

# ***Silver-lining of COVID-19: A Virtual Community of Practice for Faculty Development***

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## **Abstract.**

Communities of practice are becoming more common within higher education, yet little research has explored how these social learning networks, especially the virtual ones, can enhance faculty development. This paper describes the experience of a virtual community of practice (VCoP) initiative at a research-intensive Irish university, during the COVID-19 pandemic to share ideas and good practice as well as foster learning in a safe, supportive, encouraging and inclusive virtual environment. Though this initiative is still in its early days, we consider VCoPs to be an innovative method for faculty development through collaborative learning and enhancement of a sense of community for all.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Faculty; Higher Education; Teaching and Learning; Virtual community of practice.

## **1. Communities of Practice and Faculty Development.**

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are increasingly recognised as an essential part of faculty learning and development in higher education. (Churchman, 2005; Warhurst, 2008; Jawitz, 2009; Wenger-Trayner, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Patton & Parker, 2017; Pyrk, Dörfler & Eden, 2019). According to Lave and Wenger (1991) who first identified CoPs (although primarily in an organisational context rather than an academic one) learning does not rest with the individual but is a social process rooted in a cultural and historical context (Farnsworth et al 2016). They

define a community of practice as 'a community with a joint enterprise, shared repertoire and mutual engagement by its members' (Wenger, 1998, p73).

Research shows that most faculty use informal methods (Jennings & Wargnier, 2011) and a pragmatic approach to learning about teaching, usually based on their own teaching experiences (Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006; Sanchez, 2011). In addition, the most common resource for faculty seeking improvement of their teaching is their colleagues, not formal faculty training programmes (FTI Consulting, 2015). Research also shows that formal workshops alone are unlikely to impact on teaching practice (Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015). Instead, faculty need to learn from colleagues to help them to apply knowledge in practice (Knight et al., 2006). Hence the establishment of communities of practice (CoPs) provides a valuable opportunity for professional learning independent from formal faculty programmes (Stark & Smith, 2016).

When evaluating the use of face-to-face versus virtual CoPs, research indicates that face-to-face CoPs should be used initially before moving online. This is because of the potential barriers to interaction and knowledge sharing in virtual environments, such as a hesitancy to share information and a fear of being criticized. The resulting lack of engagement may lead to a weakened sense of community (Ardichvili, Page & Wetling, 2003). However, there is also evidence that virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) with a clear structure and institutional support offer extensive opportunities for faculty development (Sherer, Shea & Kristensen, 2003).

## **2. COVID-19 and Irish Universities.**

The COVID-19 pandemic reached the Republic of Ireland on 29 February 2020 (BBC, 2020). On 12 March, the government announced the immediate closure of all schools, colleges, child-care facilities and advised cancelling large gatherings (Leahy, Cullen, Lynch & Kelly 2020). In the Irish higher education sector, all teaching and student support activities had to be delivered completely on-line and at-distance. This posed huge challenges to campus-based Irish universities, their faculty and staff as well as domestic and international students.

### **2.1 Challenges faced by faculty in an Irish University.**

The sudden and unavoidable move to online teaching and learning due to COVID-19 highlighted a critical skills gap in higher education, with many faculty members unfamiliar with the technical and social aspects of teaching remotely. Yet migrating to an online education model involves

more than simply replicating face-to-face activities in front of a webcam or recording a short lecture and publishing it on an educational platform.

In the same week as the government announcement of Ireland's COVID-19 lockdown, the University's subject areas arranged Zoom or Google Meet sessions to connect with staff members, review the latest university guidelines for the move to virtual classrooms and share what they were learning about teaching and learning online. Colleagues debated the pros and cons of the various platforms, strategies for maintaining student engagement, and the challenges of teaching geographically dispersed students across multiple time zones (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). The approach agreed was to utilise the digital tools available but to be mindful of the fact that staff and students alike are on a steep learning curve.

