Professional development across the islands of the South Pacific

A qualitative study of blended learning facilitators in the Cook Islands

Kamila Hoffmann
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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are having remarkable effects and promise potential solutions to many of the South Pacific islands’ geographic, economic and social challenges. Access to ICTs is also an increasingly important factor for education and training in the region. While the Pacific eLearning Observatory, supported by the University of the South Pacific, has been monitoring the development and access to ICT in education across the 12 university’s campuses, studies that specifically examine the attitudes and understanding of educators working on the islands of the South Pacific towards the use of ICT in their profession, as well as for their professional development, are rare. This study aims at addressing the gap in the literature by examining the professional development of facilitators working in blended learning environment across the remote islands 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 thesis is grounded in the social and situated theory of learning. By closely examining the facilitators’ perceptions, the project sheds new light on the still little recognised concept of online communities of practice in teaching and learning. The central finding of the study is that participation in online communities of practice offers on-going opportunities for learning, development and support, and reduces the feeling of remoteness and 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.
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## ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>COP</td>
<td>Community of practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and communication technology</td>
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<td>IT</td>
<td>Information technology</td>
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<td>OLPC</td>
<td>One laptop per child</td>
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<td>OPD</td>
<td>Online professional development</td>
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<td>PD</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
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<td>TKU</td>
<td>Te Kura Uira</td>
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<td>USP</td>
<td>University of the South Pacific</td>
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1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of professional development has come to the forefront of the current debates on adult education and training. Individuals often see professional development as a way to move forward and thrive in their careers. Employers view it as means for enhancing competitiveness and productivity, while governments view it as a way to sustain regional growth and political expansion (Milana, 2012). Yet, the term itself remains vague and often refers to a wide range of formal and informal learning opportunities generally directed at promoting skills development and transformation. Some view professional development as a “one shot”, classroom-based passive process of knowledge acquisition aimed at the development of lacking skills or correction of “deficiencies” (Guskey, 2000). Others challenge such an approach by arguing that while short-term learning may indeed foster one’s interest, it is not sufficient to bring long-lasting change and improvement to one’s practice (Vanderbilt, 2008). Effective professional development is the ability to continuously and intentionally develop and transform in order to bring positive change and improvement (Billett & Pavlova, 2005). 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 on-going opportunities for professional development, the increase in access to the ICTs and online learning creates opportunities for those without easy access to the traditional face-to-face forms of learning. Given this potential, this thesis is an attempt to understand the professional development of practitioners enabled to work and learn predominantly through access to ICT formats. The study focuses on a small group of facilitators working in blended learning environment across the islands of the Cook Islands. It argues that professional development is a dynamic and complex process of learning, identity formation and participation in both online and offline communities of practice.

1.1 Aim

The overall aim of this research project is to understand professional development of Te Kura Uira (TKU) facilitators working in a blended learning environment on the remote islands of the Cook Islands. Accordingly, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- Why did TKU facilitators become facilitators and how has their professional development looked 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 for the facilitators’ professional development?

1.2 Contribution of knowledge

Use of ICT in education and training fulfills diverse learning needs and provides opportunities for the professional development of educators. While many studies have examined online and blended learning environments and the factors that supported and hindered professional development of educators working in such environments, there are few publications that deal with these matters in the socio-economic and cultural context of South Pacific islands states. Furthermore, there have been few, if any, studies that have examined the perceptions of educators working remotely in blended, secondary school environment on the islands of the South Pacific. An in-depth examination of the facilitator’s perspective of their work environment, professional roles, and factors that support and hinder their professional development and practice, will reveal implications that could be used for the future design, development, implementation and evaluation of online courses for educators working across the South Pacific region. I hope that this study will contribute to the field of online learning and development, and will provide new insights and better understanding of what it takes to facilitate and develop professionally while working on remote islands of the South Pacific.

1.3. The structure of the thesis

This thesis continues with an overview of ICT in education and training in the South Pacific region, followed by a literature review focused on the changes and use of ICT in education and training, the shifting role of the educator, professional development, and identity formation within the context of blended learning environments. It then moves to the theoretical framework, social and situated theory of learning, which acts as a tool to interpret the findings presented in this study. The theoretical section is followed by an illustration of the design, context and participants interviewed, as well as the data collection, analysis processes, and quality aspects of the study. This then proceeds to a description and discussion
of the findings. The thesis ends with final conclusions and provides implications and recommendations for future research.
2 ICT IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING ACROSS THE SOUTH PACIFIC ISLAND STATES

The South Pacific region spreads across 33 million square kilometres and is divided into three groups of islands known as Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. These three consist of 22 small developing states and territories 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 7,000,000, but also in their social and economic development levels as well as distinctive cultures and languages. What is more, their distance from global economic centres makes them one of the most remote places in the world. Information and communication technologies (ICT)¹ are already having remarkable effects on these islands and offer potential solutions to many of the region’s geographic, economic as well as social challenges. Access to ICT is also an increasingly important factor for education and training in the South Pacific region in particular.

ICT for every Pacific Islander

Historically, radio and broadcasting were the first forms of ICT services available in the South Pacific. By the 1990s most island countries had access to television, telephone, telex, paging and mobile phones (UNESCO, 1999). Mobile phone services, however, only became widely used when 2003 Pacific telecommunications reform and deregulation drove prices down. While the technology was available, no more than 60% of the Pacific Islanders had

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¹ In the context of this study, similarly to Whelan(2008), ICT in education and training is defined as the use of computers, the Internet and telecommunications in teaching and learning, including e-mail, learning management systems, synchronous and asynchronous collaborative software and web conferencing.
access to a mobile phone in 2012 (Cave, 2012). Internet technology was also brought to the South Pacific in the mid-1990s and was initiated by Telecom Fiji (Buckridge & Vocea, 2004). Today, the ICT trend continues to grow with mobile networks upgrading to 3G and 4G, and social media expanding in popularity. It is estimated, however, that only 20% of the region’s population has access to the Internet (World Bank, 2012). What is more, most Internet users are concentrated in the urban areas of the main islands (Wenmoth, 2004).

Barriers to develop and access ICT services in the Pacific region are numerous: remoteness, high costs of ICT services and equipment, poor infrastructure, insufficient bandwidth, scattered populations, lack of human capacity, and unequal or limited access to ICT. Yet, in spite of these challenges regional and national institutions in the South Pacific do recognise the impact ICT can play for the region’s development and are working together towards implementing a shared vision, *ICT for every Pacific Islander* (PIIPP, 2002):

ICTs are not only essential to social development and economic growth, but are critical to the development of good governance. They can also be effective vehicles for the maintenance of security and are vital for sustainable development. In the Pacific, ICTs are the key to ending the ‘tyranny of distance’ (Pacific Regional Digital Strategy, 2005, p. 1).

The benefits of the new technologies are also being recognised in the field of education and training. The research outcomes and preliminary results of ICT in education initiatives, such as One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) Oceania project, show that they can create leaps in quality and equality in education (PEDF, 2009). The goal of ICT in education and training is therefore to ensure that the South Pacific islands populations benefit from flexible and lifelong learning opportunities. In addition, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat identifies two further goals:

i. The recognition and utilization of ICTs as essential tools for improving education outcomes; and

ii. The development of cross sectoral policies and guidelines on the use of ICTs to improve education and learning outcomes (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2012, p. 3).

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is one of the biggest educational regional institutions in the South Pacific. It overcomes the primary challenges facing the region -
isolation and short supply of teaching resources - by making use of ICT and offering distance and flexible learning. This public university, established in 1968, is linked across the Pacific Ocean through its campuses located in 12 member countries: Fiji (main campus), Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Samoa. It provides face-to-face classes as well as distance and flexible learning through a Moodle platform and videoconferencing via its own satellite network, USPNet (Whelan, 2008). The Cook Islands is one of the 12 USP member countries with a USP campus. The country is an archipelago of 15 islands spread over two million square kilometers of the South Pacific Ocean and divided into three regions: Rarotonga, the Southern Group and the Northern Group. Rarotonga, the main and the biggest island, is the economic and administrative centre of the country. The total population of the Cook Islands is approximately 20,000 people, with the majority living in Rarotonga. The Cook Islands is a sovereign, self-governing parliamentary democracy in free association with New Zealand, and has full responsibility for its internal affairs (New Zealand is responsible for the defense and foreign affairs in consultation with and at the Cook Islands request). The people of the Cook Islands have automatic rights to New Zealand citizenship and can freely access the New Zealand and Australian labour markets as well as the New Zealand education, health and social security systems (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, n.d.). The result of this has been a decline in the resident population as many Cook Islanders move from the outer islands to Rarotoga, and then to New Zealand or Australia.

