

Research Article

Professional learning community leadership: A Facebook group as a virtual staffroom

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This study investigates the sustainability and leadership of a large (more than 26 thousand members in 2023) Czech online teachers' community, the Facebook group Učitelé+ (U+) from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to 2024. Drawing on digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews with three moderators and triangulating with eight active members, and content analysis of group interactions and rules, the research examines how the group developed internal governance, articulated values, and maintained engagement over time. Conceptualising U+ as a "virtual staffroom", the study identifies transformative leadership practices exercised by the group moderators, including value-driven rule-setting, content curation, and strategic moderation. The findings contribute to understanding how online professional communities can be purposefully led and sustained through adaptive, inclusive, and visionary leadership. This paper advances the theoretical notion of a virtual staffroom and highlights the relevance of transformative leadership in digital spaces, offering practical implications for the management of similar professional networks.

Keywords: Facebook group; Professional learning network; Support community; Teachers; Transformative leadership; Virtual staffroom

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1. Introduction

Professional online learning communities of teachers have experienced a boom in recent years (Ito, 2023; Lee et al., 2020; Marcelo-Martínez et al., 2024; Nelimarkka et al., 2021; Prestridge, 2019; Randahl et al., 2023; Yang & Chang, 2024). Involvement in professional learning communities helps teachers successfully face ever-emerging new challenges (such as global pandemics, war conflicts with economic and political global impacts, the rise of populism and radicalism, the fragmentation of societies, and technological innovation, including the boom in AI) for which their initial teacher education has not prepared them (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2021; Mutesasira & Morongve, 2024). Professional communities respond more quickly and flexibly than formal institutions and are therefore better placed to meet many of a teacher's needs.

Professional learning communities have therefore become the subject of many studies that analyse their content (Alwafi, 2021; Greenhow et al., 2021) and ways of participation (Prestridge, 2019; Randahl et al., 2023), map benefits for members (Ito, 2023; Marcelo-Martínez et al., 2024), compare and classify communities (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018), and describe their dynamics

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(Muls et al., 2019). Many professional communities are declining as a result of a lack of member participation and a gradual decline in member benefits. Therefore, attention has been paid to the sustainability of communities, identifying the quality of moderation, the form of rules set, and the structuring of content as key factors (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Nelimarkka et al., 2021).

Our paper follows up on these discussions and focuses on a particular large (26,000 members 2023, 45,000 end of 2024²), successful and still-developing community in the Czech Republic, the Facebook group Učitelé+ (U+), and specifically on its moderation, governance and rule setting.

As sustainability and ways to achieve it are among the most striking challenges regarding online professional learning communities, we aim to answer the following question: *How did an online teachers' community navigate its sustainability from the COVID-19 pandemic till 2024?* We consider sustainability to be the capacity of a professional learning community to maintain members' interest, support their professional growth, and survive beyond the initial start-up phase (Wideman, 2010). We are convinced that answering the question may contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of online teachers' communities and enrich the research in this field.

In answering our research question, we build on two traditions closely linked to the concept of sustainability in online professional communities (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Wideman 2010). First, we assume that the sustainability of a community depends on the development and maintenance of its inner values, rules, and practices (Hillman et al. 2021; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). These elements constitute the normative and operational foundations of the community, and their evolution – in response to both internal dynamics and external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures – plays a critical role in shaping community resilience (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2021; Nelimarkka et al., 2021).

Second, we posit that the formulation, enforcement, and potential adaptation of these inner values, rules, and practices are significantly influenced by community moderation (Hillman et al., 2021) and leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014; Shields, 2010). Leadership in this context encompasses not only formal authority but also the capacity to articulate a vision, set direction, and sustain member engagement – factors which have been identified as essential to the survival and growth of professional learning communities (Lei et al., 2024; Leithwood, 2005). Together with Hillman et al. (2021), we see a research gap in the lack of information about how groups are moderated. However, we expand on their approach by viewing the practices of the moderators of an online group over a longer period and as an expression of community leadership.

2. Theoretical Framing and State of the Art

To answer our research question – How did an online teachers' community navigate its sustainability from the COVID-19 pandemic till 2024? – we draw on existing knowledge of teachers' professional communities as well as leadership in these communities. We begin by discussing the characteristics of professional groups³ of teachers in both offline and online settings and then proceed to the literature on teacher leadership as a key element of community sustainability.

² Group statistics table: Facebook_Group_Insights_Members_2-21-2023/Annual Report of Teachers' Platform

³ Concerning teachers' groups, the literature often uses the words 'network' and 'community' in a similar way; for networks, the literature uses adjectives such as support, learning, or development, while for communities, it uses professional, peer, or support. A network is focused and consists of people from different physical places; the term is often used for groups that meet online, whereas a community is a group that has a common interest, and its members provide social support to each other (Lantz-Anderson et al., 2018). For our research subject, we use the word 'community' to underline the social exchange that the use of the term implies, although it is based online.

2.1. From Staffrooms to Teachers' Professional Online Communities

Staffrooms, the primary physically bounded professional communities within schools, have long attracted scholarly attention (e.g. Christensen, 2013; Downey, 2015; Hammersley, 1984; Kainan, 1997; Lisahunter et al., 2011). These spaces enable teachers to share professional experiences, worries, and successes and to offer each other support and social interaction (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Švaříček, 2009). Staffrooms are social groups with a specific structure and culture. There are various hierarchies and relations in staffrooms, and also shared aims, habits, and traditions. One key characteristic of a staffroom is that it is driven and managed by a leader, typically the principal, who establishes the "school culture" (Morris et al., 2020). While hierarchical structures may exist, staffrooms are fundamentally spaces where inner values, shared rules, and professional practices emerge and are maintained.

