A Social Work Distance Educator Community of Practice: Description, Outcomes, and Future

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Wilkerson and McCarthy

Abstract

The growth of social work distance education has increased the need for teaching faculty to develop as effective online instructors. We researched how faculty made use of an online practice community during a semester teaching in an online MSW program. Community of practice theory guided the development of a persistent community space for mentoring, support, and pedagogy building using moderated asynchronous discussion forums. Qualitative analysis provided a description of how faculty made use of the community, their needs for professional development, and the importance of peer support. Discussion considered motivation and the use of community for all faculty ranks.

Introduction

Technology innovations in distance education (DE) have rapidly changed the structure and delivery of higher education. Student enrollment in college DE courses grew from 1.6 million in 2002 to 5.8 million in 2014 (WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic provided further impetus for the growth of online teaching and learning. Faculty and students were unexpectedly forced into a variety of online platforms beginning March 2020, and several universities have been petitioned by students complaining of distance education's failure to provide an educational experience comparable to face-to-face education (Flaherty, 2020).

For faculty, the distinct role of distance educator requires new and ongoing modifications to online instructional approaches and teaching skills (Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge, 2016). The following email correspondence from an adjunct social work faculty member illustrates the need to support faculty in developing online instructional approaches:

I've been frustrated with the students in my current class. It's clear that they aren't reading the material in the modules—nor are they reading the material I send them—or viewing the videos I make. I spend a ton of time giving feedback on basic things [and] frankly, with the time I spend on this class, I could make more money per hour being a Walmart greeter.

The comment addresses frequently discussed online teaching challenges, like instructional time burden (Schifter, 2000) and the difficulties of establishing teaching presence (Philip, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007). Supporting faculty to meet these and other common DE teaching obstacles can be a challenging and important goal for DE program administrators. Obtaining consultations adds to the time demands for teaching online and is dependent on faculty motivation (Hoyt & Oviatt, 2013).

To address the need to support online teaching faculty, we developed a program to build faculty teaching expertise from within our department using the resources of our faculty community of adjuncts, lecturers, tenure-track professors, and tenured professors. To support this community-based program, we obtained consultation through the university's teaching and learning center. The project underwent several revisions, and in this paper, we describe our initial program design, delivery, and responses to emergent challenges. We examined how faculty made use of the discussion boards we created within a teaching community of practice (CoP) to foster faculty skill development and build online pedagogy.

Literature Review

Professional Development

Professional development (PD) can address a range of instructional topics to foster effective DE course delivery and normalize common challenges. It can provide opportunities for faculty to develop online pedagogical knowledge, especially for those who are new to online instruction (McLean, Cilliers, & Wyk, 2008; Storandt, Dossin, & Lacher, 2012). That many online instructors have never been online students highlights the importance of online instructional training. Without online student experience,

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instructors may lack a tacit understanding of what is good and what is not-so-good about online learning (Schmidt et al., 2016). For instance, instructors new to DE identify a lack of visual cues as disorientating (McQuiggan, 2007).

For college administrators, PD gains importance when it supports the goal of ensuring that an online program provides DE and not correspondence education. The U.S. Department of Education requires that online programs receiving Title IV awards demonstrate that instructors are engaging in regular and substantive interaction with students (Poulin, 2016). Federal inspector audits have resulted in multimillion-dollar fines for schools found in violation of these federal requirements (Supiano, 2017). PD can encourage faculty awareness and responsiveness to meet these federal requirements.

However, faculty can be limited or discouraged from obtaining support for DE teaching. For example, training may limit its focus to the diffusion of technology affordances, like gaining procedural skills in using software and network tools, rather than focusing on teaching pedagogy (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012; Clarke, 2013). In addition, geographically distributed adjunct faculty can be constrained from participation by limited access to institutionally-based, traditional PD programs, as in the case of in-service training for full-time teaching faculty. Full-time faculty may infrequently take advantage of training opportunities, especially when DE teaching makes up only a small proportion of their overall teaching, research, and service responsibilities (Belcher, Pecukonis, & Knight, 2011). Bias regarding the value of DE can also limit participation. Faculty often devalue DE as being of lesser quality than traditional face-to-face education in terms of interaction and learning outcomes (Gallup, as cited in Jaschik & Lederman, 2014).