In order to lessen 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 connects four schools each located on a different island of the Cook Islands by providing the first blended learning environment for secondary school students in the Pacific region. The project was first run as a pilot study in 2011, and was re-launched at the beginning of 2014. It aims at enabling the most isolated islands to access teachers with specialised skills, and offers an opportunity for students to work collaboratively with their peers from the other islands (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

The University of the South Pacific (USP) and Te Kura Uira (TKU) are among the few organisations that provide flexible educational opportunities for learners (especially secondary schools) living in remote locations of the South Pacific island states. They also offer some of the few professional development opportunities available to educators
responsible for programme coordination. While the Pacific eLearning Observatory, supported by the USP, monitors the development and access to ICT in education across the university’s 12 campuses (Whelan, 2008), studies that specifically examine the attitudes and understanding of educators working in the South Pacific region towards the use of ICT in their profession or for their professional development are rare. What is more, there are few, if any, publications that use the concept of online communities of practice to examine the professional development of blended learning facilitators who work across the islands of the South Pacific. This thesis aims to fill the gap in the existing literature by providing an in-depth examination of the blended learning facilitator’s perception of their work environment, of their professional role, and of factors that support and hinder their professional development while working on the remote islands of South Pacific.

In the context of this thesis, however, the term facilitator does not only refer to constructivist concept of an educator, who acts as a guide and facilitates knowledge creation (Fenwick, 2000). It also refers to a job title given to an adult working in a blended learning environment. Here, the facilitator does not act as a qualified teacher who conducts classes, but someone who coordinates student’s learning and off-line school projects and activities, establishes a pleasant learning environment, offers pastoral care to students, participates in online collaboration and training, and does ad hoc teaching when, due to technical problems, on-line teachers are not available.
3 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The literature that addresses changes and the use of ICT in education and training is broad and diverse. Research studies in this field go back decades and encompass a collection of academic and anecdotal evidence that reflect shifts in the manner of understanding, defining and practicing education. This review focuses on a smaller and more recent portion of the development and use of ICT in education and training. The literature begins with an overview of blended learning in order to provide a foundation to better understand the blended learning facilitator’s work context. It then examines the shifting role of educators and two concepts inseparable from the educator’s professional life; professional development and identity formation. A great number of academic papers, articles and book chapters were reviewed in the course of this study in order to understand the major changes in the fields of education and technology, and to provide a basis for a more focused inquiry into the professional development of blended learning facilitators in the context of the South Pacific island states.

3.1 Blended learning

The availability and use of ICT in education and training has significantly expanded educational options for learners. Technology has provided more flexibility and has overcome time and space constraints associated with instructor-led training (Cross, 2004; Fishman et al., 2013; Keegan, 2002). The Internet has also become an important medium for social interaction and much of the current literature focuses on the engagement and collaborative aspects of online learning (Cross, 2004; D.R. Garrison, 2011; Hanson-Smith, 2013; Iriberri & Leroy, 2009; Stahl, Koschmann, & Suthers, 2006). As a result, more and more schools, universities, and other industries have started combining traditional, face-to-face delivery of instruction with technology-mediated teaching and learning in order to boost student engagement and participation (Kenney & Newcombe, 2011).

Blended learning is not a new concept. It first emerged in the 1960s as an alternative concept to instructor-led training (Bersin, 2004). For many years the term encompassed a wide variety of interpretations relating to any combination of pedagogy and technology (Friesen, 2012). Graham (2006) was the first scholar to work towards a definition of blended learning and in his chapter, Blended Learning Systems: Definition, Current Trends, and Future Directions, described it as any learning system that “combines face-to-face instruction with computer mediated instruction” (p. 5). Graham’s definition referred to a variety of practices and norms related to the mix of face-to-face and online learning classroom, and
constituted a foundation for further elaboration of the term (Friesen, 2012). As such Ross & Gage (2006) identified a distinction between technology-enhanced and web courses that act as a supplement to traditional classes on the one hand, and hybrid courses where face-to-face time is reduced and replaced by online course work on the other. Picciano (2006) argued that blended learning could be a planned and pedagogically valuable method of instruction that combines the physical and virtual learning environments, and where some face-to-face classes can be converted to online activities. Allen, Seaman, & Garrett (2007) differentiated between the percentage of time spent on online content delivery (between 30 to 79%) and face to face instruction, whereas Garrison & Vaughan (2008) stressed the need for reflection and redesigning new learning and teaching methods. Stalker & Horn (2012), however, were the first ones to stress the need for the physical co-presence of both an adult educator and students in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home in addition to the ICT-assisted learning environment, and also emphasised the importance of student control over time, place, path and/or pace. The central element of Staker & Horn's (2012) definition, the student control element, differentiated blended learning from other common forms of learning such as traditional and technology-rich instruction or informal and full-time online learning. It stressed that learning is no longer constrained to the pace of the classroom or pedagogy used by the teacher, but can be replaced by interactive software that enables students to learn in a way that is customised to their needs.

FIGURE 2 Blended learning in relation to other educational practices
Source: Staker & Horn (2012).
Consequently, four main conceptual models of blended learning have emerged from various combinations of online and face to face programmes (see Figure 2). They came to characterise learning in which students rotate (on a fixed schedule or as instructed by a teacher) between classroom-based or online learning stations, classrooms, other learning modalities as well as individual work, individual tutoring, small group instructions or group projects (Christensen, Horn, & Staker, 2013).

Just as there are many definitions or models of blended learning, there are many reasons why blended learning is becoming more and more popular. Blended learning facilitates and contributes to students improving their learning outcomes, achieving greater understanding of the course material and concepts, and reducing dropout rates (Dziuban, Harman, Juge, Moskal, & Sorg, 2006; Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Poon, 2013). It improves pedagogical practices and supports active and meaningful learning as well as peer-to-peer and learner-centred strategies (D.R. Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham, 2006). By giving students more control over their own learning it also promotes student satisfaction, engagement and involvement in the process of learning (Dziuban et al., 2006; Osughterpe & Graham, 2003). What is more, blended learning also increases flexibility and access to learning environments, as well as improves cost and resource effectiveness (Graham, 2006).

3.2 The shifting role of the educator

As a consequence of the above changes and developments in the fields of technology and education, the role of an educator has also shifted. The traditional role of a teacher consisted primarily of lecturing and distributing facts. Learning was associated with schooling, something that people do at school or in isolation. Today, learning is no longer confined to the classroom; it can take place anywhere, anytime and can be self-directed (Cross & Moore, 2006). Respectively, teaching is no longer a show-and-tell practice. It is now considered to be a process of guiding, counselling and facilitating meaningful learning experiences that engage and motivate learners to participate and actively construct knowledge (Taack Lanier, 2014). Today’s educators are encouraged to understand their learners’ abilities, learning styles, needs, and their social and cultural background. They are advised to adopt collaborative, experiential, inquiry or problem-based practices based on constructionism, social constructivism and situated learning theories in order to guide and empower learners to take control over their own learning (Beetham & De Freitas, 2013). They may work individually, in teams, or as facilitators (leaving the course content to online teachers), in order to best apply their skills and strengths and spend more time working with groups of student.
In the blended learning environment the role of an educator shifts from planning and delivering generic content to becoming a facilitator of student learning, and providing more personalised student support (Armes, 2012). In such environments students typically learn online, individually, in small groups with other students, or directly with an educator, and are able to follow their own pace of learning (Burton, 2012). Facilitating in such environment does not only require an educator to adopt new practices in order to meet the individual needs of their learners but also to be a skilled information technology user. Justis (2012) suggests that teachers working within the blended learning environment should have an in-depth understanding of the content being taught as well as have sufficient information technology literacy in order to tailor the material for each student. According to the author, a competent blended learning educator combines the content knowledge with effective instructional pedagogy and technology in order to provide an enriching experience and deepen learning outcomes. Looking after a group of students, each working at their own pace on a different project, also requires an educator to possess good management skills and plan classes in advance (Burton, 2012). Willingness to learn (by experiencing online/blended learning environments or participating in professional development courses), openness to new teaching strategies, and good leadership skills that keep students focused, engaged and motivated, are also crucial factors proposed by Armes (2012).

