Establishing an online community for special education in Bulgaria

Robert Raley Peterson

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Establishing an online community for special education in Bulgaria

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B.S. Cornell University

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from the

University of Wollongong

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to apply existing design principles for the creation of successful communities of practice (CoPs) to the development of a new online community with the aim of (1) exploring the practice of special education in Bulgaria and (2) evaluating the extent and ways in which the online community supports the practice. Research and development was framed by the design-based research approach. The study was organized into three phases: needs assessment, formative evaluation, and effectiveness evaluation. Four versions of the online community were created: prototype, alpha, beta, and final.

Qualitative data were collected from personal interviews and discussions held on the online community website. Quantitative data were collected from website usage logs. Mixed data were collected from web-based questionnaires and surveys and expert consultation and usability evaluation sessions. Mixed-method studies of this nature are often described as following an exploratory research design. Such studies begin with the collection and analysis of qualitative data, which can then be used for the creation of instruments designed to collect quantitative data. In this case, the instrument was a website created to support an online community.

Findings indicate that the main issues affecting the practice of special education in Bulgaria relate to the integration of special needs and Roma minority students into mainstream schools. Findings also indicate that the online community, called Special Education Bulgaria (SEB), must further evolve to adequately address issues related to integration. SEB was found to be an effective online community but only partially effective as a CoP. It is argued that future iterations of SEB be designed to facilitate an innovative knowledge community on the topic of integration. Such a community would be designed to foster the development of new practices among special and general educators and other stakeholders of the integration process. It is suggested that the results of this study may apply to countries with cultural dimensions similar to Bulgaria. Macedonia, Romania, and Croatia are recommended for further investigation.
Preface

For most, it takes a stretch of the imagination to comprehend how a study involving the development of an online community for special education in Bulgaria could be carried out by an American graduate student at the University of Wollongong in Australia. The likeliness of such a project occurring ten years ago would have been low. But today, international cooperation and exchange at this level is more common than ever, and we can blame the Internet.

I like to think that this study is an example of good karma. The pieces just seemed to fit as the exploration into the practice of special education in Bulgaria unfolded. During my first visit to Bulgaria in September 2005, I was still very much uncertain that the project could work. Though I had spent one session at the University of Wollongong and several years prior preparing, when I actually set foot in Bulgaria, I was a little lost. It was overwhelming, for example, to arrive and see all of the billboards, store names, street signs, practically everything in the Cyrillic alphabet.

By the time I returned to Australia, however, everything was coming together. From a research standpoint, I found that Bulgarian special educators were familiar enough with using the Internet to benefit from an online community. There was also sufficient Internet access and interest in the study. From a cultural standpoint, I was also at ease. I took the opportunity to travel across the country, from Sofia to the Black Sea. I had experienced a country with a history far deeper than that of Australia or the US. It is the land where the first Europeans settled as they crossed over from the Middle East. In later visits to Bulgaria, I also visited Istanbul and Macedonia.

My favorite excursions in Bulgaria were to Rila Monastery, Melnik, Veliko Tarnovo, the Southern Black Sea Coast, and the Pirin Mountains, but there were many other locations, such as Koprivshtitsa, Velingrad, and the Old Town in Plovdiv, that I would recommend. Down south, Ohrid, Macedonia was also a highlight.

One of the more unexpected aspects of travel in Bulgaria was the discovery of so many foreigners, not Bulgarians, but Aussies and Kiwis. It seemed like I met more people from down under than anywhere else in the world. One of the worst moments was a serious bout of food poisoning from an Americanized restaurant in Sofia. It was the chicken. I learned my lesson about sticking to Bulgarian cuisine when in Bulgaria. The most disheartening aspect of travel in Bulgaria was the highly visible gap between the rich
and the poor. In Sofia, the nation’s largest city and capital, the areas visited by tourists are relatively clean and modern, but it does not take long to discover that these areas are a screen behind which the majority of Bulgarians actually live.