Although traditionally physically bounded, the concept of the "staffroom" has been extended metaphorically to describe online professional communities (Lefebvre, 1991; Lisahunter et al., 2011; Mewburn & Thompson, 2013; Muralová & Hejzlarová, 2022; Randahl et al., 2023). Teachers have been increasingly turning to such digital spaces – especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic – for just-in-time support, advice, and emotional relief (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2021; Mutesasira & Morongve, 2024). These online communities serve similar functions to traditional staffrooms, e.g. providing collegial support and sharing expertise (Nelmarkka et al., 2021; Randahl et al., 2023). However, they differ in their form and structure: online communities are less hierarchical and more egalitarian with fluid membership, fuzzy boundaries and informal roles (Mercieca & Kelly, 2018; Randahl et al., 2023; Trust et al., 2016).

The research of professional online communities has been undergoing rapid change as the development of online spaces is also continuously changing. While Recker et al. (2007) called for how teachers use social networks for professional development and what they do with the resources to be studied, Kidd (2013) was already exploring the habitual social practices of new teachers and Nelmarkka et al. (2021) conducted longitudinal research on participants' activity levels and dynamics through time in a professional development social group for teachers and what topics were discussed there, and Lee et al. (2020) how to design a sustainable online community for teachers.

Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018) distinguishes between "formally-organized" and "informally-developed" professional online communities. Informal communities are mostly formed on social networks and allow teachers to safely ask for help thanks to the distance and the possibility of anonymity. They provide important support for solitary teachers, e.g., at the beginning of their careers or occasional teachers (Mercieca & Kelly, 2018).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, activity in teachers' online communities intensified (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020; Mutesasira & Morongve, 2024; Yao et al., 2021). Teachers sought advice, solidarity, and innovation at a time when traditional school-based support structures were disrupted (Alwafi, 2021; Greenhow et al., 2021). Reaching out to teachers' communities also helped teachers reduce isolation and stress (Mutesasira & Morongve, 2024). Studies document the emotional and professional functions these communities fulfilled during crisis periods, as well as the emergence of new micro-policies inside them (Muralová & Hejzlarová, 2022).

While participation levels vary – with often a small core of active contributors (Nelmarkka et al., 2021) – the importance of moderation and facilitation in ensuring the vitality of professional online communities is stressed (Hilman et al., 2001). The sustainability of an online community is not automatic; it depends on the moral, instrumental, and affective commitment of their members and requires active efforts to foster participation, trust, and norm enforcement (Lee et al., 2020).

2.2. Leadership in Teachers' Groups

The second key theoretical point of our study is that community leadership plays a crucial role in maintaining and adapting the shared rules, values, and practices in teachers' groups. While offline communities often have clearly defined leadership roles (e.g. school principals), online

communities for teachers may exhibit more diffuse or emergent forms of leadership, because they have non-hierarchical structure and equal relations (Alwafi, 2021).

Leadership is fundamentally about “setting direction” and “exercising influence” (Leithwood, 2005, p.1). In school contexts, pedagogical leaders articulate shared visions, support others’ development, and create structures that promote collaboration and innovation (Bush & Glover, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008). These roles can be fulfilled by formal leaders but also by peer educators and moderators in informal settings (Carrington et al., 2024).

There are multiple models of educational leadership: instructional, transformational, distributed, moral, or authentic (Bush & Glover, 2014; Leithwood, 2005). While each model emphasises different aspects, they all assume some form of responsibility for guiding shared practice and sustaining group coherence. Whereas instructional leadership aims to narrow the focus of leaders to the core technology of their organisations, transformational leadership asks them to adopt a much broader, more systemic view of their work (Leithwood, 2005; Wilson Heenan et al., 2023).

Something that is particularly relevant is the concept of pedagogical leadership, which stresses leaders’ involvement in supporting others (both teachers and students), coordinating professional learning, offering pedagogical expertise and fostering shared purpose (Cuban, 1998; Robinson et al., 2008). Leadership does not necessarily refer only to school principals; pedagogical leaders can also be educators in other positions (Carrington et al., 2024).

This notion of leadership aligns with the functions observed in sustaining online professional communities – where moderation, vision-setting, and the maintenance of care practices all contribute to community sustainability (Lee et al., 2020) and the use of facilitation techniques and community management is considered a precondition for better professional development of community members (Nelimarkka et al., 2021). Therefore, in our study, we focus on the position of U+ moderators and their performance of leadership roles.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To answer the question of navigating the sustainability of U+ in time, we used a qualitative research design: digital ethnography. Digital ethnography was adapted from traditional ethnography. It studies social interactions, cultures, and communities in space mediated by digital platforms. As digital platforms increasingly facilitate the professional environment of education, digital ethnography proves to be a useful tool for this environment, especially in the case of the small-scale exploratory research approach we designed. We focused on the activity and dynamics of a Facebook group as a digital medium (Pink et al., 2016).

3.2. Participants

The study was conducted in the Facebook group Učitelé+. The group is an online space for teachers; it had 7,000 members at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic (March 2020), 26,000 members at the beginning of 2023, and 45,000 at the end of 2024. We have utilised the content of the Facebook group, including access for moderators. The three interviewed participants were all of the moderators of the U+ Facebook group before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For those, we use the pseudonyms Alex, Dylan, and Tylor to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. We also interviewed eight of the most active members of U+.

3.3. Data Collection

We used two types of data: 1) digital content and 2) the perspectives of moderators and active members.

