

## ARTICLE

# Teacher Educators' Challenges, Opportunities and Contemplations on Self-Determined Learning: Insights from a Qualitative-Constructivist Study

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## ABSTRACT

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher education has pivoted toward self-determined learning, or heutagogy, a paradigm shift that demands increased learner autonomy and a radical redistribution of pedagogical responsibility. This qualitative-constructivist study explores how two learning communities of practice (CoPs), comprised of teacher educators, navigated the complexities of adopting this approach within their respective institutions. Through categorical content analysis of meeting recordings and semi-structured interviews, the research identifies a central tension between educators' traditional roles as "gatekeepers" of academic knowledge and the heutagogical transition toward becoming mentors who facilitate student agency. Participants voiced significant concerns regarding the stability of canonical knowledge, the complexities of self-assessment, and the potential for grade inflation within rigid academic frameworks. However, the sources emphasize that these CoPs provided a vital "safe space" for collaborative reflection, effectively mitigating the professional loneliness often accompanying pedagogical innovation. The findings suggest that while heutagogy requires a profound epistemological revolution, its successful institutionalization depends on "bottom-up" initiatives fostered by lecturers and supported by "top-down" administrative openness. Ultimately, the sources advocate for the continued expansion of these communities to reshape perceptions of teaching and learning within both higher education and clinical school settings. By fostering a non-judgmental environment, these CoPs serve as essential catalysts for transforming teacher

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training into a more flexible, student-centered endeavor.

**Keywords:** Heutagogy; Self-Determined Learning; Learning Community; Community of Practice; Teacher Education

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, following the COVID-19 crisis and the rapid expansion of innovative technologies for online learning, teacher education has undergone significant transformation. This shift requires learners to become increasingly independent, take greater responsibility for their learning, and manage their time effectively<sup>[1]</sup>. Consequently, the skills of autonomous learners have become more essential, accompanied by a growing awareness of the need to reshape perceptions of education, learning, and teaching<sup>[2]</sup>. These shifts affect not only learners but also teacher educators, who are often required to acquire new pedagogical and technological skills while adapting to more flexible and less centralized modes of instruction. Many educators, therefore, regard the changes brought about by the crisis as an opportunity to reconsider traditional paradigms of teaching, learning, and knowledge, and to embrace new epistemological approaches<sup>[3, 4]</sup>.

The concept of self-determined learning, known as heutagogy<sup>[5]</sup>, has emerged as a response to the challenges faced by educators amid crisis<sup>[5, 6]</sup>. This approach proposes an epistemological shift in the perception of learning and emphasizes the development of essential skills for independent learning<sup>[7–9]</sup>. According to heutagogy, learners assume responsibility for selecting topics for inquiry within a given content framework. They determine their learning methods, choose collaborators, select information sources, define learning outcomes, and decide how to present their findings. In addition, the learners assess their own learning, as they enter into an ongoing dialogue with their mentors<sup>[10–12]</sup>. Although the concept of self-determined learning (heutagogy) shares certain features with self-regulated learning (SRL) and self-determination theory (SDT), it represents a distinct pedagogical paradigm. SRL focuses on the development of metacognition, motivation, and strategic action, while SDT posits that human growth and motivation arise from fulfilling the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness<sup>[13]</sup>. Both emphasize self-regulation and motivation within teacher-guided frameworks; however, heutagogy extends these principles by granting learners full

autonomy to define, direct, and evaluate their own learning through the cultivation of agency, reflection, and capability development<sup>[14]</sup>.

Over the past few years, two distinct learning communities within separate colleges have dedicated themselves to exploring the feasibility and advancement of teaching rooted in heutagogical conceptualizations within the realms of teacher education and school environments. These communities convened regularly, engaging in discussions, experiments, and examinations of the implications of this conceptualization on educational practices within their respective institutions. Organized and facilitated by a group of educators, these institutional learning communities served as forums for collaborative inquiry and professional development. This paper outlines a study conducted by three lecturers who led these communities, offering insights into their experiences and findings.

Although the concept of an asynchronous heutagogical learning community of practice is not new<sup>[15]</sup>, this study of two such communities contributes to the existing literature and introduces several innovative dimensions: (a) it is the first to examine two heutagogical learning communities composed entirely of practicing teacher educators, operating concurrently in two teacher education colleges; (b) unlike earlier heutagogical learning communities, the members of these communities met synchronously and on a regular basis over an extended period; and (c) both the teacher educators participating in the communities and the college administrations that supported them engaged deeply with the challenges and opportunities of integrating the heutagogical approach into their institutions, thus lending this study practical educational significance.

