VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

Reviewing the literature: collaborative professional learning for academics in higher education

This is the Published version of the following publication

Reviewing the literature: Collaborative professional learning for academics in higher education

Puspha Sinnayah, Trudy Ambler, Kate Kelly, Loretta Konjarski, Kathy Tangalakis & Andrew Smallridge

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Reviewing the literature: Collaborative professional learning for academics in higher education

Puspha Sinnayah [ID][a,b], Trudy Ambler [ID][a], Kate Kelly [ID][a], Loretta Konjarski [ID][a], Kathy Tangalakis [ID][a,c] and Andrew Smallridge [ID][a]

[a]First Year College, Victoria University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia; [b]Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia; [c]Institute for Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities, Victoria University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

ABSTRACT

The literature indicates that collaborative activities can support professional learning (PL) for academics teaching in higher education (HE). Nevertheless, limited approaches for collegial PL exist that can be embedded in the day-to-day work of busy academics. This paper reports on an evidence-based approach to practice that was undertaken to develop an authentic, structured, collegial approach to PL for academics. This involved a review and synthesis of relevant literature, which revealed that collegial PL could be supported through self-initiated communities of academics; collaborative, social interaction with peers; safe, non-judgemental, supportive, conversations; critical reflection; sustained inquiry into practice; an exploration of perspectives; and bespoke resources. These findings informed the development of the Collaborative Peer-Observation Learning Circles (CPO/LC). The approach includes a four-stage process and adaptable template resources designed to facilitate academics' collegial PL while also meeting the needs of accreditation requirements in HE.

Introduction

In the literature, ideas about professional learning (PL) vary. In this research, the term is used to denote, 'activities and processes that academics engage in to ameliorate their academic performance and the impact of their performance on student learning' (Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015, p. 93). Internationally, government policies and professional accreditation requirements recognise PL as, 'an activity that is integral to ensuring high quality teaching and learning' (Ambler et al., 2020, p. 851) and it is a feature of the global move by higher education (HE) to ensure that academics who are primarily responsible for teaching and supporting learning are appropriately prepared for their role. HE is vibrant with innovative, effective, approaches to PL where the value of structured activities and 'more informal, on-

going, everyday activities embedded in practice' (Ambler et al., 2020) is recognised. The aim of this work was to support learning for busy academics by creating an authentic, collegial approach to PL that could be embedded in practice and structured to help individuals and the university comply with accreditation requirements for appropriately educated academics.

The paper explains the background to the study and the relevant collegial approaches to PL in the literature that were reviewed are presented. Incorporating the synthesised learnings from the literature and the reflections during practice, the collaborative peer observation learning circles (CPO/LC) process and template observation tool are introduced and explained. The paper concludes by providing an overview of the study, its benefits for HE and highlights opportunities for further research.

Background

Victoria University (VU), where this approach to PL was developed, is a multi-campus, dual-sector provider of HE located in Australia. Many of VU's first-year students come from low socio-economic backgrounds and are the first in their family to attend university (Messinis & Sheehan, 2015; Wheelahan, 2009). In 2018 extensive institutional reorganisation occurred which involved the introduction of an intensive Victoria University Block Model (VUBM) curriculum (Chapin & Oraison, 2019; McCluskey et al., 2020; Messinis & Sheehan, 2015; O'Shea et al., 2018), and the establishment of a multi-disciplinary First Year College for all students entering their first-year of study irrespective of undergraduate programme or discipline. Academic staff were selected for their teaching experience and passion for teaching first-year students rather than by research expertise, and an intentionally designed transition pedagogy was created (Loton et al., 2022; McCluskey et al., 2018, 2019, 2020). In this reorganisation, a complete subject is taught within 4-week time segments, and each subject is taught sequentially (McCluskey et al., 2020).

In brief, the VUBM teaching combines small class teaching, allowing for increased time on task for teachers, so that feedback per student and contact time is increased (Jackson et al., 2022). The VUBM prepares learners for later years of university by providing them with the cultural capital of better social engagement developed during the first year (Klein et al., 2019; Gauci et al., 2023). This is combined with the scaffolding of a carefully designed Transition Pedagogy (Kift et al., 2010) aimed at developing students to become confident and independent learners. Alongside the implementation of the VUBM and formation of the First Year College, a comprehensive and customised PL programme was introduced to provide faculty with a tool-kit of high engagement teaching strategies and to build teacher capability, confidence and self-efficacy (Tangalakis et al., 2022a). The PL programme has resulted in improvements in student outcomes and high student evaluation of teaching scores (Tangalakis et al., 2022b). In the process, the First Year College has become a 'community of practice', with colleagues sharing ideas and practices both formally in workshops and informally (Jackson et al., 2022). In this paper, we describe the CPO/LC approach to PL that was designed to build on the collegiality already established and further extend teacher capability, with the aim of enhancing student success further.

