Supporting online faculty through communities of practice: finding the faculty voice

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Faculty development efforts for supporting online instructors represent a growing concern for higher education administrators. Providing online faculty with enriching experiences designed to improve practice, combat isolation, and share knowledge and resources is a challenge. This review examines the use of a community of practice (CoP) approach for online faculty support. The literature was reviewed with a focus on finding the faculty voice by extracting results from research studies on the use of professional development CoPs. Six themes of faculty perception of benefit emerged from the review and are discussed along with the pros and cons of three delivery methods for CoPs. The research supports the idea that collaborative faculty groups provide fertile ground for processing ideas and co-creating new knowledge, where productive conversations between eLearning faculty help improve teaching by identifying strengths, discussing challenges and finding solutions.

Keywords: community of practice; online learning; faculty development; distance education; online faculty isolation

Introduction

With nearly seven million US students taking at least one online college course (Allen & Seaman, 2013), the accelerated growth in online learning has forced many seasoned higher education faculty members to abandon their customary face-to-face lecture approach and adopt new teaching techniques that replace the traditional human-to-human interaction with a computer screen (Beaumont, Stirling, & Percy, 2009). This change often occurs without sufficient pedagogical training or a support system in place to assist faculty during this substantial transition. For college and university instructors, including and especially adjunct instructors, online teaching reduces face-to-face interaction with students and peers producing an isolating effect that eliminates the collegiality and sharing of ideas that can occur casually or in a structured setting for teachers who work in a campus setting (Eib & Miller, 2006; McCarthy & Samors, 2009).

According to the report *Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States* (Allen & Seaman, 2013), despite a drop in the number of students enrolled in US colleges and universities, the number of students taking at least one online course is still on the rise. There were over a half million more online students in 2011 than in the previous year. The report also shows that 86.5% of higher education institutions offer some form of online learning and

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62.4% of higher education institutions provide complete online programmes (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The increase in online offerings necessitates a rapid adaptation of face-to-face courses to eLearning formats and, for some traditional classroom professors, a major transformation in teaching methodologies.

Purpose of the study

As the number of distance learning offerings continues to grow, the problem becomes how to support online instructors as they navigate a significant shift in their teaching practice to the virtual classroom. Without adequate support, it is unclear how these new online instructors, some of whom have been teaching for decades, will develop the skills necessary to translate their classroom techniques to a virtual format. Beyond offering initial trainings to help professors convert existing courses to an online format, higher education institutions will need to nurture a sustained environment of professional development for online teachers. At odds in this shift to online teaching and learning is the upheaval that exists when pushing the square peg of traditional classroom teachers into the round hole of online course delivery. This disruption is compounded by the lack of adequate infrastructure investment for online teaching and the absence of a mechanism for helping faculty develop the necessary skills to be successful and contented in the new role (Meyer & Barfield, 2010).

This article examines the existing literature on the use of communities of practice (CoPs) for supporting teachers in higher education settings. Wenger (2006) describes CoPs as groups of individuals who interact on a regular basis around a shared concern or passion for something they do, and who learn to do it better through socially constructed learning. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) give purpose to the pursuit of CoPs in affirming that student success has been strongly linked to the use of collaborative cultures. This article will note faculty perceptions of benefit of CoPs with the purpose of providing information regarding current practices and determinants of success of CoPs. This synthesis of literature will contribute guidance for higher education administrators and faculty groups seeking to build support services for online educators.

Organisation

The first section of this article includes an extended definition of CoPs and the distinction between CoPs and other collaborative groups in education. The second section will provide faculty perspectives on participation in CoPs and their views on several themes that emerged as a result of the review. In addition, three possible delivery methods for a CoP are explored and a review of pros and cons for each method is offered. The third section includes a discussion of the findings, implications for future research and a conclusion.

CoP defined

Educational theorist Etienne Wenger coined the phrase CoP along with anthropologist Jean Lave in the 1991 publication of *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoP is a broad term that describes a formal or informal social learning system. CoP serves as an umbrella term for some of the

work that is done in groups that, in the field of education, are called by various other names including community of interest or enquiry, professional learning community or faculty learning community. The distinction between a CoP and other similar collaborative groups is that a CoP is not a team with a project deliverable as an outcome. The overarching purpose for convening a professional development CoP is to cultivate ongoing and evolving learning partnerships that serve to raise the skills, awareness and knowledge of all participants.

