
'CoP ON!' Developing Communities of Inclusive Practice (CoPs) at University College Cork (UCC), Cork, Ireland

Introduction

Our catch cry 'CoP on!' comes from the acronym for Communities of Practice. We hope with its provocative tone to encourage people to engage in and with communities of practice as open invitations for change and for good. Inclusive CoPs should be the norm since we need everyone's contribution and, by its very nature, each community is composed of diverse learners.

Our paper grows out of the AHEAD 2020 conference **Through the Looking Glass: Reflecting on Inclusion from the Boardroom to the Classroom**. Our focus is particularly on the classroom and we were delighted to present in Week 6 of the virtual conference - a result of forward thinking by the AHEAD team in a timely act of pedagogical triage necessary to address the educational challenges posed by Covid 19. Aware of the impact of the virtual conference even at Week 6, we began our presentation by noting that the conference was creating its very own version of a growing virtual community of practice, composed of those who joined the weekly webinar sessions. As a prequel to our presentation, we posed some questions regarding whether the online genre of a CoP changed its nature and whether it had advantages or disadvantages over conventional CoPs. On reviewing the Chat feedback, the conclusion from those who contributed was that the online forum gave more time to communicate and collaborate and that it broke down geographical barriers, as well as providing more ways of working together. **Covid 19 has ensured that virtual CoPs are here to stay, so it will be worth tracking their nature and growth into the future.**

We will now focus on CoPs in the context of our work at the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL) at UCC. CIRTL is situated on the main campus, adjacent to the Aula Maxima and the Council Room on one side, and the new Hub building on the other, bringing together teaching and learning, strategic and administrative perspectives for the advancement of student learning.



Figure 1. CIRTL at the West Lodge UCC with the Aula Maxima and the Council Room in the background.



Figure 2. Marian, Brian and Enzo outside the Hub building UCC, which now houses the Disability Support Service (DSS) and is adjacent to CIRTL. The proximity of both buildings facilitates the work and synergies of both communities and their impact on teaching and learning at UCC.

Teaching and Learning as Community Property

Our abstract situated CoPs in a scholarly setting (Boyer, 1990), drawing particularly on the words of Lee Shulman (1993, 2004) which have inspired our scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) approach, a cornerstone of our

accredited programme (McCarthy, 2020):

We close the classroom door and experience pedagogical solitude, whereas in our life as scholars, we are members of active communities; communities of conversation, communities of evaluation, communities in which we gather with others ... to exchange our findings, our methods, and our excuses. I now believe that the reason teaching is not more valued in the academy is because the way we treat teaching removes it from the community of scholars. (Shulman, 2004, pp.140-141).

Communities of Practice (CoP) are best understood, therefore, in the context of teaching as 'community property', where we question, share and talk about our teaching, and particularly, about our students' learning and its challenges and evidence. Shulman and other SoTL scholars (Boyer, 1990; Bass, 1999; Hutchings, 1998) see teaching as a communal, intellectual, research act, rather than a behavioural or technical one, and distinguish between teaching as **remediation** and teaching as **investigation** (Bass, 1999). Rather than conceive of teaching as 'private property' (Shulman, 1993 and 2004), we need to open the classroom door, let in the light and share our problems and reflections with others. There are no quick fixes, no short-term, technical solutions in the classroom; but there are communities of practice and of learning to which we can belong, in which we can critique and disseminate as we do in our research disciplines. We can share our stories and interrogate what surprises and puzzles us. **We can engage with uncertainty (Wenger-Trayner, 2020) and learn from it.**

Communities of Practice (CoPs): Key elements

Our experience of working together since 2006 has taught us that a community of practice is a complex, dynamic organism, made up of at least the following elements:

Culture as a way of being, as well as of knowing, which works strategically and systematically over time from the top down, as well as from the bottom up, of the organisation;

Time as a force that cannot be short-changed. CoPs develop over time and for a long time if they are nurtured and functional;

Space as a physical and psychological presence, whether CoPs develop in real and/or virtual space. Where the learner is positioned in this space, metaphorically and physically, really matters, since space can enable or disable;

Trust as a mutual, relational bond. A community thrives on trust between members and on respect for one another;

Research as an investigative stance. We need to be a community of scholars who reflect on and critique our teaching. The 'what if' hypothesis is as key to the intellectual, qualitative act of teaching and its compelling evidence – student learning - as it is to the quantitative, scientific investigation;

Connectivity as a necessary conduit. Communities of Practice rely on making connections, on networks and, ultimately, on communication.

These elements continue to inform, reform and transform the living reality of a CoP, its every changing nature brought home to us in the aforementioned online CoP genres now generated by Covid 19. We will now track the growth of CoPs at UCC through our work on the Accredited Programme in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education there, focusing particularly on the second year of the programme.

The Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (PDTLHE)

The Postgraduate Certificate and Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning in Higher education grew out of a demand for an accredited programme by staff of UCC who had been attending seminar sessions on teaching and learning since the late 1990s. The first Certificate course ran in 2004 and was designed to equip teaching staff with the theoretical and pedagogical perspectives necessary to share their expert knowledge of the disciplines and involve students in their learning. The PDTLHE soon followed in 2006, providing staff with the opportunity to analyse disciplinary understanding in more depth and giving them the chance to review a course they were teaching through the lenses of diverse learning. A decade later in 2015, the programme moved online to facilitate a more flexible approach for teaching staff and to maximise the benefits of technology. This meant that the programme could now be undertaken more widely by teaching staff from other institutions nationally and internationally. **To date, the courses have reached third level institutions in the US and as far away as the University of Tokyo.**

As with the PG Certificate, the PGDTLHE is offered annually. Though it is co-ordinated by a member of CIRTL staff, class participants are divided into discussion groups of 10 members and are facilitated by a Teaching Fellow who has already completed a Masters in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The Fellows are drawn from a range of disciplines and departments across the university. These include a member of staff from Disability Support Services and from Adult and Continuing Education. The Teaching Fellows form a close community of practice in themselves, working together to support the teaching staff who make up the students registered on the course. The Fellows meet regularly for coffee catch-ups, currently virtually, to revise and discuss any difficulties that arise in their work. They also meet with the course coordinator and other CIRTL members of staff during the summer months to discuss the programme and any challenges that require addressing from the perspectives of curriculum design and assessment. Thus, a CoP approach is central to the success of this work.

Each Fellow addresses the needs of his/her student group by facilitating the on-line discussions necessary for participants to complete the course. Each Fellow is also responsible for marking continuous assessment portfolios, which make up 100% of the overall grade of the programme. Fellows are also there to answer any questions or help solve difficulties that may arise for any student in their group. They are there to facilitate course participants as they share their learning journey through and as a community of practice.

The Critical Friend as an agent of CoP

Each member of the course is assigned a critical friend, to benefit their own work, and each also acts as a critical friend to a colleague for the duration of the programme. A critical friend can be defined as

‘A trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the

context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.’ (Costa and Kallick, 1993).

The module **TL6006 Diversity in Student Learning** makes up the second semester of the PDLHE programme and provides participants with the opportunity to research an entire module in the light of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Teaching for Understanding (TFU). This is done by means of a course portfolio (Hutchings, 1998; McCarthy, 2014) which invites participants to take a scholarly approach to their course module under the following headings:

- Course Design,
- Course Enactment or Teaching and Course Results or Student Learning.

The Discussion Board of the second semester provides participants with the opportunity to discuss their portfolios with their peers. Between the discussion groups and the input from their critical friend, each student on the course gets plenty of opportunities to receive peer feedback from their colleagues as they work together in an inclusive community of practice.

Two case studies from last year’s programme

We can now explore and demonstrate how the teachers undertaking the PGDLHE take the concept of a community of practice into their classrooms.

Case Study 1: Karen Donovan, Mercy University Hospital, Cork



Figure 3. Karen Donovan, BSc (Hons) RGN, Clinical Facilitator, Mercy University Hospital, Cork

Karen Donovan is a clinical course facilitator at the Mercy University Hospital and has chosen an on-ward, practical- based, medication management round as her module. This course or module is taken by fourth year, intern- nursing students as part of their placement. Before beginning their placement, students are first required to complete a class based preparation week in which they are introduced to the principles of medications and to the ‘10 rights of medication management’. This consists of presentation work followed by group work in which they are required to be able to discuss these principles and rights. They are also required to complete a short on-line programme in which their familiarity with the material is examined. At the end of the preparation week, each student is given a workbook to be completed while on the course. This is divided into 3 sections. The first requiring students

to study and answer questions on the 10 rights of medication management. The second section is a calculation area in which students are required to calculate the correct medication dose for a patient from his chart and from the prescriptions prescribed by the doctor. This work is supervised until the nurse is fully qualified. In the third section, students write up their own case study on a chosen patient.

CoP manifests itself in a variety of ways across the UDL principles invoked in the course, as students work in groups on the ward, present to each other as and in a group, and learn much from the patients who become an intrinsic part of their community of learning.

Teaching for Understanding and Universal Design for Learning go hand in hand, as we have established in previous papers (McCarthy, 2008; McCarthy, 2015; McCarthy and Butler, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019). Karen's approach draws on all three UDL principles to maximise learning as follows:

Multiple means of Representation Karen encourages the students to represent their learning in different ways. The very nature of the course and its focus on placement and its authentic nature and real-life setting already begets many ways of representation.

Multiple Means of Expression There are many opportunities for multiple forms of expression in this practical based course as the students work with their patients to complete their workbooks.

Multiple Means of Engagement Likewise, there are multiple forms of engagement from the variety of the prep week to the feedback and peer learning the students experience as they review their work on the ward. The fact that each student has the autonomy to choose their own patient for the case study is also important to engagement. Of course, the work is itself engaging and Karen as supervisor takes a positive approach with the students when she is providing feedback on each medication round. Even though some students may not have had the same amount of background knowledge as others, they none the less finish the 26 week module being fully qualified in the practice of medication management.

