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Using Communities of Practice to Foster Faculty Development in Higher Education

Christopher Teeter, Nancy Fenton, Karen Nicholson, Terry Flynn, Joseph Kim, Muriel McKay,
Bridget O'Shaughnessy, & Sue Vajoczki
McMaster University

Communities of practice are becoming more widespread within higher education, yet little research has explored how these social learning networks can enhance faculty development. The focus of this paper is to describe the first-year experience of a community of practice initiative at McMaster University that was designed to engage groups of faculty, staff, and students to share ideas and foster learning. Four communities were initiated: Teaching with Technology, Teaching Professors, Pedagogy, and First Year Instructors, all of which provided a forum of safety and support, encouraging new ideas and risk taking that in turn contributed to individual and collective learning. Though in its early days, we consider communities of practice an innovative way to regenerate current learning and surface teaching practices that can build dynamic academic communities to foster faculty and staff development. Communities of practice have enabled us to reach beyond formal structures (e.g., classrooms) to create connections amongst people from different disciplinary boundaries that generate learning and foster development.

Introduction

Communities of practice are becoming more widespread within higher education. According to Wenger (2006) their success depends upon the intersecting goals and interests of individuals and institutions. While the models of learning that support communities of practice have been shown to facilitate social engagement and collaborative approaches to learning, there is little re-search that specifically explores how these social learning networks enhance faculty development. The focus of this paper is to describe the communities of practice initiative at McMaster University that was designed to engage groups of faculty, staff, and students to share ideas and foster learning through professional development (i.e., activities that improve and increase knowledge). We

begin with a description of the model of communities of practice, integrating an introduction to concepts related to situated learning theory that has guided the McMaster University experience, and then provide supporting evidence for how our community of practice model supports faculty development. We conclude with a discussion of our goal of evolving a sustainable set of communities of practice for individuals who have a passion for teaching and learning in higher education.

Using a Community of Practice Lens

Communities of practice, also referred to as 'learning networks,' are formed by groups of people who share a concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic and strive to engage in a process of collective learning (Wenger, 2006; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Essentially communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion and want to improve their practice by interacting regularly with others. A central aspect of a community of practice is that learning can be the reason for the community or an incidental outcome of the interactions of the members within the community (Wenger, 2006). The term community of practice has its roots in a model of learning based on apprenticeship, whereby members learn through a process of acculturation into a community, gradually assuming increased roles and responsibilities within the socio-cultural practices of a community (Chapman, 2008). The basis of communities of practice within this model of learning serves to distinguish them from simply being a group with a common interest.

Communities of practice can exist in numerous settings, ranging from educational institutions to corporations. Regardless of the setting, they are based on three structural characteristics: (1) *The domain* is the common ground, which provides a sense of identity and purpose. Membership in the community implies a commitment to the domain and inspires members to contribute and participate; (2) *The community* is the engagement by members in activities and discussions that are aimed at helping each other and sharing information, thereby fostering

a social learning environment. This interaction between members and shared learning is essential; and (3) *The practice* is a shared body of knowledge and repertoire of resources which include experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing problems – in short, best practices. The combination of these three elements constitutes a community of practice, and the development of them in parallel cultivates such communities (Wenger et al., 2002).

The aspect of identity-construction that is common to the domain and community structures of the community of practice model should not be understated. Situated learning theory, on which the community of practice model is based, argues that the cognitivist approach to learning fails to recognize that learning is not simply about accumulating and developing abstract knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Context and learning should be embedded within particular social and physical environments. In this way learning is thought of as emergent and involves opportunities to develop an identity within a community, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging and commitment (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006). Such identity formation may continue to evolve and can be gradually shaped by the broader social relations of the multi-disciplinary communities.