Evidence-based practice

Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) (Reynolds, 2008) informed the development of a collegial approach to PL, which could be embedded in everyday practice and that would support academics' continuous growth in learning and teaching. Gray (2001) notes that when we do not use evidence in practice, important failures in decision-making can occur and ineffective interventions that do more harm than good are introduced. Lofthouse (2014) supports these comments stating, 'it could be deemed unethical to engage in changing practices which have the potential to influence educational experiences and outcomes without some form of enquiry' (p.15). EBP enacts the idea of an academic as someone who takes an inquiry focus towards their work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and applies other people's research in their own practice (Williams & Coles, 2007). EBP was appropriate for this study because one of its central commitments is to use evidence to promote opportunities for PL through 'the study of one's own professional practice ... with a view to improving that practice' (Dadds et al., 2001, p. 7) for the benefit of students and the organisation (Dadds et al., 2001; Mthiyane & Habedi, 2018; Reynolds, 2008).

To create a structured, collegial approach to PL that could be embedded in practice, an examination of the limited evidence from peer-reviewed literature, and resources that would support academics to further develop their teaching practice were reviewed (Mthiyane & Habedi, 2018). Additionally, the project team reflected upon and evaluated their learnings from the literature and drew on their experiences as educators to inform and guide the ongoing planning and actions necessary to progress the collegial approach to PL.

Collegial approaches to professional learning

Systematic, narrative critical and narrative consensus approaches to reviewing the literature are prone to bias in different ways (Moher et al., 2009; Wilczynski, 2017). Given the limited literature in this field, the narrative critical approach was chosen for this study as it reflected a better fit with EBP, the specific context and background of the study and the issue to be addressed in practice (Wilczynski, 2017) – to gain insights that would inform the creation of an authentic, structured, collegial approach to PL that could be embedded in the day-to-day work of academics. This approach involved the research team drawing from their collective expertise to evaluate recognised and seminal literature (Wilczynski, 2017) related to the topic of PL in HE that encourages reciprocal, collaborative relationships. The literature selected by the group included peer observation (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Gosling, 2005; Weller, 2009), inquiry communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009, 2021), mentoring (Ambler et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2017), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), learning circles (Peters & Le Cornu, 2005; Sutherland et al., 2020) and peer-assisted teaching (Carbone & Ceddia, 2013; Carbone et al., 2013, 2015; Drew et al., 2017). Table 1 provides an overview of the research used to inform this study, with more details presented in the next part of this paper.

Peer observation

Peer observation provides a framework, which encourages critical reflection and supports individuals and groups to collaborate and engage in inquiry into their teaching and its

Table 1. Summary of literature reviewed.

Model	Key References	Process	Method	Findings
Peer Observation	(Gosling, 2005) (Sachs et al., 2013)	Framework to support PL – based on groups engaging in inquiry and reflection PEER Model- three interrelated elements: leadership, the process of review and communication.	Three different types of peer observation, used in HE: 'evaluative,' 'developmental' and 'collaborative' International project examining peer review of teaching; funded by Australian Learning and Teaching Council; reviewers developing their own process.	Communication is essential to the PEER model, a quality enhancement approach to review.
Mentoring	(Ambler et al., 2016) (Harvey et al., 2017)	Informal mentor- mentee pairing.	Mentor-mentee relationship which removes power imbalances and conducive for productive learning experiences, online questionnaire, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews.	Mentoring enabled academics to build professional relationships and friendships; critical aspect of self-reflection opened new avenues of thoughts.
Inquiry Communities	(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015;2021)	Concept of 'inquiry as stance' in relation to teacher learning communities.	Teachers share different perspectives, pose problems, and raise questions in day-to-day practice.	Mentoring enabled academics to build professional relationships and friendships; critical aspect of self-reflection opened new avenues of thoughts.
Communities of practice	(Lave & Wenger, 1991) (Plaskoff, 2011)	Collaborative and informal networks / Three concepts; believing, behaving and belonging To cultivate community	To advance shared understanding and co-construct knowledge.	
Learning circles	(Peters & LeCornu, 2005) Ako Aotearoa funded project (Sutherland et al., 2020),	PL as continuous learning process; Grounded in work of (Dewey, 1938); / Teaching and Circle Development (TLC)	Brings together colleagues in groups within a discipline or across disciplines who meet at regular intervals. Different Disciplines: teachers are assigned by a coordinator; three stages: a pre-observation meeting, observation of teaching, and a post-observation debrief meeting.	Critical discussion and reflection to share insights/strategies focused on improving learning and teaching. Four themes identified being: 1. Collegial conversations about teaching 2. Observations of teaching and self-reflection 3. Non-evaluative feedback on teaching and 4. Changes to teaching practice.
Peer Assisted Teaching Scheme (PATS)	(Carbone et al., 2013) (Carbone et al., 2015) (Drew et al., 2017)	Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) Lave's situated learning (Lave, 1988) / Extended to five institutions across Australia / 24 Australian universities	Mentee/mentor or co-mentor partnerships to work through pre, during and post semester tasks; development of a workbook. / Voluntary participation; student course evaluation data used; specific tasks completed from the PATs workbook. / Goal- oriented peer observation instrument applicable to the PATs scheme.	Staff felt supported and improvement actioned via collaboration with mentors. / Student evaluation of course scores increased in the majority of courses. / Observation instrument enables the opportunity to enhance the feedback cycle of developmental goals established by academics.

