

The Laurentian University CAE Coffee House: Developing a Physical and Virtual Faculty Learning Community



Bettina Brockerhoff-Macdonald, Kelly Brennan, Megan Houle
Laurentian University

Laurentian University's Teaching and Innovation team recently created the virtual CAE Coffeehouse, an online repository of a variety of faculty development resources. The online CAE Coffeehouse supports the physical, in-person Faculty Learning Community through web-streamed workshops, drop-in hours, a teaching "book club", individual consultation sessions, and various departmental outreach initiatives. This article presents the characteristics of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC), as defined by Cox (2004, 2013), and a Professional Learning Community (PLC), as defined by Cherrington et al., (2018), and describes how the development of the CAE Coffeehouse builds upon these principles to extend the community into a virtual space.

Récemment, l'équipe Enseignement et Innovation de l'Université Laurentienne a créé, sous une forme virtuelle, la CAE Coffeehouse, un répertoire en ligne proposant un éventail de ressources en perfectionnement des corps professoraux. Cet outil en ligne vient en appui à la communauté d'apprentissage professorale – laquelle prend quant à elle une forme physique, présentielle – en offrant des ateliers en direct sur le web, des heures de rencontre sans rendez-vous, un club de lecture sur l'enseignement, des séances de consultation individuelles et différentes activités d'information départementale. Dans notre article, nous présentons les notions de communauté d'apprentissage professoral, telle que définie par Cox (2004, 2013), et de communauté d'apprentissage professionnel, telle que définie par Cherrington et al. (2018). Ensuite, nous montrons comment l'élaboration de la CAE Coffeehouse se fonde sur de tels principes pour étendre la portée de la communauté jusque dans l'univers virtuel.

Laurentian University is located in Canada and is a primarily undergraduate university with a robust bilingual distance education program. The Faculty Engagement Unit is part of Laurentian University's Centre for Academic Excellence (CAE), created in 2011. The CAE Coffeehouse was launched in early 2016 when the instructional design staff from the then Centre for Continuing Education and the Faculty of Management's Virtual Campus was combined into the CAE to provide teaching support for all faculty teaching on-campus and online. Before

2016 there had been no dedicated administrative unit providing pedagogical and teaching support despite having 365 full-time faculty and 475 sessional and/or clinical instructors at Laurentian University. Our most recent 2018-2023 Strategic Plan puts an emphasis on the various supports provided by the Faculty Engagement Unit, which includes the Teaching and Innovation team. Two outcomes in the "Teaching & Learning Define Us" section of the Strategic Plan specifically outline the kinds of supports to be developed and/or increased. Outcome

#12 states, “We will enhance support for professors in their teaching by providing opportunities for faculty peer-mentoring and collaboration with colleagues who specialize in pedagogy & instructional design”. Outcome #13 states, “We will increase our capacity to offer flexible teaching and learning options through technology-enabled learning and teaching”. The creation of both a physical and virtual CAE Coffeehouse aims to fulfill both of these outcomes.

This article presents a reflection on practice and highlights how the physical CAE Coffeehouse builds on both the principles of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) as defined by Cox (2004, 2013), a Professional Learning Community (PLC) as defined by Cherrington et al. (2018), and provides support for faculty on their journey as teachers. It also discusses how the development of the virtual CAE Coffeehouse builds upon these principles to extend the creation of a PLC into a virtual space.

Literature Review

Cox (2004) defines a faculty learning community (FLC) as:

a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building. (p. 8)

Cox also stresses that, “FLCs are less formal” (p. 9) and can be a useful tool in creating “community for graduate students and early-career, midcareer, and senior faculty” (p. 13). Hubbal and Albon (2007) acknowledge that “there is no universal or comprehensive theory of FLCs” (p. 121), and explain how “FLCs are good examples of communities of practice and provide alternative and authentic environments in which to encourage academics from

diverse backgrounds to become interdependent and mutually supportive in achieving pedagogical goals and engaging in scholarly approaches to teaching and learning” (p. 121). Most importantly for our discussion, FLCs “...create connections for isolated teachers, establish networks for those pursuing pedagogical issues, meet early-career faculty expectations for community, foster multidisciplinary curricula, and begin to bring community to higher education” (Cox, 2004, p. 5).