Communities of practice are sustained and evolved through structured engagement in a variety of activities across disciplinary boundaries. These include, but are not limited to, problem solving, seeking experience, reusing assets, discussing developments, documenting projects, and mapping knowledge (Wenger, 2006). Most importantly, communities of practice are focused on asking questions about what works and what is possible, in line with a strategic intent (e.g., helping, knowledge stewarding, innovation). Within the university education system, there are challenges with knowledge production, retention, and distribution. Thus, there is a recognizable need and understandable interest in developing a community of practice system to focus on such challenges. It has been suggested that communities of practice affect educational practices along three dimensions: (1) *Internally* organizing educational experiences that ground learning in

practice; (2) *Externally* connecting experience within the school to actual practice beyond the walls of the school; and (3) *Over the lifetime of individuals* continuing their interest in topics experienced during schooling beyond the schooling period (Wenger, 2006). As such, the benefit of students, faculty members, and administrators engaging in a community of practice model to enhance knowledge acquisition and identity-construction is clear.

The McMaster University Experience

At McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, a core group of individuals involved with the campus teaching and learning support unit, the Centre for Leadership in Learning, recognized the value of initiating a set of communities of practice on campus. Wenger et al. (2002) suggested that the most successful communities of practice thrive when the strategic goals and needs of the parent organization intersect with the passion and interests of the community's members. This was certainly the case at McMaster University, as evidenced within two key documents, *Refining Directions*: *Inspiring Innovation and Discovery* (McMaster University, 2003) and the Task Force on Teaching and Learning's *Initial Observations and Recommendations* (McMaster University, TOTAL, 2008). A key objective within these documents involved the creation of an inclusive community, and re-establishment of a commitment to scholarly teaching and learning at the University and beyond. With this in mind four communities of practice were initiated at McMaster: *Teaching with Technology, Teaching Professors, Pedagogy,* and *First Year Instructors.*

Each of the communities of practice at McMaster provide a forum of safety and support that encourages the generation of new ideas and risk taking, in turn contributing to the learning experience of members. The communities provide an opportunity for faculty to engage in cross-disciplinary scholarly discussion of their pedagogical practices. For example, the *Teaching with Technology* community, which is geared towards technological innovation*,* provides

a community for individuals who use technology or classroom technologies to improve the quality of student learning. At community meetings, members share specific successes, enabling other community members to not only discover new applications, but also learn how to apply the technology ideas into their own teaching practice. The use of artifacts has been a central ingredient to the development of our communities of practice. It is also evident within the *Teaching Professors* and *First Year Instructors* communities whose strategic intent is knowledge stewarding. In these communities, members focus on networking opportunities, exploration of issues related to their teaching and learning, and sharing of specific teaching strategies. Again, this allows community members to gain teaching tips and concrete approaches to implementing them into their classrooms. Complementing these communities is the *Pedagogy* community, which is aimed at examining good practices within university teaching through scientific study. This group has afforded individuals the opportunity to present research to a group of people who share a similar interest and can provide meaningful feedback, thereby inspiring future directions and collaborative efforts. As is evident, the domains of the communities at McMaster differ. In some cases the domain is more role based (e.g., *Teaching Professors*), while sometimes it is more topic based (e.g., *Teaching with Technology*). As a result of these differences we encourage people to become members of multiple communities. This allows for greater knowledge sharing and promotion of good practices, which are both clearly aligned with achieving the goals of the University. Sharing good practices in teaching and learning, a *domain* common to the McMaster University communities of practice, is one of the fundamental principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL; see Boyer, 1990; Kreber, 2002).

The communities of practice at McMaster are approaching their first anniversary and as such are in the early stage of their life cycle. It should be noted that at this stage, a significant amount of focus is given to cultivating and nurturing the communities toward developing a membership and addressing the current problems and needs of those members. At

McMaster, this has lead to the development of both public and private community spaces for members. Events, formal presentations, and resources are made available to members at face-to-face meetings and through the community's virtual space within the campus learning management system. Creating a blended environment with balance between these public and private spaces is integral to strengthening individual relationships between community members and in turn strengthening the community as a whole.

