Reflective Piece

Community of Practice in the Context of the Rapid Transition to Online Learning at a Rural University in South Africa: Successes and Pitfalls

Newlin Marongwe   Department of School Improvement Programmes, Walter Sisulu University, Queenstown, South Africa   nmarongwe@wsu.ac.za

Grasia Chisango   Department of Management, Walter Sisulu University, Butterworth, South Africa   gchisango@wsu.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective paper is to give an account of how we managed to navigate online learning and teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance students' learning at a rural university in South Africa. The aim is to share our experiences on how we used community of practice as a theory to support ourselves as lecturers in designing, accessing, and engaging with online content amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the paper details the successes and pitfalls encountered in trying to adjust to the online mode of delivery. The paper makes use of qualitative self-reflexive personal narrative inquiry. Community of practice theory and connectivist theory guide our reflections. We succeeded not only in helping each other navigate the e-learning platform but our working relationships also improved as well as our skills. Through use of community of practice and connectivism, we managed, not without difficulties, to migrate content online, to engage meaningfully with our students, and to network with other lecturers. We recommend adoption of community of practice by lecturers even beyond the pandemic since it promotes knowledge- and skill-sharing, and networking, thereby easing lecturers' burden and fears. Furthermore, community of practice encourages scholars to share their work in the form of scholarship of teaching and learning.

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the business of teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. While struggling with anger, sadness, uncertainty, and other emotional issues, the COVID-19 pandemic caused an abrupt migration to online teaching, something that was strange to many of us. Online learning was more suitable for well-resourced universities since they had the ICT infrastructure and online skills needed for online learning and teaching (Peters, Rizvi, McCulloch, Gibbs, Gorur, Hong, …, 2022). In addition, the transition to online learning was rapid (Dube, 2020) and caught many lecturers off guard. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, our teaching was mostly done through the traditional means of face-to-face and chalk-and-board methods (Marongwe & Chisango, 2021; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). The pandemic propelled us to move abruptly to online teaching and learning, and this demanded new skills, migration of content online, and redesign of content, learning activities and assessment. Technophobia was a further hurdle that needed to be overcome, as some individuals had negative attitudes towards the use of technology (Spelman & Marongwe, 2018). Some of our colleagues saw the institution's e-learning platform as a dumping site for content and used it only to comply with university requirements. Ferns, Dawson, and Howitt (2019) posited that the future of work would look quite different because of technology, and staff development workshops on how to use information and communication technology in class and how to navigate the learning management system were regularly organised for academics, but little attention was paid to this prior to the pandemic.

We formed a group guided by community of practice theory, aimed at giving each other support in the form of upskilling our online techniques, emotional support, redesigning content, and so on. Community of practice theory was used in conjunction with the theory of connectivism, which was used to promote collaboration among lecturers and to enhance student learning and participation. These two theories pushed us to move away from old ways of thinking and doing. Community of practice theory helps members develop their own practices. Wenger (1998) posits that a community of practice creates its own ways of interacting with one another. On the other hand, connectivism is a "learning theory for the digital age" (Siemens, 2005: 1) that views learning from a social dimension rather than from an individualistic angle and as the development of conversations or discussions. Both community of practice and connectivism helped us to form a group, get connected and start conversations on how to adapt to online learning and teaching. This was in line with the view of Wangi, Nashrullah and Wajdi (2018): working collaboratively fosters social networking, adaptability,

creativity, and togetherness. The purpose of the formation of the group was to help us bring ideas together to find solutions to the challenges of online teaching that faced us.

Formation of the Group

Our group included colleagues from our campus, our sister campuses, two other South African universities, a university in Uganda, a university in Zambia, a university in Zimbabwe and a university in the United States of America. Our campus is situated in Whittlesea, a small rural town, approximately 34km to the south of Queenstown in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It is characterised by villages and a few commercial farms. The campus attracts students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds whose parents or guardians are recipients of the government's social grant. Therefore, our students are predominantly Black Africans. Our campus has several challenges, such as limited ICT and structural infrastructure, among others. The campus is the youngest and smallest of the four campuses of our institution. The group composition was diverse, which allowed cross-pollination of ideas, and members received significant emotional support from the group. The pandemic forced us to transfer our courses online to maintain continuity in student learning and teaching. The questions to ask were: as lecturers teaching at a small rural university, were we prepared to shift to online teaching? Did we have the skills to use technologies to enhance learning of students and transfer our courses online? Were we familiar with use of technology to support learning, administer online assessments, and create e-learning tasks and activities? Another crucial issue that we had to take into consideration was our students' dimensions of differences. These differences manifest in discourses such as student alienation and under-preparedness. In our context, most students were schooled at disadvantaged schools, where there was inadequate infrastructure, such as limited access to ICT and classrooms (Gardiner, 2018). The discourse of alienation manifests in the form of disparities in digital literacies. Our students, especially first-year students, needed more ICT training. This triggered the birth of our group. As lecturers, we needed to develop our own understanding before meeting our students online.

We read about community of practice theory, which was adopted as an intervention strategy to share ideas and skills as a group of lecturers who had limited digital skills. This theory is based on collaborating, doing, and working together as a team (Wenger, 1998). After applying the principles of the theory, we succeeded not only in helping each other navigate the e-learning platform but also bonded to the extent that our working relationships improved as well as our skills. Additionally, our students also benefitted, and their learning continued meaningfully amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Being aware of discourses of student alienation and under-preparedness, we did not only rely on our e-Learning specialist but took it upon ourselves to train students on how to manoeuvre through the e-learning platform. As the year progressed, not only did our online teaching skills improve, but our students' digital literacies also greatly improved and they actively participated in learning activities, including assessments.

