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Faculty learning communities: Supporting the development of online educators

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic prompted a rapid transition to distance education internationally. Higher education institutions have since been challenged to adapt and support faculty needs for online teaching practices and pedagogical approaches that differ from face-to-face teaching. One approach to consider is the fostering of faculty learning communities, peer-led communities with faculty members of varied status or experience, generally selected by a facilitator or programme coordinator. Faculty learning communities have been found to provide effective environments for faculty development initiatives through members' collective encouragement, support and collaboration in the development of teaching practices. This article examines a university in the United Arab Emirates that looked at fostering faculty learning communities to deliver training and support in learning design and teaching pedagogy to improve online teaching practices. Findings suggest that faculty learning communities thrive when experienced members facilitate learning through shared goals alongside collective input, participation and collaboration in the community. Given the current pertinence of this topic, more research is needed to better understand if learning communities have long-term impact to promote effective planning and development of online teaching practices in distance education.

1. Introduction

Governments around the world took rapid, high-stakes actions in response to the global Covid-19 pandemic. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was no exception, and precautions were taken across the seven Emirates that affected all sectors. In the education sector, policies were drafted and disseminated with the goal of protecting students and institutional staff while also aiming for the continuation of education, albeit delivered differently (MOE, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The UAE Ministry of Education (MoE) referred to the fully online mandated approach as distance learning (MOE, 2020). However, due to the rapid, unplanned nature of the transition; the experience of faculty and students during this period could potentially cast a negative light on the concept of distance or online learning, therefore, in view of this, the author refers to the continuation of education provision in this period as Emergency Distance Learning (EDL), to differentiate from that of thoughtfully designed, purposefully created distance and online education (Hodges et al. 2020).

While distance education in the form of online learning is not a new pedagogy in general, the speed of transition resulted in a lack of opportunity for Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and their educators to adapt their teaching practices for effective online delivery, to consider the engagement of learners and alignment to the strengths of the modality, arguably not providing an optimal learning experience for students (Hodges et al. 2020).

This article provides a framework for well-designed learning experiences, reverting to the concept of the Community of Inquiry (COI) for guidance before looking at how faculty learning communities (FLCs) can support faculty change and adoption of COI in online teaching practice, for the continuation of distance learning. As this transition of teaching practice requires a change in human mindset and behaviour, Kurt Lewin's change management model has been used in this study to analyse how a facilitated, multidisciplinary FLC can support the advancement of effective online teaching practices in HEIs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Designing engaging learning experiences

Community of Inquiry (COI) is a constructivist concept of education, which as Garrison and Arbaugh (2007)

explained, predicts a new era of distance learning and consists of three intersecting key elements, namely Cognitive Presence (CP), Teaching Presence (TP) and Social Presence (SP), which ensure an engaging educational experience (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007)

2.2 Cognitive presence—COI

Literature indicates that, as in traditional face-to-face settings, educators perform crucial facilitation for higher-order learning activities and attainment of educational goals. Following an assessment of online learning experiences with 2,314 online learners from 32 US college campuses, Shea (2006) found that the crucial pedagogical practices such as active learning, scaffolding and modelling can help reduce the cognitive distance between the learner and learning material. Shea (2006) found that specifically, online scaffolding enables learners to articulate their views and experiences, consider alternative views expressed by classmates and instructors and 'integrate new ideas into existing cognitive structures'. These results have been corroborated by Shea and Bidjerano (2009), who undertook exploratory research with a sample group of 2,159 virtual learners to assess students' engagement within online educational classes. Shea and Bidjerano (2009) found that 70% of the variation in students' levels of CP could be attributed to "instructors" skills in fostering TP and their own abilities to establish a sense of SP

Yang & Durrington (2010) hold the view that educators' abilities in the distance education space are crucial to the effectiveness of online learning not only because they can motivate students to learn but also because they provide an experience through which students are able to critically

reflect upon their own learning experiences. Cleveland-Innes (2019) explains that online learning is underwritten by a participatory relationship between the student and the educator in which the two co-construct the ideas, meanings and practices of learning.

2.3 Teaching presence—COI

Studies conducted by Keller & Suzuki (2004) and Yengin, Karahoca, Karahoca & Yucel (2010) reported that there can be a sense of isolation associated with distance and online modes of learning; however, more deliberate presence from the educator can help to mitigate this.

Jiang, Parent and Eastmond (2006) investigated adult students' progress in a competency-based online graduate programme and measured their performance in various dimensions of learning opportunities. Jiang et al. (2006) found that students' interaction with their online instructor was the most important factor in facilitating learning because it enhanced their engagement with course materials. Similar results were reported by Garrison and Arbaugh (2007), who noted that the role of the teacher is a highly significant element not only of student engagement but also of perceived learning. Furthermore, in recent studies by Aharony & Bar-Ilan (2016) and Fidalgo, Thormann, Kulyk & Lencastre (2020) it was reported that teacher presence is an essential factor motivating students to learn, especially in asynchronous learning environments where courses can be accessed and completed at a time convenient to the learner.