A CoP created in support of online faculty professional development, ideally, focuses on a process of members interacting and learning together and creating a sense of trust and ownership among participants to empower them with the feeling of more control over the change being thrust upon them – shifting faculty satisfaction away from deprivation toward gratification. For the purpose of this article, a CoP is considered with a focus on the practice of online education and the interactions between educators who build supportive relationships through negotiations, deliberations and conversations that result in reflective examination of online teaching practice. Research accessed for this article focused on two primary questions: (1) which determinants indicate faculty satisfaction and perception of benefit of participation in a CoP? and (2) which delivery method for a CoP best suits the needs of online higher education faculty?

Themes for benefits of CoPs

The argument that grounds this review is that teaching online is a different experience than teaching face to face (Hixon, Barczyk, Buckenmeyer, & Feldman, 2011). The requisite skills, attitudes and adjustments for online instruction necessitate a faculty support system and infrastructure provisions for faculty who teach online. Hixon et al. (2011) suggests four basic areas of change encountered by faculty transitioning from face-to-face teaching to online instruction: learning new technology, adapting pedagogic strategies for the online environment, adjusting to a learner-centred focus and finding the increased time required to develop online courses (p. 1). Higher education administrators and grassroots faculty groups are, in some cases, addressing these challenges through the use of CoPs that are not intended to take the place of formal university training, professional development conferences and up-to-date technology, but to augment these efforts with informal, ongoing support.

This article considers several research studies conducted over the past ten years with higher education faculty. The studies were chosen based on their inclusion of the perceived benefits reported by faculty about their participation in CoPs. An effort was made to provide the participants' own words in order to present the voice of those on the front lines of higher education instruction. Six themes emerged from the articles that describe the different aspects of CoP interaction that the participants felt brought value to their teaching practice.

(1) shared practice/professional growth and development,
(2) fuelling change/promoting self-knowledge/promoting reflective practice,
(3) peer support/mentoring/motivation,
(4) trust building/safe environment,
(5) community building/preventing isolation, and
(6) sharing resources/modelling techniques.

Faculty perception of benefit of CoP

Theme #1 shared practice/professional growth and development. Herbers, Antelo, Ettling, and Buck (2011) reported that CoP groups experienced a greater sense of ownership of the work happening in their shared practice and a greater commitment to improving their teaching practice as a result of collaborating with other online instructors. Lu, Todd, and Miller (2011) reported that even the simple comfort found in being able to relate to one another's struggles was seen as beneficial, as one participant put it, 'being able to sit around and talk to others in the same boat made a big difference for me' (p. 5). Faculty members working together to innovate and create in collaboration allows for expanded possibilities, questioning and problem-solving. Lackey (2011) provides a glimpse into the benefit of mutual interchange reported by a participant who remarked 'it becomes that you find people of like minds so to speak and then you bat ideas around or you see something that works then you think, 'hey, I will have to try that'' (p. 8).

Shared practice and professional growth can, in some cases, be practical in nature and include productive work where one member demonstrates new techniques or tools. It can also take the form of an open dialogue in which diverse perspectives are shared and community members are exposed to alternative viewpoints. These dialogues offer the opportunity for conflict to exist as a catalyst for dynamic innovation as faculty are empowered to venture beyond their standard comfort levels (Guldberg & Mackness, 2009).

In *Courage to Teach,* Palmer (1998) describes participation in a 'community of pedagogical discourse' (p. 144) as a professional obligation and posits that growth depends on honest sharing where the ability to take risks and to try and fail is supported by community members. Sharing practice with colleagues was cited as a great benefit by a participant in Lackey (2011) who offered, 'I'm a big believer in collaboration so I think that conversations with colleagues are going to be potentially as productive as formal training sessions' (p. 11). Another teacher in Hew (2009) spoke of collaboration as a means to achieve a greater good when she said, 'I want to help other teachers by sharing my knowledge so that they can benefit from my experience and make their teaching more effective. Ultimately their students benefit' (p. 441).