impact on student learning. Gosling (2005) identified three different types of peer observation, which might be used in HE: evaluative, developmental and collaborative. Sachs et al. (2013) acknowledge that there are different approaches to peer observation that range from formative to evaluative but suggest that in HE it is best located as a collegial endeavour that involves dialogue between peers; at its best, peer observation can open the classroom to review in a safe and supportive way with a focus on improvement and PL. The conceptual scaffolding identified by Sachs et al. (2013) for supporting and sustaining peer review/observation includes a model of peer review/observation, leadership and stewardship, effective communication and planned implementation. The need for a form of peer review that is 'based on collaboration between the parties' (Gosling, 2005, p. 17), which is a non-judgemental form of teaching development that benefits both reviewer and reviewee is seen as the most effective and ethical framework to support PL about teaching practices.

Inquiry communities

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) highlighted the notion that 'teachers who know more teach better' (p.794). They suggest that this emphasis on improving what teachers know and can do has resulted in a range of approaches to support teachers' PL. Based on a 3-year study of the relationships of inquiry to teachers' professional knowledge and practice across the professional teaching life span and their experiences as educators, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) developed the concept of 'inquiry as stance'. When taking this stance, teachers engage in PL that is quite different to workshops, seminars and courses. Fundamental to this approach is the idea that teachers participate in inquiry communities where they come together in their day-to-day work to:

> . . . pose problems, identify discrepancies between theories and practices, challenge common routines, draw on the work of others for generative frameworks, and attempt to make visible much of that which is taken for granted about teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2021, p. 101)

In an inquiry, community teachers learn by relying on their peers/colleagues for different perspectives on their work, sharing and building on each other's ideas and pushing each other to pose problems and raise questions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2021). Thus, PL occurs when teachers are involved in initiating, sustaining and intentionally proliferating and connecting within networks and communities of various kinds, where they inquire into their day-to-day practice.

Mentoring

Spencer (1996, p. 5) defined mentoring as a 'relationship, which gives people the opportunity to share their professional and personal knowledge, skills and experiences, and to grow and develop in the process'. In HE, mentoring is recognised as a 'valuable collegial learning experience' (Harvey et al., 2017, p. 161) that is not necessarily systematised or imposed but informal and organic (Harvey et al., 2017; Lindgren, 2006) and based on the development of reciprocal relationships where the mentors and mentee 'feel empowered within their personal sphere of development and well-being (Ambler et al., 2016). Positive

mentoring relationships offer the opportunity for academics to engage in PL with the caveat that power imbalances usually evident in imposed, dyadic approaches to mentoring may compromise opportunities for productive learning (Coombe, 1994; Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Gonzales Rodriguez, 1995; Johnsrud, 1991; Lindgren, 2006). To ameliorate the challenges that may occur in a more traditional, imposed dyadic approach to mentoring alternative forms of mentoring such as group, peer, online and compound mentoring are options that can encourage academics to learn and develop the skills and practices for their work (Ambler et al., 2016).

Communities of practice

Communities of practice, a concept developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), are collaborative, often informal networks that are developed with the aim of supporting staff in advancing their shared understanding and to co-construct knowledge with one another (Cox, 2005). Communities of practice are commonplace in many industries and encourage the development of a shared identity that bonds the community and builds culture (Johnson, 2001). A primary focus of the community of practice is the focus on informal learning and sharing of knowledge. Since their formalised inception (Lave & Wenger, 1991), there has been much debate surrounding how best to create communities of practice that thrive (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Schwen & Hara, 2003). Some argue that for a community to be authentic and to flourish, it must arise organically, emerging and growing through conversations with like-minded individuals (Schwen & Hara, 2003), others believe that a more formulaic approach can suffice and there are clear components that can be implemented to increase the likelihood of success (Plaskoff, 2011). Wenger et al. (2002) originally composed seven serial actions that could be undertaken to cultivate a community (Plaskoff, 2011), later refined this to three concepts, believing, behaving and belonging. They indicated that if the members of the community believed in the intrinsic value of the community, developed and conformed with the norms established by the community and felt a sense of belonging and value, the community had the greatest chance of thriving.

Learning circles

Central to the rationale for creating Learning Circles (LCs) in HE is the idea that academics responsible for learning and teaching need to maintain currency in their knowledge and skills (Ambler et al., 2020). This view necessitates the engagement of academics in ongoing opportunities for PL, thus learning is located as something that is intrinsic to being a teacher/academic. For some, this idea requires relinquishing the conception that PL is an activity added on or squashed into the day-to-day work that constitutes teaching. An academic's professionalism as a teacher is framed as a continuous process of learning where they respond, inquire, and reflect around questions and issues asked by themselves and of interest and relevance to their work and the profession.

