

Transformations on the Go: International Education, Communities of Practice and a Global Pandemic

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ABSTRACT Following the transformative impact of the global pandemic travel restrictions in 2020 for study abroad institutions in Higher Education, immediate ad hoc collaborative structures emerged. The global pandemic placed educators in a collective challenge to reshape instructional methods and practice in a challenging effort to continue engaging students academically while maintaining robust experiential learning and development. Utilizing communities of practice, new ways of collaborating emerged, reshaping how information is shared across disciplines, sectors and departments. Revisiting this impact, a year later, this study explores the role of communities of practice across global higher education institutions. Assessing new practice through action research, this paper examines the transpiring cross sectoral, multidisciplinary ways of working within global education networks and introduces communities of practice as a valuable pedagogical technique to support online instruction and discuss the benefits and opportunities of global online partnerships. Building on the writers' experience as a leader and coordinator of several communities of practice, this paper offers a reflective account of how these communities emerged and offers a critique on the vital parameters necessary for creating a community of practice.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Higher Education, Study Abroad

Introduction

Driven by the pandemic defined transformations to Higher Education, the Study Abroad sector experienced severe disruptions to practice, instruction and operations due to the travel restrictions which began to be imposed in February of 2020. Though at the time, the future of travel and consequently the viability of such programmes was uncertain, the immediate concerns focused on delivering practice within the confines of lockdowns and physical isolation. Given the urgent nature of addressing students within this new context, immediate ad hoc collaborative structures emerged. The global pandemic placed educators in a collective challenge to reshape instructional methods and practice in a challenging effort to continue engaging students academically while maintaining robust experiential learning and development- as well as balancing the disruptive impact to personal lives and working conditions. Whether we are considering staff, students or faculty in the Study Abroad ecosystem, the impact was unconditional. Utilizing communities of practice (CoP), new ways of collaborating emerged, reshaping how information is shared across disciplines, sectors and departments.

Revisiting this impact, a year later, this paper presents a study of the role of CoP across global higher education institutions during the initial phases of the pandemic impact. Assessing new practice through action research, the transpiring cross sectoral, multidisciplinary ways of working within global education networks are

examined and CoP are introduced as a valuable pedagogical technique to support online instruction and discuss the benefits and opportunities of global online partnerships.

Building on the writer's experience as a convenor of two communities of practice, this work offers a documented, reflective account of how these communities emerged and offers a critique on the vital parameters necessary for creating a CoP.

Communities of Practice, a definition through prior works

A CoP is a distinct approach to producing and capturing knowledge. A process, driven by carefully selected participants who agree on a mutual area of interest worthy of examining in order to enhance, understand or direct practice. This paper discusses two CoP groups, one is local geographically and institutionally and the 2nd is constituted of participants located in several global locations. In terms of differing characteristics and form between these two heterogeneous groups, the international group primarily utilized technology such as skype and zoom for communication due to the many locations. The pandemic enforced remote communication, ultimately homogenizing the groups in this way.

With an underlying aim to enrich participant understanding and skill (Cox, 2005), a CoP can effectively expand and develop competency through creating and instigating knowledge exchange (Wenger, 2011). Participants are self-selected (Ardichvili et al, 2003) in that their participation is optional and dependent on their choice to join and identify with the CoP. This last point defines the cohesiveness of the group and how it is both sustained and maintained.

Taking the form of a series of systematic, structured exchanges, (Wenger, 2011) participants connect in person or virtually to drive social learning and explore a collectively selected area of practice. The duration of CoP activity depends on group interaction, emerging outcomes and the collective decision to continue or end the cycle (Ray, 2006). Perhaps more importantly, the ideal CoP is not necessarily driven or associated with an institutional agenda. (Webber, 2016). The exchanges are dialogue based and self-directed with a convenor leading and coordinating the exchanges. These characteristics set CoP apart from the more typical working teams, project groups and non-formal professional networks and recognize knowledge production as epistemic, within organizational contexts (Pyrko et al, 2019).

Reale (2022) documents the process of a CoP within the Academic Library and presents the value of procedural learning and sharing as a pivotal part of fostering professional growth and meaningful work relationships. Contrary to this emphasis on egalitarian communications, according to Zhang and Sussman (2008) online communities of practice can enhance the constructive input of organizational structures. Their case study of an online travelling community suggested that a hierarchical model of social structures would further nurture the development and sharing of knowledge via CoP to highlight practice according to organizational structures and cultures.

Two learning communities: emerging purpose and practice

With a collective understanding of the abundant opportunities and potentialities embedded within the creation of a Virtual CoP, each group was formed upon the convenor invitation in January of 2020 in response to experienced barriers in academia such as limited resources and lack of mentorship (Yarris et al., 2019). Upon for-

mation, the two groups established their process of meetings and specific aims as follows:

Group A, a network of academics and staff across Greece, the U.K, the U.S.A and India and institutions including Arcadia University, Amrita School of Education and Westminster University. Participants initially met at various academic conferences beginning in 2015, decided to focus on CoP delivery with a primary aim to document the evolution of their CoP.

Group B, a selection of colleagues within an institution across several global locations decided on a self-initiated task to explore practice.

Having convened several times before the impact of the pandemic reached each geographical location, the groups decided on and shared the following key areas of interest:

1. Organizational learning for the teaching institution
2. Learning from practice across organizational structures
3. Exchanging research and academic knowledge to enrich our broader learning communities
4. How and if a boundary could be drawn for participants between their work responsibilities and participating in the CoP

In late February of 2020, the arrival of the pandemic dramatically reshaped the focus for both groups, bringing the collective interests together thematically due to the mutual challenges faced. Shared difficulties within the group spanned from urgently increased workloads in response to salient, changing factors surrounding instruction and pastoral student support to the intricacies of working from home and balancing child care, trouble with internet signals and being available online across time zones.

An evolving thematic focus followed over the next 6 months driven by the transformations taking place within the virtual workplace for each participant and then by institutional responses to the shifting practices and pandemic information. Changes to policies and procedures further impacted the CoP perspectives, paving the way to completing a cycle of practice in response to the historical event. This evolution was documented and critically framed within the group using the stages of administrative crisis: Crisis, Contingency and Reconciliation (Kouzman, 2008) to outline 3 key phases in academic focus.

Borrowing Kouzman's description of risk as the tension brought about by the synergy of problem and opportunity, these stages became apparent toward the end of the CoP cycles.

Crisis: According to Kouzman, dominant theory suggests that during times of crisis, decision taking on an administrative level typically becomes centralized yet this crisis impact created what he describes as atypical but frequent- a kind of informal decentralization in practice and responsibility. This shift, corroborated by participant experiences, added to the levels of decision making necessary for professionals in the learning institution. During the onset of the Pandemic, the group was preoccupied with ways to move forward. For example, focus was on how to immediately transition instruction fully online and the practical challenges of scheduling and delivering instruction around working from home for professionals.

Contingency: in response to crisis and renewed balances of power organizationally, Kouzmin outlines this stage as the strategic response to incidence. This later phase some months later signified the need to revisit the previous decisions and consider bettering practice. The focus on enriching online instruction and employing blended learning methods was accompanied by planning for future, eminent disruptive change due to the changing, local, governmental guidelines and long term impact to (mental) health.

Reconciliation: This shorter phase questioned what students and instructors need moving forward and evaluated the CoP track, findings and practice. This final stage informed practice far more than the previous two and overlapped with real time events in academia. During this phase participants identified a mutual exchange with the CoP informing their professional work groups and vice versa. According to Kouzmin, this phase invites operational cooperation to adjust practice following the evaluation of impact.

Varying outcomes on form and knowledge production would support the claim that virtual communities of practice are self-directed leading to a particularly unique way of operating, making the CoP evolution contingent to the distinct characteristics of that group (Dubé et al, 2006).

Findings on form group A

For interinstitutional group A, the benefits of participating in a community of practice where particularly visible with a unanimous suggestion that interaction offered a higher than typical degree of openness and sharing useful information between colleagues compared to formal working groups. The diverse make-up of the group and continued interaction demonstrated horizontal exchange with a significant flow of knowledge between and among varying levels of staff and faculty. Considering the challenges associated with participation, external pressures impacted the majority of the group associated to issues of confidentiality, competition and broader skeptical attitudinal barriers.

