

## Promoting Pedagogy: The Development of a Teaching & Learning CoP in a Research-Focused Department

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### **Abstract:**

*Most faculty members at higher education institutions genuinely care about teaching (e.g., Beyer, Taylor, & Gillmore, 2013). However, it is no secret that most tenure-stream professors are incentivized to spend more time and effort on research-related endeavours than on teaching. A relatively new addition to the university landscape are teaching-stream faculty, who, by contrast, are explicitly encouraged to devote their time to investigating best pedagogical practices. Teaching-stream faculty are, therefore, highly likely to explore and implement new, innovative teaching methods, attend pedagogical workshops and conferences, and spend significant time reflecting upon their teaching practices (e.g., Vajoczki, Fenton, Menard & Pollon 2011). A teaching and learning community of practice (CoP) provides an avenue for teaching-stream faculty to share pedagogical information with all colleagues interested in teaching, in a time-efficient and informal manner. Here we share our experiences and offer some tips on initiating a teaching and learning CoP in a research-focused department.*

### **Key Words:**

community of practice, pedagogy, higher education, teaching and learning

## Introduction

The relationship between research and teaching is complicated at best. Much debate exists over whether these practices complement each other, hinder one another, or perhaps share no relationship whatsoever (see Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Gottlieb & Keith, 1997). Not only is the relationship equivocal, but spending time and effort on teaching is often not seen as a wise time investment for research-focused faculty. While faculty are typically employed with an on-paper workload of 40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% service (e.g., Vajoczki, Fenton, Menard & Pollon 2011), those who desire to actually spend 40% of their time teaching may be discouraged from this early on in their careers. Poor teaching evaluations are often not seen as a reason to deny tenure, but poor research performance is (Vajoczki et al., 2011). Course-release effectively incentivizes faculty to avoid teaching responsibilities (Cramer, 2008), and research-focused faculty often focus their limited time on training their graduate students in research methodology and writing, at the expense of pedagogical training. Vajoczki et al. (2011) note that the institutionalized devaluing of teaching is exemplified in the academic edict, 'publish or perish', which fails to mention teaching at all. We argue that one of the ways in which teaching-stream faculty can benefit their departments and impact their more research-focused colleagues, as well as graduate students – the next generation of faculty - is by creating a teaching and learning community of practice (CoP). In this paper we share our experience with developing a departmental teaching and learning CoP as teaching-stream faculty members at a university well known for its world-class research (e.g., QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2016), but less well known for its high valuation of teaching.

## Purpose

A CoP encompasses any group of individuals who achieve social learning while reflecting upon a common activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There are three necessary components to a CoP: a shared commitment to the domain of interest, the engagement in joint activities to bolster a sense of community, and the involvement of active practitioners in the domain of interest (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This definition can encompass more or less formal gatherings of a variety of groups of practitioners, including employees of companies (e.g., Wenger & Snyder, 2000) as well as those involved in higher education.

In higher education, CoPs can be aimed towards a university-wide or a department-wide participant base. A university-wide focus can benefit from the involvement of a greater number of senior faculty, who may be able to bring to the table ideas or techniques not currently used within a given department. This type of networking opportunity is unique, as cross-departmental interactions tend to be rare. A department-wide CoP, like our own, has its own benefits, as teaching tips can be discipline-specific and therefore more likely to directly apply to participants' courses.

In addition to the exchange of practical tips and ideas, CoPs allow instructors the ability to carve out time in an otherwise overwhelming schedule to reflect upon their practice. During the semester, instructors often feel they only have time to meet the next deadline or put out the next 'fire', and can fail to set aside time to check in on the progression of their teaching practice. In the same vein, a CoP can allow the time for

instructors to reflect upon pedagogical pursuits that fall outside of their daily instructional responsibilities, such as the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Staff of higher education institutions who directly support students or help design curriculum can likewise benefit from these gatherings, both by providing input to instructors from a broader, departmental perspective, as well as by learning what is happening on the 'front lines' of teaching. This type of communication can lead to beneficial changes in curriculum or policy that otherwise would remain unchanged.

