

MELTING POT

MAY 2009

All CETT and done?

Voices from a Hungarian professional community

The aim of this article – as a follow-up to our presentation at the 2008 IATEFL Hungary Conference – is to share some thoughts about what good professional communities are like, and why they matter. We were once a united force working at the *Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT)* [LINK1] - a well-established Hungarian teacher training department at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest - but now work more or less separated from each other. At the same time we feel that a 'fellowship' has emerged from our shared institutional history, similar professional passions and a sense of mission to support teacher communities elsewhere. When we started preparing for the conference presentation, the following questions were central to our discussions:

- What does your school mean to you – do you see it primarily a building, an institution, a community?
- Does teaching have to happen behind closed classroom doors?
- Do you feel insecure or isolated as a teacher or, on the contrary, that you are part of a bigger professional whole?
- What do you get from a professional community – what do you give?
- How are professional communities kept alive?

When our thoughts, questions and ideas started 'bubbling up', we realized that 'bubbles' are a useful metaphor for communities: they grow and move around. And as the cauldron bubbled, we came across a *quotation* [LINK2] which very much encapsulated our philosophy towards the relationship between *community* and *learning*. To explore the central idea from different directions, each of the contributors to the conference presentation used one keyword from the quote as a springboard for their ideas. Here they are ...

MEMORY: The need to build a collective memory

I have always been fascinated by the way MEMORY works. As a beginner teacher I was curious about how we store and retrieve information, and how we can make a new language memorable for our students. In fact, we draw on our memory all the time as we communicate, but this process is largely unconscious – like breathing in and out. We only become aware of our memory at work, when we can't remember something – just as we become aware of our breathing when a stuffy nose makes it difficult to breathe!



Fascinating as individual memory might be, I find the workings of the collective memory of a group of people even more exciting. When we interact, communicate, cooperate, argue, for example, as members of staff – or any other professional bubble – a kind of collective memory gets established. The longer and more regular the interaction among a group of people, the more intricate and developed their collective memory. When you are discussing something in a group, and someone raises the very question you were about to ask, this shows that something greater than our individual minds has been established. Individual minds become part of a larger pool of thinking. When members are focused and tuned in to each other, their collective intelligence can achieve far more than any of the individual members on their own.

I think it is very important for people within a professional bubble to have different kinds of experiences together, to develop different qualities of their collective memory. For example, singing together, going on a walk, or sharing a meal over social talk will strengthen different qualities of our collective memory. These more relaxed and personal joint experiences will allow for a more relaxed and personal atmosphere during staff meetings, for example. Trust and cohesion can deepen, which can also deepen the quality of talk. Pleasant collective memories of floating on Lake Balaton together – what we were doing on the last day of the Conference – will, hopefully, strengthen our sense of belonging to the IATEFL Hungary bubble, and will motivate us not to miss future events organized by this Association.



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Making CONTACT

For me, the word *contact* is quite a paradoxical one. Nowadays we seem to have more contacts, but tend to value them less. And while there is more technology available to us,

we seem to find it harder to really communicate. This can result in losing touch with our most valued 'contacts' and in feeling more and more isolated. *Making* contact is really a pre-condition for any personal or professional relationship; it marks the first step towards creating more or less regular occasions on which you meet and communicate with colleagues, friends.

More than 16 years ago, when I started working at CETT as a young graduate, I felt I had to establish myself as a colleague among much more experienced teachers and trainers. This was both stressful and challenging. At this point it was crucial that some colleagues did a lot of professional 'ice-breaking'. They initiated conversations with me and involved me in curricular work done by small teams where I was treated as an equal. Within two years of working in teacher training some of them had also invited me to co-teach classes. All of this made it easier for me to find the courage to walk up to other colleagues just to socialize, to ask for help or advice and to offer some of my own ideas. I realized then that establishing and maintaining professional contact requires a positive attitude, openness and the readiness to act, in other words, *effort*.

CETT Budapest was in many ways a contact *culture*: with its weekly, often time-tabled contact slots, a welcoming staffroom atmosphere and a host of other informal opportunities which made it easy for staff to meet, linger and chat. Obviously, it helps if schools have the space and physical arrangement for this. Many do not or, like in my case, teachers can no longer rely on a particular place to provide almost ideal circumstances. But what really matters is whether or not people appreciate the value of contact-making and try to start a new fabric of contacts elsewhere.