I began the study thinking that learning Bulgarian would not be necessary. For the most part, this was true, but learning the language to an intermediate level was one of my greatest personal achievements during the project. It was tremendously helpful for travel and for qualitative data analysis. Microsoft Word’s Bulgarian spellchecker and a free downloadable Bulgarian dictionary (Angelov, 2005) were essential to my success with communicating electronically.

The study was conceptualized in San Francisco, where I worked for a Bulgarian robotics company as a trainer and technical writer. I had an interest in special education as I had grown up hearing stories about my mother’s career as a special educator. My colleagues at the robotics company indicated that the special education profession was practically invisible in Bulgaria. Based on their comments, it appeared that children with special educational needs were either not identified for accommodations or, in more severe cases, completely excluded from the education system. This was an eye-opening discovery and a catalyst for the study’s proposal.

The connection to Australia came from a contract position in which I worked with an Australian website developer at Edith Cowan University in Perth. The developer introduced me, by email, to Associate Professor Jan Herrington, who would later become the study’s lead supervisor. A contact was made in the Department of Special Education at Sofia University when I applied for a Fulbright grant to fund initial stages of the project.

For me, this project has always made sense. It combines many of my interests including travel, instructional design, website development, foreign languages, technical writing, and special education, and was travel mentioned? Clearly, anyone interested in taking on such a study also has a passion for travel, but how is the research significant to both special education stakeholders in Bulgaria and the body of knowledge regarding the development of online communities? This is the question addressed in Chapter 1 and that culminates in the study’s research questions and goals.
Declaration

I, Robert Raley Peterson, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education,
University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or
acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other
academic institution.

Robert Raley Peterson

January 2009
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This project would not have been possible without assistance from my personal contacts from Bulgaria. The language, travel, and housing assistance provided through these contacts made the project affordable. Moreover, the contacts provided great insight into Bulgarian culture, history, and politics as well as the Bulgarian education system. Thank you very much to the Mladenovs: Lucho, Vania, and Dancho. This research would never have begun without the wonderful translation assistance and Bulgarian language tutoring from Antoaneta Andreeva and cultural and travel guidance from Ivan Andreev, Dushko Kesiakov, and Svilen Stoyanov. Finally, thank you to my university research subjects as well as the staff at special schools and non-profit organizations visited while in Bulgaria as well as the EU’s TENCompetence project for partial sponsorship of the study.
"The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land." — Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1920).
The riddle of the ivy. "Tremendous trifles."
ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................... iii

PREFACE .............................................................................................................. iv

DECLARATION ...................................................................................................... vi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ....................................................................................... vii

TABLE OF CONTENTS ....................................................................................... ix

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................... xiv

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................. xvii

DEFINITION OF TERMS ...................................................................................... xviii

1. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................... 1
   1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY ................................................................. 2
       1.1.1 Bulgaria and the European Union ....................................................... 6
   1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND GOALS ..................................................... 8
   1.3 SUMMARY AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS THESIS ................................ 10

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ...................................................................................... 13
   2.1 COPS AND VIRTUAL COPS ..................................................................... 13
       2.1.1 Design principles for virtual CoPs ................................................... 15
   2.2 ONLINE COMMUNITIES VERSUS VIRTUAL COPS ............................... 21
       2.2.1 Social interaction versus mutual engagement ............................... 24
       2.2.2 Shared purpose versus joint enterprise ....................................... 27
       2.2.3 History of actions and artifacts versus shared repertoire ............ 27
       2.2.4 Outcomes from online communities versus CoPs ....................... 28
   2.3 THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS ................................................................. 30
       2.3.1 Historical context ........................................................................... 30
       2.3.2 Master-apprentice and egalitarian CoPs: Theoretical complications . 32
       2.3.3 Support from the social sciences .................................................. 33
   2.4 BENCHMARK ANALYSIS ......................................................................... 35
       2.4.1 Existing websites, online communities, and related research in education . 36
       2.4.2 CoPs, online communities, and related research in special education . 39
   2.5 SUMMARY ................................................................................................. 43

