

The Transformation of Social Work Education through Virtual Learning

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Edited by

R. Paul Maiden

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PREFACE

R. PAUL MAIDEN

My journey from the traditional campus-based classroom to the cloud-based classroom began some years ago when I embraced the opportunity to ‘convert’ an *Intervention with Substance Abusers* course that I had taught for many years both at the University of Illinois-Chicago and the University of Central Florida (UCF) in Orlando. At the time, UCF was a definitive leader in the technology enhanced education, including the development of online courses across most major and disciplines – except my own – social work. The social work educator’s mantra was essentially, ‘you can’t teach social work practice in an online environment,’ a decidedly *reactive* response to this emerging technology. I don’t recall having an opinion one way or the other as no one was really doing it. I just knew no one had really tried.

The UCF’s Center for Distributed Learning was encouraging and incentivizing faculty throughout the University to develop the courses they most often taught on campus to online courses. Having joined UCF the prior year, I was eager to take on something new and interesting and admittedly was drawn in by the incentive – a nice stipend and a new laptop computer that I would later use to teach my new online course. I also fancied myself as somewhat of an educational entrepreneur and innovator, having developed and chaired the Occupational Social Work Program at the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois – Chicago.

Truth-be-told, I also clearly remember thinking that our social work students probably would not be that interested as their thinking had probably been influenced by the utter lack of enthusiasm by most of our faculty. Was I ever wrong! One of the conditions placed on faculty who developed online a course was a requirement to teach the course in the fall or spring semester of the next academic year. So I set to work with my assigned instructional designer story boarding the 15 units of my class. It is noteworthy to mention that the technology of the time only allowed for creation of an asynchronous course using Web CT or Blackboard as we did not yet have Moodle, Zoom which now enable us to develop and deliver real time synchronous course content. The ‘asynchronous only’ course delivery was the primary limitation

to teaching social work practice course in the online environment - at least from the perspective of our faculty.

Developing my first online class was a stimulating experience as I was being introduced to and immersed in new technology that I had given little attention in my own instruction. After a semester long series of online course development workshops and meetings with my instructional designer, I was ready to roll out our school's first fully online course. Even after completing the development of this course, I was still not convinced that there would be a demand among our social work students. What an absolute surprise to learn that 15 minutes after registration opened, the course had reached enrollment capacity. Thus my 'immersion' into a rapidly emerging frontier of online education.

Seven years after the launch of our first online course, and at the time I was preparing to leave UCF for a faculty appointment at the University of Southern California, the school was offering 42 either fully online or 'hybrid' courses. Our hybrid courses were also referred to as '50/50s' – 50 percent online and 50 percent in class and on campus. The hybrid course strategy was developed in response to a rapidly growing university with limited space. Developing hybrid courses enabled us to 'double-up,' essentially assigning two sections of course to the same classroom space with each section meeting on alternate weeks. In the intervening week, the student was expected to complete the online (asynchronous) content for the week. The hybrid model also resolved remaining faculty concerns about teaching social work practice in an online course.

When I joined the University of Southern California School of Social Work as Professor and Vice Dean of Academic Affairs (essentially chief operating officer of the school), I knew we were going to develop some manner of an online MSW program. However, I did not know what form it would take or who our student 'market' would be. Keep in mind that the purpose of developing online courses at UCF in the School of Social Work was to reduce 'seat time' on campus. It was not a growth strategy as enrollment growth was not a particular concern given state caps placed on enrollments in public universities. On the other hand, the University of Southern California is private, tuition driven university. Thus, enrollment growth and expanding our 'reach' were the factors driving movement into online education with quality being at the core.

After a year of planning and 'course conversion,' USC launched their online MSW degree with an inaugural cohort of 80 students. At the time there was a campus based enrollment of approximately 1,100 students. As of this writing there is a 'steady state' enrollment of 2000+/- online students scattered across most of the 50 states and either military enlistees or ex-pats

in some six countries. The School of Social Work has continued to expand its involvement in online education and recently launched a Doctor of Social Work degree in *Innovation, Leadership and Advanced Social Work Management Practice in Complex Systems*. The School also developed and launched a Master of Science Nurse Practitioner degree, the only School of Social Work in the U.S. to house a department of nursing.

While the following series of chapters are all authored by USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work faculty who have been deeply involved in the construction and teaching in the School's Virtual Academic Center (VAC), this volume is not intended (nor will you find it to be) 'USC centric.' Rather, these chapters represent almost ten years of innovations and insights, challenges, steps (and occasional missteps), in the development of what is considered a 'gold standard' online graduate program. The principles and practices applied and the lessons garnered can be applied to any discipline entering the frontier of online teaching and learning.