2.4 Social presence—COI

Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky and Thompson (2012) conducted exploratory research with two samples of undergraduate students studying at a North Carolina university. The first sample group was taught through traditional face-to-face methods, while the second group was provided with an online module. Both groups were taught by the same instructor and evaluated through completion of the same materials. Students from both groups completed self-report questionnaires to assess their engagement in the respective courses. Driscoll et al. (2012) found that while there was no significant distinction in levels of satisfaction between the two teaching methods, students in the online learning group reported lower attainment than the traditional face-to-face group. According to Driscoll et al. (2012), this outcome is because online learning must be developed to meet the unique requirements of distance learning to be effective.

In a study conducted by Garrison (2017) it was found to enable purposeful communication and interaction between

the student and the educator, online education must also aim to integrate individual students into a broader network of learner-centred experiences, such as by providing active learning, group-based learning and reflection activities.

2.5 Faculty supporting faculty to enhance online teaching practice

In order to align to the concepts of COI and achieve cognitive, teaching and social presence it is important for faculty members to develop online teaching practices. Considering the design and delivery of appropriate learning content and experiences for the online modality is a key element. The rapid transition to the delivery of distance education prompted a need for rapid adaptation of faculty and infrastructure in order to provide engaging distance education. In the HEI context in which institutions can be resistant or complex to change, Communities of Practice (CoPs) can emerge quickly and informally to enable faculty and experts to share experiences and collaborate to improve understanding and overcome challenges surrounding a topic of shared interest (Wenger, 2011). One flexible and deliberate approach to a CoP in an HEI context is a faculty learning community (FLC), a peer-led community with faculty members of varied status or experience, generally selected by a facilitator or programme coordinator. Previous research has found that FLCs can provide effective environments for faculty development initiatives through members' collective encouragement, support and collaboration in the development of teaching practices (Cox, 2002). A challenge to the development of FLCs is effective facilitation because the role should be carried out by a strong communicator with experience in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The facilitator does not necessarily have to be a subject matter expert but should have skills in fostering community (Cox, Richlin & Essington, 2013). Palmer (1999) found that encouraging social interaction was also a key ingredient to engaging faculty in supportive training. Research has outlined the extent to which FLCs promote a shared group identity and contribute to community development. Smith and Smith (1993) found that successful training programmes consist of collaboration, faculty ownership and empowerment in an on-going programme of delivery.

2.5.1 FLCs to achieve COI?

While research has shown that student engagement in online learning can be achieved through the adoption of frameworks such as COI, to guide the design, organisation and delivery of course content (Aghostinho, Bennet, Lockyer, Jones, & Harper, 2019)

Figure 2. Kurt Lewin's Change Management Model (MindTools, n. d.)

Studies conducted by Clarke, Hyde & Drennan (2016) and Newbold, Seifert, Doherty, Scheffler & Ray (2017) found that many educators in HEIs may struggle to adapt to designing and delivering in online learning environments because they have been socialised into context-specific roles as content experts, meaning that pedagogy and learning design might not be a consideration in their teaching practice.

However, in the current situation of mandated distance education, educators are required to adapt quickly. As such, training, and support are needed in order to become effective educators in the online space. Therefore, this article's investigation of FLCs as a mechanism for developing faculty in the design and delivery of online teaching may offer crucial insights for organisations in a similar position. The Kurt Lewin change management model will be discussed in the next section as the theoretical framework for this article.

3. The Kurt Lewin change model as theoretical framework

While the concept of change management is familiar in business settings, it may not be common practice in HEIs. In fact, the education sector has been slow to reform in

response to the needs of modern society (Freire, 2018; Robinson, 2010). The current transition of education provision, however, is driven by an external disruptor that mandates change at an unprecedented pace. Thus, this study will utilise the Kurt Lewin change management model from 1974 (MindTools, n. d.), which consists of three stages essential to impactful change, to explore thoughtful change management. The three stages are 1) Unfreezing, 2) Changing and 3) Refreezing (Figure 2).

Lewin's model (unfreezing, changing and refreezing) is an established model for implementing change.

Stage 1: Unfreezing (planning)

This initial stage involves the acceptance that change is needed by challenging patterns of behaviour and/or perceived models of success. This can be achieved by showing why the existing approaches are not working and planning alternatives.

Stage 2: Changing (Action)

Following the uncertainty created in the unfreeze stage, the changing or action stage is where people start to take

ownership of the change and offer approaches and solutions to implement the transition.

Stage 3: Refreezing (Result)

Once changes are happening or being implemented, the refreezing stage ensures that the momentum continues by offering some new consistent elements that were a product of the change approach.