Cherrington et al. (2018) have also defined a less formalized structure for professional learning as a “professional learning community (PLC)” (p. 298). Much like an FLC, a PLC gives “opportunities for staff to identify shared challenges, learn from one another..., and [\[it\]](#) facilitate[s] connections among staff with shared interests in teaching and learning.” (p. 298). It is interesting to note here that although research on PLCs is “[p]rimarily located in schooling literature, limited research has ... been undertaken on PLCs within early childhood and higher education contexts” (Cherrington et al., 2018, p. 300). Similarly to the characteristics of an FLC, a PLC is defined by “...a focus on collaboration and shared learning; shared and supportive leadership; an unrelenting focus on improving teaching and learning; being action-oriented and focused on experimentation and results;...” (Cherrington et al., 2018, p. 300). While the activities of an FLC can be limited to a year, a PLC demonstrates developmental phases that last longer than a 12-month period as community members grow in their teaching and learning practice. In addition, PLCs can include academic development staff who “are equal partners with other academic and professional staff” (Cherrington et al., 2018, p. 308).

Christie (2016) reviewed the effectiveness of FLCs with the main purpose of supporting technology integration and concluded that most of the training still happens in a face-to-face and time-limited setting such as a workshop. She advocates for more research on FLCs in the online environment, recognizing that the online environment “... could be leveraged by FLCs to help support technology integration into teaching and learning and to enhance and expand faculty professional growth opportunities” (p. 12).

Overview of Physical and Virtual CAE Coffeehouse Creation and Functionalities

In providing support to faculty teaching on both a full-time and part-time basis, and to those who either have an office on-campus or are teaching courses online, the Teaching and Innovation team members quickly realized that “[s]tandard approaches towards faculty development often miss the dynamic and complex relationship between content, pedagogy, and technology” (Koehler, Mishra, Hershey, & Peruski, 2004). The team also identified the continued need for a centralized online repository of faculty supports for easy reference, specifically as it relates to pedagogy and technology, since the team was working with faculty members teaching both online and on-campus. This repository was envisioned to house the PowerPoint files from the newly created annual faculty development workshop series and to give just-in-time access to teaching resources to all faculty members who signed up for access to the repository. A dedicated space for discussion to take place virtually and asynchronously was also provided to encourage active community building between individual faculty members who were physically separated by large distances. This feature demonstrates that “technology can be used to effectively support FLCs by creating new opportunities for individual reflection and critical discourse about teaching practice” (Vaughn, 2004, p. 106). Ultimately, it is the hope of the Teaching and Innovation team that the virtual space combines characteristics of both an FLC and PLC, and creates a faculty professional learning community that aims to bridge the gap between traditional and technology-enabled teaching and learning approaches. The virtual repository provides the opportunity for all faculty members to become part of this community by creating a virtual space to support faculty members with any aspect of their teaching practice through the Teaching and Innovation team.

We focused on multidisciplinary, informal, voluntary and semi-structured approaches to engage

faculty and staff in creating an FLC/PLC learning community. We did not want to limit the membership size of the group, as we were attempting to increase the awareness of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Laurentian University. We are focusing more on the learning needs of the faculty, in regards to all aspects of their teaching practice. The Teaching and Innovation team drew inspiration for the name for this professional learning community for faculty from the London and Oxford Coffeehouses of the 17th and 18th centuries. These coffeehouses provided the opportunity “for like-minded scholars to congregate, to read, as well as to learn from and to debate with each other” (Cowan, 2005). We wanted to capture and nourish this same spirit in our physical and virtual spaces while ensuring that the English and French version of the name conveyed the same meaning: CAE Coffeehouse – Café rencontre du CEU.

The physical CAE Coffeehouse functions in a variety of ways at Laurentian University. The Teaching and Innovation workspace consists of an open-concept office for six staff members with space for a small boardroom table and chairs as well as a small coffee corner with comfortable chairs. It is used for faculty to drop in and meet with staff members. A dedicated physical classroom space with a variety of classroom technologies is the centralized face-to-face location for on-going faculty development workshops. The physical CAE Coffeehouse takes place informally at the University Pub with monthly informal “Pints and Pedagogy” gatherings to discuss teaching-related issues at the university.