### 1.1. Learning Communities of Practice

Learning communities of practice are groups of learners who possess specialized knowledge and skills within a particular domain, where they engage in ongoing reflection and examination of their practices<sup>[16–18]</sup>. Each community shares a common vision, goals, and values, convening regularly to

exchange knowledge, explore practices, and propose innovations within their field. Despite often holding unofficial status within organizations, these communities play a strategic role, particularly in teacher education, where knowledge is recognized as a valuable organizational asset. Participants within these communities exchange and interpret information dynamically, contributing to individual and collective learning. Through their collaborative efforts, learning communities of practice empower members to lead, innovate, and advance their organizations or institutions while fostering a shared sense of identity among participants<sup>[19–21]</sup>. Founded in 2013, the first Heutagogy Community of Practice aimed to promote awareness and learning about heutagogy, and to advance its practice through the framework of communities of practice<sup>[22]</sup>.

This article presents a study examining how a community of practice composed of teacher educators navigated perceptual challenges in teaching and learning during the post-COVID period, particularly while adopting a heutagogical approach.

## 1.2. The First Community

In recent years, the college in which this community was established faced many changes and was searching for ways to adapt its study programs and its modes of teaching to the twenty-first century. The COVID crisis served as a turning point for the college, recognizing the need for the development of autonomy, choice, and self-management skills, which had hitherto been expressed to a limited extent.

As a first step, a call was sent out to the college's faculty for participation in the heutagogical community. Afterwards, personal conversations were held with anyone who expressed an interest in the process. Finally, a group of 11 lecturers was formed, who attended the meetings. The community included senior lecturers from the college, lecturers who held mid-level administration positions, and young lecturers, who were at the beginning of their academic career.

The learning community met online for 10 meetings, with each meeting lasting for three academic hours, and the participants were asked to commit to attending all of the meetings. Two facilitators led the meetings. One was a faculty member from the college, who had three years of experience in self-determined teaching in her education courses, and who was a member of the inter-college heutagogy learning

community. The second facilitator was a faculty member at another academic institution, with over ten years of experience in researching and teaching the heutagogical approach in both a teachers' college and a university.

In two of the meetings, guests from outside the college who had experience with heutagogy-type teaching in schools and colleges were invited to attend. Based on the needs of the group members, the participants and the facilitators determined the content of the meetings. The syllabus of the community was an "evolving syllabus," which was not set ahead of time. The content discussed in the meetings focused on theoretical and practical knowledge. Each of the meetings was recorded so that the group members could use the recordings as a tool for learning.

## 1.3. The Second Community

The second community was also established in a large teacher education college. A group of lecturers in the Faculty of Education was invited to participate in the learning community that would focus on self-determined learning.

The participation was proposed to instigate a shift in the perceptions of both instructors and students regarding learning and teaching processes in an era where knowledge is universally accessible and technology enables learning beyond the constraints of time and place. Grounded in the initiators' worldview, this initiative sought to provide learners and educators with freedom, autonomy, and the ability to choose what and how to study, while encouraging independent and critical thinking about their learning processes. Within this framework, the learning community aimed to create a space where instructors could share experiences, reflect collaboratively, and explore the principles and applications of the heutagogical approach in teacher education.

Members of this community met online every four weeks. In keeping with the heutagogical approach, people joined the learning community out of free choice: there were no manifest or latent obligatory requirements to participate. Approximately seven lecturers participated regularly in the meetings and another dozen participated from time to time, based on the topics of discussion and their personal timetables. Six of the participants had prior experience in teaching courses using the heutagogical approach. The dean of the faculty, like the heads of the departments in the faculty that participated in the community's activities, contributed to the

continuation and stabilization of the community.

In contrast to the first community, this community did not include a senior expert in heutagogy. Members independently selected discussion topics for each meeting according to their interests. During the meetings, participants presented examples and raised theoretical and practical dilemmas that highlighted the tension between structured academic learning and the autonomy encouraged by self-determined learning. A distinguishing feature of this community, differing from the first, was its members' deliberate choice not to record the meetings, in order to create an open environment that supported free and authentic expression.

## 1.4. Research Questions

The two learning communities provided distinct yet complementary contexts for exploring how teacher educators engage with, interpret, and implement heutagogical principles within their professional environments. Examining these communities made it possible to gain insights into the processes, challenges, and reflections that accompany a pedagogical shift toward self-determined learning in higher education.

The research questions addressed in this study were: How do teacher educators adapt to changes in perceptions of teaching and learning in the post-COVID-19 era, and what considerations do they raise as they adopt the heutagogical approach?

## 2. Materials and Methods

This case study was conducted within a qualitative-constructivist framework<sup>[23–25]</sup>, employing a two-stage categorical content analysis of the two heutagogy learning communities. Initially, we analyzed recordings of synchronous discussions during community meetings, as well as asynchronous written communications exchanged between community members following the meetings. Additionally, we examined data from 12 semi-structured interviews exploring participants' attitudes towards self-determined learning and the nature of institutional learning community activities.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions: What brought you to the learning community? How did you feel during the community meetings? Which principles or ideas you encountered in heutagogy were familiar to you or

aligned with your views, and which provoked or still provoke resistance? What kinds of discussions arose within the group, and what did you think about them? Do you currently teach, or plan to incorporate, principles from the heutagogy approach in your teaching? What concerns do you have, and what would help you to solve these concerns? To what extent do you think this approach could be suitable for teacher education or for school students, and under what conditions or support could you integrate self-determined learning into your teaching?