We saw the CoP model as a pathway to enhance communication between the teaching-stream faculty and the rest of our department. One of our roles as teaching-stream faculty at an R1 institution is to provide teaching leadership in our department. Some teaching-stream faculty report having a positive impact on their colleagues (Vajoczki et al., 2011). For example, Condon et al. (2015) describe a study in which faculty with extensive pedagogical professional development had an observable positive influence on their low-participating colleagues' teaching practices. However, some teaching-stream faculty perceive that their positions do not have a positive impact on colleagues (Vajoczki et al., 2011). Based on survey and interview responses from teaching-stream faculty, Vajoczki et al. (2011) speculate that the perceived lack of influence may be the result of unfamiliarity with the role of teaching-stream positions and the benefits that they may bring to the department. We believed that the communication CoPs can facilitate would help familiarize our colleagues with our roles in the department. We wanted the pedagogical skills and knowledge we had each cultivated to be an easily accessible resource for improving the teaching experience of faculty and the learning experience of students. Moreover, we wanted to help strengthen the teaching culture in the department.

With these goals in mind, we established a department-wide CoP that met monthly throughout the academic year. We invited members of our department to lead the discussions, and advertised the series through the departmental email list, adding the university-wide teaching-stream email list during the second iteration of the CoP. Our attendees were primarily teaching-stream faculty, graduate students, and sessional instructors from our department, while we also benefitted from intermittent participation by departmental staff members, as well as faculty and post-docs from other departments (see "Keys to Success" below for more details).

## **Emphasis**

We were interested in keeping the topics for discussion as open and creative as possible. Discussions or presentations could either capitalize upon a presenter's expertise, or could equally be a topic the presenter wished to explore, but had not yet had the opportunity to do so. Participants were elicited for topic ideas, and topics were also determined based upon the participation and level of enthusiasm generated at previous CoPs. For example, as our CoP is held at a research university, it is not surprising that the topic that generated one of the liveliest discussions was related to SoTL. The graduate student who led the discussion was interested in learning more about the topic, but had not engaged in SoTL, previously. Despite the lack of personal experience, the presenter led a fruitful discussion. As a result, SoTL is a topic that will

get picked up again in our next round of CoPs, with a different set of discussion points (see Table 1 for a list of topics from the first two years of our CoP).

Regardless of topic, we made it a point to tell discussion leaders that primary literature should be presented. Rooting the CoP in primary literature helps promote the value of pedagogical development. By emphasizing research on teaching and learning, we thought we would be better able to communicate the benefits of pedagogical inquiry and reflection to a research-focused department. We also wanted to emphasize the literature on teaching and learning to show that teaching is a scholarly activity with identifiable, evidence-based best practices. In addition, it has been noted that the sharing of teaching tips can become diluted as passed from one instructor to the next (e.g., Weimer, 2016). The sharing of original sources, either through URLs or hardcopies of handouts, can help mitigate the dilution of original ideas.

Finally, we wanted each meeting to allow time for participants to reflect upon how the current discussion affected their practice. The direct impact of CoPs can be seen in changes made in the classroom or in course curriculum, changes that can initially be developed during the CoP and brought to fruition at a later time. The more time allowed for participants to jot down ideas or start to formalize their thoughts, the better prepared they will be to institute these changes down the line. Whether through individual reflection or think-pair-shares, allowing participants time to reflect is critical for subsequent changes to be realized.

**Table 1. Topics from the first two years of our CoP**

Year 1	Year 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marking Rubrics &amp; LMS Embedded Rubrics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The APA learning objectives &amp; how we are addressing them</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing students for assignments: formative feedback &amp; scaffolding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching philosophies and approaches: Bloom, Fink and Nilson overview</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dealing with requests for special treatment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic integrity at U of T</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LMS tips &amp; tricks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An in-class experiment as an educational experience</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 practical teaching tips from the pedagogical literature</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student engagement and active learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating effective exam questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting research in teaching environments</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The secret world of lecture prep: How do you prepare for lectures?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education literature research</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debriefing the academic year: sharing successes &amp; challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops on critical thinking for undergraduates</li> </ul>

## **Benefits**

We invited some regular members of our CoP to complete a short open-ended survey on their experience with the CoP, and all respondents mentioned that one of their major motivations for attending was to establish relationships with other individuals who were passionate about (or at least interested in) teaching. The interactions that occur during CoPs help facilitate networking among faculty and staff members. This is of particular importance at large, research universities, which necessarily focus on and support research pursuits, many times at the expense of instructional pursuits. While research symposia may be sponsored daily throughout a variety of departments, events focused on teaching practice are less frequent. Finding others who are interested in teaching may be difficult in these situations, and a CoP provides a venue in which to interact and learn from each other.