The virtual CAE Coffeehouse operates in tandem with the physical CAE Coffeehouse, both supporting and archiving the activities of the Teaching and Innovation staff. Faculty are made aware of the virtual CAE Coffeehouse via emails announcing workshops and the monthly newsletter, and for new faculty during on-boarding. Faculty also have the option to register for the coffeehouse via a link sent with either emails or newsletters, as it is currently housed on the institution’s Learning Management System (LMS). As of January 2020, we have 362 faculty enrolled in the virtual CAE

Coffeehouse, both full-time and part-time, and teaching either on-campus or online. The Coffeehouse provides a calendar of future workshop sessions and access to copies and recordings of past faculty workshop sessions, access to the in-house created Course Syllabus Generator, and resources to create and incorporate Work Integrated Learning Opportunities and Open Educational Resources into individual courses. It also provides an appointment-booking tool with individual members of the Teaching and Innovation team and the Teaching Fellows. Faculty members who are deemed educational leaders committed to excellence in university teaching and are interested in the development of transformative teaching/learning practices and initiatives are appointed to this position yearly.

The Teaching and Innovation team tracking data for the 2018-2019 academic year reported a 35% increase in one-on-one interactions between staff of the teaching and innovation unit and individual faculty members based on the initiatives of the physical and virtual Coffeehouses listed above. These results demonstrate that there has been a higher level of engagement from faculty related to matters associated with their teaching and learning practice after initial access to either the physical or virtual CAE Coffeehouse “communities”, which the Teaching and Innovation team have sought to establish. Table 1 illustrates the types of interactions and mode of contact that have occurred between faculty and members of the Teaching and Innovation team.

Currently, 29% of interactions happen in-person while 71% happen virtually (either via phone or online conferencing platforms such as Zoom). The virtual CAE Coffeehouse also acts as a repository of resources for faculty who are interested in teaching with technology, which is why it is currently housed on our university’s LMS, *Brightspace*. A bonus with this arrangement is that it enables new faculty members to become familiar with the features of the university’s LMS, while accessing the various faculty supports such as the New Faculty Orientation Manual. This opportunity provides “the supportive

educational development required for faculty to develop and maintain their competence and fluency with the use of digital technology for teaching and learning” (Christie, 2016, p. 2).

Table 1

Modes of Contact for One-on-One and Small Group Support

Types of Interaction	Winter 2019	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Total
Scheduled Meeting (in person)	6	4	17	32
Drop-in (during drop-in hours)	2	1	1	4
Drop-in (random time)	10	5	13	33
Zoom, Hangout, other online	1	2	3	7
Email Thread	47	15	55	129
Phone Call	11	8	22	45
Totals	77	35	111	254

The virtual CAE Coffeehouse is also a hub to celebrate teaching excellence, to encourage innovative thinking as it relates to technology-enabled teaching and learning, and to further explore and discuss pedagogical approaches to teaching via an online discussion forum. It showcases current and past winners of both the full-time and part-time teaching excellence awards.

We introduced badging in 2017-2018 using the badging functionality within *Brightspace* to enable faculty members to track their attendance at workshops, and we are encouraging faculty members to use these badges in their annual reports to highlight their teaching-related professional development activities. While we gave out 83 badges in 2017-2018 to workshop attendees, we gave out 274 badges in the 2018-2019 academic year—a 230% increase that could partly be attributed to an increased awareness of the supports offered by the Teaching and Innovation unit and a growing sense of building a community around the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Both the physical CAE Coffeehouse and informal face-to-face gatherings, such as *Pints and Pedagogy* or one-on-one meetings between staff and faculty members, allow for community building via workshops. The virtual CAE Coffeehouse has been created as a place for faculty to share ideas amongst their peers and receive support for their ideas from the CAE Teaching and Innovation team via a dedicated discussion forum. This would be particularly beneficial for those faculty members who are not able to come onto campus during the day and/or online instructors.

