

## Social learning in cluster initiatives

### Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to portray social learning in cluster initiatives (CIs), namely: 1) to explore, with the lens of the communities of practice (CoPs) theory, in what ways social learning occurs in CIs; 2) to discover how various CoPs emerge and evolve in CIs to facilitate a collective journey in their learning process. Subsequently, the authors address the research questions: In what ways does social learning occur in CIs? How is social learning facilitated through the emergence and evolution of various CoPs in CIs?

Design/methodology/approach – The study applies the abduction approach for the interpretation of the collected data and attempts to create the best explanations for the observations on the basis of the CoP theory. The qualitative study of four CIs helped to identify various ways that social learning occurs in CIs and the role of the identified CoPs in the process. Social learning is portrayed as a collective journey within and between CoPs, where the interactions of their members deepen their level of involvement and help them to enhance learning in their CoP.

Findings – The paper shows ways that social learning occurs in CIs and describes the role of CoPs. It identifies three types of CoPs in CIs: participants, cooperators and locomotives. Additionally, it documents different ways of social learning in CIs, namely one-way or two-way information transfer and raising awareness, demonstrating and inspiring, or motivating and educating. It also shows that while potentially every member of a CI has access to these practices, only a limited number of members are actually involved. Social learning in CIs is selective and some CI members accept their role as more peripheral in their CI.

Research limitations/implications – The research shows the application of the CoP theory to the analysis of social learning in CIs, a peculiar type of clusters. It describes how CoPs in the studied CIs varied in terms of the occurrence of learning. Furthermore, it reveals how social learning related to the level of involvement of CI members, namely with an increase of involvement, the members formed more selective CoPs and strengthened their social learning. Nevertheless, the qualitative approach in the study and the specific sample of the CIs chosen for the analysis do not allow a generalization of the findings.

Practical implications – Although in different CoPs social learning occurs in different ways, at each stage of the development of CIs the learning process is carried out on the basis of interactions created among members. Therefore, it is important to support the ‘soft’ forms of cooperation within CIs – involving members in activities and developing interactions. In addition, to ensure the growth of their entire CI, coordinators should create conditions for the development of existing CoPs into higher forms which better support learning. They should also adopt boundary spanning roles between various CoPs to strengthen social learning in CIs.

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3 Originality/value – The literature on CIs, which are peculiar forms of clusters, is still  
4 underdeveloped. The research fills in the gap concerning the ways social learning occurs in CIs. It  
5 shows that selectiveness can be observed in this process, and emphasizes the role of interactions  
6 developed through CoPs and the benefits offered by them. The study applies the CoP approach.  
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8 Consequently, it expands the theoretical base in view of the generally lacking studies on social  
9 learning in CIs in the literature on clustering. Since the CoP theory has rarely been applied in the  
10 management literature, it also augments this specific field.  
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16 **Keywords:**

17 Cluster, Cluster initiatives, Collective identity, Communities of practice, Social learning  
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## Social learning in cluster initiatives

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The abundant literature on clusters perceives learning and knowledge flows as inevitable elements of their functioning, sources of increasing returns for enterprises in clusters, which are “magnified by the potential of interaction and networking effects” (Brosnan, Doyle & Connor, 2016, p. 508), and antecedents of innovation and competitiveness (Beerepoot, 2005, 2008; Capello, 1999; Cotic-Svetina, Jaklic & Prodan, 2008; Gausdal, 2008; Lin, Chuang & Wei, 2014; Lorenzen, 2018; Parrilli, Aranguren & Larrea, 2010; Perez-Aleman, 2011; Svetina & Jaklic, 2008). Learning is a driver through the lifecycle of a cluster, enhancing the development of the cluster firms as opposed to the non-cluster ones (Menzel & Fornahl, 2010). Such learning is collective or social as it occurs at the level of the cluster and involves interactions that create a context within which knowledge is formed and flows among cluster members. Knowledge, the result of the learning process, is more than mere data and facts that individuals acquire. It is enacted, situated and known by engaging in practices (Perez-Aleman, 2011).

Notwithstanding the vital role of learning and knowledge flows in the extant literature on clusters, a limited number of studies have documented social learning in clusters or cluster initiatives (CIs) due to the interactions that their members are involved in. Nevertheless, a deeper look at the nature of learning in CIs is necessary to understand how learning can contribute to their development, especially that geographical proximity may not be a sufficient factor for learning to occur (Staber, 2009; Ter Wal, 2013). Learning in clusters is predominantly via informal processes, namely during social interactions and experience gained as a result of participating in the practices of clusters (Beerepoot, 2005). The major channels of learning in clusters, identified in previous research, are through interactions with local firms and institutions as well as the local labor market (Svetina & Jaklic, 2008). Moreover, along with increasing globalization, the importance of cooperation for the competitiveness of firms is growing as codified knowledge is globally accessible. Consequently, the role of tacit knowledge acquired via an informal learning process is becoming more crucial (Gausdal, 2008).

Although the understanding of collective learning in the clustering literature is indeed social learning, social theories of learning, in particular the communities of practice (CoPs) theory (Wenger, 2009), have rarely been used to discover how learning occurs in clusters or CIs. While the CoP theory has become popular in other fields, it has only been addressed marginally in the management literature, remaining nearly absent in the studies on clustering (Wang & Helms, 2019). However, the concept of a CoP “fits well in the learning process contextualized in industrial clusters” (Wang & Helms, 2019, p. 5) since a CoP is a social entity composed of members that augment common knowledge through their participation in practices. Hence, the application of the CoP theory may help to shed new light on the process of learning in CIs and extend the extant subject knowledge.

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3 Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to portray social learning in CIs, namely: 1) to explore, with the  
4 lens of the CoP theory, in what ways social learning occurs in CIs; 2) to discover how various CoPs  
5 emerge and evolve in CIs to facilitate the collective learning journey. Subsequently, the authors  
6 address the research questions: In what ways does social learning occur in CIs? How is social learning  
7 facilitated through the emergence and evolution of various CoPs in CIs? In our study, we explore  
8 social learning in CIs as well as demonstrate different patterns of learning among CI members. We  
9 purposefully make a distinction between clusters and CIs and limit our investigation on social learning  
10 to CIs as a peculiar type of clusters.  
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16 Cluster initiatives<sup>1</sup> have gained importance in Europe since 1990. The literature on CIs has also  
17 developed extensively, yet it mainly derives from the overall studies on clusters (for its overview, see,  
18 e.g. Morgulis-Yakushev and Sölvell, 2017), which can be seen as a drawback since there are some  
19 differences between clusters and CIs, which concern the following (Sölvell, Lindqvist & Ketels,  
20 2003): 1) CIs have their own life cycles which may not be fully aligned with the cluster life cycle; 2)  
21 the nature of clusters may shape the objectives and processes of CIs; 3) CIs are constituted to  
22 strengthen and develop clusters; 4) CIs are organizations (sometimes called cluster organizations - see,  
23 e.g. Jankowska and Główska, 2016; Morgulis-Yakushev and Sölvell, 2017) at a higher level of  
24 aggregation, built of other organizations that form a cluster; 5) CIs are interventions established to  
25 increase the competitive strength of the cluster through facilitating interactions, among others (Sölvell  
26 et al., 2003), and they should effectively promote spontaneous, face-to-face, informal interactions  
27 which are necessary to support knowledge flows among CI members and, consequently, their social  
28 learning; 6) companies located in spontaneous clusters and CIs differ with respect to “entrepreneurship  
29 level, linkages, social capital and financial dependence” (Ibn-e-Hassan & Talib, 2015, p. 526).  
30 Consequently, CIs are formally established organizations comprising institutional members that have  
31 joined them purposefully to achieve some collective or individual objectives (Lis, 2018). As far as the  
32 peculiarities of CIs are concerned, it may be useful to focus on them solely in the research. Ibn-e-  
33 Hassan and Talib (2015) claim that studies on policy-driven clusters are still rather scant, yet needed.  
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Staber (2009) contends that the mechanisms by which a learning community is constructed are  
not the subject of systematic studies in the clustering literature. Thus, our research goes beyond the  
state-of-the-art knowledge by exposing a more social view on learning in CIs and implementing the  
CoP theory to gain an additional insight into their learning process. We focus on ways that social  
learning occurs rather than channels or dimensions of learning, as prior studies have done so far.  
Furthermore, we stress the role of CoPs in social learning in CIs and how this relates to the level of  
involvement of their members. We show the trajectory of the emergence of various CoPs in CIs. The  
paper adds to the relatively insufficiently developed studies on CIs in the clustering literature with  
regard to social learning and focuses on more typical forms of clusters in Europe, namely top-down