Student Perspective

A further perspective on the importance of PD comes from DE students, who differ from their on-campus counterparts. Characterized as "nontraditional," their DE student role occurs alongside other employee or caregiver roles that carry competing responsibilities and time demands (Hixon, Barczyk, Ralston-Berg, &

Buckenmeyer, 2016). DE student perceptions of course quality can also differ from those of their on-campus counterparts. In their investigation of student perceptions of online instructors' misbehaviors, Vallade and Kaufmann (2018) identified that online students and face-to-face students shared concerns around the same issue of receiving feedback. However, online students had additional concerns about instructors' communication styles like concerns about ineffective communication, inconsistent communication, and a lack of instructor engagement (Vallade & Kaufmann, 2018). This study also identified unfair grading, response timeliness, and professionalism as concerns of online students.

Engaging Faculty

Given the importance of PD for faculty, administrators, and students, and given the barriers to PD participation, educational researchers have sought methods to effectively engage faculty. Cho and Rathbun (2013) considered traditional PD programs to be ineffective because their structure minimized faculty's "active participation" (p.144) and they were not participant-centered. Instead, they were content-centered, and instructors were passive recipients of a program. Their investigation found that a participant-centered approach using online delivery methods increased PD engagement. The shift from content-centered to participant-centered faculty development is consistent with a pedagogic shift in the field, whereby faculty are recognized as adult learners and development follows adult learning principles (McQuiggan, 2007).

Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) reviewed methodologically strong primary and secondary teacher PD programs and also discovered that participant-centered practices produced measurable, positive changes in either learner outcomes or teacher effectiveness. Effective programs were based on andragogic principles, included collaboration, were discipline-specific, modelled exemplars of practice, provided mentoring and support, incorporated feedback and reflection, and were ongoing. The Community of Practice (CoP) framework supports many of these participant-centered features.

Community of Practice

In its earliest form, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Li et al. (2019) described the CoP as a setting in which novices advanced their skills in a domain of practice through peer support and tutelage with master craftsperson's. Although not a learning theory in this description, the idea of a CoP was later found to have broader implications and uses. These new uses grew from the recognition that a CoP can connect the sociocultural dimensions of learning with the developing knowledge of a community. In this use, the CoP was defined as "people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared human endeavor [like] a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope" (Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor, 2015, p. 1). Central to this definition, and in contrast with a learning community, the social structure of a CoP is engaged in interactions that construct and generate knowledge (Brooks, 2010).

The CoP framework has been used to deliver PD in a variety of DE contexts (Brosnan & Burgess, 2003), including virtual communities of instructors engaged in creating online course designs (Bond & Lockee, 2014). Brooks (2010) reviewed the varied usages of an online CoP by educators, comparing an online, asynchronous CoP with a face-to-face CoP. Both had advantages for social interaction and shared knowledge generation. In addition, the online CoP demonstrated an advantage for mentor-mentee relationships because it flattened sociocultural differences associated with face-to-face contexts.

The literature on using a CoP in education is varied. However, the literature for the intentional creation of a supported, virtual CoP for online instructional development of pedagogical practices throughout a higher education program is nonexistent. The intentional creation of a virtual CoP that incorporates PD contrasts a CoP that is organically created by the members of an arena of practice. According to Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor (2015), this intentional usage of a CoP is possible provided "the domain is relevant and a priority to members" [and provided the CoP exhibits] "artful facilitation" (p.1).

Jeon, Kim, and Koh (2011) studied the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on knowledge-sharing in business organizations within three types of CoP that were identified by Saint-Onge and Wallace. These included: (a) the informal CoP (voluntary membership), (b) the sponsored CoP (mixed voluntary and mandated membership), and (c) the formal CoP (mandated membership). Each type of CoP was characterized by differing life cycles, motivation, and roles. Reward systems ranged from entirely intrinsic motivators, like affiliation, mentoring, support, and knowledge-sharing in informal CoPs, to a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators in sponsored CoPs, to entirely extrinsic motivators in formal CoPs.