Furthermore, a focus group comprising the four facilitators of the communities provided additional insights. Triangulation of these diverse data sources through dual coding enhanced the reliability and validity of our findings.

The analysis process and categorization followed both deductive and inductive approaches<sup>[26]</sup>. In the deductive stage, three main categories were formulated based on the research questions and the researchers' conceptualizations, informed by relevant literature on learning communities<sup>[27]</sup>. These categories delineated learning communities according to: (1) their shared field of interest (heutagogy); (2) the characteristics of community members (lecturers in colleges of teacher education); and (3) practice (implementation of heutagogical approaches in colleges and schools). Subsequently, in the inductive stage, the data were further scrutinized, with text segmented into units of analysis and sub-categories identified and named. This iterative process allowed for the refinement and alignment of sub-categories with the main categories, enriching our understanding of the nuances within each theme. The study received the approval of the Institutional Ethics Committee. All of the participants approved the use of the recordings and the interviews for research purposes. Since the two colleges are relatively small and the participants could be easily identified if their specific positions were disclosed, we chose to report only that they are lecturers, without providing any additional details.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. The First Main Category: The Encounter with the Heutagogy Approach, Perceptions and Beliefs

The community participants expressed a complex, multi-faceted understanding of the heutagogy approach. On

one hand, some criticized the traditional approach and embraced the heutagogical conceptualization. On the other hand, others voiced concerns and partial criticism of heutagogy. The challenges and opportunities connected to adopting the idea were central to the learning communities' discourse.

### 3.1.1. Embracing the Idea

Most participants expressed interest in the heutagogy approach. After all, they had freely chosen to become part of the heutagogical learning community. Some found that the approach matched their worldviews: "I can tell you that the principle of this choice is a principle in which I believe" (A.L.). Others noted they had used similar methods without naming them as heutagogy: "I have often felt that these things are the same, but different [...] they are very similar to things that people already do" (M.).

In addition, the participants sensed that heutagogy makes it possible for them to pave a new road for its application: "I felt that it [...] connects to my way of thinking [...] it leads me forward to other ways and to other ways of thinking" (T). Nevertheless, embracing the approach was also accompanied by different fears concerning its application. The essence of these concerns is explored below.

### 3.1.2. Criticism of the Approach

In the learning communities, members voiced criticism concerning the degree of freedom that heutagogy allows: "[...] the principle of freedom is a principle in which I believe, but with limitations. Perhaps, the limitations need to be clearer than heutagogy gives [...]. Freedom is certainly inappropriate for college studies" (A.L.).

Although there was criticism of the current state of educational system, this did not prevent participants from raising criticism about self-determined learning:

There is no doubt that what happens today in the education system isn't working [...]. On the other hand, I think that it's like when someone completely takes the pendulum to the other extreme, they ignore the disadvantages (A.D.).

From the criticism raised by participants, we learn about the difficulty in the adoption of heutagogy and the profound cognitive shift that it entails, which is pertinent to academic learning. The community members are deliberat-

ing on the challenging and significant impact of the heutagogical principle of emancipation from academic constraints, concerning the status of knowledge and their responsibility towards it and towards the learners.

### 3.1.3. Change in the Perception of the Status of Knowledge

The freedom of choice of students in self-determined learning raised a number of questions among community members concerning the status of knowledge and its structure. Some participants averred that there is basic knowledge that everyone needs to know: "[...] there is a professional gradation in each field that one needs to understand" (A.D.). These participants adhered to the traditional approach to academic study, in relation to knowledge, and wanted to modify heutagogy to fit their approach to education: "At the end of the course, will we be able to say that the students learned the basic concepts and theories?" (Y.R.).

Members, who held this stance, attacked the undermining of the importance of canonical knowledge. They perceived that, according to heutagogy, 'anything goes', since there is no hierarchy of agreed-upon knowledge. However, most of the members expressed a complex stance and were less resolute about how they perceived the status of knowledge. As one member noted, "Even though I am very progressive [...] there are people who know something about a given topic" (M.).

The participants are required to contend with the tension wherein, on one hand, they advocate for the existence of core knowledge and emphasize the imperative of knowledge transmission, while on the other hand, they also question the veracity of existing knowledge and the stability of the canon in their possession. One of the participants noted that there is a need for canonical knowledge. However, she immediately added, "A canon is a dynamic thing [...] it can't remain static" (Y.I.). In order to solve this quandary, some members proposed combining traditional teaching with self-determined teaching in the same course: "To let them choose, but to provide a basic introduction that everyone will read. [...] Perhaps [...] some of the courses will use the heutagogical approach and some won't" (Y.R.).

Other participants did not have a solution for this duality: they hold the tension between the desire to let go and the desire to give the students the knowledge they came to acquire in the college: "[...] this is the tension that you always

have to hold” (M.).