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<sup>1</sup> Also called policy-driven clusters, state-led clusters, see Ibn-e-Hassan & Talib (2015); Obadić (2013); Richardson (2013)

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3 and bottom-up CIs (Sölvell, 2008) in one European country, i.e. Poland. The CIs in Europe create a  
4 relatively diversified universe with respect to their setting, objectives, organization and performance,  
5 which justifies the reason for studying them within a single state and with a qualitative approach.  
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8 The discourse is organized in the following manner. Firstly, it contains a literature review that  
9 delineates CIs from clusters as well as regarding the meaning of collective/social learning in the  
10 clustering literature, the identification of the research gap and the theoretical background of the study.  
11 Secondly, the paper includes details with regard to the methodology. Thirdly, it reports the empirical  
12 results. Finally, a discussion and conclusions are provided.  
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## 16 17 **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### 18 **2.1 Clusters vs. cluster initiatives**

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20 Cluster initiatives are an idiosyncratic form of clusters. The clustering literature concerning  
21 clusters and recently CIs has significantly developed since the 1980s (e.g. Enright, 1996, 2003; Cooke,  
22 2002; DeBresson, 1996; Lis & Lis, 2014; Parrilli et al. 2010; Porter, 1998, 2000, 2008; Rosenfeld,  
23 1997; Swann & Prevezer, 1996), while the concept of industrial clusters as a certain concentration of  
24 firms, institutions and other entities linked through industries in a given geographical location was first  
25 introduced by Porter (1990, 2000). Since then, clusters have been scrutinized from different angles and  
26 disciplines as scholars wanted to discover how they function, develop and contribute to the growth of  
27 interrelated firms, regions and economies (Brosnan et al., 2016). Clusters are defined as “geographic  
28 concentrations of interconnected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, firms in related  
29 industries, and associated institutions (for example, universities, standards agencies, and trade  
30 associations) in particular fields that compete but also cooperate” (Porter, 2008, p. 213-214). This  
31 understanding of the cluster coincides with other theories regarding the connections among business  
32 entities and the consequences of these connections for economic growth and development (Feser,  
33 1998). This group of theories includes, in particular, Marshallian industrial districts (Marshall, 1890)  
34 and their Italian version – Italian industrial districts (Becattini 2002; Becattini et al., 1990; Bellandi,  
35 2002; Sforzi, 2002).  
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45 Clusters facilitate an exchange of business information, know-how, and technological expertise,  
46 which in turn may produce knowledge externalities, in particular, in knowledge-intensive and creative  
47 industries (Wang & Helms, 2019). In this respect, clusters can be treated as “dynamic arrangements  
48 based on knowledge creation, increasing returns (...) and innovation” (Sölvell, 2008, p. 15). They not  
49 only provide their members with participation in social networks, which can diminish transaction costs  
50 and improve efficiency (Giuliani, Maffioli, Pacheco, Pietrobello & Stucchi, 2014), but they are also  
51 sources of learning in the local/national context. They may also enable their members access to global  
52 production networks or a pipeline of knowledge (Geenhuizen & Nijkamp, 2012; Upadhyayula,  
53 Dhandapani & Karna, 2017), e.g. if they include multinational corporations, their subcontractors or  
54 affiliates, or when they support export, cooperation with foreign clusters or participation in  
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3 international fairs. As a result, learning is one of the main concepts that have been analyzed in the  
4 studies on clusters, both theoretical and empirical ones (Li, Haoyi & Wenbin, 2008; Staber, 2009) (see  
5 par. 2.2).  
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8 A conviction that clusters are beneficial for regional economies and development was reflected to  
9 support their development through appropriate policies (Obadić, 2013). Consequently, a new term was  
10 coined, i.e. 'cluster initiatives', namely "organized efforts to increase the growth and competitiveness  
11 of clusters within a region, involving cluster firms, government and/or the research community"  
12 (Sölvell et al., 2003, p. 15). A cluster initiative can be understood as a formally established  
13 organization functioning at a higher level of aggregation, composed of institutional members (and  
14 units comprising them) who consciously and voluntarily joined it, combining with one another in  
15 cooperation to achieve collective goals (related to the development of a specific cluster) and/or  
16 individual goals (related to their own development) (Lis, 2018).  
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22 A cluster initiative can be treated as a working cluster. According to the Enright (1996, 2003)  
23 typology, modified by Rosenfeld (1997), clusters can be divided into three groups: potential clusters  
24 ("wannabe"), latent clusters ("underachieving") and working clusters ("overachieving"). A working  
25 cluster is a structure with high self-awareness, able to fully take advantage of its own potential and  
26 achieve the synergy effect. A developed and specialized infrastructure (social and institutional),  
27 facilitating the flow of information and the development of connections among individual elements of  
28 the cluster, is an attribute distinguishing between working clusters and potential or latent clusters.  
29 Furthermore, due to the legal basis of activity, CIs can be divided into formal and informal (Knorringa  
30 & Meyer-Stamer, 1998). CIs may formalize their cooperation on the basis of various contracts  
31 provided in the legislation. Cluster initiatives can also be analyzed by the way in which the clusters are  
32 brought to life. With regard to this division, a distinction is made between bottom-up and top-down  
33 (induced by public policies) CIs. As far as the first category is concerned, such CIs are created  
34 primarily on the basis of endogenous factors such as natural resources, resources developed in the  
35 region, and industrial traditions. The bottom-up term emphasizes the willingness of enterprises to  
36 cooperate towards the further development of existing relationships among the partners. The creation  
37 of top-down structures primarily involves entities beyond the business sector, e.g. R&D sector  
38 institutions, business-related institutions as well as public authorities. The research from Sölvell et al.  
39 (2003) shows that bottom-up CIs are often launched in response to a crisis, while top-down ones are a  
40 result of governmental programs. The literature also provides the term "Cluster Development  
41 Programs" (CDP), which, closely related to the concept of CIs, defines them as "(...) public  
42 interventions that foster the beneficial effects of economies of agglomeration by creating a set of  
43 incentives to overcome the coordination failures that hamper the development of some industries in  
44 specific localities" (Maffioli et al., 2016, p. 9). The development of CIs, particularly in Europe, has  
45 been the result of various development programs implemented at the EU level under the Lisbon  
46 Strategy 2000-2010 and in the current EU strategy "Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and  
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3 inclusive growth” (2010-2020) as well as at the level of individual countries and regions. The funds  
4 allocated in these programs are intended for launching and developing CIs, which is indirectly  
5 supposed to contribute to the development of clusters.  
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8 Although the literature on CIs has grown substantially, it remains somewhat underdeveloped  
9 since it does not fully capture the genuine nature of CIs, which are created to develop clusters. In  
10 particular, it has not sufficiently examined how CIs can shape knowledge-related processes. It is  
11 limited only to analyses of the consequences of cooperation undertaken within clusters (considered in  
12 economic categories). Learning can be seen as a vital driver in the life cycles of both CIs and clusters  
13 (Giuliani, 2011; Liu, 2012; Menzel & Fornahl, 2010). Nevertheless, differences among companies  
14 located in clusters and CIs may occur (Ibn-e-Hassan & Talib, 2015; Richardson, 2013; Richardson,  
15 Yamin & Sinkovics, 2012), which impacts their social learning. Furthermore, CIs can galvanize and  
16 motivate their members to be more engaged in order to support learning, as our study shows (see par.  
17 4). In the view of the authors, the distinctive features of CIs and their popularity in Europe, contrary to  
18 ‘organic’ clusters, justify focusing on them in research.  
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## 27 2.2 Social learning