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DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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AND JUNE WILEY

Abstract

A Community of Practice (CoP) refers to a group of practitioners or experts who share a common concern and/or engage in a collective process to fulfill individual and group goals in a specific environment. CoP often places an emphasis on sharing best practices, creating new knowledge, and managing knowledge to advance a domain of professional practice. For online social work education programs, a community of practice has relevance. The concept offers social work educators teaching in a virtual environment a framework for describing how they create, manage, share, and apply knowledge. Within the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work's MSW online program, the ways faculty sustain the virtual environment, and train emerging social workers provide evidence of how a CoP undergirds its virtual enterprise. This chapter contributes to the discourse on online communities of practice and discusses the features of the school's Virtual Academic Center's CoP. It presents the authors' reflections of their experiences, provides examples for effectively cultivating and sustaining a virtual CoP, and concludes with a discussion on the challenges and realities of an online CoP.

Introduction

Lave & Wenger's (1991) concept "community of practice" provides a conceptual framework for understanding the process that orients faculty to the practices of an online graduate program and how it shapes their online teaching identity. As the concept "community of practice" has evolved over time, it is now best described as "a group of people who share a concern, a

set of problems, or a passion about topics, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis... These people don't necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interaction..." (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002 p. 4). In the online environment, faculty members are social work educators who enter the online community and gradually take up its practice. The sense of community emanates from promoting innovation through curriculum development, sharing knowledge with each other, and networking with others who are teaching in the online environment.

In this chapter, we discuss our experiences teaching online and reflect on the ways we cultivate communities of practice to organize our teaching knowledge and share it with faculty teaching online. We begin by describing the elements of USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work Virtual Academic Center's (VAC) community of practice. Then, through pedagogical cases, we use the model to describe our role and responsibilities and the principles of our teaching philosophy, and personal commitment to contribute to the VAC's community of practice.

Cultivating an Online Community of Practice

The past decade has seen exponential growth in online education (Durrington, Berryhill, & Swafford, 2006, Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006; Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014). With the growth of web-based programs, there has also been an increase in the pedagogical sophistication of higher education programs (Stavredes, 2011). Online learning environments offer a variety of ways to engage students in creative learning activities. The quality of teaching online, as it does in traditional courses, matters. Online education environments require faculty to learn innovative pedagogical strategies for teaching online (Hutchings, Huber, & Golde, 2007). To accomplish this, it is imperative that faculty receive the training and support necessary to create an effective online learning experience for students (Lackey, 2011; Orr, Williams, & Pennington, 2009; Puzifferro-Schnitzer, 2005).

When examining the increase of online programs in higher education, the question of how to actively engage practitioners and manage the growth and development of an online faculty becomes paramount. Leading change includes the art of inclusion, persuasion, planning, mentoring, and delegating. For large-scale change initiatives, situational factors affecting individuals and/or groups within the organization magnify with the scale and scope of what needs to be undertaken (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2012).

Stavredes (2011) has identified the properties of effective online teaching and ways to prepare faculty teaching online. She invites us to review our philosophy of teaching and create a new one for online teaching. Organizing this type of knowledge remains a challenge. As the field of social work participates in the online education community, the authors join the discussion on how to develop and maintain structures within the online community to assist in knowledge creation and sharing as well facilitate a long-term management of support for faculty teaching online.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) describe their model of a community of practice and the three elements within it—domain, community, and practice—as providing the foundation for understanding the importance of why an organization must harness and utilize knowledge to ensure its success—for its longevity and production of quality products and/or outcomes. They further postulate that these three elements comprise the “ideal knowledge structure” (p. 29) for creating and disseminating knowledge.

Similar to other communities of practice (CoP), the VAC CoP has a unique combination of three components: a domain, community, and practice (Wenger et al. 2002). Each element of the CoP intersects around common interests and expertise (Figure 1).

Components of an Online Community of Practice

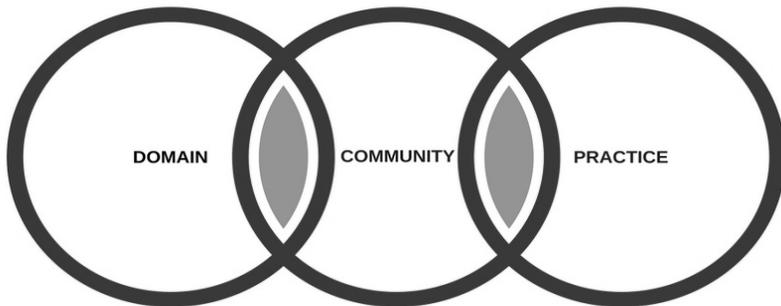


Figure 1: Components of the VAC Community of Practice

- **Domain.** There needs to be a shared interest (e.g., training emerging social workers online) and commitment to the organization’s mission.

