The Ties that Bind: How Faculty Learning Communities Connect Online Adjuncts to Their Virtual Institutions

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Abstract

Online learning is in its infancy compared to other types of learning in the history of academe. Because of its limited history, there is much to be discovered about the ontological, axiological, and epistemological aspects of this technology-driven learning environment. While literature is saturated with online student experiences, and the differences between online and traditional teaching and learning, one area has been relatively unexplored: the relationship between the virtual instructor and his or her institution. This paper discusses findings from a recent dissertation study that, in part, sought to operationalize the construct of collegiality for online instructors. The literature and the study suggest that fostering this connection from the virtual faculty to their institution is incredibly important and it is argued that to do so a Virtual Community of Practice and Faculty Learning Communities should be developed and nurtured.

Introduction

Online faculty can and do become "professional online adjuncts" and make a decent living doing so; because of this, feeling a sense of belonging, a sense of collegiality with the university and other faculty is important (Orlando & Poitrus, 2005; Puzziferro-Schnitzer, 2005). Involving faculty in academic decisions (Betts, 1998), or recognizing them in some way for a job well done might be two ways to do this (Wolcott & Betts, 1999; Maguire, 2005). However, since no study had confirmed how online faculty operationalize the construct of collegiality, universities may not be doing it right or doing it at all. Creating a feeling of collegiality and connection is not an easy feat for virtual universities, but it can be done (McLean, 2006). Creating a greater sense of collegiality is a form of faculty support; currently many institutions only offer technical and instructional design support to their faculty (Gates, 2000) instead of getting a wider picture of what the faculty may need besides those two important areas. Once new faculty are comfortable with online teaching, they need less technical and teaching support, but need encouragement and recognition for their efforts, which is part of developing a collegial relationship (Clay, 1999).

Communities of Practice and Faculty Learning Communities

Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave (1998) proposed the Communities of Practice model, which views learning as a continual process of refining knowledge and practice while participating in a certain community (Fenwick, 2008). They proposed that learning is social and comes from peoples' experiences in the interactions with different groups (communities) on a daily basis (Smith, 2003). Wenger (1999) states that members of a Community of Practice are brought together through *joint enterprise*, which is a set of common activities and common goals that are understood and continually renegotiated by the members. The beginning of this process can be new instructor training and mentoring at an online institution. Further, *mutual engagement* sustains the Community of Practice because they are bound by their common goals and become a social entity. Finally, the Community of Practice has a *shared repertoire* of *communal resources* like routines, language, styles, habits, that the group members develop over a period of time. It is important that members develop relationships with each other over a period of time (Lave &

Wenger, 1991) and they develop that relationship around things that matter to each other (Wenger).

In the area of virtual organizations, Communities of Practice can be developed through the interactions between those who teach for the organization. They are introduced to one another through a training facilitator, who is more than likely a member of the Community of Practice already in progress at the institution and who has strong connections with other members of that community. The training facilitator helps introduce the new members to the Community of Practice and shares information and practices related to what is important to that institution's Community of Practice. If the new faculty succeed through initial training, and programs are in place to nurture the Community of Practice and the individuals participating in it, then the group will reach *mutual engagement.* As professional growth and development opportunities are shared, and members are able to sustain and enhance their relationships within the community, they will develop and continue to contribute to their *shared repertoire* of resources related to enhancing their teaching in the online environment.

Creating and maintaining a virtual Community of Practice is important for online institutions because participation within such a community might positively affect instructor performance (Lesser & Storck, 2001). The Communities of Practice provide a vehicle for the online institution to handle issues that might arise and to disseminate and explore new knowledge; furthermore, the communities provide a way to sustain the university's mission through the individual contributions and sustaining actions of each faculty member who participates (Lesser & Storck). Paying close attention to the fact that there is social capital hovering in Communities of Practice, and this social capital can lead to changes in faculty behavior due to increased knowledge sharing, can help online organizations see the benefit of having a Community of Practice for its faculty, which can be greater organizational effectiveness and profitability (Smith, 2003).

Virtual institutions might resist the urge to create Communities of Practice because of the lack of direct, face to face contact, but Paloff and Pratt (2007) offer that building online communities can create relationships that are stronger than the relationships built at face to face institutions. Appropriate initial faculty training, efforts to promote collegiality, and other collaborative opportunities provide not only the initiation into the Community of Practice, but also the means to enrich and enhance the Community of Practice through opportunities to interact as a group or smaller groups within the larger community, called Faculty Learning Communities (Cox, 2004). Smaller faculty learning communities could exist within the Community of Practice. A Faculty Learning Community (FLC) is a group of cross-discipline faculty of about eight to 12 members who engage in an active, collaborative program based upon a specific curriculum related to enhancing teaching and learning (Cox, 2002). Because online Communities of Practice do not have the time constraints of needing to meet face to face, these smaller FLCs can be easy to create and sustain within an already successful Community of Practice. The FLC will help sustain a virtual, collegial atmosphere because evidence shows that FLCs increase faculty interest in teaching, in learning, and provide support to faculty on an ongoing basis (Miami University of Ohio). In short, Communities of Practice and FLCs are two easy ways to promote collegiality and enhance the relationships between faculty and the institution, and between faculty and their peers.