28 The emphasis on learning in the clustering literature can be found in several concepts such as  
29 epistemic communities, learning networks, learning by interactions, learning regions, regional  
30 innovation systems, innovative milieu, innovation ecosystems or hot spots (Staber, 2009; Lis, 2018,  
31 2019). All these concepts are rooted in the concept of the Marshallian industrial district (Becattini,  
32 1990; Brosnan et al., 2016; Marshal, 1890; Porter & Ketels, 2009), which emphasizes the existence of  
33 external agglomerations deriving from a labor market with specialized skills, access to non-  
34 commercial outlays specific to a given industry, and knowledge spillovers. Having applied such a  
35 theoretical basis, scholars have examined the relationship between learning in clusters and  
36 innovations, knowledge flows, learning channels and learning dimensions, the role of institutions in  
37 supporting cluster learning, learning mechanisms, the role of spatial proximity in learning, etc.  
38 (Capello, 1999; Cotic-Svetina et al., 2008; Keeble & Wilkinson, 1999; Li et al., 2008; Lin et al., 2014;  
39 Parrilli et al., 2010; Svetina & Jaklic, 2008).  
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47 Collective learning (also known as localized or interactive learning) is the core, yet rather a fuzzy  
48 concept in the clustering literature and almost absent in studies on CIs (see Table 1) (Capello, 1999;  
49 Cotic-Svetina et al., 2008; Keeble & Wilkinson, 1999; Lin et al., 2014; Staber, 2009; Svetina & Jaklic,  
50 2008). It is perceived as a social process that leads to knowledge accumulation via shared rules and  
51 procedures. The process is social and individuals are involved in practices in search of a solution to a  
52 problem. Their exchange, modification of practices and the commitment of individuals form the  
53 foundation for an informal learning process (Beerepoot, 2008). Such practices reflect the way work is  
54 done (Capello, 1999; Perez-Aleman, 2011) and are situated in a context (Mozzato & Bitencourt,  
55 2014). The understanding of collective learning is indeed social learning, i.e. learning through  
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3 individual participation in social life via engaging in activities, conversations, reflections, etc., where  
4 interactions with others are of vital significance (Capello, 1999; Wenger, 2010). Capello (1999)  
5 indicates that a crucial difference exists between the concept of learning and collective learning as the  
6 latter occurs in a socialized way via an interactive mechanism. Collective learning is “learning through  
7 interactive and communicative action creating synergy” and it “brings about shared knowledge and  
8 understanding concerning something that was not previously known or understood among the  
9 interacting agents” (Döös and Wilhelmson, 2011, p. 489). It “generates social processes of cumulative  
10 knowledge creation and exploitation” (Capello, 1999, p. 730). Thus, collective learning can be  
11 associated with social learning and social theories of learning may add to its deeper comprehension<sup>2</sup>.  
12 Social learning exhibits changes in individual understanding through social interactions among various  
13 actors within different social networks. It is about the process of change and participation in  
14 communities of practice (see par. 2.3) (Nicolletti, Lutti, Souza & Pagotto, 2019; Rogge, Theesfeld &  
15 Strassner, 2020). Moreover, “social learning often requires flexible, spontaneous and sustained  
16 participation” (Ison, Blackmore & Iaquinto, 2013, p. 36).

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25 It needs to be highlighted that collective/social learning goes beyond individual knowledge, skills  
26 or competences. The characteristics of a CI and of those who represent it determine the scope of such  
27 learning (Beerepoot, 2008). Furthermore, as proved by Staber (2009), members learn with one another  
28 and from others, which does not necessarily assume close interactions each time. Additionally,  
29 learning outcomes are not always beneficial. Social interactions, cognitive proximity, social capital  
30 and other aspects of clusters contribute to social learning among their members. In addition,  
31 collective/social learning can be perceived as a deliberate activity of cluster firms “to intentionally  
32 share, coproduce, and disseminate knowledge through the establishment of a community of practice”  
33 (Wang & Helms, 2019, p. 2).

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It appears to be paradoxical that the number of studies on learning in the clustering literature is  
substantial, yet research that is solely focused on collective/social learning, its key concept, is  
insufficient, particularly regarding CIs (Table 1). Moreover, a closer look at the search results  
concerning a pair of keywords ‘cluster’ and ‘social learning’ shows that all the papers have been  
irrelevant to clusters. Svetina and Jaklic (2008) emphasize that the concept of collective learning in the  
clustering literature is under-theorized, so there is a need to conduct more theoretically-oriented  
studies, whereas “empirically, it has been treated in a somewhat cavalier fashion” (Staber, 2009, p.  
555). Additionally, social learning theories have been rarely applied in the clustering literature to  
analyze collective/social learning. This makes the current empirical study an important and interesting  
scientific inquiry into what ways social learning occurs in CIs and how social learning is facilitated  
through the emergence and evolution of various CoPs in CIs. Through our research, we expand the  
theoretical base of generally lacking studies on social learning in CIs in the clustering literature. Since

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the social nature of collective learning, in the subsequent part of the paper we treat collective learning and social learning as synonyms.



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3 the CoP theory has been sparsely implemented in the management literature, we also augment this  
4 specific research field. Our findings can help CIs to stimulate their members to be more involved in  
5 order to improve their social learning.  
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### 11 12 **2.3 Social learning in communities of practice**

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14 The communities of practice theory (Wenger, 1998, 2009, 2010) provides an interesting  
15 contribution to the explanation of the ways that social learning occurs and the role of various  
16 communities in the process. Therefore, it may be applied to the context of CIs as they contain groups  
17 of enterprise representatives that interact on a more or less regular basis (Wang & Helms, 2019). CIs  
18 as CoPs have an emergent structure with complex relationships, both formal and informal (Dessne &  
19 Byström, 2015). They organize themselves, have flexible and dynamic boundaries and their ongoing  
20 negotiation helps them to create an identity and cultural meanings.  
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24 According to the theory, a CoP is initially a loose network which, with the gradual growth of  
25 connections among members, transforms into a community. A CoP is “an emerging informal network  
26 or structure based on engaged participation by members in a joint” organization (Dessne and Byström,  
27 2015, p. 2278). It is described as a relational space binding individuals through interactions and shared  
28 expertise (Wang & Helms, 2019). The need for more systematic interactions increases when members  
29 develop the sense of a shared domain. Discovering that others face similar problems may induce  
30 learning from one another. A CoP constitutes a common base of knowledge among various individuals  
31 allowing participants to co-ordinate their actions to successfully manage problems. The negotiation of  
32 meanings contributes to the development of practices, which is a property of a community. As a result,  
33 a CoP has three attributes, namely domain, community and practice. “The domain brings people  
34 together and guides their learning, the community consists of the social ties between individuals  
35 sharing the domain, and the practice covers the means used to act within the domain” (Dessne and  
36 Byström, 2015, p. 2279).  
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40 The CoP theory claims that social learning is more than merely acquiring knowledge and skills. It  
41 is a social becoming, i.e. developing a certain identity; it is also a production of practices (Wenger,  
42 2010). People learn in social relationships, while their participation in a CoP may be full or peripheral  
43 (Dessne & Byström, 2015).  
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47 CoPs were initially portrayed as emergent and informal structures with voluntary membership.  
48 However, later works regarding CoPs also suggest that CoPs may be designed and managed to  
49 facilitate learning (for their overview, see Dessne and Byström, 2015). Since clusters or CIs are, by  
50 definition, social communities (Castro, 2015; Gausdal, 2008; Giuliani, 2011; Staber, 2009; Turner,  
51 2010; Wang & Helms, 2019), the creation of CIs may, on the one hand, be considered as a  
52 development of CoPs, while on the other hand, different spontaneous CoPs can emerge within CIs  
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3 with their own practices related to their domains, meanings and identities. As the theory predicts,  
4 “communities emerge, merge, split, compete, complement each other, and disappear” (Wenger, 2010,  
5 p. 182).  
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8 Concerning the application of the CoP theory to the studies on clusters, we found just a few  
9 works, none of which referred to CIs. Consequently, a vital gap is noticeable in the extant knowledge  
10 on CIs in this respect. Wang and Helms (2019) notice that the accumulation of knowledge-based  
11 assets in a region can be achieved through a CoP or Marshallian externalities, or their combination,  
12 consequently enhancing a locational competitive advantage of clustered organizations. Nevertheless,  
13 their study investigated geographically isolated and remote firms. Other authors have analyzed CoPs  
14 composed of enterprises and organizations in a region organized through professional associations  
15 (Faulconbridge, 2007; Turner, 2010). In her qualitative study, Gausdal (2008) showed how an  
16 educational program by a CoP helped to invigorate the Electric Coast cluster and how the CoP  
17 contributed to collective learning. Giuliani (2011) applied a CoP lens to scrutinize the role of  
18 technological gatekeepers in localized learning in a wine cluster. Finally, Castro (2015) proposed  
19 considering clusters as CoPs and adopting a community-based knowledge management approach to  
20 support innovation.  
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28 The above overview shows the rather limited application of the CoP theory in research on clusters  
29 and an opportunity to expand it regarding social learning in CIs. The theoretical framework allows the  
30 prediction that various CoPs may emerge within CIs with their specific domains, practices and  
31 identities. Moreover, the participation of CI members in these CoPs can be more selective, i.e. some  
32 members choose a more peripheral than full participation, which results in the occurrence of learning  
33 in different ways.  
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### 39 **3 METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE**