A central question, raised in the learning communities, focused on the status of the knowledge. The participants asked if it is possible to depend on the students-learners’ abilities to learn on their own and analyze new knowledge, or on the trustworthiness of the knowledge they acquire. Participants asked: Are the students, themselves, interested in, or mature enough, to free themselves from the perception that the instructor is the only source of knowledge? The members also felt that they had the responsibility to teach correct knowledge and to evaluate knowledge sources: “It’s important that they learn to evaluate knowledge sources. To clarify, to filter, to choose and decide by themselves [...] this is a skill that is important for them to learn” (Y.R.).

Alongside these concerns, there were participants who thought that heutagogy offered an opportunity for learners to take responsibility for their choices of knowledge sources, and to undertake critical reading of diverse sources. However, this is a deep change that requires the lecturers to adopt new perceptions concerning their role. Moreover, it might even herald a kind of their liberation.

### **3.1.4. The Lecturer’s Role and Their Liberation**

The change in the status of the knowledge, in the heutagogy approach, and the question concerning ownership of this knowledge, leaves the lecturer, who adopts heutagogy, with questions about their role in the classroom. Moreover, this also heralds a kind of liberation and feeling that it is now possible to deal with what really is important in teaching: “Heutagogy—you’re more interested in placing the learning in the center” (Y.R.).

While the liberation is welcomed, it also creates pressure among some of the instructors, alongside their acknowledgement that change is necessary: “[...] the thought itself that I need to release and to know that I don’t hold the reins to the course and the content that they learn, that is very stressful” (Y.).

The participants are of the opinion that the lecturer who works according to heutagogy: “[...] is more of a mentor, a counselor who accompanies the learning process and less bank knowledge” (Y.R.).

The new work of the lecturer requires a new character: “[...] gentleness in the work that accompanies processes that [is] a lot more complex and complicated” (Y.I.). The

undermining arises also in the lecturer’s position in relation to the student and the unclear and novel relationship system: “I think that the freedom that bothered me more is really the freedom in the interaction between the mentor and the student. [...] there really is here an unclear interaction” (A.L.).

In specific, the status of the lecturer, as an authority on knowledge is undermined: “I was an authority on the knowledge and, all of a sudden, that wasn’t so important. You need to leave the stage, for the student. It’s a matter of ego. You need to put your ego aside” (Y.R.).

Among the communities’ participants, we also heard a critical attitude that called for retaining the traditional role of the lecturer. This stance doubted the ability of the learners to direct their studies: “My role is to mentor you, to present before you a new research endeavors, to provide something to open up interesting discussions, to light a fire under an issue and to see explosions in the classroom (A.L.).

### **3.1.5. Fear of Diving into the Water**

Most of the lecturers in the learning communities lacked prior experience in facilitating an entire course based on heutagogy. A few had limited exposure, having integrated a single heutagogical unit or element into one of their course requirements. However, it seemed that most participants hesitated to fully adopt the approach, largely due to the conceptual and practical transformation it demands. Many expressed concern about whether heutagogy aligns with accepted academic standards and feared criticism from colleagues. Others doubted the learners’ ability to engage effectively in self-determined learning. The challenge of providing individualized guidance to large groups of students further intensified these concerns. As Y.R. noted, “I’m used to managing courses according to all kinds of academic instructions, academic criteria. And, in heutagogy, you have to ignore a bit of this, to not deal with some of the academic fixations.” These reflections illustrate the tension between the participants’ recognition of the need to change their teaching and learning practices—particularly in the post-COVID-19 context—and their cautiousness and apprehension toward implementing an approach that challenges established norms.

### **3.1.6. Assessment and Self-Evaluation**

Heutagogy aims for the self-assessment of the learners concerning their learning<sup>[28]</sup>. In this spirit of liberation,

there were community members who wished to stop giving grades and to transfer this responsibility of evaluation to the learners: “I would like this to be without grades. That there won’t be assessment. [...] Why do we need grades at all?” (A.I.).

However, the issue of grade inflation, which connected to the grades that the students gave themselves, was difficult for participants to accept. The reasons were their obligations to meet academic-institutional norms and their loyalty to their colleagues, who adhered to the traditional process of evaluation. This difficulty appeared also in connection to students themselves, who are unaccustomed to undertaking self-assessment: “In the end, students, and the system as well, demands that you give the students some grade. [...] In heutagogy [...] it is very difficult for them to write a detailed evaluation of themselves” (S.).

### **3.1.7. The Difficulty in Adoption of Heutagogy as an Educational Paradigm**

In the community discussions and in the interviews with their members, we saw two trends. The first trend—the radical one—perceives heutagogy as a paradigmatic revolution and as an opportunity to change ways of teaching and learning. It looks to completely adopt the approach. The second trend, and the more common one among the participants, raised the difficulty of adopting heutagogy as an overall, leading paradigm. This trend tended to relate to heutagogy just as an additional method, as an instrument or as an experience that they could offer to their students in certain contexts, dependent on the maturity of the students and the character of the topic being studied:

Perhaps, the question is when to choose this [...] What class, situation, what course [...] I think that it isn’t right for students in the first year, like it is for students in the fourth year. What is right for an introductory course isn’t the same for teaching a research seminar (M.).

