del has reached multiple and diverse audiences that have given life to a community imbued with multicultural, multidisciplinary, local and global traits. An interesting view from which to consider these traits and the relations and tensions between local and global issues within the VCoP, as suggested by Gargiulo and Gómez (2018), is that presented by British sociologist Roland Robertson, who coined the concept of *glocalization* in an attempt to connect time-and-space discussions with universalism-and-particularism theories (Robertson, 1995). Robertson argues that “While globalization per se refers to a temporal process, glocalization injects a spatial dimension in its emphasis upon the *necessarily* spatial distribution of that which is being globalized...” (Robertson and White, 2005, p. 354).

Gargiulo and Gómez state that the nature of the transactions, interactions and knowledge generation within Del should be understood in the light of this powerful concept of glocalization, as the community members are scattered all over the world, and communication and knowledge creation take place both in synchronous and asynchronous ways, stretching over variable time intervals, long and short (cyber)spatial distances, as well as across academic and professional disciplinary boundaries and beyond. All of these glocal collaborative phenomena happen within the VCoP thanks to the generous, free contributions of Del’s members; Furthermore, they are phenomena that rest

on a glocal culture of mutual trust which the community leaders have been developing right since the origin of this community in 2013. This mutual trust implies acceptance and appreciation of *the other*, whether they are an intra- or an external-leading-team other, a same-discipline or a different-discipline *other*. It also requires a great deal of tolerance, open-mindedness and divergent thinking, to see learning and teaching practices through the eyes of *glocal others*, and enable co-thinking and co-creation to exist.

The fact that individuals from different cultural backgrounds, generations, and levels of expertise from various fields converge in our community enriches its activities and makes it grow and move forward along new paths. During these years, our websites and social networks have received visits from more than 118 countries, our main audience being from Mexico (25.99%) in the first place, followed by Argentina (24.69%) and the USA (11.87%), which shows that Del's audiences are not restricted to language or geographical boundaries.

All of Del's sites are only in Spanish, a fact which we thought would cause other glocal audiences who cannot communicate in Spanish to be excluded. Nevertheless, the third main group in Del's audience members belongs to a non-Spanish-speaking country, and we also have participants from many other non-Spanish-speaking countries. This means that we still reach non-Spanish-speaking audiences in countries where the existence of a language barrier could be expected. Rather than a problem, then, this is a good example of how our community has reached a wider variety of audiences than expected, and of how learning takes place informally online. Analysis of our website traffic using Google Analytics data shows that we have a global reach, spanning all six populated continents.

The concepts discussed in this section, and even our Google Analytics data, are, we think, relevant to an idea that is not explicit in Manifesto 15 but seems to hover over all its principles: those people, those we who are urged to take action and produce an 'innovution,' are all of us, inhabitants of the world, regardless of our country of origin and relationship to education. We feel the activity in Del is proof of what can be achieved in this sense; in fact, when our project began its public life, we expected to have a largely local, national audience but, in a matter of only hours, we had already received a larger and more varied number of contributions than we could have dreamt of, and they already came

from different countries. This has shown us that all that is needed to facilitate change is to communicate our intentions to whoever wants to hear, and the collaboration, social learning and co-construction will come by themselves. This means that there is a yearning in all of us, people who are interested in education (we are deliberately not using the word ‘specialists’), to act and produce change, which we will discuss in the next section.

Why do people come to our community?

It is clear that many educators feel the need to continue learning for different reasons: out of curiosity, as an obligation, for pleasure or simply for *themselves*. As Rexach (2017, p. 158) affirms, we can find three main categories of educational spaces for teachers in order to “solve the problem” of ICT in education: those focused on instrumental education, the ones based on the use of digital tools to complement or enrich the teaching and learning process, and last (and least frequently found), the ones that focus on soft skills³.

Some users come to our VCoP looking for a solution to an instrumental conception of technology. Indeed, experience has shown along these years that they gradually move on to the next step, understanding that an ofimatic kind of instruction (the basic office workers’ tools) is not enough to face 21st-century classrooms.

When a teacher begins to engage in virtual environments, they have to perform basic actions such as accessing a website, looking for information, downloading files, learning to use software, sharing a link, participating in a forum discussion, and eventually writing collaboratively with their peers. These actions are not mere routines or technicalities, “... [t]hey have a tinge of the participation of a culture, they are a precursor to digital literacy, perhaps” (Rexach, 2017, p.164)⁴. Our work in Del aims at demonstrating that the experience of participating in a virtual learning environment clarifies the

³ Soft skills refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals. These skills are broadly applicable and complement other skills such as technical, vocational, and academic skills. (Lippman et al., 2015, p.4).

⁴ Translation is ours.

meaning of the use of technology for educational purposes and makes it clear to teachers that it is not a question of introducing any kind of technology, but that it only makes sense to use those tools which provide a better alternative to traditional ones.

This approach to the way in which we view technology for education is based on the notion of “*tecnologías del aprendizaje y del conocimiento*”, also known as “*tecnologías para el aprendizaje y el conocimiento (TAC)*”⁵, which refers to a use of technology that goes beyond merely learning to use ICT and aims at exploring these digital tools for learning and knowledge acquisition (Lozano, 2011). “TAC are those technological tools that we use to study, learn, gain or share knowledge. This pedagogical use of ICT implies moving from ‘learning about technology’ to ‘learning *with* technology’” (Scorians, 2016, p.18)⁶. This shift, we believe, guarantees meaningful learning, as opposed to the kind of instrumental knowledge one can gain by using digital tools at random, without any purpose, or simply because they are in fashion. In other words, our answer to the question in principle 6 of Manifiesto 15 is that technology may, at least in some cases, be the answer to how to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Yet, only time will tell if and how this may happen, because both the future of education and of the role of technology in it are being discussed at the moment, while we repeatedly try out, modify and sometimes discard or leave behind theories and practices that the constant evolution in this field presents us with.

