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“Faculty Professional Development – A *Virtual Reality*?”

A Critical Literature Review of Online Communities of Practice in Post-Secondary Settings

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Keywords: Post-Secondary Education, Faculty, Online CoPs, Professional Development

Abstract: This literature review explores how online communities of practice have served to influence faculty professional practice in diverse settings. Findings indicate that though online CoPs had positive influences including clarity of professional identity, increased reflection and diversified skills, challenges existed that could impede the process. Implications for adult education are also discussed.

Overview & Problem Statement

Technology has increasingly impacted the process of work and learning, opening up new and dynamic possibilities for professional development through group collaboration, knowledge sharing and information exchange (Williams & Olaniran, 2012). As such, the online community of practice has emerged as an important professional development tool for faculty in diverse post-secondary settings. Key reasons for this are (1) an increased focus on how to better design and maintain online classes or seminars, due to the increase of distance education modalities and an increase in faculty who work from remote locations (Brooks, 2010) and (2) challenges faced by faculty in terms of balancing research deadlines, class schedules and administrative duties with traditional professional development activities (Cirillo & Shay, 2007; Lock, 2006). As communities of practice are “a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavor and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them” (Lave & Wenger, 2002, p.2), by extension, online communities of practice are virtual versions of communities of practice that rely on information and communications technologies (ICTs) to connect their members. Many researchers believe that creating and maintaining virtual communities that are not inhibited by space and time (Wenger et al, 2002, p.5) will provide a meaningful solution to the challenge of pursuing traditional professional development and expand its scope (Kirschner & Lai, 2007; Lock, 2006; Williams & Olaniran, 2012).

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the literature related to post-secondary educators involved in online communities of practice, with a view to obtaining a greater understanding of how virtual communities that seek to improve their professional practice have worked over time. As academicians (and other professionals) find themselves pressured “to adapt and apply emerging technologies...it is still unclear how these technologies will impact professional development” (Williams & Olaniran, 2012, p.2). To this end, I begin with an overview of the concept and construct of online communities of practice. I then outline findings related to online CoPs and its impact on professional practice. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the findings, to include perceived implications for the field of adult education.

Methodology

I utilized an integrative literature review for this research project. This involves reviewing, critiquing, and synthesizing relevant literature in order to come to a new understanding of the topic at hand (Torraco, 2005). Keyword search terms included “online or virtual communities of practice and faculty professional development”, “faculty learning communities online.” I examined peer reviewed articles and journals such as *Innovative Higher Education*, *Internet and Higher Education*, *Technology, Pedagogy and Education* and *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development*. To guide the review, I focus on the following research question: “Do online communities of practice improve faculty professional practice?” Professional practice may be referred to as the use of one’s knowledge and skill (University of Alberta, 2013). In a bid to examine the work done on virtual CoPs since a previous review in 2001, articles reviewed for this paper were published between 2002 and 2012.

Key Findings

Three main themes emerged in response to my guiding research question. They are “Clearer Sense of Professional Identity”, “Increased Reflective Practice” and “Diversified Methods and Skills”.

Clearer Sense of Professional Identity

Particularly for new or novice instructors, frequent, meaningful interaction with like peers can serve to affirm, modify, or evoke new insights into contextual roles and responsibilities (Gray & Smyth, 2012; Hew, 2009; Ramirez Allison-Roan & Peterson, 2012). A strong sense of professional identity in practice manifests through an increased sense of self-confidence and in one’s view of his/her ability to teach effectively (Macdonald, 2009). Ramirez, Allison-Roan & Peterson (2012), for example, researched novice teacher educators in the United States and Canada who engaged in frequent and open dialogue online. These participants used reflective journals and anonymous student feedback on their classes as a ‘springboard’ to discussion. They probed questions relating to the impact of their collaborative community on “socialization into the professorship” (Ramirez et al., 2012, p.110). As they did, they were able to explore their vulnerabilities and anxieties regarding classroom practice, and “new identities” (p.114) were forged. Researchers found that the online CoP fueled a greater sense of professional identity, which helped to alleviate early career anxiety– and to fuel self-confidence, allowing participants to be more vulnerable and open with their students. As one student noted, “I’ve learned the importance of honesty in my teaching from you. I think I’m going to be a far better teacher because I’m not afraid to say “I don’t know. Thanks for not knowing everything”(p.118).