The impression that many of the participants left, was that while they support the idea of heutagogy, they prefer to relate to it in their courses in a cautious and incremental way, and to combine the approach a little bit at a time in their traditional teaching: “[...] with the right dosage” (A.).

## **3.2. The Second Main Category: Readiness to Apply the Heutagogy Approach**

From the beginning, the communities came together, due to their dissatisfaction with the traditional ways of teaching and learning in academic institutions, especially after the COVID pandemic had highlighted the problems with traditional modes of teaching. However, even while the members had a clear desire to make a change, we found different ways that they wished to assimilate the idea in their work.

### **3.2.1. Heutagogy as a Model That Could Bring About Change**

There were participants who saw heutagogy as a worthy way to bring about the desired change in the teachers’ colleges:

I think that the heutagogical approach is right for teacher education, because we want to teach the next generation to have self-confidence, to have inner motivation to learn [...] who won’t be afraid of trying to learn and who won’t be dependent on others. [...] Now, it’s impossible to continue in the world with the traditional approaches (S.).

Some of the community members reported proven successes when they integrated some heutagogy into their college courses: “Every year, we also try harder to provide the students in the college class with opportunities to experience self-determined, independent processes that they choose and that they decide upon and they [...] completely lead the process” (T.). This process begins with the learners’ instinctive recoiling of the heutagogical approach. However, it ends with the students’ full acceptance of the approach:

[...] at first, they experience this with resistance [...] students that say: [...] ‘It’s easier if you tell us what to do’ [...] But, at the end of the year [...] there is a lot of motivation and a lot of their activities (T.).

### **3.2.2. The Needed Preparation for the Process**

There were participants who wished to integrate heutagogy in their classrooms but only after the students had been prepared:

[...] you need to train them, to prepare them. To give them a framework [...]. The entire format of the college is, in essence, the antithesis to heutagogy [...] it is not fair toward the students [...] I think that you also have to prepare the hearts for heutagogy (S.).

The participants reported that, at times, the obstacles and the resistance to implementing the change came from their colleagues and, as a result, they needed to prepare their colleagues' hearts, as well. "I need to work in sync at least with some of the content I teach, and we sat together with the mentors. We are five [lecturers]. It won't happen, since somebody opposes the idea, or she doesn't feel like it" (Y.).

The college administration, the deans, and the department heads are perceived by participants as being the main sources for introducing the idea in the college. They are perceived as the ones who can impel and encourage lecturers to try the approach. "The department head has a very, very essential role in leading processes, such as these [...] and the same goes for the heads of the units" (T.). In order to do so, intellectual openness is required from them:

The college needs to be more open and to allow more freedom. [...] I believe that if you work in an institution in which the dean is participating in a heutagogy group, you dare more to do the things in which you believe (S.).

### **3.2.3. Assimilation in the Clinical (Training) Schools**

Community members also believe that, in order to integrate heutagogy into teacher education, it is important to prepare the school community that serves as clinical sites. The experience that students gain in these sites is central and significant in their training: "I think that teacher training is a very relevant place [for heutagogy] and the hope is to also pay it forward. The question is: will the school allow students to combine the heutagogy approach in their student teaching?" (Y.). It can be assumed that a precondition for engaging in heutagogy in the schools and in the kindergartens is its successful assimilation in the teacher education institutions. "[...] to give them the chance to experience it in the classroom in the college" (T.).

However, even if most of the learning community members agreed "that it is imperative to integrate heutagogy in

teacher training. If not in the training, so where?" (H.), here, as well, the difficulties and the questions about the student teachers' abilities to adopt heutagogy in their teaching was raised. "My question isn't if this is relevant for teachers. My question is: will the teachers, who were trained in this [approach], know how to pass it forward?" (Y.). In other words, we need to ask if the preservice teachers, who had a heutagogy course, or had courses that partially adopted the approach during their mainly-traditional studies, will indeed be prepared to assimilate heutagogy learning in the schools. An additional question connected to the ability and the desire of schools to adopt this new approach. After all, even schools that express an interest in trying heutagogy, erect barriers that make it very difficult for teachers to employ it: "The school, as an institution [...] doesn't work like that [...] it's always the first thing that is eliminated from the schedule" (M.).

Another issue was directed at the ability of the students in schools to accept the idea: after all, throughout their studies, students have been trained in a completely different manner. Therefore, adaptability to self-determined learning is difficult to achieve: "We need to do things in the school, and not only train the teachers—the students as well" (Y.). Indeed, according to members of the communities, the teachers need to prepare the students and, perhaps, even the parents, in order to eliminate or weaken resistance to adopting heutagogy in the classroom: "[...] we need to prepare them. And, I would say that the parents, too; it's worthwhile telling them about it at the first parents' meeting" (S.).

