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“Because more trust now”: The Role of Peer Observation of Teaching in Building a Faculty Community of Practice

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“Because more trust now”: The Role of Peer Observation of Teaching in Building a Faculty Community of Practice

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Abstract

As the main facilitators of teaching and learning, faculty developers' views as individuals and as members of their academic communities are essential to higher education research. Yet, developers' perceptions of their own growth and learning as practitioners are underrepresented in the extant literature. This qualitative study explored perceptions of a peer observation of teaching (PoT) program and its role in building a community of practice (CoP) amongst a nine-member team of faculty developers in a large university in Saudi Arabia. Participant data were collected through semi-structured interviews after two years of the program. A thematic content analysis of interview responses revealed four themes: 1) authentic collegiality and mutual communication improved through the shared experiences, which provided a foundation for the CoP; 2) participants' perceptions of PoT shifted from an evaluative experience to a developmental one with noticeable challenges; 3) teaching and learning strategies and practices were enhanced from the observation experiences; and, 4) PoT contributed to building community through shared practice and/or sense of belonging. Implications of this study support explicit discussions about the foundation and underlying values of proposed PoT and related programs; a balanced, outcome-oriented yet still developmental program with follow-up opportunities; and, learner-centered and sustainable development that empowers a bilateral role and identity as both academician and faculty developer.

Keywords: academic development, community of practice, faculty development, peer observation of teaching, teaching and learning

"Porque Ahora Hay más Confianza": El Papel de la Observación de la Enseñanza por Parte de los Compañeros en la Construcción de una Comunidad de Práctica Docente

Philline Deraney

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Resumen

Como principales facilitadores de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, los puntos de vista de los desarrolladores de la facultad como individuos y como miembros de sus comunidades académicas son esenciales para la investigación de la Educación Superior. Sin embargo, las percepciones de los desarrolladores sobre su propio crecimiento y aprendizaje como profesionales están poco representadas en la literatura existente. Este estudio cualitativo exploró las percepciones de un programa de observación por pares de la enseñanza (PdT) y su papel en la construcción de una comunidad de práctica (CoP) entre un equipo de nueve miembros de desarrolladores de la facultad en una gran universidad en Arabia Saudita. Los datos de los participantes se recogieron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas después de dos años de programa. Un análisis de contenido temático de las respuestas a las entrevistas reveló cuatro temas: 1) la auténtica colegialidad y la comunicación mutua mejoraron a través de las experiencias compartidas, lo que proporcionó una base para la CoP; 2) las percepciones de los participantes sobre el PdT pasaron de ser una experiencia evaluativa a una experiencia de desarrollo con desafíos notables; 3) las estrategias y prácticas de enseñanza y aprendizaje mejoraron a partir de las experiencias de observación; y, 4) el PdT contribuyó a la construcción de la comunidad a través de la práctica compartida y/o el sentido de pertenencia. Las implicaciones de este estudio apoyan las discusiones explícitas sobre el fundamento y los valores subyacentes de la TdP propuesta y los programas relacionados; un programa equilibrado, orientado a los resultados, pero todavía de desarrollo, con oportunidades de seguimiento; y, un desarrollo centrado en el alumno y sostenible que potencie un papel y una identidad bilaterales como académico y desarrollador de la facultad.

Palabras clave: desarrollo académico, comunidad de práctica, desarrollo del profesorado, observación por pares de la enseñanza, enseñanza y aprendizaje

Faculty developers in teaching and learning centers (also referred to as academic development units or departments) are often the main facilitators of teaching and learning professional development (PD) in higher education institutions. While developers' pedagogical knowledge and presentation skills are explicitly seen through PD events such as workshops and consultations, their own academic development is not often considered. Aspects such as continuous pedagogical learning, collegial relationships, and the individual developer's dual roles as both discipline-specific academician and teaching and learning facilitator/ consultant (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2021) can significantly affect these educators and their communities. However, the faculty development community is not a common research focus as "there are comparatively fewer contributions on how we [academic developers] develop the knowledge and skills for the practice we engage in" (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2021, pp. 405-406). Indeed, it is suggested by scholars that developers' perceptions and practices are under-represented in the educational literature (Baker et al., 2018; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2021). Yet, as the main source of teaching and learning in their institutions, their perspectives as individuals and as members of their academic communities are vital to higher education research.