Due to blended learning becoming increasingly popular, Horn & Staker (2012) propose five skills that teachers working in a blended learning environment will most likely need in the future in order to succeed. These are: 1) comfort with ‘chaos’; 2) student-learning data analysis and decision-making; 3) targeted learning opportunities; 4) specialisation; and 5) technological prowess. According to Horn and Staker (2012), educators will need to learn to be comfortable in a learning environment where students work on different tasks, and create a culture that encourages students to be engaged and pursue their own learning. Teachers will also need to be able to teach offline as well as online, and be able to use the real time student-learning data in order to continuously deliver diverse, personalised learning opportunities. Horn and Staker (2012) also suggest that as a result of the diversification of roles and responsibilities, blended learning educators will have opportunities to teach in teams, specialise and become experts in one area.

While the blended learning model, through its use of technology and constant modification of learning strategies to support and personalise learning, can offer continued professional development to educators; it also appears to be a challenging task. One of the most prevalent themes in the literature relates to the feeling of being overwhelmed by the
time devoted to learning more sophisticated technologies (Dziuban & Moskal, 2013; Smyth, Houghton, Cooney, & Casey, 2012; Voos, 2003). Planning and developing personalised course material for blended learning, especially at the beginning, may be a time consuming activity (Johnson, 2002). Another commonly cited challenge relates to slow internet connections that inhibit students’ engagement and often leave educators frustrated (Hara, 2000; Smyth et al., 2012; Welker & Berardino, 2005). Content and course quality issues (content provided by vendor companies may be too complex or difficult for students), building a learning culture where students are able to take control over their own learning, finding the right balance between online and offline activities to meet students’ needs, and learning styles, or a lack of support, are some of the other challenges faced by blended learning educators (Bendavid, 2014; Burton, 2012; McElroy, 2012).

3.3 Professional development and identity formation

Emerging technologies have created endless opportunities for learners, and hence have also become a popular alternative for professional development (PD) for educators working in online and blended learning environments. Professional development (sometimes also called staff development or professional learning) is a formal or informal learning process directed towards providing a practitioner with the required skills, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs to support them in their professional roles (Holmes, Signer, & Macleod, 2010). The motivations for pursuing professional development may also be linked to educational or organisational change, and might be either targeted and direct (e.g. acquiring a particular skill) or less definite (e.g. creating a community of practice) (Dede, Breit, Ketehtult, McCloskey, & Whitehouse, 2005). Traditional, face-to-face formats of professional development range from instructor-led workshops to mentoring relationships. The former, instructor-led workshops are in particular criticised for lack of flexibility, continuity, or poor quality due to the implementation of “fragmented, intellectually superficial” courses (Borko, 2004, p. 3).

Online professional development (OPD) meets the needs of a wider group of educators by providing flexible, on-going, just-in-time support available at the educator’s convenience. Online professional development programmes make use of a variety of synchronous and asynchronous information and communication technologies (ICTs) and allow learners to think, reflect or go back to the studied material when needed (Bonk, Wisher, & Lee, 2004). Similarly to face-to-face professional development, research suggests that online professional development is also most effective if offered in a collaborative manner and sustained over time (Dede et al., 2005; Holmes et al., 2010). Studies also suggest that
belonging to both online or face-to-face communities of practice, defined as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98), provides educators with informal learning and an opportunity for shared practice, negotiation of meaning, discussion and reflection, which later enables them to create learning communities in their own classrooms (Dede et al., 2005). From the instructional point of view, however, online communities of practice require initial support as they are generally designed top-down (due to technological requirements), whereas offline communities of practice have the advantage of emerging and evolving naturally (Kwok, Pratt, Anderson, & Stigter, 2006; Wenger et al., 2002). Quality online instruction, to a large extent, will depend therefore not only on the interactions and experiences among learners, but also among the learner, instructor and content (D. Randy Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010).

Literature on blended learning also stresses the need and the importance of continuing professional development for educators working in blended learning environment (Stacey & Gerbic, 2008; Vaughan, 2007). Having an experienced blended learning mentor or participating in online professional development gives practitioners working in such settings a chance to up-skill their pedagogical and technical skills, experience what their learners do, and reflect on their practices both as a learner and educator. Research indicates that the successful online and blended learning teachers and facilitators bring techniques learnt from online training courses into their practice (Vanderbilt, 2008). The North American Council for Online Learning proposes that professional development as well as blended learning models in general should be developed according to the needs, and respond to the local culture and context (Davis & Rose, n.d.). On-going pedagogical, technical, as well as a school’s community support and cooperation through membership in a community of practice, are also a proven models that enhance learning and a teacher’s innovation potential (D.R. Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Stacey & Gerbic, 2008).

The concept of professional development should not only be discussed in relation to the educator’s work environment, however, but also in connection with the concept of professional identity. What is an identity? Some view it as a fixed, permanent and well-defined something inside of us and about ourselves (Currie, 1998). Others suggest it is a complex and on-going process that shifts depending on the situation and social interactions (Chappell, Farrell, Scheeres, & Solomon, 2000; Watson, 2006; Wenger, 1998). If we consider the latter, it is then through personal aspects of life, work, learning and engagement
with others individuals professional identity is shaped (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Nyström, 2011). The concept is also significant if we assume that “who we think we are influences what we do [or] we may also become who we are because of what we do” (Watson, 2006, p. 510). It is hence a changeable and complex relationship between an individual, their professional life and work context. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003), and Hodkinson et al. (2004), in their studies on workplace learning and identity formation, stressed the interrelationships between individuals, workplace communities of practice these individuals belong to, and wider contextual issues in the development and construction of professional identities. Billett and Pavlova (2005), similarly to Hodkinson et al. (2004), emphasised the importance of the individual’s life outside of work in the process of professional identity formation. They however also suggested that the extent to which individuals values and identify themselves with their work depends on whether their work allows them to ‘be themselves’. Alongside this argument, Wenger (1998) also suggests that one’s identity is constructed through a multimebership in a number of communities of practice, and that individuals work towards maintaining one’s identity across all these diverse communities of practice.

The above topics investigated in this literature review provide a foundation to better understand blended learning and professional development of blended learning educators. They will hence hopefully provide a good basis for the analysis of professional development and identity formation in the context of blended learning facilitators working across the islands of the Cook Islands.
4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research project is concerned with the professional development of facilitators working in blended learning environment on the different islands of the Cook Islands. It thus requires a theoretical framework permitting an understanding of the professional development phenomenon. In this study, professional development is understood as a learning process that supports facilitators in their professional roles. What does this learning look like? What happens in this process? In order to examine these questions further, I will use the concepts of the situated and social theory of learning. I selected Lave and Wenger’s (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) theory of situated learning and communities of practice because of their emphasis on learning, practice, participation and identity.

4.1 Situated and social theory of learning

This study is grounded in the social theory of learning, which assumes that people as social beings learn through on-going interaction with others. Learning is thus a social activity inseparable from the rest of our lives (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) present this process as legitimate peripheral participation, a relationship between newcomers and old-timers “in which newcomers become included in a community of practice” (Etienne Wenger, 1998, p. 100). Learning hence happens when a newcomer becomes more competent and moves from the periphery further into full participation in the community of practice. At the same time, Wenger (1998) stresses that communities of practice are not “only a context for the learning of newcomers but also, and for the same reasons, a context for new insights to be transformed into knowledge” (p. 214). Learning thus also takes place when old members engage in new practices within the same community. Learning is therefore a dynamic interplay between two components, personal experience and social competence and “combines personal transformation with the evolution of social structures” (Wenger, 2000, p. 227).

4.2 Communities of practice

In this thesis I want to relate the professional development context of Te Kura Uira facilitators to the concept of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice, according to Wenger (1998) represent a “(…) system of interrelated forms of participation” (p. 90) developed, negotiated and shared over time around things that matter to its members which give them a sense of joint enterprise and identity. While
communities of practice can be found everywhere, and we all belong to diverse communities, not everything can be called one (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). For Wenger (1998) a community of practice consists of three interrelated elements:

- **Mutual engagement** which represents shared norms and values that bind the members of the group together, and by which the members of a community interact

- **Joint enterprise** which stands for a collective understanding, created through interactions and continuously negotiated by its members, as well as the responsibility that members have towards their community

- **Shared repertoire** which is a shared collection of resources i.e. activities, stories, tools or symbols developed over time that may represent the community

Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that learning within such communities is a process of moving from peripheral participation to full participation, from being a newcomer to becoming an old-timer, in relation to various activities and communities. Communities of practice thus constitute basic social learning structures where experience is accumulated and meaning negotiated (Wenger, 1998). It is also important, however, to mention power relations, which has been the main criticism of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) and Wenger’s (1998) work. Fenwick, for example, argues that communities of practice are not only a ground for positive aspects of learning as they might also promote tools or activities that are undesirable, unfair or dysfunctional (Fenwick, 2001).