The success of assimilation in the schools is also dependent upon the understanding the self-determined, independent learning is a process that needs to begin early. Then, the chances for success will be greater. "First grade. They should learn [it] and they'll discover the basic skills and then it will be possible to free them; they'll learn everything on their own" (M.).

## **3.3. The Third Main Category: Thoughts about the Learning Community**

Up until here, we discussed the perceptions and beliefs of the participants concerning heutagogy and its implementation. The last main category relates to the participants' perceptions of their learning communities. We present the motivations for participation, the atmosphere and the feel-



ings that they had during the meetings, and the role that the community plays for them, and its place in campus life.

### 3.3.1. Motivation for Participating in the Community

Most of the participants noted their unease with traditional teaching. This is what led them to search for an educational alternative and to join the learning communities: “[...] for years I have believed that the learning needs to be something that is derived from inside you, more from independent motives” (S.). “I think that teacher training needs to change and that heutagogy makes different learning possible. It really presents a perception in which the teacher is a mentor for learning [...]” (H.).

In addition to the unease, some of the participants joined because of their personal connection to the communities’ facilitators: “I came because S invited [me]” (T.). Another participant expressed appreciation for the professionalism of the group leader: that was the reason she joined. “I have high esteem for A, the senior and professional [facilitator]. It was clear to me that if she is a partner in something, for sure it’s worthwhile getting to know what it is” (A.D.). Other participants came out of curiosity, the desire for professional development and the desire to keep up-to-date. One of the participants stated: “I had never heard the name, heutagogy [...] curiosity. That is what led me to register [...]” (A.D.). Another participant noted: “I’m curious, I like to learn, I like new things, if I don’t renew myself every year [...] I feel like I’m sinking [...]” (H.).

Another often-noted motive for joining was the need for a professional group—a group that would fill the void that teacher educators and, perhaps, all college and university lecturers, often feel: “[...] we don’t have any opportunity to talk about what is happening in the classes and, specifically, about pedagogy and new things. So I think that this is very welcomed” (S.).

The intellectual issue in the joint learning, the self-examination of the principles of heutagogy, and the ways of practical implementation were additional important motivational factors for participation. The motive of the group facilitators to establish the heutagogy learning community, as noted in the focus group, was, first of all, exposure, advancement and assimilation of the heutagogical approach in the participants’ colleges. They wished to breathe new life into the old learning-teaching approaches, to offer an alter-

native to traditional learning—especially after the unsettling COVID pandemic—and to promote the worldview of freedom, independence and of joint, reflective teaching-learning processes.

### 3.3.2. Feelings in the Learning Communities

Overall, it appeared that the community participants had positive feelings about the activities in the community. An explanation for this is the volunteer participation, the yearning for discussion between colleagues in the learning communities, and the ability—created in the communities—to connect the worldview to practice. Moreover, it was noted that the atmosphere in the communities was non-judgmental, and was characterized by curiosity and the feeling that real learning was taking place.

It was always interesting and there was a combination of theory and practice [...] I enjoyed learning from my colleagues and I learned for myself [...] wow, the time flew by and the two hours were excellent (K.).

It is interesting to note that, in the second group, there were participants who, among other things, attributed the good and free atmosphere to the fact that the meetings were not recorded.

[...] made a very good decision connected to this issue, not to record, because it was possible [...] to ask questions, to go deeper, to talk [...] since you didn’t record I think that it also made it easier to bring up points that, perhaps, weren’t so popular (S.).

In contrast, participants in the first group were happy that the meetings were recorded, because this made it possible for members who could not attend a certain meeting to learn what they missed. “When I missed a meeting, I was very happy to receive recordings of the meeting. I found myself very interested and thinking about what was said in the meeting, for a while, even when I wasn’t at the meeting” (Y.). The participants noted that the facilitators contributed to the relaxed atmosphere, the openness in the meetings, and the stage provided them to determine the content of the meetings.

Even if you came with an idea for the meeting, it flowed in many different directions and

there was always what to develop. [...] I very quickly connected to the ideas that people want to share, and to learn from others, as well [...] there was something very communal in the way in which we learned together. It really was a kind of learning community (Y.).

The facilitators sensed that honestly presenting the difficulties, complexities and frustration, often found in integration of heutagogy, as well as providing a non-judgmental atmosphere and safe space in the meetings, comforted the participants and created an open space for thought. These factors created a good atmosphere, one characterized by equality. The meetings in the learning communities reflected the spirit of heutagogy; as a result, the participants were not worried when they did not receive unequivocal answers to their questions.

Here, there is the understanding that you have to go through a process. In the beginning, there will be a lot of ambiguity, with a lot of uncertainty, with a lot of frustration and, perhaps, with a lot of disappointment, since they don't give me what I expect (A.M.).