Mårtensson and Roxå (2021) emphasize the importance of not only developing the wider faculty development community of practice but also progressing the individual developer and community at the micro-level. A community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or CoP is defined by Eckert (2006) as "a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor" (p. 1). Wenger-Traynor (2015) mention three key elements that define a CoP, namely *domain*--area of common interest, *community*--shared interactions and events that promote learning, and *practice*--participants are "practitioners" who have "shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice" (p. 2.).

One form of shared, community practice explored in this study is peer observation of teaching (PoT) or observing educator-to-educator with the intention of enrichment of teaching practices, reflection on said practices, and reciprocal feedback (Gosling, 2002; Hendry et al., 2021). PoT as a form of faculty development is highly based on the shared experiences within and reflections of developers' practices (Fletcher, 2018; Shortland, 2010).

In the context of this study, the relatively recent launch of faculty development in higher education in Saudi Arabia, over the last 13 years, was largely in response to enhanced teaching quality standards and standardized student qualifications and accreditation (Muammar & Deraney, 2019). As a result, within the last decade, faculty development research in Saudi higher education has grown substantially with studies primarily focused on the overall need for faculty development (Al-Hattami et al., 2013) and the impact of programs such as mentoring and in-depth continuing education programs (Alghamdi, 2018; Alkhatnai, 2021; AlRweithy & Alsaleem, 2015; Deraney & Al-Ghamdi, 2020; Deraney & Khanfar, 2020; Muammar & Deraney, 2019; Muammar & Alkathiri, 2021). However, as in the international context, few studies, if any, heretofore have focused on the challenges, practices, or academic growth within faculty development communities in Saudi Arabian higher education. So, while Wenger-Traynor's (2015) concepts of domain, community, and practice may seemingly be present in academic development units in Saudi, the reality of the community and their members' perceptions about their own development are relatively unknown in current literature.

Thus, this study explores faculty developers' perceptions of their community of practice (CoP) in a large university in Saudi Arabia after two years of a peer observation of teaching (PoT) program. Two main questions guided this study:

1. Based on previous and current experiences, how do participants perceive peer observation of teaching?
2. Based on participants' perceptions of their community of practice, what role, if any, does peer observation have in building their community?

This article further highlights the importance of previous experiences and current context that may affect educators' professional learning environment: its community and practice. The study also offers recommendations that could support effective practice in faculty development and other teaching and learning communities.

Relevant Literature

Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal concept of community of practice (CoP) is founded in the idea that learning is integrated, negotiated, and develops through a *situated learning experience* moving newcomers in a learning community from "legitimate peripheral participation" (p. 29) into completely participatory members at the core of the CoP (Warhurst, 2016). Later study by Wenger (1998), Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), Wenger (2010), and Wenger-Traynor (2015), transitioning the theory into a social constructivist learning model, defines CoPs as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Traynor, 2015, p. 1).

The concept of CoP covers varied learning communities, which can overlap into different domains, traverse across stages of academics' careers, and continuously welcome new members as others exit, re-evolving throughout the changes (Blankenship & Ruona, 2008). These communities can be formed implicitly or explicitly, deliberately or fortuitously (Blankenship & Ruona, 2008; Wenger-Traynor, 2015). Several scholars posit that educators continually develop their identity based on internal and external influences that expound to their colleagues and consequently form their identity as an individual community member and as a community as a whole (Eckert, 2006; Remmik, Karm, Haamer, & Lepp, 2011). These influences in the case of faculty developers can range from shared language/s, cultural beliefs and educational backgrounds to pedagogical content knowledge, facilitation skills, and experiences. Remmik et al. (2011), who studied early-career academics, contend that, "An important aspect of professional identity is belonging to a community or acceptance by members of a community" (pp. 189-190). Accordingly, professional identity is strongly linked to one's CoP and the perceived role and experiences within that community (Polizzi et. al, 2021).

Remmik et al. (2011), similarly to Arthur (2016), further explain that while CoPs may apply in other domains such as medical institutions, corporations, or even school settings, for example, universities offer a different setting, where an individualistic approach to academia may be promoted over a community-based one. With the changing teaching

paradigms, delivery formats (virtual or face-to-face) and increased quality-driven practices, Arthur (2016) posits that there is less time for community-building activities, and the current university environment may not be as *situated* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as previously. Instead, the researcher argues, universities in the current era can be unstable and overly complex, which can make CoPs challenging. Yet, Wenger-Traynor (2015) highlights that even with new members and evolving developments in the domain, in this case higher education, a successful CoP can and does transform itself, re-aligning with dynamic internal and external factors as needed. Scholars suggest that even in a community which is complex, that may not be entirely harmonious, community relationships and identity can be formed and built based on mutual learning, common experiences, and interaction between peers (Abigail, 2016; Alshaikhi, 2020; Remmik et al., 2011; Wenger, 2010; Wenger, 1998).