4 Developing and Sustaining an Online Community of Practice in Social Work Education

- **Community.** There needs to be a community. The community revolves around people's professional needs for connections and a sense of belonging. For example, faculty and administrators are committed to developing an online teaching and learning community oriented towards training students to be social workers and earning a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree. In this online learning community, faculty build relationships with each other and share best online practices to engage in the learning process.
- **Practice.** There needs to be a practice. For a CoP to exist, members must be practitioners. Identifying and sharing resources and experiences. They develop a shared repertoire of resources which can include stories, experiences, problem solving strategies etc. formal and informal conversations are ways in which communities develop a practice overtime.

Reflections of an Administrator: Building and Maintaining the VAC CoP

The Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work at the University of Southern California launched its online MSW program in Fall, 2010, creating a paradigm shift for social work education. The Virtual Academic Center (VAC), the first nationwide online MSW program in the country, was created to respond to the occupational needs of the profession and nation since a greater than average growth rate of 12% was predicted for the profession (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2016-17 Edition*, Social Workers) in comparison to other similar occupations and to ensure that the diversity of student enrollment remains a hallmark of student admissions. Since the program is offered online, students who are unable to attend the traditionally scheduled classes in person due to a variety of circumstances, e.g., location of an MSW program in proximity to their residence and family and work obligations impeding graduate school attendance, are able to participate in an online format.

Many questions regarding the appropriateness of online education as a delivery format for social work have been raised by social work professionals and others unfamiliar with virtual environments (Flynn, Maiden, Smith, Wiley & Wood, 2013, p. 340). While the ability to immediately address some of the concerns regarding online social work education could not be easily determined in the nascence of the program, ensuring that students and professors were knowledgeable and adept in the

use of the technology and successfully engaging in the virtual classroom were concerns that could be.

Since its inception, the Virtual Academic Center (VAC) has experienced consistent enrollment growth, from its initial cohort of 88 students to the current enrollment of over 2,000 students. The VAC enrollment is nationwide, with students located in urban and rural areas of the US and a small number of students located overseas, due to their military assignments.

To instruct the number of students who are enrolled in the program, a large number of faculty have had to be employed. Currently, there are over 250 full and part-time clinical teaching and field faculty who teach in the VAC. These individuals, as the students, are located across the nation, since online classroom instruction occurs electronically.

The roles of the VAC faculty are aligned with their campus-based colleagues: faculty teach, serve as course leads, and conduct research. With the establishment of the VAC, some faculty are now specifically designated to the VAC as their primary assignment, creating a cadre of professors whose expertise includes their subject matter specialization as well as their expertise with creating asynchronous content materials and delivering technology-mediated instruction. The VAC faculty course leads also mentored faculty who were new to teaching online classes.

Domain: Virtual Academic Center MSW@USC

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) describe the domain within a community of practice as its core, its persona, its “raison d’etre” (p. 31). As result of the domain’s existence, a commonality emerges among those who are attracted to the ideas and values associated with it. These individuals seek to understand and share the knowledge about a concept that interests them.

When reflecting on the history of the Virtual Academic Center (VAC), it is evident that the concept of a domain as described by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) aptly describes the VAC. In 2010, the VAC was a groundbreaking enterprise in the field of social work. It created an innovative instructional delivery format for providing social work education to graduate students who were located in various cities across the U.S. Using Adobe Connect software to deliver the course content via asynchronous and synchronous course material, the VAC is the hub—the domain-- of the School’s work in online education. The center of activity and information related to online education for the School became and remains situated within this academic center.

When examining the history of the VAC, what occurred during its early months also corresponds to the concept of a domain. Initially, a critically important first step was to ensure that there were enough faculty prepared to teach in the virtual classroom. Some professors who were long accustomed to traditional in-person teaching eagerly volunteered to teach the inaugural online classes. While they were well-acquainted with the curriculum, these early adopters also recognized that training on how to use the virtual technology would be essential. Upon completion of the virtual online platform training, these faculty were now equipped to bring to the online classroom their content expertise coupled with their newly honed technology skills to teach online, creating a knowledge base previously unknown in the school.

Anticipating that the program would attract large numbers of students seeking to enroll in the online program necessitated hiring additional faculty. The extensive recruitment process was successful and a cadre of new instructors were hired. These newly hired instructors would also need to be trained to use the virtual technology; equally as important was the orientation process to assist new faculty to become acclimated to the culture of the university and the social work program.

As the new faculty were hired, they were also able to learn best online teaching practices from colleagues who had taught the first online cohort. Consistent with the concept of a domain, the first cohort of instructors recognized the value of being able to share this information with the new instructors, since it would assist the incoming faculty in being effective and efficient online instructors. Distinguishable from a work project, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) highlight that within a domain its members relate to each other based on mutual commitment to developing and disseminating applicable knowledge. This commitment, however, grows from their mutual interest, unlike a task that is overseen and directed by a leader. While a hierarchical structure has existed within the VAC since its inception, providing structure and direction, it is also the organic nature of knowledge sharing among the faculty that also attributes to how the program has grown and thrived.

