



Parallel Process in Final Field Education: A Continuing Education Workshop to Promote Best Practices in Social Work

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Redefining the Water Cooler: Relationship Building and Collaboration in Virtual Education</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol.21 No.1</i>
Manuscript ID:	<i>211061</i>
Page Number:	<i>61</i>
Year:	<i>2018</i>

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Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published two times a year (Spring and Winter) by the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at 1923 San Jacinto, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

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Redefining the Water Cooler: Relationship Building and Collaboration in Virtual Education

Parga, Schwartz and George

The demand for online education continues to steadily increase with no indication of decline among graduate programs across public and private education institutions. While research on virtual education consistently demonstrates curriculum integrity and has examined classroom teaching methods, satisfaction, and student engagement, little has been reported on virtual faculty community-building or relationships with virtual peers. For many who pursue careers in academia, engaging in stimulating conversations and collaborations with colleagues is an essential benefit of the job. While the benefits associated with being a virtual educator are well documented in the literature to include flexibility, greater work-family caretaking balance, and interaction with a more diverse audience (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2007), virtual educators report challenges associated with feeling connected to colleagues and the wider educational institution. This may be especially true for virtual faculty living far distances from the ground campus, thus restricting opportunities to informally interact with colleagues. This lack of unstructured, informal interaction can result in barriers for relationship-building with colleagues, limited opportunities for professional collaboration and mentorship, and feeling a sense of alienation from the larger culture of the institution and its members (Bentley, Secret & Cummings, 2015; Curry, 2016; Dolan, 2011; Schwartz, Wiley, & Kaplan, 2016; Smith, 2015). These experiences can influence one's sense of belonging and produce additional work-related barriers that can be detrimental to work morale, productivity, and organizational commitment (Curry, 2016; Nicklin, McNall, Cerasoli, Varga, & McGivney, 2016).

The concerns identified above echo the lived experiences of the authors, who introduce an intervention aimed at facilitating community-building amongst a geographically dispersed

virtual faculty. The authors, located in Colorado, Northern California, and Southern California, are virtual faculty in the University of Southern California's Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work's Virtual Academic Center. They were introduced to each other through their participation in a common project on the virtual platform. While they all embrace technology and its capacity, they were all looking for opportunities to connect with colleagues in an informal way. In this context, the Virtual Water Cooler was launched in September 2016 as a way to facilitate community building across a geographically diverse faculty.

The Virtual Water Cooler seeks to mimic the unplanned interactions that occur when campus-based faculty walk down the hall together or bump into one another at the copy machine. In addition to increasing job satisfaction, the Water Coolers aim to create opportunities for geographically diverse faculty to connect in order to build a shared identity with each other and the larger institution, to offer professional development opportunities, and host a platform from which to launch scholarly collaborations. The anticipated long-term impacts of the Water Cooler are to translate the school culture, increase the visibility of the school through nationwide collaboration, and to forge new partnerships which otherwise might never occur.

In the fall of 2016, 'Connect Over Coffee,' now known as the Virtual Water Cooler, was approved and launched as a pilot project for virtual faculty. The authors selected three random days and times during the fall semester in attempt to capture the three time zones the virtual program represents. Initial meetings had no specific agenda, as unplanned, informal interactions generally do not have an agenda. Faculty were notified of the date, time, and web location of the Virtual Water Cooler via the faculty email listserv and postings in the Virtual

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Faculty Lounge, which is a shared space on the virtual platform for faculty to post questions or event notifications, similar to a bulletin board.

Instructor attendance this first semester fluctuated, leading the authors to consider new strategies to improve attendance the following semester. Surveys of attendees suggested that the alternating times of the Virtual Water Coolers or time zone differences posed challenges to attendance because of inconsistencies in scheduling. In response to this, Virtual Water Cooler dates were set and announced at the start of the spring 2017 semester. The authors selected the third Wednesday of the month, and times oscillated between morning and afternoon. Also, per feedback received, pre-selected topics were identified to include teaching strategies or current events to jumpstart conversations that would ideally morph into unplanned discussions. For example, the January 2017 Virtual Water Cooler focused on the 2016 United States Presidential Election and its influence on classroom dynamics and discussions.

USC's Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work's Virtual Academic Center recruits and retains students and faculty living in cities outside of Los Angeles, across all 50 United States. Therefore, community-level crises that occur across the country such as riots, incidents of violence, and natural disasters impact classroom discussions because of the first-hand accounts from students and faculty living the experience in real-time. Such events inspired the creation of 'pop-up' Virtual Water Coolers during the summer 2017 semester, with faculty other than the authors hosting unscheduled Water Coolers in their classrooms for the purpose of processing community crises occurring across the nation. The geographic dispersion of our program facilitates rich discussions in the classroom and opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking about how policies and programs are executed around the country. Given political and social instability this past year, these discussions have sometimes become divisive. Having divisive conversations in a classroom is not a new concept; however, because of our national program and the possibility for students attending

class with raw emotions resulting from community event/crisis, faculty would be remiss if they failed to address the events and the students' need to process them. Pop-up Water Coolers provide virtual faculty immediate opportunities to connect with colleagues over these incidents and share strategies on how to approach these discussions in the classroom.

Faculty attendance and feedback received over the first year of the Virtual Water Cooler prompted the authors to pilot several new tactics during the fall 2017 semester. First, the authors will notify faculty of the Virtual Water Cooler via their Microsoft Outlook Calendar rather than simply posting a flyer on the Faculty Wall. If interested parties accept the event, they will receive advanced notification of the events and it will be automatically inserted into their calendar. Second, the team will continue hosting regularly scheduled Virtual Water Coolers the third week of the month; however, in addition to these events, 'pop-up' Water Coolers will be hosted in response to community crisis on an as-requested basis. In addition to these tactics, the team will pilot a new strategy of attaching Water Coolers to faculty meetings. Monthly mandatory full faculty or departmental meetings are executed as hybrid meetings, with faculty on the ground and those on the virtual platform interacting during meetings. These scheduled meetings create an opportunity for all virtual faculty to informally engage in a Virtual Water Cooler setting before or after the scheduled meetings. The authors want to harness the momentum provided by this convergence of faculty and host Water Coolers on the tail end of these meetings by posting an invitation to 'continue the conversation.' The post-meeting events will be 15-30 minutes in length and are likened to ground faculty walking back to their offices from the meeting, perhaps recapping moments from the meeting, discussing points of confusion or plans to work on something together in the future. Opportunities like the one described above are lost in distance education as participants at the end of a meeting are immediately disconnected from everyone and everything just discussed, with the attendee left to their own thoughts or immediately to log on to the

next virtual meeting.

While the benefits of the Virtual Water Cooler have not been formally evaluated through a pre/post-test design, feedback has been positive from regular attendees as well as faculty who have not participated in the Virtual Water Cooler. Challenges faced have largely revolved around scheduling, with interested participants forgetting the day/time of the events and a resistance to scheduling additional meetings. A larger challenge is establishing buy-in for 'planned' meetings that try to mimic the happenstance in which campus-based faculty run into one another and have informal interactions. This is not possible for virtual faculty. One does not schedule time to go to the copy machine or block off time to bump into a colleague in the elevator. As a result, the Virtual Water Cooler can feel counter-intuitive to the random nature in which campus based interactions happen. Knowing this, however, if the Virtual Water Cooler were not scheduled, these virtual interactions would never happen.

There needs to be a culture shift in virtual education that takes into account the multiple opportunities that people have to informally interact in workplaces and how these interactions facilitate connections among colleagues that promote positive organizational cultures and collaborations among colleagues. Such informal interactions are not a reality for faculty working in virtual worlds. Given the important role that unstructured, informal social interaction plays in building community and increasing employee engagement, virtual education programs should strategize ways to facilitate informal interaction amongst colleagues. The Virtual Water Cooler is one example of such a program that has experienced success in its first year of operation.

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