#### 40 **3.1 Research method and participants**

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42 The paper reports the results of an explorative qualitative study, the aim of which was to analyze  
43 social learning in cooperative relationships in CIs. The choice of CIs (not clusters) as the research  
44 subject was justified by the identified cognitive gap (see introduction and par. 2.2). CIs are hardly  
45 studied in the literature, yet increasingly popular in business practice.  
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49 This is part of a larger study aimed at identifying the levels of advancement of cooperation among  
50 enterprises in selected CIs in Poland (Lis, 2018). The study introduced the concept of ‘trajectory’ for  
51 the development of cooperative relationships in CIs. It was found that they develop in four stages,  
52 namely the transition from level I "Integration at the unit level", through level II "Allocation and  
53 integration at the process level" and level III "Impact on the environment", and end on level IV  
54 "Creation and integration at the organizational level". Each stage has different goals. Along with the  
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3 transition from one stage to the next, the role of CIs, the involvement of cluster members, and the pool  
4 of received benefits also change.  
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6 The questions stated in the current study are as follows: What ways does social learning occur in  
7 CIs? How is social learning facilitated through the emergence and evolution of various CoPs in CIs?  
8 Both the aforementioned concepts of the trajectory of development of CIs, as well as additional  
9 research threads, i.e. social learning, are the result of the abductive approach applied in the larger  
10 study (Lis, 2018). Abduction, derived from the Peirce philosophy (1931, 1958), consists of  
11 discovering and interpreting the observed data (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). When analyzing the results of  
12 the preceding research, we noticed some additional threads related to processes in CIs and we  
13 attempted to find the best explanation for them. We were prompted to conduct an additional literature  
14 review to familiarize ourselves with the-state-of-the-art knowledge and, consequently, this led us to  
15 the topic of social learning and CoPs. As a result, the CoP theory has become the theoretical  
16 background for the interpretation of our findings.  
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24 Based on the theoretical underpinnings of the study (Dessne & Byström, 2015; Wenger, 2010), it  
25 is predicted that various CoPs emerge within CIs with their own domains, practices and identities. It is  
26 also anticipated that member participation in these CoPs is more selective, i.e. some members choose a  
27 more peripheral than full participation, with different consequences for learning.  
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30 The sample consisted of four CIs located in Poland (Table 2). In the selection of the CIs, extreme  
31 cases logic was used to ensure maximum variability and diversity within the research field. Taking the  
32 economic sector as the main differentiating criterion, four CIs were selected for the study – two CIs  
33 from the metal industry and two CIs representing the information and communication technologies  
34 (ICT) industry. All four CIs are formal organizations created as a result of the large involvement of the  
35 enterprises. Given the type of CIs, one of them (Metal Cluster A) is a bottom-up initiative, while the  
36 other three are mixed forms. R&D institutions were the main initiators of the studied ICT initiatives,  
37 while non-governmental sector institutions played the biggest role in launching both metal initiatives.  
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43 On the one hand, the dissimilarity of the two selected sectors was considered to be a factor  
44 potentially revealing the development of cooperative relationships among cluster partners. On the  
45 other hand, the similarity of the surveyed entities was required as they should therefore present above-  
46 average (taking into account the overall population of CIs in Poland) organizational maturity. It can be  
47 predicted that in mature CIs, cluster mechanisms are better developed, especially in the context of  
48 social learning. We assumed that organizational maturity may be manifested by the age of a CI  
49 (measured by the number of years since the CI was created), its size (measured by the number of its  
50 members) and scope (local, regional, nationwide). In the context of organizational maturity, we also  
51 took into account the length of membership. The participants of the study were primarily members  
52 with a long membership period (the vast majority of them had been involved in the CIs since their  
53 inception), whose involvement in CI activities exceeded the average for a given CI. The choice of  
54 longer term cluster members for the study was motivated by the need to ensure the same plane of  
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3 comparison regarding the surveyed entities since all of them potentially had similar chances, related to  
4 the length of their membership, of achieving various benefits from their participation in their given CI,  
5 including participation in social learning.  
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10 Table 2  
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14 Another aspect that needs to be stressed with regard to CIs is the vital role of the representatives  
15 of CI members, who are individuals delegated to represent the interests of their employing  
16 organizations. Apart from activities directed at establishing institutional relations among various  
17 members, they undertake and maintain personal relationships which have various effects for CIs and  
18 their organizations. In this paper, the authors adopt the individual perspective of these representatives  
19 while studying social learning in CIs.  
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22  
23 The study was based on individual in-depth interviews with the representatives of the CI  
24 organizations – a total of 35 interviewees representing the selected CIs participated in the research and  
25 their selection was based on the snowball technique (Goodman, 1961). The use of the snowball  
26 technique, on the one hand, allowed the identification of the most involved cluster members (which  
27 was one of the criteria for sample selection), yet on the other hand, it could bring about too much  
28 similarity within the sample. Therefore, the selection of entities was carried out carefully, taking into  
29 account the above threat. It was assumed that entities representing various types of activities should  
30 participate in the study. As a result, these were the coordinators and representatives of members of the  
31 selected CIs, mainly cluster companies, but also – to broaden the perspective – R&D institutions,  
32 educational institutions and support institutions. The coordinators were represented by employees  
33 delegated to run the CI (see Table 2).  
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37 We talked to the so-called key informants (Kumar, Stern & Anderson, 1993), namely the  
38 individuals with the most comprehensive knowledge of the functioning of a given CI and the role of  
39 their parent organizations in the CI. The respondents, on behalf of the cluster members, were the  
40 owners of companies or top managers and people selected to represent the organization in the CI.  
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44 About 44 hours of interviews were conducted in the offices of the surveyed companies and  
45 institutions in the first half of 2016; the average length of each interview was 75 minutes.  
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49 The interview questions were divided into the following sections: 1) forms of cooperation in CIs;  
50 2) involvement of the coordinator and members in CIs; 3) development of relationships and building  
51 trust in CIs; 4) creating opportunities and achieving benefits in CIs; 5) flows of knowledge and  
52 information in CIs.  
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56 To describe the four CIs in the sample, additional information was acquired via interviews with  
57 the representatives of the CIs and an analysis of the documents and web resources of each CI. Hence,  
58 the study ensures methodological and data triangulations (Maxwell, 2005) since it applies multiple  
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3 methods of data collection (i.e. interviews and document analysis) and multiple sources to gather  
4 information within a given method (i.e. the interviewees representing different CI members).  
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### 8 **3.2 Analytical procedure**

9 The conventional qualitative content analysis procedure (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was applied to  
10 analyze the interviews. With regard to the coding schemes, the researchers constantly compared each  
11 interview and theme to inductively delimit codes from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).  
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14 The analysis included three steps, i.e. open, axial and selective coding. In the open coding stage,  
15 some common themes were identified emerging from the interviews in each CI. For instance, these  
16 were 'dead souls', 'distrust', 'inspiring', 'co-creation of knowledge'. In the axial coding stage, each  
17 theme was classified with respect to the four identified categories and their peculiarities concerning  
18 cooperative relationships (interactions) in the CIs (Table 3). At the final, selective coding stage, the  
19 categories and their peculiarities were horizontally grouped to feature the strength of interactions,  
20 symptoms of learning and the type of received resources at each involvement level (Table 4).  
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38 Referring to the first main category, "the involvement level", which defines the specificity of  
39 cluster members, it should be emphasized that it was not possible to select a research sample  
40 consistent with this category and its four peculiarities (dead souls, participants, cooperators and  
41 locomotives). The logic was inverse – based on the abductive approach, this category emerged from  
42 the collected data, as did the other three categories and their properties. It should be emphasized that  
43 the four selected groups (properties of the "involvement level" category) were distinguished in relation  
44 to all the cluster members, not only the respondents. Nevertheless, the respondents, due to their above  
45 average involvement, represented three distinguished groups (classified later as CoPs): primarily, the  
46 participants and the cooperators as well as (although much less often) the locomotives. However,  
47 based on the conducted interviews (especially with the coordinators), the fourth and at the same time  
48 least involved group was identified – the dead souls.  
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## 57 **4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### 58 **4.1 Results**

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3 *4.1.1 The involvement level, the strength of interactions and the emergence and evolution of*  
4 *communities*  
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6 The conducted research allowed four main groups of members (and three communities) to be  
7 identified according to their level of involvement (Figure 1). The shape of the triangle reflects the  
8 decreasing number of members included in each level.  
9