3. RESEARCH DESIGN .......................................................................................... 45
   3.1 MIXED METHODS AND DESIGN-BASED RESEARCH .............................. 45
       3.1.1 Strictly quantitative research is not enough .................................... 45
       3.1.2 Qualitative research techniques are also required ......................... 48
       3.1.3 There is a clear case for the use of mixed methods ....................... 48
       3.1.4 All signs point to design-based research ...................................... 50
       3.1.5 Prior use of DBR for online community development ................... 52
   3.2 DBR AND SPECIAL EDUCATION BULGARIA ........................................... 53
       3.2.1 Exploratory research design ............................................................ 56
# Table of Contents

3.2.2 Three phases of DBR ................................................................. 57
  3.2.2.1 Phase 1: Needs assessment .................................................. 57
  3.2.2.2 Phase 2: Formative evaluation ............................................. 58
  3.2.2.3 Phase 3: Effectiveness evaluation ........................................ 58
3.3 SUMMARY .................................................................................... 59

4. METHODOLOGY ............................................................................. 61
  4.1 TRAVEL AND RESEARCH ARRANGEMENTS IN BULGARIA ............. 61
  4.2 PARTICIPANT SELECTION ............................................................ 62
    4.2.1 Qualitative sampling ............................................................. 62
    4.2.2 Quantitative sampling ........................................................... 64
    4.2.3 Informed consent ................................................................. 65
  4.3 PHASE 1: NEEDS ASSESSMENT .................................................. 66
    4.3.1 Stages of data collection ....................................................... 67
    4.3.2 Research instrument ............................................................. 68
    4.3.3 Internet-use questionnaire .................................................... 69
    4.3.4 Personal interviewing ........................................................... 69
    4.3.5 Exploratory usability interviewing .......................................... 72
    4.3.6 Qualitative code development ................................................. 78
  4.4 PHASE 2: FORMATIVE EVALUATION .......................................... 81
    4.4.1 Stages of data collection ....................................................... 81
    4.4.2 Research instruments ........................................................... 83
    4.4.3 Web-based questionnaire and surveys ..................................... 83
    4.4.4 Assessment usability interviewing ......................................... 85
    4.4.5 Expert consultations ............................................................. 88
    4.4.6 Website log data ................................................................. 89
    4.4.7 Discussion forums and other website postings ......................... 91
    4.4.8 Qualitative code development ................................................. 92
  4.5 PHASE 3: EFFECTIVENESS EVALUATION .................................... 92
    4.5.1 Stages of data collection ....................................................... 94
    4.5.2 Research instruments ........................................................... 94
    4.5.3 Email questionnaires ............................................................. 95
    4.5.4 Validation usability interviewing ............................................ 95
    4.5.5 Expert consultation .............................................................. 96
    4.5.6 Qualitative code development ................................................. 96
  4.6 LIMITATIONS .............................................................................. 96
  4.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS ..................................................... 97
  4.8 TRANSLATION ........................................................................... 98
  4.9 SUMMARY .................................................................................. 99

5. WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT ............................................................. 101
  5.1 WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT CYCLE .............................................. 101
  5.2 PROTOTYPE WEBSITE ............................................................. 102
    5.2.1 Prototype site features ......................................................... 104
      5.2.1.1 Accessibility and usability ................................................. 108
# Table of Contents

5.2.2 Prototype upgrade requirements ......................................................... 110

5.3 ALPHA WEBSITE ................................................................................ 110
  5.3.1 Moodle ......................................................................................... 111
  5.3.2 Alpha site features ......................................................................... 113
    5.3.2.1 Accessibility and usability ....................................................... 118
    5.3.2.2 Sociability ............................................................................. 120
    5.3.2.3 NGOs, NPOs, .org, .com, and .bg websites ............................ 121

5.4 BETA AND FINAL WEBSITES .............................................................. 122
  5.4.1 Beta site features ........................................................................... 124
  5.4.2 Final site features .......................................................................... 128
    5.4.2.1 Screenshots ........................................................................ 131

