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Faculty Development as Community Building

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Abstract

When faculty development is viewed as an ongoing need and when we approach faculty development as a long-term, continuous effort, community building becomes a part of the process. Carefully designed faculty development approaches can facilitate and create a culture that supports a thoughtful focus on teaching, while at the same time, nurture a sense of connectedness and collegiality across the organization that is vital to continuous innovation and improvement. This paper reports on a program designed to improve the collegial culture at a higher educational organization in Western Canada. While the program was aimed at a Social Work Faculty at a research university, we believe the design can be modified and applied in other disciplines and in other environments, such as distant and open universities. We conclude with suggestions for applying our approach to faculty development in open and distance institutional contexts.

Keywords: faculty development; community building; professional development; higher education; open and distance education, community of practice; collegiality

Introduction

The growing number of blended, online, and distance education courses, programs, and degrees offered by institutions of higher education offers challenging new opportunities to re-examine teaching and learning. Carefully designed faculty development approaches can create a culture that supports thoughtful focus on teaching, while nurturing the sense of connectedness and collegiality that is vital to continuous innovation and improvement in post-secondary institutions.

Today, most universities – both open and distance and campus-based alike – have faculty who care deeply about teaching, yet feel isolated and disconnected from like-minded colleagues. Simply working in the proximity of others does not ensure a motivating environment that enhances professional collegiality. All educational institutions and the sub-groups that operate within them should attend to the development of dynamic and nurturing interactions among faculty that support excellence in instruction and the scholarship of teaching. Such conditions, in turn, will promote a collective sense of mutual benefit and reciprocal responsibility among faculty.

Described in this paper is a faculty development program designed to reduce feelings of isolation among faculty, while building a community of learners, improving teaching, and building organizational capacity. While the program was aimed at a Social Work Faculty at a face-to-face, commuter campus located in a large city in western Canada, it is suggested that the design can be

modified and applied in other disciplines and in other environments, such as distant and open universities. We also point to literature that has influenced our thinking as professional developers – influences that resonate in the program design. We conclude with suggestions for applying our approach to faculty development in open and distance institutional contexts.

Literature Highlights

Faculty isolation and the impact on the organization

According to Smith and Smith (1993), commonly cited concerns among teaching staff at colleges and universities include a sense of isolation, lack of community, and lack of belonging. They contend that if left unattended, such concerns may progress toward exasperation, disillusionment, and the eventual alienation of faculty. "This isolation, tolerable at age thirty, becomes deadening by age fifty," assert Smith and Smith (1993, p. 82). In response to the isolation felt by teachers and faculty members, Palmer (1999) strongly supports collegial socialization as a core component of professional development programs and refers to the increasing isolation of faculty, their research agendas, and teaching activities as the "privatization of teaching."

> *Privatization creates more than individual pain; it creates institutional incompetence as well. By privatizing teaching, we make it next to impossible for the academy to become more adept at its teaching mission. The growth of any skill depends heavily on honest dialogue among those who are doing it. Some of us grow by private trial and error, but our willingness to try and fail is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks. The most likely outcome when any function is privatized is that people will perform the function conservatively, refusing to stray far from the silent consensus on what 'works' – even when it clearly does not. That I am afraid, too often describes the state of teaching in the privatized academy* (Palmer, 1999, p. 1).

Professional development and collaboration

In line with Palmer's emphasis on addressing the "privatization of teaching," Smith and Smith (1993) outline two programs that they assess as particularly effective in promoting a sense of belonging and in providing opportunities and challenges for faculty to experience incremental, long-term professional growth: the New Jersey Department of Higher Education and the New Jersey Institute for Collegiate Teaching and Learning Partners in Learning Program. They identified strengths of the collaborative process used in these two programs, including their ongoing nature, faculty empowerment and ownership, and their potential for transformation. They found potential in these programs to encourage revitalization, re-energization, and reinvestigation among participants.