An additional, downstream benefit of our CoP is that those in attendance can bring their knowledge to others in the department on an informal basis. These participants can become 'local experts' to their neighbouring research-focused colleagues, who almost certainly teach, as well. While those who are focused on research may not have the time to reflect upon their teaching by participating in day-long workshops, they may have the time to engage in a casual conversation with a colleague to discuss pedagogical theory or practice.

We also discovered the ancillary benefit of participants developing a better familiarity with the material taught in other courses, related to their own. This knowledge can help focus the curriculum of a department in two ways. First, this can ensure that courses do not contain an extensive amount of overlap, and, secondly, this can allow instructors to design their courses to appropriately build upon the material of the prerequisite courses. This is an issue particularly important to larger departments, which employ a great number of faculty and sessionals to teach courses. Course catalogue descriptions tend to be subject to some level of interpretation, allowing each new member of a department or new instructor to make appropriate changes to the course in order to capitalize on their own expertise. Without a concerted curriculum mapping effort (e.g., Sumison & Goodfellow, 2004), informal conversations among instructors may be the best way to stay in touch with the concepts and skills being taught throughout a department.

Another benefit of our CoP is that many of its members are graduate students. As PhD students at an R1 institution, their training is obviously focused on research, and they typically need to seek support from outside of the department (e.g., the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation) if they desire instruction or advice on teaching. The CoP offers an in-house support system for matters related to teaching, with the added advantage of being discipline specific ("Your students are struggling with APA style? Here is the resource I use for that."). The CoP offers graduate students an opportunity for pedagogical professional development early in their careers, before they are given the task of serious teaching responsibilities. In addition, the involvement of graduate students in the CoP may also help to change the valuation of teaching in the upcoming generation of faculty.

## Keys to Success

One of the steps in making the CoP successful was to try to make participation as easy and as beneficial as possible. We organized the entire CoP series for the academic year in August to ensure that participants could book the dates and times for the whole year of activities before the term started in September. Participants could then plan around the CoP, rather than having to move commitments to participate. We also invited specific departmental members to present during different sessions. Participants had the opportunity to present a topic of their choice, which was an opportunity to grow their teaching practice, and also gain experience that could be included in a CV. We invited speakers from the following categories (in order):

- Junior tenure-stream faculty members
- Teaching-stream faculty members
- Adjuncts and sessional instructors
- Post-docs and graduate students

When inviting people to participate as presenters, we provided an optional list of topics to choose from. We wanted presenters to be engaged with the topic they chose, but we also wanted to relieve some pressure from the presenters, particularly post-docs and graduate students, from having to find the 'perfect' topic.

To bolster participation in our CoP, we drew upon principles supported by the vast social psychology literature. For example, we chose to reach out individually to invite department members to participate as presenters. This method of communication targeted people who may have ignored a mass email invitation, and avoided the diffusion of responsibility and resulting lack of motivation to take action (e.g., Darley & Latané, 1968; Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981). In addition, we wanted to announce the CoP to the department with a set list of presenters and topics. By contacting possible presenters individually, we could book presenters before we promoted the CoP to the entire department. For many of our departmental colleagues, their first introduction to the CoP was as a complete package - rooms were booked, presenters were confirmed, topics had been selected; all they needed to do was decide which meetings to attend. Finally, we specifically invited the more junior members of the department, including post-docs and graduate students, to present, and we marketed it as an opportunity to grow their CVs. These invitations leveraged the norm of reciprocity, which is easily activated and often used in persuasive attempts. Reciprocity refers to the idea that people feel obligated to return a favour when they perceive that someone has done something for them (Gouldner, 1960). By framing participation as a presenter as a professional development opportunity, we could imply that the invitation to present was actually a favour that we were doing for the presenter, as opposed to the other way around. We hoped that the presenters might return the favour by coming to more of the sessions in which they were not leading the discussion.