5.5 SUMMARY ............................................................................................ 135

6. PARTICIPANTS AND QUANTITATIVE RESULTS .................................... 137
  6.1 RESEARCH AND WEBSITE PARTICIPATION ..................................... 139
    6.1.1 Sampling results ........................................................................ 139
      6.1.1.1 Interview locations ............................................................. 142
      6.1.1.2 Participant background and demographic information .......... 142
      6.1.1.3 Representativeness of sampling ........................................... 148
    6.1.2 Research participant computer hardware and Internet access ......... 150

6.2 QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRES AND WEBSITE LOGS .................. 153
  6.2.1 Questionnaires and surveys ......................................................... 153
  6.2.2 Website logs ................................................................................ 161
    6.2.2.1 Website log preprocessing, data display, and analysis .............. 162
    6.2.2.2 Posts to discussion forums and site repositories ..................... 164
    6.2.2.3 Active, peripheral, and repeat website users ............................ 174
    6.2.2.4 Website participant activity logs ............................................. 178

6.3 SUMMARY ............................................................................................ 186

7. QUALITATIVE RESULTS ......................................................................... 189
  7.1 CODING THE DATA ............................................................................ 190
    7.1.1 Conceptually clustered coding matrix .......................................... 190
    7.1.2 Units of analysis .......................................................................... 193
    7.1.3 Coding objectives ..................................................................... 194

7.2 DESCRIPTIVE CODING ....................................................................... 195
  7.2.1 Special education themes ............................................................. 197
  7.2.2 SEB website themes .................................................................... 218
  7.2.3 Bulgarian education system and cultural themes ............................ 228

7.3 INTERPRETIVE CODING ..................................................................... 232
  7.3.1 Need for SEB and feasibility to establish ....................................... 236
  7.3.2 Comments about usability ............................................................ 240
  7.3.3 Effectiveness as a community of practice ...................................... 240
  7.3.4 TENCompetence and SEB ............................................................ 245

7.4 SUMMARY ............................................................................................ 246
## Table of Contents

8. **EXPERT CONSULTATION AND USABILITY RESULTS** .................................................. 249

8.1 **EXPERT CONSULTATIONS** .................................................................................. 250
  8.1.1 Consultation results ......................................................................................... 251
  8.1.1.1 Expert 1: Moodle websites ........................................................................ 251
  8.1.1.2 Expert 2: Graphic and website design ......................................................... 254
  8.1.1.3 Expert 3: CoPs and online communities ...................................................... 255
  8.1.1.4 Expert 4: TENCompetence and e-learning ................................................ 257

8.2 **USABILITY** .......................................................................................................... 258
  8.2.1 Usability results ............................................................................................... 260

8.3 **INTERVIEWING CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS** .......................................... 264
  8.3.1 Methodological modifications ....................................................................... 266

8.4 **VALIDITY OF RESULTS** .................................................................................... 268
  8.4.1 Triangulation ................................................................................................... 269

8.5 **SUMMARY** ......................................................................................................... 271

9. **DISCUSSION** ......................................................................................................... 273

9.1 **SPECIAL EDUCATION IN BULGARIA** ............................................................. 273
  9.1.1 Integrated education, special schools, and minorities .................................. 274
  9.1.2 Multiple and intellectual disabilities ............................................................... 276
  9.1.3 Speech, language, and learning disabilities ................................................... 276
  9.1.4 Inadequate appreciation .................................................................................. 277
  9.1.5 Special education issues identified for future research .................................. 277

9.2 **THE SEB ONLINE COMMUNITY** ..................................................................... 281
  9.2.1 Need for SEB and outlook for long-term use .................................................. 282
  9.2.2 Effectiveness in terms of usability and sociability ........................................... 285
  9.2.3 Effectiveness in terms of CoPs ....................................................................... 286
  9.2.3.1 SEB as an online community ..................................................................... 286
  9.2.3.2 SEB in terms of the structural elements of virtual CoPs ............................ 292
  9.2.4 From online community to innovative knowledge community .................... 301
    9.2.4.1 IKCs and CoPs ......................................................................................... 301
    9.2.4.2 A focus on integration ............................................................................. 303
    9.2.4.3 SEB as an IKC, structurally speaking ....................................................... 307

