

With a Little Help from our Friends: Teaching Collectives as Lifelines in Troublesome Times

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Abstract: Faculty members often lack support structures in which they can support each other in crisis. The authors recently discovered that sharing ideas with a community of colleagues has made them more resilient. The Civility Community of Practice (CoP) at IUPUI transitioned to a weekly online teaching and support seminar in response to the university's unexpected move to online course delivery on account of the pandemic. This reflective essay will examine the transformative possibilities of a teaching collective in the face of crisis. It will include reflections by each of the five community members about how their CoP Zoom meetings helped them navigate and adapt to their personal and professional lives during the pandemic. The authors will discuss how moving their courses online challenged their teaching practices, motivated their experimentation with Zoom, and transformed their online classroom to impact the student learning experience. The essay concludes with an outline of the conditions that create successful learning communities.

Keywords: community of practice, CoP, teaching, learning, online, faculty learning community, COVID-19, pandemic

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, as teachers around the world were jumping into remote life, we came to appreciate our Community of Practice (CoP) as a place to reflect, grow, and develop during times of urgency and crisis. The CoP was founded in 2014 as an interdisciplinary group of faculty members who were seeking solutions to classroom problems hindering student success. This was the innovation of Kate Thedwall, a senior lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies and the director of the Gateway to Graduation Program at IUPUI. The Gateway to Graduation Program is a faculty-led effort to improve student learning and retention in gateway courses which are high-enrolling first-year classes. Recognizing that faculty, on account of their disciplinary knowledge and experience in the classroom, know what is needed to improve teaching and learning, Thedwall instituted Communities of Practice (CoPs) as an opportunity to establish and develop interdisciplinary faculty support networks and to serve as knowledge incubators for scholarly research. Some of the issues particular to first-year students around which Thedwall organized CoPs to pursue scholarly projects and best practices included academic integrity, civility, critical thinking, information literacy, intercultural learning, and technology.

Communities of practice allow individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences to take collective responsibility for a project (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger-Trayner, E. & Wenger-Trayner, B., 2015). This concept was initially proposed to reiterate that learning is a social process (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and requires individuals to have a shared area of interest (Wenger-Trayner, E. & Wenger-Trayner, B., 2015). The Gateway Program helped us find other faculty members who were interested in civility in the classroom and provided us with the resources to help us achieve our teaching and research goals.

Our CoP met in person twice per month during the fall and spring semesters to research and discuss issues relating to civility in the classroom. During that time, we developed a civility toolkit that we shared at several Gateway retreats and through campus workshops and conferences. After three years, despairing of our efforts to define the term ‘civility,’ along with related concepts such as ‘implicit bias’ and ‘empathy,’ and recognizing that sometimes incivility by students originates out of boredom with traditional lectures, we decided to turn instead to active-learning pedagogies that have the potential of improving the classroom culture. We then discovered Djikic et al. (2013), who suggested that reading literature is a means of increasing empathy, which sent us in a new direction. Next, we encountered Mavroudis and Bournelli (2016), who pointed to using drama to counter bullying in elementary students. We spent much of the next year working through Dawson and Lee’s (2018) *Drama Based Pedagogy: Activating Learning Across the Curriculum* and Kat Koppett’s (2013) *Training to Imagine: Practical Improvisational Theatre Techniques for Trainers and Managers to Enhance Creativity, Teamwork, Leadership and Learning*. During this process, we found Drama-Based Pedagogy and began experimenting with a variety of activities and applying the most promising to our classrooms. As Dawson and Lee (2016) explained, “Drama-Based Pedagogy (DBP) uses active and dramatic approaches to engage students in academic, affective and aesthetic learning through dialogic meaning-making.” We discovered that these Drama-Based Pedagogies did, in fact, cultivate civility within our classrooms by keeping students engaged and building trust. We then began sharing with colleagues, through conferences and workshops, the potential of Drama-Based Pedagogy to help instructors cultivate trust, engagement, and community within their classrooms. At the time, we focused only on face-to-face contexts without imagining the need to apply them in online contexts.

Our first six years of meeting as a CoP gave no indication of the wealth of support our community would give us as we entered the uncharted territory of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. In early March, when it first dawned on us that the pandemic on the other side of the world would find its way to Indianapolis and affect our lives in significant ways, the ground we had once counted on to be stable was continuously shifting. Although the university provided frequent communications about the official response to the virus, the information changed rapidly, and many faculty found it more overwhelming than reassuring. Rumors and speculation intensified about the direction to be taken by IUPUI, with faculty from different schools hearing different, and sometimes contradictory, information. Amid this changing landscape, our community provided stability because of the foundation we had laid together.

