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Supporting Staff Transitions into Online Learning: A Networking Approach

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ABSTRACT

As online programmes in higher education continue to grow in number, the literature identifies emerging areas of concern. Whilst appreciating the flexibility and accessibility of online learning, learners often experience challenges in balancing their professional and personal lives whilst studying. In addition, such students have complained that their online educational experiences may be irrelevant and inappropriate, with tutors having limited presence or interest.

Online learners' experiences are contingent upon the skills and characteristics of the tutors, who face the challenges of changing and developing practices, such as taking a more student-centred approach in order to provide opportunities that foster deep learning. Current, familiar practices may no longer be appropriate. There is a need to support tutors as they develop and expand their practices, facilitating familiarity and confidence with the opportunities afforded by a range of technologies. Research indicates that communities of practice as a form of staff development may assist tutors in this transition.

This paper shares the early experiences of a recently formed Network for online tutors at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, Scotland. This community of practice was based upon an adapted Community of Inquiry Framework (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). The Network, endorsed by management, was launched in 2017, with two co-leads, one from an educational development unit and one from the School of Health Science. Sub groups, all led by members of the Network, were subsequently developed to look at specific aspects of online delivery and development within the University.

The purpose of the Network and the successes achieved in the first academic year are outlined. The challenges arising in the early stages of implementing the Network are reported, and proposals for progress in the next academic year are discussed. Finally, suggestions are offered to those embarking on a similar endeavour.

Keywords: staff development; online learning; communities of practice; community of inquiry; networking

Introduction

Online higher education is continually developing, with rapid growth in the number of available online programmes (Haggerty, 2017). Online learning has well-documented advantages, allowing learners to study to a great extent at their own rate and in their own ways whilst remaining in employment and fulfilling familial responsibilities (O'Shea, Stone, & Delhunty, 2015). Some learners have reported positive responses to online offerings, expressing feelings of joy, enthusiasm and excitement (Zembylas, Theodorou, & Pavlakis, 2008). Emergent findings hint that online learning may even result in better outcomes compared with face-to-face provision (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010), whilst Shea and Bidjerano's (2014) study of community college students in the United States concluded that, when controlling for learner background characteristics, "students who participated in distance education early in their college careers were more likely to attain a degree than students who had not done so" (p. 110). Nevertheless, moving online presents notable challenges for institutions which may be confronted by high attrition rates, low learner progression, and low learner attainment (Baxter, 2012; Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015; Simpson, 2013). Online learners often find it difficult to balance competing responsibilities whilst studying (Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, & Smith, 2015) and the need for self-regulation and self-efficacy required when studying online (Whittaker, 2015). Such learners may also complain that their educational experiences are inappropriate, irrelevant and with limited tutor presence (Liaw & Huang, 2013).

Tutors thus have a vital role in designing and then maintaining dynamic online learning environments, in which the learner's experience is directly linked to the skills, efforts and characteristics of the facilitative tutor (Lu, Todd & Miller, 2011). However, there has been an ambivalent response to such innovative developments, with tutors finding their deeply held beliefs about learning and teaching "disrupted" when moving online (O'Shea et al., 2015). Often, when developing online learning, tutors simply work with adaptations from the known (face-to-face), being reluctant to abandon their familiar practices. Adherence to traditional approaches may result in less than ideal online learning environments with tutors disregarding the affordances offered therein, and students thus missing out on being engaged in activities which should foster deep learning. There is clearly a need to support tutors as they move into these online spaces which require them to take a more learner-centred approach with a particular focus on active learning, as



suggested by Hixton, Barczyk, Buckenmeyer and Feldman (2011). This paper describes a venture whose aim is to address that need through the development of a networking group.

We here review and share our early experiences of an approach to address staff development requirements arising from a growing institutional commitment to provide online learning. First, we address the literature on staff development for tutors moving into online learning and discuss case studies which consider the role of communities of practice (CoP). Then we report on our Tutor Network which has recently been launched at a small, niche institution in Scotland. The purpose of the Network, and its successes to date, are outlined. The Network is a type of CoP whose detail is informed by an amended version of the Community of Inquiry Framework (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). Challenges became apparent in the early stages of the initiative, and these are openly reported and discussed, together with the proposals to progress the Network over its second academic year. The article concludes by offering advice to others who may wish to embark upon a similar initiative. Given the rapid developments in online learning, the authors consider it worthwhile to share what is only an emergent experience to date, seeking to assist others who may decide to embark upon this mode of tutor support, and who could find it useful to launch a similar provision featuring constructive, collegial interaction between online tutors.