Learning circles bring together colleagues in groups within a discipline or across disciplines who meet at regular intervals to support each other (Peters & Le Cornu, 2005) by engaging in critical discussion and reflection on issues pertaining to teaching and learning (Sutherland et al., 2020). In the learning circles academics, 'build and share

knowledge of successful experiences through the process of open discussion and deep reflection' (Fahmi Dajani & Yousef, 2014) around aspects related to practice (p.143). As an approach to learning, LCs are grounded in the seminal work of Dewey (1938) and (Bruner, 1966) where social-constructivist, inquiry-based theories support the idea that learning occurs in settings where individuals interact with others in a community. LCs bring together individuals into a group, so they can learn by investigating questions and problems through social experiences. Peters and Le Cornu (2005) explained that in LCs, participants interact and reflect on issues/challenges they are facing and share insights/ strategies focused on improving learning and teaching. There is also an expectation that participants in a LCs can critically explore their experiences in a safe (Lewis, 2002) supportive environment (Little, 2002) and 'without fear of being judged or evaluated' (Fahmi Dajani & Yousef, 2014). In terms of the benefits to learning and teaching, research has identified that LCs may help academics: re-imagine practice, share ideas and solutions, build community, engage in dialogue, theorise their work, learn from others and reflect on practice (for details see Arnold & Mundy, 2020, p. 4). Regardless of the structure and process adopted for LCs professional growth (Fahmi Dajani & Yousef, 2014; Le Cornu, 2004a, 2004b) is the intended overall aim.

In an Ako Aotearoa funded project, learning and sharing circles were used to foster collegial conversations (Rogers et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2020). A Teaching and Learning Circle (TLC) consists of three or four members (i.e. teachers) typically from different disciplines, and assigned to a TLC by a co-coordinator or they are encouraged to form their own TLC. The process involves three stages: a pre-observation meeting, observation of teaching, and a post-observation debrief meeting. Pre- and post-observation meetings occur informally, enabling staff to build rapport and share practice. The pre-observation meeting allows members to mainly coordinate their teaching schedules and observation times and to set clear purposes and tasks. All members of a given TLC participate in reciprocal observations of teaching. Following the observations, they discuss what they learned from their observations of their peers' teaching. Upon completion, participants were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Four themes were identified: 1. Collegial conversations about teaching 2. Observations of teaching and self-reflection 3. Non-evaluative feedback on teaching and 4. Changes to teaching practice. One of the recommendations from this study highlighted the need for staff to receive more feedback.

Peer-Assisted Teaching Scheme (PATS)

The Peer-Assisted Teaching Scheme (PATS) was initially trialled in the Faculty of Information Technology (FIT) at Monash University to improve teaching quality and student satisfaction through building peer assistance capacity (Carbone et al., 2013). The programme uses Brookfield's four lenses, being, the 'self', 'student', 'peer' and' scholarly literature' embedded, with critical reflection being a key outcome for teachers to adjust or strengthen their pedagogy (Brookfield, 2017). PATS also draws upon Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) and Lave's situated learning (Lave, 1988), but in the context of academic teaching staff.

PATS involves participants supporting each other in mentee/mentor or co-mentor partnerships to work through pre, during and post-semester tasks. Subsequent iterations of the programme evolved to include the development of a workbook and set tasks with endorsed faculty support, in recognition of the workload required to commit to the programme during the semester. Academics felt supported by the programme and could action improvement for their subjects via collaboration with their mentors (Carbone, 2014; Carbone et al., 2013). PATS has further been extended to other institutions across Australia (Carbone et al., 2015), with voluntary participation either aiming to increase unsatisfactory student evaluation scores or as part of enrolment in a graduate certificate of teaching qualification. Data from this study (Carbone et al., 2015), sourced student course evaluation data and specific tasks completed from the PATs workbook where staff described the goals and strategies set for refining their teaching and their reflection on the achievement of these goals. Across five institutions, student evaluation of course scores increased in the majority of courses, suggesting the changes made had a positive effect on students' learning experiences and student evaluations of courses.

A review of teaching observation instruments and protocols in use at 24 Australian universities for PAT revealed that development of goal-oriented design was largely absent nationally (Drew et al., 2017). As such, the study focused on creating a goal-oriented peer observation instrument designed to meet the following criteria:

(1) provide observation prompts applicable to a range of delivery modes and media (McKenzie et al., 2008);
(2) consider students' feedback and teaching improvement requests (Carbone & Ceddia, 2013), and
(3) focus observers on teachers' stated development goals (Carbone & Ceddia, 2013).

This observation instrument enables the opportunity to enhance the feedback cycle of developmental goals established by academics.