We also asked the chair of our department to support the initiative in two very important ways. First, the introductory announcement for the CoP was sent out from the chair's office. In our department, the chair sends few emails directly to the department - much of the departmental business is communicated by administrative staff or other faculty members. We asked the chair to specifically send out the first announce in order

to maximize the probability that faculty read the email, and to lend the CoP an 'air of credibility'. The norm of obedience to authority (e.g., Milgram, 1974) refers to the idea that authority figures should be obeyed, and is often used to elicit compliance. In our department, if the chair supports us, faculty members generally take note. Our chair also gave us a small stipend for the meetings, which allowed us to bring food. Our CoP is a brown-bag lunch series held in the faculty lounge in our department. Participants are encouraged to bring their own lunch, but we guarantee participants snacks and coffee. The stipend was an objective indication that the department, and particularly the chair, supported this endeavour. Moreover, the social psychology literature suggests that bringing food has other ancillary benefits. Treats can help motivate people (particularly graduate students) to attend in the first place, and they can improve the mood of those in attendance. They can also contribute to producing cognitive dissonance, the finding that people feel uncomfortable holding two disparate opinions at the same time and will seek to reduce the inconsistency (e.g., Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). For attendees who feel that the free food doesn't really justify an hour of their time, the resulting cognitive dissonance may lead them to convince themselves that they are, in fact, coming for the professional development.

Finally, to increase interest and motivation, we invited specific faculty members with a potentially vested interest in a topic to join us for specific sessions. For example, one research-focused faculty member in our department taught two 3-hour lectures on the same day each week. We invited him to specifically attend our March session on how to prepare for lecture, suggesting that he would have a lot to offer in terms of time management and efficiency. Again, as opposed to group emails, individual invitations can invoke reciprocity norms, making them more difficult to ignore. Instead of passively ignoring a mass email, this makes turning down the invitation a more difficult, active process. By pointing out their own behaviours to them and encouraging the activation of self-perception processes (Bem, 1972), faculty members who may not otherwise realize that they actually do have an interest in these topics, may come to realize that they can both learn from and contribute to discussions on teaching practices.

In sum, Table 2 outlines the specific steps and considerations in organizing a CoP, based on our experience.

**Table 2. Steps and considerations in organizing a departmental CoP.**

<b>STEP</b>	<b>CONSIDERATION</b>
1. Get departmental support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideally, the department chair will be on board, and will provide financial support and space in the department for meeting</li> </ul>
2. Book rooms for the entire year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select a reasonable schedule (e.g., once a month)</li> <li>• Consider days of the week – different days of the week every month could help maximize participation</li> <li>• Select a time that is convenient – consider lunch meetings to maximize time commitment</li> </ul>
3. Book speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Send personal invitations to people in the department who would benefit from the experience of presenting</li> <li>• Allow presenters to choose topics of interest to them</li> <li>• Consider providing a list of possible topics</li> </ul>
4. Promote CoP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Send mass email invitation with all sessions and topics listed</li> <li>• Consider asking your chair to announce the series to lend an air of legitimacy</li> </ul>
5. Individual invitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify key faculty who may have a particular interest in a specific topic and reach out to them with personal invitations</li> <li>• Avoids diffusion of responsibility</li> </ul>
6. Bring treats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food can serve as a motivator, inspiring a greater investment in the CoP over time</li> </ul>

## Conclusions

Ideally, CoPs can quickly and efficiently strengthen the pedagogical practices of research-focused and teaching-focused instructors, alike. The regular attendees of our CoP who completed an anonymous, open-ended survey stated that participating in the CoP either bolstered their understanding of tips learned previously or introduced new techniques, altogether. One participant also reported developing a better understanding of their own teaching style, suggesting that the more theoretical topics also resulted in a noticeable impact. As organizers, we have also heard from colleagues in other departments that they have learned about what we are doing in Psychology with our teaching and learning CoP, suggesting that the outside perception of our departmental teaching culture is changing for the better. These reports support the idea that a

relatively small dedication of time and resources for a CoP can effect positive change in the practices of instructors. As various pedagogical concerns are introduced, emphasized, and reiterated with a fresh perspective, the culture of thoughtful, reflective teaching is strengthened. This culture can become infused throughout a department, redefining the mere delivery of content to students as an insufficient instructional plan for a course. All instructors, including those at research universities, can be held to high pedagogical standards. A CoP can be an approachable and rewarding first step towards achieving this goal.

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