Theme #2 fuelling change/promoting self-knowledge/reflective practice. Eib and Miller (2006) found that community participants were engaged in substantive reflection and recognised the ability to see accomplishments and shortcomings as equally beneficial to professional growth. One participant in Paulus et al. (2010) realised immediate changes as a result of the community collaboration by 'putting it right into practice in the course that I was teaching, which was really, really, helpful' (p. 6–7). Another participant in Paulus et al. (2010) shared, 'I think we've all been kind of transformed, really, we've been moved up a level when it comes to the whole distance learning thing' (p. 11).

In Hew (2009), participants commented on the value of feedback from other teachers by noting 'the online community acts like a peer-review kind of thing. For example, somebody puts up a proposal for doing something and other people comment upon the pros and cons of it' (p. 439). Reflective practice bolstered by the confidence gained through participation in a CoP brings new depth to self-knowledge allowing teachers to enhance their teaching practice. One teacher in Hew (2009)

explained, 'When other people agree to the ideas that I'm sharing, I feel that the things that I shared are valid. I get validation from my peers and this gives me emotional support in carrying out my ideas' (p. 439).

Theme #3 peer support/mentoring/motivation. CoPs can provide benefits to new and more seasoned online teachers by nurturing a sense of collegiality where more experienced online teachers act as mentors to newer teachers. Perhaps one of the more emancipating outcomes of shared practice involves the challenge to move beyond the safety of an existing mindset. Online faculty operating at a distance from colleagues need motivation and inspiration to grow and develop in their practice. Faculty empowerment as an outcome of peer support is considered one of the assets of participation in a collaborative group (Eib & Miller, 2006).

Participants in Lackey (2011) cited collaboration with peers as one of the most beneficial methods of preparing them to teach online. Mentorship is considered a key method for informal training of distance learning teachers (Clay, 1999; McCarthy & Samors, 2009). Regardless of whether the mentoring happens as person-to-person sharing or passively in an online discussion board, participants appreciated the input of more expert online teachers and found value in having them in the online CoP forum noting, 'I find reading about others who teach online a great way to learn the ins and outs and dos and don'ts' (Paulus et al., 2010, p. 8). In contrast, having facilitators who displayed too much ease of navigation in online courses or colleagues whose course designs were way above average had the effect of setting the bar too high which backfired as intimidating and mentally exhausting to novices (Paulus et al., 2010).

Theme #4 trust building/safe environment. Eib and Miller (2006) cite research participants as affirming that collaborative communities provided a safe learning environment for sharing practice. For CoPs to succeed, there must be an atmosphere of trust that enables community members to be open and present in discussions concerning problems of practice and areas of insecurity or anxiety. Lu et al. (2011) report faculty feeling the need to tinker with the technology in a non-threatening setting in order to learn how things work. Faculty who are new to technology and apprehensive about their ability to navigate successfully in an online course need a non-judgmental atmosphere where challenges can be discussed openly and solutions can be shared (Lu et al., 2011). A community member in Vaughan and Garrison (2006) reflected on the small group discussions that created a sense of intimacy among participants in saying, 'the sense of openness and trust that was created in these sessions allowed me to freely share my fears and concerns around the use of educational technology' (p. 146).

Research participants in Herbers et al. (2011) reported having developed a deeper sense of trust and openness as a result of their participation in a CoP along with a willingness to share challenges and insights which resulted in the creation of a space for reflective teaching. Paulus et al. (2010) revealed an appreciation for the group work and found benefit in being able have open dialogue about challenges and fears with the group members. A frank admission from a teacher participating in Hew (2009) speaks to the anxiety involved in putting one's professional self out there, she admits that in an online CoP,

> I feel comfortable to discuss questions and ideas related to my professional practice, which may not be 100% correct, when I know that people are not going to judge me for it. People may disagree, but nobody's going to say that my discussion was stupid. (p. 441)