Community

Since its founding in 1920, the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work of the University of Southern California has enjoyed an impressive history. Since its creation in 2010, the VAC has graduated 3,465 students. Additionally, the School has served as a hub for resources for alumni as well as working collaboratively with social work and related nonprofit

organizations in the area, who also strive for the betterment of individual and families' lives in Los Angeles and its surrounding communities.

The school's history and its values have been integral to the VAC. The establishment of the VAC meant that although the MSW program would differentiate its instructional delivery format from the on-ground program it would replicate the curriculum online and the values of the school with an emphasis on student success and preserving the student-faculty relationship. These program values are embedded in the VAC.

Practice

It was recognized in the early development of the VAC that its online format created a convenient way to learn and interact for both students and faculty. It was also determined during that that faculty should have opportunities to convene in person to enhance the development of the VAC community and camaraderie. To facilitate faculty development, it was decided that the VAC would hold two annual faculty retreats, one in the Fall and the other in the Spring, whereby the full-time faculty would meet to discuss the curriculum and practices related to student and faculty success, identify issues, and recommend to the administration how to resolve these issues. These retreats also serve as opportunities for faculty to learn the best online practices and share their pedagogical approaches. It is also an opportunity for networking, since many faculty members do not reside in the same city and/or state.

The VAC has also fostered the growth of a different type of learning community based on the different needs of students, faculty, and administrators functioning in the virtual environment. What has emerged are mechanisms to maintain and enhance the experiences of collective knowledge of the VAC community and to respond to the numerous inquiries, suggestions, and concerns related to its operation. Below we share our reflections and some insightful lessons learned given the roles we played in the VAC while writing this chapter.

Reflections of the VAC Administrator: Lessons Learned by June Wiley

The platform created for the VAC lends itself to ensuring that instructors are well-prepared for online teaching. Also, continuing improvement to further advance the asynchronous and synchronous tools are essential. In this CoP, the MSW program is transformative in its ability to assist students and faculty in realizing their personal and professional goals. As an

administrator, the VAC allows me to cultivate and develop a transformational leadership style that lends itself to working with colleagues to identify needed change, create a vision to guide the change, and execute the change with social work educators and other administrators.

Reflections of Renee Smith-Maddox, Faculty Course Lead

Teaching and Learning Domain

The adoption of online learning platforms in higher education created an opportunity for me to incorporate my teaching philosophy and teaching practice into a new CoP domain. Joining an online higher education community involved not only entering its internal configuration, but also learning the established modes of professional practice. In 2010, I started teaching online as a part-time instructor. I served in this capacity for two years before becoming a full-time clinical associate professor with the VAC.

As a newcomer to the online environment, I was quickly initiated into the structure and dynamics of the asynchronous and synchronous environment. The training oriented me to the features of the online platform (including discussion forums, embedded videos, interactive polling, recording, breakout rooms, and a backchannel for synchronous communication during class). My smooth transition to online teaching is attributed to my teaching experience in teacher education programs and experience in the social service sector. As a result, I understood the social work profession's code of ethics, values, service ideals, and practice skills. These professional experiences and insights also helped me share my knowledge with the online learning community. My appreciation for sharing best practices teaching online and level of comfort with innovative learning environments also helped me understand the complexities of professional education and how to create a community of adult learners.

Learning how to teach online is filled with a series of trials and errors, including testing the system's many features, dealing with the unpredictable nature of technology, and recognizing that some on-the-ground pedagogical techniques were transferable while others were not. The online challenges are situational. It is best to deal with problem situations immediately. As I became more proficient in the online technology, I was able to adapt my teaching style to the online environment, to deal with the unpredictable nature of a web-based learning environment, practice patience, and to share troubleshooting strategies with my colleagues and students.

Creating a Community of Practice

As a course lead instructor for required generalist and specialized practice courses, I am responsible for the following:

- maintaining curriculum oversight to ensure consistency in instructional and content delivery across multiple class sections (i.e., selecting and updating course readings, and ensuring that attention is given to diversity, equity, and inclusion);
- creating and revising the asynchronous material to make learning more engaging (including professional videos and other learning materials produced by experts);
- mentoring new faculty learning to teach online;
- orientating faculty to the online course they will be teaching;
- discussing student issues and constraints to determine a course of action;
- sharing information on a variety of effective teaching methods;
- distributing course-related resource materials;
- meeting with VAC faculty teaching the course to continuously review and update course content.

The VAC faculty works with a standardized syllabus co-created with colleagues, subject matter experts, and approved by the school's curriculum council. The 15-week online courses have asynchronous interactive learning activities to engage the students, such as a video, discussion forums, or cooperative peer learning. The synchronous learning environment (75 minutes weekly) is an opportunity for faculty to bridge the students' understanding of required readings with asynchronous learning activities and facilitate their learning of new knowledge. The major assignments are analytical, evidence-based, reflective, and an opportunity to integrate theory and practice. Within this role, a challenge I faced was determining how to create and sustain a viable community of practice for the faculty teaching online.