Background

Growth in online learning has required many tutors to “abandon their customary face-to-face lecture approach and adopt new teaching techniques that replace the tradition human-to human interaction with a computer screen” (Golden, 2016, p. 84). Developing an online programme is certainly different to planning for face-to-face delivery (Hixton, Barczyk, Buckenmeyer, & Feldman, 2018), with some tutors viewing the required paradigm shift akin to that of learning a new language (Lu et al., 2011).

As early as 2011, Hixton et al. were citing four areas which tutors need to address when moving from face-to-face to online. These are adapting pedagogic strategies to the online environment; adjusting to learner-centred focus; finding increased time; and learning new technologies. Institutions often fail to develop a consistent and effective mechanism to help tutors with this “step into the unknown”; thus Golden concludes that, without appropriate support, it is unlikely that tutors will develop the appropriate skills and understandings to navigate such a “significant shift” (2016, p. 85). Vaughan and Garrison (2006) agree with Golden, stating that professional development for online tutors tends to concentrate on skills-based workshops addressing how to use particular software. They note that tutors have little time afterwards for follow-up through which to implement their ideas and to discuss them collegially together with their concerns and frustrations. They conclude that “those faculty members who do master these new skills often use educational technology to reinforce rather than change existing teaching practices” (2006, p. 140).

Communities and staff development

A well-researched approach to staff development is through the development of communities, often, but not always, led by central units. Cox has written extensively in this area (2001; 2002; 2004; 2017) and is generally credited in the United States with the development of some of the first faculty learning communities (FLCs) in 1979 in a Lilly Endowment program at Miami University (Richlin & Essington, 2004). Cox asserts that FLCs can bring together isolated tutors and establish networks for those interested in discussing and addressing pedagogical concerns.

Communities of practice for staff development?

Many FLCs are informed by Wenger’s work on communities of practice (Wenger, 2006; Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Whilst it is outwith the scope of this article, to provide an in-depth review of communities of practice (CoPs) (see Brooks, 2010 or Golden, 2016), a CoP is generally described as a group of practitioners who interact regularly addressing a specific concern (Wenger, 2006; Wenger-Trayner 2015). Usually those participating want to know more about something professional, or to learn to do something better. CoPs are based upon the social constructive approach in which knowledge is increased through collaboration amongst professionals which requires a sense of trust and ownership. Whilst researchers remain uncertain if a FLC is different, or contributes, to a CoP (Brooks, 2010), the hoped-for outcome of such groupings is to “cultivate ongoing and evolving learning partnerships that serve to raise the skills, awareness and knowledge of all participants” (Golden, 2016, p. 86).

Golden helpfully outlines six advantages of a staff development CoP for online tutors, drawing upon several case studies. Benefits include: shared practice and professional growth; fuelling change/promoting self-knowledge/reflective practice; peer support; trust; community-building; and sharing resources. One of Golden’s examples is the work of Lu and colleagues in San Jose State University in the United States. This case study identifies the benefits of providing tutors with a safe, open, trusting and supportive environment in which they can play with the technology. Participants in Eib and Miller’s (2006) Canadian case study similarly welcomed having a safe place within which to engage in reflection about their use of technologies. In Paulus et al’s (2010) work, nursing tutors felt their fear of the step into the unknown with online learning was appeased by sharing concerns with others, exemplified in comments such as, “[It] is reassuring that other faculty find the same hurdles that I do.” (p. 7) And “it was good to share challenges and anxieties with colleagues” (p. 8). Similarly tutors in Northwestern Ohio particularly value collegiate support with a tutor noting:



Get the colleagues together ... and just talk about what you're doing in online learning and just by talking to everybody else you get different ideas. Everybody's got different ideas, different theories, different ways of doing things. (Lackey, 2011, p. 13).