The implementation of change involves the current state of an organisation to be disrupted, reformed and reset into a desired state. Critics of this model highlight the over-simplification of organisations and absence of a user-centred approach. If the persons involved in the process of change are neglected, change initiatives may result in failure (Kanter, Jick, & Stein, 1992).

Lewin's solution was to highlight the significance of preparing people for the change (unfreezing) and reinforcing the necessity of change (freezing) after the implementation of the initiative; this process ensures that people first understand the necessity of change and therefore, reduce the chances of returning to old routines (MindTools, n. d.).

4. Problem Statement

This article explores how FLCs can support the development of online teaching practices at a University in the UAE by responding to the following questions.

- RQ1.1—Which factors impact the design of an online training programme?
- RQ1.2—How can FLCs support delivery of an online training programme?

5. Methodology

5.1 Case focus: the institution

This study focuses on the experiences of an Australian university campus in Dubai, UAE. The University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD) is one of the oldest private institutions in the Emirates.

5.2 Aims of the FLC

The FLC aims to establish a community of faculty that will enable sustained change across the institution. Change would be enacted by members of the FLC who have ex-

pertise in certain areas and shared amongst members. The responsibility for change emerges with faculty members rotating to drive the community, offering their own experiences and identifying areas they would like to lead.

5.3 Initiating the FLC

As the initiating member of the FLC, I have experience in designing curriculum and learning experiences in face-to-face, online and blended modalities and therefore, due to the needs identified by the move to EDL, I acted to provide guidance in the form of training in designing distance education. FLCs thrive when experts in the group facilitate learning around shared goals and there is collective input, participation and collaboration from the members regardless of status or experience in the community (Cowan, 2012).

5.4 Member selection

Invitations to participate in the learning community was sent to all faculty members across the four departments of business, engineering, humanities, and the University College. In total, 51 participants signed up to be part of the FLC. Their roles consisting of teaching undergraduate and postgraduate learners and with professional backgrounds of business, engineering, nursing, education and language teaching.

5.5 FLC: First contact

The starting point for the community was to participation in a structured, facilitated training programme that offered opportunities for continued collaboration, support and training across all faculty areas.

The FLC members self-selected which of the 4 week-long offerings they would attend. The training programme was delivered via the organisation's video conferencing tool and lasted for 1 week, offering one 90-minute session per day for 5 days (see Figure 3). The programme was repeated 4 times to give all FLC members the opportunity to attend.

5.6 Data collection: Member feedback

Faculty feedback is essential for improving future workshops and identifying future themes. Therefore, data was collected in the form of qualitative feedback derived from an evaluation video that participants created following the final training session. The 3-2-1 evaluation asked participants to access a video tool that they had been introduced to and answer the following questions:

Figure 3. Overview of the ‘Designing Distance Education’ training

- What are 3 things that they had learnt from the training (reflection),
- What were 2 things that they already knew (linking to prior knowledge) and
- What is 1 thing they were still unsure about (needs analysis for further training).

5.7 Data analysis

I employed an inductive approach to thematic analysis of the data to avoid any potential bias and to offer flexibility in the outcome. I manually coded responses to the training evaluation videos, identifying similarities, differences and relationships between components of the data before combining codes to form themes (O’Leary, 2017).

6. Findings and discussion

The use of literature supports the outcomes of the online training programme learning design. In addition, the data of the 3-2-1 evaluations was analysed by comparing and determining similarities and differences in order to identify patterns. The findings were analysed according to each of the following themes that have emerged from the data:

- Learning design
- Learning and teaching approaches
- Teaching tools/ technology

The following findings and discussion are structured and reported in relation to the theoretical framework of the Kurt Lewin’s Change Management Model in order to address the identified research problem of how FLCs might support the

development of online teaching practices.

In relation to RQ 1.1, factors that impact the design of an online training programme, stages 1 (planning) and 2 (action), below, highlight the need for planning and implementation of an online education programme that supports the FLC by fostering community and providing training in the development of online teaching practice.

In relation to RQ 1.2, how FLCs can support delivery of an online training programme, is addressed in stage 3 with the collection and analysis of feedback to inform future training programmes.

6.1 Stage 1: Unfreezing (planning)

As part of Lewin’s ‘unfreezing’ stage, planning was represented by the learning design of the ‘designing distance education’ training programme which was informed by the COI framework to incorporate best practices in online learning design and teaching.

Each session was assigned a theme and related practice skill, allowing participants to gain or reaffirm theoretical aspects of learning and teaching while offering practical experience in using tools or approaches that could be transferred back into their teaching practice. Each session built upon the content of the previous session and gave opportunity for reflection, facilitator instruction, collaboration and active learning opportunities. Sessions were designed in a way to reduce teacher-led delivery and increase learner-centred content as the participants progressed.