When working with faculty, the standardized course syllabus, assignments, rubrics, and course schedule ground us with a common purpose. In turn, I create opportunities for faculty to reflect, interact, give feedback, and collaborate to ensure professional interaction, and collective responsibility for providing a high quality teaching experience. In addition, our professional community of practice involves meeting virtually 3-4 four times per semester, sharing of best practices, and distributing resources

materials. In these communication structures, new instructors learn what is expected of them and how to meet those expectations, they engage in reciprocal exchanges with experienced colleagues about curriculum and instruction, and they get the support they need. Likewise, veteran instructors get to share their expertise and enhance their teaching practice.

Our professional community of practice cultivates an informal learning space for expanding and enhancing the faculty's awareness of the significant role they play in teaching emerging practitioners. With this perspective in mind, I found that the most productive starting place for faculty development is with their own online teaching experiences. Instructors bring incidents of teaching and learning not only to our faculty meeting, but also directly to me as they occur. During these interactions, I use an inquiry-based learning approach by focusing on questions that draw on the instructor's knowledge and experiences. This approach engages instructors in the teaching and learning process, as well as cultivates a community of practice that considers the various learning styles of adults.

Working with Experience and Novice Online Instructors

Creating a community of practice with novice and experienced instructors is like teaching students with different learning styles. Regarding their teaching experience, it's not uncommon to hire teaching faculty (mostly adjuncts) who have limited or no teaching experience. In 2010, when the VAC was launched, most faculty members did not have online teaching experience. Now, almost 10 years later, although we still hire new part-time instructors as needed, we have a core team of regular online teaching faculty who now have extensive online teaching experience. However, working with experienced instructors and novice instructors caused me to consider the diverse array of problem situations they have to address and the problem-solving strategies needed to resolve platform and in-class issues (i.e., teaching the course content, planning for weekly synchronous sessions, engaging students in the learning process, assessing students competencies, learning the features of the online platform, enforcing online decorum, and troubleshooting technical difficulties).

Our community of practice provides a structure for mentoring in the moment and serves as a safe space to engage faculty in thinking how to apply their pedagogical skills and talents in their online classroom. In addition, advising faculty how to handle student issues or recommending ways to develop assignments that incorporate critical thinking and relatedness to the real world equip faculty with viable strategies for student engagement. Our online community of practice enables both novice and

veteran instructors to succeed in their work as online instructors by giving them a sense of belonging to a significant higher education movement lead by the School. At the same time, it is a community that is intended to help novice instructors feel supported by their experienced colleagues. Moreover, consistently meeting online and in-person throughout the year and having access to faculty development webinars/seminars cultivates this sense of community. If instructors have student-related issues, they can contact colleagues, the course lead, and the student's academic advisor. If the instructor has instructional challenges, the assistant dean of faculty development and course lead will assist them in developing a plan of action (Flynn et al., 2013).

Teaching Practice

Although understanding the online technology and its features were essential to teaching online, it was not a prescription for effective teaching. It was still imperative for me to be in touch with my teaching practice and how it applied to the online environment. This is where I drew on my teaching philosophy to get started. My teaching practice is strongly aligned with Giroux and Simon's (1989) thoughts on critical pedagogy:

Pedagogy is a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among set of social relations. [It] includes the integration in practice of particular curriculum content and design, classrooms strategies and techniques, and evaluation purposes and methods. When one practices pedagogy, one acts with the intent of creating experiences that will organize and disorganize a variety of understandings of our natural and social world in particular ways... (p. 222)

Because of this pedagogical view, my teaching philosophy is driven by two questions: What is the role of faculty in training emerging social work practitioners? And how can the learning environment be a democratic setting where teachers and students contribute to the learning process? The development of my pedagogical approach came from several experiences. In my graduate school training, the inquiry-based research I conducted with elementary school teachers in two urban school districts and more than 10 years teaching in higher education allowed me to become keenly aware of how I teach, how I assess what graduate students learn, and the implications for the teaching and learning process. My 10 years of experience as a non-profit Executive Director of a wide range of youth development initiatives gave me the opportunity to understand places of struggle where I witness young people transform their lives and the people around them. The youth

also taught me that it is necessary to practice compassion in new learning settings. As a nonprofit manager, my work was rooted in hope. I got to witness how nonprofits struggled as the demand for services increase and revenue declines. As a result, my professional experiences became the training ground for understanding how to effectively use organizational resources to fulfill a nonprofit's mission, engage stakeholders in making mission-driven decision, and recognize the organization's capacity-building needs. I also recognized the challenge in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches. Working in nonprofits and academia taught me about paradigm shifts and the discomfort it caused. A by-product of these experiences prepared me to teach and address the motivations, needs, learning styles, and constraints of online learners.