Theme #5 community building/preventing isolation. Smith and Smith (1993) indicate that isolation, lack of community and lack of belonging are some of the most common concerns among educators. A faculty member in Lackey (2011) noted that pairing up with another online instructor would have been beneficial, 'One of the problems with online teaching is that you feel kind of isolated. It's just like you and the computer out there' (p. 13). Eib and Miller (2006) described community building as a means of fostering a sense that everyone was focused on the common goal of teaching excellence. A participant in Paulus et al. (2010) found comfort in sharing a struggle with colleagues revealing that it 'is reassuring that other faculty find the same hurdles that I do' (p. 7). Keengwe and Kyei-Blankson (2011) illustrate the energising effect of being part of a collaborative learning community through a comment from one faculty member who said, 'I think the benefits of tying social interactions, fun, and learning together are wonderful. I get so emotionally and intellectually reinvigorated' (p. 5). A large majority of participants in Guldberg and Mackness (2009) reported feeling as though there were opportunities for negotiation of meaning and learning within the group. Different levels of perception of connectivity within the CoP were also reported with some participants feeling strong connections to the community as a whole and others reporting connections only with particular individuals within the group (Guldberg & Mackness, 2009).

Theme #6 sharing resources/modelling techniques. Recommendations that emerged from Eib and Miller (2006) with particular application to online learning noted the importance of promoting scholarly enquiry and action research in addition to effective teacher reflection. Study participants in Lackey (2011) reported a desire to have more sharing of resources and modelling of techniques with their colleagues; one participant noted, 'It would be beneficial if faculty could get together occasionally and talk about what's working online' (p. 11). Another participant shared the desire to

> … just talk about what you're doing in online learning and just by talking to everybody else you get different ideas. Everybody's got different ideas, different theories and different ways of doing things. For instance, I know XXX is using a Wiki. We hear things through the grapevine, but I have never flat-out seen some of these projects that people are working on. (p. 11–12)

Despite the enthusiasm shown by respondents in Lackey (2011), Eib and Miller (2006) reported that, following participation in a CoP, the community did not sustain robust contact over time, although small groups did continue to share resources. Paulus et al. (2010) also cited one faculty member as admitting that her 'participation diminished over the semester, both due to time constraints and a lack of urgent need' (p. 6). Administrative support for maintaining continued interest in a CoP for online faculty is recommended.

Formats of CoPs

Online-only CoPs. Faculty perception of online-only collaboration forums revealed that the use of technology for CoPs was seen as having both pros and cons. Guldberg and Mackness (2009) indicates that technology could be a significant barrier to participation in an online-only format. CoP participants who were not at ease with technology did not take part in the CoP as fully as those who had stronger technology skills. Difficulties with technologies elicited frustration and became a barrier to reaping the benefits of connecting with others and engaging in the learning experience. The need for workshops on the use of the technology was indicated (Brooks, 2010; Carr & Chambers, 2006). Commitment to the online forum was also cited as a barrier to success of the online CoP. Guldberg and Mackness (2009) report that a majority of the online community members logged into the forum, but engaged very little in posting to discussions or viewing pages.

On the plus side of technology-driven CoPs, Brooks (2010) noted that online interactions may provide a space for those less likely to speak out in a face-to-face group due to cultural, personal or other reasons. Bierema and Merriam (2002) point to the unique ability of an online forum to provide a levelling effect, citing the capacity for online discussions with colleagues to cross-racial, gender and socio-economic boundaries potentially drawing out marginalised groups. Convenience was also noted as a benefit of online communities. Online faculty who work at a distance from the campus or have limitations of time and travel that prohibit them from attending face-to-face CoPs can still take advantage of peer-to-peer sharing through an online forum. These forums can be used to search previously asked questions or to eliminate the need to wait for face-to-face meetings to get just-in-time help from trusted colleagues (Lackey, 2011).

Face-to-face communities. Formal and informal face-to-face communities mentioned in the literature, in some cases, sprang up out of necessity in order to get questions answered about technology issues, pedagogical issues, online course conduct management and best practices for fostering student-to-student interaction (Lackey, 2011). Sharing ideas and showcasing peer examples of work were among the most frequently mentioned as desired and beneficial methods of sharing of practice in face-to-face communities (Guldberg & Mackness, 2009; Herbers et al., 2011; Hew, 2009; Lackey, 2011).

