

https://dspace.org/

Building online communities: exploring the conditions for interpersonal and cognitive connections

Padayachee, Kershree; Kluyts, Marike

2022
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/33514

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

CHAPTER 6

Building online communities: Exploring the conditions for interpersonal and cognitive connections

Kershree Padayachee
University of the Witwatersrand
Kershree.Padayachee@wits.ac.za

Marike Kluyts
University of the Witwatersrand
marike.kluyts@wits.ac.za

Abstract

Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT&L) arose out of necessity in 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and continued in 2021. A critical but often over-looked aspect of ERT&L was the feeling of isolation that increased significantly for staff and students alike, with the remoteness making it difficult to connect and form communities. Given the importance of connection and community in learning, academic success and general wellbeing, the question that unfolded for us as academic developers involved in the academic support of students and staff, was how to re-create spaces for connection and community (interpersonal and cognitive) in the current online environment. In this chapter, we reflect on this question in the context of the various communities within the Academic Development (AD) spheres in which we were involved during the Covid-19 pandemic. These included postgraduate writing communities, a community of Instructional designers at the institution, and faculty teaching and learning communities that emerged between AD staff and lecturing staff. Data was generated through an autoethnographic approach involving free writing of our experiences, followed by coding and

thematic analysis using the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 1999) which focuses on the three types of presences required for the successful functioning of online learning communities, viz., social, cognitive and teaching presence. Four characteristics emerged that enabled the transformation of the online space into a platform for knowledge building and knowledge sharing. We discuss these characteristics and the implications thereof for ongoing student and staff support, with a cautionary note on the impact of social positioning on community engagement. We conclude with some suggestions for ways in which the various online communities might be maintained and strengthened to enhance teaching and learning beyond Covid-19.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry, online teaching and learning, academic development, social positioning, Covid-19

Introduction

With the necessity to move to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERT&L) due to the Covid-19 pandemic, feelings of isolation and disconnection set in for many staff and students. As Academic Development (AD) practitioners, we not only felt isolated from the staff and students whom we engage with, but also from each other due to the disparate positioning of AD practitioners across the university. However, as we scrambled to find solutions to the teaching and learning challenges at hand, it became apparent that we could benefit from online collaboration and collective problem solving. Communities of Practice (CoPs) thus became important third spaces (Oldenburg 1999), creating a sense of belonging, connecting, and learning in our virtual meetings.

CoPs can be defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015: 1). Members of a community of practice gain access to a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems. In other words, members benefit from a shared practice. The communities which we report on here were either intentionally created for a particular practice (e.g., writing skills development), while others emerged organically amongst colleagues with shared interest in teaching and learning, and who were experiencing similar challenges during ERT&L. As a result, these online communities became spaces of collective critical inquiry and reflection. This type of engagement, coupled with the fact that these community learning spaces were computer mediated during ERT&L, reminded us of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (1999), shown in Figure 1.

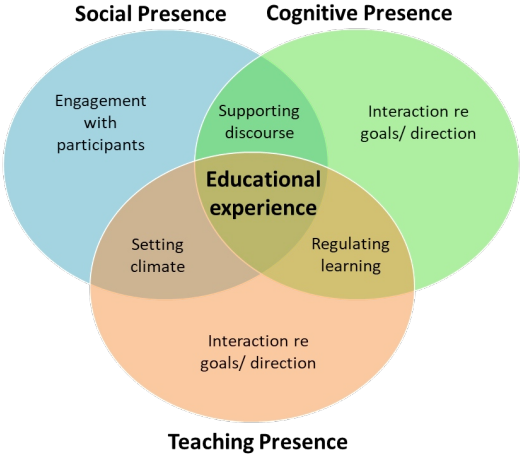


Figure 1: The Community of Inquiry Framework

(Garrison, Anderson and Archer 1999)

The Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 1999) highlights social, cognitive and teaching presence as three key types of presence required for effective online engagement and learning. The CoI framework is geared towards the creation of meaningful educational experiences through the establishment of cognitive, social and teaching presences (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung 2010). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) argue that attention to these presences in an online community, supports collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning.

It should be noted that CoPs and CoIs are not synonymous. However, we found that the guiding principles of both types of communities aptly described how we navigated our online spaces, reached out to each other, reached out to the staff and students, and learnt new ways of doing and thinking linked to our work in the online environment. We therefore drew on both frameworks to reflect on and analyse our participation in three specific learning communities, linked to our different sub-fields of AD work within our AD unit based in the Faculty of Science within a research-intensive university in South Africa. However, for purposes of consistency, we hereafter refer to these as CoIs, although, the underpinning principles of CoPs still apply.