My instructional perspectives are grounded in the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which gives me a framework for designing learning experiences for students. Bradford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) identified three attributes of the learning environment: learner-centered, knowledge-centered, and assessment-centered. In my courses, I create opportunities for students to engage in critical discourse, construct meanings from new knowledge, and discover connections, as well as contradictions between various worldviews. This learner-centered perspective allows me to pay attention to students' knowledge bases and draw upon their experiential bases. Knowledge-centered environments focus on the type of information and activities that will help students develop an understanding of the macro and micro practices of the social work field. In addition, an assessment-centered environment is established to provide opportunities for feedback. I have learned that whatever is assessed must be congruent with the course's learning objectives. This sounds obvious, but an instructor should consistently map the instructional activities with learning outcomes. Assessments provide invaluable information about the students' learning progress over time and help me determine how to facilitate their learning through the coursework.

Teaching as a practice of freedom is a perspective of critical pedagogy attributed to bell hooks (1994). It is a transformative experience that includes high expectations, high regard for student diversity, caring (mentoring and building relationships), sharing (networking), and learning (mastery). What I have learned is that good teaching happens when I co-create a learning community with my students and view students as experts and resources. Recognizing the lived experiences of students, I provide them with opportunities to learn through collaborative peer-learning activities, promote self-directed student learning groups, and give them the safe space to think and do something new, creative, and innovative.

Over the years, through my own ongoing reflective practice, I have remained open-minded and curious about innovative ways to implement effective teaching strategies, expand student awareness, and guide students' transformation while developing their critical perspectives. Subsequently, the work of John Dewey (1933) and Carol Rodgers (2002) on the benefits of a reflective practice informs my teaching practice. They contend that reflection involves a process that is rigorous and systematic and is a tool for enriching the teaching and learning process. Reflection gives me a way to draw on my personal and professional experiences to enhance my teaching practice.

Lessons Learned

Almost ten years ago, I became part of a new trend of online learning in higher education. In the VAC, the role of the course lead can be considered the primary influencer for determining how faculty get acclimated to the online environment. This domain of influence occurs in the online community of practice that is co-created with faculty. Before you engage students in deep learning, faculty need to be engaged in deep learning and thinking about what it takes to teach online. Therefore, an online community of practice ensures that faculty receives the support they need to be effective instructors and have a sense of belonging. This community of practice should be planned and established to give faculty opportunities to evaluate the online course they are teaching, enhance or expand their teaching practice, and transfer this new knowledge to their online classroom. This process is intentional; it requires continuous refinement and improvement as the syllabus, assignments, and coursework change, as new cohorts start the program, and as enrollment increases.

The online environment presents a new way of learning and teaching. Overall, teaching online has enhanced my pedagogical stance and approach. Using the features of the online platform make learning more appealing, accessible, and engaging. Creating a space for colleagues to transfer their pedagogical insights makes an online community of practice more meaningful. The work we are doing in the VAC was once considered a radical innovation. However, each year the number of schools of social work offering an MSW increases. Competitor programs provide the impetus to cultivate and assess the learning, knowledge, and products created by the VAC. During this phase of its lifecycle, the VAC community is in a good position to consider how additional innovative online degrees, certificates, asynchronous content and synchronous learning opportunities may be introduced.

Reflections of a Senior Lecturer, Stacy Kratz

The recent expansion of social work education has not only increased opportunities for students (Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006), but for educators, as well. Whereas previous job search models for academic employment often required geographic flexibility, teaching in the online and virtual environment allows the educator to reside in any locale. The opportunity to teach as an adjunct lecturer in the VAC was presented to me, despite living in a different state from the hiring university. I joined the school's online community of practice, what Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) describe as a "social structure for fostering learning, developing competencies, and managing knowledge" (p.11). The online community of practice theoretical framework present at the VAC enabled the development of my method and practice of teaching, by providing the necessary components of a shared domain of interest, a community to build relationships that foster learning, and the space to continually evolve with my colleagues as a practitioner where we can constantly build and share a formal and informal depository of various resources (Lave & Wenger, 1998). What follows are my reflections on how I became part of and professionally grew within the VAC community of practice.

Teaching and Learning Domain

I began my new position as a VAC adjunct lecturer in 2011. The process of becoming an adjunct at the school involved submitting an online questionnaire application and participating in an electronic interview, where I answered social work course-content specific questions and was provided an opportunity to describe my teaching philosophy and pedagogy. Telephone interviews and an offer of employment followed, resulting in the initial contract to join the school. Upon hiring, human resources directed me in the necessary paperwork submissions, and I was linked to the course lead for course materials, teaching instructions, and support services availability. Simultaneously, I was connected to technology training personnel who directed me in navigation and mastery of the VAC learning platform, which has continued throughout my employment. From the beginning, I entered a domain that was a supportive environment with role models stimulating creativity and inspiration to embrace online teaching, knowing that a great opportunity awaited me. My previous social work education and work experience had cultivated a commitment to the social work profession, and I harnessed this energy into committing myself to online social work education.