Before departing for an extended spring break, our CoP decided to meet over Zoom for the first time. Our first Zoom meeting proved to be a turning point for our group; we transitioned immediately from a best practice and research collective to a support structure during a crisis. Recognizing the need that our meetings might fill, we began meeting by Zoom on a weekly basis rather than twice a month as we helped each other run a Zoom class meeting, design virtual courses, and ultimately survive the transition to virtual instruction. When we first built and grew our community, we could never have imagined what a lifeline it would be for us during this crisis. The CoP we built together—its basis in trust and mutual respect, its commitment to learning, and the joy we find in constructive play and laughing together—has helped us adapt in the face of uncertainty and change.

Nancy Goldfarb, Senior Lecturer, School of Liberal Arts and Division of Undergraduate Education, IUPUI

Moving all my courses online triggered in me a great deal of anxiety. Like many faculty members, I was not comfortable exposing my vulnerability to either colleagues or students. The additional week we were given of Spring Break was not nearly long enough to acquire the skills that would be needed to make my courses successful. I knew that making mistakes, looking stupid, and even failing were not only possible but likely. Nonetheless, I dreaded having all of my students watch me fumble with unfamiliar technology; frankly, I found

the prospect of not being able to resolve a technological problem during class terrifying. Since panic is not conducive to the clear thinking required for good teaching, I knew I needed to control my anxiety, but the more pressure I put on myself, the more anxious I became.

Our CoP helped me break the cycle of anxiety, providing me with the opportunity to tussle with this unfamiliar technology while feeling free to share my uncertainties and failures. I allowed myself to make mistakes because of the trust we had built over the years within our community. I knew I would not be judged or laughed at; rather, my fellow CoP members helped me see this new challenge as an adventure and an opportunity for playful exploration.

In this sense, our CoP helped me develop a growth mindset about my online teaching skills. Though I often teach growth mindset in my first-year seminars, my anxiety about failing or looking stupid triggered in me a fixed mindset. As Carol Dweck (2016) observed, “Even after educators understand growth mindset, it takes a lot of hard work to move toward it.” After all, even educators are a “mixture of fixed and growth mindsets” (Dweck, 2016). Putting a growth mindset fully into practice is a journey that takes a lifetime; it requires us to identify what conditions send us “into a state in which we feel our fixed ability is being judged or in which we judge our students’ fixed abilities” (Dweck, 2016). Though we may instruct students in growth mindset, they learn it not only from our words but also from our deeds. For this reason, educators need to make growth mindset visible and compelling to their students by, among other actions, “treating mistakes, difficulty, and even failure as something beneficial for learning, rather than something that can harm children or reflect badly on their abilities” (Dweck, 2016).

Our CoP helped me recognize and overcome the fixed mindset that had been triggered by moving my courses online. To encourage discussion in my literature classes, I needed to explore the breakout feature on Zoom, but the prospect of making a mistake with the technology and embarrassing myself during class had me quite anxious. I shared my anxiety with the CoP and requested that we learn Zoom breakout rooms together. When we did so, two breakout rooms were created and randomly assigned. I will never forget the relief that overcame me when, by sheer luck, I was placed into a breakout room with Leslie, my on-campus next-door neighbor. For ten years, Leslie and I had greeted each other every day when we arrived at school and had spent many hours in each other’s offices discussing our teaching and sharing our personal lives, which had strengthened our trust and rapport. We both laughed in delight when we saw that our office intimacy could be replicated in the breakout room.

Once our Zoom CoP meeting had calmed my nerves, I was more able to focus on the task at hand, which was to figure out how best I could adapt the breakout room technology to my classes. Members of our CoP helped me understand that breakout rooms, since they make student-instructor communication more cumbersome, need more structure and more clearly articulated instructions than small groups in a face-to-face classroom. I came to trust the advice of our CoP members for the help I needed. Once I had learned to look to members of our community for help when needed, they then helped me with using Google Jamboard—a virtual whiteboard that allows participants to write, draw, or post images—in my classes. I had learned about Jamboard at a workshop but had not visualized how it could best be used to promote learning until we used it in a CoP workshop.

I feel profoundly fortunate to have found a group of colleagues and friends with whom to explore technological possibilities and their educational applications, exchange ideas, and adapt to the new instructional conditions. The support and trust that our CoP has developed helped me face the fall semester with greater equanimity and ultimately restored me to a growth mindset, where I am now eager and excited to learn new strategies for engaging students from a distance.