Insights from the literature

The recognised and seminal literature reviewed was selected because of their influential ideas related to the focus for the study – to support learning for academics by creating a structured approach to collegial PL integrated into day-to-day work. The authors discussed and analysed the literature looking for common themes and ideas and their synthesised learnings revealed a range of features to support PL. Self-initiated communities of academics that evolve in day-to-day teaching (Harvey et al., 2017; Schwen & Hara, 2003) were evident. Collaboration and social interaction with colleagues was considered to be generative for learning (Ambler et al., 2016; Cox, 2005; Gosling, 2005). The quality of interactions between colleagues was also recognised as important and characterised by choice (i.e. relationships that are not imposed), safety and non-judgemental, supportive, conversations (Harvey et al., 2017; Lewis, 2002; Rogers et al., 2019, Sachs et al., 2013; Sutherland et al., 2020). Critical reflection was noted as something that should be encouraged (Peters & Le Cornu, 2005; Sutherland et al., 2020). An opportunity to explore different perspectives and ideas sustained through a process of inquiry into practice also emerged as helpful (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, 2021; Fahmi Dajani & Yousef, 2014). Some studies recognised that resources to support collegial opportunities for PL can be

beneficial and they offer a structure to guide academics pursuing their PL goals (Carbone et al., 2015; Drew et al., 2017; Sachs et al., 2013).

Our approach: Collaborative peer observation learning circles (CPO/LC)

Based on the findings from a synthesis of the literature reviewed, and personal experiences, aspects of teaching circles (Sutherland et al., 2020), collaborative peer observation (Sachs et al., 2013), an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and resources to facilitate learning and observation (Carbone et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2020) informed the creation of the Collaborative Peer Observation Learning Circles (CPO/LCs). This approach is voluntary, facilitates guided, collaborative peer-observation, constructive dialogue and reflection among colleagues for the purpose of improving learning and teaching. The approach is supported with resources that include an observation template designed by drawing upon ideas, from PATS and the Active Learning Classroom Observation Tool (ALCOT) tool developed by Birdwell et al. (2016).

The ALCOT tool was deemed to be an appropriate resource to adapt for this approach to PL as it supports (1) active learning, (2) creation and implementation of student collaborative learning activities, (3) formative assessment in the classroom and (4) classroom management. These categories provide prompts to elicit more descriptive responses to questions about classroom practices (Birdwell et al., 2016). The intended purpose of the ALCOT is to facilitate reflection on active learning practices. In our work, we have adapted the ALCOT as part of the CPO/LC, where we have incorporated question prompts into the observation template (Supplementary).

Table 2. The CPO/LC process.

The CPO/LC Process	
The CPO/LC Stages	Insights From the Literature
Stage 1: Self-initiated pre-observation meeting where academics arrange times and logistics and consider the questions in the Teaching Observation	Self-initiated communities of academics that evolve organically.
Template for discussion provided.	Academics choose staff with whom they will collaborate.
Teachers are encouraged to form their own CPO/LCs, or the CPO/LCs can be facilitated by a coordinator.	Structured resource to guide academics.
Stage 2: Observation activity where academics collaborate to observe teaching and *understand* the use of active learning strategies in the classroom and associated student engagement.	Collaboration and social interaction with colleagues evident.
	Safe non-judgemental, supportive, conversations encouraged.
Stage 3: Individual reflection time is included post observation, so that academics can think about the observation and determine what they could implement into their own practice.	Critical reflection prioritised.
Stage 4: Post observation meeting where those involved in the observation meet collaboratively within a learning circle (a small group of academics), in an informal setting, to talk about the learnings from the observation of teaching. The idea of a collaborative, collegial post-observation conversation underpins the approach – academics learn from and with their colleagues.	Sustained through a process of inquiry into practice.
	Exploration of perspectives and ideas.

A CPO/LC group consists of three or four members (i.e. academics) typically, but not necessarily from different disciplines. Teachers are encouraged to form their own CPO/LC groups or this can be facilitated by a coordinator. All members of a given CPO/LC participate in reciprocal observations of teaching. The observations can be in dyads or they might involve three or four members in a group. Table 2 provides an overview of the relationship between the four stages in the CPO/LC process and the synthesised insights from the literature.

For those wishing to create an environment where PL is embedded in the day-to-day work of academics, the experience gained during this study would suggest that it is important to consider the role of leadership. The jointly held goals and beliefs about the value of this approach to PL agreed by the small, dedicated team responsible for this work provided essential leadership for the initiative.

Conclusion

There are limited examples of approaches to PL for busy academics that are structured and facilitate collegial opportunities for learning in day-to-day practice. The literature reviewed provided insight into different ideas for encouraging collegial PL. Based on a synthesis and interpretation of the literature reviewed, we identified features for an approach to collegial PL that would satisfy individual learning and teaching needs and accreditation in HE. The features that guided the creation of the approach highlighted in Table 2 were that it should be self-initiated by academics and embedded in day-to-day teaching; encourage social interaction and collaboration with peers; foster safe, non-judgemental, supportive, conversations; stimulate critical reflection; sustain an inquiry stance; nurture an exploration of perspectives and ideas; and be supported with a process and appropriate resources. The CPO/LCs resources were created, and these are designed to be adaptable, and tailored to the needs of different HE contexts.

