

Creating Community: One Institution's Experience With Communities of Practice

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This article examines the use and benefits of communities of practice (CoPs) in academic settings. In the 2010-2011 academic year Teaching Support Services at Wilfrid Laurier University introduced four theme-based CoPs for faculty and academic support staff after a successful pilot initiative. This article explores our motivation for focusing our programming efforts on CoPs and our anticipated outcomes of the project. We highlight the successes and challenges as well as share survey data and participant feedback on their experience. Central to the article as well as our philosophy is the idea that “good talk about good teaching” (Palmer, 1993) can prompt personal reflection about one’s teaching and meaningful exchange between colleagues.

Introduction

Learning in community (Palmer, 1998) is the underlying principle of communities of practice (CoPs). As Parker Palmer (1993) noted, “the growth of any skill depends heavily on honest dialogue among those who are doing it” (p. 8). At Wilfrid Laurier University, creating a sense of community where meaningful exchange about teaching and learning could take place in a safe environment and in a manner that moves beyond mere technique was a priority for our centre. More specifically, we wished to establish a space where faculty and academic staff could come together and embrace “the challenge of ideas, the exploration of shared practice, the uniqueness of each

teacher’s genius, [and ultimately] the mystery at the heart of...educational exchange” (Palmer, 1993, p. 10). In this article, we provide context to appreciate and understand what CoPs are all about, outline how and why our institution embraced CoPs, highlight what we learned from our early experiences based on personal observation and survey data, and identify how we intend to move forward.

Communities of Practice

The various communities of practice to which educators belong (e.g., disciplinary, professional, other) provide a forum to learn about and situate their

practice, facilitate relationships with professional colleagues, engender a sense of belonging, forge a spirit of inquiry, and impart a sense of professional competence and identity (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The term, *communities of practice*, was collectively coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger and is formally comprised of three distinct elements: the domain, the community, and the practice. The domain element “creates common ground and a sense of common identity” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27) where membership “implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people” (Wenger, 2006). The element of community provides the “social fabric” for learning about the domain and a “participation framework” for its members to engage in joint activities and discussions on an ongoing basis, thereby, helping each other out and sharing information” (Wenger, 2006). In the process, individuals build enduring relationships that enable them to learn from one another and their practice (third element) by sharing resources, that is, experiences, stories, strategies, best practices, and ways of addressing recurring issues, concerns, and problems (Wenger, 2006).

Faculty learning communities (FLCs) is another term used in the literature (see Beach & Cox, 2009; Cox, 2004) to describe groups of academics who regularly come together to talk about concerns, connect with other like-minded individuals, share their passion about a topic, and deepen their knowledge and expertise (Wenger et al., 2002). Beach and Cox (2009) described two categories of FLCs: cohort-based and topic-based. The former addresses the teaching, learning, and development needs of specific groups defined by “common attributes” or “career stages” (e.g., new, mid-career, senior academics). For these groups, the curriculum is shaped by the participants and may include a range of issues and topics. The latter (i.e., topic-based) and more common type brings together a group of individuals of a similar mindset on pressing issues or specific areas of interest or need such as curriculum, technology, and first-year students (Beach & Cox, 2009). The level of structure and the lifespan of an FLC or CoP can

range, depending on the intended purpose and commitment of its members. Those described by Milton Cox (2004) at the University of Miami are more structured, whereas those offered at Wilfrid Laurier University vary across the communities. What distinguishes an FLC or CoP from other groups (e.g., action learning sets) is the degree of informality and the focus on community versus efficiency alone (Cox, 2004).

Communities of Practice at Wilfrid Laurier

Laurier's first community of practice, the Writing Circle, was initiated in the 2009-2010 academic year. Co-sponsored by Educational Development and the Writing Centre, its goal was to encourage discussion on ways to integrate writing into the classroom. In its inaugural year, the group attracted a range of participants (e.g., staff, faculty, librarians) who attended consistently and provided us with positive feedback about their experience. The Writing Circle was also successful in helping us to engage faculty and staff members new or recently new to Educational Development programming (i.e., not just the regular crowd). Based on the pilot's success, in 2010-2011, three more CoPs were created: Teaching Large(r) Classes, Teaching First Year Students, and Teaching and Technology. Each theme-based CoP focused on a concern specific to the institutional culture.

Although each CoP was unique in theme, we had several overarching objectives that applied to all of them. First, we wanted to provide a forum for Laurier professors and academic staff to come together to discuss issues relevant to teaching and learning. We also wanted to forge new relationships with faculty not previously involved in our programming. By encouraging faculty and staff to set aside some time to think and talk about teaching, we hoped to encourage reflective practice that would extend beyond meeting boundaries, facilitate the sharing of best practices among faculty and staff from different corners of the campus, and provide a forum for the expression of common concerns and challenges.