We engaged in qualitative, phenomenological self-reflection and personal narrative inquiry. This allowed us to share our lived experiences without bias since we were able to point out our strengths and weaknesses (Moen, 2006) in using technology to enhance learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As alluded to earlier on, community of practice and connectivitist theories guided us. We documented our daily experiences each time we had online meetings and talked about online challenges and how to counter them. We held several meetings during 2020 and 2021.

Successes

Some of the successes experienced by the group were that through community of practice and connectivism, lecturers managed, though not without difficulties, to migrate content online (including by breaking it into manageable sizes), to engage meaningfully with students on the e-learning platform, to network with other lecturers, and to increase motivation (to mention but a few). As argued by Mwangi and Ingado (2020), working together promotes engagement and motivation. We started having our own Teams training on how to do voice-overs on PowerPoint slides, creation of websites (this happened with lecturers who were teaching the same module), videoing ourselves, blogs and on how to use discussion forums. Additionally, we avoided using a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. We each listed our own areas that needed attention.

We also took into cognisance the contextual background of our students. We considered our students' dimensions of difference such as digital literacy. Student-centred pedagogy coupled with ICT training improved our students' digital skills: they learnt from each other and from us. Boughey and McKenna (2021) argue that denying students' contextual background is like denying reality and therefore misunderstandings and misconceptions are bound to arise that can cause emotional stress and create a rift between students and lecturers.

It is worth noting that online class attendance was encouraging because students expected to learn something new every time, we met with them. We were learning together with our students. What

was interesting was that our students saw us growing together with them in navigating online teaching and learning. Our willingness to learn as lecturers motivated our students too. However, the 'warm bodies' element was still missing, and this created a void in some students' experience. Realising that some students missed the social presence of peers and the lecturer, we turned on our cameras when conducting live sessions, whenever the internet bandwidth permitted. The student voice was present because we engaged our students in activities. Students felt that they were part of the learning process and took ownership of it.

The other success story was that out of this community of practice group, papers on SoTL were written with the aim of understanding online teaching and what we needed to do as lecturers to enhance learning and teaching. This was the first time that we used technology to do research that was informed by our practices and our practices informed by research. We managed to publish three articles and presented two papers at an international conference. We were able to share our experiences in a scholarly manner.

Pitfalls

There were also challenges that we encountered, such as attitudes towards upskilling, fear of the coronavirus, not knowing how to navigate the system to yield better results, confusion regarding online assessment tasks and student cheating, information overload that drained lecturers psychologically, connectivity disruptions, and failure of some students to join sessions, which negatively affected their performance. Some of our peers still experience challenges designing and administering authentic online assessments. In addition, our learning and teaching were continually disrupted by rolling blackouts due to electricity generation constraints in South Africa. Students were scattered throughout the province and power cuts impacted different towns at various times, meaning that some students could not join the live sessions.

Conclusion

The rapid transition to online learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was a bittersweet experience, hence the adoption of a community of practice. Community of practice is a useful strategy to adopt even beyond the pandemic since it promotes knowledge and skills sharing, networking, and working together as a team, thereby easing lecturers' burden and fears.

Furthermore, community of practice encourages scholars to share their work with the global community.

Acknowledgements

References

Boughey, C. & McKenna, S. 2021. *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives*. Cape Town: African Minds.

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2020. Annual Performance Plan 2020/21. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

Dube, B. 2020. Rural online learning in the context of COVID-19 in South Africa: Evoking an inclusive education approach. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 10(2): 135–157.

Ferns, S., Dawson, V. & Howitt, C. 2019. A collaborative framework for enhancing graduate employability. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 20(2): 99–111.

Gardiner, M. 2018. Education in rural areas. [Online] https://www.saide.org.za/resources/Library/Gardiner,%20M%20-%20Education%20in%20Rural%20Areas.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2022).

Marongwe, N. & Chisango, G. 2021. Magnitude of Covid-19 on rural universities in Eastern Cape province: Lessons learnt. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Science*, 16(1): 2248–2260

Moen, T. 2006. Reflections on the narrative research approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Methodology*, 5(4): 56–69.

Mwangi, W. P. & Ingado, D. 2020. Higher education in the 21st century: Relevance, sufficiency, challenges, and remedies from graduates' perspective. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, 24(3): 23–37.

Peters, M. A., Rizvi, F., McCulloch, G., Gibbs, P., Gorur, R., Hong, M., Hwang, Y., Zipin, L., Brennan, M., Robertson, S., Quay, J., Malbon, J., Taglietti, D., Barnett, R., Chengbing, W., McLaren, P., Apple, R., Papastephanou, M., Burbules, N., Jackson, L., Jalote, P., Kalantzis, M., Cope, B., Fataar, A., Conroy, J., Misiaszek, G., Biesta, G., Jandrić, P., Choo, S. S., Apple, M., Stone, L., Tierney, R., Tesar, M., Besley, T. & Misiaszek, L. 2022 Reimagining the new pedagogical possibilities for universities post-Covid-19. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(6): 717-760.

Siemens, G. 2005. Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2(10).

Spelman, K. & Marongwe, N. 2018. Technophobia: Understanding computer anxiety for teaching and learning of computer studies. Journal of Communication, 9(1-2): 11-23.

Wangi, N. B. S., Nashrullah, M. H. & Wajdi, M. B. N. 2018. Digital era's education and application in higher education. *EDUTEC: Journal of Education and Technology*, 1(2): 119–128.

Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.