

AND THEN I ASK THE COMMUNITY - NURSING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

Virtual Communities of Practice in the context of nursing - understood as interest-based associations of people who exchange nursing knowledge and nursing experiences using online platforms - also develop their significance in case of professional identity development.

"What does it mean to be a nursing professional?" is a central question in the nursing education context, in which the foundation for the development of a professional identity is laid. While findings already exist regarding the development of nursing professional identity in the context of different learning places (nursing school and nursing practice), it's still open, how the participation in virtual Communities of Practice can influence the development of professional identity already in the context of nursing education.

This research project explores the following questions: *Which nursing related themes show up in the context of virtual Communities of Practice? How the process of nursing professional identity development is influenced by the participation of nursing scholars in virtual Communities of Practice? Which meaning the learners attribute to the participation in virtual Communities of Practice with regard to the formation of nursing professional identity?*

The goal of the study is to develop the virtual Community of Practice as a learning space that supports the process of identity formation already in nursing education. Furthermore, the findings will be used to shed light on the medial reality of nursing scholars and to derive curricular consequences.

Within the framework of a netnographic research design, data collection will be conducted via field observations of community activities and will additionally be supplemented by focused individual interviews with community members. In the context of data analysis, the documentary method will be used in addition to the production of dense descriptions.

Keywords: *Virtual communities of practice, nursing education, professional identity development.*

1. Introduction

One way of exchanging professional knowledge and experience via Internet represent virtual Communities of Practice (Rolls et al. 2019, p. 1382). The establishment of these Communities in the healthcare sector has national and international significance, as evidenced by the initiation of various research projects (Struminger et al. 2017; Bermejo-Caja et al. 2019). The term "community of practice" was coined in 1991 by Lave and Wenger as part of their monograph "Situated learning. Legitimate peripheral participation." Communities of Practice are considered groups of people existing over an extended period of time who have an interest in a common topic and want to build and share knowledge together (North/ Franz/ Lembke 2004, p. 8). Communities of Practice are self-organized, dynamic systems that can be located inside or outside of organizations and usually have an informal character (Wenger 1998, p. 2). According to Wenger (2011, p. 1f.), they are also characterized by the fact that their members share a common area of interest ("domain"), exchange information about this ("community"), and thus build up a common culture of practice ("practice"). Participation in a community of practice takes place on a voluntary basis and it do not necessarily have to be face-to-face. According to an assessment by North, Franz and Lembke (2004, p. 91), most Communities of Practice exist virtually, which in turn enables interaction and communication processes that are unbounded in time and space. Complementing the definition of non-virtual Communities of Practice, virtual Communities of Practice specifically in healthcare are considered as "a common online platform to provide healthcare professionals with the opportunity to access highly specialized knowledge, build a professional support network and promote the translation of research evidence into practice." (Shaw et al. 2021) Participation

in aforementioned Communities can provide a variety of support, such as working together on professional problems, finding alternative solutions and interpretations, search professionally relevant information, conducting collegial consultations and promoting interprofessional working (Bermejo-Caja et al. 2019, p. 403; Rolls et al. 2019, p. 1393; Terry et al. 2019, pp. 372-375). Virtual Communities of Practice also have an impact on the process of professional identity formation (North/ Franz/ Lembke 2004, p. 9; Terry et al. 2019, p. 372). The formation of professional identity is described as the result of a developmental process that is closely linked to the development of professional competence (Heinemann/ Rauner 2008, p. 10). Professional identity development thus takes place as a gradual growing into the respective professional Community of Practice. Identification with the profession is characterized primarily by an interest in orientation, (co-)design and quality. In the field of nursing, the development of professional identity takes place in fields of tension characterized by crises (Bohrer/Walter 2015, p. 25f.). The confrontation with the above-mentioned areas of tension is expressed in various types of self-assertion (Bohrer/Walter 2015, p. 26). These are characterized by learners becoming increasingly independent, i.e. taking responsibility and making and arguing their own decisions. Furthermore, by taking a position as learners, which also includes expressing learning needs, questioning things and demanding feedback (Bohrer/ Walter, p. 26). The latter aspects in particular are also found in the context of participation in virtual Communities of Practice: one's own learning needs are identified and put up for discussion online. At the same time, other community members provide feedback and position themselves with respect to a particular learning subject. While findings regarding the development of nursing professional identity in the context of different learning places (nursing school and nursing practice) exist, it's open, if virtual Communities of Practice also provide a home for identities (North/ Franz and Lembke 2004, p. 9) or whether and to what extent participation in the aforementioned Communities can influence the development of professional identity already in the context of nursing education.

2. Objectives

In the context of nursing education, learners are particularly challenged to initiate the development of a stable professional identity - not least due to the demand for evidence-based nursing practice and the debate about Nursing 4.0. Against the backdrop of the Nursing Profession Reform (2019) in Germany, questions of nursing professional identity formation become priority because there's a new job title „Pflegefachfrau/ Pflegefachmann“ with far-reaching changes in the requirements and activity profile of the aforementioned occupational group. Thus, the answer to the question "What does it mean to be a nursing professional?" is of central relevance. In addition to the learning locations of nursing school and nursing practice, there is an increase in the importance of informal learning opportunities that manifest themselves in virtual space and also have an influence on the development of professional identity. In the context of this dissertation project, virtual Communities of Practice are to be explored as a further place of learning. The insights generated in this process can be used for integration into the interplay of different learning places that are significant in the context of professional identity development. The understanding of the learners' media reality can also help to develop curricular units on this basis and to generate new learning spaces, in which formal and informal forms of learning in virtual and non-virtual places experience an interweaving. The following research questions arise from the aforementioned objective:

- (1): Which nursing related themes show up in the context of virtual Communities of Practice?
- (2): How the process of nursing professional identity development is influenced by the participation of nursing scholars in virtual Communities of Practice?
- (3): Which meaning the learners attribute to the participation in virtual Communities of Practice with regard to the formation of nursing professional identity?

3. Design and methods

The focus of this research project is the question HOW the process of nursing professional identity development is influenced by participation in virtual Communities of Practice. Therefore an ethnographic approach is needed, which enables an explorative and interpretative description of ways and means of human interactions (Hitzler/ Eisewicht 2016, p. 63). With the increasing emergence of virtual worlds, approaches to ethnographic research have also evolved. In 1996, the Canadian cultural anthropologist Kozinets founded a format of ethnographic fieldwork that is particularly suited to the study of online Communities. "Netnography" (Kozinets 2019) enables the analysis of computer-mediated interactions within virtual Communities. Netnography is primarily understood as a qualitative research approach, as the discovery of human behaviors and interactions within virtual worlds are at the center of the research interest. The data collection is primarily carried out by observing the community activities,

which are particularly evident in the context of forum communication. An unstructured, open approach is recommended initially in the research project, which becomes increasingly focused in the course of the research process. In the present study, three observation periods of the Community „krankenschwester.de“ are planned, each lasting three months. The last observation period will be supplemented by focused individual interviews with community members. This is done to gain insight into the participants' attributions of meaning and subjective experiences (Misoch 2019, p. 83). Observation protocols, field notes, documented forum communication, and transcribed interviews form the basis for the evaluation of the data. In addition to the production of dense descriptions, meaning that is revealed in the intertwining between individual and group perspectives should be tapped using the documentary method according to Bohnsack (2013). A particular challenge of internet-based research is the adherence to ethics principles, such as informed consent or the unrestricted voluntariness of participation. The planned project will be reviewed by the ethics committee of the "Deutsche Gesellschaft für Pflegewissenschaft e. V.".

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