Most of my ex-CETT colleagues and I now try to grab every opportunity to come together for a professional or personal purpose, whatever the excuse! For example, we sometimes do a training course with a former colleague, look for each other at conferences, give a joint presentation, just meet up at a café or reunite for a party once or twice a year. At the heart of all these efforts lies a deeply felt need and the will to take the initiative: to contact that colleague you haven't seen or written to for some time so we can blow a new bubble together...



Andrea Fischer - Centre for English Teaching and Training Budapest/Nyíregyháza

INDIVIDUALS: Community or individuality? Or both?

Under the 40 years of communist rule in Hungary people acting as *individuals* were suspect. So much so that the term *individualism* had become a derogatory term. There was a very strong rhetoric extolling communal values, very often coercing people into thoughtless conformity and discouraging individual enterprise or creativity. In spite of the rhetoric, what actually happened was that traditional communities were destroyed as people became uprooted by the millions, which created isolation, confusion and alienation on a massive scale.

With the fall of the Berlin wall and the resulting triumph of consumerism in Eastern Central Europe, individuality became a buzzword, helping to sell products from cars through cell phones to mineral water. In either case, we were led to believe that *individuality* and *community* form a dichotomy, the more there is of one, the less there is of the other. As Anne Bogart, an American theatre director, put it very forcefully (Bogart 2008, p. 29):

"In our culture, which is rapidly spreading around the world, collective action is suspect. We have been discouraged to think that innovation can be a collaborative act. There has to be a star. Group effort is a sign of weakness. We revere the cowboy riding out alone across the prairie. We are brought up to make money and spend it on ourselves. People are considered successful if they get rich and appear on television..."

But what if we assume that individual identity and community form a duality rather than a dichotomy? That instead of being mutually exclusive they are mutually constitutive and that they have a dynamic relationship? We can very safely say that there is no individual identity without a social context, human identity is, by its very nature, relational. Except for the most elementary forms of learning, like learning to walk, every other kind of learning is socially mediated (Vygotsky 1930). Since the ability to walk doesn't make us very unique, everything else we become is the result of the relationships of which we are part.

Conversely, communities are created and maintained by the individuals who are their members. This is as true about street gangs as it is true about the United Nations. As Wenger (1998) puts it, individuals construe communities of practice by participating in them and at the same time they are involved in negotiating an identity for themselves within the community. The process of participation creates both the community and the individuals' identity through negotiating meaning. Negotiating identity within a social context then becomes a powerful learning experience. In professional terms, I consider myself a product of CETT and I also consider CETT a product of mine as far as I was part of the creative group process which shaped and re-shaped it. Communication among staff resulted in professional learning for the members as well as improved performance for the department.



It is true, though, that many teachers think they learn largely 'on the job' and from their own experience. So they see the intervention of other adults, (administrators, colleagues, parents, etc.) not as learning opportunities but as hindrances to their work. Lortie (1975) also draws attention to what he calls the 'cellular' nature of a teacher's job. He emphasizes the importance of psychic rewards that teachers largely receive from classroom contexts, from the teacher's close(d) relationships with her students. But such professional solitude also has its downsides.

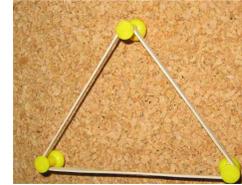
If we look at a rubber band, like the one on the right, we can see that it is slack, it lacks energy. I myself have experienced how solitude can turn into isolation because it is very easy to lose sight of long-term aims and a sense of appreciation for one's own work. When that happened I started to let things slacken: my standards slipped, I began to rationalize cheap solutions and to settle for fossilised teaching routines. The moment a colleague

enters the classroom, however, the atmosphere, the level of awareness changes. There is no room for cheap compromises on the part of the teacher.



If we look at the second rubber band, we can see and almost feel this tension. As a pair of strings it might well make music! This enhanced energy is an opportunity for learning. There is, of course, a risk to our professional self-esteem but it is possible to create a culture which makes that risk fairly tolerable and proportionate to the expected gains in learning.