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11 The research shows that the largest group comprised entities not involved in CI activities, so-  
12 called ‘dead souls’ (this term was borrowed from the interviewees). From the formal point of view,  
13 these entities were members of the CIs but their participation in the initiative was limited to the  
14 payment of membership fees, which ensured that they held the status of member and had access to the  
15 information sent by the CI (by coordinators and other members) via communication technologies. At  
16 the second level, there were active members – ‘participants’, although their activity was mainly based  
17 on their participation in the meetings organized on the CI forum. Levels three and four were  
18 dominated by the most active members, who, in order to achieve specific goals, took part in working  
19 groups and project groups or consortia. These goals may be related to the benefits of greater  
20 involvement such as creating a base network of relationships among the cluster partners, obtaining  
21 access to an increased pool of resources, increasing quality or reducing costs, affecting the external  
22 environment or creating common added value (e.g. through innovation). The main difference between  
23 the third and fourth level is that the former – ‘cooperators’ – joined the CIs for the purpose of  
24 cooperation initiated by other cluster entities, adapting to the rules governing the given group  
25 (working or project ones). In turn, the fourth and smallest sub-set of the CIs – ‘locomotives’ –  
26 describes those entities that initiated these forms of cooperation within the CIs themselves, involving  
27 other cluster members in their ideas.  
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31 With regard to identity among these groups, the dead souls were brought to the CIs to collect  
32 information from their environment; however, they did not identify with the CIs and weakly so with  
33 one another. By contrast, the participants developed their identification with the CIs, which were used  
34 for establishing contacts, developing relationships and exchanging resources. The cooperators were  
35 imitators rather than initiators, and their identity was strong, yet only with the working groups they  
36 were involved in. The last community, the locomotives, identified strongly with their project groups in  
37 the CIs and was selective in accepting new members in the groups. The locomotives initiated them to  
38 create added value through the execution of projects and the development of knowledge.  
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41 As the study shows, the entity’s location at a given level was, to a large extent, related to their  
42 involvement in the CI activities (the greater the involvement, the higher the level). This, in turn, was  
43 largely associated with the period of membership and many other factors (such as matching the  
44 company profile to the CI profile, the company location, the motivation of the people representing the  
45 company in the CI, etc.). However, it was observed that the largest involvement occurred in the case of  
46 those members who participated in the establishment of the surveyed CIs.  
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3 Due to the fact that the assignment to a given community was strongly associated with  
4 involvement, which is a variable that changes over time, i.e. may increase or decrease, the study  
5 showed that some cluster members changed their groups, yet this was not a common practice. It  
6 occurred relatively rarely at the first level (transformation from dead souls into participants), which  
7 may indicate that the members of this group did not intend to increase their involvement in activities  
8 undertaken within their CI. A community change most often occurred between the second and the  
9 third level, when the participants began to realize the benefits of participating in higher forms of  
10 cluster cooperation and felt the need for greater involvement. This moved them to the position of  
11 cooperators. Nevertheless, the last possible transformation of cooperators into locomotives happened  
12 very seldom (these were individual cases), when a given cooperator-subject, inspired by cooperation  
13 with the entity-locomotive began to exhibit similar activities. Based on the interviewees' accounts, we  
14 did not notice a direct transition from the second level (participants) to the fourth level (locomotives).  
15 In Figure 1, the directions of migration among the identified CoPs are marked with arrows, where the  
16 thickness of the arrows reflects the frequency of occurrence of the given migration. The study also  
17 revealed that if the involvement of cluster entities was insufficient, then the given community  
18 disappeared – this situation was observed among some cooperators.  
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35 At each level, a different strength of social interactions among the cluster members was also  
36 observed, as reflected in the illustrative citations presented in Table 5.  
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46 At the first level, the cluster members had very limited opportunities to establish contacts with  
47 other participants. A lack of commitment hindered the development of any relationship. The more  
48 active the members were, the stronger interactions they had with other selected members of the CIs.  
49 Together with increasing involvement, the interactions among the members developed, moving from  
50 the phase of removing the barrier of anonymity (the second level) by gradually removing the barrier of  
51 distrust (levels three and four). Cooperation in working and project groups resulted in frequent  
52 interactions among the partners, which strengthened the relationships in these groups. The existing  
53 community of goals (and often also the commonality of interests or, in other words, the shared  
54 domain), additionally helped in the development of trust. This referred, in particular, to project groups,  
55 as subsequent projects implemented with a similar composition of participants allowed for the  
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3 verification of trust, which, in consequence, led to the separation of these subsets in the structure of the  
4 CIs. During the project implementation, these were rather formal subsets. Nevertheless, the ties  
5 established among the partners, and their shared experiences, constituted informal subsets of members  
6 within the studied CIs.  
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10 When comparing the CIs, it could be seen that the CoPs identified in the study occurred in the  
11 studied CIs with varying intensity. Each CI (regardless of the industry) included the first three  
12 identified groups, while the locomotives were noticed only in ICT initiatives, which may be due to the  
13 specificity of this sector (focus on project activities). At the same time, in these CIs, the dead souls and  
14 the participants were more numerous, which can be explained by the size of these initiatives (they  
15 were much larger than the metal CIs). The cooperators were apparent in both the metal and the ICT  
16 initiatives, but the involvement of the members of these CIs was quite different. In the metal  
17 initiatives, the activities undertaken by the cooperators were aimed at achieving collective benefits  
18 from the angle of the region and the industry, related to adjusting the educational profile in the region  
19 to the needs of the companies. Conversely, the activity of the cooperators in the ICT initiatives was  
20 focused on achieving mainly individual goals connected to facilitating access to resources or the  
21 pooling of resources in order to generate added value, by increasing quality or reducing costs.  
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#### 30 *4.1.2 Ways that learning occurs*

31 Based on the obtained research results, eight ways that learning occurs in CIs were identified. For  
32 simplicity, they are presented as two examples at each distinguished level, though they are additive in  
33 nature – at each next level new forms appeared, yet the manifestations identified at the earlier level did  
34 not disappear. As a result, at the highest level of involvement, all the identified symptoms of learning  
35 occurred (Table 6).  
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40 Table 6

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44 At the first level, two basic ways of learning were observed – information transfer and raising  
45 awareness. In both cases, the inactive cluster members (dead souls) were primarily the recipients. The  
46 gained benefits referred to access to information about the initiative (and its members) and the closest  
47 environment of their organizations and the CI. The information obtained at this level, usually  
48 appearing in a large amount, was very general and poorly personalized.  
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52 At the second level, the two previous ways of learning were still present, namely information  
53 transfer and raising awareness, but in contrast to the first level, the members of the CIs (participants)  
54 were not only the recipients but also the donors. Due to their involvement, they achieved additional  
55 benefits such as access to much more detailed information, more suitable for their business profile.  
56 This information concerned the other members of the CI, and facilitated the identification of sources  
57 of missing resources and favored their exchange within the CIs. In addition, the cluster entities at this  
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3 level of involvement were given priority in gaining important information on changes in the  
4 environment, which placed them in a privileged position in relation to entities from outside the CIs.

5  
6 The cluster members that managed to enter the third level of involvement (cooperators) had better  
7 opportunities (compared to the previous two levels) to use the effects of demonstration and inspiration.  
8 This worked both ways because, on the one hand, the members of the working and project groups  
9 acted as demonstrators and inspired the others by their achievements, while on the other hand, they  
10 could observe the other partners and gain inspiration from them. Both symptoms of learning  
11 (demonstrating and inspiring) occurred most often in an unconscious way. The involvement of the  
12 entities in these most mature forms of cooperation facilitated the acquisition of knowledge resources  
13 not available at the lower levels. First and foremost, it was tacit knowledge, difficult to codify and  
14 transfer.

15  
16 The most involved group of cluster members – locomotives – undertook conscious activities  
17 aimed at motivating and educating the other participants. Although bidirectional actions were  
18 observed at this level, the locomotives were, above all, the giving side rather than the receiving one.  
19 Over time, the desire to balance input-output motivated this group to engage in cooperation with  
20 equally highly motivated and involved participants with a similar innovation potential. This resulted in  
21 the formation of closed subgroups with high entry barriers. At this stage, owing to their great  
22 involvement (Table 9), the participants were able to share their knowledge in order to achieve mutual  
23 benefits as well as to co-create knowledge based on their competences.

24  
25 Referring to the two sectors of CIs participating in the study, the ICT and metal initiatives, the  
26 distinguished ways of learning coincided with the previously identified CoPs. Consequently, in the  
27 metal CIs, they ended with third-level learning forms (demonstrating and inspiring), while in the ICT  
28 initiatives, all eight ways of learning were observed, including motivating and educating.