Distance Educator Practice Community

We adopted CoP learning theory to guide our approach to DE professional development. Our approach was participant-centered, as opposed to a content-centered, and aimed to develop a sponsored faculty community of practice from within our program to enhance its pedagogic practices. We invited adjuncts, lecturers, tenure-track faculty, and tenured faculty to participate in a persistent space that was housed within the learning management system where our online courses are taught. We introduced pedagogic practice topics that centered on student feedback and presented questions around these topics that were designed to encourage problem-based learning through discussion, reflection, and discovery. We were particularly interested in whether joining adjunct and full-time faculty would result in mentoring and support. The following research question guided our research: *How does an intentionally created online community of practice support the development of mentoring, support, and pedagogic practices within a social work distance education program?*

Methods

We used case study methodology for this research because we wanted to explore and describe how faculty were making use of an online community space for PD (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Participants included all ranks of faculty who taught a variety of DE courses within the same online graduate program during the course of a semester. We conducted qualitative analyses

on the community's discussion boards where faculty interacted to discuss pedagogic concerns, questions, and resources. The university's institutional review board approved this research.

Faculty recruitment occurred at the beginning of the fall 2018 semester. Teaching faculty received an email through the DE faculty listserv that included: (a) a description of the faculty development program, (b) a study information sheet, (c) an invitation to one of three teleconferenced orientation sessions, and (d) an anonymous DE teaching practices pre-survey. Participation was voluntary, and we did not provide any incentives other than a written acknowledgment of participation. We briefly met with faculty via teleconference to orient them to the PD program and to explain the external software application that they would use to facilitate their asynchronous discussions.

Distance Educator Practice Community Discussions

The PD program consisted of three types of asynchronous discussions. The "Feedback Practices" thread provided brief information about feedback teaching practices and prompted faculty to apply these concepts through discussion and practice activities. The "General Discussion" thread allowed faculty to introduce their own online teaching topics to explore and learn from each other. The "Ask the Course Designer" thread created a communal space to reach out for technical support around facilitating the online courses.

Facilitation

Faculty discussions took place in an external software app that was embedded within the learning management system where our program's DE courses are taught. We facilitated the "Feedback Practices" thread by making a series of introductory posts that provided information around four different topics about feedback. We also included question prompts to encourage community building around these topics. We posted occasional responses to faculty's questions and expanded upon faculty's ideas in the "General Discussion" thread. We did not include our posts or our responses in the analysis.

Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis process, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), to understand how the participants contributed to the PD discussion boards. Thematic analysis permitted a flexible approach to qualitative data exploration that was an appropriate fit with the exploratory nature of this research and served to deliver clear and useful understanding of the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Initially, the participants' comments in the discussion boards were open-coded at a latent level to organize the variety of comments posted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the second round of analysis, we identified overarching themes to explain how faculty used the distance educator CoP discussion space (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This provided insight into how the faculty used the PD program as a space to share pedagogy and connect with other faculty.

Findings

Faculty Discussion Board

While twenty-two out of twenty-four social work faculty accepted invitations and began the program, active participation in the discussion boards was inconsistent. The "Feedback Practices" thread invited faculty to engage around four specific topics about feedback. Twelve faculty participated in the "Student Feedback Literacy" discussion; 11 faculty participated in the "Closing the Feedback Loop" discussion; three faculty participated in the "Feedback Focus" discussion; and three faculty participated in the "Student End-of-Course" discussion. Faculty often discussed specific examples from the courses that they were teaching and shared their results. This seemed to enhance instructors' awareness about the need for continual assessment of students' understanding beyond offering feedback. The "General Discussion" thread had the most active faculty involvement. Five faculty asked questions and received responses from nine different faculty members. Topics ranged from addressing student challenges to handling technological issues. Faculty members connected to their colleagues' questions and responded from a grounded development of their own expertise. Faculty infrequently used the "Ask the Course Designer" thread. Only two faculty posted questions; however, multiple faculty often viewed the questions in this thread without contributing content.