The academics in Zuber-Skerritt's (1992) study who experienced various methods of professional development indicated a preference for an inquiry type approach to professional development: "The best way to learn about teaching in higher education is not to be given information and advice by outside experts who determine what academics need to know. Rather . . . academics can and should try to learn about teaching as they do in their discipline or particular subject area, that is, as personal scientists" (p. 75). Those who view knowledge building from a Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism framework would put this inquiry process in a social context. Learning about teaching within a social constructivist framework is more of a social process involving formulation of knowledge through sharing and comparing learnings and understandings

with others. This fits well with the collegial model Palmer (1999) argues for and is represented in the programs described in Smith and Smith (1993). It is also in line with the collegial aspects of the "Process" and "Discipline" approaches to faculty development described in the review of literature on professional development completed by Amundsen and colleagues (2005). Collaborative work in collegial groups to enable individuals to examine their thinking about teaching is one of the characteristics of the "Process" approach. The "Discipline" approach is characterized by small groups of colleagues from the same discipline making explicit their understanding of knowledge development or learning in their discipline to develop their teaching and critique the perspectives and understandings of their colleagues. Both approaches emphasize the important role of colleagues in professional development to support reflection on, and development of, knowledge and skills required for effective teaching (Amundsen, Abrai, McAlpine, Weston, 2005).

Learning communities/ communities of practice

The focus on collegiality and creating a sense of belonging, as well as formulation of knowledge as a social process, is not new. Rather, it can be found throughout the ongoing development of the metaphor of learning community. Schön (1973) argues for the development of institutions that are capable of bringing about their own continuing evolution by functioning as "learning systems." Senge (1990) introduces the concept of the learning organization to explain and justify strategies to enhance the capacity of all members of an organization to collaborate in the achievement of agreed-upon goals. Hord, Hall, Rutherford, and Huling-Austin (1998) propose that learning communities are distinguished by: supportive and shared leadership, collective learning, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Sergiovanni (2000) describes the learning community as an organization whose members are committed to thinking, growing, and inquiry, and as a place where "learning is an attitude as well as an activity, a way of life as well as a process" (p. 59). Many authors write about the power and usefulness of learning communities in colleges and universities (Barab, Kling, and Gray, 2004; Lenning and Ebbers, 2000; Na Ubon and Kimble, 2003; Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Shapiro and Levine, 1999). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), who are often credited with the contemporary development of the metaphor of communities of practice, state that within a community of practice "learning requires an atmosphere of openness . . . the key is to build an atmosphere of collective inquiry" (p. 37).

Researchers that work in the area of professional faculty or teacher development and discuss elements of learning communities in their models include: Palmer (1999) explicitly describes a social constructivist process of faculty development during which faculty are encouraged to reflect upon and write about teaching incidents: Duffy (1996) asserts that "knowledge is something people do together," and proposes collegial, collaborative, and team-oriented initiatives aimed at increasing teaching effectiveness. Stahl's (1996) "open systems dialogue" model of teacher development at the tertiary level includes ongoing discussion to support mutual growth among the participants. Schwier (1997) has articulated the conditions necessary for a learning community within the context of describing what is necessary for virtual learning communities – i.e., allow for participants to have their interests and needs represented (negotiation), intimacy, commitment, and engagement.

An Example of Communities of Practice approach to Faculty Development

Vision, Goal and Strategy

The Vision: Make courses and degree programs more accessible throughout the Province and North America

The Goal: Prepare faculty to effectively integrate technology to support an active learning approach and to prepare them for teaching in blended or completely online learning environments

The Strategy: Focus intense attention on best practices in teaching and learning in an atmosphere of collegial support

In 2000, when the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary envisioned more flexible ways to deliver courses and make its degree programs more accessible throughout Alberta and North America, distance education was an obvious option to consider. The motivation and capacity of faculty members to take advantage of existing and emerging technologies seemed lacking, however. A few individuals had experimented, with reasonable success, with delivering option courses via web-based course delivery tools such as *Blackboard* and *Centra*, but the majority of faculty viewed these approaches with skepticism, doubting the quality of teaching and learning that could be achieved through these methods and the capacity of students to succeed in an online environment. They were also unsure of student access to technology.

Five years later, not only has the number of option courses delivered through distance learning technologies and the number of students enrolled in them increased, but the Faculty also offers a Master of Social Work degree online and a Bachelor of Social Work degree in a blended format that emphasizes online over face-to-face delivery. How did this happen? We believe the faculty development events and processes that supported this change in capacity and disposition are the very ones that can build and support communities of practice in post-secondary institutions, be they primarily open and distance institutions or more traditional campus-based institutions.