Literature Review

The mentoring relationship established during or right after training might be the first relationship a faculty member will have at the virtual campus. However, that relationship should not be the only one that a faculty member develops over the time that he or she teaches for an institution. This social dimension is sometimes ignored, but teachers learn best within a community where

issues are shared, discussed, debated, and where members assist in each other's development (Schalger & Fusco, 2003, cited in Chalmers & Keown, 2006).

Giving online faculty a place where their stories are shared and their voices are heard increases their feelings of connection to other human bodies who are teaching for the same university, who are dealing with similar issues, and who are working towards the same goals (Carnevale, 2004; Orlando & Poitrus, 2005). This is but one aspect of a successful Community of Practice. McLean (2005) also finds that the literature truly lacks in the realm of the affective experiences of the online educator; she offers that researchers need to pay closer attention of the total online teaching experience and its relationship is to the instructors' personal and social perspectives.

Administrators might view programs and processes aimed at promoting collegiality as just additional costs added to strained budgets; however, Husmann and Miller (2001) reveal that administrators of distance learning programs believe that their largest investment should be in their faculty because the quality of their program is based upon their performance. By recognizing even the smallest achievements of faculty, and by recognizing their individual contributions to the success and vitality of the institution, administrators will be helping further faculty commitment to the organization and strengthen their morale (Floyd, 2003). Weaver, Robbie, and Borland (2008) share this viewpoint by stating that the full and ongoing support of senior management for online learning and the development of online educators should be top priority for an institution.

Teaching in the online environment does require the ability to quickly change and adapt as learners change and as technology and learning management systems change. Having a FLC or several of them in place assists in helping faculty through change (Davis & Niederhauser, 2005). Shulman, Cox, and Richlin (2004) state that when there are challenges of constant change in an organization, there is no substitute for the collaboration that occurs as a result of FLCs because they are a result of people volunteering to gather together (virtually or otherwise) for a common goal to support each other so that progress can continue.

Communities of Practice and FLCs are not new fads that will fade in the next decade; rather, they are philosophical in nature because they fit into a changing philosophy of knowledge; they are research-based because what FLCs do and how they work fit within what research says about learning; they are pragmatic because they work (Cross, 1998). What is important to consider, however, is the success rate of other university initiatives that have been implemented in the past. If the institution does not manage change well, then it is unlikely that an FLC initiative will be successful (Shulman, Cox & Richlin, 2004).

Creating the Ties that Bind

As discussed previously, creating a Virtual Community of Practice and FLCs are two ways to connect faculty to their institution. In terms of FLCs, they can be cohort-based or topic-based (Cox, 2002). The cohort-based FLCs are designed for and around a group of faculty with a shared experience, perhaps it is their discipline, their status (new, mid-career or senior faculty) or another area that ties them together. They work on a range of teaching and learning topics that are important to the particular group (Cox). If given support over a period of time, these cohort-based FLCs can positively impact the culture of the institution, as shown by four examples of these communities: the Teaching Scholars Community for junior faculty, the Senior Faculty Community for Teaching Excellence, the Preparing Future Faculty Community for graduate students, and the Department Chairs Learning Community, all of which are at Miami University of Ohio (Cox).

The topic-based FLC is designed around a specific need, issue, or opportunity for teaching (Cox,

2004). Faculty members who participate in these communities are multi-disciplinary and come from a range of faculty ranks and cohorts (Cox, 2002). Some topics that might be covered by topic-based FLCs are: problem-based learning, critical and evaluative thinking, diversity, the first year experience, and technology (Cox). A topic-based FLC ends when the issue is satisfactorily addressed. A topic-based FLC is, like a cohort-based FLC, led by a community leader, or FLC Program Director (Cox, 2004), who is probably an experienced faculty member. Having such a leader is one of the most important factors for success of an FLC (Ingram, 2005). There should be a person at the university who oversees the Community of Practice and FLCs. This person should: a) coordinate funding, b) provide technology support, c) educate the faculty and administration about the FLCs, d) identify faculty with common interests who would make a good FLC, e) help faculty and FLCs find resources relevant to their group, and f) form partnerships with other campus departments (Sherer, 2005).

Conclusion

When institutions start to implement learning communities, they are taking steps that will profoundly affect their culture (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Online institutions have a unique opportunity to initiate new faculty into their Community of Practice during initial preparation to teach online (Correia & Davis, 2008). In addition, they can establish and maintain FLCs and add to their membership after faculty are successfully prepared to teach within the online university's culture. While it is suggested that online universities might already have established Communities of Practice, investing time in them, and creating a position that oversees them and promotes the development and management of FLCs is important (Ingram, 2005; Sherer, 2005). Not only that, but the literature suggests that creating communities of learners is a recommended practice for online pedagogy (Larramendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Lynch, 2002) and certainly a large step in a positive direction for online faculty.

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