## 41 **4.2 Discussion**

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43 The empirical findings suggest that whatever learning occurred in the CIs (i.e. one-way or two-  
44 way information transfer and raising awareness, demonstrating and inspiring, motivating and  
45 educating) it was related to the strength of interactions among their members (Figure 2), which reveals  
46 the social nature of learning in CIs. This is consistent with previous research, which showed that  
47 cluster members learn with one another and from others even when the interactions are not close  
48 (Staber, 2009). Beginning from the second level of involvement, different CoPs emerged (participants,  
49 cooperators and locomotives) with their characteristic practices (Table 7). Our research has portrayed  
50 a collective journey in the learning process, where the members of CIs joined, created or changed their  
51 CoPs to better adjust their participation in CIs to their own objectives. Each CoP presented a different  
52 stage of development (described as the strength of interactions and the level of involvement), which  
53 was further reflected in the ways social learning occurred in a given CoP as well as its domain,  
54 identity and practices.

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3 Involvement in CoPs, which has been demonstrated in this study as the basis for trust-building  
4 and social learning, is also strongly emphasized in the concept of a development trajectory (discussed  
5 in a more extended study, while the current one serves as a scientific component) (Lis, 2018). The  
6 concept of trajectory reflects the dynamic approach to the development of cluster entities. According  
7 to this concept, along with the transition to higher levels of CI development, the set of goals, the roles  
8 fulfilled by CIs, the received benefits as well as forms of cooperation (and involvement) change. To  
9 the best of our knowledge, there is a lack of publications that would adopt a dynamic approach to  
10 cooperation in CIs, in contrast with cluster development models, which are very well-grounded in the  
11 literature (i.e. Bergman, 2008; Gordon & McCann, 2000; Smith & Brown, 2009; Malakauskaite &  
12 Navickas, 2011; Poudar & John, 1996; Rosenfeld, 2002). Although these are dynamic models, they  
13 relate to clusters understood in economic terms, not CIs treated as a kind of organization. A model of  
14 development of CIs was proposed by Sölvell, Lindqvist and Ketels (Sölvell et al., 2003; Lindqvist et  
15 al., 2013), but it does not describe the development of cooperative relationships in CIs so thoroughly.  
16 However, it needs to be stressed that in the social network models of cluster development (Gordon &  
17 McCann, 2000; Smith & Brown, 2009), the strength of relationships (similar to our ‘strength of  
18 interactions’) - the so-called level of ‘embeddedness’ of the social network, is described.

19  
20 Furthermore, we wish to emphasize that social learning in CIs was not the subject of the extended  
21 study, i.e. the interview scenario did not include questions directly tackling this phenomenon. We  
22 discovered it in the course of an additional analysis and interpretation of the collected data. Such an  
23 approach is coherent with abduction theory, as our new discoveries provoked us to look for further  
24 explanation in the theoretical background having found it congruent and insightful after once again  
25 reviewing the literature.  
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In addition, involvement (or in other words, engagement – doing things together) is emphasized in the CoP theory as it is reflected in belonging to a community (Chapple, Molthan, Rachel & Michael, 2020). It can profoundly shape individual experiences of learning in social interactions, as we also observed in our study.

The findings are coherent with our theoretical assumptions and show that CIs can be seen as formally established CoPs (Wang & Helms, 2019). However, they split spontaneously into smaller

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3 communities to meet the objectives of their members (Wenger, 2010). Additionally, the research  
4 reveals that the CoPs at the second level were less mature with practices and featured underdeveloped  
5 identities, while the CoPs at higher levels (three and four) presented deeper involvement, a wider  
6 spectrum of practices, awareness of their identity and a selective choice of community members.  
7 During and after the fulfillment of projects, it is likely that both the conscious and formal development  
8 of inner CoPs is observed (with a separation of project groups from other members of the CIs) as well  
9 as the less conscious and spontaneous formation of CoPs when the interactions developed in projects  
10 were still vibrant after project completion. Furthermore, less mature CoPs in terms of their members'  
11 involvement may not advance and may disappear. Likewise, even mature CoPs without new projects  
12 at hand can vanish. This observation is consistent with the assumptions of the CoP theory concerning  
13 changes in communities (Wenger, 2010) (see also par. 2.3).

14  
15 In conformity with the CoP theory and prior studies on CoPs (Dessne & Byström, 2015; Wenger,  
16 2010), the study reveals that the boundaries of each identified CoP are rather flexible since the  
17 members can decide which level of involvement is sufficient for them and whether their participation  
18 is more peripheral (like in the case of the participants), almost full (in the case of the cooperators) or  
19 full (the locomotives). They can transfer between CoPs and intensify their involvement to meet their  
20 objectives. The research additionally reveals that when the strength of interactions increases, CoPs  
21 change their shared domain and identities, which reflects their social learning. Furthermore, the study  
22 has shown that the identification of the most active members of CIs with their CoPs is stronger than  
23 with their CIs as a whole, while the least mature groups failed to create a collective identity, a shared  
24 domain or substantial practices. Underdeveloped identity, as in the case of dead souls, created barriers  
25 to the deeper involvement of members and their social learning. This evidence is consistent with the  
26 assumptions of the CoP theory (Chapple et al., 2020).

27  
28 To sum up, the study provides evidence that various CoPs emerged within the CIs with their own  
29 domains, practices and identities. The participation of members in these CoPs was rather selective, i.e.  
30 some members chose a more peripheral than full participation, which was reflected in the ways that  
31 social learning occurred.

## 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 **5 CONCLUSIONS**

### 48 **5.1 Contribution and practical implications**

#### 49 *5.1.1 Research contribution*

50  
51 The study has documented indications of social learning in CIs via the interactions that their  
52 members are involved in, namely one-way or two-way information transfer and raising awareness,  
53 demonstrating and inspiring and, finally, motivating and educating. It has portrayed the ways social  
54 learning occurred in CIs, i.e. through the emergence and evolution of various CoPs with their domains,  
55 practices and identities. The findings have shown at which level of involvement the groups evolved  
56 into CoPs and adopted their unique domains and identities.

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3 The results add both theoretically and empirically to the state-of-the-art knowledge in the still  
4 underdeveloped literature on CIs. Firstly, they have exposed a more social view on learning in CIs.  
5 Secondly, social learning theories have been rarely applied in the clustering literature to analyze  
6 collective/social learning, while the authors have implemented the CoP theory, nearly absent in the  
7 clustering studies (Wang & Helms, 2019), and have presented the emergence of CoPs in CIs. Social  
8 learning has been portrayed as a collective journey within and between CoPs, where the interactions of  
9 their members deepened their level of involvement and helped them advance learning in their CoP.  
10 The research has identified three CoPs in the studied CIs which varied in terms of how they supported  
11 the occurrence of learning. Furthermore, it has stressed the role of CoPs in social learning in CIs and  
12 how this is related to the level of involvement of the CI members. With an increase in involvement, CI  
13 members have formed more selective CoPs and strengthened their social learning.

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16 Moreover, as indicated in the paper, the CoP theory has been infrequently addressed in the  
17 management literature. Subsequently, this study expands this specific research field.

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20 Additionally, the research augments prior research as we have solely focused on CIs (so  
21 distinctive from clusters), responding to calls by Ibn-e-Hassan and Talib (2015). Moreover, the study  
22 has revealed, in conformity with previous works (Staber, 2009; Ter Wal, 2013), that geographical  
23 proximity may not be a sufficient factor for collective/social learning to occur. It suggests that social  
24 learning is induced by deeper involvement in the practices of CoPs, which is related to how the  
25 members perceive the benefits from such interactions. It also implies that the more the interactions  
26 increase, the more the social learning may intensify (Svetina & Jaklic, 2008).

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29 **Last but not least**, our study has exhibited various manifestations of social learning in CIs via the  
30 emergence and evolution of CoPs.