Another important assumption for this study is the dual process of meaning making that involves direct engagement, participation in social life, as well as creation and interaction with physical and conceptual artifacts, which can be resources, concepts, tools or other forms of reifications around which a community of practice builds its history and organises its participation (Wenger, 1998). As an example of this in the context of this study, access to the internet can be seen as a tool, while Skype can be seen as an artifact that enables the facilitators to engage in an active and meaningful practice.

### 4.3 Identity formation within and across communities of practice

Another important implication for this study is the idea of identity formation. Wenger (1998) states that people continuously construct and transform their identities through interplay of their experiences and participation in various communities of practice. He points out that
identity of an individual is also constructed through these communities’ reifications, essentially, how communities’ perceive themselves. The construction of one’s identity is thus re-negotiated on a continuous basis due to the nexus of multimembership, the participation and belonging to a number of communities of practice in which an individual engages at different levels. Furthermore, participation in diverse communities of practice, and the extent to which one engages with these communities, expresses distinct aspects of one’s identity. In the context of this study, the professional development of TKU facilitators may thus also be seen as the facilitators’ interaction and participation in numerous communities of practice, one of them being online community of practice enabled through the ICTs.
5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Design

This research was driven by the desire to understand the professional development of facilitators working in blended learning environment on the remote islands of the Cook Islands. The aim of this project was to not only examine the facilitators’ work environment and professional roles, but also to identify what has supported and hindered their professional development. The research collection methods included the use of semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to explore the perceptions and understandings of the participants. For this purpose, I decided to employ a qualitative research approach.

There were several reasons why a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable to answer the project’s research questions. Unlike the quantitative method, qualitative design research employs an inductive research orientation to the research data in order 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 was therefore deemed the most suitable approach for the present study, as it provided opportunities for the comprehensive reconstruction of the ‘multiple realities’ of the participants’ perceptions and understanding of their work context. What is more, by grounding the study within situated and social theory, it did not seek to test, but to elaborate and add to the field’s understanding of the adopted theoretical concepts.

5.1.1 Selection of the context and participants

The case chosen for this study was the Digital School of the Cook Islands (hereafter TKU), which is the first blended learning initiative for secondary education across the South Pacific island states. TKU started offering blended learning opportunities for high school students located on remote islands of the Cook Islands in February 2014. It also started providing ongoing online professional development opportunities for facilitators responsible for the coordination of programmes on their respective island in November 2013.

Five potential participants, four island facilitators and their leader, were identified and purposefully selected on the basis of their expertise and experience in the area of blended learning, their diverse locations (each participant was located on a different island or village), and their participation in online professional development courses run by TKU. The reason for this targeted selection approach was to focus the inquiry on the participants who had time
to reflect and develop their perceptions about their work and its online community of practice. All sampled participants were females of different age, between 20 and 60 years old, and employed at TKU. They were a diverse group in terms of their family status, professional experience and educational background.

5.1.2 Interviews

In-depth interviews provided the key primary original data sources analysed in this study. All interviews were recorded after consent was granted by each informant. Appendix 2 contains a copy of the participant information sheet and the consent form used by participants to provide consent for their participation and data collection. Due to the fact that all five participants were located on the remote islands of the Cook Islands, all interviews were conducted via Skype video or audio call and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1a and 1b), designed and tested in advance to ensure all relevant areas were covered, directed the conversations (Bryman, 2012). The interview guide directed the interview and kept it focused, but at the same time allowed me to be flexible in terms of adjusting questions and creating a comfortable atmosphere.

Each interview began with an informal chat followed by a brief introduction. Participants were then informed about the purpose and directions of the interview, had a chance to ask questions, and gave their consent to participate. After gaining permission for recording and note taking, the interview began. The interviews were carried out in a conversational style with different types of open ended questions in order to gain in-depth understanding of the context and explore participant’s perceptions (Bryman, 2012). The interview started with broad entry questions followed by more descriptive, structural and hypothetical questions. The interview also 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 comprehend how participants organised their understanding. An example of a descriptive question I used for the interview was “can you please describe a typical day at work”. Hypothetical questions allowed participants to reflect upon future situations that they may be presented with. An example of such a question was, for example, “what would you do if you had a similar problem again?” The use of hypothetical questions provided more data for analysis and generated further opportunities to explore participants’ dimensions of meaning.
In general, the interviews went well. Due to technical problems, however, during two of the interviews it was necessary to switch from video to audio, and then in one further case, to switch from audio to synchronous chat. The technical issues interrupted the interviews for a moment, but switching to a more technically reliable form of communication available at that time allowed to continue the conversations without any further problems. It did demonstrate the participants’ ability to quickly adapt and overcome technical challenges they come across in their profession. As the exact content of the interviews was essential to the present research, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed in order to enable me to concentrate on the interview.

5.2 Data analysis

Data obtained from the five interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a research method used to encode qualitative information into themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Bryman, 2012). I started the analytical process by familiarising myself with the data through an examination and re-reading of the interview transcripts in order to locate information relevant to research aims and questions; in essence, the process of sensing themes (Boyatzis, 1998). In this phase I worked with NVivo9, a qualitative software analysis program. Using NVivo9 enabled me to compare the interview questions in order to find similarities and differences. I chose to focus on quotes and extracts from the interviews that related to and addressed the areas of interest that motivated the study (see Table 1 Themes from data analysis). The last step of the analysis involved interpreting and relating the findings to the context of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger’s (1998) theory, which I elaborate in Chapter Six.

As illustrated above, qualitative data analysis is a continuous process of re-interpreting and re-organising the data throughout the whole course of the research. In the context of this study, the thematic analysis approach helped me find patterns and significant themes in the interviews, as well as to arrange the key findings and apply them to the theoretical concepts. What is more, my role allowed me to gain deeper understanding of the material by analysing, interpreting and applying it to the social situated theory of learning.
5.3 Quality aspects of the study

The quality aspects of this research are also important to note. The standards of credibility, dependability and transferability were used and observed to ensure rigour and challenge the unique but small sample size of the study.

In order to make sure the presented findings illustrated the empirical data, and hence ensure the credibility of the study, I ‘negotiated consensus’ by consulting and interpreting the gathered data with a peer researcher. I also used thick descriptions to illustrate the context in depth so that the readers could develop their own understanding of it (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009). The dependability or trustworthiness of the research was addressed by a detailed description of the settings and the context of the study, explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures, and the clarification for the chosen design and theory in order for future researchers to repeat the study if necessary (Bryman, 2012; Shenton, 2004).

In order to evaluate effectiveness and validate the trustworthiness I kept a personal reflexive journal and discussed the findings with a peer researcher. Transferability “is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situation” (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). The findings of this qualitative research were specific to the context and the small number of participants of the study. I hope, however, that the in-depth descriptions and contextual information about the study strengthened the ability to transfer and generalise its conclusions to a similar context of online professional development across the South Pacific island states.

5.3.1 Ethical considerations

The ethical principles (Principles of the Research Ethics for the Social Sciences – Swedish Research Council) regarding harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy or deception (Bryman, 2012), have been taken into consideration in carrying out this study. All participants were informed of the nature and the purpose of the study and gave their consent to participate. For the purpose of the study and to protect the anonymity of the participants, all informants are given fictional names in the text of this thesis and the name of the village or island they were located on is not mentioned.

5.3.2 The role of the researcher

I worked as an online course developer and instructor for TKU – the Digital School of the Cook Islands from October to December 2013, and hence had a chance to not only
participate, but also run the online training course from November to December 2013 and
acquaint myself with the participants before conducting the present study. I met two of them
personally and the rest through online communication tools. This enabled me to gain a deeper
and more comprehensive understanding of the context of education and training across the
South Pacific island states and build trust and positive rapport with the participants before
conducting the present study. It also allowed me to apply the interest I had in the topic and
knowledge I possessed about it to best illustrate its context. Nevertheless, this might have
also led to formation of predetermined beliefs about professional development of the
participants. As I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in this study, I
not only worked on being open while conducting the interviews and asking follow-up
questions, but also kept a personal reflective journal, met with a peer researcher to discuss the
findings, and thereby attempting to minimise the potential bias and enhance confirmability
(Merriam, 1998).
6 FINDINGS

This research was an attempt to understand professional development of TKU facilitators working in blended learning environments on the islands of the Cook Islands. It also sought to compare facilitators’ perceptions of their work environment, professional roles, professional development, the support and challenges that they have experienced in their profession, and the role of the online community in their professional development. The following paragraphs offer an illustration of the key findings from the study. Findings and themes that emerged from data analysis have been matched with the research questions in Table 1 and discussed in the subsequent sections.