To provide more context, Author 1 is primarily involved with the ongoing professional development of academic staff in the area of teaching and learning, while Author 2 is focussed mainly on undergraduate and postgraduate student support for writing and other academic literacies. Our communities (and our reflections in this paper) are thus, similarly structured. One CoI exists for engagement with postgraduate students, the domain of interest here linked to the writing students needed to complete in order to fulfil their degree

requirements. The other two CoIs focus on support for teaching and learning development (one being an intra-faculty specific community between our faculty teaching and learning (T&L) unit and academic staff in the faculty, and the other an inter-faculty community of practice among AD staff from different AD units throughout the university).

This chapter arose as a consequence of our discussions on our experiences of being, at various times, both participants and facilitators in the aforementioned communities, and how we approached the creation of spaces for connection (interpersonal and cognitive) in the current online environment. From these initial discussions emerged the idea to use an integration of the CoP and CoI frameworks to analyse and better understand the nature of these communities, our primary aim being to use this nuanced understanding to inform future online community engagement and AD praxis.

Data collection and methods

This study involved an autoethnographic approach as it allowed us to look at ourselves and our work in a meaningful and thoughtful way, within the larger educational context that Covid-19 created at our institution and in our praxis. Although originally used in culture studies, autoethnography has been used in higher education. For example, lecturers have used autoethnography to explore their teaching experiences, the impact their teaching has on students as well as reflecting on social justice teacher education as captured in the volume edited by Fitzgerald, Heston and Tidwell (2009), as well as their experiences of academic culture (Walford 2004). This research methodology privileges the self in the research design, recognising that experiences of the self can contribute to a deeper understanding of various social phenomena (Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington 2008).

Hamilton *et al.* (2008) further suggest that autoethnography can reveal the professional identities of those who write them through situating the researchers within a specific context. This calls for 'strong reflexivity' on the part of the researcher, drawing on the influence between self, co-participants and the setting they find themselves in, reflecting and introspecting on how these three aspects influence each other (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2016). The approach was, therefore, ideal for our study on the nature of online AD CoIs.

For this study, we made use of self-narratives that can be categorised as personal documents, to explore our current phenomenon. We each wrote in-depth narratives to reflect on our experiences of the AD communities in which we participated, guided by questions that were framed according to the domains of the CoI framework (Table 1).

Table 1: Questions that guided the narrative inquiry, based on the three types of presence that underpin communities of inquiry

CoI focus area	Cognitive presence	Social presence	Teaching presence (facilitator perspective)
Postgraduate writing CoI	• Is there opportunity for reflection? • Is there room for sharing and connecting ideas? • Is there space for collective meaning making and creative problem solving?	• How do students communicate? • Is there space for emotional expression? • Is there opportunity for group cohesion?	• What curriculum principles guide interactions with students? • To what extent are facilitators and students available to each other?
i) Intra-faculty T&L CoI between AD practitioners and academic staff **ii) Interfaculty T&L CoI consisting mainly of AD practitioners from different disciplines and with different competencies**	• Is there opportunity for reflection and constructive critique? • Are there opportunities for perspective sharing? • Is there acknowledgment of different expertise and competencies? • Is there opportunity for creative problem solving?	• Is there risk-free expression? • Is there group cohesion? • Are participants open to collaboration? • Is there opportunity for perspective sharing?	• What principles guide facilitation? • Is there space for sharing personal meaning? • To what extent are CoP members' competencies expressed and valued?

The data generated from the narratives were examined in a four-step approach starting with compilation of the 2 independent narratives, which were drawn together into one document. This was followed by inductive and deductive analysis of the data to reveal emerging clusters of meaning and themes, which consequently allowed for interpretation

of the data in a meaningful and contextualised way (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010).