We started with this assumption: *a culture that supports learning, nurtures collegiality, and encourages the co-creation, sharing, and use of teaching knowledge and skills is a critical ingredient in a successful professional development effort.* We emphasized process and culture-building in our approach, with information sharing and skill development occurring simultaneously with development of a supportive culture. We assumed that keeping current with new information and skills was only a part of what improves teaching. Working to create Senge's (1990) "learning organizations" or developing Wenger and colleagues' (2002) "communities of practice" takes time and commitment, but can provide big pay-offs in terms of providing energizing environments in which faculty feel connected and committed to each other and the goals of the organization. The fact that it takes time, and the sense that the whole process is too abstract, often prevents organizations from ever taking the first step and committing to keep taking steps in that direction. What first steps did the Faculty of Social Work take?

Detailed Description of Context and Process

Our previous experience with "training" faculty on how to use technology indicated three distinct groups of learners within our Faculty. A small group of faculty could be described as 'early adopters,' according to Rogers' (1962) definition. These individuals attended training sessions,

learned, and subsequently applied technology in their teaching. A second group of faculty members simply did not attend training sessions on educational technology. While a third group attended technology training sessions, individuals in this group remained fundamentally uncertain about how to apply technology to their teaching. Individuals in the latter group also quickly forgot what they had learned about technology and became frustrated if – and when – they tried to access it.

Our observation of faculty members' typical reactions to traditional technology training led us to believe that our approach to professional development would need to be something fundamentally different from "training" if we were to achieve our goal of helping a significant number of faculty members integrate online strategies to enhance their teaching. To that end, we implemented what we called an Institute designed to engage faculty members by asking them to identify and work on projects that identified and addressed authentic questions arising from their teaching experiences: to put into practice the "personal scientist" concept of Zuber-Skerritt (1992) with the collegial context that Palmer (1999) argues for in professional development programs.

Further, a professional development approach was used that incorporated learning about online educational technology within a context of enhancing teaching excellence. This approach successfully attracted approximately two-thirds of 35-member Faculty to an intensive Institute focusing on the meaningful integration of technology into teaching. Participants in the Institute included not only many early adopters of technology-enhanced teaching, but also instructors with no prior experience using technology beyond email, word processing, and Internet browsing.

Overview ~ Institute Design and Implementation

The Institute was built on an inquiry approach to learning with activities spanning the course of a full academic year. Prior to the start of the Institute, faculty members identified teaching- and technology-related questions arising from their interest in improving their own teaching. These authentic, faculty-driven questions provided the inquiry-based foundation of the intensive, two-and-a half day kick-off event.

Rather than focusing on technology, the emphasis of the Institute was consistently on enhancing teaching effectiveness. Various online and computer mediated technologies were introduced in a manner that addressed teaching and learning issues. At the end of the Institute, each participant had an individualized plan to implement during the academic year. During mid-year meetings, participants reported on their progress and received feedback and support for continuing work on implementing their plans. At the conclusion of the year, faculty participants shared what they had accomplished and learned, and proposed "next step" ideas.

Phase One: Institute preparation

Significant preparation occurred with each participant prior to the Institute's actual implementation. To meet both individual and group needs, efforts were made to ensure each participant's ownership of their own inquiry process, to solidify their commitment to specific areas of learning, and to guide the design of the Institute sessions.

After initial support was obtained from faculty administration, an email was sent to all faculty members, inviting their participation in the Blended Learning Faculty Development Institute. The invitation included details on Institute expectations, timelines, and stipends. Faculty members who responded received additional information and instructions on designing a project that

reflected the purpose and goals of the Institute; however, the structure left room for addressing improvements they wanted to make in their teaching and use of technology. This approach personalized participation and created the Institute's inquiry-based foundation. It also formally anchored the use of technology in teaching activities, and imparted the strong message that technology should be at the service of teaching and learning objectives.

Each participant met with the primary Institute facilitator to discuss and refine their project proposal. Some participants had well-defined plans and needed only to discuss Institute sessions that would be most beneficial. Others had drafted plans that seemed overly ambitious or not sufficiently challenging; with these participants, the facilitator suggested modifications to ensure their projects were both feasible and significant. Some faculty members wanted to participate, but lacking basic knowledge about educational technology, were unable to suggest appropriate projects. The facilitator helped these participants identify teaching areas and technology topics to explore during the Institute. In some cases, the facilitator allowed faculty to postpone finalizing a project until after the Institute kick-off.