Findings on form group B

With the participants professionally associated with a single institution, group B identified problems and solutions within the CoP far more quickly. Here, mutual institutional knowledge acted as a catalyst carried further by a mutually recognized speed in communication with immediate access that comes with familiarity between colleagues. According to the group, practice was significantly informed by emerging CoP exchanges and this also occurred at a faster rate than for the interinstitutional team. Yet the CoP observed that the exchanges frequently replicated the typical working group. It became crucial for the convenor to ensure groups followed a CoP flow using the Convene- Curate – Emerge process (Akkerman et al, 2008) to ensure the last stage was reached to create cycles of knowledge rather than task-oriented exchanges.

These cycle phases are driven or recorded by the convenor and serve to maintain the momentum of emerging knowledge throughout the CoP duration. Tasked to Convene the meetings and organization of the CoP, the convenor must coordinate sessions to ensure they are 1) scheduled according to participant availability and ability to commit, and 2) that discussions are moderated in a way that fosters unilateral participation and 3.that all sessions maintain coherence in theme, aims and outcomes. The Curate phase consists of documenting meetings in order to evaluate, assess and adjust practice as well as ensuring that participants can revisit ongoing discussions and emerging themes. With an underlying aim to uncover infor-

mation on practice and examine emerging knowledge, Emerge signifies the need to draw out and emphasize outcomes from each meeting and ultimately from the entire CoP cycle.

Emerging findings on knowledge

For the teaching CoP participants, a preoccupation with the learner at each stage of the CoP cycles invited evolving accounts on instruction, student welfare and responsiveness during the study period. According to the teaching experiences of CoP participants, at the time of paper publication, students still find it challenging to operate as part of a group with online and blended instruction. Students are also now finding it challenging to return to attending in person classes. They are feeling fatigued with being alert and online and negotiating changing variables. Mental health is being severely overlooked.

For instructors adopting CoP principles in their classrooms, student responsiveness and engagement was elevated in classes where assessment and evaluation techniques took place after fostering a trusting environment with attention to participant individuality and engagement.

Where instructors aimed to engage students through awakening curiosity and involvement, engagement was amplified with the introduction of communal decision making and choice.

While we know that the evaluation of student competencies can lead to distinctly personal pathways into growth and development, the aforementioned CoP based approaches recognizing participant individuality included:

1. Redesign of peer review to establish a learning community focus
2. Including low stakes evaluation as a starting point for interaction with attention to frequency and timing
3. Assessing evaluation based on student responsiveness and engagement.

These findings can be attributed to an active virtual classroom culture that fosters trust within the interactive environment, similar to the observed enhancement of CoP encouraged by enabling trust (Usoro et al., 2007).

Conclusion: Informing practice in the future

Mapping emerging CoP knowledge is an imperative, validating and evaluating outcome (Wenger, 2011) and measures the impact and value of the interaction in entirety. In conclusion, combining the findings and documented evolutions for groups A and B, a series of suggestions inform practice moving forward in terms of delivering and participating in a COP. According to this study, these emerging indicators have also successfully lend themselves to fostering maintained, enhanced exchange within the virtual classroom and are presented as the following contextualizing steps:

1. Create community

Participant interaction is subject to external pressures making it important for group cohesiveness and identity to be established early on in the CoP cycle. Participating is a time consuming commitment which can only be enhanced by belonging to a distinct support structure of a beneficial nature. For example, an agreed two-way commitment, a mutual agreement of responsibilities for instructor and students, at the beginning of class can enhance responsibility and engagement both ways.

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2. Explore

The value of a CoP depends on a mutual interest and drive. Current events, sector challenges, principles and interorganizational practice are good starting points to establish an area of interest.

3. Develop

Communities of practice thrive within their own distinct parameters as developed by the participants and exchanges. It is vital to develop an inclusive practice to consider the contextual environment and learning community (Wenger, 1998).

4. Schedule

Systematic exchanges can ensure a maintained, sustained CoP provided that participant availabilities and individual characteristics are taken into account. Consequently, communication needs to be scheduled in a way that ignites interest and fosters support (Walinga & Wilson-Mah, 2017).

5. Record

For evaluation purposes, information and practice needs to be recorded in a way that allows for enhanced critique and a reconsideration of practice and emerging conclusions. Much like our final section here.

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