Findings and discussion

Although our study was structured on the three domains of online CoI, our analysis revealed that in light of the nature of our work, for us as AD practitioners, social presence appeared to underpin both teaching and cognitive presence. Indeed, this may in fact be true for any teaching and learning interaction, given that teaching and learning, whether online, face-to-face or blended, is a socially constructed event. It also addressed the need for connection and community which we craved due to the isolation created by the pandemic, and to rehumanise the people who during ERT&L became "names in my inbox, or initials on my screen when we did consultations, workshops, or classes" (Author 2). The importance of social presence in CoIs was reiterated by closer examination of the data, which revealed the existence of a further four characteristics related to social presence, that enabled effective engagement and learning. These included that CoIs had to be 1) **supportive and safe spaces;** 2) **underpinned by the principles of democracy and equality;** 3) **collaborative;** and 4) **seen as a platform for knowledge sharing and knowledge building.**

Considering the first characteristic, i.e., CoIs as safe and supportive spaces, Author 2 reflected the emphasis in the postgraduate writing CoI was to develop a supportive and safe environment in which everyone felt comfortable to share their feelings and frustrations around writing. This was achieved through an icebreaker activity where each participant introduced themselves by sharing a 'poster' with their research topic, where they are in the writing process, what they would like to focus on during the week, and a meme that captures their feelings about writing.

The meme seemed to be particularly powerful, as most students' choices reflected frustrations linked to postgraduate study or feelings of imposter syndrome. This led to an open learning environment that showed the participants that they were not alone - many frustrations were quite similar. This opened everyone's eyes and set the tone that this was a place where one could share one's insecurities and vulnerabilities, and that through sharing in this supportive space, participants could connect with others and work towards addressing the issues they were facing.

Similarly, Author 1's reflection also revealed the importance of creating a safe and supportive space in intra-faculty communities, recalling that when this intention was held by the facilitator, it created the conditions for participants to speak openly of their concerns about feeling ill-equipped to transition to ERT&L, and of the anxiety arising from not knowing how to transform lectures and assessment for the emergency online learning environment. It was also noted that both inter- and intra-faculty CoIs became a place to voice frustrations and to share uncertainties and vulnerabilities, as well as a place to share 'wins' and positive stories of ERT&L.

Interestingly, Author 1 also noted that inter-faculty CoIs (consisting primarily of AD practitioners), soon became a place where such staff could voice one's feelings of marginalisation within the wider university community, a feeling that is widely reported in the literature on AD practices. This is further linked to the next two characteristics of CoIs that emerged in our data - democracy and collaboration.

In the context of the postgraduate writing CoIs, Author 2 noted that within all these, a democratic space emerged with a relatively flat hierarchy. In the writing retreats the facilitator was not the 'beacon of

all knowledge', but someone also on her own writing journey, a sentiment that was explicitly shared with the participants. This stance opened the door for participants and the facilitator (Author 2) to negotiate and collaboratively set the agenda for each day. The group thus, decided what they wanted to do, discuss and explore for each session, thereby creating a democratic and collaborative online CoI. The collaborative nature of the writing CoIs was further evidenced in the organic formation of smaller collaborative groups, with students from different Schools in the Faculty creating informal groups to write together (pomodoro groups), as well as support groups on WhatsApp to keep in touch. Some students also formalised these into weekly catch-up meetings where they could write to each other to ask for peer advice. In addition, Author 2 noted the transition from knowledge acquisition as the primary motive for engaging in the CoI to knowledge creation observed in the discovery sessions, in which students and Author 2 shared tips, tricks and resources that they picked up through their writing endeavours.

Democracy, collaboration, knowledge sharing, and knowledge creation were also mentioned as important guiding principles by both authors in recollections of intra- and inter-faculty CoIs. Both authors described these CoIs as spaces in which colleagues journeyed together on the ERT&L road, with participants sometimes adopting the Vygotskian perspective of the facilitators as the more knowledgeable other (MKO) (Vygotsky 1978). However, given that ERT&L could not have been predicted or prepared for, it was important for the authors to explicitly address the expectation by acknowledging their limitations in knowing the best practices for the prevailing circumstances, and to actively elicit academic staff experiences and challenges of ERT&L with students to facilitate co-learning. In this way, the CoIs provided a common space for

sharing experiences, expertise, resources and lessons learnt, and for collaborative peer learning within a community of practice and inquiry as we "collectively navigated our way through the good, the bad and sometimes, the ugly of ERT" (Author 1). The intra-and inter-faculty CoIs were thus noted as rich spaces for the discovery of new insights about students and learning, leading to the emergence of innovative teaching and learning practices. The inter-faculty, AD focussed CoIs in particular, were viewed as vibrant and dynamic knowledge creation hubs, with a variety of university staff from previously separated divisions and departments (e.g. information and communications technology, AD, instructional design, curriculum design, quality assurance, and senior management) collaboratively researching emergent teaching and learning phenomena and finding solutions to the multi-faceted challenges presented by ERT&L.