A final pre-Institute preparation involved the construction of a *Blackboard* website to engage participants, support the Institute process, and model uses of that technology. The *Blackboard* website was used to post Institute schedules and instructions. To help Institute participants access current literature related to their inquiries and projects, a reading packet was also assembled and distributed. Participants posted summaries of readings and their reactions to them. Participants read and responded to each others' *Blackboard* postings, thereby using the technology and beginning the collegial discussion of teaching and learning with technology before the kick-off session began in late August.

Phase Two: Institute kick-off

The two-and-a-half-day Institute kick-off began with lunch and small group discussions during which participants learned about each others' projects. This, along with several other large group sessions, helped to foster and develop a sense of community within the group – a sense that everyone was learning at different rates and in different ways, but that they were working toward the same goal of teaching excellence. The agenda offered a large number of choices through which participants could tailor the experience to their own needs. There were beginning, intermediate, and advanced technology sessions, plenary sessions, and discussion sessions. Participants selected which sessions to attend. While each participant was provided a personalized agenda, the decision on which session to attend was left to the individual, which reinforced the inquiry-based nature of the event and emphasized individual responsibility for meeting learning needs.

Kick-off session learning opportunities

Learning opportunities available to participants can be broadly grouped into two areas: teaching/ learning, and technology. In the area of teaching/ learning, participants were offered a variety of discussions and presentations on best practices in post-secondary education, inquiry learning, the use of portfolios within social work education, various innovative approaches to dynamic assessment, and instructional strategies for blended learning contexts.

In the area of technology, sessions were offered on *Blackboard*, *Centra*, videoconferencing, videostreaming, and the use of *Excel* within research courses and/ or projects. Each session

included hands-on experiences for participants, taking into account their knowledge and skill levels and the particular projects on which they were working.

In addition to breakout and general sessions, an online learning environment was created by setting up independent learning stations called *e-Stations*. These were spaces that contained the technology and instructions participants needed to investigate specific topic areas. Nine *e-Stations* were made available for participants to explore throughout the kick-off session days at their descretion. Content was also made available online for access anytime, anywhere. Examples of topics covered in the *e-Stations* include: putting digital photographic stills and video in *Blackboard*, concept-mapping using software called *Inspiration*, and classroom assessment and feedback techniques for online learning.

The final session of the Institute kick-off included all participants and involved a modified "Tuning Protocol" activity (Allen and McDonald, 2003). During this session, each participant received peer feedback and encouragement on their particular project ideas and implementation plans. We also collected participant requests for follow-up activities and support.

Characteristics of faculty projects

To enhance the likelihood of success, several criteria were suggested for Institute projects. Projects were tailored to be appropriately challenging for each particular Institute participant, promise increased student learning in classes taught by the Institute participant, and hold the potential for further growth on the part of the faculty member. Each project needed to have a significant technology component and employ best practices for teaching and learning. Finally, projects needed to enhance face-to-face teaching and focus on helping the participant transition from face-to-face to blended or distance teaching contexts.

Phase Three: Follow up, support, and closing session

Between August 2003 and May 2004, Institute participants were offered a number of short follow-up workshops and project consultations on an as-needed basis. Participants were also alerted to related campus services and events. In February, a half-day session was held that allowed participants to share their progress, get advice from each other, and continue conversations about enhancing teaching excellence with technology. Most were present in Calgary, but some participants attended via videoconferencing.

In May 2004, participants and guests attended the closing Institute session either face-to-face or via videoconferencing. Each participant presented the outcomes of their project, with emphasis placed on learning from each other. Participants reflected on where they had started, describing not only what they learned about the use of educational technology but also what they learned about teaching and learning. Discussion included identifying components of the Institute process that had been most helpful, and aspects of their own work that had been most important. Individuals talked about what they saw as "next steps" and, as a group, discussed potential "next steps" for the Faculty of Social Work as a whole. This contributed to the perception and feeling that neither the Institute collegiality nor the learning process was over. This "closing" day was just part of the process – not the end.

