



Dotting the i's and crossing the t's: Operationalising a teaching and learning community of practice

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Abstract

Social theories of learning propose that communities are vital building blocks for knowledge sharing and construction. In essence, learning thrives when individuals congregate in a community where they exchange knowledge, ask questions, and reveal gaps in understanding. Nevertheless, the process of cultivating a community of practice is not necessarily straightforward, as it requires meticulous planning and decision-making. This instrumental case study seeks to explicate the formation and development of a teaching and learning community of practice (T&L CoP) at a research-intensive university in Hong Kong. More specifically, it explores how the structural model of the community of practice – domain, community, and practice – are applied and manifested. Multiple sources of documents, including a project proposal, a project website, a project progress report and archival records, were analysed using deductive thematic analysis. The results reveal that the T&L CoP is constitutive of an overarching domain of teaching and learning, within which ten special interest groups are formed. The T&L CoP also bring together 150 professoriate and professional staff from across eight faculties. The community facilitates knowledge exchange through periodic professional development workshops and materials as well as sharing sessions that highlight exemplary teaching practice. The study concludes by discussing three fundamental questions regarding the operationalisation of a CoP, in terms of expansion, retention, as well as sustainability, and argues that the T&L CoP helps cultivate members' social capital through improved networks and visibility among the teaching and learning community.

Keywords: community of practice, case study, Hong Kong higher education, operationalisation, teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Communities of practice are ubiquitous and can take many forms. Some exist informally and without official recognition, while others are acknowledged, supported, or institutionalised (Wenger et al., 2002). Communities of practice are broadly defined as groups of individuals who share a common interest, set of problems, or passion for a particular subject (ibid.). Through ongoing and periodic interaction, these communities aim to enhance members' knowledge and expertise in a specific area, with a caveat that knowledge is not simplified as a mere object (ibid.). This is because the form of knowledge is often incorporated into activities and interactions of a community where knowledge serves as a dynamic and evolving reservoir (ibid.). However, while most organisations recognise the significance and value of communities of practice, there remains a managerial conundrum as to how to actively and systematically develop knowledge-based communities due to the complex nature of knowledge *per se*.

This paper seeks to address this gap by contributing to an instrumental case study on how a teaching and learning community of practice (T&L CoP) is operationalised in a research-intensive university in Hong Kong. More specifically, it explores how Wenger et al.'s (2002) structural model of the community of practice – domain, community, and practice – is applied and manifested in the practical context. After explicating key components of the T&L CoP, the paper proceeds to discuss three pivotal managerial inquiries revolving around the challenges and strategies associated with member retention, expansion, and sustainability within and beyond the T&L CoP. By identifying the obstacles that may impede the aspects of growing and sustaining the community, the paper offers practical insights into the potential issues that need to be addressed to ensure the continued success of the T&L CoP.

2. Method

This was an instrumental case study that explored the operationalisation of a T&L CoP at a research-intensive public university in Hong Kong. The choice of an instrumental case study design was driven by the aim of understanding a social phenomenon, such as bringing together a heterogenous group of academic staff through a teaching and learning community of practice, and how such practice interacted with its contextual conditions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). It was also useful to define its bounded system in particular (ibid.). This case study was constitutive of three key elements. First, it revolved around a teaching and learning project on building a T&L CoP at a research-intensive university in Hong Kong. Second, it captured the progressive development that takes place in the triennium 2022-2025, with the current study specifically discussing the first half of the project. Third, it highlighted a university-level endeavour to congregate academic staff, including professoriate and professional staff, from across various disciplines and faculties.

Multiple sources of documents were used as the data under examination. In particular, documents included a 16-page project proposal, a project website, a project progress report and archival records. Drawing on Bowen's work (2009), the study adopted document analysis as a systematic approach to review, interpret, and extract relevant information and insights regarding the operation of the T&L CoP. This iterative process of document review also incorporated deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022), with a specific analytic lens interested in exploring the structural model of the community of practice as proposed by Wenger et al. (2002). The paper set out to identify codes and themes pertinent to Wenger et al.'s (2002) three propositions, namely domain, community, and practice. These elements were manifested in various forms within the documents, such as objectives, aims, scope, individuals involved, deliverables, news, and events. By conducting a detailed analysis

of the documents, the study aimed to generate rich descriptions of how the T&L CoP was structured and operated within the examined context.

3. Findings

This section offers insights into the practical application of the structural model of the community of practice. Specifically, these findings are presented in three sub-sections that correspond to Wenger et al.'s (2002) three propositions, which are domain, community, and practice.

3.1 Domain

According to Wenger et al. (2002), the concept of a domain refers to a shared realm of knowledge, a set of issues, or interest among members of a community. The domain serves as a platform for community members to come together and engage in ongoing discussions. In the case of this instrumental study, the domain of the T&L CoP may appear self-evident. It encompasses various teaching and learning aspects, such as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and feedback, classroom management, collaboration, communication, and the application of technology. More concretely, within the overarching domain of teaching and learning, there are ten special interest groups (SIGs). These SIGs focus on specific areas, namely (1) the application of immersive technologies for teaching and learning, (2) artificial intelligence (AI) for education, (3) the design and enhancement of communal classrooms, (4) education for social responsibility, (5) educational research, (6) gamification and game-based learning, (7) location-based learning, (8) micro-module and courseware development, (9) students as partners, and (10) service learning (T&L CoP, 2024) (See Figure 1 for a visual representation).

The domain of the Teaching and Learning CoP

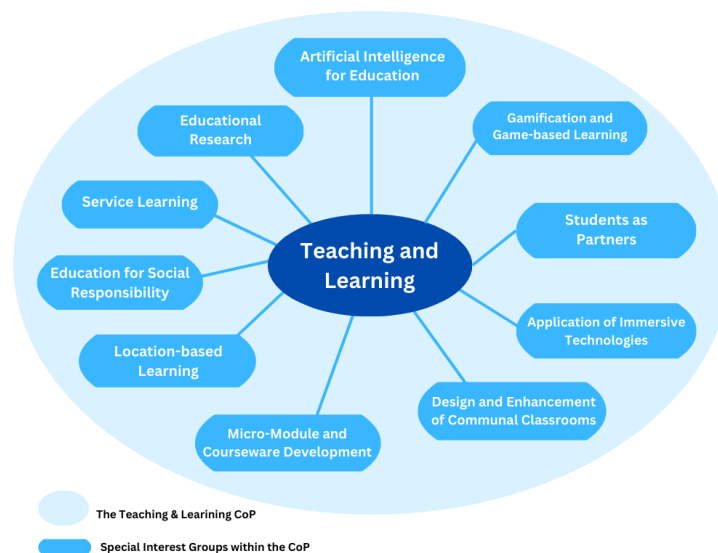


Figure 1. The domain of the T&L CoP

Although the ten SIGs within the T&L CoP are operated independently by their respective SIG convenors, two characteristic features are worth highlighting. The first characteristic is the propensity for lecturers to have overlapping interests across multiple SIGs. Consider that Dr. Chan is an ardent advocate of AI and interested in collaborating with students on course design using AI, Dr. Chan can be a member of the AI for Education and Students as Partners SIGs, particularly when multiple enrolment of groups are allowed. The second inherent feature of this T&L CoP is its emphasis on supporting lecturers in developing research close to practice. In other words, the community nurtures a culture of conducting pedagogic research within specific disciplines. The university under examination accentuates the importance of fostering a culture shift towards research on teaching, driven by the understanding that teaching and pedagogic research have distinct yet complementary roles in promoting excellence and impact. This recognition has led to a diligent endeavour to promote a pedagogic research-oriented culture through this T&L CoP.

3.2 Community

In essence, a community denotes a collective of members who actively participate in shared endeavours and conversations, as they strive to collaboratively develop solutions to specific problems, exchange valuable information and knowledge, and establish connections with like-minded colleagues (Wenger et al., 2002). The underlying concept behind a community is that it provides a vital environment for fostering collaborative learning (ibid.). Notably, the community comprises both experienced and novice members, where through constant and periodic interactions, newcomers gradually construct knowledge, skills, and practices within the domain (ibid.).

Consisting of 150 members from eight different faculties, the T&L CoP represents diverse academic backgrounds. These members can be broadly classified into two groups: the majority (70%, n = 105) are on the professional track, while the remaining members (30%, n = 45) are on the professoriate track. The professoriate track includes individuals holding professorship at the university, while the professional track includes a range of roles such as professional consultants, lecturers, senior lecturers, and principal lecturers. Among the various disciplines, Medicine has the highest total number of members, totalling 41 staff, followed by Arts. On the other hand, Law has the lowest total number of members, with a total of five individuals. Table 1 below presents the demographic summary of the members.