Peer Observation of Teaching

As researched by several, peer observation of teaching or PoT can enhance teaching and learning practices, increase collegiality, boost educators' confidence, and increase collaboration (Albaiz, 2016; Bandura, 1977; Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Hendry et al., 2021; Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Shousha, 2015; York St. John University, 2018). Gosling (2002) defines three PoT models: evaluation or management model, development model, and peer review model. While all three are 'peer' or educator-to-educator, there are differences on a continuum of key aspects such as role, purpose, and relationship or dynamic between the observers and the observed. In the evaluation model, senior educators or management observe junior members of staff primarily for appraisal and promotion purposes. The development model focuses on academic developers or experts observing other staff members for developmental purposes to enhance teaching and learning. The peer review model, used in this study, emphasizes an educator-to-educator observation accentuating reciprocity and reflection. Gosling (2002) indicated the importance of the context and relationship of the peers and cautioned about the possible subjective nature of observation as performance-driven rather than focused on actual learning. These possible hindrances could be mediated, according to Gosling (2002), by shared understanding of the process and intentions.

Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004), in their earlier work, emphasize the “breadth and depth” (p. 489) of the PoT process based on organized planning with specific goals that aim for enhancement of teaching, peer support and interactions, and also sustainable professional development for faculty members. Building on the collective nature of well-planned peer observation, studies have shown that PoT is a ‘partnership’ (Bell, 2014) with interchanging roles of observer and observed where “the process of observing is just as if not more valuable than being observed and given feedback” (Hendry & Oliver, 2012, p. 1). Further to the point, PoT can build faculty relationships of “mutual trust and respect” (Shortland, 2010, p. 295) when goals are shared and existing work relationships are constructive (Fletcher, 2018). Peer observations in a faculty community, in agreement with CoP research, can also facilitate educators’ identities (Warhurst, 2016) as well as encourage reflective conversations between faculty members and across communities (O’Keeffe, 2021), and create a sense of belonging to their community (Harper & Nicolson, 2013).

During peer-to-peer observational learning, as part of Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, faculty members’ self-efficacy can also be linked to increased confidence and collegiality through PoT (Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Hendry et al., 2021; Walker, Patten, & Stephens, 2022). Hendry et al. (2021) found that, through PoT feedback, “reassurance or positive affirmation enhanced participants’ confidence in themselves as teachers, or their self-belief in their ability to teach successfully” (p. 64). Bandura’s (1977) well-known sources of improved self-efficacy, namely *performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional support/arousal* (p. 195) play a strong role in self-perceptions of PoT for higher education educators including faculty developers, many of whom do not have a specific teaching or faculty development certificate or training. Reports on facilitation strengths, gaining new teaching strategies, and positive and constructive verbal feedback within a supportive team has immediate relevance and benefit to faculty developers’ context and practice (Alshaikhi, 2020).

With all of the reported benefits, PoT as a developmental tool has caveats and potentially negative effects when not systematically or transparently implemented or supported (Al-Ghamdi & Tight, 2013; Sachs & Parsell, 2014). Numerous scholars, both in Saudi and internationally, have alluded to faculty perceptions that PoT and comparable teaching review programs are

often inconsistent and subjective, standards-driven evaluations (Al-Ghamdi & Tight, 2013; Ali, 2012), “associated with judgment” (Deraney & Al-Ghamdi, 2020, p. 321) and initial mistrust between colleagues and about the program’s intention (Ali, 2012; Shousha, 2015). Yet, in these same studies, as reported by Bell (2014), Bell and Mladenovic (2008), Hendry and Oliver (2012), and several others, instructors reported meaningful self-reflection and enhanced ideas, particularly about teaching strategies, from the PoT experience.

Thus, PoT in the wider Saudi context is growing in awareness and implementation but often resonates with elements of uncertainty and hesitancy, a cautious acceptance. As suggested by Deraney and Al-Ghamdi (2020) based on the extant PoT literature in Saudi higher education, while “most institutions and practitioners changed their practice or became more open to the benefits of peer observations” (p. 321), transparency and mutual cooperation are necessary for faculty to engage in and benefit from peer observation within teaching and learning communities (Gosling, 2002).