Sample Projects

The scope of the Institute was such that a description of participant projects as a whole is impossible. We offer a brief description of three projects to provide a general idea of the types of activities undertaken by Institute participants.

One Institute participant proposed to use student interest areas to guide his clinical course while incorporating inquiry approaches and using digital video. Early in the course, he asked students to identify situations in which they wanted to gain knowledge and skill. The students and instructor drafted scenarios, which they then discussed with professional actors (simulators) who helped them further develop the characters and scenarios. The actors played the part of couples in therapy, the instructor was the therapist, and the simulated therapy session was videotaped. The instructor then edited the tapes to embed the pertinent sections into a *PowerPoint* presentation, which also presented content on couples' therapy. The instructor could stop, start, repeat, and skip sections of video as he and the students pointed out therapy techniques and discussed alternatives. At the completion of this project, the instructor believed the process could be expanded to support a fully online course on therapeutic interviewing.

Another participant, who was already skilled in the use of various technologies, focused on active teaching. In the semester following the Institute, this participant incorporated a new, experiential activity into his classes on a weekly basis. These activities were drawn from two books: 101 Active Learning Techniques (Silberman, 1996); and Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo and Cross, 1993). He also adapted several of these activities to be done via *Blackboard* and/ or *Centra*.

A third participant wanted to see students more engaged with the content of her course. She planned to use online discussions to extend classroom discussion and encouraged students to select alternative products to replace the traditional final course paper. Even though she had no personal experience developing webpages, she offered webpage development as an alternative to final papers, and arranged for interested students to receive training in basic webpage development. Ten of the 11 students in her class elected to do webpages; they researched an area of interest and constructed webpages to convey their research findings. These pages will now become part of the course website.

Results ~ Institute Evaluation

According to Guskey (2002), professional development efforts can be evaluated on five levels. These levels move from simple (i.e., participant satisfaction) to complex (i.e., organizational change), and build upon one another to provide a well-rounded, multi-dimensional understanding of the impact of the development effort under consideration.

Participant satisfaction

Feedback began during the pre-institute conferences when participants commented to the facilitator on the Institute design and helped shape the agenda timeframe and topics. This level of formative evaluation continued through the duration of the Institute, with daily checks made to see how participants were feeling and to determine what needed to be altered. At the end of the kick-off phase, there was an excitement about what had happened and what was to come. More than one participant commented that it was the best professional development experience they ever had. Following the Institute, participants completed an anonymous survey online. Generally,

the institute was considered to be a success. Participants reported they had learned a lot, were given plenty of choice and were excited by the opportunity to learn and converse in an atmosphere of support and collegiality.

Participant learning

At the May 2004 closing meeting (Phase 3), participants demonstrated their projects and outcomes, which then became part of the evaluation and feedback process. Approximately half of the participants had completed their projects and were able to deliver comprehensive presentations. Some advised that they had not completed their projects, but were able to provide an update on what they had accomplished to date and indicated when they would finish. Two participants told us that they had not accomplished very much and explained the reasons for that. A handful of participants in the last two categories – uncompleted projects and not accomplished – volunteered to forfeit their reporting time to others. While time adjustments were made to allow more time to those who had fully completed their projects, the facilitator asked everyone to present work to date and share their reflections on that work. We believed this approach was needed to maintain a community of learners who felt responsible to each other.

All participants, in order to claim their final stipend, were required to submit a brief written report including their own assessment of how their project work met the required project characteristics. Generally, participants were deeply reflective and insightful in their reporting, noting accomplishments as well as what they felt were short-comings. Themes that emerged were:

- Need for further practice with what they had learned and initially implemented
- Focus on teaching strategies (a number of participants commented that this had been one of their first opportunities to really think about and discuss different ways of teaching)
- Belief that they would continue to use technology more, and in a more effective manner
- Willingness and enthusiasm on the part of many to employ blended learning techniques in their courses
- Appreciation for the community of learners

One participant stated:

> "*I found the Blended Learning Institute to be a highlight of this past year, for a number of reasons. In general, I believe the Institute served as an open and safe platform from which faculty members could discuss their own development in using technology in the classroom. More importantly, the excitement that one could feel when we shared learnings was tangible. It was possible to literally feel the sense of accomplishment and plans for future development on the part of faculty members*."