Fostering Development Within Higher Education

Those who have participated in the communities of practice initiative at McMaster University describe how the experience was vital for connecting with different individuals across campus. The communities fostered individual and group development by providing a 'safe place' for members to inquire into topics and reflect upon practice with individuals who shared similar goals and interests – factors that are considered integral to a communities of practice approach to professional development (Blanton & Stylianou, 2009). Many members believed the measure of success was having a metaphorical space to share ideas with colleagues and reflect upon how these ideas could be applied in their own classrooms.

The multi-disciplinary composition of the communities facilitates varied perspectives on teaching, learning, and research that provided richer relationships and innovative ways of experimenting with classroom strategies. More experienced members provide seeds for enculturating novice members into the socio-cultural practices of the community, which promotes an atmosphere of learning and change. Newcomers gain access to the community's professional knowledge in authentic contexts through encounters with people, tools, tasks, and social norms. For example, the *Pedagogy* community of practice invited a well known researcher to discuss his research on the use of multiple-choice testing in higher education. Following the discussion, one graduate student in attendance worked with and encouraged the instructor for whom she was a teaching-assistant to assess (and improve) his multiple-choice test questions. The resulting adjustments made to his test questions have provided an improved, more reliable assessment of his students' learning. This interaction has encouraged the instructor to attend the regular meetings of the *Pedagogy* community of practice, which has certainly provided numerous other evidence-based examples for improving his teaching practices. As our communities continue to evolve, we learn more about the ways in which they organically emerge and how particular structures and processes enhance faculty development. For example, a registrant attending the first Centre for Leadership in Learning writing retreat, identified the need for ongoing peer support and writing skills development and later formed a writing community. The newly formed writing community is structured using a writing exchange and critique process, whereby members are paired up to review and provide constructive feedback on each other's writing. Examples such as these illustrate how our communities provide the ground on which new ideas germinate, new methods and tools are developed, and new communities are rooted. Through informal mentoring and participation, scholarly conversations can begin that examine existing views and assumptions related to teaching and learning.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Though in its early days, we believe communities of practice are an innovative means of regenerating current learning and teaching practices and a particularly appropriate way of building dynamic academic communities that can foster faculty and staff development. As we write this paper, new communities have sprung up at McMaster, each with its own particular purpose and role: *Writing*, *Post-Doctoral Fellows*, *Instructional Assistants*, and *Accessibility*. Each new community provides space for enabling faculty members, staff, and students to become scholars of teaching. Regardless of the form each of these communities of practice

take, they will enable members to collectively take responsibility for managing knowledge they need, creating a link between teaching and learning, as well as addressing aspects of knowledge creation and sharing. Communities of practice have enabled us to reach beyond formal structures (e.g., classrooms) to create connections amongst people from different disciplinary boundaries. Our experience thus far has shown that engagement in these practices generates learning and fosters faculty development.

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Biographies

Christopher Teeter is a Ph.D. Candidate in Psychology, Neuroscience, and Behaviour at McMaster University. Interests include multimedia (slideware) design, multiple-choice testing, and the role of body-based in spatial memory.

Nancy Fenton is a Health Policy Researcher with the School of Public Health at Waterloo University. Interests include educational leadership and training of public-health professionals.

Karen Nicholson is a Teaching and Learning Librarian at McMaster University. Her interests include immersion literacy programs and models of blended learning.

Terry Flynn is an Associate Professor with the Degroote School of Business at McMaster University. Interests include public relations management, crisis communications, and environmental risk communications.

Joseph Kim is an Assistant Professor of Psychology,

Neuroscience, and Behaviour at McMaster University. Interests include the integration of technology into blended learning environments.

Muriel McKay is an E-Content and Communication Administrator with the Center for Leadership in Learning at McMaster University. Interests include multimedia design and learning management systems.

Bridget O'Shaughnessy is an Assistant Professor of Economics at McMaster University. Her interests include open-economy macroeconomics and teaching large introductory level classes.

Sue Vajoczki is the Director of the Center for Leadership in Learning at McMaster University. Interests include blended learning environments for inquiry-based and problem-based learning.