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## Using virtual learning communities in shaping the professional identity of primary and preschool pedagogy specialization students: a knowledge management approach

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### Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between using virtual learning communities in initial education process and the development of students' professional identity, by examining the most recent contributions in this field and by proposing a new strategy of knowledge management, at university level, that harness the virtual learning environment's potential, based on mobile learning models. In addition to that, the paper proposes a strategy for empowering higher education institutions to use VLCs in order to improve primary school teachers' professional identity highlighting especially the requirements, curriculum and evaluation of such a strategy, focusing on the existing best practices on international level.

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*Keywords:* virtual learning communities; communities of practice; knowledge management; professional identity

### 1. Paper rationale

The idea of this paper initially started from our study of the European mental images in the field of primary and preschool education and how they are reflected in teachers' professional identity. One of the most important conclusions was that the process of assimilating the new mental images related to identity could be done in a more

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efficient way by developing new models of knowledge management, that are actively using the potential of virtual learning communities, at different levels of implementation: European, regional and national. The national level, analyzed in this paper, highlights the pivotal role of universities in building and maintaining virtual learning communities. In order to do so, we proposed a new concept (eidos) and we analyzed several models of managing students' professional identity, offering concrete suggestions for improving virtual learning communities' educational development strategies. Our study has three parts: 1) Premises for a new model of knowledge management in professional identity development; 2) Models of developing professional identity in virtual communities and 3) Managing professional identity development in virtual learning communities.

## 2. Paper theoretical foundation and related literature

First, according to Ayling, Owen and Flagg (2012), central to participation in a virtual learning community (VLC) for pedagogy students, is the concept of an educator's *identity*. This idea is also supported by Wenger (1998) who explained, that "issues of identity are an integral aspect of learning and are thus inseparable from issues of practice, community and meaning". According to our own studies in the field of professional development (Strungă, 2014), identity is the interface between social and individual and in BMEMI (the bi-dimensional model of European mental images) model is it also the pivot point between the national and European dimensions. From another perspective, Prentice presents two types of identity: Common and Common Bond. The Common Identity is commitment to an enterprise or a value, whereas the Common Bond is to the people involved in the enterprise (Prentice, 1994). Previous research also strongly suggests that students derive their identity from the communities to which they belong and where are accepted (Utz and Sassenburg, 2002; Handle, 2006 apud Ayling, Owen and Flagg, 2012).

Second, in the literature, the experts are constantly analyzing many concepts that are related to professional development and professional identity (North and Kumta, 2014). Some of them are the following: professional associations, professional learning communities, communities of practice, virtual professional learning networks. In this plethora of concepts and terms, multiple educational paradigms are models are used, from various fields of activity: education sciences, economy and business administration, social psychology, occupational psychology and so on. However, few studies, analyzed students' professional identity development from the knowledge management's point of view.

Third, many experts think there is considerable evidence to assert that a postmodern community is likely to be virtual. Insofar geographical distance and access to technology is concerned, the new technologies for information and communication (NTIC) can bring people together and build cultural bridges over nations (Nistor et al, 2013; McConnell et al, 2012). Many students and teachers are increasingly more communicating by using smartphones, tablets and laptops creating the premises for a radically new culture of education. One that can offer the possibility of instant access to information regarding almost any topic, that is connecting the people across the planet, bringing, in the same time, education closer to home. For the first time in the history of humanity, every act of communication has the potential of developing into an activity of education.

From our point of view, a virtual learning community must be embedded in a larger educators' virtual community of practice, under the supervision of a larger professional association. Unfortunately, there are not many influent professional associations that coordinate this process. In the field of Pedagogy, we can't find a similar institution to the College of Romanian Psychologists or equivalent organizations from the field of medicine. This phenomenon further reflects the marginal role Pedagogy has in the middle of the other social sciences, one of the most important perceptions of the general public being that anyone can teach, no matter their pedagogical training or competences. We find this social representation to be harmful to an efficient process of teachers' professional identity construction.

One of the best models of developing the sense of community and identity in the virtual space was proposed by Blanchard, Askay and Frear in 2010:

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