Michelle Clemons, Visiting Lecturer, Kelley School of Business, IUPUI

At the start of the pandemic, anxiety was high and all of us were trying to find a way to adjust to the temporary changes in our course delivery. Because I had been teaching online courses for over ten years and had completed some of my education online, I had a strong understanding of online pedagogy. The mid-semester switch to virtual learning and the personal connections we had established within our CoP and continued to build in Zoom created an opportunity for me to share my knowledge to encourage my peers to grow and be confident in their virtual teaching and gave me the ability to bounce innovative ideas off of my peers before trying them

in the classroom. These exchanges also provided me with a respite each week, which was a much-needed time to laugh and bring joy to myself and those around me.

Although I had been preparing mentally for the possibility of a shutdown and had cancelled all my personal plans before they were cancelled for me, watching society shut down felt different. As all of us were working through the longest months of our lives, my peers in the CoP were there to provide support and answer both work-related questions such as, “How are you finding focus to grade in all of this?” and personal questions such as, “Where are you buying toilet paper?” Uncertainty was everywhere. Meanwhile, we were still trying to conduct classes, prepare for the end of the semester, and manage our own grading. During a particularly overwhelming day, I received the following silly email from Leslie. It read:

Dear “Scrambled” in School of Business:

You are in good company.

All over America, adults are considering if it is too late to have breakfast because it is nearly lunch time. Their pets are plotting to keep this ‘new normal’ going on for a long time; they like having their Feeders and Walkers at their beck and call.

Teachers like you are bleary eyed from trying to figure out new/different technologies and if they will actually work when the time comes (well, maybe not like you).

Face-to-face only teachers are vacillating between just issuing a bunch of worksheets, or to attempt to actively engage the minds of their students in some virtual way.

And everyone is overwhelmed by the e-mails titled “[Fill in the blank]’s Response to COVID-19,” “Moving your course online,” and “59 Ways to engage your students in an online setting” (a post that is itself nearly 59 pages long for you to read).

Meanwhile, grading looms.

Meanwhile, grading looms.

It is probably fatuous of me as an adviser to all America to tell you to hang in there. I myself have discovered the joys of mixing peanut butter and chocolate to just the right ratio for my taste.

I have to sign off now. The dog wants to go for a walk!

Blabby in Brownsburg (L.L. Miller, personal communication, March 26, 2020).

Although she did not know it at the time, the email I received that day, which was also my birthday, shifted my mindset. I decided to embrace what was happening and focus on the only thing I had control over—my attitude and response to the entire situation.

I did what I could to make the experiences of my peers and my students more enjoyable. Within our CoP, we started to get to know each other on a more personal level. Through Zoom, we were invited into each other’s homes and met each other’s pets. During more than one meeting (okay, probably during all of them), my dog made a cameo by walking across my computer or jumping into my lap. We learned to find humor in the things we might have been upset about outside of this pandemic. Suddenly, dogs barking and children running into rooms reminded us that we are all human beings and that we were all in this together.

Over the next few months, we continued to meet as a CoP. We talked about school, and we talked about life. We gave each other a space to be authentic. We tested out new technologies. We tried new things, and sometimes, we failed at those new things. Our CoP became the place where we could practice new skills before testing them out in the classroom. We shared our successes but, more importantly, we shared our failures. Since we had already built a space where we felt comfortable, this facilitated the transition to our (hopefully temporary) new normal because we had a community to lean on, grow with, and ask about the hot spots for purchasing toilet paper.

**Leslie Miller, Senior Lecturer, School of Liberal Arts and Division of Undergraduate Learning,
IUPUI**

I was in near-panic mode after the pandemic reality finally hit me, but the strength of our community grounded me. I had never taught an online class before, and in fact, had studiously avoided doing so. I was an in-person teacher, and that was that. My whole focus was my students, their education, and building trusting relationships

with them. I did not believe such work could happen online. I was also not familiar enough with the technology to feel any degree of comfort about working with something called Zoom or the mysterious Google Docs; however, our weekly CoP meetings became my training ground.

Suddenly, Spring Break was extended by a week, and that was all the time I had to figure out how to meet with my students, help with assignments, and finish the courses by the end of the semester. While I was wondering how to use technology to maintain a relationship with my students, I found technology was also enhancing my CoP relationships. Almost seamlessly, we became a mutually supportive group of friends, helping each other figure out the unfamiliar environment in which we had found ourselves.

At first, I was worried about learning the most basic aspects of technology, and our CoP was fortunate to have members who were familiar with online teaching, having done it for years. Lynn and Michelle became our teachers in technology and would have us practice together in our meetings. My colleagues helped me navigate the choppy waters of connecting with students, turning class activities into interactive online activities, and building a community. Their past experiences gave me a star to follow as I floundered through the early days of online classes.

As I reconfigured my classes, a particular hardship for me was helping my students bear up under their changed circumstances. I had assumed that their greater facility with technology would ease the switch to online classes. That was not the case, however, and my students mirrored my own uncertainty. Some students took advantage of being home by getting another job or taking on extra hours at work to strengthen their financial standing, though these changes limited their available time to do their course work. Some students did not have quiet study spaces. Others had broken hardware they could not afford to replace. Others had connectivity issues. My CoP colleagues confirmed that their students were having similar experiences. In other words, I was not alone. In all, our CoP has developed from a group of interdisciplinary faculty wanting to research and present on a single topic into a steady crew of like-minded people focused on keeping the educational ship afloat during Hurricane COVID.

Lynn Jettpace, Senior Lecturer, School of Liberal Arts, IUPUI

Our commitment to support each other is matched by our commitment to become better teachers. The pandemic gave us a unique opportunity to leave our comfort zones, reimagine ourselves as educators, and grow professionally, whether we liked it or not. The pandemic pushed me to step forward into a leadership role that I have been hesitant to assume and share more of my experience with my colleagues.

My spring 2020 experience differed significantly from my peers' because I was not teaching that semester. After 19 years teaching at my institution, I had been granted a sabbatical-like leave available to senior, non-tenure track faculty. My stress level and blood pressure have probably never been lower. Then the pandemic hit.

Everyone assumed that I must have been thankful to not be teaching during the pandemic, but I was not. I have been teaching online off and on for the last 17 years, and the last six have been exclusively online. Furthermore, I developed, implemented, and administered IUPUI's Online Writing Center starting in 2010. Because meeting with students via Adobe Connect and later Zoom were like breathing to me, I felt like post-deployment combat vets report feeling: like I was letting my comrades down precisely when they needed me most. I had no students to guide through this crisis when I knew I could have helped them.

When our CoP met on Zoom that first time, not only was I anxious to help, but I also needed to help. I set up that first Zoom meeting expecting we would do our usual debriefing on a conference presentation we had just given. This presentation on using Drama-Based Pedagogy to develop trust amongst student groups was based heavily on our experimentation with activities in Dawson and Lee (2018) and Koppett (2013), but it also drew from the trust we had built in our group through these activities. Instead, we went back to basics as each person shared the anxieties each have written about here. Michelle and I showed them how to set up a Zoom meeting, and we talked about the basic ideas of moving instruction online. I finally felt like I was contributing.

My approach to online tutoring and teaching composition and literature has been to choose technological tools according to their ease of use for students, which means I rarely find myself in the position of teaching others how to use the technology. Then, I was teaching my peers how to set up Zoom meetings,

integrate video into Canvas, use Google Docs for collaborative writing, etc. I was stretching myself as an instructor and calling on pedagogical best practices in new ways. Over the next few weeks, other group members gained experience setting up our weekly Zoom meeting and became more comfortable interacting in that medium. As our members gained confidence, we explored the possibilities of the technology together. We played with breakout rooms, whiteboards, and screen sharing in a low-stakes environment. Everyone shared online tips and tools they had learned about that we practiced as a group.

When a conference at which we were presenting on using Drama-Based Pedagogy for student team formation moved online, we converted our highly interactive presentation for online delivery. To adapt our presentation, we first planned how we would accomplish it for a face-to-face conference and then chose technological tools that could have similar effects. For instance, any activity that would normally use giant Post-its was completed using Jamboard. Group activities took place in Zoom breakout rooms. We had to consider limitations and eliminate any activities that assumed the participants would all have working cameras, for instance, but many of the activities we learned about in our studies worked well online to build community amongst session participants. All CoP members contributed ideas for converting face-to-face activities for a distance model. Three months of meeting weekly had turned our group of experienced classroom teachers into distance learning pros. I could not be prouder.

Mary Ann Frank, Senior Lecturer, School of Engineering and Technology, IUPUI

I discovered quite accidentally through a Facebook post that I would be teaching remotely for the remainder of the semester. I realized I would need to use technology in unfamiliar ways. Although I was comfortable with asynchronous online teaching, I had never managed a synchronous Zoom meeting, and I needed a way to illustrate drafting techniques and put students into groups. My students and I both needed support because we were all adapting to ever-changing circumstances.

