# Professional Development Across the Islands of the South Pacific: A Perspective of a Blended Learning Facilitator

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## Abstract

Access to information and communication technology (ICT) is becoming an increasingly important factor for education and training in the South Pacific region. While many studies have examined the attitudes and understanding of educators towards using ICT in their profession and for their professional development, studies that specifically deal with these matters in the socio-economic and cultural context of the South Pacific island states are rare. This study aims to address the gap in the literature by examining the professional development of blended learning facilitators working in remote and isolated communities of the Cook Islands. The research outcomes of this study are based on the analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and the theoretical foundation of this project is grounded in the social and situated theory of learning. The central finding of the study suggests that participation in online communities of practice offers ongoing opportunities for learning and development, and reduces the feeling of isolation associated with the geographical conditions of the South Pacific region.

**Keywords:** qualitative analysis; ICT; blended learning; facilitator; professional development; identity; communities of practice; online communities of practice; South Pacific island states and territories

## Introduction

The idea of professional development has come to the forefront of the current debates on adult education and training (Billett, Harteis, & Gruber, 2014; Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird, & Unwin, 2006). Individuals often see professional development as a way to move forward and thrive in their careers. Employers view it as a way to enhance competitiveness and productivity, while governments view it as a way to sustain regional growth and political expansion (Milana, 2012). Yet the term remains vague and often refers to a wide range of formal and informal learning opportunities that are generally directed at promoting skills development and transformation.

While face-to-face development formats (such as individual or group coaching, experiential on-the-job learning, or the creation of learning communities) remain valuable and offer ongoing opportunities for professional development, the increase in access to information and communication technology (ICT) and online learning creates opportunities for those who do not have easy access to traditional face-to-face forms of learning. Given these opportunities this study attempts to understand the professional development of practitioners who are enabled to work and learn predominantly through ICT. The study focuses on a small group of facilitators working in remote and isolated communities for Te Kura Uira (TKU)—the digital school of the Cook Islands—and, accordingly, aims to answer the following questions:

- What does professional development for TKU facilitators look like?

- How do TKU facilitators perceive their work environment and their professional roles?
- What challenges have TKU facilitators come across and what support have they received in their daily profession?
- What role has an online community played in the facilitators' professional development?

The key argument of this paper is that professional development is a dynamic and complex process of learning, identity formation, and participation in both online and offline communities of practice. This argument will be advanced by examining the facilitators' perspectives of their work environment, professional roles, and factors that supported and hindered their professional development. This argument will be grounded in the social and situated theory of learning.

## Context: Bridging the gap for isolated communities

The South Pacific region spreads across 33 million square kilometres and is divided into three groups of islands known as Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Together, these three groups consist of 22 small developing states and territories that are made up of thousands of islands and atolls. The South Pacific polities vary not only in size and population numbers (from Niue, with 1400 people, to Papua New Guinea with over 7 million), but also in their social and economic development levels, cultures, and languages (West, 2008). What's more, their distance from global economic centres makes these islands some of the most remote places in the world. Information and communication technologies are already having remarkable effects on these islands and offer potential solutions to many of the region's geographic, economic, and social challenges (Cave, 2012). Access to ICT is also an increasingly important factor for education and training in the South Pacific region in particular (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2009; UNESCO, 2015).

The Cook Islands are part of the Polynesian group. They are an archipelago of 15 islands spread over two million square kilometres of the South Pacific Ocean and divided into three regions: Rarotonga, the Southern Group, and the Northern Group. The country is a sovereign, self-governing parliamentary democracy in free association with New Zealand. The people of the Cook Islands have automatic rights to New Zealand citizenship and can freely access the New Zealand and Australian labour markets (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2007). This freedom has resulted in a decline in resident populations as many Cook Islanders move from the outer islands to Rarotonga, and then to New Zealand or Australia.

To decrease the emigration rates and overcome many of the local obstacles such as the isolation of the outer islands, reduced access to education, or short supply of teaching resources, the country has invested in a number of nation-wide educational programmes. Te Kura Uira (TKU)—the digital school of the Cook Islands—is one such educational initiative. It aims to provide the most isolated islands with access to teachers who have specialised skills, and enables students to work collaboratively with their peers from the other islands (Crouch, 2013). What's more, the school offers some of the few professional development opportunities available to the island facilitators responsible for programme coordination (Scott, 2015).