### 31 32 33 *5.1.2 Policy and practical implications*

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36 The empirical findings can also suggest a policy and some practical implications for coordinators,  
37 members and authorities of CIs. Knowledge of the identified relationships within the involvement  
38 level, the strength of interaction and learning in CIs, anchored in a larger concept that shows the  
39 trajectory of the development of CIs, can help these organizations to take conscious actions focused on  
40 the development and creation of CoPs. With regard to practitioners, the coordinators of CIs should  
41 stimulate the activity of members through indicating opportunities for entry into more mature CoPs  
42 and showing the benefits of deeper involvement, such as greater access to better tailored knowledge,  
43 participation in innovative projects, and social learning. The examples of practices identified in the  
44 study (that were aimed at developing interactions among the cluster members and implementing them  
45 in the other CIs) may support social learning processes. Such practices can also be collected and  
46 distributed in the form of a code of good practice. Moreover, actual success stories can be better  
47 publicized. In addition, the research suggests that coordinators may motivate and lead CI members in  
48 their collective journey to reach higher levels of involvement in their CIs and become part of the most  
49 active groups owing to the greater benefits they offer. They should also put effort into building a  
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3 collective identity of various CoPs in CIs, and of CIs as a whole. Coordinators should adopt boundary  
4 spanning roles, i.e. actively cross the boundaries of each CoP in CIs to exchange knowledge and  
5 practices. They ought to manage personal relationships and gain legitimacy within various CoPs to  
6 help them to develop a collective identity (Chapple et al., 2020). In addition, to ensure the growth of  
7 entire CIs, coordinators should create conditions for the development of existing CoPs into higher  
8 forms which better support learning.  
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12 Furthermore, with regard to the policy implications, the authorities need to apply cluster  
13 development programs to support those activities of CIs that are significant to acquire new knowledge  
14 in CIs and, subsequently, reach higher innovativeness of their members. Moreover, the study  
15 emphasizes that at each stage of the development of CIs, the learning process is carried out on the  
16 basis of interactions created among the members. Therefore, it is important that authorities maintain  
17 the 'soft' forms of cooperation within CIs – involving the members in their activities, developing  
18 interactions and fostering the creation of a collective identity of CIs. Finally, as part of planned  
19 development programs, certain measures should be provided to increase the competence level of  
20 coordinators and CI members and enhance their awareness as well as strengthen the relationships  
21 among CI partners (such as participation in training courses, workshops, conferences, seminars, etc.).  
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## 23 **5.2 Limitations and further research**

24  
25 The study is not without limitations.  
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27  
28 The first limitation is the small, specific and only slightly diversified research sample (four  
29 intentionally selected CIs, 35 interviewees) of CIs and their representatives chosen for the analysis.  
30 This limits the possibility of generalizing the conclusions, although the assumptions made at the stage  
31 of selecting the research sample (the logic of the sample selection according to extreme cases) allow  
32 for a wider universality of the discovered regularities. The analysis of two different sectors of the  
33 economy suggests that the observed relationships may also occur in CIs representing other sectors. A  
34 certain threat regarding the similarity of the studied entities is associated with the use of the snowball  
35 technique, yet it was minimized by an attempt to include various groups of CI entities in the study. We  
36 also consider the selection of only engaged cluster members for the research sample as a research  
37 limitation, since the study involved only the representatives of three out of the four identified groups.  
38 The "dead souls" group, although not represented in the study, emerged from the interviews with the  
39 respondents.  
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41  
42 The second limitation is the subjectivity which characterizes qualitative research, mainly due to  
43 the applied techniques of data collection and analysis. The qualitative interviews used in the study,  
44 allowing the respondents to express their opinions freely, created a wide field for subjectivism, even  
45 forcing the researcher to interpret the received data.  
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48 The third limitation refers to the dynamics of the studied processes. Despite the fact that the  
49 applied data acquisition technique (an interview) allows the time factor to be taken into account, the  
50 study in the four CIs was carried out in the same period of time. This does not fully capture the  
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3 changes occurring over time, especially cause-and-effect relationships, such as the impact of  
4 involvement on the benefits gained by CI membership, both of an economic and non-economic nature  
5 (e.g. the development of interaction, trust, common group identity, etc.). Finally, we have focused our  
6 study on social learning, while for future research, developing involvement in CIs could be analyzed  
7 in more detail.  
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11 Regarding the results of the study, the aspects associated with learning in the identified CoPs,  
12 such as changes in identities and meanings, could have been studied in greater detail, as the role of CIs  
13 in building a collective identity could be very important for the policy. These constructs have been  
14 inferred from the respondents' accounts; however, they did not directly refer to them in the interviews.  
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16  
17 To sum up, based on the study results and the theoretical background, three propositions can be  
18 put forward for a further quantitative investigation (Figure 3):  
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21 **P1:** Involvement in the activities undertaken within CIs determines the development of trust and,  
22 in turn, affects the strength of interactions among the involved members of CIs.  
23

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25 **P2:** The strength of the interactions among the involved members of CIs determines social  
26 learning and, in turn, affects access to the benefits received by them from CIs.  
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28  
29 **P3:** Involvement in the activities undertaken within CIs determines the development of a common  
30 group identity and, in turn, affects access to the benefits received by the involved members from CIs.  
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33 Figure 3  
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36  
37 In order to fully confirm the observed dependencies outlined in the above-described propositions,  
38 it is necessary to carry out quantitative research in a large group of CIs representing various sectors of  
39 the economy, e.g. more market-driven CIs (like R&D or Creative Industries) as well as to extend  
40 research to CIs in other countries. It is also worth considering CIs in their various stages of  
41 development. In addition, to obtain a better understanding of the involvement factor and examine its  
42 impact on the other identified variables, future studies should cover cluster entities with different  
43 membership periods and different levels of commitment.  
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45  
46 The relationships between the variables would be best tested on the basis of structural equation  
47 modeling, which allows the determination of the directions of the dependencies of variables and is a  
48 matter of importance in the formed propositions. A social network analysis could also help to  
49 understand the dynamics of social learning within the identified CoPs and evaluate their structural  
50 properties, similarly to the study by Giuliani et al. (2014) on cluster development programs.  
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**Table 1. Scopus bibliometric analysis (February 2, 2019)**

<b>Search criteria</b>	<b>“cluster” and “learning”</b>	<b>“cluster initiative” and “learning”</b>
Title/abstract/keywords	24,018	7
Subject area: Business, Management and Accounting	846	1
Subject area: Economics, Econometrics and Finance	262	1
Subject area: Social Sciences	2,868	5
<b>Search criteria</b>	<b>“cluster” and “collective learning”</b>	<b>“cluster initiative” and “collective learning”</b>
Title/abstract/keywords	56	1
Subject area: Business, Management and Accounting	20	0
Subject area: Economics, Econometrics and Finance	14	0
Subject area: Social Sciences	29	1
<b>Search criteria</b>	<b>“cluster” and “social learning”</b>	<b>“cluster initiative” and “social learning”</b>
Title/abstract/keywords	98	0
Subject area: Business, Management and Accounting	9	0
Subject area: Economics, Econometrics and Finance	7	0
Subject area: Social Sciences	31	0

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**Table 2. The sample characteristics**

Cluster initiative name	Creation date	Number of cluster members	Scope	Type of cluster initiative	Number of interviews
Metal Cluster A	2008	35	regional	bottom-up	11 (2C, 4E, 4R&D+, 1B)
Metal Cluster B	2009	78	regional	mixed form	7 (2C, 5E)
ICT Cluster A	2007	200	regional	mixed form	6 (1C, 4E, 1R&D+)
ICT Cluster B	2009	130	regional	mixed form	11 (2C, 7E, 2R&D+)

*Note: C (coordinator); E (enterprise), R&D (R&D institution, university, education institution); B (business environment institution)*

**Table 3. The axial coding**

No.	Category	Peculiarities
1.	The involvement level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Passive participation (dead souls)</li> <li>– Active participation (participants)</li> <li>– Joining for cooperation (cooperators)</li> <li>– Initiating cooperation (locomotives)</li> </ul>
2.	The strength of interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Anonymity</li> <li>– Removing the barrier of anonymity</li> <li>– Removing the barrier of distrust</li> <li>– Verification of trust</li> </ul>
3.	Symptoms of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Information transfer (recipient)</li> <li>– Raising awareness (recipient)</li> <li>– Information transfer (donor &amp; recipient)</li> <li>– Raising awareness (donor &amp; recipient)</li> <li>– Demonstrating (donor &amp; recipient)</li> <li>– Inspiring (donor &amp; recipient)</li> <li>– Motivating (donor &amp; recipient)</li> <li>– Educating (donor &amp; recipient)</li> </ul>
4.	The type of received resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Access to general information</li> <li>– Access to detailed information</li> <li>– Access to knowledge</li> <li>– Co-creation of knowledge</li> </ul>

Table 4. The selective coding

Category 1. The involvement level	Category 2. The strength of interactions	Category 3. The ways that learning occurs	Category 4. The type of benefits
Passive participation	Anonymity	Information transfer (recipient) Raising awareness (recipient)	Access to general information
Active participation	Removing the barrier of anonymity	Information transfer (donor & recipient) Raising awareness (donor & recipient)	Access to detailed information
Joining for cooperation	Removing the barrier of distrust	Demonstrating (donor & recipient) Inspiring (donor & recipient)	Access to knowledge
Initiating cooperation	Verification of trust	Motivating (donor & recipient) Educating (donor & recipient)	Co-creation of knowledge

Competitiveness Review

Table 5. The involvement level and the strength of interactions - illustrative quotations