Table 1. Responses to the question: What 3 things did you learn from the training? (reflection)

Theme	Participant's response summary
Learning design	The participants indicated that they had learnt about aspects of learning design, such as chunking content, learning sequencing and cognitive load.
Learning and teaching approaches	The predominant area represented in this theme was the content and activities related to developing educator presence. This was a substantial area of the training that covered the COI and how videos can be quickly created and used to provide deliberate teacher presence in online environments. The specific instructional strategy of the jigsaw method was something that came up regularly as something newly learnt.
Teaching tools / technology	The training introduced three collaboration tools that could be integrated with the existing learning management system: FlipGrip, Padlet and Google Jamboard. A large proportion of the respondents named these tools as something they had learnt.

Table 2. Responses to the question: What 2 things did you already know? (linking to prior knowledge)

Theme	Participant's response summary
Learning design	Respondents were equally divided between having previous familiarity and being introduced to the areas of chunking content, learning sequencing and cognitive load
Learning and teaching approaches	Respondents identified that the active learning techniques covered were already known or reinforced during the training in addition to material coverage, assessment for learning and feedback techniques.
Teaching tools / technology	Very few respondents reported that they had prior knowledge or experience with the technological tools that were covered.

Table 3. Responses to the question: Name 1 thing that you are still unsure about. (needs analysis for further training)

Theme	Participant's response summary
Learning design	There were few responses under this question across all themes. 'Academic integrity of online exams' was mentioned along with 'strategies for online only or face-to-face'. I believe further exploration is required to uncover the meaning of the last statement.
Learning and teaching approaches	Some individual responses highlighted 'Design thinking', 'Group assessment design', 'active learning strategies' and 'interactivity for scientific courses'.
Teaching tools / technology	This theme produced the most responses, with participants requesting more training on the functions of video conferencing tools, such as breakout rooms, creation of digital learning objects and 'new technologies to be used in class'.

6.2 Stage 2: Changing (action)

As stated, the COI framework underpinned the learning design of the training programme. Its use to develop effective online learning was also communicated in the content of the sessions throughout the programme and can therefore be associated with communicating the need for considerations

to be made when designing online education, such as CP, SP and TP

In addition, as previously noted, Cox et al. (2013) stated that the development of an FLC requires effective facilitation from a member or coordinator with experience in the scholarship of teaching and learning. I was the primary

facilitator of programme having over a decade of experience in the area of teaching and learning, learning design and digital education.

6.3 Stage 3: Refreezing (results)

To identify any areas of the training that may need to be readdressed, reinforced or built upon, a quick activity to evaluate the programme was delivered to the participants: a 3-2-1 evaluation.

The 3-2-1 evaluation asked participants to access a video tool that they had been introduced to and answer the following: What are three things that they had learnt from the training (reflection), two things that they already knew (linking to prior knowledge) and one thing they were still unsure about (needs analysis for further training). Twenty-four of the 51 participants provided a response. The responses provide qualitative data that was analysed and the following themes identified: learning design, learning and teaching approaches and teaching tools/technology. In Tables 1, 2 and 3 each question is presented with a table of the theme and a summary of the participant responses in relation to the identified theme.

One aim of the training was to balance the theory and practical aspects of learning design, reviewing the evaluation responses shows a general consensus that participants are more focussed on training related to technology and tools, feeling that they already had a good understanding of and experience with learning design and learning and teaching approaches. Evidence of this in teaching practice, however, is something that could be explored by the FLC through peer observation and coaching.

7. Conclusion

Due to the international Covid-19 pandemic, teaching practices have been impacted and change has been required across the education sector. This study aimed to examine how FLCs can support the development of online teaching practice, particularly around appropriate learning design for the delivery of distance learning. Lewin's change management model has provided a useful lens to view and structure the findings of this study, the unfreezing stage came from an external source—the global Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent mandate from the UAE MoE that led to the provision of EDL. Due to the unprecedented nature of the semester, there was an acceptance of change to preserve the student experience, which paved the way for planning of a training programme which aimed to impact teaching by modelling

best practice in its design and delivery to provide faculty participants with knowledge, techniques and tools that could be immediately transferred into their own practice to support change beyond the workshops. The changing or action phase of the model was the development of an FLC, and subsequent delivery of the training programme, and the refreezing stage gathered results from the training to assess if changes were impactful and transferable to future practice.

In order to achieve sustained change, FLC members will need to take ownership and continue to drive the community by using their own experiences and identifying areas that they would like to lead. This study provides insights into leveraging a FLC to train faculty on appropriate learning design for the delivery of distance education using the COI framework. The outcomes may be of interest to policymakers looking to create and implement new policies to improve online education, or faculty developers, faculty members and educators in general looking to develop online teaching practice.

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