Although many studies have examined online and blended learning environments and the factors that supported and hindered professional development of educators working in such environments, few publications deal with these matters in the socio-economic and cultural context of South Pacific islands states. Furthermore few, if any, studies have examined the perceptions of educators working on the islands of the South Pacific towards the use of ICT in their profession for their professional development. This study aims to address the gap in the literature by providing new insights to better understand what it takes to facilitate and develop professionally while working in remote and isolated communities of the South Pacific.

## Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach. For several reasons, a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable to answer the research questions. Unlike the quantitative method, qualitative research design employs an inductive orientation to the research data to understand, interpret, and explain the social phenomena and the meaning people have constructed (Bryman, 2012). Such a qualitative inductive approach permits in-depth and experience-based investigation, and generates richly descriptive findings (Merriam, 1998). It therefore provided opportunities for the comprehensive reconstruction of the 'multiple realities' of the participants' perceptions and understanding of their work context. What's more, by grounding the study in situated and social theory, it sought not to test, but to elaborate and add to the field's understanding of the adopted theoretical concepts.

The collection method included using semi-structured interviews, allowing exploration of the perceptions and understanding of the five purposefully selected participants. Selection was based on participant expertise and experience in the area of blended learning, their diverse locations, and their participation in an online professional development course run by TKU. This targeted selection focused the inquiry on the participants who had time to reflect on and develop their perceptions about their work and its online community. All sampled participants were females aged between 20 and 60, and employed at TKU. They were a diverse group in terms of their family status, professional experience, and educational background.

Because all five participants were located on the remote islands of the Cook Islands, all interviews were conducted via Skype and lasted approximately 60 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide (which was designed and tested in advance to ensure all relevant areas were covered) directed the conversations and kept them focused, but also allowed flexibility to adjust questions and create a comfortable atmosphere. Each interview began with an informal chat, followed by a brief introduction to the project. Participants were then informed about the purpose and direction of the interview, had a chance to ask questions, and gave their consent to participate.

The interviews were carried out in a conversational style, with different types of open-ended questions to gain in-depth understanding of the context and to explore participants' perceptions (Bryman, 2012). The interview started with broad entry questions followed by more descriptive, structural, and hypothetical questions. The interview covered the participants' perceptions of their professional development, work environment, professional roles and responsibilities, and their online work community. Descriptive and structural questions provided a way to reconstruct specific events or experiences, and to comprehend how participants organised their understanding. An example of a descriptive question used for the interview was: "Can you please describe a typical day at work?" Hypothetical questions allowed participants to reflect on situations that they may encounter. An example of such a question was: "What would you do if you had a similar problem again?" Hypothetical questions provided more data for analysis and generated further opportunities to explore participants' dimensions of meaning.

Data obtained from the five interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to find significant patterns and encode the interview data into themes. It also helped to arrange the key findings and relate them to the context of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger's (1998) theory of the social and situated theory of learning.

# Findings

The following paragraphs offer an illustration of the study's key findings. Appropriate verbatim quotations from the research participants have been used to deepen understanding, show participants' perceptions, and illustrate themes that emerged from the data analysis.

## Complex role of the island facilitator

The island facilitators came from and worked in sparsely populated villages on the remote islands of the Cook Islands. They represented a diverse group in terms of their life experiences, interests, professional and educational background, and age. Apart from working for the virtual school, they were involved in local initiatives, shared passion for education, and willingness to support and contribute to learning on their islands.

> I wanted to do the job here because I am an ex-student of the school and I did some studying overseas and I wanted to use the knowledge that I have to help the kids here. My way of showing the kids—if I can do it, they can do it. (Participant 1)

When describing their professional roles and work environment, the facilitators stressed the job's complexity, which required them to constantly juggle between offline duties (e.g., classroom management) and online duties.

> I get the connections done, I set up my laptop and as soon as I can, I chat with Rarotonga to let them know that I'm here and then my kids come. I want to make sure that they are ready to go. Everyone knows what they are doing, [then they] settle down and then I have a moment to think and prepare for our live lessons. (Participant 2)

The extract above, and other data gathered in this study, suggest that the facilitators have created tools and routines around which their offline and online practices have evolved. For example, one of the online routines reported in this study related to the informal tradition of saying 'hello' to everyone in the morning. This served to say 'I am ready to go' and motivated other facilitators by showing one's presence and willingness to be there for the others. One example of an offline routine related to regular meetings that facilitators held with educators from their local schools.

The research also revealed that a complex working environment such as this requires facilitators to perform a number of roles, which they all viewed through five lenses.
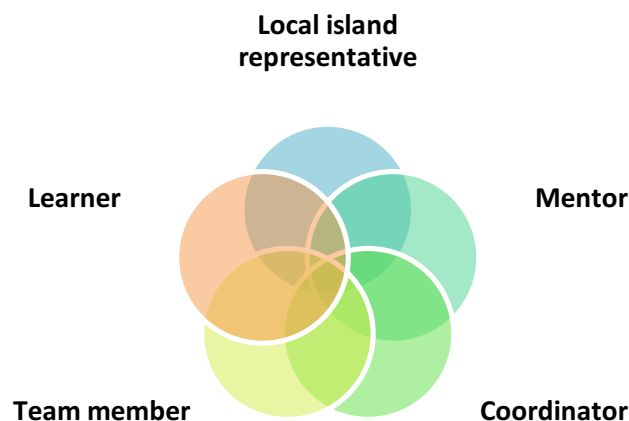


**Figure 1** Complex role of the island facilitator

All facilitators saw themselves as *local island representatives*. They all emphasised the significance of being based on the ground on their island and one noted that being local helps both their islands and the virtual programme to communicate and understand each other better.

> We are on the ground with the kids so we really know the children. I am acting in the place of someone here on the ground [and I can] perhaps understand what's being asked of the children by liaising with Rarotonga, and then helping the children to get started on their work. (Participant 2)

The facilitators also emphasised that one of the major parts of their role is about being a *mentor*, guiding and assisting their students with their work.

> As a facilitator my role is to point the children in the right direction so they can discover or find the answers and build understanding. (Participant 3)

Furthermore, all facilitators noted that a big part of their role involves being a *coordinator*, communicating, passing on information, and mediating between their local school (Rarotonga) and their colleagues on the other islands.

> I am supposed to let Rarotonga know what my students are up to, what they are working on, and communicate with them and the rest of the team on a regular basis. (Participant 4)

The facilitators also highlighted that, as well as all their professional tasks and responsibilities, their role involves being a *team member*, being part of the TKU team that shares similar tasks and works together to achieve the shared goals of educating the islands' students.

> We're all aiming for the same goals—to help the children as far as possible to facilitate the teaching programme that has been brought to them. (Participant 2)

Finally, all facilitators also acknowledged that a big part of their role involves being a *continuous learner*. Learning takes place online, where they interact with other facilitators, and in their daily work routines.

> Working for TKU is a great opportunity given to me. As the saying goes, you learn every new day and learning never stops until the day the Lord calls you. (Participant 4)

In summary, the findings not only showed the complexity of the facilitator's role, but also demonstrated how facilitators have combined their offline and online duties and the tools and routines they have created as a result of their practice.

## Professional learning: Online participation and on-the-job learning

The facilitators have been working together, talking and "meeting" virtually every day using Canvas (their learning management system [LMS]), Skype, email, telephone, or texting to communicate. The LMS has been used mainly for announcements, notices, and asynchronous work-related collaboration. Subjects that required more urgent attention were normally discussed informally via telephone or at arranged Skype conference meetings. Skype has been the main tool for both formal and informal synchronous conversations and as a 'meeting place'. Te Kura Uira facilitators have spent a lot of time chatting, catching up, and discussing both work- and non-work-related matters.

So what does their professional development look like? Based on the findings, an understanding of their professional development can be divided into two themes: online participation and on-the-job learning.

All respondents reported on participating in an online professional development training course before their first term at school. They stressed that during the training they had a chance to get to know each other and make friends, discuss their roles and responsibilities, and learn to use a variety of online tools that they later used at work. They also noted that during the training they were online every day to work individually, in pairs, or as a group on various tasks. They reported that at times they took work home, watched or read additional resources, or reflected on or added extra thoughts on discussion forums. What's more, all respondents noted their continuous interaction and collaboration after they took part in the online course and started to work. They emphasised their engagement in their daily conversations and catch-ups and revealed that they had even been contacting each other during the weekends or holidays.