Anecdotal data indicates that it has encouraged faculty to reach out to the teaching and innovation unit for more one-on-one support and discussion associated with the workshop themes based on access to the resources available in the virtual CAE Coffeehouse outlined above. We encourage faculty to talk with their peers who are already engaging in these practices. One example of the creation of such a learning community was the formation of an extended rubrics working group after a presentation at our annual Teaching and Learning Days in 2019. That group consisted of three faculty members from different disciplines who attended the initial presentation and then met three more times in the physical CAE Coffeehouse post-workshop to discuss their rubrics and obtain support for implementing them in their courses with the institution's LMS. Since then, we have recommended that faculty reach out to two of the three faculty

members regarding their process associated with creating and using rubrics in the institution's LMS.

Survey Results

We had 268 faculty enrolled in the virtual CAE Coffeehouse in May 2019. We created an informal survey to gather some insight on the faculty members' perception of the virtual CAE Coffeehouse and its usefulness for their teaching practice. We received 16 responses in English and 2 responses in French, which represents a 7% response rate. In our survey, we asked three questions via a Google Form to ensure anonymity. Question 1 asked respondents to "Select three (3) of the features listed that you like best about the CAE Coffeehouse." The responses to this question are illustrated in Figure 1.

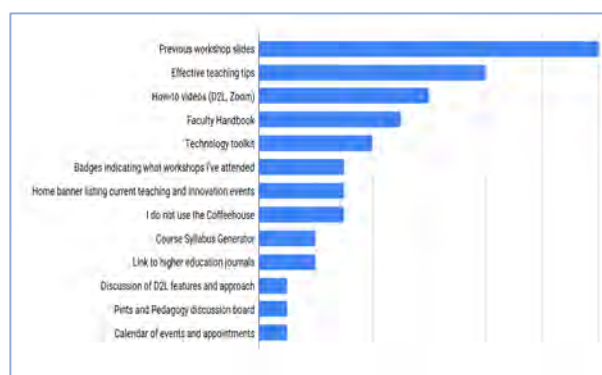


Figure 1

*Most Liked Features of the Virtual CAE Coffeehouse
(Laurentian University Teaching and Innovation Unit, 2019).*

The responses to Question 1 indicate that the majority of faculty members found access to the presentation slides for previous workshops (10 responders), effective teaching tips (8 responders) and how-to-videos (6 responders) the most useful, indicating that the goal of providing teaching tools in a just-in-time setting was achieved.

Question 2 asked respondents, "In your opinion, what could be improved about the CAE Coffeehouse?" We received the following comments: "more advertising and promotion of this great resource; create a more user-friendly layout; provide more resources on emerging teaching techniques and

innovations; provide more walk-throughs on tools (D2L or otherwise)”.

Question 3 asked respondents to provide feedback as to how the team may be able to “better stimulate virtual community building in the CAE Coffeehouse”. In response to Question 3, a variety of responses were provided ranging from, “Polling?” to “Good work so far - Perhaps keep updating people of events, workshops, build community, etc. by using your Twitter account, more online presence in community - advertise, post, etc.” Please see Appendix A for a comprehensive list of responses.

Discussion and Recommendations

Responses to Questions 2 and 3 suggest that there is still a widespread lack of awareness of the resources contained in the virtual CAE Coffeehouse and its capability to create a community of practice via the discussion forum. This lack of awareness could also stem from the fact that the Teaching and Innovation unit has only existed for about three years and that the staff is still working on building awareness of its supports for on-campus instructors reflective of an institutional commitment to teaching and learning. The discussion forum in the virtual CAE coffeehouse has also not seen any postings, which points to the necessity of having a dedicated facilitator who initiates these discussions via the dedicated twitter or email accounts. We are planning to send a follow-up survey in April 2020 to see if any of the strategies have had a positive impact on increasing awareness and building more interactions between staff and faculty.