Prior to joining the VAC, my professional social work experience extended across multiple settings including school social work, leadership roles in policy development for domestic violence and refugee task force and coalition teams, military clinical practice, child welfare prevention services, and private practice specializing in substance abuse treatment. I had experience in developing and leading workshops, as well as virtual training modules to use in social service agencies, so I was accustomed to online formats in professional settings. I was also a part-time student in a social work doctoral program that did not offer teaching opportunities for students but did require students to take a course in teaching social work. With this academic and work experience, and record of commitment to the profession, I brought to the VAC community of practice domain an understanding of what mattered in general to the social work profession, and therefore started with a baseline for what would most probably matter to the online community of practice as well. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) state the domain of a community of practice is the common identity of its members, and that the domain inspires members to participate and contribute to the shared learning agenda. This professional lens helped me to understand the importance of the community of practice from the very moment I began employment, and energized me to become even further involved.

My professional involvement at VAC expanded, as after four years of adjunct teaching, I applied for a full-time faculty position as Senior Lecturer, a new teaching line that opened within the school. As Senior Lecturer, the responsibility would be to teach three classes each semester, including the summer term. During most of my time as adjunct I taught three courses each term anyway, also in the summer semester, so the prospect of full-time teaching and the accompanying responsibilities was not daunting in the least. Additionally, although I had started out the four years prior with a solid technology knowledge base, I now had mastered the school's specific technology platform, adding to my comfort at the prospect of becoming a Senior Lecturer. When hired in this new position, although certainly not a newcomer to the community of practice, my membership in the domain was at a different status.

This new membership status allowed me to engage with faculty in other ways that had previously not been available. Required participation now included virtual attendance at monthly faculty meetings, as well as in-person attendance at the annual conference of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Additionally, the research fund I was given allowed me to make choices about attending other conferences, ultimately leading me to work with multiple faculty members in presenting research. Not only

did I feel more accountable now to the community of practice, this new level of engagement brought with it more opportunities for exposure and in-depth understanding of the boundaries of the domain, including understanding more of what mattered to members. With this fuller understanding, I could now more confidently contribute more of what I thought others would find relevant, an essential aspect of the continued development of a community of practice (Wegner, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Communities of practice exist as a social landscape of shared practice, and have boundaries dictating “lines of distinction between inside and outside... inclusion and exclusion” (Wegner, 1998, p.120). Moving from adjunct to Senior Lecturer allowed me to cross some of the informal internal boundaries that naturally existed between contract workers and employees. Smith (2014), in her writing about the VAC, spoke of relational dimensions, and although not linking this particularly to online communities of practice, noted virtual faculty have a need for institutional assistance in acquiring a sense of community and connection with peers. She furthered that despite the fact virtual faculty have fewer opportunities to meet in person, the need for contact still exists, especially in terms of professional development and connection to the school. As Senior Lecturer, opportunities to meet virtually and in-person increased, which fostered a deeper connection to the online community of practice. My deep connection, together with my track record of positive student evaluations, eventually afforded me the opportunity to become a lead instructor for a foundation –level policy sequence course. Now, as I enter my seventh year of teaching in the VAC, I am keenly aware of how my presence in the domain has evolved, and how my interactions and engagement in shared activities of the community have grown.

Community

The online community of practice at the VAC continues to develop not only because of the shared domain of interest, but also an actual community exists as the social fabric of learning and the basis of collective inquiry. It is necessary that members of the community interact regularly, with a sense of continuity. Because of interaction and engagement in shared activities, interpersonal relationships form (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wegner-Traynor & Wegner-Traynor, 2015). The relationships I built eased my participation in the community and helped me to have a sense of belonging, share in a mutual commitment to learning, and develop a unique individual identity within the community.

Faculty acquiring a sense of belonging in a community of practice is important in nurturing members committed to continuous innovation and

improvement (Ein & Miller, 2006). Flynn, Maiden, Smith, Wiley and Wood (2013) intentionally addressed creating a sense of belonging in the learning and teaching community of the VAC in order to increase online teaching success. My sense of belonging in the community increased as my role in the domain changed, and I shared in more and more activities with fellow faculty. I joined the school's Wellness Committee, where all members join virtually, even if they work on-ground. In monthly meetings, we share health promotion information with each other, and design school-wide events that are held virtually and on-ground, including nutritional coaching webinar series led by content matter experts, and an annual walk-a-thon. Additional activities that specifically increased my sense of belonging include acting as a guest-lecturer in colleague's courses, and substitute teaching for them in times of need. Helping each other also provided a space to share knowledge and generate connectivity as we experience together the mutual commitment to learning.