9.3 **SUMMARY** ......................................................................................................... 312

10. **CONCLUSION** ..................................................................................................... 313

10.1 **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH** ....................................................... 314
  10.1.1 Degrees of participation in online communities ............................................ 314
  10.1.2 Theoretical exploration ................................................................................. 316
  10.1.3 Macedonia, Romania, Croatia, and SEB ......................................................... 317
    10.1.3.1 Design principles .................................................................................... 319
    10.1.4 Phase 4: Impact evaluation ......................................................................... 323

10.2 **SUMMARY OF THE STUDY** .......................................................................... 326
# Table of Contents

## References

331

## Appendices

347

A. Research Timeline ........................................... 347
B. Research Instruments ........................................... 349
C. Participant Information Packets ............................... 448
D. Website User Agreement and Informational Pages .............. 486
E. Letter to/from the Ministry of Education about SEB .......... 500
F. Peer Review of Research ....................................... 504
LIST OF FIGURES

2-1. Dimensions of online communities and communities of practice ............ 23  
3-1. Model of the design-based research (DBR) framework ........................ 51  
3-2. Extended evaluation variation of DBR as applied to SEB study ............... 54  
3-3. Online community development in five stages ............................... 55  
3-4. Phased concurrent strategy for mixed-methods data collection and analysis 57  
4-1. Setup for exploratory usability evaluation sessions ............................ 73  
4-2. Prototype website discussion forums built with custom phpBB template .... 76  
4-3. Thematic analysis with Microsoft Word ........................................ 79  
4-4. Web-based questionnaire screenshot ............................................ 84  
4-5. Web-based survey screenshot .................................................... 85  
4-6. Setup for assessment and validation usability evaluation sessions .......... 86  
4-7. Website log entries generated by Moodle and displayed on SEB website ... 90  
5-1. Website development cycle by research phase ................................. 102  
5-2. Prototype Special Ed Bulgaria home page in English and Bulgarian ....... 103  
5-3. Prototype website map ............................................................ 106  
5-4. Alpha SEB home page ............................................................ 111  
5-5. Moodle website with editing features turned on .............................. 113  
5-6. Alpha website map ............................................................... 116  
5-7. Beta SEB home page, blue theme .............................................. 123  
5-8. Beta website map ............................................................... 126  
5-9. Final website map ............................................................... 131  
5-10. Final SEB home page ........................................................... 132  
5-11. Discussion forum topics (left) and threaded discussion posts (right) ...... 133  
5-12. Photo album (left) and links gallery (right) .................................. 133  
5-13. Participant profile (left) and participant profiles list (right) ............... 133  
5-14. Feedback form (upper left) and chat room (lower left) .................... 134  
5-15. TENC-SEB pilot course page (left) and Mahara e-portfolio interface (right) 134  
6-1. Research participant areas of expertise, interview subjects .................. 140  
6-2. Interview locations ............................................................... 142  
6-3. Research participants by location ............................................... 143  
6-4. Website participants by location ............................................... 143  
6-5. Research participant gender .................................................... 144  
6-6. Website participant gender .................................................... 144  
6-7. Research participant professions .............................................. 145  
6-8. Research participant age groups .............................................. 145  
6-9. Research participant Internet skill ............................................ 145  
6-10. Research participant Internet experience .................................... 145  
6-11. Hours research participants spend using the Internet per week / day .... 146  
6-12. Where research participants use the Internet ................................ 146  