Hew (2009) also found that participants in her qualitative study of three national online CoPs emphasized clarity of professional identity as an element that was foundational to improving their practice. United States literacy educators, for example, engaged in an online forum discussing suggestions for diverse literacy areas and ideas that might meet the needs of struggling adult readers. As the educators communicated and exchanged ideas using listserv technology, the essence of their professional role became more defined. This clarity of identity acted as a foundation to their self-confidence as educators – and specifically to appropriate decision making regarding methods, design or resources used in their teaching context, as explained by a participant:

...as a new literacy coach, it is really helpful for me to hear seasoned literacy coaches voices... I get a sense of what a literacy coach does. This gives me a clearer sense of a literacy coach’s identity...it helps me define my own job. (Hew, 2009, p.440)

Elsewhere, because of knowledge convergence, there became a like-mindedness, an internalization of ideas and ideologies, and in so doing educators' sense of "professional isolation" was reduced and professional identity reinforced (Cranefield and Yoong, 2009; Macdonald, 2009; Fusco et al., 2011). At the core of these online forums, is the idea that through meaningful interaction with others, educators can make sense of their practice and what it entails (Locke, 2006; Taylor, 2008).

Increased Reflective Practice

Through consistent discourse exchange with their peers, teachers gained new insights into (1) the importance of thinking critically about their own interactions with students in the classroom and (2) the importance of understanding factors that might shape their sense of self and approach to teaching (Chalmers & Keown, 2006; Gray & Smith, 2012; Kelly, Gale, Wheel & Tucher, 2007). This resulted in a greater awareness of how their efforts might be interpreted by learners in the classroom. Further, as 'teacher-learners' in the CoP, they had an authentic opportunity to reflect on how learners might feel in certain situations during the learning process, and used this newly developed culture of reflection to make more informed decisions in planning, designing and facilitating their classes (Kirschner and Lai, 2007; Ramirez et al., 2012). Kelly, Gale and Wheeler and Tucker (2007), for example, explored six case studies of educators in who used an asynchronous discussion environment to aid in professional development. These researchers found that participation in the online CoP helped participants to reflect on and change their positions on professional issues in their day to day practice. They further argued that writing as a form of interaction in online CoPs promoted reflection on action (Schon, 1987). The product is a record of thinking and reflection, of an individual's struggle to make sense of the world, and as such allows the process of knowledge creation to be scrutinized." (Kelly et al., 2007, p.158).

Both novice and experienced teachers saw engagement in the online CoP as a facilitator of critical self-reflection and improved reflective practice. Newcomers recognized how their students might feel in the same circumstances, while experienced educators uncovered teaching practices that needed to be changed (Chalmers and Keown, 2006; Cranefield and Yoong, 2008; Macdonald, 2009). In one study of an award winning online CoP initiative for distance educators in the United Kingdom, tutor-participants realized negative effects their own teaching tendencies could have on students. In reflecting on posts and messages he received, one concluded that "it made me aware that I can be long – winded and aim to cut down... overlong messages can be intimidating" (Macdonald, 2009, p.4)! An emphasis on reflection as part of the online CoP process increases critical reflection in practice and provides other improvements such as better decision making.

Deconstruction of Power Hierarchies: An 'Unexpected' Sub-finding?

Four of the research studies spoke to the fact that critical reflection allowed participants to notice power structures resident in their classes. Some studies indicated that as a result of increased self-reflection, faculty became aware that they were afraid to allow their students to express their own values enough or to play a more dominant role in classroom activities and decision making (Chalmers and Keown, 2006; Kelly et al., 2007). Ramirez et al. (2012) describe their participants' recognition of this as follows: "it was difficult to deny that the professor is situated in a privileged position, issue[ing] grades and recommendations for teaching positions" (p.116). These participants also noticed the difficulty they had in engaging in non-coercive dialogue due to these "inherent power differences between teacher and student (p.114). Through the online CoP fueling increased reflection, participants "acknowledged the instinct to revert to

positional power when students criticized them or challenged their authority” (p. 117). As a result, they affirmed their commitment to a more democratic classroom environment. As noted by one participant:

I share the results of my evaluation with students now and ask for alternatives to practices... I find my students have insights that help me to see my blind spots. Students are far more receptive to my criticism -they see critical reflection modeled. (pp.120-121)