This study may be valuable to HE and contribute to positive change by encouraging academics to participate in a continuous cycle of improvement by creating opportunities for them to reflect and innovate on their practice. Furthermore, learning for students is encouraged as academics consider the impact of their teaching on student engagement. The need to respond to the accreditation requirements for HE can also be embraced by offering a voluntary PL activity designed to enhance learning and teaching.

Initial evidence indicates that the approach is being used by staff teaching in the first-year college at the university. The approach can be used by academics at all levels, and we would be interested in collaborations to understand the transferability and adaptability of the resources to other HE contexts. Further research is also underway to explore academics' experiences of participating in CPO/LCs to understand the impact of the approach on learning and teaching.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Puspha Sinnayah is a teaching and research focussed academic with the First Year College and research fellow with the Institute for Health and Sport (IHES) at Victoria University (VU). She has extensive experience in curriculum design and innovation in blended and active learning strategies in physiology teaching. She has a track record in neuroscience of appetite research and is highly cited in this field.

Trudy Ambler is currently an Honorary academic at Victoria University and she also works as a Learning and Teaching Consultant. Trudy's research and publications explore issues related to teacher and student learning, specifically how their 'experiences' of learning enable us to better understand the world. This research agenda has taken different forms and includes teacher learning in both the school and university sectors; teacher knowledge; students' learning; peer learning; first-year curriculum: mentoring; narrative inquiry; autobiographical inquiry; practitioner inquiry; research ethics in learning and teaching; learning spaces and places.

Kate Kelly is a Teaching Focused Academic in the First Year College and is the Deputy Head of Scholarship and Professional Learning role within the College. Kate teaches skills-based units to aspiring health professionals and outdoor-leadership students that aim to prepare them for life after university by developing authentic interpersonal skills. Her personalised approach involves firstly helping students explore themselves, their own values, cultural influences and upbringing before developing communication skills within the context of this personal paradigm. This approach prepares students for work with a diverse range of individuals and helps them understand how they respond cognitively and emotionally in a safe environment prior to commencing placement.

Loretta Konjarski is the Head of Community Engagement in the First Year College (FYC) at Victoria University (VU). She is experienced with qualitative research, including design, interviews and analysis. Loretta leads the FYC in developing networks and partnerships within the university, education-focused organisations and industry, providing leadership on university committees to support the work of the FYC. Further, she supports the FYC staff in designing and implementing high-quality industry and education-based activities for first-year students

Kathy Tangalakis is the Head of Scholarship and Professional Learning in FYC. Kathy's career focus has been on enhancing the first-year student learning experience and outcomes for diverse student cohorts in biomedical and health-related courses. She is researching how Victoria University's innovative Block Model has impacted on commencing student outcomes in STEM. Kathy's aim is to build a national Assessment Framework which will allow mapping of, and improvements to, the quality of assessments in the biomedical and biosciences.

Andrew Smallridge is the Dean of First Year College at VU and has extensive experience in research. His leadership role in the University is tasked with leading the college and implementing, reviewing and continually enhancing the First Year Model. Learning and teaching in the College comprising design, development, delivery and review of the tertiary curriculum; enhancement and mainte-nance of the courses profile and enhancement of the student experience.

ORCID

Puspha Sinnayah http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9811-7236
Trudy Ambler http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2654-6274
Kate Kelly http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2954-2009
Loretta Konjarski http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2624-7493
Kathy Tangalakis http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5735-326X
Andrew Smallridge http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6645-760X

References

Ambler, T., Harvey, M., & Cahir, J. (2016). University academics' experiences of learning through mentoring. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *43*(5), 609–627. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-016-0214-7

Ambler, T., Solomonides, I., Smallridge, A., McCluskey, T., & Hannah, L. (2020). Professional learning for academics teaching first-year undergraduate students. *Professional Development in Education*, *46*(5), 845–857. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1647272

Arnold, J., & Mundy, B. (2020). Praxis pedagogy in teacher education. *Smart Learning Environments*, *7*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-020-0116-z

Bell, A., & Mladenovic, R. (2008). The benefits of peer observation of teaching for tutor development. *Higher Education*, *55*(6), 735–752. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-007-9093-1

Birdwell, T., Roman, T. A., Hammersmith, L., & Jerolimov, D. (2016). Active learning classroom observation tool: A practical tool for classroom observation and instructor reflection in active learning classrooms. *Journal on Centers for Teaching and Learning*, *8*, 19–27.

Brookfield, S. D. (2017). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. John Wiley & Sons.

Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction* (Vol. 59). Harvard University Press.

Carbone, A. (2014). A peer-assisted teaching scheme to improve units with critically low student satisfaction: Opportunities and challenges. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *33*(3), 425–439. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.841644

Carbone, A., & Ceddia, J. (2013). Common areas for improvement in physical science units that have critically low student satisfaction. *2013 Learning and Teaching in Computing and Engineering*, 17–24. https://doi.org/10.1109/LaTiCE.2013.12

Carbone, A., Ross, B., & Ceddia, J. (2013, July 1 - 13). Five years of taps on shoulders to PATS on backs in ICT. In *Proceedings of the 18th ACM conference on Innovation and technology in computer science education*. Canterbury,UK (pp. 195–200).

Carbone, A., Ross, B., Phelan, L., Lindsay, K., Drew, S., Stoney, S., & Cottman, C. (2015). Course evaluation matters: Improving students' learning experiences with a peer-assisted teaching programme. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *40*(2), 165–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.895894

Chapin, L. A., & Oraison, B. (2019, July 7-10). VU Kick Start: A pilot intervention for first-in-family university students. STARS Conference 2019, Melbourne.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Chapter 8: Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education*, *24*(1), 249–305. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X024001249

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). Practitioner inquiry: Versions and variance. In M. Cochrane-Smith & S. Lytle (Eds.), *Inquiry as stance practitioner: Research for the next generation* (pp. 37–59). Teachers College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2021). Inquiry in the age of data: A commentary. *Teaching Education*, *32*(1), 99–107. https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2020.1868142

Contu, A., & Willmott, H. (2003). Re-embedding situatedness: The importance of power relations in learning theory. *Organization Science*, *14*(3), 283–296. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.14.3.283.15167

Coombe, K. (1994). Mentoring in early childhood settings. *Independent Education*, *24*(3), 26–32.

Cox, A. (2005). What are communities of practice? A comparative review of four seminal works. *Journal of Information Science*, *31*(6), 527–540. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551505057016

Dadds, M., Hart, S., & Crotty, T. (2001). *Doing practitioner research differently*. Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203469514

Darwin, A., & Palmer, E. (2009). Mentoring circles in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *28*(2), 125–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360902725017

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. N Macmillan Company.

Drew, S., Phelan, L., Lindsay, K., Carbone, A., Ross, B., Wood, K., Stoney, S., & Cottman, C. (2017). Formative observation of teaching: Focusing peer assistance on teachers' developmental goals. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *42*(6), 914–929. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2016.1209733

Fahmi Dajani, M., & Yousef, M. (2014). Learning circles: Promoting collaborative learning culture for teacher professional development. *Arab World English Journal*, *5*(3), 142–153.

Gauci, S., Edwards, R., Rajaraman, G., Salcedo, A., Kastis, K., Klein, R., & Sinnayah, P. (2023). Student preference and perceptions of asynchronous online activities for first year allied health physiology blended block units. *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching (JBILT)*, *1*(1), 46–65. https://www.ibilta.org/_files/ugd/4d5f99_d3fbea72a233424d986c60fb94df8818.pdf

Gonzales Rodriguez, Y. E. (1995). Mentoring to diversity: A multicultural approach. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, *66*(66), 69–77. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.36719956608

Gosling, D. (2005). Peer observation of teaching. *SEDA paper*, 118.

Gray, J. A. M. (2001). *Evidence-based healthcare*. Elsevier Health Sciences.

Harvey, M., Ambler, T., & Cahir, J. (2017). Spectrum approach to mentoring: An evidence-based approach to mentoring for academics working in higher education. *Teacher Development*, *21*(1), 160–174. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2016.1210537

Jackson, J. A. I., Tangalakis, K. A. I., Hurley, P. A. I., & Solomonides, I. (2022). Equity through complexity: Inside the "black box" of the Block Model. *National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education report*. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/black-box-block-model/

Johnson, C. M. (2001). A survey of current research on online communities of practice. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *4*(1), 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(01)00047-1

Johnsrud, L. K. (1991). Mentoring between academic women: The capacity for interdependence. *Initiatives*, *54*(3), 7–17.

Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE - A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, *1*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v1i1.13

Klein, R., Sinnayah, P., Kelly, K., Winchester, M., Rajaraman, G., & Eizenberg, N. (2019). Utilising computer based learning to complement class teaching of gross anatomy. *International Journal of Innovation in Science and Mathematics Education*, *27*(8), 10–25. https://doi.org/10.30722/ijisme.27.08.002

Lave, J. (1988). *Cognition in practice: Mind, mathematics and culture in everyday life*. Cambridge University Press.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge university press.

Le Cornu, R. (2004a). *Managing the challenges and dilemmas of constructivism in practice*. Australian Association for Research in Education].

Le Cornu, R. (2004b, July 7-10). Learning circles: Providing spaces for renewal of both teachers and teacher educators. *Australian Teacher Education Assocation Annual Conference: Making spaces: Regenerating the profession*. Charles Sturt University, Bathurst.

Lewis, G. (2002, August 8-10). Teaching and learning in circle. "Dreaming of a new reality," *Third International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other Restorative Practices*, Minneapolis.

Lindgren, U. (2006). Mentoring in the academic world. In C. Cullingford (Ed.), *Mentoring in education* (pp. 153–165). Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Little, J. W. (2002). Professional community and the problem of high school reform. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *37*(8), 693–714. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355(03)00066-1

Lofthouse, R. M. (2014). Engaging in educational research and development through teacher practitioner enquiry; a pragmatic or naïve approach? *Education Today*, *64*(4), 13–19. ISSN 0013-1547.