### 3.3.3. Thoughts about the Role of the Communities

The heutagogy learning community of practice, like its name implies, is primarily a place for the enrichment of knowledge of the members, concerning any and everything that connects to self-determined learning. "I gained knowledge [...] the academic materials [...] it's possible to understand what this thing is, that is called heutagogy" (T.). Overall, the learning communities themselves work in the spirit of heutagogy. They do not engage in the transference of knowledge, but rather in joint learning, and in the perceptions, beliefs and turning them into practice. When discussing the process, one participant noted: "[...] I underwent a certain process, which is, in essence, what I always wanted, but it didn't happen. It was only at the end that I felt 'OK; I'm now beginning to understand, perhaps, what the heutagogy approach means'" (A.L.).

In the interviews, the learning community is portrayed as a supportive, listening place, a place in which it is possible to think together about implementing the perception in learning and teaching: "There is a lack of confidence when

you teach a heutagogy course. If you do it right. If you do it in the right way. So, it really helped me that it was possible to talk about the things" (Y.R.). The community also helped alleviate the loneliness of the lecturer: "When there are more people like me, [...] who came to the workshops that do more and [when you] hear their voices; it's very reinforcing. You don't feel that you are alone in this story" (T.).

Some of the participants saw the learning communities as the worthy way to instill heutagogy in academic institutions, since it developed from the field, from the honest desire of the lecturers. As a result, they do not submissively accept it as a decree from above: "It's not top-down. I don't think that it's top-down, because even if tomorrow the president of the college will come and say 'Listen, take this and do this', I don't think that I'll take it and run a complete heutagogy course" (S.). Moreover, the learning community facilitators also thought that the communities' activities contributed to the fact that the topic of heutagogy was seeping into many people's thoughts, who are connected to the colleges: the idea was being spread and many people were exposed to the idea. Furthermore, the approach was a factor that motivated some of the participants to decide to implement the idea in their lessons, to varying degrees.

Others thought that in order to integrate the approach, it is important that the learning communities push the idea from the bottom up. However, they also thought that there was a need for additional involvement from the college's management:

The lecturers need to receive some sort of permission [...] that the institution accepts or, perhaps, encourages heutagogy teaching. It can be in a group like this or, perhaps, meetings or lectures that open up the idea, and then they give the OK. The feeling that heutagogy is welcomed (Y.R.).

Another participant reinforced this idea: "I think that the most essential changes are changes that take place [...] bottom-up, with support from the top-down. Not via a directive, but, perhaps, with more opportunities for courses that are out-of-the ordinary" (T.).

The participants in both communities were very clear about their interest in continuing their activities: "I really hope it will continue [...] there really should be some group, perhaps, something will develop from this kind of constancy,

from this kind of discussion [...] I will be happy to grow. I see growth in this" (A.).

Another community member said, "If you look at what happened last year, and this year, I think that there have been many insights, and it will be a shame if they were for nothing and, therefore, it's worthwhile to continue" (S.). The community facilitators also agreed with the necessity of continuing the activity of the heutagogy learning communities. However, they had different opinions concerning the character of the desired participants in these continued communities. Some thought they should be practical people, who implement the heutagogical learning, while others thought that they should include whoever is interested in the approach. Either way, the facilitators perceived these communities as important groups to support and guide in their heutagogical work.

## 4. Discussion

The results of the study demonstrated that the need of the educational system to change its perception and to promote self-determined learning<sup>[1, 2]</sup> requires lecturers to undergo a paradigmatic and epistemological change, as they engage in innovation or change their perceptions and beliefs<sup>[3]</sup>. The findings further showed that lecturers who have a shared vision, goals and values, and who agree that change is needed in teacher training programs, still have difficulties freeing themselves from the previous paradigm, which opposes the paradigm of heutagogy. This is because thinking about a change process brings instructors face-to-face with considerations connected to their perceptions, beliefs, professional identity and worldviews. Our study also showed how the ideas of heutagogy collide with established educational perceptions. While, at times, lecturers in the learning communities are enticed by heutagogy, in the end, only a few joined this revolution of thought. That is, only a few have fully implemented the approach in one or more of their courses. This finding was not surprising: heutagogy is, indeed, a new paradigm that undermines the well-known and accepted educational order and calls for a revolution in learning and teaching in higher education<sup>[5]</sup>.

The tension between the two opposing perceptions led to an internal epistemological tension among all of the participants and among the members of the community and themselves. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic

demonstrated to everyone who deals with knowledge and education, the need for a change in the way we approach teaching and learning.

The community members sought to make educational change possible—a shift toward self-determined learning that allows learners to choose both what and how they learn. In addition, they saw themselves as the ones who need to lead the change. On the other hand, however, such a change is seen as threatening the self-identity of the lecturers, as experts in their fields. It also threatens the perception they hold of their role as educators who 'stand guard' at the gates of the profession, and serve as the 'gatekeepers' of academic knowledge that they need to transfer to the next generations.