> We gave each other our private mobile numbers, so over Christmas we wished each other "Merry Christmas" and promised to keep in touch with what was happening. (Participant 2)

The findings thus indicate that the facilitators' professional development has been an ongoing process of online participation and collaboration, affected by their engagement and enthusiasm to learn. However, the data analysis also revealed that a big portion of the facilitators' learning took place offline and on the job. They stressed that they have been continuously learning a variety of new skills and techniques by experimentation and observation.

> I'm still learning, trying to get the most productive setup. When it's time to do work then I think it's best to put them [students] in groups, so if one asks a question I answer the two or three. So, I don't have to keep repeating myself, you know. (Participant 3)

## Challenges, support and the importance of online community

The requirement to mix and combine the offline and online responsibilities in a blended learning environment inevitably created a number of challenges for the facilitators. Findings revealed some prevalent themes relating to these challenges and the type of support they received in their daily profession, and the importance of online participation for their professional development.

### Challenges

All facilitators reported two broad types of challenges that they had come across in their profession. These challenges related to technology and academic work.

**Table 1** Challenges TKU facilitators encounter in their profession

| Challenges | |
|---|---|
| **Technology** | **Academic** |
| • Learning to use educational technologies<br>• Being able to fix technical problems<br>• Slow and unreliable internet<br>• Students' lack of focus due to connectivity issues | • Students not used to having a facilitator<br>• Students not used to technology-enhanced learning |

Facilitators reported dealing with technology every day. Technology has enabled them and their students to participate in classes and communicate with those on other islands. It thus required the facilitators to become familiar and comfortable with the digital technologies being used by TKU, and to be able to fix them when they went wrong. All facilitators reported on the initial challenges they experienced while learning to use previously unfamiliar educational and collaborative software.

> When I first started training with TKU it was very challenging—especially when I started playing with Canvas—that's when my first challenge was. (Participant 3)

The facilitators also reported the need to improve their IT-related skills, due to the lack of IT support on their islands.

> Now that I have the equipment, I really need to know how to get things to work, get things fixed, because we don't have any IT person here. I actually enrolled at the [The University of the South Pacific] to do a paper in IT. (Participant 1)

However, the major technology-related challenge experienced by all respondents was the lack of fast and reliable internet connection, which has prevented teachers and students making full use of the collaborative software and toolkits that have been prepared for class delivery. Slow and unpredictable internet connections have also been reported as the major cause for delayed material, disorganisation, and lack of students focus.

> The service is the biggest challenge, because I just lose pace and focus of the students. (Participant 4)

Academic challenges, such as student management, comprised the second theme to emerge from the data analysis on what has hindered facilitators in their day-to-day work. The respondents stressed that they had initial struggles with their students, who were not used to technology-enhanced learning and having a facilitator.

> My students were so used to not having a teacher at school. So when I came I was invisible! So in a way I'm glad our equipment didn't arrive on time. I had time to get to know my students and create the bond between us. (Participant 1)

Surprisingly, the remoteness and isolation of the islands and the lack of physical support were not reported to be major challenges. All facilitators stressed that ongoing communication with TKU teachers and their island colleagues had reduced the feeling of remoteness.

### Support and the importance of online participation

All facilitators reported that, as well as trying to address the challenges they had faced by themselves,[1] they asked for and received support from others. The major source of assistance came online in an online form, from the TKU team on Rarotonga or their island colleagues. When dealing with issues that were more local, the facilitators stressed that they had received help from their local schools. Most importantly, however, all respondents highlighted the significance of their daily online interactions as the predominant source of support, comfort, and learning.

> I know that I'll be working alongside great facilitators that I can turn to and ask for help when I'm having difficulties… [we can] share, work together, and pursue some common interests and enjoy each other's comments, words of encouragement, and support. (Participant 4)

They also stressed that the online community had helped them reduce the feeling of remoteness and isolation associated with their remote locations.