Apart from workshops offered by the E-Learning team which focused on the technical aspects of moving online, formal teaching support for online and blended learning was limited. Hence many experienced feelings of isolation. However, the College of Business Intercultural Forum was able to provide support to staff within the college and beyond.

## **2.1 College of Business Intercultural Forum (CBIF).**

CBIF is an open community of collegial learning and sharing, set up by the first author in 2018. Its purpose was to enhance practice and intercultural development and provide a safe and inclusive space for colleagues in the College of Business (CoB) to develop their skills and broaden their knowledge base. CoB is the most culturally diversified college in the University with students from more than 60 countries and a significant percentage of international faculty members. In 2017, the first author joined the CoB as its Intercultural Development and Support Officer. Part of her role is to provide intercultural support for all faculty and staff. Prior to COVID-19, CBIF organised two face-to-face events which were well attended by both faculty and staff.

With limited formal online teaching support available and a clear thirst for knowledge among faculty members, CBIF designed a series of 'bitesize' webinars (no more than 30 minutes long), each dealing with a topic related to online teaching, including The Interactive Virtual Classroom, Recorded Materials for the Virtual Classroom, and Going Online with Assessment. The aim was to provide the CoB with advice and support from a few colleagues who were further along the online teaching learning curve. Hence CBIF itself is an excellent example of what McLoughlin, Patel, O'Callaghan & Reeves (2018) refer to as a Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP) - an online forum for collegial learning and collaboration (McLoughlin et al., 2018).

Each 30-minute webinar began with an introduction by the host followed by 5-minute presentations delivered by each of the three panellists. Questions were answered using the chat function, with the last 5 minutes dedicated to any additional Q&A. All webinars were recorded and made available later to registered participants. Resources were shared amongst the participants included PowerPoint slides from each speaker, 'how to' videos for filming online, reflective blogs and links to helpful online resources.

The first webinar on student engagement was suggested by the first author based on her ongoing research into students' online learning experiences during COVID-19. Colleagues whose online teaching received positive feedback from students were invited to share their insights and lessons learned at the webinar. Topics discussed included using the Breakout Rooms feature on Zoom to break large classes into smaller groups to create intimacy online and foster one-to-one connections. Other tips to encourage participation included making eye contact via looking directly into the webcam and creating 'fun' spaces: using quizzes and other games to connect with students and foster a more dynamic learning environment.

The first webinar was very well received. Colleagues from the fast-growing CBIF community suggested the topics for the remaining webinars, based on their own experiences and needs. The second webinar was opened to participants from across the wider University to share knowledge and experience with a broader mix of colleagues. As a result, 194 colleagues registered for the webinar. This was remarkable not just for the numbers, but more so for the fact that all of the different colleges were represented. Like many higher education institutions, the University can best be described as operating in 'silos', (Trust, Carpenter & Krutka, 2017) with each college - and even the schools within those colleges - keeping more or less to themselves. For so many to attend one webinar was a notable change from the norm and a positive sign that we had hit upon an unmet need among the University's employees.

Overall, the CBIF Bitesize Webinars reached more than 300 colleagues across the University. The feedback on the webinars was significantly positive, as indicated by the following samples:

*"Thanks to all concerned for your generosity in sharing your resources in such a user-friendly way. The short duration is especially attractive as it makes it easier to find the time!"*

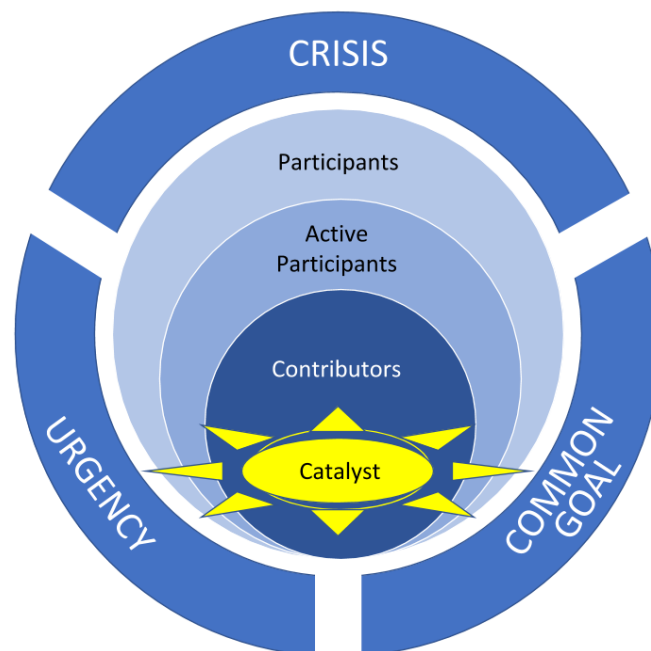
*"Your material has been extremely useful in planning for next semester's teaching!"*