TABLE 1 Themes from data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Findings and themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Why did TKU facilitators become facilitators and how has their PD looked like?</td>
<td>Facilitators’ background and interests</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional learning: online participation and on-the-job learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. How do TKU facilitators perceive their work environment and their professional roles?</td>
<td>Offline vs. online</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Complex role of the island facilitator</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. What challenges have TKU facilitators come across and what support have they received in their daily profession?</td>
<td>Technology and academic-related issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Online vs. local support</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What role has online community played for facilitators’ professional development?</td>
<td>Support, comfort and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduced feeling of remoteness and isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6.1 Why and how?

6.1.1 Facilitators’ background and interests

TKU’s staff consists of the island facilitators, e.g. Maria, Cara, Ina and Eitiare and online teachers, e.g. Anna who provide online classes from the main island of the Cook Islands, Rarotonga. The four facilitators come from and work in four scarcely populated villages on various remote islands of the Cook Islands.

The facilitators represent a diverse group in terms of their life experiences, interests, professional and educational background, and age. For instance, the facilitators are between 20 to 60 years old. Besides working for TKU, they are involved in various local initiatives,
such as the church, baking or weaving communities. Three are married, have children and work experience gained overseas in both private and public sector. None of them had received formal education qualifications; two were studying towards a teaching qualification, however. Despite these differences, all facilitators share passion for education and willingness to support and contribute to learning on their islands. For example, Ina and Maria, who were ex-students of their local schools, mentioned that they saw the need to encourage the local students to learn. Maria, a teacher-to-be, showed a great desire to gain more teaching experience. Ina expressed eagerness to share her overseas knowledge and experience in order to motivate her students:

The reason why 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.

Two other facilitators, Cara and Eitiare stressed their previous experience working for their local schools and pointed out that it was the nature and design of the TKU programme that got them interested. For example, Cara said that she saw it as a great opportunity for her local island’s students to go back to school:

When I thought of the programme coming here to teach the children, encourage them to pick up their school work and actually progress that got me hooked, because that seemed to be the most practical help that education has offered to the outer islands.

Eitiare, on the other hand, highlighted her passion for working with young people and eagerness to share her life knowledge and experiences with them:

I believe it was God's plan to make me use and share my talents and skills with our future generation. I continued the role because I love children and I treat them like adults, with more respect.

Consequently, the research in this thesis not only demonstrates the variation of the participants’ backgrounds, experiences, aspirations or expectations, but also their similarities when it comes to their interests and passion for education.

6.1.2 Professional learning: online participation and on-the-job learning

The four facilitators and Anna have been working together for almost a year talking and ‘meeting’ virtually every day using their Learning Management System (LMS), Skype, e-
mail, telephone or texting for their communication. The Learning Management System (LMS) has mainly been used for announcements, notices or asynchronous work-related collaboration. Subjects that have required more urgent attention were normally discussed informally via telephone or at arranged Skype conference meetings. Skype has been the main tool used for both formal and informal synchronous conversations and the ‘meeting place’. TKU facilitators and Anna have thus spent a lot of time chatting, catching-up, and discussing both work and non-work related matters. How does their professional development look like, therefore? Based on the findings, an understanding of their professional development can be divided into two distinguishing themes: online participation and on-the-job learning. The following paragraphs offer a more detailed illustration of the dynamics of the professional development process.

All respondents reported on participating in an 8-week long online professional development course before the beginning of their first term at school. They noted that the training introduced them to virtual collaboration and topics such as classroom leadership and positive behavior management. 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 a variety of online tools that they later used at work. They reported that they mainly interacted via Skype and LMS and used other collaborative software such as Google Docs. They also said that during the training they were online every day (Monday to Friday) from approximately 8am to 2pm and worked individually, in pairs, or as a group on various tasks. They also reported that at times they took work home, watched or read additional resources, or reflected and added extra thoughts on discussion forums. What is more, all respondents pointed to their continuous interaction and collaboration after they took part in the online course and started to work. For example, Anna, the project manager, highlighted the facilitators’ ongoing participation in discussions and reflective tasks happening through Skype and LMS. Facilitators also emphasised their engagement in their daily conversations and catch-ups and revealed that they have been even contacting each other during the weekends or holidays. For instance, Cara said:

We gave each other our private mobile numbers, so over Christmas we wished each other ‘Merry Christmas’ and then we promised to each other to keep in touch with what was happening.
The data analysis also revealed that a big portion of the facilitators’ learning took place offline and on-the-job. Here, the facilitators stressed that they have been continuously learning a variety of new skills and techniques that relate to student and classroom management or technology. For example, Cara noted that they experiment with different ways of classroom management:

I’m still learning, trying to get the most productive set up. 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 to the two or three. So, I don’t have to keep repeating myself, you know.

Maria also mentioned different techniques she has experimented with in order to keep her students calm and focused:

I don’t send them out. I keep them inside and keep them quiet. Never do anything, just folding your arms and sit quietly.

The facilitators also reported that they were the ones responsible and trained to use the technology and equipment provided by TKU. If therefore something has gone wrong and there was no one else to support them, they needed try to fix the problem. Ina, for example, mentioned she enrolled at the USP to do a course in IT in order to help her better deal with the technology issues on her island:

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.

The findings thus indicated that professional development of the facilitators has been an on-going process of both online participation and collaboration and on-the-job learning affected by the facilitators’ enthusiasm to learn and help to educate children on their local islands.

6.2 Facilitators’ perceptions of blended learning environment and their professional roles

6.2.1 General perceptions of TKU

Te Kura Uira (TKU), the digital school where the four facilitators of the study Maria, Cara, Ina, Eitiare and their leader Anna work, is the first blended learning initiative for secondary school students that are geographically disadvantaged with regards to access to education. It
serves as a remote learning centre for 41 ESL (English as a Second Language) students between 12 and 17 years old. The virtual school is organised around brick-and-mortar schools located in different villages on remote islands across the South Pacific. Each school is coordinated by one of the facilitators and follows the New Zealand curriculum but not the ‘one-size-fits-all’ design. Instead, it delivers individualised material according to the learner’s needs using a variety of educational technologies. This means that while a group of students has a synchronous, online class with their online teacher based in Rarotonga, the rest might be doing individual, personalised tasks and/or project-based, collaborative activity facilitated by their island’s facilitator. Below is an extract from an interview with Anna showing a typical day at the school:

The TKU typically begins on the islands at 8.30 in the morning when students are online. They check their feedback from any work that has been submitted or needs editing and go to work on those. When they are not online they have their offline activities to work on.

Respectively, the four island facilitators: Maria, Cara, Ina and Eitiare are the ones who look after the children and manage the TKU programme on their island. They are not however trained teachers and their main responsibilities include offering pastoral care, student support, student management, classroom management and communication. During the interview, Anna stressed the importance of the facilitator’s role, as well as its evolving nature:

We needed someone on the ground there to be able to coach the kids on how to manage their time, how to set their personal goals and tools to achieve them; and to be eyes and ears on the ground so we know what’s going on. The role of the facilitator is constantly evolving we’re finding, as the needs of the students change.

Subsequently, the facilitators highlighted the complexity of their work environment as well as their professional roles. The following paragraphs illustrate the main themes that emerged from the analysis of their perceptions.

### 6.2.1 Online vs. offline

The research in this thesis showed an interplay between online and offline, and how important the TKU programme is for the people on the participating islands. For example, Ina emphasised the significance of the programme for her local people and the fact that they no longer need to leave the island in order to get secondary school education:
I’m just glad the programme is here because people don’t have to leave the island to get their kids to get educated. Most of them say we’ll go for some time and they never come back.

When it came to describing their professional roles and work environment, all facilitators stressed the job’s diversity and a constant need to juggle between offline and online duties. Offline duties in this case included student and classroom management (here findings also revealed the facilitators’ agency and freedom over the choice and form of student activities), while online duties included reporting and communication with Rarotonga, online participation in professional development, and communication with other facilitators. Below Cara describes her morning routines:

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 when my kids come. I want to make sure that they ready to go. Everyone knows what they are doing, settle down and then I have a moment to think and prepare for our live lessons.