The possibility of the change brought the lecturers face-to-face with challenging questions concerning their teaching processes vis-à-vis the learning processes of their students. In the community meetings, the participants noted the difficulty they had believing that most of their students in the teacher training programs would have the ability to learn out of curiosity and the joy of learning. Moreover, the lecturers, who see themselves as responsible for these students, have a sense of obligation and loyalty to the traditional academic system. This is because they are both a product of this system and employed by it.

At the same time, in the heutagogy learning communities, there were participants who pointed to the difficulty of letting the learners assess their own knowledge and methods of learning. These participants found that their students did not give themselves justifiable grades. They believe that learners will give themselves inappropriate grades—grades that do not honestly reflect the learner's knowledge. As a result, they do not perceive these assessments as serving as an instrument for encouraging learning.

In the study we found that belonging to a learning community makes it possible for participants to cope with the tension and gaps that exist between the traditional and heutagogical paradigms. This coping is reflected in the deepening of the understanding of the details of heutagogy, as well as study and exploration of epistemological issues: teaching and learning; the status of the knowledge; the change in the role of the lecturer; self-evaluation and the implementation of each of these issues in academic training. Coping in this fashion demonstrated that both learning communities that were examined in this study were, indeed, function-

ing as learning communities<sup>[19]</sup>. Belonging to a learning community provides members with freedom of thought and the legitimacy to discuss, without fear, ideas that push the boundaries, like heutagogy. Moreover, it provides support for experimenting with the approach, in either a partial or a full manner. Nonetheless, it is important to note that our study demonstrated that participants in these communities do not completely understand the heutagogical approach. For example, one central principle of heutagogy, which focuses on the supreme importance of relations based on trust between the mentor and the learner, was not noted at all in the interviews.

Furthermore, our study showed the importance of asking about the extent of the influence of the learning communities on their educational institutions, in which they act, and on the educational institutions, in which their students train. The answer is complicated. Even if the academic literature demonstrates that informal learning communities have the ability to bring about a meaningful and strategic change, in the organization in which they work<sup>[8]</sup>, the participants in the two communities that we studied felt that in order to instill a real change, support is needed ‘from above’, from the institutions’ administrations<sup>[29]</sup>. The leaders of these communities felt that their communities have an overall organization impact. Even if this impact is not substantial, the leaders believe that, like water, the idea begins to seep into the colleges and melts resistance. It eats away at existing, stagnant structures and has the ability to bring about a major change in an organization.

Our research also pointed to the connection between involvement of the decision makers in the colleges, schools and the Ministry of Education, and the ability to integrate the heutagogical approach in educational systems. In other words, there is a need to persuade decision makers about the importance of adopting self-determined learning and bringing together people, in order to begin instilling practical training in the schools and nursery schools<sup>[30]</sup>. This will make it possible for preservice teachers to gain important experience in working with this new approach.

## 5. Conclusions

The two learning communities have not yet finished their work. The participants and the leaders noted that the

need remains to deepen the understanding of the approach’s principles and ways to implement the approach. They believe that the learning space in the communities is the relevant space for learning and examining the needed perceptual changes in their colleges, and for understanding the ideas of heutagogy.

Based on the study’s findings, it was clear that the communities have not yet arrived at complete answers to the questions that concern them. Moreover, in the spirit of heutagogy, it can be assumed that these are questions that need to continue to preoccupy educators interested in self-determined learning. Among other things, it is important to try to answer the following questions:

What is the appropriate status of the knowledge?

What is the role of the lecturer/teacher in heutagogy?

What do the students expect to gain in their training?

Are students capable of assessing their own learning?

How can we recruit institutions of higher learning to appreciate heutagogy?

What are the social consequences of adopting this approach?

Should we be afraid that the approach will create and deepen gaps between learners who possess different resources and abilities?

In light of these questions, our recommendation is to continue the work of the learning communities and to widen them to an additional audience of college lecturers. Moreover, we recommend recruiting additional colleges and learning communities, in order to develop the heutagogy approach. In terms of future research, we recommend continuing the examination of the development and the degree of influence of the heutagogy learning communities in the colleges in which the participants work. Specifically, we recommend exploring the perceptions and the beliefs of the different functionaries, the academic faculty and the students; the extent of the change that has taken place in the college’s processes of learning, due to the implementation of heutagogy; and the significance of these changes on the emotional and social aspects of campus life.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as a qualitative case study conducted in two neighboring and similar teacher education colleges, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to other institutional or cultural settings. Second, the participants self-selected to

join the communities, which may have introduced a positive bias toward heutagogical principles. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews and focus group discussions may have been influenced by participants' perceptions and retrospective reflections rather than by direct observation of practice.

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All authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Levinsky-Wingate Academic College, protocol code 2023080901, date of approval 10/8/2023.

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study consists of interviews that contain confidential information. Due to ethical and privacy considerations, the data is not publicly available. Access to the data may be granted upon reasonable request, subject to approval from the interviewees.

Researchers interested in accessing the data should contact the corresponding author.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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