We use technological tools to achieve specific goals but, at the same time, technology modifies our environment, our culture, our values, our habits and our social relationships (Burbules, 2001, p. 8) and, of course, our classrooms and the way we teach and learn. That explains the interest that these topics arouse, our hunger for more and, thus, the consistent growth of our community. Its members become *entrepreneurs* (Moravec et al., 2015). They find in our community a living space to build knowledge collaboratively and, at the same time, build their learning paths individually, following their own interests and motivations. This is a key factor to achieve not only individual goals but also to keep the community alive. It is this plurality that keeps pushing the horizon line further and further, building bridges beyond our expectations.

⁵ Learning and knowledge technologies, also known as technologies for learning and knowledge.

⁶ Translation is ours.

In this regard, because we see it in practice, we adhere to J. Lave's view (1991), when she proposes to "consider learning not as a process of socially shared cognition that results in the end in the internalization of knowledge by individuals, but as a process of becoming a member of a sustained community of practice. Developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeably skillful are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter, which it subsumes" (p. 65). The "*El futuro de la educación (en nuestras manos)*" conference, organized by Del's leading team and held in the FaHCE, in 2016, provides a good example of what this kind of activity can bring about.

Present and future of Del's journey

Looking at what our community has done so far and at what we expect to be able to do in the future gives us a sense of achievement but, also, urges us to move forward and to continue to participate in the inspiring adventure of collaborating in building the future of education, a privilege that former generations did not have. Our success to date shows that we have been able to construct the following:

- Del provides its members with the possibility of enabling asynchronous and, on occasion, synchronous collaboration with individuals from diverse age groups, cultural backgrounds and levels of expertise, individuals who have come to acquire various teaching and learning practices.
- The fact that it is a VCoP, on the other hand, can make this community reach more individuals worldwide, even those who live and work in more remote and less favored areas.
- This communal sharing facilitates the worldwide dissemination and circulation of common topics of interest for the members of the community and, at the same time, encourages the interconnected aspect of knowledge building: the glocal network is the learning. Del's members possess glocal cultural identities and have had diverse digital experiences; these two facts stimulate reflection and thinking about self-backgrounds in the light of the other members' backgrounds.

- Working as part of a VCoP might well help its members develop and/or enhance communication skills and their intra- and intercultural competence since the very nature of communal life rests on words and images used to exchange effectively and build knowledge almost exclusively on an online physical stratum. This, which is only a hypothesis at the moment, is part of the analysis we are carrying out in our current research project.
- We see our VCoP as a training space, a sandbox where members can learn and teach themselves by doing, through experiential learning.
- We believe that a VCoP like Del is a sample of a collaborative initiative to co-create new education futures. We consider that Del is a knowmad community inside our present-day knowmad society: a group of individuals following the same interests, each of them valued for their personal knowledge, working collaboratively in a non-hierarchical way and led by innovation and co-creation. Individuals who understand that knowledge is socially constructed (and, as Lave (1991) says, much more than a process which is merely socially shared), consider learning a lifelong process and feel “responsible for designing their own futures” (Moravec, 2013, p. 19).

Our future will very probably find us looking for new and better tools to continue to tackle some challenges which arise from our diversity and ever changing activity:

- Along the years, the inclusion of new members coming from diverse fields of knowledge has posed the challenge for the leading team of developing the strategies and skills needed to carry out our teamwork collaboratively and harmoniously. This has been a demanding task, given the fact that we have formed a group of individuals whose scholarly knowledge has ranged from the so-called *soft sciences*, for example, modern languages, psychology, journalism and educational sciences to the so-called hard sciences, such as astronomy, mathematics and computer science, that is, individuals whose cognitive styles have been pressed and shaped by the particular learning mode of each field of studies along their training paths and academic careers.

- We can say something similar about the diversity of the disciplines taught and studied by the rest of the members, who also come from all educational levels, from kindergarten to university degree and post-degree teachers. This adds to the complexity of the relationships in the community and of the possibilities of shared knowledge building and has to be taken into account by the leading team at the time of selecting topics and approaches to them. Our policy has usually been to deal with every topic in such a way that those who have no previous knowledge of it can understand it, but complementing it with information or reading materials for those who want to enlarge their knowledge of a topic they have visited before.

The original plan for Del, submitted to the UNLP in 2012, drew interesting and innovative ideas from several theories and studies which were recent then and are still valid now in most cases. To our (pleasant) surprise, a few years later Manifesto 15 appeared to summarise what the authors of initiatives like ours thought and were trying to put into practice. This is why, in this chapter, we have set out to show in what ways our activity contributes to the realisation of its principles and is helping to bring about the changes that are necessary for the future of education. In fact, we think that all CoPs and VCoPs can, like ours, provide an opportunity for the more creative, informal and continuous forms of learning that are necessary to begin to change education in the present and project it into the future. Circumstances have placed us in the world at the right place and time to have the opportunity to participate in this serious enterprise which, at the same time, often feels like a playground in which we can “dream, create, make, explore, learn and promote entrepreneurial, cultural, or social endeavors, taking risks and enjoying the process as much as the final outcome, without fearing the potential failures or mistakes that the journey includes.” (Moravec et al., 2015), because we feel (and, in fact, are) so free to follow our best instinct. We do not forget that we are supported by one of those traditional educational institutions that we are trying to reshape, and that makes us smile and gives us hope.

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