The digital content was conducted by participatory observation in the online environment of the Facebook group community. We did not only work with public content (group rules, membership growth, discussion content, and post tags) but also had access to data through

administrator rights in the spring of 2023, which gave us a comprehensive view (statistics, frequent contributors) and the ability to bypass the Facebook algorithms.

To gain perspectives from participants, we conducted three semi-structured interviews with the moderators using purposive sampling and eight short semi-structured interviews with active members of the group. Similarly to Hillman et al. (2021), we focused on the moderators' perspective and included moderators of the U+ Facebook group who moderated the group from the beginning of the group up to the end of research. All the interviews were conducted in February 2023. A few follow-up questions were asked via online messaging to explain the function and background of some of the group rules. Each interviewee was informed in detail of the purpose of the interview and signed an informed consent form. In addition, short interviews with eight frequent contributors to the group were conducted to triangulate the information.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data from the interviews was coded in two phases. First, we used inductive manual open coding to understand the management of the community and identify the values and practices of the moderators. The analysis revealed the vision of the moderators, so in the second phase thematic analysis based on the principles of transformative leadership was conducted. We employed content analysis of digital content (posts, rules) to triangulate the data from the interviews.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Foundation and Background of the U+ Online Community

The U+ Facebook group was established in 2017 along with its owner organisation the Teacher's Platform (Učitelská platforma, NGO); it is one of many teachers' organisations in the Czech educational space.⁴ The Czech education system is highly decentralised and fragmented, as a result of which it consists of an enormous number of schools with their own curricula and a staggering number of school founders (the ministry, regions, or municipalities) but also many educational and teachers' organisations (Muralová & Hejzlarová, 2022). The Teacher's Platform was established as an attempt to create an umbrella organisation for teachers and to promote teachers expertise, to share good practice, and consult teachers' issues. Its Facebook group U+ is a complementary product. Tylor: "So the U+ group emerged from the need to help teachers, to give them some space to share experiences, to help each other, and to develop each other, so that those students have better teachers, yeah, it's actually fulfilling the vision of the association." According to the informants, there was a desire to bring Czech teachers together in an organisation that would "give the teachers a voice" (Alex) – to influence educators, policymakers, and the public interested in education. A byproduct of the NGO initiative was the Facebook group, as Facebook was the most widely used social network in 2017 in Czechia and the typical users of Facebook were mostly between 35 and 60 years old, which corresponded with the structure of the Czech teaching profession. The moderators describe U+ as a space for practising teachers to share their problems, concerns, and frustrations, as well as ideas and good practices. The '+' in the name of U+ signifies its positive spirit. It also serves to distinguish this group from another one that was founded around the same time and was rather conservative: "not that there are teachers and anyone else, and not that you necessarily have to write positively, but one should at least write constructively, which I think resonated a lot with some of the teachers" (Alex).

⁴ Other big teacher support groups on Czech Facebook are Učitelé učitelům.cz (Teachers to teachers, 17 thousand), Pedagogická komora (Pedagogical chamber, 11 thousand), školáci.com (schoolers, 15 thousand), Učitelé a vychovatelé MŠ a ŠD (Teachers and carers, 8 thousand), Učitelé (Teachers, 8 thousand), and Učitelé přírodovědných předmětů (Teachers of science, 6 thousand). Numbers of members are from March 2023.

4.2. COVID-19 as an Accelerator of Professionalisation of the U+ Community

During the school lockdown (COVID-19), there was a huge expansion of U+ users from 3,000 before lockdown and about 7,000 a month after lockdown started to 26,000 in the spring of 2023. Its moderators responded to the unprecedented increase in the number of members and posts by implementing new rules to govern the group's operation during the period. The most important rule that they decided to adopt to facilitate the transparency for readers of the suddenly massively viewed group was the approval of all posts to allow them to control the content of U+ better; "We turned on approval of posts, which we didn't have from the beginning, ... because there was a lot of duplication" (Alex). The following statement announced it:

Dear colleagues, we are watching the changes in the group with concern. The spike in members who have clearly not all read the rules sufficiently is beginning to lead to arguments, attacks, and frustration on the part of formerly active members and enthusiastic new ones. We are seeing a proliferation of lively but duplicated posts, posts unrelated to the profession, and wallpapering. As the moderators of this site are limited in number, and we are running out of time to deal with all the problems individually, we are forced to resort (perhaps only for the most acute social crisis) to blanket approval of posts. We ask for your understanding; we want to keep this group clear and useful. Thank you. (Dylan, March, 2020)

The moderators began approving contributions 13 days after the start of the school lockdown. Although it was originally anticipated that this measure would be withdrawn again, it proved useful and was still in operation at the end of 2024.

The second major rule to be newly adopted to serve the users during lockdown was tagging posts. The U+ moderators encouraged users to sort their posts into tags (Facebook's term at the time). "We approved the post and then added the tags. Very few people did it automatically." (Dylan). We analysed all the tags with at least six posts between March 10 and June 30, 2020.⁵ These were 382 unique contributions from group members.

The first tagged post was a proposal to share insights about distance learning:

So, we have a number of members here who are very experienced in e-learning. Please, would they like to share their tips? I, for instance, am digging in with <https://khanovaskola.cz/>. (D, member, March 10, 2020)

The day after the schools closed, 27 unique posts were written and tagged in the group, with more than half of them related to sharing. The tagged posts were mostly about sharing online lesson guides, materials, and information about services available to teachers for free ("Kahoot! Premium now free." March 11, 2020) and also requests: "how to teach ..." advice, materials or links ("Please, does anyone have any tips for online tests or online teaching for German? Duolingo can only do English" (P, member, March 11, 2020)); then warnings and challenges:

"Dear Colleagues. I see that you are busy preparing online activities for students. We certainly don't want pupils to have holidays because of the pandemic, but we also certainly don't want them to spend ten hours a day in front of a screen just for school. Moderation is probably in order here. I believe so." (R, member, March 11, 2020).