Limitations identified through Golden's work include lack of persistence in CoPs such as in Eib and Miller's case where the authors conclude "The community is not as connected and working toward the same purpose" (p. 10); and in Paulus et al.'s (2010) CoP where there were notable concerns over peer-modelling in which the facilitators were highly accomplished and too intimidating for novices.

One particular example, referenced in Golden's work, is that of a CoP informed by the well-known CoIF (Vaughan & Garrison, 2006). In this instance, a FLC was run in 2003 to support tutors in the redesign of face-to-face undergraduate courses to be offered as blended learning. Whilst all three CoIF presences - social, teaching, and cognitive presences - were identified, the authors acknowledge that "the challenge is to recognize the changing dynamics of the faculty learning communities over time and the need to adjust social, cognitive and teaching presence strategies to meet the evolving demands of inquiry for faculty development. Each of the three presences manifest themselves and evolve in different ways in a face-to-face or online context" (Vaughan & Garrison, 2006, p. 150). In later work in 2008, these authors stipulate that they believe that a CoP based on the CoIF can help provide more flexibility, structure and organisation, which will sustain the CoP, especially through the strong focus on the link between teaching practice and student learning.

The study

Queen Margaret University is a small, niche institution in Edinburgh, Scotland with approximately 5,000 learners. Programmes are mainly in vocational areas including health and rehabilitation, sustainable business, and creativity and culture. Online learning provision is mostly at postgraduate level, providing opportunities for continuing professional development and career enhancement for our learners. Currently there is only a small online offering, but the aim is for this to grow in alignment with our institutional vision of providing a friendly and supportive community environment in which our students can flourish, and relevant outcomes can be achieved.

To support academics moving into online learning, the University has launched a Network, endorsed by senior management. The Network is to open to all having a specific interest in online learning. Participants may be online tutors, or learning support staff such as librarians, information technologists, learning technologists, or educational researchers. Whilst the Network is certainly open to online tutors and support staff at an early stage in their appointment, we differentiate its activity from routine institutional briefings, training and induction, although we link to, and align with, these. Currently the Network unites over 40 academic and professional members of staff in sharing resources, pooling knowledge, and exchanging experiences.

The Network was conceived through consultation with potential participants, in the hope that it would become a vehicle for advancing participants' understandings, knowledge, and practice concerning online, collaborative, community-based learning. After collegiate discussions within the Network, it was agreed that a community of practice would be developed based upon an adapted version of the Community of Inquiry Framework (CoIF) (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). This amendment to the CoIF, undertaken by one of the co-leads in her doctoral work, had been shared with tutors who were designing online spaces and was not unfamiliar to many in the Network.

This well-established Framework was originally conceived by Garrison (2017). Its focus on broadening practice and deepening understandings through collaborative online learning, has already informed other extended educational development initiatives (Paskevicius & Bortolin, 2016; Vaughan & Garrison, 2006; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The Framework consists of three prominent areas of activity, commonly named 'Presences' (social, cognitive and teaching or tutoring), and especially in their intersections, entitled 'influences', (see Figure 1, Peacock & Cowan, 2016).

This initiative originated in an educational development unit, the Centre for Academic Practice (CAP), at our institution, which has a responsibility for and some research experience in online learning. The first author envisaged that the CAP would provide for a self-supportive networking community the type of 'tutoring presence' proposed by Peacock and Cowan (2016). Ideally the CAP would have a facilitative, but not a directive role, nurturing the community to develop skills and knowledge about online learning. She was committed to the principle that the direction of the Network and its activities would be shared amongst participants. This arrangement would ensure that there are clearly formulated, relevant and generally accepted aims and objectives appropriate for a range of subject specialisms, to guide the development and maintenance of the Network. It would also help to nurture the Influence – trusting – located at the intersection between social presence and cognitive presence, since joint leadership of the Network would be perceived by members as being vested in an interdisciplinary group of online tutors and support staff of whom the first author, located in CAP, simply happened to be a member, rather than the Network being centred upon that person.