The third dimension is more transcendental in the sense that it points beyond the here and now of classrooms and beyond the immediate interests of individual teachers or staff. Here professional learning only becomes significant when seen in the context of increased student learning. So it is not enough for the teacher to retain or boost her self-esteem or for a classroom visitor to enjoy themselves. The reinforcement of their collegiality, which might be another outcome of the class visit, becomes truly meaningful only when it serves wider educational aims. This is what the third rubber band represents.



It shows the effect of the professional community's relationship with a larger whole: an 'upward pull' that gets created when colleagues become passionate about their work because they share values, understandings, goals with a healthy sense of mission.

I am convinced that the quality of our teaching at CETT improved as a direct result of this dimension. Regular curriculum group meetings, bench-marking sessions, visiting each other's classes or lectures and sometimes even teaching together all created a public yardstick for our individual classrooms. I also think that the feedback routines which developed as part of our micro-school culture (unlike in other university departments) were, in fact, taken as another 'excuse' for us to engage in open professional communication. For me, team teaching was perhaps the most instructive and exciting professional experience and we were often content to accept half the hourly rate of pay in return for being able to teach a group of students together. This co-operation involved planning courses and individual sessions, sharing ideas and responsibilities as well as successes and failures. To this day I look for opportunities for this kind of cooperation and miss it very painfully if it is not there. I also had to learn that it is very difficult to change traditionally cellular teaching cultures. It might take years of one-sided investment.

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CONDITIONS: One small change at a time



Many of us working in education have experienced our institutions as "one-person communities" (Csányi 2008) facing conditions that have left us struggling with a keen sense of fragmentation, professional loneliness and,

gradually, the temptation to become cynics. Isn't it strange that all the enlightened educational philosophies and student-oriented methodologies of the past 20 years have done little to change the overall 'factory feel' of our schools or universities? One reason might be that, to this day, factory workers and teachers experience their workplaces in quite similar ways. For example, both work in bureaucracies and both appear to contribute to a 'bigger whole' from a relatively isolated position. What is more, teachers – just like factory workers – are exposed to hierarchies that answer first and foremost the dictates of everyday administration, outside stake-holders and financial pressure. Under these conditions few educational institutions favour and sustain a culture rooted in strong personal-professional relationships among its workforce. CETT Budapest was one such place.

I experienced life in that department as a continued, conscious effort not only to do ordinary things well but to do them well as a *fellowship* of teachers. My colleagues and I did not attempt to challenge the university-as-factory. Instead, we quietly subverted 'life in the factory' by humanising it for ourselves and for our students. We consciously created opportunities for team work, left space in our heads, offices and corridors for talk and treated students as 'will-be teachers'. In other words we took ourselves and our students seriously. One colleague once put it like this: "I felt I was part of a team and what I did really mattered, the quality of what I did really mattered". This is what made our teaching and training work in the 'education factory' meaningful, exciting and rewarding. And, perhaps just as importantly, we found that the beginning teachers that left our programme were welcome in primary, secondary and private language schools around Budapest.

Life has changed and we have all moved on. Sadly, it hasn't become easier to find places that bring people together so real learning becomes possible. As head of a recently merged university department, I believe more than ever that we must create the conditions for this ourselves and turn ourselves into fellows, one teacher at a time. So I have found myself starting over with a string of small things: I write emails to staff that are meant to sound personal, I've been encouraging colleagues to form small working groups and initiated small 'beautification' projects around the department. When the teachers started bringing their own plants and a photo for a staff gallery which showed them in their favourite place, silly outfits, as grandfathers, parents or dog-owners and when the first student posters appeared on the empty walls I felt a new bubble had begun to grow...

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LEARNING: does it ever stop?

The word *learning* can be interpreted in hundreds of ways. We might even say that, because the process of learning differs so much from one person to another, it is

impossible to come up with a perfectly comprehensive definition. So I would like to share what learning has come to mean for me.

As a young professional, I have very clear memories of my university years. I spent roughly 2190 days being an English-major student. That is 52,560 hours, to be precise. During those years I spent most of my time learning lots of important things. I studied literary criticism, learnt who Noam Chomsky is and what there is to know about the 'X-bar theory'. I also



learnt some remarkable skills - such as how to cheat at an exam without being caught and how to talk about novels very effectively without even opening the book...