The moderators used the tag 'distance learning' to provide information about the new rules. They contributed six posts on the first day with various pieces of advice and sharing and continued to be the main trend-setting contributors for this. Alex introduced this most-used hashtag with words of encouragement and a highlight of values:

Dear colleagues, this group (which already has 7,000 members) has behaved in an unexpected situation exactly as I would expect from great teachers – professionally and by sharing support and good practice. Reading the news and posts all around, I can't help but write, let's keep it up. Let's

⁵ These tags were: Distance learning (#výukanadálku, posts 148); MSTEams (#MSTEams, 43); Teaching suggestions (#námětydovuky, 40); Googleclassroom (#googleclassroom, 41); Apps (#aplikace, 21); From life (#zeživota, 12); Escapegames (#únikovky, 13); Employment law (#pracovněprávní, 11); Graduation (#maturita, 10); Humour (#humor, 10); Group organization (#organizaceskupiny, 7); Math (#matematika, 7); English (#angličtina, 7); School opening (#otevíráníškol, 6); Peer support (#kolegiálnípodpora, 6).

show that we are modern and flexible teachers; this is a great opportunity. I look forward to more sharing, tips, and examples of how you are doing with distance learners. We, the moderators, will try to tag posts like this with the distance learning tag for the moderators so that they're easy to find. (Alex, March, 2020)

There was a great deal of support inside U+: "Of course, for many people, the group, especially during COVID, was a matter of the heart. Those people really held on and supported each other. When someone wrote that they really couldn't do it anymore, 30 people wrote back saying that they couldn't do it either and that they understood and maybe they should take sick leave. They showed real understanding to each other. That's not quite possible now with 26,000 people. It's impossible to maintain even the apparent intimacy of the group." (Alex) The group lost some intimacy following the huge increase in the number of actors.

4.3. Moderators as Key Actors of the U+ Online Community

The main actors of the U+ network were teachers: on the one hand, the teachers who managed U+ – the moderators of the network, and on the other hand, the teachers who often contributed with their own suggestions and thus made up a large part of the content, and also, the teachers who contributed exceptionally: they gave likes and mainly consumed or only consumed the content. Other silent actors were bystanders in U+, who did not always have to be teachers, just people interested in schooling, and people who followed U+, drawing information about the teaching world (the group was visible to anybody, the approval by moderators is needed for activity). These will be dealt with in the paper only marginally, but their existence significantly influences the nature of the network and its communication; they form a collective, an audience.

The school lockdown (caused by the pandemic in 2020–2023) and the subsequent redirection to the virtual space increased the number of actors in the U+ network. This resulted in the need to adapt and refine the rules. The moderators found it necessary to take even unpopular steps and stand firmly by them. Establishing and demanding adherence to the values and rules of the U+ network was sometimes traumatic work for the moderators, which caused one of them to quit moderating at that time. The work of the moderators also started to need professionalisation, as Dylan commented: "So that's where the big influx started, and that's where we actually first applied for grants to moderate the group. That's where it was revolutionary." (Dylan) Moderators began to be rewarded a few months after the first lockdown. The amount is not a lot considering the hours worked and the moderator still has to be motivated by the U+ vision, but it was a big transformation to professionalisation and maintained the Facebook group to thrive.

The status of actors and the dynamics of contributions during the lockdown resulting from the expansion also changed. As Alex described it: "The number (of people) has gone up exponentially; the number of active discussants has gone up too, but not exponentially. ... A lot of people just hang out there and read or just wrote two questions in two years. Somehow, we know the active debaters, or we know they're there. I've never seen them in person, but we know of them." (Alex) Although the moderators play an important role within U+ in determining values and rules, the key players are the active users. The bystander actors, and thus the consumers of U+ who do not contribute, have a low-visibility but nonetheless significant role in U+, which contributes to the reach of the information shared there and the very important spillover further into physical staffrooms and classrooms. Information is also sought there by journalists, policymakers, and social scientists.

The rules of the Facebook moderators were rather complex. They were able to accept members, approve applications, approve and reject posts, remove posts and comments on them, pin and unpin posts, exclude members of the group (ban), and restrict their posts for a certain period of time (mute). They could also change the name of the Facebook group, its photo, and the privacy settings. They could also appoint another moderator and remove them. This was the official list of actions that a group moderator can perform. However, the key to our research is the internal rules and values set up by the moderators.

The moderators created and modified the rules over time according to the community's needs and values. Individual moderators also gradually specialised in various activities. Dylan monitors access to the group, "verifying each individual; either requesting a school email address or searching for them on the school website" (Alex). Tylor is primarily concerned with cultivating discussion so that the rules and values of a pleasant and welcoming environment are not violated. Alex then creates content. "I try to share things that I think are relevant" (Alex).

The moderators of the U+ network moderated the content, and their roles evolved during the creation of the group. Alex describes the beginning: "So they just agreed that the group would be public and that we just wanted to make it easy for teachers to find, so that the public could see what teachers were doing. That's why it was also agreed that the group would be moderated, so it was moderated from the beginning... so that it could be monitored and actually move in 'our direction' a little bit." (Alex) The network is not a traditional Facebook group; the moderators have their view of what it should look like, and they created and controlled the content, as confirmed by Dylan's words: "It means that we're not just moderators, we're actually like the ones who are thinking about the content. It means that we have a content vision. And we just stick to that content vision." (Dylan) From this narrative of the foundation and expansion of U+ during COVID-19, we identified certain values and practices which were present from the start but crystallised over time.