Faculty contributed a total of 102 postings in

the discussion threads. Posts were open-coded, line-by-line to describe the latent content. This resulted in some postings demonstrating several different codes. We identified 63 codes, which were grouped into five larger themes: pedagogical stance, interaction methods, instructor needs and growth, evidence of instructor empowerment, and collegiality. Table 1 demonstrates the frequency of these themes and related codes occurring in the discussion posts. For instance, 31 specific codes were grouped under the theme pedagogical stance.

See Table 1

Pedagogical Stance

Faculty discussed their pedagogical stance 176 times, with 31 different codes falling in this theme. Faculty often mentioned their rationale for the choices they made in conducting their online classes. These topics most often centered around improving the experience for students by helping to reduce their anxiety, fostering community among and with students, and attending to the student-instructor relationship. Instructors also shared their views on what makes education effective, which speaks to both meeting their goals as instructors and to enhancing the online student experience.

See Table 2

Interaction Methods

Faculty discussed methods of interacting 69 times, with 15 different codes falling in this theme. Faculty also discussed the "technical how-to" of interacting with students through the online environment, e.g., with synchronous meetings, video, or written evaluations. More experienced online educators clarified questions for newer faculty. The time spent helping students navigate technical challenges also came up as a regular aspect of the online educator's experience.

See Table 3

Instructor needs and growth. Faculty identified common challenges inherent in teaching online 80 times, with 13 different codes falling in this theme. This offered participants a chance to recognize difficulties and swap ideas for solutions. Faculty used these discussions to verbalize what they found difficult and to make programmatic requests that could make their roles easier or enhance student learning.

See Table 4

Instructor Empowerment

Faculty demonstrated their expertise and confidence in their online teaching by assisting each other with their own earned experiences. This occurred 58 times, with two codes falling in this theme. Faculty also saw opportunities to make recommendations about the courses to support the overall development of the program. By taking the initiative to express their own opinions, recognize the value of their own knowledge, and put forth the effort to share it with peers, faculty demonstrated a sense of empowerment in their online teaching abilities.

See Table 5

Collegiality

Faculty's style of interacting with each other demonstrated an intentional collegiality. A total of 32 intentional acts of collegiality occurred, with three codes falling in this theme. Faculty actively affirmed each other, and some faculty clearly posted with requests for support. This normalization of struggle and mutual identification around the common goal of providing quality learning experiences seemed to further a sense of community among the instructors and to encourage them to face their teaching challenges.

See Table 6

Discussion

This case study addresses the question: *How does an intentionally created online community of practice support the development of mentoring, support, and pedagogic practices within a social work distance education program?* The topics explored in our CoP discussion boards demonstrated that online faculty were actively developing pedagogical perspectives on their work with online students. Faculty valued the opportunity to both express and elicit viewpoints on teaching and strategies for working with students. The collaborative space also lent itself to a participant recognition of common online teaching challenges that could be normalized or problem-solved with their peers. In addition, this space fostered a sense of empowerment since faculty's viewpoints were valued and faculty recognized that their ideas could inform future program development as well as the learning trajectories of fellow instructors. Participants

placed considerable effort into soothing anxieties or affirming each other's online teaching struggles, resulting in support that otherwise might not have been available. Since practicing social workers prefer work environments that foster connection and collegiality (Shier & Graham, 2010), it is not surprising that online social work educators also value this. In summary, participants actively affirmed each other and demonstrated a need for a place to share ideas, mentor others, incorporate pedagogical guidance, and normalize their teaching challenges.