6-13. What research participants do on the Internet ................................ 147  
6-14. Research participant email providers ....................................... 147  
6-15. Research participant instant messaging providers ......................... 147
6-16. Browsers used by research participants ............................................ 147
6-17. Website’s most visited by research participants ................................. 148
6-18. Age of research participant computers ............................................ 150
6-19. Operating system installed on research participant computers .......... 150
6-20. Processor type in research participant computers ............................... 150
6-21. Amount of RAM in research participant computers ......................... 150
6-22. Hard drive size in research participant computers ............................. 151
6-23. Connection type for research participant Internet access ................. 151
6-24. Speed of research participant Internet access ................................... 151
6-25. Reliability of research participant Internet access ............................. 151
6-26. How website participants discovered SEB ........................................ 154
6-27. Level of isolation felt by website participants at work ....................... 154
6-28. Website participants that knew they could upload documents to SEB .. 155
6-29. Website participants that knew they could add to the glossary on SEB .. 155
6-30. Best SEB features according to web-based questionnaire respondents .. 156
6-31. Website participant primary areas of interest in the special education field . 158
6-32. Website participant secondary areas of interest in the special education field . 158
6-33. SEB members that feel like members of a community ....................... 159
6-34. Why research participants would access the SEB community ............ 160
6-35. Interest level of research participants in the SEB community ............. 160
6-36. Research participants that reported they would use SEB in the future .. 161
6-37. Speed of SEB website as reported by research participants ............... 161
6-38. Stages of website log processing and analysis ................................ 163
6-39. Most popular discussion forums by total page views ........................ 164
6-40. Most popular discussion forums by total posts ................................ 165
6-41. Most popular discussion topics by total page views ........................... 166
6-42. Most popular discussion topics by total posts ................................... 167
6-43. Other discussion topics by total page views ..................................... 169
6-44. Most frequent forum searches ....................................................... 171
6-45. Most popular glossary terms by total page hits ................................ 171
6-46. Most popular website modules by total page views ........................... 173
6-47. Most popular website modules by total posts ................................... 174
6-48. Year 1 website participant discussion views and posts by month ......... 177
6-49. Year 2 website participant discussion views and posts by month ........ 177
6-50. Year 1 website participant logins and new registrations by month ...... 180
6-51. Year 2 website participant logins and new registrations by month ...... 181
6-52. Year 1 website participant logins and discussion activity by month ..... 182
6-53. Year 2 website participant logins and discussion activity by month ..... 183
6-54. Year 1 total website activity by month ............................................ 184
6-55. Year 2 total website activity by month ............................................ 185
7-1. Descriptive codes: Categories by percentage ..................................... 197
7-2. Descriptive codes: Special education themes by frequency .................. 199
7-3. Descriptive codes: Integrated education subthemes by frequency .......... 210
7-4. Descriptive codes: Integrated education, special schools subthemes 211
7-5. Descriptive codes: Integrated education, minorities subthemes 211
7-6. Descriptive codes: SEB website themes and subthemes by frequency 219
7-7. Descriptive codes: Discussion forums subthemes 221
7-8. Descriptive codes: Bulgarian education and cultural themes by frequency 229
7-9. Interpretive codes: Categories, negated / supported 233
7-10. Interpretive codes: Supported 234
7-11. Interpretive codes: Negated 235
7-12. Interpretive codes: Effective CoP subcategories negated / supported 243
8-1. Alpha website logo (upper left), beta website logo (second from upper left) 254
8-2. Usability findings by importance (A-C) and repairability (1-3) 261
8-3. Usability data analysis and triangulation 271
9-1. SEB video presentation web page open in TENCompetence PCM software 304
9-2. SEB course website opened in PCM’s integrated Web browser 305
10-1. Degrees of community participation 315
10-2. Degrees of participation in online communities 315
10-3. Map of Balkan Peninsula 318
# LIST OF TABLES