Sharing a mutual commitment to learning increases engagement in communities of practice, and therefore create a richer context for learning (Wenger, 1998). Examples of this mutual commitment is the maintenance of a Virtual Faculty Wall, a social media - style place that I share and access information relevant to the community. Here we can post questions as well, request information or seek the experience of members, among other pursuits. Other opportunities for sharing a mutual commitment to learning that have been meaningful to me are discussions among senior administration, lead instructors, and other professors and adjuncts that occur at faculty meetings for the entire school. These meetings are streamed live and held on the same teaching platform. Specialized meetings are scheduled as well, such as with course leads for specific classes, instructional support, library services, and student affairs. Participating in these information sessions and shared dialogues has opened learning opportunities for me in recognizing the importance of reflection in my interactions with colleagues and in learning and sharing best practices and resource materials. It is within this community of practice that I can continue to define my teaching philosophy and pedagogy, thus my practice.

Teaching Practice

As a member of the VAC community of practice, benefitting from the shared domain, and the presence of community as the social fabric of learning, I continually strive to develop as an effective practitioner. Achieving a sense of belonging and sharing a mutual commitment to learning has enabled me as a practitioner to absorb new ways of viewing my

work and to see how it is situated within a bigger picture of the purpose of excellence in social work education. Wenger (1998) states belonging is a combination of engagement, imagination, and alignment that are anchored in practice and “allow our identities to absorb our new perspectives and make them part of who we are” (p.217). The development of my teaching philosophy and practice has been influenced by my growth as a faculty member, particularly as it relates to incorporating the social work value of empowerment, which I attribute to my study of Paulo Freire (1970) and his writings on education as a discourse of shared experiences.

My connection with the VAC community of practice is anchored in my experience teaching online. Under good leadership, the culture of the VAC provides the foundation for pedagogical transformation. Pedagogical competence in university teaching encompasses several points but specifically requires knowledge of subject matter and effective evidence-based teaching strategies (Anastas, 2010). Durrington et al. (2006) state when students experience high levels of interaction in online classes, performance and positive attitude is higher. High levels of interaction and maintaining an interactive learning environment increase the quality of the learning experiences. In applying this research knowledge to my work in the VAC, I have been able to focus on new teaching strategies to build a supportive learning community that fosters high levels of interaction in the virtual classroom.

Lessons Learned

Applying this research knowledge to my work in the VAC, specifically focusing on building teaching strategies to build a supportive learning community, fostered high levels of interaction in my virtual classrooms. My pedagogical foundation has fostered a strong and supportive learning environment. As technology expands, resulting research on the use of technology in the virtual environment expands, and new and interesting ways students interact with this technology increase. I am certain that my online pedagogy will continue to develop, as well. This development, a goal in higher education, is fostered under the framework of a community of practice. Without this framework, I do not believe my professional trajectory into higher education would have occurred as smoothly, and I would not have had the robust opportunities to fine-tune my teaching excellence.

Trends, Challenges, and Future Considerations

The VAC represents a paradigm shift in the social work profession. With the growing number of online social work programs, social work educators can benefit from sharing experiences and insights with other colleagues teaching in virtual environments or those who are in the process of converting their social work curriculum to a virtual environment. Similar to faculty teaching on the ground, the faculty teaching online create norms and agreements. They have various defined roles which depend on their desired level of participation, goals, and previous experience. They are responsible for creating an effective online community of practice that enhances their students' learning and supports their professional development. However, the online technology gives faculty access to new tools and strategies that can engage students on a deeper level. Given their critical role, faculty teaching online need ongoing support and ways to enhance and evolve their online instructional approaches.

Our reflections created an opportunity to shed light on the features of an online community of practice, which include the following:

- hosting bi-annual faculty retreats for online teaching and field faculty
- developing faculty effectiveness as instructors through online faculty development sessions that focus on teaching,
- reinforcing ways for the instructor and students to think critically about new knowledge, concepts, and ideas,
- engaging students at deeper levels so they can understand the social problems of our time and design creative solutions to those problems,
- making new-course preparation manageable,
- making a wide range of teaching materials available,
- learning how to be effective delivering a course and assessing the learning outcomes in the online environment,
- promoting standardization and consistency when delivering curriculum,
- creating a space to regularly connect with colleagues teaching the same course, and
- providing multiple forms of communication (i.e., webinars, faculty guidelines, and resource materials) for faculty to learn about their roles and responsibilities and the program policies.

The VAC online community of practice that is cultivated and sustained for faculty plays an essential role not only in the socialization of new and continuing faculty teaching online, but also in moving toward the development of a signature online community of practice in social work education. The VAC is creating a new way of designing and implementing online social work education. Simultaneously, it is amassing a repository of data (with videotaped class discussions, surveys from retreats and research studies conducted by colleagues, reflections of the online experiences of faculty, and published articles and books) that can be mined for understanding the principles of an effective online community of practice.

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