## 2.2 CBIF's emergent composition.

As the diagram, VCoP (Figure 1), below shows, there are four layers of the CBIF community. The catalyst is the founder of CBIF, the first author. Leadership in the virtual environment often grows organically from within the group: leaders are more likely to *emerge* from within the group over time (i.e., emergent leadership), as opposed to being appointed to a leadership role (Avolio, 1999; Carte, Chidamabram & Becker, 2006; Yukl, 1998). In the case of CBIF, the first author acted as the catalyst for its formation and development.

The next layer comprises *contributors* from the College of Business who are either actively involved in organizing activities for CBIF, acting as panellists, or both. The third layer, *Active participants*, are colleagues within the College of Business and from other colleges who attend the CBIF webinars in an active capacity, posing questions and being involved in discussions. The fourth layer, *Participants*, are mainly from outside of the College of Business who attend the CBIF webinars, often in a more passive capacity.

**Figure 1. Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP).**



Interestingly, among the Contributors group, there wasn't an issue in terms of *trust*, even among colleagues who had never met each other. Everyone was open and willing to contribute. The

authors attribute this to a number of environmental conditions, also represented in the graphic below:

First among these is the *Crisis* of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its immediate and significant impact on the operations of the university. A crisis situation accelerates the change process by making all actors aware of the need for change (Mitroff, 1988). Hence everyone was open and willing to learn from the sharing of knowledge and good practice. Another important environmental condition in the case of CBIF was *Urgency*. All teaching had to move online immediately, i.e. within a matter of days. Finally, and most importantly was sharing a *Common Goal*. In this case, the common goal amongst all CBIF members was to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible in order to improve online teaching practice. In this sense, everyone was at a similar level in terms of experience, while also capable of contributing expertise to the community. This reflects Chiu, Hsu & Wang's (2006) definition of virtual communities as online social networks in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions.

### 3. Discussion.

The success of CBIF's webinars demonstrates that VCoPs can provide a platform to disseminate best practices in teaching and learning as well as generate social capital (Morgan, 2014). In addition, they can transform the nature of isolated, individual teaching towards a more collaborative and connected culture. Due to their online format, VCoPs foster interdisciplinary dialogue even more so than face-to-face CoPs, as participants are participating from a 'safe space' home or office environment rather than in person, and hence may feel less intimidated.

CBIF organised in total three bitesize webinars within a very short period as a quick response to support faculty and staff during COVID-19. However, though it is CBIF's intention to keep supporting our community in the years to come, it would be interesting to see the conditions needed for such VCoPs to succeed in the long term. In addition, future research can also look into whether VCoPs can provide the same depth of engagement as face to face alternatives, and also how to best combine virtual and in-person CoPs to support faculty development in the higher education context.

Paradoxically, the crisis of COVID-19 has brought communities closer together through collectives such as CBIF. As one of the authors of this paper said: "*We were all together on Zoom*

*calls sharing and collaborating as we've never done before. Ships passing in the night at college previously, now we are colleagues and, in some cases, friends. Opportunities for collaboration (such as this article!) have grown from this."*

Based on our experience with CBIF, universities should recognise, value and support the emergence of strong online communities of practice (McLoughlin et al. 2018) to support the professional development and workplace learning of their faculty.

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