Methodology

A qualitative research design using a thematic content analysis of semi-structured interview responses was chosen to explore faculty developers’ authentic perceptions. Such inductive research allows rich descriptions that can form a connected portrait of the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were used to empower the participants’ to “share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48) between researcher and participants.

Aside from the primary interview data, the researcher observed participants in context as oversight of internal professional development prior to the program’s inception and discussed the PoT program with participants throughout the process. In this way, the researcher also had a role as *participant observer*; the researcher, who observes and discusses with the participants, is also part of their daily work life (Creswell, 2013). These informal observations and discussions, as in Baker et al.’s study (2018) within a faculty development community, informed a thoughtful interpretation of the interview data and supported the study’s findings (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

Nine faculty members in one academic development community in a large university in Saudi Arabia participated in the study, which represented the entire faculty development population at this site. The participants’ majors included various specializations the field of education as shown in Table 1. All participants took their initial undergraduate education in the Middle East or Northern African (MENA) region with over half (56% or 5 participants) earning advanced degrees outside of the region (United States, United Kingdom, and Malaysia). The participants’ range of work experience in education was 3-25 years with an average of 14 years.

Table 1.
Participant Demographics.

Characteristics and Specializations		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	6	67%
	Female	3	33%
Level of Education/Specialty	Doctorate Degree	7	78%
	Teaching and learning		
	Curriculum and instruction		
	Special-needs education		
	Adult higher education		
	Teacher education		
	Science education		
	Master’s Degree		
	Business education	2	22%
	Instructional design and technology		

Context of the Study

“Faculty developers do not passively experience context; rather, they actively interact with their environment in ways that maximize their performance” (Baker et al., 2018, p. 265). As written by Baker et al. (2018), understanding the context is essential to exploring the perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study. The main form of faculty development in the study

context is short-term workshops and courses grounded in pedagogical foundations and teaching and learning best practice in higher education. While faculty development programs are designed based on national standards and the institutional culture (e.g., institutional outcomes, graduate attributes, teaching quality reports and surveys), the programs are also aligned with and modified for the individual colleges (Wenger-Traynor, 2015) at the micro-level (Baker et al., 2018).

As mentioned, the researcher of this study oversaw the internal professional development of the faculty developers and quality enhancement of the unit's programming. Through observation, it became evident that the developers were working and learning primarily in isolation independently of each other or in pairs/small groups, often based on gender. It is noteworthy to mention that, in Saudi Arabia, office spaces at universities are often gender-segregated. Consequently, working somewhat separately in gender-based groups is expected, but it is also expected that faculty development remains at a constant level in timeliness, pedagogical content, and quality across genders. In other words, CoP elements such as an interactive community and "shared practice" (Wenger-Traynor, 2015, p. 2) were apparently lacking in this context.

Development of the PoT Program

Based on these observations and previous experiences, the internal PD program was initiated with PoT first in mind grounded in existing literature that suggested peer-based observation improves confidence and competence in teaching reciprocally (Hendry & Oliver, 2012), and could potentially build a stronger faculty development community and even promote retention (Mack, 2019). Adding to the point, the most authentic shared practice in this context is the design, preparation, and facilitation of workshops.

Following the study of Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004) emphasizing clear intentions and process for meaningful PoT, the program evolved through three steps: (a) mutual agreement on the program's observation protocol and process; (b) mid-year and year-end "check-ins"; and, c) follow-up professional development based on the identified team needs. From the researcher's observations, participants were hesitant about the intentions of the program—administrative or developmental. As a result, before the observations actually began, colleagues were consistently

consulted and reassured in individual and group meetings, and correspondence that PoT was confidential, developmental, and not for promotion or evaluation purposes. The underlying values of peer mutuality, confidentiality, and transparency needed to be discussed before the program could begin.

A narrative observation form used was developed and negotiated with the academic development team. Each member had individual choice and transparency regarding all PoT logistics (peer observer, program to be observed, date/time, etc.) and complete autonomy over observation notes and feedback; all forms/feedback were kept by and between the peers. The team adopted a three-meeting best practice protocol: pre-observation information share/possible observation focus, observation, and post-observation debriefing (York St. John University, 2018) twice per semester to have time to collaborate, self-reflect, and focus on specific teaching and learning areas.

At the end of every semester, team feedback (via conversations) was elicited and analyzed by the researcher for recurring themes of facilitation strengths and areas for improvement. Annually, the researcher shared a report about the process, team strengths, and areas for improvement, i.e., recommended professional development; all names remained confidential to respect the individual faculty member. The annual report showed a collective portrait of the team. The interviews for this study were conducted after two years of the PoT program.

Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining the necessary approvals and informed consent, data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by questions in three focused areas informed by the literature and the researcher's observations throughout the program. The first area of questions focused on the participants' previous PoT settings and experiences including location/s and number of experiences; role as observer/observed such as peer or administrator, and their narrative oral reflection on their experiences. In the second part of the interview, questions focused on the PoT program in the current context—participants' description of their experiences and comparisons between previous and present PoT experiences. The final area of questions was guided by the connection, if any, between PoT and CoP in their faculty development unit and their perceptions of their identity in

relation to their community. In this portion of the interview, the definition of CoP (Eckert, 2006) was also shared with all participants for mutual understanding.

Each in-person interview was recorded, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. To improve reliability, interview data was transcribed verbatim by a bilingual assistant and checked by the researcher for transcription accuracy. Each interview transcript was then sent to the participants for member-checking (Birt et al., 2016) and final approval on the transcript to empower participants and enhance data trustworthiness in content and meaning.

The researcher analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) first five stages of thematic content analysis: (1) a strong sense of or familiarity with the data, (2) initial coding of the data, (3) generating potential themes, (4) reviewing themes, and, finally, (5) defining themes. After an initial readthrough of the overall data, with over 50 pages of transcripts, each question was open-coded by the researcher at four different times to minimize coder fatigue (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) and improve reliability. Codes were re-checked for consistency and combined into categories. The categories were then revised against the data for repeated patterns and combined when found to be similar in meaning. Finally, the emerging themes were refined and modified several times based on the collated data. Table 2 illustrates the frequent codes, categories and resultant themes found through the data analysis.

Table 2.
Data Analysis of Participants' Perceptions.

Themes	Categories	Frequent Codes
Authentic collegiality and mutual communication	sincere and transparent interactions throughout the observation process supportive and improved peer relationships	honesty, transparency, sincerity, support, mutual, reciprocal, care, respect, empathy, interaction, improved relationships, choice, feedback, culture of observation, face-to-face
Shift of perception of PoT from evaluative to developmental	Previous experiences of PoT as evaluative and formal Current experience of PoT as developmental/peer-focused Engaged in PoT process and intention Challenges of non-evaluative approach	Previous PoT experiences: top/down, evaluation, judgement, critique, mistakes, hesitant, intentions, stress, misunderstandings, formal, paperwork, unannounced Current PoT experiences: intentions, confidential, engaged, relaxed, comfortable, informal, easier, developmental, not serious, not structured enough, busy work, repetitive
Teaching and learning strategies and practices	Teaching activities and strategies Interactions with the audience Elements of delivery Follow-up and improvement plans	body language, movement, voice/tone, focused follow-up, activities, ice breakers, charisma, responding to the audience/participants, learning through observations, constructive feedback, needed follow-up, improvement plan, PD
Role in building a community of practice	Sense of belonging Shared experiences Identified as facilitators within a team/community	family, team, collective, facilitator/trainer, empowerment, mutual care/trust, created bonds/closer, department culture, peer relationships

Throughout the data analysis, researcher reflexivity and various forms of triangulation (Creswell, 2014) were considered. As the PoT program was based on best practice, continuous ‘check-ins’ with related literature about the observation process, offering feedback, and the impact of PoT seen in other contexts helped inform the data analysis in this study. In addition, the researcher’s informal observation notes after PoT debriefings each term, and discussions with colleagues allowed for more reflective interpretation of the data (Baker et. al, 2018; Creswell, 2014). Based on these interactions, when analyzing the data, there was a deeper understanding of the contextual underpinning of participants’ responses. For confidentiality, no names or identifying characteristics of participants are mentioned. Excerpts of responses are accompanied by pseudonyms in the findings to support a varied representation of participants’ perceptions. To ensure accuracy, interview data are written verbatim in the findings with only minor editing when responses were not understandable.

Findings

Perceptions of faculty developers in this study revealed four prominent themes about peer observation of teaching and its role in building their community of practice: 1) authentic collegiality and mutual communication improved through the shared experiences, which provided a foundation for the CoP; 2) the concept of PoT shifted from evaluation to peer development albeit with challenges; 3) participants gained varied teaching strategies and practices both as observer and observed; and, 4) participants responded that the PoT experience contributed to building community through shared practice and/or sense of belonging.

Authentic Collegiality and Mutual Communication

Authentic collegiality and communication were the most prominent theme that emerged from the interview data, and, as shown in the findings, influenced other themes as well. Elements related to collegial relationships and communication were mentioned when discussing the PoT concept and faculty members’ previous and current experiences, in the manner of communication when giving and receiving feedback, and the role of PoT in building a community. Responses of authentic collegiality, focusing on

transparency and sincerity, and peer relationships were expressed through repeated responses about caring, trust, honesty, and mutuality—the most prevalent codes revealed in the interview data.

All participants mentioned an improvement in the collegiality and communication between peers through shared PoT experiences as shown in Michael and Isaac’s responses below:

We can sit and chat and elaborate even more while looking at yourself maybe you will say, “oh did I do that?” Maybe I should change. When you have somebody with experience walk into your class, this can make a big difference. (Michael)

Breaking the barriers and ice between colleagues. Another thing is you would see yourself through people’s eyes. [PoT] helped in creating relationships between people, and it made me feel part of this family. (Isaac)

Several participants mentioned the importance of the manner of giving and receiving feedback, which initially provided challenges of transparency and even uncertainty in some cases:

The discussion of the issues [was the most difficult part]. Because some people don’t accept the critique...sometimes you will be embarrassed to tell someone your body language should be improved. You have to take care and select the right words. (Rasha)

At first, [Dr.] didn’t like it [feedback]. But after all, [Dr.] got to know me, and I care about your development, and I want you do to better and excel. Then, [Dr.] appreciated it. (Michael)

Communication and feedback that were authentic or sincere, constructive as well as positive, were also perceived by participants as important to building peer relationships and improve collective learning as articulated in Michael’s response below:

I should be very appreciative of that [feedback], but to flatter and just tell you...‘doing great’...just flattery, that is not good. Being honest, constructive and friendly; this is what matters. This is what can boost the culture of observation. When we sit face to face and

act up the whole scenario, I would say it's much, much better than writing. You are going to write there just to please me or something? No... we bring everything to the table and [be] frank and honest and just talk about it.

PoT Concept Shift from Evaluation to Development

When discussing previous PoT experiences in their former institutions or departments, the majority of participants responded that previous experiences represented a more evaluative model as compared to their current experience. Participants used words such as “unannounced,” “judgement,” “evaluations,” and even “undercover” to describe previous experiences, which led to initial hesitancy in some cases. After experiencing a more peer-focused approach in the current program, participants, including Abdulaziz and Akram, described their PoT experience as “informal,” “more relaxed,” “more comfortable,” and “really developing ourselves:”

This is much better. This is not an administrative level but rather friendly type of observation while the other one was just for the director actually walk in to evaluate how I'm doing and she actually gave me a report. (Abdulaziz)

Honestly, when we started the idea, we thought maybe [it's] in a hidden way; they will ask people “what about this one [Dr.] or what about that one?” But when it became clear, and we visit each other and no one asked, it became relaxed and more acceptable...trust and more confidence. (Akram)

While PoT in their current experience was mainly perceived as positive and enriching, participants also discussed concerns, even skepticism, of using the non-evaluative approach and the need to be “convinced” or believe in the peer observation process. To illustrate, some participants described aspects of the PoT process as “busy work,” “not serious,” and “repetitive” especially between peers who were already sharing teaching and learning experiences:

Like...[he/she] is my buddy ...and they always go together; I have seen that. It's not serious the way people approach it...to rush it. (Abdulaziz)

If someone is convinced with the whole process of peer observations...then maybe they will change. But if they don't care about it, then maybe not. (Isaac)

Teaching and Learning Strategies and Practices

Participants responded that they gained varied teaching and learning practices both as observer and observed. For the majority of respondents, however, improved pedagogical knowledge or learning was infrequently mentioned in responses. Rather, participants perceived enhanced teaching practice and performance as facilitators as they discussed new activities, strategies, or delivery tips gained through the PoT experience as the observed peer:

I learned to change my activities at the beginning [ice breaker]. It was based on questions, and questions are boring. I now do more scenarios...more problem solving...more discussions. They're [learners] engaged and they talk about their classes. (Isaac)

I received very constructive feedback on how to handle the audience. Maybe I would say during my studies, it was different; part of it was about content. Not anymore. I hope that's a good thing that I mastered my content (laughs). Now it's about...how I deal with the group, participants, etc. (Meshari)

As peer observer, several faculty members again mentioned facilitation practices they hoped to emulate. Several also mentioned they learned by observing practices that were not effective during the observation or would not work in their individual practice. As shown in their responses, participants could vicariously view their own practice in their observation experiences with peers:

I learned through observation that I don't need to talk a lot. I need to give them activities... To plant an idea in their head but not to give them everything. (Isaac)

I learn from their way of talking, language, their strategies and tools, ...English and Arabic. Sometimes how to deal with women and men...especially for men. (Fatimah)

While all members mentioned practices gained or acquired, several also made suggestions to improve the PoT process and their follow-up professional development:

I think it's better to make it more than in pairs, like in threes so we can maximize the impact. And we can learn more. (Isaac)

For an improvement plan, maybe I can sit with him/her during the semester before he/she can visit me again. I can go through some videos of good [practice] to follow up regarding this skill itself. (Akram)

Building a Community of Practice

The central theme of *authentic collegiality and communication* was consistently linked to *building a community of practice* expressed by responses of “family,” “one team” through “mutual respect” and “trust.” However, this final theme reflects specific participant comments about the role of PoT in their community of practice. All participants responded that the PoT experience contributed to building community through shared practice, a bond created, an overall change in the department culture, or sense of belonging:

And the proof for the that is anyone can now visit me. Why? Because more trust now. So, it's part of the culture. (Akram)

Another thing, we all feel we are in the same boat, and we have the same goal from peer observations. (Isaac)

We have become like a community and close friends when we open up to each other and be honest and give sincere feedback. This is what counts--this constructs a community of colleagues built on trust and built on mutual respect and caring. (Michael)

We started to talk about the issues that [are] related to us in our world, and we have become closer with each other. When we discuss the negatives of each other and we accept that, it's good. It creates a bond. (Rasha)

Although the PoT played a role in creating a CoP, multiple members noted it was only one part of community building, or that it built community to “an extent.” Participants made suggestions to further improve their CoP similar to the following excerpt from Mansour:

To create this culture or this community of practice, you need collective effort from everybody. PoT encourages people to share and be open to more collaborative ways of work. But I don't wanna say...one single activity will create the community of practice of environment; community of practice takes time.

Related to participants' perceptions of belonging and based on the literature that links membership in a CoP and educators' identity, at the end of each interview, participants were asked how they identify themselves as professionals at the university. The vast majority of participants mentioned the faculty development unit and their role in their responses, reflecting a sense of being a member of and identifying with this CoP:

I feel now as a facilitator. At the beginning, I used to feel like I'm the faculty member teaching you...

I'm a facilitator of learning/professional trainer at the [unit]. (6 similar responses)

Discussion and Implications

Faculty developers' perceptions of peer observation of teaching in this study mirror the existing literature regarding enhanced collegiality, relationship building, and increased and improved communication (Albaiz, 2016; Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Hendry et al., 2021; Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Shousha, 2015). However, the importance placed by the participants on the values of 'trust,' 'honesty' and 'mutuality'—i.e., authenticity, were heightened within this faculty development community. As shown in the data, authentic

collegiality and communication permeated all other themes and seemingly provided the foundation for the participants' perceptions of PoT in this study. As per the regional literature, interview data, and researcher's observations, the participants' perceptions of PoT initially hinged largely on their previous experiences—predominantly evaluative and highly formal including unannounced administrative visits and filed reports that could determine promotion or employment status (Alghamdi & Tight, 2013; Ali, 2012; Shousha, 2015). As a result, there was initial skepticism and even resistance from several participants who felt that observations may primarily be for administrative “detection of areas for improvement” (Hendry & Oliver, 2012, p. 8). However, through co-building the foundational values of the program, perceptions about its purpose began to change. As shown in the data, what started for some, such as Akram, as “I choose my observer” became “anyone can observe me; they don't even have to tell me.” Further, based on the researcher's observations during the program and indicated in the data, more teaching discussions and between-gender observations were also occurring as a result of the increased interaction between colleagues.

Although the peer-to-peer approach was welcomed by participants, the conceptual shift from an evaluative to a developmental model on the PoT continuum (Gosling, 2002) was viewed by some participants as “busy work” or “not serious.” The more peer-driven approach, with no formal reports in participants' files, proved challenging for some indicating that the conceptual shift from an evaluative to a more peer-focused and guided model is not yet realized in this community. As intimated by several participants, the culture of mutual and shared experiences is improved but still a work in progress. Several participants also recommended PoT program improvements related to “follow-up” observations and PD to enhance participants' learning. This finding indicated that an outcome-based program with subsequent, customized plans for professional development would increase the PoT program benefits while offering the structure participants were accustomed to.