> Even though I'm here by myself, physically, that's about the only place where I am by myself at any moment because I have the other ladies to trouble shoot and share my problems with. (Participant 2)

The findings thus revealed the significance of online participation and collaboration for the facilitators. These connections have not only provided them with continuous opportunities for

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[1] For example, three facilitators enrolled at the University of the South Pacific to do a course relating to the area they needed to improve or develop.

learning and support, but also with a feeling of comfort and belonging to a team of blended learning professionals.

## Discussion

The aim of this research is to understand and describe professional development of facilitators working in blended learning environments in remote and isolated communities of the Cook Islands. By applying the situated and social theory of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), the study provides useful context on how facilitators learn and how their professional identity is constructed.

### Online TKU community of practice

The literature suggests that belonging to an online community of practice provides its members with opportunities for sustainable and continued learning and development (Dede, Breit, Ketehult, McCloskey, & Whitehouse, 2005; Holmes, Signer, & Mcleod, 2010). The TKU facilitators began their professional study when they participated in an online training course and started interacting daily, using both asynchronous (LMS and email) and synchronous (Skype) communication tools. This contact led to the emergence of the online TKU community of practice, a social construct with a sense of common purpose which has given the facilitators support and opportunities to continue to share their experiences, learning, and expertise.

Wenger (1998) stresses the significance of physical and conceptual tools, artefacts, and routines that turn common understanding into practice. As such, members of the TKU community of practice have adopted, developed, and used tools and artefacts around which they have built their history and organised their participation. For example, the participants highlighted how they communicate, collaborate, and 'meet'—both formally and informally—using Skype, sometimes even after hours. The findings thus indicated that Skype is a meaningful and essential tool, and is an artefact that enables the members to participate in their shared practice, cultivate their routines, and build their history.

The concept of a community of practice is based on a situated and social theory of learning, which views learning not as a process of knowledge transmission and assimilation but as a process of peripheral legitimate participation in a community of practice with no distinction between learning and participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Such learning usually occurs when new members become more competent and move from the periphery into full participation leading to the development of new practices and understanding in the community. Literature on blended learning stresses the importance of continued professional development through membership of a community of practice as a way to enhance educators' learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Stacey & Gerbic, 2008). The findings in this study indicated that the online TKU community of practice is an essential context for the professional development of its participants. Its members learn continuously by interacting, sharing knowledge, and developing new practices and tools that help them and the community to grow. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of learning is therefore a valuable approach to understanding how members of the online community develop professionally. However, the outcomes of the study also demonstrated that learning can be self-motivated and does not always require a new member to be introduced to a community. This study, like the Hodkinson and Hodkinson study (2003), revealed that learning is something that takes place continuously and may also happen when old members engage in new practices in the same community.

## Identity, community, and wider context

It has been argued so far that professional development of TKU facilitators happens through ongoing learning, interaction, and participation in the online TKU community of practice. Because the key findings of the research suggest that a facilitator's professional evolution is not an isolated phenomenon, this perspective needs to be expanded.

The design of the online professional development course began to form the facilitators' professional identity and provided them with skills and knowledge that were soon ready to be employed and contextualised. They understood what it meant to be a TKU facilitator, to belong to the online TKU community of practice, and to have access to the community's shared repertoire. When asked about their role, facilitators' responses were compatible. Furthermore, the facilitators' perception of what their role required from them aligned with the examples from previous research on educators working in blended learning environments (Armes, 2012; Burton, 2012; Horn & Staker, 2012); namely, the need to:

- be adaptable, flexible, motivated and constantly willing to learn
- be open to new teaching and learning strategies
- become a skilled technology user
- possess good classroom management skills to accommodate their students working on different skills at their own pace.

The review of literature also suggested that professional development can be seen as a dynamic and complex process of identity formation; it is a relationship between an individual, their professional life, and their work context (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Nyström, 2009). Accordingly, the findings from this research showed variation in terms of the facilitators' personal interests, goals, or expectations of themselves and others, experiences, backgrounds, or life stages. What's more, in line with Wenger's (1998) concept of a nexus of multi-membership, the findings also indicated that the facilitators' professional identity was not only a result of their belonging to the online TKU community of practice, but also of an interplay between their past, present, and future experiences and aspirations which were affected by their belonging and participation in various communities of practice, such as their local school communities.