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 evolve. 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 has acted as a way to say ‘I am ready to go’ and also as a way to motivate other facilitators by showing the presence and willingness to be there for the others. Another example related to the different team roles staff of TKU adopted towards each other. For instance, findings indicated that Anna was generally the first one to be contacted when a content, academic-related problem arose. Eitiare or Cara were generally contacted for any student-related issues, whereas Maria and Ina were responsible for anything to do with technology. Another example, this time of an offline routine related to regular meetings facilitators held with educators from their local schools, came from Maria. Maria reported on having weekly morning meetings with the primary school teacher and principal of the local school that she has shared her Te Kura Uira space with. The principal was the one who encouraged Maria to become a TKU facilitator and introduced her to their local school’s routines. The findings did not only show how the facilitators have managed to combine their offline and online tasks, but also what tools and routines they have created as a result of their practice.
6.2.2 The complex role of the island facilitator

The research also revealed that the facilitators view their professional roles through five different lenses: 1) local island representative; 2) mentor; 3) coordinator; 4) learner; 5) team member. These perceptions are illustrated by the graph below and described in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

![Complex role of the island facilitator](image)

**FIGURE 3 Complex role of the island facilitator**

**Professional Roles:**

1) Local island representative
All facilitators emphasised the significance of them being based on the ground on their island. They noted that that fact that they are local helps both the local island and the TKU programme communicate and better understand each other. For example, Cara noted:

> 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 who can perhaps understands what’s being asked of the children by liaising with Rarotonga and then, helping the children to get started on their work.

2) Mentor
The facilitators also mentioned that one of the major parts of their role is about mentoring and assisting their students with their work, for example Maria said:

> My responsibility is to always be with my students and also help, assist them and organise everything for them.
Facilitators stressed that as mentors they are not supposed to give their students right answers but to guide and support them in their learning discoveries. For instance, Ina noted:

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.

Furthermore, the facilitators highlighted the importance of being an inspirational mentor who motivates their students to learn. Eitiate mentioned that:

We are defending our students who are the future, guiding them as best as we can physically and spiritually. When my students understand and are happy to do their work then I know I have done my best.

3) Coordinator

All facilitators also noted that a big part of their role involves being responsible for coordinating, communicating, passing on information and mediating between their local school, Rarotonga, and their colleagues on the other islands. For example, Maria mentioned:

I am supposed to let Anna know what my students are up to, what they are working on and communicate with her and the rest of the team on a regular basis.

4) Team member

The facilitators also highlighted that, besides all their professional tasks and responsibilities, their role involves being part of the TKU team that shares similar tasks and works together to achieve the shared goals of educating the islands’ students. For instance, Cara said:

We’re all aiming for the same goals to help the children as far as possible to facilitate the teaching program that has been brought to them.

5) Learner

Finally, all facilitators also acknowledged that big part of their role involves continuous learning that takes place online by interacting with other facilitators and on their daily work routines. For example, Eitiare said:

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.
Consequently, the research in this thesis suggested the presence of many similarities in the facilitators’ perceptions of their professional roles and the environment that they work in. They have all stressed the job’s complexity and highlighted the fact that they have been constantly learning. Nevertheless, the findings also revealed some differences in terms of the facilitators’ future aspirations. For example, a couple of them would like to become trained teachers, and their teaching methodologies, as some facilitators like to give their students more agency and control over their work. For example, Ina mentioned:

It’s really up to them which activity they want to do first, or what they want to do later on.

It’s pretty much up to them what they want to do in the class.

6.3 Challenges, support and the importance of online participation

The requirement to mix and combine various offline and online responsibilities linked to a blended learning environment inevitably creates a number of challenges to the facilitators’ work. Data analysis revealed some prevalent themes related to both these challenges and the type of support the facilitators received in their daily profession as well as the importance of online participation for their professional development. The following paragraphs present and examine these key issues, summarised in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology-related issues</th>
<th>Academic-related issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning to use educational technologies</td>
<td>Students not used to having a facilitator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being able to fix technical problems</td>
<td>Students not used to technology-enhanced learning</td>
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<td>Slow and unreliable Internet</td>
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<td>Lack of students’ focus due to connectivity issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team in Rarotonga</td>
<td>Team in Rarotonga</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other facilitators</td>
<td>Other facilitators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local School</td>
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<td>Local ICT service provider</td>
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</table>
Challenges

All facilitators reported on two broad types of challenges that they have come across in their profession: technology and logistics (technology-related issues), and student management (academic-related issues).

Technology and logistics (technology-related issues)
Facilitators reported on dealing with technology on a daily basis. Technology has enabled them and their students to participate in classes and communicate with other islands. It thus required the facilitators to become familiar and comfortable with the digital technologies being used by TKU, and 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. For example, Maria said:

When I first started training with TKU it was very challenging, especially when I started playing with Canvas (TKU LMS); that’s when my first challenge was.

The facilitators also reported the need to improve their IT related skills, due to the lack of IT support on their islands. Ina and Maria have even planned on doing an IT course through the University of the South Pacific. Ina said:

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 USP, to do a paper in IT.

The major technology-related challenge experienced by all respondents was however the lack of fast and reliable internet connections which has impeded the teachers and students making full use of the collaborative software and toolkits prepared for class delivery. For instance, Cara mentioned: “At the moment we download the files and that takes quite a while”. Slow and unpredictable Internet connections have also been reported as the major cause for delayed material, disorganisation and lack of students’ focus. For example, Ina stressed: “The service is the biggest challenge, because I just lose pace and focus of the students”.

Student management (academic-related issues)
Student management was the second theme that emerged 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. Not used to having a facilitator, for example Ina noted that:
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.

Not used to technology-enhanced learning, for example Cara said:

At this stage they [the students] are quite demanding, because they are actually learning so many new skills like learning to work with the program. So, there are lots of questions, lots of interactions.

Surprisingly, the remoteness and isolation of the islands and what comes with the lack of physical support was not reported to be a major challenge. 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 besides trying to address the challenges they had faced by themselves\(^2\), they have also asked for and received support from others. The major source of assistance has come in an online form, from either the TKU team in Rarotonga or their island colleagues. Subsequently, Anna, has offered help on issues related to the academic content, student management and technology. She has been the key contact for the facilitators when dealing with a more serious academic or organisational issue. For example, Eitiare said: “I definitely contact Anna first, she is my best advisor.” When faced with technology and/or academic problems, or with a desire to informally catch up, share ideas and experiences, the facilitators reported on getting in touch with their island colleagues. When dealing with the more local-context related issues, the facilitators stressed that they had received help from their local school teachers, or the local communication service providers (the ICT challenges).

Most importantly, however, all respondents highlighted the significance of their daily online interactions with Anna and other facilitators as the predominant source of support, comfort, and learning. For example, Ina said:

\(^2\) For example, three facilitators enrolled at the University of the South Pacific in order to do a course related to the area they needed to improve or develop.
I know that I’ll be working alongside with great facilitators that I can turn to and ask for help when I’m having difficulties […] share, communicate, work together and pursue some common interests and enjoy each other’s comments, words of encouragement and support.

They also stressed that the online community had helped them reduce the feeling of remoteness and isolation associated with their remote locations. For instance, Cara noted:

Even though I’m here by myself, physically, that’s about only place where by myself at any moment because I have three other ladies to trouble shoot with and share my problems with.

The findings thus reveal how significant online participation and collaboration has been for the facilitators. It has not only provided them with continuous opportunities for learning and support, but also with a feeling of comfort and belonging to a team of blended learning professionals.
7 DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to understand and describe professional development of TKU facilitators working in blended learning environment across the islands of the Cook Islands. The findings indicate that the professional development of TKU facilitators is a complex process that involves more than just learning. In this chapter, I describe its complexity by illustrating how the facilitators’ learning is influenced by participating in the online TKU community of practice. This chapter also outlines how this online interplay as well as interaction with other communities of practice and the facilitators’ increased knowledge, experience and perceptions of their roles, shape facilitators’ professional identity.

The following section discusses the main findings from my research in relation to the theoretical framework and the review of literature. The section begins with an analysis of the online TKU community of practice, followed by an examination of how other factors impact the facilitators’ professional development and identity formation. The findings are presented under different headings and will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of how blended learning facilitators working across the islands of the South Pacific can develop professionally.