1-1. Research question, subquestions, and goals ........................................... 9  
2-1. Features that facilitate usability and support sociability .......................... 19  
2-2. Design principles for virtual CoPs in the planning/potential stage .............. 20  
2-3. Design principles for virtual CoPs in the start-up/coalescing stage ........... 21  
2-4. Characteristics of online communities and virtual communities of practice .. 24  
3-1. Laboratory experiments versus design experiments ................................... 50  
4-1. Phase 1 activity summary (02/2005-04/2006) ........................................ 67  
4-2. Phase 1 interview questions and tasks by type and time frame ................. 70  
4-3. Observation sheet for usability data collection ...................................... 76  
4-4. Qualitative code development progressions by research phase .................. 80  
4-5. Phase 2 activity summary (04/2006-03/2007) ........................................ 82  
4-6. Phase 3 activity summary (03/2007-04/2008) ........................................ 93  
5-1. Prototype website features ................................................................. 106  
5-2. Prototype website design principles ..................................................... 107  
5-3. Alpha website features ...................................................................... 114  
5-4. Alpha website design principles ........................................................... 117  
5-5. Usability of prototype and alpha websites ............................................ 119  
5-6. Sociability checklist for alpha website .................................................. 121  
5-7. Accessibility of prototype and alpha websites ........................................ 119  
5-8. Beta website features ....................................................................... 125  
5-9. Beta and final website design principles ............................................... 127  
5-10. Final website features ......................................................................... 129  
6-1. Research and website participants, all phases (12/2005-12/2007) .............. 138  
6-2. Quantitative data collected, all phases (12/2005-12/2007) ..................... 138  
6-3. Sampling methods and totals by participant area of expertise and profession .141  
6-4. Active, peripheral, and repeat users of SEB ........................................... 175  
7-1. Qualitative data collected, all phases (12/2005-12/2007) ......................... 190  
7-2. Conceptually clustered coding matrix for analysis of qualitative data ......... 191  
7-3. Descriptive codes and categories ........................................................... 196  
7-4. Interpretive codes and categories .......................................................... 232  
7-5. ECOP (effective CoP) subcategories and codes ....................................... 241  
8-1. Checklist matrix for analysis of expert consultation data ......................... 250  
8-2. Problem/solution matrix for analysis of usability data ............................ 259  
8-3. Importance and repairability criteria for usability data analysis ................ 260  
8-4. Examples of common usability findings ............................................... 261  
8-5. Examples of usability findings not repaired ........................................... 263  
8-6. Examples of triangulation among findings from mixed data .................... 270  
9-1. Sociability and usability checklist .......................................................... 285  
9-2. SEB’s structural elements in terms of virtual communities of practice ....... 293  
9-3. Schedule for five-day pilot course on social inclusion ............................. 306  
9-4. SEB structural-element changes predicted for successful IKC development .308  
10-1. Stage 1: Planning/potential design principles for virtual CoPs ............... 319  
10-2. Stage 2: Start-up/coalescing design principles for virtual CoPs ............. 322
DEFINITION OF TERMS

**CoPs:** Communities of practice are groups of professionals and other stakeholders “who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). Also fundamental to the CoP concept is the notion that in a shared field of practice, novices steadily develop into experts due to interaction in the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**DBR:** Design-based research is an approach to researching, developing, and evaluating technologically-based educational interventions. The critical characteristics of design-based research are “addressing complex problems in real contexts in collaboration with practitioners; integrating known and hypothetical design principles with technological affordances to render plausible solutions to these complex problems; and conducting rigorous and reflective inquiry to test and refine innovative learning environments as well as to define new design principles” (Reeves, 2000, p. 26).

**IKCs:** Innovative knowledge communities are deliberately designed to facilitate innovation and knowledge advancements. “One of the central differences between CoPs and IKCs is that people who work in the latter ones are ‘forced’ to create new forms of acting, working and learning in order to deal with the challenges of turbulent work environments” (Hakkarainen, Paavola, & Lipponen, 2004a, p. 80).

**Research participant:** A participant who was interviewed or responded to an email questionnaire.

**SEB:** Special Education Bulgaria is an online community developed according to CoP design principles for special education stakeholders in Bulgaria (see www.specialeducationbulgaria.com).

**TENCompetence:** The European network for lifelong learning and competence development is an integrated project of the European Commission’s 6th Framework Programme, priority IST/Technology Enhanced Learning, contract 027087 (see www.tencompetence.org).

**Website participant:** A participant who registered for the SEB website but was not otherwise in communication with the researcher.