# Challenges and struggles

Working in blended learning environments, participating in a number of work- and non-work-related offline and online communities of practice, and the issues that arise from the constant learning involved in both, can at times be a challenging process that involves more than identity renegotiation. The literature suggests that educators working in blended settings face many significant obstacles. These obstacles include learning new technologies (Smyth, Houghton, Cooney, & Casey, 2012; Voos, 2003), planning and facilitating personalised learning classes (Johnson, 2002), building a learning culture where students can take control of their own learning, frustrated and disengaged students as a result of technical problems or slow internet connections (Hara, 2000; Smyth et al., 2012; Welker & Berardino, 2005), and lack of support (Bendavid, 2014; Burton, 2012; McElroy, 2012).

Accordingly, TKU facilitators emphasised the technological challenges they faced regularly, as a result of their location, unpredictable weather, and poor infrastructure. They stressed the amount of work required to become skilled technology users. They also emphasised the many methods they needed to explore to develop the best ways to meet their students' needs and learning styles, to boost their students' engagement, and to motivate them to become self-directed learners. Findings suggested that by delivering such individualised material—supported through a number of educational technologies—the facilitators and the TKU school have adopted the online-lab

model of blended learning. This model is often associated with programmes that have teacher shortages, and they rely on online class delivery provided by remote, trained online teachers (Horn & Staker, 2011). In such learning environments, students complete their courses online but in a brick-and-mortar laboratory or classroom, under the supervision of an adult facilitator who usually has little content expertise.

## Implications and recommendations

Could these findings be relevant and have value for other contexts of professional development? Because the findings are based on a small sample, it is difficult to draw specific and definite recommendations for other projects. However, a number of general suggestions can be offered for the consideration of those running and designing online professional development courses in other contexts. Because this study focused on professional development of facilitators working in blended learning environments across the Cook Islands, it can provide data for designers of online training courses for educators, especially in the context of the remote South Pacific island states. The findings suggest that participation in an online community of practice reduces feelings of isolation associated with the specific geographic conditions of the South Pacific region, and that such participation offers ongoing opportunities for learning, development, support, and reflection. It also facilitates smoother and faster encounters in a work context. These findings could therefore also be of value to policy makers debating the importance of ICT for the South Pacific island states. The findings of this study could, finally, be of interest to researchers studying issues of professional development and identity formation in relation to working in blended learning environments in general.

Although the study provides meaningful insights to understanding how facilitators working in blended learning environments across the islands of the South Pacific develop professionally, its shortcomings should also be considered. A possible limitation of the study could relate to its demographics, since it had only five female participants. This unequal gender distribution was, however, neither random nor intentional. At the time the study was conducted, the digital school had only five female members of staff available to participate. The gender distribution, and the fact that more staff have been employed since the original interviews, opens up opportunities for conducting further research on issues that relate to gender, age, and other possible power relations. It could also be possible to employ a more participatory and longitudinal methodology. This could allow an examination of the development of the online community and a deeper understanding of how other local communities of practice affect the facilitators' professional development. Finally, it would also be interesting to see whether the findings could be generalised to the professional development of a larger group of educators working across the South Pacific island states and territories.

## Conclusion

The key conclusion of this research project is that a facilitator's professional development is a continuous process of learning, participation in an online TKU community of practice, and a process of dynamic identity formation and renegotiation. This development is affected by facilitators' belonging to a number of different communities, their professional and personal experiences, and their aspirations. In this study, the TKU facilitators' professional development began when they took part in an online training course and started interacting every day. This interaction led to the emergence of the online TKU community of practice, which has given the facilitators support and opportunities to continue to share their experiences, knowledge, and expertise. The online participation has also reduced the feeling of isolation the facilitators feared could be associated with their remote locations. The findings thus confirmed that learning is indeed a social process. The study also demonstrated that learning can nevertheless be deliberate and does not always require a new member to be introduced to a community. Furthermore, the

research indicated that a facilitator's professional evolution can be seen as a dynamic, ongoing, and complex process of professional identity formation. This identity formation is affected by (a) interaction and belonging to various communities of practice (such as the facilitators' local islands schools communities), and (b) the facilitators' increased professional knowledge, experience, aspirations and perceptions of their professional roles, as well as the relationship between their professional, private, and personal life spheres.

## Acknowledgement kama

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