It is important to note however, that as much as the online CoIs were predominantly regarded in our reflections as being democratic, collaborative and appreciative of different stakeholder expertise, there were moments noted in which we, as facilitators of these CoIs, felt the need to moderate certain voices that were underpinned by preconceived notions of right and wrong. Such intervention was at times needed to maintain the safety and collaborative nature of the CoIs. The data also revealed that this phenomenon appeared in both intra-and inter-faculty teaching and learning CoIs, with the potential for AD and instructional designer voices to sometimes be silenced in the intra-faculty CoIs in particular. This was attributed to the historically hierarchical nature of academia as well as the historic positioning of AD and Higher Education Studies on the margins of academia (Green and Little 2013), rather than as recognised fields of academic and professional practice. Social positioning (Lawson 2012; Lawson and

Morgan 2021) sometimes appeared to play a role in conditioning the nature of the social presence and social interactions, where the different institutional positions and roles one occupied either enabled or constrained participation.

It was, therefore, important for us to remain aware of potentially difficult power dynamics and preconceived notions of academic legitimacy and to address this both implicitly, and sometimes explicitly as well, to highlight and normalise the fact that teaching and learning is a multi-stakeholder endeavour, as pointed out by Padayachee and Dison (2021). A key part of this process of addressing power dynamics in CoIs with diverse participants is acknowledgement of contributions from both experts and relative newcomers (Lave and Wenger 1991). Also important for us as AD practitioners was the need to remain cognizant of the influence of our own social positioning relative to other stakeholders particularly in the intra- and inter-faculty CoIs, and to exercise our own agency in making our contributions heard. It is worth noting however, that despite these perceived constraints, we both experienced a genuine willingness from most participants in these CoIs to transcend traditional academic hierarchies and disciplinary and professional boundaries, and to embrace the contributions of different role players, perhaps in part, because the emergency circumstances required it. However, as we shift out of emergency mode, the long-term sustainability of such interactions is uncertain, especially CoIs involving academic staff, as this would require further commitment in an already highly constrained academic climate. Nevertheless, we will continue to explore ways to sustain CoIs for staff and students due to the significant potential benefits.

Conclusion

Our reflections on the nature of the online CoP and inquiry revealed the importance of creating and maintaining a strong social presence in these learning structures. However, genuine and meaningful participation depends on the creation of a safe, democratic and supportive environment, acceptance of all voices (regardless of institutional position or rank), and collaboration. Embedding these principles in online CoIs greatly enhances the creation of personal and cognitive connections that are essential for cultivating a sense of belonging, legitimate participation, leading to shared meaning making and knowledge creation.

References

Anderson, L. and Glass-Coffin, B. 2016. Autoethnographic Modes of Inquiry. In: *Handbook of Autoethnography*. London: Routledge.

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T. and Archer, W. 1999. Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3): 87-105.

Garrison, D.R. and Arbaugh, J.B., 2007. Researching the community of inquiry framework: Review, issues, and future directions. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 10(3): 157-172.

Garrison, D. R., Cleveland-Innes, M. and Fung, T. S. 2010. Exploring causal relationships among teaching, cognitive and social presence: Student perceptions of the community of inquiry framework. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(1-2): 31-36.

Green, D. A. and Little, D. 2013. Academic development on the margins. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4): 523-537.

Hamilton, M. L., Smith, L. and Worthington, K. 2008. Fitting the Methodology with the Research: An exploration of narrative, self-study and auto-ethnography. *Studying Teacher Education*, 4(1): 17-28.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lawson, T. 2012. Ontology and the study of social reality: emergence, organisation, community, power, social relations, corporations, artefacts and money. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 36(2): 345-385.

Lawson, T. and Morgan, J. 2021. Cambridge social ontology, the philosophical critique of modern economics and social positioning theory: an interview with Tony Lawson, part 2. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 20(1): 1-37.

Ngunjiri, F.W., Hernandez, K.A.C. and Chang, H., 2010. Living autoethnography: Connecting life and research. *Journal of Research Practice*, 6(1): E1-E1.

Padayachee, K. and Dison, L. 2021. Stakeholder Struggles in the Uptake and Use of Blended and Online Learning in Higher Education. *Blended Learning and the Global South: Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education*. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing. Available: http://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-529-2

Vygotsky, L. L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walford, G. 2004. Finding the limits: Autoethnography and being an Oxford University Proctor. *Qualitative Research*, 4(3): 403-417.

Wenger-Trayner E, Wenger-Trayner B. 2015. Introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses. Available from: https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/07-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf