



Symposium on Educational Excellence 2024

Growing education scholarship through a community of practice

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Keywords

Mentoring; Community of practice; Faculty development; Third places in academia

Abstract

Can peers effectively mentor themselves? The “writing seed” sought to answer this with a supportive, peer-based community to foster education research and scholarship. This arose from a shared need: Many were looking for structure, mentorship, and opportunities for collaboration. We also wanted to approach this in a scholarly way and document outcomes.

Background

Thus, the writing seed emerged as a community of practice in January 2023 as part of the Educators’ Collaborative. Communities of practice form around a common interest or concern to share and expand one’s knowledge through interaction (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2010). This group began with six individuals who set two simple rules (Sull & Eisenhardt, 2016): To have “just enough” structure and to be small and engaged enough to be known. Communities of practice benefit from having a coordinator to help facilitate, build, and evaluate the practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2010), who, by default, was the seed facilitator. The community agreed that we would meet on MS Teams once per week for the first quarter and use the chat to seek assistance or advice between sessions. During this hour, we would briefly share our planned work for the hour, write for 45 minutes, and then close by stating our writing goals between sessions. We met to evaluate the community at the end of the first quarter (April 2023) and the first year (December 2023).

Findings & Impact

Interest in and attendance at the writing times was strong. At the end of the first year, 16 of 20 who expressed interest attended at least once, with eight individuals attending regularly. The community comprised individuals from the Schools of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Dentistry, and the Provost's Office. After six months, we added a second hour during the week.

Participants Increased Outputs. Members served as pilots for interview questions, reviewed material, and established collaborative projects. Individuals used the time to write conference abstracts, work on their dissertations, and respond to requests for revision. One member observed decreased productivity when they took a break from the group.

Sharing enhanced the sense of community. We added a monthly colloquium in quarter two to discuss work in progress and ideas. People felt welcomed and known by others (noted as missing in larger programs), exchanged resources, connected to other groups and opportunities, and began project collaborations.

Consistency and synchronicity increased output. The regularity of meetings prompted people to think and plan their work, while the synchronous time served as a judgment-free forcing function. The effectiveness of synchronous work was a common insight, with a few members expanding their use of body doubling (ADDA Editorial Team, 2022) to other projects.

Quarterly evaluations increased commitment. Calendar requests were sent quarterly, with the last meeting being an evaluation. An unintended consequence is that people re-committed each quarter, a self-check-in process that people have found beneficial. We plan to keep and formalize this re-commitment practice.

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The required isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic changed the fabric of our communities, eliminating third places (Oldenburg, 2023). However, it accelerated the use of virtual tools to collaborate in new ways, crossing organizational silos and geographical divides. Using principles of the third place (Oldenburg, 2023), communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2010), and body doubling (ADDA Editorial Team, 2022) the writing seed created a sense of belonging and self-efficacy among members.

Possible applications

This concept and model may be applied to many areas of our professional lives. The session will end with tips for forming a community of practice.

References

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