The Network provides online but sometimes face-to-face spaces for the sharing of resources, pooling of knowledge and exchanging of experiences, thereby addressing the impacts of both social and cognitive presence in the overlap areas that Peacock and Cowan have called "Meaning-making". This arrangement offers networking support for individual members through discussions, as well as encouraging members to constructively develop 'critical friendships', potentially, but not necessarily, within their own subject specialism. For instance, one tutor in Business is, at the time of writing, drawing upon first-hand experience of implementing a MOOC, to guide another in their first implementation of a health MOOC. In this case, the first tutor has provided examples of how



technologies such as Padlet, Pikton and Pictochart (with which the second tutor was previously not familiar) have been used to support a more student-centred approach allowing learners to work together in groups to construct new learning and understanding about subjects which they find relevant and appropriate. The second tutor is now trialling these. Some Network members are sharing experiences of facilitating synchronous online sessions, resulting in tutors from one subject discipline joining others in their online class, and leading to guidance materials that are shared throughout the institution. The specific aim of such engagements is to lead to the development of our participants' ability to improve their learners' online educational experiences through experience, analysis and reflection.

The role of the leads of the Network is to encourage, stimulate and sustain conversations whilst members, leads included, share, debate and review their experiences and concerns. It is our hope that engagement in the Network will deepen tutors' understanding of online collaborative, community-based learning and develop their facilitative skills through their interactions within the community.

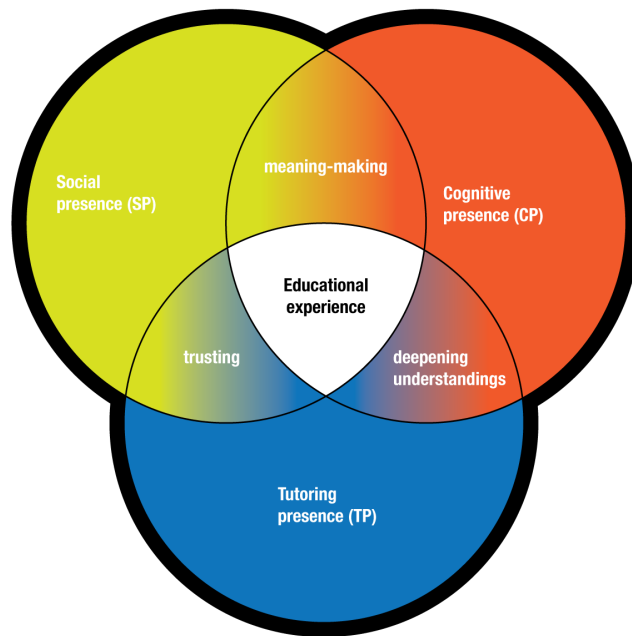


Figure 1: An adapted version of the Community of Inquiry Framework by Peacock and Cowan (2016) (reproduced with permission from the *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*). This version was developed from Garrison (2011) and reproduced with permission from Routledge.

Launching the Network

The CAP invited all colleagues in the University who were interested in progressing online teaching practices to complete an online survey. This asked them to identify the perceived challenges of online learning for them as tutors, to share their aspirations for a suggested Network, and to outline what they could contribute to the Network and what they envisaged CAP's role might be. The responses of over 20 professional and academic staff were collated, discussed at the launch event and uploaded to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The launch also asked for volunteers to form or join potential working groups. Three groups were decided upon at the launch and a fourth identified a few days after. These four working groups that emerged from the launch were to address: marketing and fees of online learning programmes; the development of a template induction area for online learning, the creation of generic online support resources, and the evaluation of online learning from the learner's perspective.

On-going activities

The four working groups, each led by an academic, consisted of six to eight members totalling 26 active members who met on a regular basis, usually face-to-face but sometimes online.

At the same time, the joint leadership, following the recommendations of Campbell (2016) and Brooks (2010), organised a hybrid programme of half and full-day face-to-face and online events to support tutors in this paradigm change, by addressing both pedagogical and technological developments in online learning relevant to challenges reported in the opening questionnaire. Over the ensuing six months, there were six events including online presentations from international guest researchers from the United

States and Italy, and face-to-face workshops about planning and design for online learning. This programme dovetailed with activities offered by the CAP focusing on upskilling academics' use of technologies in such aspects as planning and running online synchronous seminars and tutorials.

Outcomes

One of the successes of the Network is that, in its short life to the time of writing, it has already raised the profile of online learning at QMU amongst tutors and senior management.

The Network has provided a safe trusting environment in which participants can discuss and develop their understandings of online learning. Members of the Network have anecdotally discussed their growing sense of trust, reminiscent of community members in Vaughan and Garrison's study who stated that the sense of openness and trust allowed them to share fears about the use of technology (2006, p. 146). Tutors in the Network are now aware of others who offer similar programmes and have similar issues, and can take up opportunities to contact each other for advice and to share good reflective practice. A particular example occurred when the Network held a 'Celebration of Online Learning'. Online tutors who were members of the Network displayed their online modules. Other members of the Network could sit next to them (one-to-one or in small groups) and discuss the paradigmatic changes that had been made when moving online. One of the tutors proudly demonstrated learner postings to the online discussions. With permission from the learners, the tutor discussed how, through careful crafting of the online activity and facilitation of postings, the amount and depth of the discussions far exceeded those in the face-to-face environment. The tutor explained the need to praise leaders in discussions and encourage them to challenge each other. Other tutors are now contacting this first tutor to present to programme teams.

Before the Network was created, CAP had found that tutors faced with the pedagogical shift of moving online for the first time had tended to focus on the development of their technological skills rather than explicitly addressing the socio-constructivist, student-centred approach required for effective and deep online learning and development of higher level cognitive and interpersonal abilities. Whilst tutors are still keen to attend Network events about technological aspects of tutoring online, these are balanced with discussions and events exploring the underpinning pedagogy of the online provision, guided by those who already have experience of online education. Tutors are now discussing the student journey in online modules, what learners need to do, and what the tutors' role is as facilitators of learning. Technologies are explored more thoroughly and less readily accepted, with tutors wanting, and expecting, robust services which are fit-for-purposes for all our learners. For instance, there has been much debate about the preferred approach to the recording of videos.

Institutionally, a short-term working group, to which members of the Network have been co-opted, has been created by the University. This has the pertinent remit of identifying, addressing and considering the University's plans for online provision and reviewing how to operationalise these, practically and effectively.

The four working groups have already generated tangible and worthwhile outcomes.

1. *Marketing and tuition fees of online programmes:* This group presented a paper for review by the institution's fees working group which led to changes in institutional-thinking. This paper also generated cross-institutional discussions about marketing for international learners, and the credit-weighting for online modules.
2. *Development of a template induction area for online learning:* A template with this purpose was created within the institutional VLE, with guidelines for tutors. This consisted of three areas:
 - a. Short videos introducing online learning at QMU, featuring current and previous online students discussing their experiences and providing hints and tips about how to be an effective online learner. It covers areas such as participating in online discussions and group work.
 - b. Text and video guidance was developed by tutors and learners about what it entails to be an online Masters student, how this differs from studying at undergraduate level, and how to succeed.
 - c. Support for online learning has been summarised. The types, amount and level of support available for students, and essential contact details for support services such as Information Technology and the Library, are detailed in user-friendly format. This includes short videos such as the librarian outlining the help mechanisms available for online learners.
3. *The creation of generic online support resources:* this has brought together many of the resources used in the induction template, while adding more guidance about developing generic skills and abilities, such as video advice about reflection and its role in learning. A substantial section addresses academic writing with information-clips and short quizzes.
4. *The evaluation of online learning from the student perspective:* This group created and launched a questionnaire specifically addressing the experiences of our online learners; the results are to be shared with the Network in due course.

The Network has also raised awareness about, and encouraged engagement with, the scholarship of learning and teaching. International peer-reviewed articles are shared amongst members informing collegial debate about good practice in the design and management of online spaces seeking to foster deep learning. Thus, in demonstrations of their online spaces, tutors reference current published work which has informed their thinking about online learning. Articles pertaining to the student voice are of most interest.

Supporting Staff Transitions into Online Learning: A Networking Approach

Some members had undertaken scholarly activities - with the first co-lead, for example, encouraging the second to engage in joint educational authorship of this article. A research project to determine the creation and importance for online postgraduate learners of a sense of belonging is currently in hand. The working group addressing student evaluation of online learning will be drawing upon two student surveys in a future publication.

Although the Network is supported by management, it is seen primarily by all concerned as being driven by the shared ownership of its members. While it was originally conceived in the CAP, others have volunteered to help run and manage the events and the working groups and, most importantly, provide joint leadership of the Network. The second author and co-lead is a QMU academic with experience both of providing and participating in online learning, which brings an additional and distinct perspective to Network management. Many of the other members of the working groups have also participated in online learning as part of their CPD and are thus able to draw upon their first-hand experiences to inform progress in their groups. To ensure the best use of available resources, the co-leads meet frequently, if briefly, to ensure that forward planning is effectively managed. Group chairs are consulted regularly, and the leads attend working-group meetings. In this way, everyone participating in the working groups is part of the consultation and development of projects. This structure also provides a pathway for members' views and decisions to be communicated effectively to senior management regarding such matters as the resources and arrangements required to provide effective online learning.

Challenges and affordances

Being a small niche institution has meant that staff numbers are such that maintaining interrelationships is not onerous, while the small number of subject specialisms has resulted in much commonality; thus networking has been stimulated. However, as with any initiative, we have encountered issues, similar to those in other CoPs as noted above. These challenges are outlined in Table 1 with amplification of how they are being addressed following the date of writing.

Challenge	Response in hand
Finding time for involvement with the Network	When advertising events, the benefits for staff becoming involved, including consequent saving of their time, is emphasised. Events are usually no longer than one hour.
Continuing uncertainty and lack of confidence of members regarding online education	The Network helps colleagues to build confidence and provides informal, collegial support for tutors developing skills, such as those that are required in the creation of multimedia resources. More lunch-time meetings are planned for informal sharing of experiences.
Sharing good practice – there is still a lack of conversations on tutoring matters, and development of the buddy system is still embryonic	The joint leads of the Network will continue to facilitate dissemination of good practice throughout the institution via the VLE and encourage members of the Network to buddy with others. The CAP is continuing to encourage researching by Network members into online learning.
Failure so far to encourage support staff to engage in collaborative educational conversations to acknowledge and address the need for them to engage in supportive relationships with their online learners	In the first instance, the co-leads concentrated upon bringing together academics who were either already involved in online teaching or interested in doing so. In the next phase of development, support staff are being actively encouraged to join the Network, for instance, in the working group developing the template induction for online learning.
VLE space is irregularly updated due to the competing demands on the leads.	At the moment, the joint leads update the VLE but their teaching and research demands impact on the amount that can be progressed, and the rate at which that can be done. By involving more members of the Network in this task, we hope to ensure that the information continues to be current.

Table 1: On-going challenges for the Network and actions in hand, as at June 2018

Advice for those considering the implementation of an Online Tutor Network

For those embarking upon a similar initiative, we would suggest beginning by recruiting joint leads from different constituencies, and negotiating and obtaining meaningful and committed support of senior management in order to access resources required to



drive projects forward, and to encourage tutor and support staff buy-in to the planning stages of such a group. The joint leads may also consider:

- The recruitment of a champion. As suggested by Lu et al. (2011), this will need to be a member of the senior management team who has credibility within the institution and can make timely reminders to all relevant parties about the Network, its purpose and its activities.
- Diverse mechanisms for communication amongst the Network members, but also within the institution as a whole. This may range from social media to short 'coffee-room chats'. Whilst informal conversations can encourage tutor participation, more formal communication mechanisms, such as succinct and specifically constructive papers about the purpose and outcomes of the group presented at key committees will also have a critically important role.
- Being strategic is essential if the group is to survive and thrive. There may be much enthusiasm at the beginning of an initiative, but it is important to concentrate upon specific and valued short-term goals which can be readily met, ensuring that the group is soon viewed as more than a 'talking-shop' but one that addresses, and resolves, meaningful and worthwhile issues.
- IT infrastructure and support – technological support and development will be essential if online learning is to thrive. One of the key participants in the Network should be a manager within the IT department who can provide informed guidance about the capabilities of, and planned developments for, the institution's IT infrastructure.
- Core group – the 'inner circle' will provide the motivation and enthusiasm to maintain the momentum of the group. This needs to include both professional services staff and academics from a range of disciplines.
- A hybrid approach – as Brooks (2010) recommends, many practices in universities are being 'hybridised' to include both online and face-to-face; this approach needs to be reflected in staff development and should be planned for by the Network as suggested by Vaughan and Garrison (2006). Online support may appeal to tutors who need assistance but are unable to attend particular events. An online space with discussions can help tutors meet virtually and build upon face-to-face meetings. Using webinar software for events provides tutors with the opportunity to experience the technologies in a non-threatening environment, whilst at the same time considering how they may avail themselves and their students of the opportunities of the technologies to provide a more active and learner-centred environment.
- Offering extensive opportunities for tutors to discuss their paradigmatic leap, which may include, for instance, how they have had to focus more on the learner journey, the impact on the design of activities to help in scaffolding learning, and groupwork to provide opportunities for learners to discuss their emergent understandings.
- Use the detail of the CoF approach as a springboard for the design of the CoP and also for regular informal evaluation, perhaps by the co-leads. As the community changes so too will the emphasis on the different Influences (Vaughan & Garrison 2006). For instance, as members of the group become more confident, there may less need to address the 'trusting' Influence whilst it may be more appropriate to encourage members to review their online offerings in line with their deepening understandings about facilitating learning in the virtual space.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, initiatives have emerged responding to the need for educational development regarding the use of technology in the classroom (Brooks, 2010), and especially about online learning (Eibb & Miller, 2006; Lu et al., 2011; Paulus et al., 2010). Such community-based endeavours, often based upon the community of practice approach, have been positively received within institutions, with tutors valuing a collegiate, trusting supportive community. In some instances, this arrangement has resulted in increased motivation, self-knowledge and constructive reflective practice (Campbell, 2016). However, notable challenges to such groupings have included sustaining the momentum, focus and enthusiasm of the community, whilst deepening participants' understandings, and reshaping their practice in view of the paradigm transformation required for effective online learning (Eibb & Miller, 2006; Paulus et al., 2010).

At QMU, after a carefully planned and relevant launch, the foundations of a thriving Network have been established in a relatively short time. The Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, 2017) has informed the vision of the Network to advance participants' knowledge and practice concerning online, collaborative, community-based learning and to address some of the emergent areas of concern for learners. The co-leads have a facilitative role (akin to a tutoring presence supporting learner-directed learning) ensuring that the Network is guided by the needs of the members, both pedagogical and technological. They seek to develop a safe space where tutors can network – discuss issues, share resources and exchange ideas – informing their meaning-making about online learning and ultimately leading them to deeper understandings of online learning. The Framework has provided a holistic base to support tutors when they are faced by the paradigm shift required when adjusting to the online environment. Rather than the belief expressed by one of the participants in Paulus et al.'s (2010) work, claiming that their community had transformed knowledge, there appears to be agreement in our institution that the Network has helped inform understandings about the need for different, more active and learner-centred approaches in online learning. There have been challenges, but these have been addressed as a community drawing on the experience and skills of the members. Whilst any additional activity is time-consuming, the impact of the Network on the student and staff experience has so far justified the extra resources required.

In conclusion, we would agree with Golden (2016) that our particular CoP based on the CoIF is a small step towards “developing and sustaining energised, engaged, productive conversations among eLearning faculty and fostering ownerships and identification with the new role of online educator” (p. 92).

Biographies

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Dr Christine DePlacido is a Fellow of the HEA, Principal Clinical Scientist and Senior Lecturer in Speech and Hearing Sciences at QMU. She is also a registered Hearing Aid Dispenser and Humanistic Counsellor. Her research interests include audio-vestibular rehabilitation, person-centred practice and curriculum development for clinical audiology education. Prior to working at the University Christine was an NHS Clinical Scientist and audiology manager with responsibility for clinical training. She has also served as Director of Education for several Professional body committees.

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Supporting Staff Transitions into Online Learning: A Networking Approach

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