

Together in electric dreams: inventing an online asynchronous community of practice for learning developers working with health students

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Presentation abstract

The creation of a virtual community of practice (vCOP) is a way to bring Learning Developers in different institutions together to create opportunities for collaboration and a sense of community which may help educators to overcome a sense of isolation as well as limited time and resources (Yarris et al., 2019). The development of LDHealthCOP (Learning Developers Health Community of Practice) unintentionally aligned with Wenger's (2000) social definition of learning and three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. The group formed to explore how to improve Learning Development (LD) practice for Health students at our institutions. Students on health programmes are often from 'under-represented' and 'non-traditional' groups which pose particular challenges. It has a crowd sourced co-created programme of monthly talks and activities where practitioners pose each other topic questions to enable discussion and share ideas or resources. Using technology to gather together and 'connect over their craft' (Yarris et al., 2019) enables members to transcend the boundaries of space and time allowing members to 'meet' when and where they are, creating a unique sense of flexibility (Knapp, 1998 cited in Valenti and Sutton, 2020).

This mini keynote shared how the vCOP has been developed, linking theory with practice to address the specific challenges faced by Health Care students. The following themes were covered at the session: Firstly, it covered areas of exploration or challenge for a Health and Social Care vCOP. Secondly, it looked at methods of engagement with the vCOP, including demonstration of collaborative Padlet resources. It also reflected on the

benefits and pitfalls of sharing knowledge and experience asynchronously. Finally, participants gained an insight into the workings of a vCOP which could inspire them to: join us, join another ALDinHE community of practice or create their own.

Keywords: community of practice, digital learning, continuing professional development, online learning

Community response

Anne-Marie and Karen showcased their 'virtual community of practice' focused on healthcare students. For me, they have managed to overcome one of the biggest challenges for Learning Developers: our diaries! This virtual community used asynchronous tools for collaboration which made participation possible where it otherwise wouldn't be. Simple platforms such as Padlet were being used to sustain the CoP's 'living curriculum' (Wenger, 2000) and facilitate meaningful collective learning. There was – both in the presentation and in the CoP itself – demonstrable professional generosity in the sharing of resources and ideas.

Editorial Comment

Connecting as professional communities is increasingly difficult in turbulent times in higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic enabled groups to connect online in new ways that quickly became the social norm. However, we need to explore how engaging those online fora are for creating communities with a high sense of belonging, as they are often simply for content delivery or meeting platforms. This keynote offers one focused tangible practice where activities engaged groups in professions, to achieve that sense of belonging online, where previously, doubt has been cast on the ability to create digital belongingness (Lowe, 2020).

Author's reflection

Giving the talk gave myself and the wider community of practice an opportunity to reflect on the progress so far. LDHealthCOP came about organically so the opportunity to engage with the theory and reflect upon it with the wider LD community was very welcome.

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Author details

For the last 20 years Anne-Marie Langford has been working in Heritage Education as a teacher, practitioner and manager in settings such as historic houses, museums and archives. She developed learning resources and sessions on a range of subjects including Art History, Black History, Computer Science, Social History and STEM. Prior to this she taught English as a Foreign Language. In 2021, I became a Learning Development Tutor which has enabled her to explore my interest in learning resource and session development in new contexts. Her current areas of interest are cultures and critical thinking and digital co-creation.

Karen Hudson is the Learning Development Tutor for the School of Health and Social Care (Nursing Division) at the University of Essex. In this role, she supports students on pre-registration Nursing degree programmes, including Nursing Degree and Higher Apprenticeship pathways, to develop their academic and clinical numeracy skills. She has a particular interest in demystifying academic practices and conventions and making these accessible for diverse student cohorts on programmes with extensive placement and professional requirements.

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