Organization support and change

This aspect of evaluation focuses on the effects of the professional development effort on the host organization (Guskey, 2000). Potential impacts include change to the climate and procedures of the organization. Organizationally, the institute provided a vehicle to develop teaching capacity

required for the Faculty to deliver its Leadership Masters of Social Work online (the first cohort graduates in 2006). The Institute also contributed to development of support in the Faculty for the creation of a new director-level position dedicated to e-learning and distance education. Plans for a Bachelor of Social Work degree program, delivered primarily online with some face-to-face components sparked interest for a two-day session held in October 2004. The program, focused on rural, remote, and Aboriginal practice, has since been developed and began in August 2005. At the time of writing, a Clinical Masters of Social Work in a blended learning format was in the planning stage. These are examples of the Institute's direct influence on capacity and disposition in the Faculty of Social Work.

Conclusion

The Institute, spanning almost a year and a half, from initial interactions to final project implementations, was deemed highly successful by almost all participants. Individual faculty members improved both their teaching repertoires and their technology skills. Significantly, the Faculty of Social Work developed the capacity to deliver entire programs online. The Institute accomplished what it set out to do using a faculty development process grounded in best practice as confirmed by decades of literature. We nonetheless saw room for improvement and identified what could have been done better and what should be done next.

The feeling of excitement and community that was so palpable in the hours, days, and weeks following the Institute is no longer so acute. The community is not as connected and working together toward the same purpose. It did come very close, however, to being a community of practice, though unfortunately, it is not one now. Nonetheless, many participants continue to grow and develop in the ways the Institute supported; small clusters of colleagues do share resources and insights with each other, and the Faculty of Social Work continues to improve programs and develop new ones – but the fact remains that it is not a community of practice. Wenger and colleagues (2002) describe communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). "What makes [communities of practice] successful is their ability to generate enough excitement, relevance and value to attract and engage members . . . nothing can substitute for this sense of aliveness" (p. 50).

At the conclusion of the Institute, participants suggested that another one be held. They said it did not have to be on blended learning; it could be on a different topic, such as globalization or diversity for example. They advised that the process had been influential and important, and they wanted to keep it going. Unfortunately, there was no structure in place to support a continuation of the process. We were focused on the goal of achieving the capacity to deliver online and blended programs, not on sustaining the "aliveness" that the Institute nourished.

Wenger and colleagues (2002) outline seven principles for designing to evoke aliveness:

1. Design for evolution: Combine design elements in a way that catalyzes community development. Attend to physical, social and organizational structures

2. Provide for open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives

3. Invite different levels of participation

4. Develop for both public and private community spaces. Nurture interconnected relationships between community members, including day-to-day, one-on-one

exchanges. Support a community coordinator to drop in on members, call or email to discuss problems, link to resources, etc.

5. Focus on value

6. Combine familiarity and excitement

7. Create a rhythm for the community (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 51)

The Institute did all of the above; and the later professional development activities accomplished all but two of them. Although there was a coordinator for the Institute, there was no ongoing community coordinator and no one worked at sustaining the rhythm of the Institute after it formally concluded. This shortcoming points to the much needed next step: a community coordinator focused on supporting and maintaining a rhythm for several communities of practice, some within the Faculty and others that work in interdisciplinary communities with members of other faculties. Ideally, all should be focused on improving teaching and learning from different aspects and different content perspectives.

Recommendations
How can this work in distant and open institutions?

Professional development in line with the approach described in this paper may well be a vehicle that allows institutions of higher education to truly become learning organizations through communities of practice. By leveraging current and emerging technologies, communities of practice can cross the time and location barriers that exist in open and distance universities. Interactions can occur in asynchronous formats like online discussion forums and email. Others can occur synchronously via telephone, videoconferences, or via audiographic conferencing tools such as *Elluminate* or *Centra Horizon*. Still others can take advantage of face-to-face events, such as conferences and institutional meetings, to gather community members together.

Presumably, people in open and distance education organizations know how to teach effectively online or at a distance. Many of the same strategies known to be effective in teaching and learning online can be used to facilitate professional development programs that support communities of practice with a focus on continuous growth and development of teaching. The following is one scenario that can be used to implement the approach to professional development described in this paper in a distance or open university context:

- Assemble a small team to plan and coordinate implementation. Include people who understand and can represent the needs of the instructors in the field, as well as the needs of the organization. Also include those who are skilled professional development facilitators. This team need not be located in close physical proximity, but must clearly define roles and commit to regular and purposeful communication.