The Teaching and Innovation team increased its number of visits to individual departments in the 2019-2020 academic year. The team has also created a monthly newsletter highlighting teaching tips and resources to amplify our presence virtually and physically. The team will also continue to build a comprehensive assessment bank with effective practices and templates, and continue to build on the sense of community created thus far with the workshops and individual consultations through the encouragement of

mentorship and skill-support amongst our faculty, sessional, and graduate students. In addition, more resources need to be created for faculty to be able to effectively utilize the various functionalities of our LMS to its full potential and suited to the individual teaching needs of faculty.

Conclusion

We are excited and proud to have created both the physical and virtual CAE Coffeehouse space so that all faculty members can participate in a growing community dedicated to professional learning and development. Regardless of if these meetings occur face-to-face or online, this budding community is dedicated to enhancing teaching effectiveness and technology-enabled teaching and learning. The creation of the virtual CAE Coffeehouse has opened a door to collaboration and ignited discussion amongst faculty members from different departments and faculties about design thinking, pedagogy, and technology-enabled teaching and learning strategies for our bilingual and tricultural faculty and graduate student teachers, both on campus and at a distance.

We have been able to build upon the elements of an inclusive PLC to lay the foundation for an FLC that engages all faculty members in pursuing professional development in teaching and pedagogy. We use the virtual CAE Coffeehouse as a repository and one-stop source of information on upcoming Teaching and Innovation unit events along with Teaching Resources. The next step is to build upon this foundation by using consistent messaging via our dedicated twitter and email accounts to engage faculty to discuss issues related to teaching on the virtual CAE Coffeehouse discussion forum. Our initial findings contribute to further research to help “understand how online environments could be leveraged by FLCs to help support technology integration into teaching and learning and to enhance and expand faculty professional growth opportunities” (Christie, 2016, p. 12). It is our hope that the next informal evaluation of the effectiveness of both the physical and the virtual CAE Coffeehouse

in April 2020 will demonstrate how “[t]he computer-mediated discussion forums allowed participants to reflect individually about their teaching practice through the process of composing messages to their peers. They were then exposed to other perspectives, different from their own, through reading discussion forum postings from other members of the community” (Vaughn, 2004, p. 105). Ultimately we are hoping to show that this would reflect a vibrant faculty learning community (FLC), which is able to “...indicate changed teaching practices and improved student learning” reflective of a professional learning community (PLC) (Cherrington et al., 2018, p. 308).

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Appendix A

List of Responses to Question 3 of the CAE Coffeehouse Informal Survey:

- A monthly e-mail with links to previous workshops
- Show up regularly to different department meetings for quick training and talking about the coffeehouse helping tools
- Ensure to offer workshops, virtual training, etc that applies specifically to administrative assistants to help us help our faculty and fellow staff
- I think a lot of this is word of mouth, actually. Peers telling peers about it.
- Not sure
- Would like to learn how to use the site
- Posting discussion questions or links on Twitter? push notifications?
- Maybe you have limited influence to do so because of how busy profs are

- Ask questions of the week with links to the coffee house for answers
- Possible to provide links to the Coffeehouse with Workshop Announcements? Get people used to visiting it? or push notifications when new material is posted?
- Provide valuable content and resources; communicate benefits to the community
- I don't enjoy virtual communities unless I know the humans involved in real time and space. So, I guess, keep the hands-on workshops coming!
- Good work so far - Perhaps keep updating people of events, workshops, build community, etc. by using your Twitter account, more online presence in community - advertise, post, etc.
- Not sure, seems good so far
- I think there's great potential in collaborative inquiry - if you got small groups to investigate their technology questions and meet at regular intervals to share their experiences.
- Polling?
- Proposer des séances totalement en ligne à partir de Zoom en faisant un Doodle pour savoir quand les gens y sont intéressés.

Kelly Brennan is an Instructional Technology Coordinator who works with Laurentian University faculty to effectively implement a variety of pedagogical approaches to using technology for learning and teaching.

Biographies

Bettina Brockerhoff-Macdonald, PhD, is the Director for Faculty Engagement in the Centre for Academic Excellence, Laurentian University. Her team supports faculty, both teaching on campus and online.

Megan Houle is the former Manager, Teaching and Innovation in the Centre for Academic Excellence, Laurentian University.