Each community of practice had a similar

structure, which included tri-weekly meetings held in a space that was chosen for its comfortable setting and its central campus location within a non-teaching building. Group size ranged from four to 15 participants, reflecting the rhythms of the semester and the discussion topic. We aimed for an informal atmosphere to encourage open dialogue, although different formats evolved in each group. The Teaching and Technology CoP, for example, used a “show and tell” model where various faculty members showcased their technology initiatives at each meeting (e.g., teaching with tablets). In Teaching First Year Students, the winter term meetings were devoted to the reading and discussion of *My Freshman Year* by Rebekah Nathan. At the Writing Circle, participants occasionally brought in assignments or grading rubrics they were working on in order to receive feedback from other group members. In some meetings, a collegial discussion of challenges experienced by individual CoP members (e.g., integrating writing into larger classes) became the focus, while in others the group discussed a reading of interest. For each CoP, we created a wiki where we posted meeting summaries as well as relevant resources. Many participants also shared their own artifacts (e.g., syllabi, assignments, rubrics) for others to view, adapt, or use.

Lessons Learned

Our first full year of CoP offerings culminated with an end of term social, providing a sense of closure and a chance to discuss future programming. We also created an ethics approved electronic survey that was sent to all CoP participants (n=59) from the previous two years to collect feedback and to review and redirect our efforts if necessary. Of those who responded (more than half of the participant pool), 95.7% said that they would continue to attend the CoPs in the future.

Selecting from a list of choices, participants indicated that it was the opportunity for social interaction (27%), to share issues or concerns (65%), and the chance to gain new ideas, tools, or resources to adapt to their own practice (96%) that

mattered most. Indeed, when asked what aspects the participants liked most about attending the various CoPs, the theme of meaningful exchange between colleagues was primary. The following quotations illustrate this point:

This was a great learning experience for me and I am excited to attend next year. The connections made during these meetings and the information obtained from other members of the Laurier community are invaluable.

[I enjoyed] the sharing of real life experiences at WLU, not the typical “textbook” scenarios that do not reflect what really happens in classrooms.

[I liked] getting a sense of whether the challenges I face are unique or common to other educators, development of a sense of perspective, learning more about issues that lead to such challenges, and thinking about principles involved in addressing them.

Many things worked well in the initial years. For the majority of meetings, we had consistent attendance, which helped to foster a sense of trust and community amongst participants. The CoPs were successful in exposing innovative practices from Laurier faculty, and we saw a great deal of collective problem-solving as well as cross-disciplinary resource and idea sharing taking place. For example, a new Biology professor was inspired by the Writing Circle CoP to integrate writing journals into his large (300+) first year Biology class to aid students in thinking about and consolidating their learning in written form. According to survey commentary, CoP attendance further seemed to revitalize individual members and encourage risk-taking and the testing of new ideas amongst participants. As one member shared in the survey:

The biggest change for me was the

increased confidence to try new things; even ideas which others had tried, but which wouldn't apply to my situation provided motivation to be creative myself.

The presence of academic staff at most meetings also helped to raise awareness of campus concerns and efforts to address them (e.g., initiatives aimed at helping first year students). Lastly, the CoPs seemed to be successful in encouraging reflection on teaching and learning more broadly. Reflection also seemed to be connected to the intangible elements of CoP membership, as noted by the following survey participant:

I'm not sure if my teaching changed in any way significantly. However, I enjoyed the chance to think more deeply about the issues in my classroom.

The year was not without its challenges however. Occasionally, CoP members used the group as a sounding board for institutional complaints, which is understandable, but made it difficult at times to prevent such occasions from turning into gripe sessions (e.g., increasing class sizes or student apathy), and for us to redirect conversation toward more constructive ends (i.e., given the situation at hand, what can we do). In response, we developed a set of CoP guidelines to set a baseline for future exchange and found ways in other aspects of our work (e.g., meetings with administrators, future programming) to bring forward and address these systemic-based concerns. And, while we tried to keep discussion true to the organizing CoP theme, conversations sometimes went off on tangents and there was occasional overlap between topics discussed in the Teaching Large(r) Classes and Teaching First Year Students CoPs. Not surprisingly, scheduling of the CoPs was a challenge for some as the times and dates selected for meeting inevitably conflicted with member teaching schedules. Despite strong participation rates by faculty and staff, a group aimed at graduate student teaching assistants was

not successful in its pilot year. Lastly, while we were thrilled to see participants attending the CoPs regularly, we found it difficult to continually attract new members.

Future Directions

Our early success has encouraged us to continue focusing our programming on this initiative. In the coming academic year, we will keep offering our existing theme-based CoPs with some modifications (i.e., merging teaching larger classes with first year students due to overlap of issues and topics), while adding an additional cohort-based group for new faculty. Eventually, we would like to devote a CoP to championing the scholarship of teaching and learning, initiate and/or support CoP programming across Laurier campuses, and sponsor a CoP grant program to encourage grass-roots formation. Acknowledging the time and effort required to prepare for, facilitate, and post meeting minutes and resources to the respective wikis, we have talked about the possibility of using faculty or staff facilitators for some of the CoPs. Lastly, we are currently looking at different ways to promote CoPs to faculty and staff to increase and diversify membership. We are confident that by implementing some of these ideas future CoP programming will continue to engage Laurier faculty (and others) in constructive dialogue about teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The experience of Laurier CoPs highlighted the importance of making teaching public, creating community, and finding ways to support educators in navigating and reflecting upon their individual practice in meaningful ways. It also reinforced our centre's decision to move away from the "one-off" workshop and explore faculty development approaches that encourage sustained dialogue and community building. As previously suggested the benefits of "good talk about good teaching" cannot be overstated in its ability to seed and inspire a

culture of teaching and learning and a personal sense of satisfaction in both individual practice and community membership.

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