4.4. Values and Practices of the U+ Community

While the U+ moderators have a more or less clear idea of what the group is supposed to look like, what it is supposed to do, and what its content should be, other users may have different ideas. I suggest 'From the posts and interviews it is apparent that the moderators follow values that they have embodied in rules and practices. Some of the rules are explicitly formulated. These are the network guidelines posted on the Facebook group. Each contributor must agree to abide by them before posting for the first time. Alex describes the rules as follows: "So a lot of people join, and if they don't say anything, we don't deal with them. It's only when they want to post a comment that they come across our entry questions (...), but actually, they can follow the group (...) anyone can do that, and they can like it, but they can't comment until they're approved. If you approve them, they're just regular members, and they can post and comment." (Alex) Facebook used to allow groups to be found before the change, but the rules had to be accepted when one turned on tracking (Like).

Less explicit rules or guidelines are based on values that are clear and communicated internally among the moderators but are not explicitly written anywhere and are not obvious to ordinary users. These rules are consistent with the printed rules and support them. Users do not see them, but the moderators follow them when moderating the group. They include, for example, not overloading the group with too much ballast. It is derived from the written rules, but it is not explicitly mentioned there; it is related to several other rules, such as not posting many posts at once, giving links, not posting many commercial offers, and so on. These are internal rules.

Then there are negotiated rules. Rules of this last type concern ambiguous issues negotiated between the moderators in their private chat application. These are rules that might not be known to all the moderators, e.g. if the person who wants to know if we can post her advertisement is a school principal and a member of the Teachers' Platform. Therefore one moderator cannot decide on cases such as this without further information or there are controversial facts that can be viewed from different sides and according to different values and, therefore, require negotiation.

We have identified three basic values to which the rules and practices point or refer. These are a) usefulness, b) professionalism, and c) supportiveness.

Usefulness means providing content that is interesting to members, relates to their experience, and can be used in their practice. This is reflected in the moderators' efforts not to overwhelm the group with repetitions of the same or similar information, offers of educational events, and other advertisements, but also to regulate the sharing of children's work as stated by Alex: "Then I guess

we don't approve those posts that are also a lot of 'we made nice drawings with the kids and here are the pictures'. If it's a really good idea, then yeah, but otherwise, it would just be horribly cluttered."

The value of usefulness is reflected in several rules, e. g. the rule No. 2 presents the idea of unique content and no chain posts; or the rule No. 3 says that "inactive members are not allowed to provide information on training, courses, etc." Dylan points out that, especially, the refusal to all advertisement "caused huge resentment in the educational environment" among organisations and partners. "It was terribly traumatic, but we asked for respect." (Dylan) Sharing events is possible in two modes: firstly, as purely commercial, which is clearly labelled as such, and moderators control the frequency of such announcements. The second way is to share personal experiences: "If a group member says, 'I've been on teacher training and it was great', then yes (...) so we started to change that content." (Dylan)

Professionalism is ensured by a whole range of rules that determine who can become a member (primarily active teachers or teacher training students; all accounts are veriflicated), but also what content is inappropriate because it would damage the good name of the teaching profession (e.g., racist or xenophobic posts, but also disrespect toward students and their families). Professionalism is emphasized because the group is public and the discussions within it help shape the image of teachers in society.

Professionalism is reflected in several internal practices; moderators have a fairly clear vision of what image teachers should or should not present, so they reject negativity, unconstructive posts and one-sided complaints. Alex explains: "We reject a post that complains about salaries or something like that if it seems to us that the discussion is built from the beginning like 'come on, let's complain about how bad things are', because maybe it seems to us that in the current economic situation, everyone is having a harder time." Similarly, Tylor states: "We wanted to say that it's not just about the money, but also about the quality of teaching and that if we want more money, we should also offer some better services for it, like to our clients or students, thinking about them as well."

The value of professionalism is also reflected in the internal rule that moderators must present teachers as a qualified and highly skilled workforce. Alex points out that they systematically refrain from publishing posts where teachers are required to work for free: "We are saying that if they want a teacher to try something, to pilot something, then they should pay him or her for it because it is the right thing to do." (Alex)

One of the internal rules is also to postpone potentially controversial posts until a time when administrators can intervene. Alex describes: "At the same time, we try to make sure there is always at least one of us... We also do that when we know there's potentially a flame post, so we wait to drop it until we have time to be there and monitor the discussion a bit." The management of members' activities is governed by relatively clear internal rules, but specific cases are still consulted within the team: "Actually, in case of some misinformation and spreading fake news, we probably exclude right away. But we always discuss it." (Alex)

Supportiveness refers to strong will to support and help each other. Tylor explains: "We envisioned it as a 'safe space' where we could share some experiences and get advice and admit that we are not good at something and ask how others are handling it."

Supportiveness strengthens in situations of crisis. Alex illustrates this by showing the situation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic: "There was distance learning; nobody knew how to do it, and when they were sitting at the computer, they were looking for someone to advise them. And because there were a lot of teachers who were used to sharing and who had come to the technology before the rest of us whom COVID had nudged, there was good advice being shared.... we enjoyed it so much because those people were so appreciative and it was so obvious that it was making a difference. I was just connecting strangers together over the phone. I knew that Mr. XY could set up a Google Classroom for a school. He was willing, so I simply gave the headmistress,

who was desperately texting that she just didn't know what to do, his number with his permission. They made arrangements, and he helped her set it up over the phone." (Alex)

In Table 1, we summarise the different types of rules (public, internal, and negotiated) according to the value reflected.

Table 1

Values and rules in the U+ group

	<i>Usefulness</i>	<i>Professionalism</i>	<i>Supportiveness</i>
Explicit/public rules (network guidelines, must be agreed by each contributor)	The group is moderated, and a goal is a form of unique content; chain posts are not encouraged. (No. 2). Inactive members are not allowed to provide information on training, courses, etc. (No. 3) Always share the original source. (No. 9)	The group is professional and brings together only educators (No. 1). We are professionals, and we love our work (No. 8) Respect students and their loved ones (No. 4) Racism, xenophobia, and prejudice do not belong on U+ (No. 7) Always share the original source (No. 9)	Respect each other (No. 5) Partly also No. 7 (no racism, xenophobia and prejudice) and No. 4 (respect to students)
Internal rules and practices (consensus among administrators, but not publicly formulated)	Not overwhelming by sharing repetitive posts of little value. Regulation of commercial contributions, not too frequent, and clearly labeled. Possibility to share personal experience (e. g. with course, material)	Rejecting negativity and dismissing unconstructive posts or one-sided complaints. Demanding fees for teachers' extra-curricular work. Potentially controversial posts postponed to a time when the administrators could intervene.	Strong will to support and help each other. Connecting members, tagging expert members in discussions, linking to other services (legal advice, methodological support, community of beginning teachers, community of principals, etc.)
Negotiated rules ambiguous issues, new situations, conflicts of values	Which posts to approve and which to reject? What is useful for whom? How can a post be reformulated so that it is no longer pure advertising, but rather personal sharing?	What counts as a violation of the rules? Should we intervene: mute or ban the user? Who should be added to the group? Should exceptions be made?	Who should be supported? What opinions and questions is it legit to post publicly?

These values are usually complementary but can sometimes clash. For example, moderators try to minimise anonymous posts to follow the professionalism value, as professional teachers should not be ashamed of their questions, opinions, and actions. However, in specific cases, they prioritise the value of supportiveness and allow anonymous questions to be asked in order to provide teachers with a safe space. Depending on the particular dilemma, the moderator must resolve it alone or negotiate it among the moderators as a group. In these cases, it is then necessary to negotiate which value will take precedence (this typically happens in the moderators' private chat application).

Individual moderators assign different levels of importance to different values, which sometimes requires negotiation within the group's management. "I think most of the time in that group we discuss (...) what to post and what not to post and why." (Alex) The question of

usefulness is, of course, strongly individual, which is why U+ encourages a diversity of perspectives in moderation. “So it’s good that there are people with a variety of experience, that maybe between Tylor and Jordan (moderator since 2023) there will be, I don’t know, 30 years of difference. And then there’s Jordan, who’s... I don’t know, from a little school. We are a little bit more diverse; we try not to be all from secondary schools in Prague.” (Alex)

Some values or rules are more prominent for one moderator than for another. Sometimes there is a contradiction between the rules and/or between values. For example, the internal value of usefulness, which says not to publish posts that only include links without an introduction or explanation, can clash with the rule that a useful post should be published. Alex: “... sometimes it’s a good topic, so even without the introduction, I’ll just post it ..., so that can happen...”. This sometimes needs to be negotiated amongst other actors, “... but of course someone can complain. And then the grievances are big.” (Alex)

Situations were sometimes very emotionally challenging for the moderators. They did not want to offend their colleagues in any way. However, they considered it necessary to insist on the rules they believed were essential for preserving the group’s relevance and appeal, namely its usefulness, supportiveness, and professionalism, while staying true to their values. In these cases, a moderator is subjected to pressure resulting from the contradiction between the values, i.e. being supportive, meeting the users’ needs, and being useful to other users. In some situations, to keep space supportive it is necessary to take unpopular measures to prohibit something and set strict rules of prohibition.

4.5. Transformative Leadership in U+

Analysing the leadership of the moderators, we argue that the U+ leadership corresponds to the characteristics of transformative leadership as defined by Shields (2010). Transformative leadership is a normative approach grounded in the values of equity, inclusion, excellence, and social justice. It is based on the assumption that effective learning requires individuals to feel accepted, respected, and included, and that one of the key purposes of education is to contribute to the development of democracy by strengthening the principles of civic participation (Shields, 2010). Transformative leadership also contributes to the development of professional learning communities: it helps in their organisation, improves collective learning, and cultivates members (Lei et al., 2024).

In Table 2, we compare eight general types of transformative leadership practices, as described by Shields (2010), with specific rules, principles, and values identified within the U+ group. Table 2 shows that the practices of the U+ moderators align with the majority of transformative leadership principles, and therefore they may be considered transformative leadership. Community members are affected by that leadership in different ways according to the level of their activity and involvement. Each active member who comments or posts must accept the U+ group’s rules and, in doing so, commit to certain shared values. Active contributors interact with these rules more frequently, for instance through the post approval process. However, transformative leadership impacts on passive (silent) participants as well. Even though it is not applied to them directly, they nonetheless benefit from the character of the led group, which provides useful information in a moderated and safe environment, promotes the values of mutual respect and professionalism, and contributes to the public image of the teaching profession.

5. Discussion

From the data presented above we conclude that the U+ Facebook group displays characteristics associated with traditional school staffrooms, as described in the literature (e.g. Christensen, 2013; Downey, 2015; Kainan, 2008; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Like physical staffrooms, U+ is a space for teachers to share work-related successes, frustrations, and humour, exchange advice, and seek emotional support. It is also a space for relaxation; it fosters collegiality and supports the building

Table 2
Principles of Transformative Leadership Presented in U+

Principle of transformative leadership	Where the principles can be found within the U+ FB group	Data evidence
A mandate for deep and equitable change	The group is moderated; challenging the common (self-) presentation of teachers; trying to show that teachers are constructive, hardworking, and passionate about their work, and encouraging them to be so.	Rule no. 7: We are professionals, and we love our work. "Let's show that we are modern and flexible teachers; this is a great opportunity." (Alex, a post in March 2020) "We wanted to say that it's not just about the salary, but also about the quality of teaching." (Tylor) "Distance learning is an opportunity to try it without frontal learning, to leave the position of the "overworked" teacher in the classroom, without whom nothing can be done, to leave behind the motivation of the grade, to lead a little more independence again (...) It is an opportunity for everyone to learn effective communication and self-organisation, to become freer but, therefore, more responsible for their learning." (Alex, a post in March 2020)
The need to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice and to reconstruct them	Challenging established frameworks regarding the (self-) presentation of teachers (complaining about salaries), but also traditional pedagogical and didactic practices (comparing children, power, penalising mistakes...). Moderators eliminate misinformation and fake news; rule to cite primary sources.	"We'll reject a post that complains about salaries or something like that (...) it seems to us that in the current economic situation, everyone is having a harder time." (Alex) "...misinformation and spreading fake news we probably exclude right away." (Alex)
A focus on democracy, emancipation, and equity	The value of supportiveness. Efforts to encourage teachers to be active and share the practice of valuing questions even when disagreeing. Decent treatment of teachers – respect and decent pay for extra work.	"We envisioned it as a 'safe space' where we could share some experiences and get advice." (Tylor) Rules nos. 5 and 6: Respect each other. Racism, xenophobia, and prejudice do not belong on U+.
The need to address the inequitable distribution of power	Value of receptiveness to students and parents. Support for inclusive education.	Rule no. 4: Respect students and their loved ones.

Table 2 continued

<i>Principle of transformative leadership</i>	<i>Where the principles can be found within the U+ FB group</i>	<i>Data evidence</i>
An emphasis on both the public and private (individual and collective) good	Professional identity (only teachers in the group), professional pride, respect for teachers, pupils, and parents. Visibility of the group so that people can read how teachers think. Rule no. 1: The group is professional and brings together only educators.	"I try to share things that I find relevant because a lot of people share them on their walls and don't put them on U+." (Alex) "...we throw a screenshot of a post that's hanging in the queue into that chat group, and we discuss whether or not to post it." (Alex)
The necessity of balancing critique with promise	Support even for silly questions with which they disagree.	"...not to beat up a teacher who is trying to do some reflection by saying 'How could they do it so stupidly for 20 years?' That's terribly discouraging. They're trying. (...) People come from different locations, university backgrounds, and general backgrounds; they were more or less lucky to have a school that shaped them in some way early on." (Alex) "...and admit that we are not good at something and ask how others are handling it." (Tylor)
The call to exhibit moral courage	Not to complain primarily, but to be constructive, to look for solutions, to take responsibility, to be able to admit mistakes	
An emphasis on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness	The supportiveness value encourages people to share their problems, concerns, and frustrations, as well as ideas and good practice. The group was formed because teachers needed a credible and respected teachers' organisation to represent them. Public content, the group as a public service, developing discussion on systemic issues.	"Dear colleagues, this group has behaved in an unexpected situation exactly as I would expect from great teachers – professionally and by sharing support and good practice. (...) Let's keep it up. We, the administrators, will try to tag posts, so that they're easy to find." (Alex in a post in March 2020)

of teaching identity, particularly for early career teachers or teachers (Mercieca & Kelly, 2018) in a position of dissent in their schools. Even though the group operates in the digital environment, U+ mirrors many functions of the staffroom. Therefore it can be considered to be a virtual staffroom (Mouralová & Hejzlarová, 2022; Randahl et al., 2023).

The notion of a virtual staffroom allows us to underline the group structures. Compared to other teachers' groups, the staffroom is hierarchically structured: it has clear leadership in the principal and school management. Mere group moderators in usual Facebook groups take on the form of group leaders in the case of U+. The U+ moderators have a range of roles, not only those identified by Hillman et al. (2021), namely overseeing rules, facilitating, nurturing relationships, or providing expertise, but also articulating the group's vision and core values, setting rules, and giving direction. Thus, U+ differs from other informal teachers' online communities (cf. Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018); it is not simply a spontaneous and undirected community, but its moderators exercise a distinct leadership style that shapes the form of the community. This goes against the general expectations of the online environment, which tends to be perceived as egalitarian (e.g. Alwafi, 2021; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018; Trust et al., 2016). In the U+ group, we see a clear hierarchy in managing content, setting rules, and controlling group dynamics. The moderators demonstrate the ability to direct the community and create a space with clear values.

In their statements, the moderators/leaders of the U+ group strongly emphasise the values and requirements that members are expected to uphold. Their values are strongly present in what they do, and they encourage the U+ group members and other stakeholders to share them. The community's philosophy, structures, and activities aim to achieve their shared vision (Bush & Glover, 2003) of an inclusive, democratic, and professional community. The leaders state similar values and beliefs in the interviews, although their emphases diverge in places. Visions and values are communicated to the community through the group's rules. While the values remain stable, the rules are dynamic and can change. We identified three types of rules: public (published), internal (shared among moderators), and negotiated (emerging from dilemmas). These layers show that the group's leadership is not rigid but responsive and sensitive to the needs of the community and its members.

The ability to change is clearly observable during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated school closures and shift to online teaching and learning, which dramatically altered teachers' needs and organisational demands. Thanks to the pandemic, the community grew dramatically, replacing other tools for teacher support, assistance, and sharing. For such a large online professional support group to be successful, elaborate intervention facilitation techniques and community management are necessary to sustain the group's professional development (Nelimarkka et al., 2021). Through this dramatic expansion, many of the micro-policies still in place today were formed, values were refined, and rules were formulated. The COVID-19 pandemic thus acted as an accelerator which made the processes within the group more efficient and synthesised, and that made it clear rather quickly which instruments were suitable and which were not. The moderators had to adapt by approving posts, organising content through tags, and professionalising their moderating practices. This experience demonstrated their capacity to respond to crises and simultaneously use the opportunity to consolidate rules and values.

The flexibility did not stop with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic; the vitality of the community post-pandemic is notable. Our analysis shows that this is not only due to ongoing gaps in institutional support structures but also to the active leadership. The moderators/leaders continue to address new challenges – such as the influx of Ukrainian refugee students and the economic crisis or climate-related events – without compromising their values. This suggests that transformative leadership is not merely rhetorical in the U+ group but is a key tool for building a sustainable professional community even in the digital environment.

These findings support previous research on the emotional and professional function of teachers' online communities during a crisis (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2021; Mouralová & Hejzlarová, 2022). The U+ group functioned not only as a platform for knowledge

exchange but also as a coping mechanism during a period of high stress and professional uncertainty. The emotional safety and collective validation provided by the group – especially visible in the early lockdown posts – echo the findings on teachers' need for contextualised, peer-based support networks. These aspects of emotional labour and shared vulnerability are an essential, though often overlooked, dimension of professional learning in online environments.

Although the group originated as a grassroots initiative and continues to rely primarily on volunteer work, enthusiasm, and the efforts of specific individuals, a certain degree of professionalisation in its administration contributes to its sustainability. This is evident in the increasing specialisation and division of labour among the moderators (which corresponds to the recommendations of Hillman, 2021), as well as in the group's connection to a professional teaching organisation, even though it is a non-governmental and non-profit entity, which enables a degree of substitutability and continuity.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how a large professional Facebook group of Czech teachers, Učitelé+, navigated its sustainability from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic until 2024. Addressing a key research gap concerning the lack of information about how groups like online professional communities are moderated, we focused on the evolution of group norms, values, and rules, as well as the role of moderators as community leaders. By conceptualising U+ as a "virtual staffroom," we examined the group's inner dynamics and governance structures through the lens of transformative leadership theory.

Our findings reveal that U+ is not merely an informal peer support network; it is a purposefully shaped professional learning community governed by a clearly articulated vision and set of values – usefulness, professionalism, and supportiveness. The moderators' leadership extended beyond typical group administration: they engaged in vision-setting, rule-making, value negotiation, and community moderation in ways that align closely with Shields' (2010) principles of transformative leadership. These included fostering democratic participation, addressing inequities, and creating a safe and inclusive environment for teachers' professional and emotional development.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst that forced rapid innovation in the group's governance. The moderators responded by implementing systematic rule-based practices such as post approval, content tagging, and value-guided moderation, which strengthened group coherence and resilience. This adaptation of the leadership not only ensured the group's survival during a time of crisis but laid a foundation for its continued relevance and vitality in addressing subsequent challenges, such as refugee integration and systemic educational crises.

Through this case study, we contribute theoretically by extending the concept of the staffroom into the digital domain and empirically by demonstrating that transformative leadership can be enacted effectively in virtual communities of teachers. Our findings suggest that successful and sustainable professional online communities require more than shared interests and open platforms; they demand intentional, values-based leadership that adapts to community needs while remaining committed to a unifying vision.

7. Limitations

This study is based on a single case: the U+ Facebook group. Thus, its findings are context-specific and cannot be automatically generalised to all teachers' online communities. The unique characteristics of the Czech educational landscape, the specific developmental trajectory of the U+ group, and its linkage to a broader professional organisation all shape the findings in ways that may not apply elsewhere. Nevertheless, the analytical insights into transformative leadership, rule-setting, and community dynamics may offer valuable reference points for similar digital professional networks operating in other cultural or institutional settings.

The second limitation concerns the researchers' positionality. Both authors were passive members of the U+ group prior to and during the research process. While this position facilitated

prolonged observation and access to group dynamics, it also carries the risk of interpretive bias. To mitigate this, we engaged in reflective practices, team triangulation, and data triangulation by combining interviews, content analysis, and observations from multiple data sources, including contributions from group members with varying levels of activity.

Lastly, as this study focuses on a social media platform subject to rapid technological and policy changes, some findings – particularly those regarding moderation tools and interaction patterns – may become obsolete over time. Despite this, the study offers enduring insights into leadership practices and value-based governance in digital professional communities.

8. Implications

Our study has both theoretical and practical implications. Studying the structure and leadership of online communities has proved to be worthwhile. This has opened up a number of questions for further research, such as: What rules and mechanisms help ensure sustainability? What demands does leadership (specifically transformative leadership) place on leaders and moderators? Is a transformative dimension necessary for sustainability?

The internet is saturated with abandoned or overwhelmed platforms. Our case presents one possible pathway to achieving sustainability and success in a professional online learning community. Good content, shared interests, and broad appeal are not sufficient on their own. Effective moderation, guided by clearly articulated rules and transparent values, is also essential. Investing in group leadership pays off – establishing clear communication among moderators, ensuring leadership continuity and substitutability, and distributing tasks all contribute to long-term viability. Having the support of an affiliated organisation, even one that provides only symbolic compensation, has also proved beneficial. The model of transformative leadership has shown itself to be applicable in the online context: it is indeed possible to promote equity, democracy, and social justice in digital communities, thereby contributing to meaningful change.

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