However, based on participant posting frequency, our findings showed that active participation was inconsistent. This inconsistency raises the question as to whether a self-sustaining CoP was developed. Whereas faculty postings demonstrated knowledge sharing, the development of in-depth pedagogy within the practice activities and discussion threads was limited. So, for instance, the enthusiasm with which faculty shared instructional knowledge often evolved into an exploration of tangential concepts, rather than staying focused on a main idea to deepen discussion. In addition, faculty preferred the "General Discussion" thread over the "Feedback Practices" thread and its corresponding practice activities, although we developed the latter as a central pedagogical focus for this intentionally created community.

We noted that Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor (2015) believed an intentionally created and sponsored community can succeed if participants make it a high priority and if it is conducted with "artful facilitation" (p.1). Regarding the element of "high priority," Lawler and King's (2000) Adult Learning Model of Faculty Development states that PD must be preplanned and consider faculty reward systems in order to make it a high priority. Importantly, their examples, such as promotion and tenure, provide extrinsic motivation for participation. Our program included all ranks of faculty, but it did not include extrinsic motivation. Further, extrinsic motivators like promotion and tenure would have no importance for participating adjunct faculty.

Regarding the element of "artful facilitation," instructors sometimes found the external software application used to facilitate their asynchronous discussions confusing due to unexpected but operational glitches. The acceptance of

technology affordances in higher education is dependent upon its perceived ease of use and usefulness (Olson & Appun, 2017). It is possible that the occurrence of ongoing technological difficulties impacted faculty participation and confounded program facilitation. This, too, could be a factor that minimized intrinsic motivation to participate.

In summary, our intentionally created and sponsored CoP failed to establish itself as a high priority within a teaching semester. Greater posting frequency and depth of posts were needed to establish a self-sustaining community of the informal type that Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualized. Instead, faculty interaction in the discussion boards grew more inconsistent over time. Jeon et al. (2011) noted that sponsored CoPs, like the one created for this research, generally include some extrinsic motivators and membership can be mixed, i.e., voluntary and mandated. In retrospect, the intentional creation of a sponsored teaching CoP that included a mix of all faculty ranks required greater preplanning to understand the roles of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in the development and sustenance of a CoP.

Future Steps

We will evaluate faculty motivation as the next step in our future CoP development. As long as participation in the community learning space is voluntary, a lack of participation will remain an issue and a concern. Although intrinsic motivation is the ideal, the reality of the busyness of faculty members' lives requires greater preplanning to determine how to increase faculty participation in a sponsored CoP PD program. It remains to be seen how the near universality of online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic will alter faculty's openness and interest in fostering online pedagogical community, both to enhance their online teaching expertise and to feel connected to their peers. An important consideration for this developmental step is the need to engage participation by all faculty ranks. The number and importance of adjunct teaching faculty has increased as higher education has expanded its DE courses and programs. Following Jeon et al.'s (2011) typology of COPs, it will be important to identify a system of reasonable mixed intrinsic and extrinsic

motivation that is effective for all social work faculty ranks. Needs assessment should focus on gaining greater insight into motivation for participation and understanding the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators for participation.

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Table 1: *Distant Educator Practice Themes*

Themes	Occurrences	Codes*	Major Codes	Occurrences
Pedagogical stance	176	31	Pedagogical beliefs	20
			Focus on student experience	14
			Reducing student anxiety	13
			Wonder if students using feedback	13
			Student instructor relationship	12
Instructor needs and growth	80	13	Tech complications	15
			Online teaching challenges	12
			Instructor request	11
Interaction methods	69	15	Send email feedback	9
			Providing tech guidance to students	8
			Comments about feedback	8
			Using synchronous or video feedback	7
Evidence of instructor empowerment	58	2	Share specific learning	44
			Program recommendation	14
Collegiality	32	3	Affirm colleague	25