Table 1. Demographic summary of members

	Discipline	Professoriate track	Professional track	Total
1	Medicine	9	32	41
2	Arts	9	23	32
3	Social science	9	12	21
4	Education	4	14	18
5	Business	6	8	14
6	Science	2	10	12
7	Engineering	4	3	7
8	Law	2	3	5
		45	105	150

The T&L CoP actively constructs opportunities for members to engage in joint activities and discussions in order to foster the interactions and relationships among them. The community has organised a range of events to support professional development (PD). These included five series of PD workshops, a sharing series, and a panel discussion held at a teaching and learning exposition. Among the five PD workshop series, four of them targeted at enhancing lecturers' capacity for conducting pedagogic research. Workshop topics covered different stages of research, including literature review, data collection and analysis, as well as disseminations. In response to the growing prominence of generative AI since late 2022, a dedicated workshop series was offered to develop staff's artificial intelligence (AI) literacy. While the PD workshops were categorised by topics, such as qualitative or quantitative research method/ologies, writing and editing, and AI literacy, an ongoing sharing series on pedagogic practice and research innovation is held to capture members' previous initiatives, current projects, as well as future plans. Additionally, one panel discussion was arranged for members at a teaching and learning exposition where they shared their work and exchanged ideas with both internal and external speakers and participants. Table 2 summarises a list of community events organised for its members since November 2022.

Table 2. A list of community events organised from November 2022 to June 2024

	T&L community events	Professional development types	Topics	Time
1	Workshop series	Workshop	Peer review	Nov 2022
2	T&L exposition	Panel discussion	Pedagogic research practice and challenges	Dec 2022
3	Workshop series	Workshop	Literature review	Jan 2023
4		Workshop	Practitioner research	Jan 2023
5		Workshop	Academic writing	Feb 2023
6		Workshop	Quantitative ethnography	Feb 2023
7		Workshop	Peer review	Mar 2023
8		Workshop	Academic writing	Apr 2023
9		Workshop	Creative thinking	May 2023
10		Workshop	Thematic analysis	Jun 2023
11		Workshop	Qualitative research design	Jun 2023
12		Workshop	Qualitative data analysis	Jun 2023
13		Workshop	Reflexivity, positionality, and power	Jun 2023
14		Workshop	Quantitative methods	Jun 2023
15		Workshop	Quantitative methods	Jun 2023
16	Sharing series	Sharing session	Internationalisation at home and virtual reality in teaching	Sept 2023
17		Sharing session	Technology in teaching law and clinical nursing reasoning skills	Oct 2023
18		Sharing session	Student engagement	Jan 2024

	T&L community events	Professional development types	Topics	Time
19	Workshop series	Workshop	Computational text analysis using R	Feb 2024
20		Workshop	Computational text analysis using R	Feb 2024
21		Workshop	Making the most of your quantitative data	Feb 2024
22		Lecture + practical session	AI literacy for academics	Feb 2024
23		Workshop	Questionnaire design	Feb 2024
24		Workshop	Questionnaire design	Feb 2024
25		Lecture + practical session	AI literacy for academics	Mar 2024
26		Lecture + practical session	AI literacy for academics	Mar 2024
27		Workshop	Critical thinking and writing	Mar 2024
28		Workshop	Academic writing	Apr 2024
29		Practical session	AI literacy for academics	Apr 2024
30		Workshop	Academic editing	May 2024
31		Workshop	Academic writing	Jun 2024

3.3 Practice

The practice of a community refers to the collective frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents that its members share (Wenger et al., 2002). In the T&L CoP, the knowledge base we steward and share is comprised of five major areas: teaching and learning, general research knowledge, specific/hands-on research skills, teaching and pedagogic research practice, as well as research culture and practice. The data collection for these resources involves multiple methods, including interviews, literature reviews, workshops, sharing sessions, and manual website searches. As such, the modality of each resource varies, ranging from written summaries and video recordings literature, to presentation slides and email exchanges. Notably, the resource contexts cover both local institutional practices as well as global perspectives so that practitioners can stay abreast of the diverse and evolving practice relevant to their instruction and the wider teaching and learning research landscape. Table 3 below presents an overview of the repository of the T&L CoP. In essence, this repository serves as “a living curriculum” for members to explore, experiment with, and examine their teaching, and pedagogic research approaches (ibid., p.38).

4. Discussion

The T&L CoP adopts Wenger et al.'s (2002) practical model of a community of practice to develop practitioners' capacity for teaching and pedagogic research. However, three managerial questions about the operationalisation of the community arise as any community, as in the T&L CoP, is dynamic and constantly evolving. These questions point to issues with expansion, retention, and sustainability. The notions of expansion and retention are self-evident: the former refers to the progress of becoming greater in size while the latter describes the state of keeping members in the community. While expansion and retention operate *within* the premise of a current T&L CoP, sustainability considers the impact of the community *beyond* its project span.