Teaching for Understanding (TfU)

Karen takes a Teaching for Understanding approach (Wiske, 1998) to the course which gives it direction and focus: 'The overarching goal is to complete a medication round independently adhering to policy, procedure and the ten rights of medication management, while displaying a clear knowledge of the medications being administered and the reasons for same.'

CoP manifests itself in a variety of ways across the UDL principles listed above, as students work in groups on the ward, present to each other as a group and in groups, and learn much from the patients who become an intrinsic part of their community of learning. This is a great example of creating moments of engagement and of engaging with uncertainty. There is much personal and professional learning. In terms of TfU, students are literally performing their understanding on the ward on a daily basis.

Challenges

Karen's challenges relate directly to improving student learning and take into account her own critical friend's advice. Though all of these student nurses have completed some lectures in medication management and

pharmacology, some have more practice on the ward depending on their previous placements over the four years. Inevitably, some have been more exposed to medication management than others and this leaves Karen with a class who have a variety of background knowledge. Karen's critical friend suggests a classroom assessment technique or CAT (Angelo and Cross, 1993) be taken during the prep week, which would equip Karen with important knowledge when she goes to work with students in the area of medication management. Karen is, therefore, considering this strategy for the future.

Case Study 2: Dr Kenneth Keating, School of English, UCC



Figure 4. Dr Kenneth Keating, School of English, UCC.

Our second case study comes from a very different discipline and setting in the School of English at UCC. We wanted to highlight that inclusive practice is possible across the university and its disciplines and that inclusive CoPs should be ubiquitous. Dr Kenneth Keating's course portfolio also provides a rich resource of UDL practice and of student engagement.

Dr Keating is an IRC Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Research Fellow and the author of **Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Canon: Critical Limitations and Textual Liberations**. He is working on transnationalism and poetic form in contemporary poetry with his students. The course he chooses to research and review is entitled **Twenty-First Century Irish Writing** taken by first year undergraduates.

The course portfolio model (Hutchings, 1998, McCarthy, 2014)) again facilitates the documentation of Dr Keating's practice across the three principles of UDL:

Multiple Means of Representation Kenneth works across a variety of genres to draw his students into the course. These include lectures and seminars and comprise written text, visual material, videos, oral histories and interviews. There is a CoP focus throughout since students are invited to make in-class presentations and to provide feedback to their peers.

Multiple Means of Action and Expression Kenneth takes an innovative approach to assessment and, with the approval of his Head of Department, moves from the traditional, terminal exam to the continuous assessment method of a learning journal and the promotion of oral and visual forms of expression. Students are also introduced to a variety of texts and tones from literary, cultural and political perspectives. The CoP focus here is in the form of in-class group discussions elucidating these nuances.

Multiple Means of Engagement Kenneth uses a variety of topics, themes and texts to engage and motivate students. Crucially, he also provides students with a variety of assessment modes and invites them to present their portfolios in textual, visual or digital submission formats.

Dr Keating is also focused on Teaching for Understanding (TfU) approaches, an intrinsic part of the Diploma course which aligns with UDL. TfU gives direction to the design of his course from the beginning

‘...to present students with more opportunities to demonstrate their performance of understanding across its four dimensions in relation to the key issues addressed in the course, changes must be made to the delivery and assessment strategies of the module.’

From Kenneth’s perspective,

‘These new elements...include the completion of learning journals, in-class presentations, and the completion of a portfolio, which will be submitted at the end of term.’

Once again, we are on a journey beset with uncertainty as students embark on new ways of reading and sharing texts on literary, cultural and political levels, embracing a wide variety of genres, of contexts and of tone and setting. In terms of developing a vibrant CoP, opportunity and risk is taken by this innovative lecturer to create moments of engagement for his students.

Challenges

Dr Keating’s challenges are pervasive across the course and he asks some probing questions in order to research and advance his course:

Regarding the design of the course he asks ‘**where does the course fit into the degree?**’ This question leads him to discuss innovative approaches with his Head of Department. He also wonders about what counts in assessment and creates clear rubrics for grading each assignment, letting students know the criteria which will count and can be used to rate their own progress. He consults again with his Head of Department, and colleagues, regarding such innovation. Finally, he is conscious that innovation itself will beget new conversations with his Head of Department and his colleagues and he values the response of his own critical friend and discussion group to frame such thinking.

In Conclusion

Both case studies above provide examples of how CoP works in practice across the disciplines, harnessed through a course portfolio approach that facilitates the systematic review of UDL and TfU approaches in the redesign of modules to advance student learning. Our ‘Cop On!’ approach allows us at CIRTl and DSS to frame classroom engagement in a scholarly, reflective and communal way. Being part of a community of practice invites us, like Alice, to step **Through the Looking Glass** and take a different perspective. In so doing we come upon new people who challenge our thinking, stretch our imaginations and open us up to new pedagogical vistas.



Figure 5: Alice goes through the Looking Glass. Original illustration by John Tenniel.

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Marian is a member of the Senate of the NUI and a former Governor of UCC. She also served on the Board of Directors of AHEAD, in which she has a keen interest.