The social construction of new meaning through group interactions was seen as a strong benefit of in-person collaborations between online instructors. Cabrera and Cabrera (2005) found that socialisation and the familiarity that grows out of face-to-face participation in communities increase the potential for knowledge sharing among members. Lackey (2011) found that help from colleagues was of high importance in preparing to teach online with five out of six respondents considering peer collaboration as an area where increased support was needed.

Hybrid CoPs. Brooks (2010) notes that the changing faculty roles in higher education that have resulted from the adoption of technology may point to a hybrid model of CoP as the most beneficial for post-secondary instructors. While social interaction and community sharing of resources is addressed in face-to-face meetings, the use of online forums can help model strategies for developing effective teacher presence in eLearning courses and facilitating meaningful dialogue in online discussion

boards. Other descriptions from the literature of methods of mixing in-person and online faculty development utilised face-to-face workshops followed up by online discussions that took place within a learning management system or through blogging and emails (Paulus et al., 2010).

Hybrid CoPs offer flexibility and accessible options for maximum faculty participation. The value of the combination of collaborative venues was described by a hybrid community participant in Vaughan and Garrison (2006) who commented, 'The face-to-face sessions allowed me to learn from others directly and the online sessions allowed me to reflect and share my ideas about blended learning with the other members of the group' (p. 146). Providing a complementary online space outside of face-to-face meetings for community members to continue to develop collegial relationships and seek support from others doing the same type of work is the premise of a hybrid/blended model of CoP (Brooks, 2010). A hybrid approach allows faculty to make use of the elements of the online or face-to-face collaborations that best suit their schedule and geographic needs.

Discussion

Faculty development efforts geared toward supporting online instructors represent a growing concern for higher education administrators struggling to balance the demand for more and more online course offerings with the need for professional development that provides online faculty with enriching experiences designed to improve practice through interactions in a community of trusted peers. Regardless of which format was chosen for the delivery of the CoP, the research supports the idea that collaborative faculty groups provide fertile ground for processing ideas and co-creating new knowledge where productive conversations help improve teaching by identifying strengths, discussing challenges and finding solutions (Eib & Miller, 2006; Herbers et al., 2011).Limitations of CoPs, including lack of persistence in participation and challenges in addressing differing levels of technology skill and confidence, indicate that CoPs represent one tool for online faculty development to be used in conjunction with other complementary support strategies.

Dolan (2011) posits that tending to the social needs of online instructors can develop a sense of commitment and institutional pride that will transfer to a stronger sense of purpose and responsibility to the students. A major challenge now facing higher education administrators is how to combat the isolation and frustration of online faculty (Beaumont et al., 2009) and assure that students at their institutions are provided with quality eLearning courses taught by confident, well-prepared, well-supported instructors.

Conclusion

Many of the studies reviewed for this article centred on CoPs that were either fully online or face-to-face only. Further research on hybrid CoPs would augment the data already existing on CoPs and better inform decisions made by higher education administrators tasked with developing support and making infrastructure investments for distance learning faculty. Additional research is also recommended to investigate training practices targeted at helping administrators better understand the issues that online faculty face and the support online faculty need. A strategic and intentional plan is necessary for higher education institutions to be able to construct eLearning

faculty support systems that lead to the design and facilitation of online learning focused on student success (Lackey, 2011). Further investigation is also suggested to determine the consequences of online faculty isolation (Eib & Miller, 2006; Santagata & Guarino, 2012: Lackey, 2011) and approaches to building a sense of institutional identity for faculty teaching at a distance from the campus (Brooks, 2010; Guldberg & Mackness, 2009; Velez, 2009).

For administrators and faculty groups, facilitating the creation of CoPs is one step toward developing and sustaining energised, engaged, productive conversations among eLearning faculty and fostering ownership and identification with the new role of online educator (Vaughan & Garrison, 2006). The perception of benefit of establishing a community of support for online instructors is substantiated in comments from faculty in McCarthy and Samors (2009), 'The most important part of online learning is the structure that supports an online learning community so that those folks bond and [also] bond with the university' (p. 45). Faculty development programmes that include CoPs can build a culture of support for online educators that encourages innovation fuelled by community connections and lessen the disconnect often experienced by online instructors (Eib & Miller, 2006; Santagata & Guarino, 2012).

Notes on contributor

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