It wasn't until my third year at university that I felt I wanted *learning* to stop and *teaching* to begin. That was about the time when I started to attend methodology and classroom studies seminars at CETT and the end of my learning career seemed to be getting closer each day. Or at least that was what I thought. Being taught by the CETT tutors turned out to be a completely different experience - whether it was learning what a 'thesis statement' is or where the primary stress falls on the word 'adjective' (special thanks to Péter Rádai and Ági Enyedi!). What is more, I learnt a bunch of useful in-class activities, interesting teaching methods and 'survival' strategies in order to become a good beginner teacher.

When I first started working as a teacher in a language school, I was in for a bit of a surprise. Not only did my learning process continue, I found that it actually took on a higher priority than teaching. Becoming a language teaching assistant at university then gave me the opportunity to work with some of my beloved tutors for almost two years. Here I learned how a group of fellow professionals can co-operate even in rough times. And when in September 2008 I finally started working as a secondary school teacher, I very soon realized that there is a lot I have to learn from my *students!* I believe that a teacher should never be too proud to admit that they have to learn all the time to be able to teach well. So I really hope I will be a 'constantly learning teacher' as I become a less *young* professional and more *professional* young teacher.

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Budapest

CONVERSATIONS: Corridors – staffrooms – conferences

Some people say that the most important things at a conference happen in the coffee breaks, and I tend to share this view. The annual conference of IATEFL Hungary seems to be no exception. Observing participants while they rush down the corridors to get to the next presentation of their choice in time, I have caught bits of conversations ranging from the "I haven't seen you for ages... how good to meet you..." type, through the crisis management over the telephone "...then put her to



bed and give her lots of tea..." to the somewhat quieter and more thoughtful chunks of "...yes, that's what I've always felt but I've never been able to phrase it so clearly" or "what a fantastic idea. I can hardly wait to try it out in class ..."

With all this bubbling around it was easy to make some conclusions: the teachers here obviously need and appreciate the professional context which they themselves created by setting up a professional association. We enjoy the sense of this professional community, where we feel safe and supported. Our problems do not seem to be so frightening if they are the same as those of many other colleagues and we also like to feel important by giving ideas to others in return for the ones we received. It is also clear that teachers are human beings not just teaching professionals, with their own lives and commitments that would draw them in many different directions. Why are we all here then, why do we come together year by year? From the third type of conversation I mentioned above it seems to me that engaging in professional conversations is the key issue.

Nothing can be more developmental and energizing than sharing ideas, experiences, doubts and even failures with colleagues. If one believes in reflective teaching, and we at CETT certainly did, it is clear that reflecting on one's professional activities and learning from one's everyday practice is a rich source of personal and professional development. Reflection is always easier if one is helped by peers; you simply see yourself better if someone helps by holding the mirror.

I would go as far as to say that one of the best indicators of any school is the quality of the professional discourse in the staffroom; it gives away the level of involvement, the level of thoughts and the strength of the community. You may or may not be lucky with the school you work for, but you can contribute a lot to improvement, to building a bubble with at least a few like-minded colleagues. A conference, however, is like the best type of a staffroom. Like a bubble-bath with all the learned, engaging and involved conversations going on... It is our joint responsibility to keep it going.

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RELEVANCE: Finding your own stepping stones

This word for me is a very personal one as it marks a series of stepping stones in my professional career. I would like to think and certainly hope that each stepping stone has in turn created relevance for others.

Joining CETT made relevant so much I had done before. It was like a domino effect in reverse as I looked back at what I had done up to that point, or like a jigsaw with all the pieces falling in place, leaving empty spaces to challenge me further. I had been teaching and done in-service teacher training for years. I had benefited enormously from all the colleagues I had worked with, but what was missing was a community of common purpose, the sounding board of other teacher trainers. The strength of the CETT community, and the sharing, trust and confidence it inspired, all gave additional relevance to my teaching and training, which, in turn, has perhaps made my work more relevant for the students and teachers in the courses I taught.