Table 3. Repository of the T&L CoP

	Knowledge	Resource types	Data collection	Contexts	Modality	Examples	Status	Quantity
1	Teaching and learning	Good practice across disciplines	Interviews	Local	Written summaries	VR Trail of Plant Learning, The DNA Wonderland	Completed	13
2	General research knowledge	Research methodologies and methods in education	Literature reviews	Global	Written summaries	Validity, reflexivity	Ongoing	10
3	Specific/Hands-on research skills	Pedagogic research workshops	Workshops	Global	Video-recordings and/or presentation slides	Questionnaire design, peer review	Ongoing	13
4	Teaching and pedagogic research practice	Teaching and pedagogic research sharing sessions	Sharing sessions	Local	Video-recordings and/or presentation slides	Internationalisation, student engagement	Ongoing	4
5	Research culture and practice	Additional workshops, seminars, conferences, training opportunities	Manual website searches	Global	Emails	Open research, effective use of AI in research	Periodic	6
							Total	46

Managerial question 1: What strategies can be used to expand a community of practice?

Expanding a vibrant community of practice necessitates an iterative, progressive approach that combines regular events, data collection, and continuous outreach. It is important to organise periodic community events that bring together community members. These events can include workshops, seminars, conferences, and networking sessions. However, equally important is the systematic collection of *registration* information to grow the mailing list and community database. For example, the T&L CoP includes an additional question about joining its community in each event registration form. If any prospective members check “yes” on the digital form, follow-up questions will be prompted. Examples of these questions include asking colleagues to indicate their interest in joining any SIGs, as well as their research and professional interests. After each event, post-event evaluation is useful for gathering participant feedback and gauging members’ interests in topics for future events. This information can be used to identify their current needs for teaching and learning, and pedagogic research. Over time, as good work is done, *organic growth* of the group is anticipated. Prospective colleagues may become members through *word of mouth*. Consequently, it is important to provide a platform for voluntary enrolment, such as through the project website. In other words, an established, frequently updated, and easily accessible project website can provide timely information for members.

Managerial question 2: What strategies can be used to effectively retain active participation within the community over time?

Three strategies can enhance member participation. First, the T&L CoP facilitates *a two-way flow of contribution*. More precisely, members are not passive recipients of knowledge, but active knowledge co-constructors (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson, 2019). Drawing on their diverse academic expertise, the T&L CoP invites colleagues to act as speakers, SIG conveners, case example contributors, and more. Second, it is useful to acknowledge and structure around *the cyclical nature of member engagement*. While members are all busy knowledge workers with varying schedules and priorities, there are certain times of the academic year, such as marking periods, that may not be ideal for engagement. However, other peak times, such as grant proposal writing periods, would be beneficial for relevant supporting events. Lastly, building *trust and rapport* with both prospective and current participants can boost participation. For example, the T&L CoP offers prompt replies and assistance when colleagues inquire about workshop materials, recordings, or enrolment. These strategies foster a supportive, dynamic environment that promotes ongoing involvement from the community.

Managerial question 3: What strategies can be used to enhance the longer-term sustainability and positive impact of a community of practice?

Enhancing members’ social capital and fostering partnerships are vital strategies to sustain the impact of the community of practice. First and foremost, colleagues will be able to develop their social capital by becoming members of the T&L CoP. Social capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1986, p.248), is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition”. In essence, such membership provides access to valuable social resources, such as connections with other members. For instance, the T&L CoP has acted as a middleman and initiated several collaborations or connections among members. The community sharing events illustrate the efforts to invite members who share

similar interests to present their work on the same occasions. Collaborations between members and the project team are also evidenced by three recently funded pedagogic research projects. Additionally, establishing international partnerships can bring or exchange valuable resources, such as best practice, human resources, global perspectives, and more. Currently, two partnerships with universities in the UK are under liaison. Some upcoming collaboration plans include hosting sharing series that involves colleagues from both sides, conducting comparative research studies, and organising professional training workshops facilitated by partners from either side.

5. Conclusion

This paper explicates the application of the structural model of the community of practice – domain, community, and practice, in the T&L CoP and how the community operates in the context of a research-intensive university in Hong Kong. It illustrates a wide variety of community events that bring together members from across disciplines based on the common interest in teaching and learning (research). It further explores several practical strategies to address the managerial conundrum, often related to challenges in expansion, retention, and sustainability. The paper argues that the T&L CoP has helped cultivate members' social capital through improved networks and visibility at the community (Bourdieu, 1986), and that the impact of the community can be sustained by active liaison in partnerships as well as collaborations among members and between members and the project team.

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