Diversified Content and Skills

Engaging in it adds to teachers’ knowledge of content, creates much variety in terms of ideas for teaching methods and exposes them to global best practices that they can draw upon (Brooks, 2010; Hew, 2009; Lewis et al., 2011; Schrum et al., 2005). Researchers found that wherever CoPs were successful, participants always talked about the usability of content for their classrooms and how it stretched and challenged them to think in new ways about the content and methods used. It is through these forums that new understandings are constructed (Brooks, 2010). According to Sari (2012), the use of an online CoP in Indonesia developed helped teachers develop their knowledge and communication skills as they probed authentic problems faced in the classroom with other peers. These teachers were then able to take the varied approaches to the problem, as well as diverse solution options to their classrooms. Similarly Chalmers and Keown (2006) and Hew (2009) found that the professional aspects resulting from online CoPs were among the most rewarding for their participants. In these cases, teachers were able to remain up to date with current best practices with a view to applying them to their practice and context as appropriate.

The review found that only two studies recorded a lack of improvement in this area. Quantitative and qualitative research conducted by Schrum et al (2005) and Karageorgi and Lym boridou (2009) found that participants’ expectations were not met as it relates to gaining additional knowledge, learning more about teaching and improvement in teaching. Researchers concluded that insufficient initial training activities to stimulate the online community, initiation of the community from external personnel and some participants’ lack of technology readiness served as barriers to positive outcomes.

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

Based on the literature reviewed, online CoPs do improve faculty professional practice. It is evident that novice educators in particular found significant benefit. However, the degree to which it improves practice, according to the studies, seems varied because of the presence of challenges that can impede online engagement and because a significant number of the studies made only scant comments about educators’ actual experiences. Several made statements about the improvement but with no follow up explanation as to how it happened, to what extent and/ or very little comments on the alleged ‘improvement’. More studies are needed that offer thick rich descriptions about the ways in which improvements manifest in professional practice.

In addition, almost every empirical article reviewed dealt with challenges related to the online CoP experience. These are consistent with the conceptual literature and include technology issues (mainly lack of readiness or complex design), conflicting schedules/lack of time and lack of motivation and interest (Baran & Cagiltay, 2010; Cirillo and Shay, 2007; Locke, 2006). If researchers are to move to the ‘heart’ of investigating professional practice improvement via online CoPs, we must ensure that these issues are examined prior to CoP startup. Interestingly, the most successful cases were initiated by community members themselves. Where there were outside initiators (e.g., administrators), some participants cited a

lack of interest (Schrum et al., 2005; Karageorgi & Lym, 2009; Schwarz-Bechet et al., 2012). Traditionally, voluntary communities carry far more participation and engagement (Glowacki-Dudka, 2007) and an initiation by leaders or administrators may signal just a regular training initiative and a lack of understanding of the essential concept/organic nature of communities of practice (Wubbles, 2007). Online CoPs also seemed to have impacted cultural matters in researchers' efforts to provide professional development (e.g. Sari, 2012). Thus, culture should be a central consideration in the design and implementation of online CoPs in a global world.

The discussion surrounding the review's findings has varied implications for adult education. First, online CoPs seem a potential avenue for investigating professional development growth, using such undergirding frameworks as, for example, transformative learning theory. As the latter promotes (1) using adults' experiences to develop activities that lead to deep questioning of assumptions; (2) using critical reflection to facilitate constructive self-investigation, then new ways of thinking; and (3) learners moving through various elements of consciousness to growth (Merriam, Cafarella & Baumgartner, 2007), using it to frame research linking online communities of practice to actual professional development outcomes in diverse faculty contexts would add much clarity and value. Second, examining professional development outcomes given the use of online CoPs in cross-cultural contexts, or across faculty levels might expand the adult education theoretical literature on how such contexts might affect learning for diverse adults. Moreover, it has the potential to provide additional professional development, research and networking opportunities across the global adult education community. Third, as a field committed to democratic practice in its learning settings, adult education might benefit from exploring the use of online CoPs in increasing critical reflective practice with a view to unearthing power structures or hierarchies in the professional practice of its educators.

Despite the looming possibilities, the challenges associated with using Online CoPs cannot be ignored – the main issue being technology readiness and access. As such, an equally useful research investigation to ponder, going forward, might be: “How can we tailor our use of online CoPs to ‘level the playing field’ so all adult educators might be involved in developing their craft this way?”

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