*line by line coding often resulted in numerous codes per post

Table 2: *Posts Demonstrating Themes of Pedagogical Stance*

Major Code	Example Post
Pedagogical beliefs	"I also think we need to be careful that we are encouraging independence and autonomy in our students. It is up to them to engage in the course, to read/view the feedback we provide and to utilize it. At some point this seems to become us working harder than the student (to quote a colleague's recent words to me) - and I don't know that is really beneficial to the student."
	"I have become pretty good about my own mindset to not believe I can fix in one semester what has likely developed over a long, academic and possible personal journey for students. I try to use that to help the student understand that my role with them is to stretch them and sometimes the stretch in their learning will not be measured by their grades but what is innately built into them through the process of school."
Focusing on student experience	"This was a good reminder to me that the feedback is for the student, so even if a comment makes sense to me it may not be sufficient for the student if they don't have the foundation for overall understanding."
Reducing student anxiety	"Create a learning/growth culture so expectations are that we will support one another's learning and the mistakes or missteps are truly learning moments and not failures. Assume good intent both as a receiver and the deliverer."

Table 2: *Posts Demonstrating Themes of Pedagogical Stance*

Wondering if students using feedback	"This conversation has really intrigued me in terms of how much students are really getting from the feedback that we spend time on giving in speed grader for each assignment and if they are applying that feedback."
Student-Instructor Relationship	"I also provide writing and grammar feedback as needed and keep things positive yet constructive. I enjoy this because it keeps me engaged with the 'temperature' of the course, and my students tell me they appreciate it because it is more like having an instructor in a brick and mortar classroom, they like hearing a voice, and they value having the feedback on a reliable basis each week as we move through the modules along with a quick discussion on what's coming next."

Table 3: *Posts Demonstrating Themes of Interaction Methods*

Major Code	Example Post
Email feedback	"I have provided feedback to students via the speed grader and will email them if I see they may need extra help or attention."
Tech guidance to students	"I used to receive a TON of questions about peer reviews since it can be tricky for the students to figure out too. I've been using a Canvas Guide document but added this video at the beginning of the semester. I've only done one round of peer reviews in one class so far, but I had NO questions about how to access or upload peer review and everyone did it right!"

Table 4: *Posts Demonstrating Themes of Instructor Needs and Growth*

Major Codes	Example Post
Online teaching challenges	"One thought I had is that when content overload occurs, deep reflection decreases. If students are feeling overwhelmed and just trying to survive their life responsibilities and coursework demands, it might be difficult for them to produce meaningful reflection. We can add assessment points to the reflection, but then that adds to our grading loads. I'm not sure what the answer is to that dilemma but adding more reflection could feel like an extra task to them."
Instructor request	"So, I am a newbie to the online teaching world, and this is my first semester. I do send announcements to streamline and help the students prioritize the weeks with the intention they wouldn't feel overwhelmed, but I honestly do not think they are reading/listening to them carefully as I still get the same questions I have addressed. Tips/Suggestions?"

Table 5: *Posts Demonstrating Themes of Instructor Empowerment*

Major Code	Example Code
Sharing specific learning	"I'm happy to share my experience and approach to this issue. I think the same skills that I use as a therapist and as a supervisor apply to communicating with a student whose anxiety leads them to place the responsibility of their grade on the instructor. I stay positive and behavioral (and believe me this has been trial and error because I've wanted to help them and fallen into back and forth discussions and trying to help them process their feelings and had it end with me being the bad guy who is unfairly grading them - I just don't go there anymore). First and foremost, I remind myself what my role is, I am not their therapist, or even their advisor."
Program recommendation	"Standardizing how we do feedback is probably a good way to go, that way students develop a running knowledge of where to find feedback."

Table 6: *Posts Demonstrating Themes of Collegiality*

Major Code	Example Post
Affirm colleague	"Be gentle with yourself, I give myself a hard time because I feel overwhelmed and am not able to do the job I would like to be teaching. It gets easier when you can make the changes that made things difficult the first time around."
	"Great idea making a list of changes for next semester! I find just learning your online teaching 'style' is part of it. Everyone is different and getting into your groove may take some time. I know I like to use the tools available, even if it is time consuming, just to better acquaint myself with the technology. I am here if you ever want to bounce ideas off me or need an outlet if you feel overwhelmed again. We are all in this together."