UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FRAMEWORK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

What is it about?

The purpose of communities of practice (CoP) and faculty learning communities (FLCs) is for group knowledge mobilization, collaboration, and skill development. A CoP is comprised of a domain, the genuine participation of members; community, the interactions between members; and practice, the opportunity for members to apply new skillsets outside of the CoP. The CoP is also effective when it includes faculty members from different disciplines, as faculty members explore and share different perspectives regarding a particular topic. However, online CoPs (OCoPs) have become prevalent due to COVID-19. This chapter examined seven tenets that informed an OCoP framework used by faculty.

What did we do?

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to deliver classes in a blended and online format, the authors reflected on how their roles of instructional designer, educator, and educational developer has shifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an OCoP that the authors developed as a case study, the authors isolated seven considerations regarding the development, delivering, and supporting of OCoPs and analyzed the implementation, implications, and impact of these considerations: context and need, technology and space, shared leadership, model flexibility, coordination and support, critical engagement, and extended impact.

Need to know

The OCoP framework that the authors created considered how to create and sustain an OCoP, which include the design, implementation, technologies used, and coordination of the OCoP. The authors also examined the primary audience and how to engage and impact this audience. Other considerations included leadership opportunities, accessibility, and flexibility considerations within the OCoP to ensure that the OCoP can be accessed by all faculty members.

What did we find?

From the case study, the authors found that domain, community, and practice were the main three characteristics that framed the structure of OCoPs, which ensured authentic participation from faculty members who wanted to join. The OCoP structure was also predicated on flexibility whereby members shared their perspectives, actively or passively listened to the discussion, or sent their perspectives about the topic digitally if they could not attend the meeting. Furthermore, content, process, and context were ideals that the authors aimed to promote, as these ideals aided in information storage, accessibility, and technological capacity.

Specifically, these ideals encouraged participants to lead topics and share and collaborate on strategies that worked for them in blended and online classrooms. Ultimately, the OCoP helped members organize their own professional development opportunities, collaborate on projects and publications, and rely on a repository of information to inform their future teaching practices and discussions with other colleagues.

What does it mean?

From their case study, the authors found that The OCoP model was unique in that the framework prioritized equitable discussion and coordination between members and facilitators. Further, OCoP members were grateful that they could communicate with faculty outside of their discipline to share worldviews and perspectives. The use of diverse technologies in the OCoP was especially impactful as it helped improve access, engagement, and comfortability for members. The OCoP also ensured that there was always consistent presence, immediate responsiveness, and reliable administration in its structure. Finally, the OCoP bypassed barriers of COVID-19 and fostered a space of belonging and connection.

About this snapshot

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Wright, A. C., Jardine, L., Anselmo, L., & Dyjur, P. (in press). An online community of practice framework for higher education. In K. Rainville, D. Title, and C. Descrochers (Eds.), *Expanding the vision of faculty learning communities in higher education: Emerging opportunities for faculty to support and engage with each other*. Information Age Publishers.

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