My experience teaching design methods primarily consisted of hands-on, interactive activities where participants critique each other, learning how to give and make use of constructive feedback. The Interior Design Educators Council (2020) pivoted to support its faculty members and promoted distance learning resources that were new to many of us. The typical studio is well-suited for this learning environment, but now it needed to be replicated in a way that supported distance learning, and it needed to be ready in a week's time. Fortunately, my CoP colleagues shared similar learning goals moving into a virtual environment; although in different disciplines, we all teach creativity in various ways.

Means of support came in a flurry. Informative emails were so overwhelming—from my program, my departmental colleagues, and many other discipline-specific and campus resources such as the Center for Teaching and Learning—that it was difficult to take it all in. The constant source of support, however, and the one that kept me grounded was our CoP. While the Zoom platform provided common ground for meetings around the world, it also served our CoP as a means of survival. Not only did it enable our small group to meet and support each other in a time of isolation, but it also became a testing ground for teaching strategies in Zoom that we would all implement in some fashion when classes resumed.

We soon realized in our CoP that our diverse disciplines in English, Business, and Design Technology, teaching practices, and technical skills blended to create a combination from which each of us benefited. While we had long appreciated the unique perspectives that each brings to a discussion, it was this crisis that brought to light how vital our varied experiences were. The five of us brought a unique combination of expertise, sensibility, and humor. This diversity of experiences, in addition to our various disciplinary perspectives, served us well in teaching each other how we might move forward in our own classes.

Recognizing that students in my courses needed their classmates for support through the pandemic, I ventured out of my physical classroom mindset and intentionally adapted my classes with Zoom to capitalize on existing connections amongst students, as well as enabling new ones. Students' support of each other greatly increased through these multiple opportunities during our synchronous online class meetings. For example, I used Zoom breakout rooms to pair students for a role-play activity between client and designer and then used it for a team project with three or four students. In addition, I set up meeting rooms for pairs and groups to independently collaborate outside of scheduled class times. There was a risk that students would socialize and

not take the activities seriously, but teaching workshops and discussions with colleagues addressed many of the issues. These opportunities not only supported the students academically, but they also provided social support.

Our CoP gave me the personal support to make it through this crisis and helped me transition to synchronous online learning. This support enabled me to help the students build on the personal connections they had made in our in-person class, thereby helping them cope with a stressful transition. Looking forward to what promises to be a challenging future, our collaborative CoP will continue to be an important source of support for me.

Conclusion

Our group evolved as we became more comfortable sharing our vulnerability and learning to share responsibility and credit. We shared leadership by recognizing and relying on each other's strengths to achieve our collective goals. Although we did not have a pandemic in mind when we first joined this CoP, we were fortunate enough to have this support system in place before the crisis occurred.

Reflecting on our research and experiences, we recommend the following steps to build an effective community of practice:

1. Look for and connect with colleagues with similar academic interests.
2. Discuss what you want to pursue as a group and how you and your students will benefit.
3. Meet consistently throughout the academic year, deciding as a group on the frequency and schedule of meetings (for example, our CoP met twice a month prior to the pandemic).
4. Anticipate setbacks and see them as opportunities to communicate and share responsibilities.
5. Set goals and plans, but be flexible and open to changing them to suit the interests and needs of the group.
6. Share the credit for your group's accomplishments (for example, our CoP rotates the order of authors in presentations).

The evolution of our team into a collective enterprise that is productive and resilient in the face of crisis revealed how important it is to create opportunities for interdisciplinary groups of faculty to work together and learn from one another. By building and supporting faculty communities of practice, universities can help prepare faculty members to adapt to change and thereby facilitate the continued quality of the education provided to students.

Epilogue

Although a lot has changed throughout the course of the pandemic, members of our CoP continue to provide mutual support for teaching challenges, deepening our professional and personal relationships. The collaborative spirit in which our community was founded has endured as we continue to look to one another to learn new technology, pedagogy, and tricks to improve student learning in the virtual environment. In the recent past, one of our members shared with the rest of us a teaching success using a newly-learned technology; the rest of us warmly congratulated her and reminded her how much she has learned since March 2020. Although we are still wearing masks in public, we have been able to remove our masks of vulnerability within our community of practice and build our relationships as colleagues and friends. We are excited to see where our journey leads us as a community of practice. Most of all, we are grateful for the abundance of toilet paper we will likely find along the way.

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