In concurrence with relevant PoT literature (Bell, 2014; Deraney & Al-Ghamdi, 2020, Hendry and Oliver, 2012), participants gained teaching and learning practices (e.g., new activities, delivery techniques) through the PoT experience as both observer and observed; however, the collective data did not indicate pedagogical knowledge was enhanced through observations. This finding reflects Gosling's (2002) concern about PoT as a performance-

based experience rather than a developmental one. A plausible reason for this finding may be that several comments in the interview data suggested that participants, with an average of 14 years of experience and graduate degrees in education, believed they had advanced knowledge or even “mastered” their content. On the contrary, up-to-date pedagogical content knowledge is crucial for faculty developers to support the dynamic needs of academic staff as well as contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning. If the faculty developer is not continuously participating in current scholarly discussion, both the developer and institutional academic staff are at a disadvantage that, consequently, could affect student learning. To this point, in the context of Saudi higher education, faculty developers are not considered mere educational consultants but rather experts or at least a main source of teaching and learning (Al-Ghamdi & Tight, 2013). Therefore, both updated facilitation skills and educational content knowledge is imperative for faculty developers in this context.

Adding to the discussion of continuous scholarly development is faculty developers’ identity. Mårtensson & Roxå (2021) posited that faculty developers’ academic identity, primarily defined by their research and practice, is often ambiguous, one that is between two fields—their academic specialization and the field of faculty development. However, participant’s responses did not show ambiguity of role in this study; all identified themselves as a facilitator or faculty member of the unit. The apparent indication is that faculty developers who are not affiliated with an academic department, as in this context, have developed a shared experience and routine with college faculty colleagues and each other over time (Abigail, 2016), a “frame” (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2021, p. 414) from which to work and identify themselves in their development community. While a positive finding from the aspect of a stable CoP, each developer in this study, also a faculty member, has an academic specialty outside of faculty development, which he/she may return to throughout their career. Thus, having a bilateral “frame” of practice and research in both academic development and their specialty is crucial to faculty developers’ identity and viability as academicians.

The role of the researcher and the generalizability of findings are the main limitations of this study. Participants’ interview responses may have been biased or nuanced by the researcher’s role as PoT program developer and oversight. To mitigate biased or forged responses as much as possible, the

researcher consistently consulted with and referred back to the participants throughout the program and during data collection. While the study sample included all faculty developers on site, the research explored the unit of only one university. Consequently, the findings of this research can inform studies in similar contexts but could not necessarily be generalized to other faculty development communities. Instead, this study aims to add to the limited literature on faculty development teaching and learning communities in Saudi higher education and to offer possible ways to enhance those communities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored faculty developers' perceptions of a peer observation of teaching (PoT) program and its role in building a community of practice (CoP) in a large university in Saudi Arabia. Four themes emerged from participants' perceptions: 1) authentic collegiality and mutual communication improved through the shared experiences, which provided a foundation for their CoP; 2) the concept of PoT shifted from evaluation to peer development albeit with challenges; 3) participants gained various teaching strategies both as observer and observed; and, 4) through the PoT experience, participants shared a sense of belonging in the faculty development community. The theme of authentic collegiality and mutual communication was articulated through repeated participant responses expressing care, trust, honesty, and mutuality during PoT experiences. This theme was consistently integrated throughout the research data and linked to other themes. Perceived collegial relationships and communication provided the foundation for the PoT program and its role as impetus in building a CoP amongst the faculty developers in this study.

Based on this study's findings and existing research, recommendations to enhance teaching and learning communities of practice through PoT or similar peer review programs are three-fold. First, explicit discussions about the proposed program and its underlying values are key to a supportive, stable environment for building a CoP. As explained by Wenger-Traynor (2015), the domain, or common interest, is not enough; practicing as a community takes time, collective effort, and mutual understanding. It 'sets the stage' for the community and allows for smooth acculturation of new members, particularly in this study and similar contexts that are used to an evaluative

approach to peer reviews/observations. Secondly, a balanced, more structured program that has clear overall and individual outcomes and follow-up that is still developmental and transparent in both intention and implementation will support faculty members' perception of PoT. Possibly, over time, empowered faculty members will facilitate their own peer-to-peer initiatives within their departments and across disciplines. Finally, teaching and learning within any community, as mentioned by numerous scholars, should be learner-centered, sustainable, and practical. A final recommendation then, focused on this community, is that PD for the developers themselves should enhance their pedagogical knowledge and instructional strategies as well as consistently empower their bilateral role and identity as both discipline-specific academician and faculty developer.

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