Mentor Training at CETT represents another relevant step. Angi Malderez, our British Council Outreach Coordinator, and I started the first mentor course, drawing on our years of experience and moulding the course, with the experience and insights of the participants, into a constantly evolving framework - an on-going learning experience for us all. To this day, these Mentor Courses are joint explorations into the relevance of participants' beliefs, attitudes and values to their future work with trainee teachers through professional dialogue. In this way a small professional community arises between the trainers and participants and the participants themselves, one which becomes relevant for everybody well beyond the duration of the course. Close friendships are formed and a professional support system is developed which the newly qualified mentors carry into their work with mentees and colleagues and in this way forming new professional bubbles.

The relevance of my years at CETT has also had the greatest impact on my work at the business school where I am now employed. Much of my investment into the English Language Department there was inspired by my CETT experience and benefited greatly from it: from classroom observations and on-going professional development for the teachers to the overhaul of our language proficiency exam, which was developed with the help of CETT colleagues. This big bubble has spawned another bubble, as I now work with *business* teachers who have had no teacher training, observing their classes, discussing their teaching, having professional development workshops with them, and training others in observation skills.

So the series of stepping stones continues for myself and for others. It is all to do with giving and taking: creating communities, accepting and rejecting, honing ideas and forming new ones, within a group that develops its own dynamism and becomes more than the sum of its members.

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RELATIONSHIPS: Make them happen!

This word has so many meanings in life. We keep building relationships from

our childhood; first with our parents and relatives, then with our peers, teachers, coaches etc. Relationships are quite changeable – at times close and intense, at other times more distant and loose.

Professional relationships have had a determining role in my life. Right after graduation, I applied to teach at a place where I experienced that relationships among colleagues, and teachers and students provided the basis for high quality learning, teaching and professional development for all parties. This place was the Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT), where I worked for 16 years. The emphasis at CETT was always on respect, tolerance, sharing and good-will, qualities that should serve as the foundation of all kinds of relationships from family ties through friendships to professional contacts. I experienced how much this community can mean in one's life, how motivating working on these terms may be. I am also aware that not all working environments allow for the same setting, but I strongly believe that we can do a lot to build it up little by little, step by step. Some shared ideas or problems, a helpful pair of eyes, or asking for help when in need can be the very basis of such a bubble, where professional relationships start growing and colleagues feel more connected, secure and confident.

One such wider community is a teachers' association and a conference like the one we attended in the autumn of 2008 is the perfect place to initiate this network of relationships. And there is an extra gift, something you can't foresee when you take up this everlasting 'job': maybe some of these professional relations will, as if by magic, turn into real friendships that will survive all troubles and flourish even when people do not meet on a daily basis anymore, just as happened to me. But these things do not happen by themselves; YOU have to make them happen, and if you put ample energy, trust and respect into your relationships you can be sure that one day all parties will be able to pick their own fruits, and what's more, the harvest will be a happy joint event.

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LINK 1: The Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT)

On August 9th 1990, a group of EFL teachers were called to a meeting at Eötvös University in Budapest which was in many ways to change the direction of our lives for ever. There were nine of us, and we had been selected by Peter Medgyes to teach at the new *Centre for English Teacher Training*, which was to open at the beginning of September the same year.

This was our first meeting, and within certain administration parameters we were free to develop the curriculum as we wished: the content, the assessment and the teaching practice. It was certainly heady stuff. The first year of our programme was devoted to language development, with student discussions of the methods and techniques that were used in their language practice classes. The second centred heavily on ELT methodology and systematic classroom observation, while the entire third year was given over to school teaching in pairs. Throughout this school experience our trainee teachers also met in a support class at university where they could share concerns and ideas with their peers and which helped them develop a feasible classroom research framework for their BEd thesis.

The 1991-1992 academic year saw the number of staff increase by 10, and the arrival of two highly qualified and dedicated British Council colleagues. The democratic approach that we had established at the beginning continued to be one of the main strengths of our community, although it meant a great many meetings and discussions. But all of these contributed to making us a dynamic professional community, where we could try things out, challenge what we were doing, make necessary changes, and become the team that formed the heart of CETT for 15 years. The Centre was disbanded for administrative reasons in 2005 and many of us no longer work directly together.

But we still are a professional community ...

LINK 2: Quotation

"Learning traditionally gets measured on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads ... [Here] learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is no learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part."

Murphy (1999)