Category 1. The involvement level	Category 2. The strength of interactions	Selected quotations
Passive participation	Anonymity	<p>“To have access to information in a cluster, it is not necessary to establish relationships with others from the cluster. The Internet is enough for that.” (B2)</p> <p>“80 companies are ‘dead souls’; they pay the fee, but they do not take advantage of it, in other words, they simply have a gym pass. They buy tickets and are happy to have them, but nothing more [...]. They are completely ‘dead’; there is no contact with them, only their payment of membership fees.” (D3)</p>
Active participation	Removing the barrier of anonymity	<p>“I am a relational man and I decided that a cluster is the best way to make contacts.” (A6)</p> <p>“At the beginning, everyone looked at one another with such distrust. There was resistance because, theoretically, companies in the metal industry compete with one another. But then relationships developed. [...] We got to know each other better.” (A5)</p>
Joining for cooperation	Removing the barrier of distrust	<p>“The cluster members begin to meet, talk, discuss and develop their relationships. A certain scope of trust is created, a very underestimated one.” (D1)</p> <p>“Finding a subcontractor is quite simple because it can be done without a cluster. But the search for a partner for cooperation may already be difficult because you have to trust the other side.” (D7)</p>
Initiating cooperation	Verification of trust	<p>“It is understandable from the point of view of a project member or project leader that one wants to recommend companies about which one is confident because s/he has already cooperated with these companies and this has succeeded.” (D5)</p> <p>“We like one another and we trust one another because we have completed one project together. We have one or two partners, and now the third one ‘is born’, with whom we are able to cooperate..” (D9)</p>

Note: A, B, C, D refers to clusters A, B, C, D, respectively, while 1, 2...n denotes a particular interviewee

**Table 6. The ways that social learning occurs in the cluster initiatives**

Category 1/ Category 2	Category 3. Symptoms of learning	Selected citations	Category 4. The type of benefits	Selected quotations
Passive participation/ Anonymity	Information transfer (recipient)  Raising awareness (recipient)	“In a cluster, a coordinator or animator is a very important person. A man who can collect information to know which project or program will have effects. And if he knows that a company can take advantage of these effects, he will make them available to the cluster.” (D3)  “When information sent in the cluster reveals the creation of some software and someone in the cluster is surprised that this is nothing but an innovation. Although s/he already owns something similar, this very information makes him/her realize that.” (C6)	Access to general information	“Sometimes, it’s great in a larger group. There is always some information about what’s going on in the world. This is about what knowledge we get in the cluster – that’s knowledge that does not require a deeper analysis.” (D5)
Active participation/ Removing the barrier of anonymity	Information transfer (donor & recipient) Raising awareness (donor & recipient)	”I assume that if there is a conference, discussion, meeting, and we also exchange some views there, it gives a lot. There must be information flow in the cluster, even such meetings for gossip - it also brings us to act, or indicates the directions which we can follow together.” (B10) “If someone is aware of something... For example, the average person knows only that ‘someone’ takes part in EU projects. And you can tell him: listen, you can also apply, you can learn a language for free, you can have a trip. And he says: oh, am I also able to do it?” (C6)	Access to detailed information	“To supplement and expand my capacity, I got to know the local market intensively and, among other things, the cluster allowed me to do so. And now I know exactly what machines other companies have and I can take advantage of it because we know one another well.” (A6)
Joining for cooperation/ Removing the barrier of distrust	Demonstrating (donor & recipient) Inspiring (donor & recipient)	“I did something with graphene, and in the cluster we have one member who works in the automotive industry. I told him that he could also use graphene and he could do something with it.” (A4) “The cluster stimulates, accelerates and inspires us. We have a strategy and we should go in this direction for sure. But if we did not join certain projects all this would take longer, it would take - not 2, but for example, 5 years longer.” (D5)	Access to knowledge	“To have general information - you come to meetings, you observe. To get detailed information - you participate in working groups, you build trust. Market opportunities appear later - you look at those working groups and projects that are discussed and you see in which direction ICT is developing, you catch the trends and problems. And the next level is knowledge, which appears in projects.” (D1)
Initiating cooperation/ Verification of trust	Motivating (donor & recipient)  Educating (donor & recipient)	”What's happening in our company ... it is impossible to do so much in the normal world. If something is to be done and at an unrealistic pace - it is definitely in our company... The others in the cluster know about it. We told them about it, we showed, explained and encouraged them.” (B8) ”In order to stimulate the participants’ thinking, it is necessary to set the whole program very precisely – how to educate, how to teach them, how to run meetings, show cases of success, make everyone think: ‘what can I do?’. We try to make the companies have ideas.” (D9)	Co-creation of knowledge	“Knowledge arises in projects. Some of the documents are open to everyone, and some are only for the people who carried out these projects.” (D5)

Note: A, B, C, D refers to clusters A, B, C, D, respectively, while 1, 2...n denotes a particular interviewee

**Table 7. Communities of practice and practices**

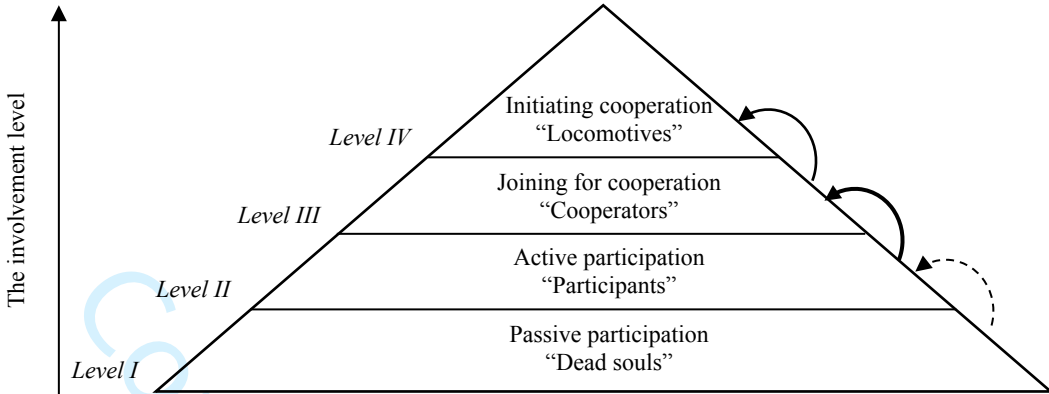
<b>Communities of practice</b>	<b>Examples of practices</b>	<b>Description</b>
Participants	Attending the CI meetings, enabling contacts in meetings, encouraging, enlightening, showing benefits	Many communication links, abundant information, networking opportunities, engaging in particular topics, presenting advantages for members
Cooperators	Attending working or project group meetings in the CIs, good practices	Joining the existing groups in the CIs, setting up cooperation with a particular scientist, knowledge sources, or ideas
Locomotives	Initiating and working in project groups in the CIs	Convincing others to get involved in the project groups, using and developing R&D resources

Competitiveness Review

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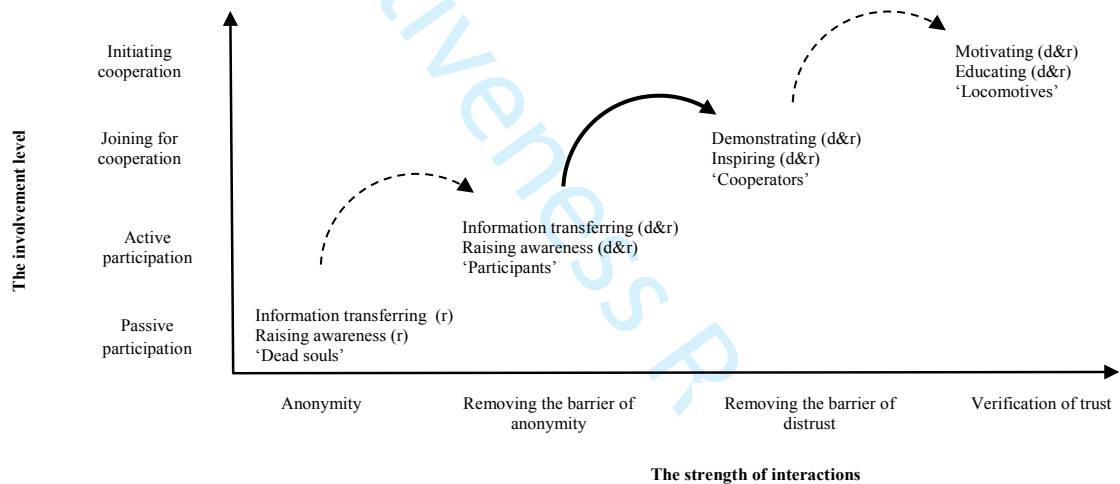


Figure 1. The groups of members in the cluster initiatives



Note: levels II-IV show CoPs

Figure 2. Learning in cluster initiatives – the involvement level and the strength of interactions



Note: d – donors, r – recipient

Figure 3. The propositions for further quantitative research