7.1 Online TKU community of practice

The TKU facilitators and Anna have formed what Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), and Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002), would collectively call an online community of practice:

A community of practice is not just a Web site, a database, or a collection of best practices.
It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 34)

The literature suggests that belonging to such an online community of practice provides its members with opportunities for sustainable and continued learning and development (Dede et al., 2005; Holmes et al., 2010). The online TKU community started as a formal virtual work group established for communication and formal induction work training due to the scattered locations across the South Pacific of its participants. It quickly developed, however, into a social construct focused on continuous interaction, practice and knowledge exchange. This raises a question, however, whether this virtual TKU work context can actually be called a community of practice.
For Wenger (1998; 2000; 2002) a community of practice is a group of people bound together by shared expertise and three interrelated elements: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire. The online TKU community of practice emerged informally from a designed virtual work community and within a few months evolved into a social construct with a sense of common purpose, and distinct activities and routines. The four facilitators and Anna have worked together, shared passion for teaching and learning and helping others to grow in their roles. They all emphasised their continuous collaboration and work towards their own professional development and observance of best practice that they all were able to achieve as a group. This “creates relations of mutual accountability that become an integral part of the practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 78). The research also indicated that all participants have continuously shared ideas, stories and interacted at work as well as outside of it in order to solve problems, share frustrations, or to simply catch up and wish each other “Happy Christmas”. The respondents stressed that they have worked towards the same goals which are directed at educating their students and helping their local island communities. Moreover, they all emphasised that in a period of a few months of such continuous interaction they had developed a collection of resources such as routines, activities and tools that have helped them in their practice and have defined them as a group.

The findings demonstrate that the participants have indeed created an online community of practice if the three dimensions proposed by Wenger (1998) that define the construct of a community of practice are taken as a reference point. This online community of practice, differing from offline communities of practice, has however been fully supported and dependant on the information and communication technologies (ICTs) and hence, especially in the beginning, needed someone to introduce and support it. Accordingly, the online TKU community emerged naturally from a designed work group, but had a recruited leader who supported it in the beginning. This aligns with the observation that online communities of practice are generally designed top-down due to the fact that technological infrastructures are needed to enable such communities to emerge (Kwok, Pratt, Anderson, & Stigter, 2006; Wenger et al., 2002).

7.1.1 Tools, artifacts and routines

Previous research suggests that online professional development makes use of a variety of synchronous and asynchronous information and communication technologies (ICTs) and allow learners to collaborate, reflect, or go back to the studied material when needed (Bonk et al., 2004). As stated above, access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) is
the essential enabler for the online TKU community of practice as well as the Digital School of the Cook Islands’ existence. It not only allows students to attend their classes and make use of digital technologies available to them, but also allows the online TKU community of practice to develop and thrive. The research in this thesis suggested that the Learning Management System, e-mail and Skype are the main communication tools adopted by the school. The findings also implied that while all three forms of digital communication support interaction between Anna, Maria, Cara, Ina and Eitiare, they are all used in different ways and for different purposes than originally planned. Wenger (1998) stresses the significance of physical and conceptual tools, artifacts and routines that turn common understanding into meaningful practice. As such, members of a community of practice have adopted, developed and used tools and artifacts around which they have built their history and organised their participation. The author highlights that these are critical for constructing shared understanding, cultivating shared practices, and learning. He also emphasises the fact that different communities of practice may embrace the same tools, artifacts or routines but for different purposes. The research in this thesis suggests that members of the online TKU community of practice have adopted and developed their own routines, tools and artifacts through which they interact and participate in the online TKU community of practice. For example, the participants highlighted how they communicate, collaborate, ‘meet’ and catch-up, both formally and informally using Skype, sometimes even after hours. The findings thus indicate that Skype is a tool and an artifact that enables the members to participate in their shared practice, cultivate their routines, and build their history. Its ability to serve the purpose in the context of the online TKU community of practice is visible. It could be argued that it is the internet or any other information and communications technology (ICT) that matters the most in the context of the TKU community. I would argue, however, that while the internet is a critical factor without which the community would not be able to exist, Skype (at least for now) is the essential and meaningful part of the community’s practice.

7.1.2 Learning as participation

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). Learning within such community takes place predominantly when new members become more competent and move from the periphery into full participation in a community of practice which also leads
to developing new practices and understanding within the community. Literature on blended learning stresses the importance of continued professional development through a membership in a community of practice as a way to enhance educators’ learning (D.R. Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Stacey & Gerbic, 2008). The research in this thesis indicates that the online TKU community of practice is an essential context for the professional development of its participants. Its members continuously learn by interacting, sharing knowledge and developing new practices and tools that help them and the community grow. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of learning is hence a valuable approach to understand how members of the online community develop professionally. It needs some modifications, however. For instance, all five members of the online TKU community of practice began working together at the same time and respectively can all be described as ‘oldtimers’ by now. Yet, learning continuously takes place within their community. This suggests that the process of legitimate peripheral participation as a relationship between the newcomers and old-timers may not be the main element of learning in communities of practice. What is more, similarly to the Hodkinson & Hodkinson’s (2003) art teachers, members of the online TKU community of practice have also faced challenges and disruptions to their existing practices that have originated outside of their community. Such challenges have included their local school, remote locations, and information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. For example, as a result of a remote geographical location and lack of regular infrastructure to ship the equipment, two schools began working with Te Kura Uira’s programme in a delayed way. The situation interrupted the learning dynamics of the online TKU community of practice and later required the other members to help their colleagues to catch-up with their learning. This example demonstrates the members’ desire to cooperate and the fact that learning is indeed a social practice that may also happen when old members engage in new practices within the same community. Furthermore, findings from the study indicated that members of the online TKU community of practice, just like the Hodkinson & Hodkinson’s (2003) art teachers, also continuously strive to find new and better ways to work. For example, all facilitators continuously express the desire to learn new technologies or teaching methodologies that may help them in their professional roles. This finding thus further challenges Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory by showing that learning does not always require a new community member, disruption or a return to the peripheral stage, as it can simply be deliberate.
7.2 Identity, community and wider context

I have so far argued that professional development of TKU facilitators happens through on-going learning, interaction and participation in the online TKU community of practice. This view however needs to be modified and expanded. The key findings of my research suggest that professional development is not an isolated phenomenon and can also be described as a process of a continuous identity formation and renegotiation affected by trajectories of participation\(^3\) and community membership.

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 had an understanding of what it meant to be a TKU facilitator and to belong to the online TKU community of practice, as well as had access to the community’s shared repertoire. Respectively, when asked what role was and required the facilitators’ responses were compatible. For example, all facilitators stressed that their professional roles are about coordinating the TKU programme on their island, looking after and acting as a student guide and motivator, representing their local school/island, and being a TKU team member as well as constant learner. 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 continuously willing to learn;
- Be open to new teaching and learning strategies;
- Become a skilled technology user; and
- Possess good classroom management skills due to the fact that their students work on different skills at their own pace

The review of literature also suggested that professional development is a dynamic and complex process of identity formation, a relationship between an individual, their professional life and work context (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Nyström, 2011). Accordingly, the findings from this research showed variation in terms of the facilitators’ personal interests, goals or expectations from themselves and others,

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\(^3\) Wenger (1998) also uses the term “trajectory” to illustrate the continuous motion of identity formation that consists of the past, present and the future that cannot be foreseen. He lists various types of trajectories i.e. peripheral, inbound, insider, boundary and outbound trajectories.
experiences, backgrounds or life stages. What is more, in line with Wenger’s (1998) concept of a *nexus of multimembership*, 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 of their experiences and participation in other communities of practice, such as their local schools’ communities. For example, the study revealed that facilitators have developed working relationships with teachers and principals of their local schools. These relationships differed but were all based on the creation of communal resources and routines, shared practices, interests and purpose, as all facilitators stressed their willingness to help and educate students on their local islands. It was not only the complexity of their professional roles and participation in various communities of practice that offered continued professional development. The facilitators’ personal experiences, aspirations, reflections on themselves and their private spheres, such as their family or friends relationships, also influenced their learning, as well as the formation and changes in their professional identities. The professional development process that the facilitators have gone through can be hence seen as a trajectory, a continuous course of action that includes the facilitators’ past, present and future experiences and aspirations, affected by the facilitators’ belonging and participation in various communities of practice. These diverse relationships affect the way facilitators view their professional roles and raise questions and implications for further study on how and to what extent other non-work related communities of practice affect the facilitators’ professional development and identity formation.

### 7.2.1 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 what comes with the constant learning involved in both, may at times be a challenging process that involves more than identity re-negotiation. The literature suggests that there are many significant obstacles that educators working in blended settings face. These obstacles include: learning new technologies (Dziuban & Moskal, 2013; Smyth et al., 2012; Voos, 2003); planning and facilitating personalised learning classes (Johnson,, 2002); building a learning culture where students are able to take control over 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 a lack of support (Bendavid, 2014; Burton, 2012; McElroy, 2012).