Loton, D., Stein, C., Parker, P., & Weaven, M. (2022). Introducing block mode to first-year university students: A natural experiment on satisfaction and performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, *47*(6), 1097–1120. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1843150

McCluskey, T., Smallridge, A., Weldon, J., Loton, D., Samarawickrema, G., & Cleary, K. (2020). Building on the VU Block foundations: Results from the inaugural first year cohort. In E. Heinrich & R. Bourke (Eds.), *Research and development in higher education: Next generation, higher education: Challenges, changes and opportunities* (Vol. 42, pp. 61–72). Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc.

McCluskey, T., Weldon, J., & Smallridge, A. (2018). New kids on the block: Results of a first year college initiative. *Student Success*. https://unistars.org/papers/STARS2019/05A.pdf

McCluskey, T., Weldon, J., & Smallridge, A. (2019). Rebuilding the first year experience, one block at a time. *Student Success*, 10(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v10i1.1048

McKenzie, J., Pelliccione, L., & Parker, N. (2008, November 30 Dec 3). Developing peer review of teaching in blended learning environments: Frameworks and challenges. In *Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology? Proceedings Ascilite Melbourne* (pp. 2008). http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/melbourne08/procs/mckenzie-j.pdf

Messinis, G., & Sheehan, P. (2015). *The academic performance of first year students at Victoria University by entry score and SES, 2009-2013*. Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies Melbourne.

Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., Altman, D. G., & PRISMA Group*, T. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA statement. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 151(4), 264–269. https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-151-4-200908180-00135

Mthiyane, G. N., & Habedi, D. S. (2018). The experiences of nurse educators in implementing evidence-based practice in teaching and learning. *Health SA Gesondheid*, 23(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v23i0.1177

O'Shea, S., Stone, C., Delahunty, J., & May, J. (2018). Discourses of betterment and opportunity: Exploring the privileging of university attendance for first-in-family learners. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(6), 1020–1033. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1212325

Peters, J., & Le Cornu, R. (2005). Beyond communities of practice: Learning circles for transformational school leadership. In P. Carden & T. Stehlik (Eds.), *Beyond communities of practice* (pp. 107–132). Post Press.

Plaskoff, J. (2011). Intersubjectivity and community-building: Learning to learn organizationally.In M. In M. A. L. Easterby-Smith & K. E. Weick (Eds.), *The Blackwell handbook of organizational learning and knowledge management* (pp. 199–223). Blackwell Publishers.

Reynolds, S. (2008). *Evidence-based practice: A critical appraisal*. John Wiley & Sons.

Rogers, T., Wass, R., Timmermans, J., & Golding, C. (2019). Teaching and learning circles: A framework for enhancing teaching culture and practice. *Southern regional hub-funded project*. Wellington. https://ako.ac.nz/

Sachs, J., Parsell, M., Sachs, J., & Parsell, M. (2013). *Peer review of learning and teaching in higher education: International perspectives* (Vol. 9). Springer Science & Business Media. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7639-5

Saroyan, A., & Trigwell, K. (2015). Higher education teachers' professional learning: Process and outcome. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 46, 92–101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2015.03.008

Schwen, T. M., & Hara, N. (2003). Community of practice: A metaphor for online design? *The Information Society*, 19(3), 257–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972240309462

Spencer, C. (1996). *Mentoring made easy: A practical guide for managers*. NSW Government Publication.

Sutherland, K., Elgort, I., & Tennent, E. (2020). *Teaching and learning circles: Developing reflective practice and enhancing teaching culture*. https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/developing-teaching-and-learning-circles

Tangalakis, K., Brown, C., Ryan, J., & Winchester, M. (2022a, June 27-30). Evaluating the effects of professional learning on perceptions of teaching capability in a multidisciplinary first year college. *Higher Education Research & Development Society of Australasia conference*. Melbourne. *Abstract 309 pg 70*, On-site oral abstract book. https://conference.herdsa.org.au/2022/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/HERDSA-2022-On-site-oral-abstract-book-3.pdf

Tangalakis, K., Kelly, K., KonYu, N., & Hall, D. (2022b). The impact of teaching from home during the COVID-19 pandemic on the student evaluations of female academics. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 19(1). https://doi.org/10.53761/1.19.1.10

Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard university press.

Weller, S. (2009). What does"peer" mean in teaching observation for the professional development of higher education lecturers? *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 21(1), 25–35.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

Wheelahan, L. (2009). Do educational pathways contribute to equity in tertiary education in Australia? *Critical Studies in Education*, *50*(3), 261–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480903156854

Wilczynski, S. (2017). *Other sources of evidence. A practical guide to finding treatments that work for people with autism*. Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-809480-8.00002-9

Williams, D., & Coles, L. (2007). Teachers' approaches to finding and using research evidence: An information literacy perspective. *Educational Research*, *49*(2), 185–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131880701369719