Accordingly, TKU facilitators emphasised the technological challenges they faced on regular basis due to their location, unpredictable weather and poor infrastructure. They also stressed
the amount of work they needed to put in in order to become skilled technology users. They also emphasised the many methods they needed to explore in order to develop the best ways to meet their students’ needs, learning styles as well as boost their students’ engagement and drive 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 has adopted the online-lab model of blended learning which often characterises programmes faced with a teacher shortage that 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 lab environment, it is under the supervision of an adult facilitator with usually little content expertise.

Lastly, the participants of the study emphasised the importance and on-going support they have received from their TKU colleagues, which suggested how unusually cohesive and stable their community of practice was. One, however, should not forget that communities of practice may not always and only be a ground for positive aspects of learning as they may induce conflicts or promote tools or activities that are unfair or dysfunctional (Fenwick, 2000). Here, one could question and speculate whether or not such adherence among the online TKU community’s members relates to the fact that they are all women. I would however recommend further research in order to examine in more detail how new teachers and facilitators adapt to their work community and how the online TKU community of practice as well as the local islands’ school communities develop over time.
8 CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to understand and describe professional development of facilitators working in blended learning environments on the islands of the Cook Islands. In order to achieve these goals, this study looked into the facilitators’ work environment, examined their professional roles and development, explored the kinds of support that they have received and the challenges that they have come across in their profession, and also analysed the role online community has played in their professional development. By applying the situated and social theory of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), this study provided useful context on how facilitators learn and how their professional identity is constructed.

The key conclusion of this research project is that the facilitator’s professional development is a continuous process of learning, participation in online TKU community of practice and process of dynamic identity formation and renegotiation affected by facilitators’ belonging to a number of different communities as well as professional and personal experiences and aspirations. In my study professional development of TKU facilitators began when they participated in an online training course and started interacting on a daily basis by creating shared tools, artifacts and routines. This led to the emergence of the online TKU community of practice which has given the facilitators support and opportunities to share their experiences, knowledge and expertise on an ongoing basis. The online participation has also reduced the feeling of isolation the facilitators feared could be associated with their remote locations. The findings thus confirm that learning is indeed a social process. The study also demonstrates that learning can nevertheless be self-motivated and does not always require a new member to be introduced to a community. Furthermore, the research undertaken for this thesis also indicates the facilitator’s professional evolution can also be seen as a dynamic, on-going and complex process of professional identity formation. This identity formation is importantly affected by 1) interaction and belonging to various communities of practice, such as the facilitators’ local islands schools communities, and 2) the facilitators’ increased professional knowledge, experience, aspirations, perceptions of their professional roles, as well as the relationship between their professional, private and personal life spheres.

8.1 Implications and recommendations for further research

As I argued in the previous chapters, it is important to emphasise the role of the online community of practice for the facilitators’ process of professional development and identity
formation. The online community is where these processes predominantly begin and evolve, and is where the facilitators turn to when faced with a challenge or in need for support. It is important to bear in mind that professional development and identity formation are not solely restricted to such community and are more of a continuous trajectory. Could these findings be of any relevance and value for any other contexts of professional development? Since the findings are based on a small sample, it is difficult to draw specific and definite recommendations for other projects. At the same time, a number of general suggestions can be offered for the consideration of those running and designing online professional development courses in various different contexts.

As this study focused on professional development of facilitators working in blended learning environments across the islands of the Cook Islands, it can provide valuable data for designers of online training courses for educators, especially in the context of the remote South Pacific island states. Based on my findings, I want to stress that participation in online community of practice reduces feelings of isolation associated with the specific geographic conditions of the South Pacific region and offers on-going opportunities for learning, development, support and reflection. As per my conclusions, it also facilitates smoother and faster encounter within a work context. These findings could hence also be of value to policy makers debating the importance and impact ICT has for the region of 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.

While the study provides meaningful insights to understanding of how facilitators working in blended learning environment 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 in the study. Such a gender distribution and the fact that more staff have been employed subsequently to the original interviews, opens up opportunities for conducting further research on issues that relate to gender, age and other possible power relations. Another limitation of the study that also has implications for further research relates to employing a more participatory and longitudinal methodology. This could allow examining the development of the online community and gaining deeper understanding of how other local communities of practice affect the facilitators’ professional development. Finally, it would be
also be interesting to see whether my findings could be generalised to the professional development of a larger group of educators working across the islands of the South Pacific.


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APPENDIX 1A

Interview guide for TKU facilitators

Work life and personal information

1. Can you please start by telling me about your work at Te Kura Uira
2. What is your role?
3. How and why did you become Te Kura Uira facilitator?
4. What is your educational and professional background?

Professional Development

5. Can you please describe your typical day at work
6. Have you got any “on the job” training?
   a. Please tell me more about the training
   b. If you think about this training again, what do you value most in that training in regards to your work now? What do you value less?
   c. Did you get in contact with other facilitators during the training? How often? Why?
   d. Do you still keep in contact with other facilitators? How often? When? Why?

Professional identity

7. If you think about your responsibilities as a facilitator, what do you think about them?
8. If you think about other facilitators’ responsibilities, what do you think about them?
9. How do you value your connections with other facilitators in regards to your work? Do they help in any way? If so, how?

Challenges and support

10. Now, could you tell me about some problems/challenges you have had so far in regards to your work?
11. What did you do to solve those problems? Who did you speak with? Who helped you?
12. What do you generally do/ or would you do if you again had a similar problem?
13. If there was something you could change or add in regards to you work or professional development, what would that be?
14. And on a final note, what do you enjoy the most about your work?

Thank you!
APPENDIX 1B

Interview guide for TKU teachers

Te Kura Uira initiative

1. Can you please start by telling me about Te Kura Uira
2. What is your role?
3. If you think of Te Kura Uira and compare it with other online initiatives across the South Pacific island states, are they similar or different? In what way?
4. What are the major challenges facing Te Kura Uira?

Work context and facilitator’s professional development

5. Can you describe a typical Te Kura Uira day?
6. What is the role of the islands’ facilitators?
7. Have facilitators received any “on the job” training?
8. What do you think helps facilitators the most in their daily work?

Thank you!
APPENDIX 2

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: Blended learning and professional development on the islands of the South Pacific.

Name of Researcher: Kamila Hoffmann

My name is Kamila Hoffmann and I am currently enrolled as a student in the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at the Linköping University, Sweden. This research is being undertaken as part of my Master of Education degree in the international Adult Learning and Global Change programme.

The purpose of my research is to examine professional development of facilitators working on the islands of the South Pacific.

I cordially invite you to be involved in this research by participating in a personal interview. You have been selected as a prospective interview participant because of your expertise as a practitioner and your experience in the area of blended learning. Participation in this research is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate.

In personal interview, I will ask you about your perceptions and experiences working in blended learning settings. The interview will be conducted via Skype and will last of approximately 30-60 minutes.

All data collected in the interview and discussion will be analyzed and reported anonymously. As the exact content of your statements is essential to my research, your agreement to participate in this research is also agreement to have the content of our conversation recorded. This is only to allow for accurate transcribing and translation at a later date. Your name will not be used in any publication, and your personal information will not be transferred to any third party, unless you explicitly wish otherwise. As your free and frank opinions are of utmost importance to me your privacy will be respected. I will personally transcribe the interviews. The summary of findings will be sent to you at the end of the project. All data will be stored in a password protected computer. In addition to the master’s thesis, it is possible that the material gathered in this research may be included in published journal articles and conference proceedings.

I would like to stress that I will take every precaution to ensure your identity is not revealed. When reporting more detailed information, I will only associate your answers with your general occupation i.e. blended learning facilitator.

If you decide to participate in this research, you have the right to withdraw your contribution, including the content of the interview or the discussion, at any time until one month subsequent to the interview. If you wish to withdraw, or have any other questions in regards to my research, I can be contacted at the addresses at the end of this document.

Many thanks for your participation in this research.
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Project Title:** Blended learning and professional development on the islands of the South Pacific.

**Name of Researcher:** Kamila Hoffmann

PARTICIPANT’S CONSENT

I have been informed of and understand the purpose of this study and its procedures and wish to participate. I also understand that I have a further opportunity to ask any questions about this study at any time. I understand that the data collected for this study is strictly confidential and I will not be identifiable in any report of this study. I further understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice to me.

___________________ __________________ ________________
Print name Signature Date

RESEARCHER’S STATEMENT

I have informed the above named participants of the nature and purpose of this study and have sought to answer their questions to the best of my ability. I have read, understood, and agree to abide by the Principles of Research Ethics for the Social Sciences (Swedish Research Council) in carrying out this study.

___________________ __________________ ________________
Print name Signature Date