- Secure administrative support for the process, including the consideration of resources and incentives to participate. Many instructors may be intrinsically motivated to participate, but if the current culture does not place a high value on professional growth and community, and does not reward or recognize excellence in teaching, the incentives may have to be extrinsic to start (i.e., stipends, travel to conferences, resources, etc.).

- Care must be taken to invite participation in a way that is part marketing, part welcoming and encouraging, part challenging and yet honest and transparent. There should be no

hidden agendas, no unrevealed requirements or expectations. Invitations to join the community should set the tone and be issued in many formats. While emails and hardcopies offer one way, take the opportunity to connect in more personal ways. Where possible or practical, make phone calls and personal visits. Using a brief audiographic presentation (e.g., *Breeze* or *Captivate*) or an audioconference recording (e.g., *Elluminate* or *Horizon Live*) or video (podcast) will add a human touch.

- Lay the foundation for community building by involving participants in some aspects of the planning: ask them to reflect on their interests and needs; provide options for participants to select from, or to rank, according to their preference; involve them in narrowing down timeframes for events; and ask them to identify objectives for their own participation. This kind of professional and collegial negotiation will assist planners and assure participant investment. Use a mix of methods such as online surveys to assess needs and interests, online discussions, and videoconferencing to clarify expectations, roles, and responsibilities. Consider conducting the planning process through a blog or a wiki, wherein anyone interested can view and comment on the process. Gentle email reminders and recognition of contributions will keep attention on the process and encourage participation.

- Remember to plan for, and allow, different levels of participation during all phases. Establish a few minimum standards (e.g., respond to invitation by a certain date, complete the initial survey, etc.) for which planners will work hard to reach 100 percent participation. For other activities, such as viewing and contributing to the planning blog or wiki, encourage participation, realizing that some instructors will have the time and interest, but others will not. Continue this mix of base-level requirements to be part of the process, along with activities/ tasks that are strongly suggested and those that are optional. This will foster a shared sense of responsibility among planners and participants.

- Faculty development activities can be designed and delivered in several ways; again, a mix will make activities accessible to more people. Some ideas and information can be presented in the form of readings and audio, audiographic, and video presentations. Employ strategies that encourage participants to think critically about the presentations, discuss them with colleagues, and apply what is appropriate to their own teaching practice. Online discussion forums provide a way for participants to post reflections and engage in thoughtful discourse, but combine this with synchronous sessions (audio, audiographic, or video conferencing, or even small group face-to-face sessions where some participants are within reasonable travel distance from each other).

- Development and application of knowledge and skills occurs when faculty are able to practice. Facilitate the design and implementation of individual and small group projects in which participants try out new knowledge and skills, reflect on the results and then design ways to improve even further. Help participants employ effective methods for reflective practice, action research, and scholarship of teaching. Perhaps most important for community development is designing, facilitating , and supporting ways for faculty to share what they are doing and what they are learning with each other. Provide templates to make project design an easier process. Create ways for participants to learn about each others' projects and to ask questions and offer suggestions. For instance, divide the participants into small groups and post their templates to a discussion board along with several specific questions they would like colleagues to respond to regarding their project.

- Plan for a number of synchronous sessions throughout the process. Hold an audio conference with small groups after they have given feedback on project plans. Later, conduct an audiographic or video conference session in which each participant presents a few slides to bring the group up to date on the project implementation, talking briefly about what is going well and what challenges they are finding. Ask participants to think together to help each other, keeping the dialogue between participants, as much as possible. The idea is to help the participants connect with each other rather than relying on an outside expert or facilitator. These sessions will build a sense of mutual support and connectedness.

- Culminating events are important to celebrate achievements and progress, to signal the close of a segment of a journey, a milestone of sorts, and perhaps to mark the beginning of another. Again, a combination of methods will offer greater access. Take advantage of any opportunity to meet face-to-face such as meeting the day before a major conference or meeting that most people plan to attend anyway. But it is also possible to construct a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online events that can do the trick. Online "poster sessions" are easy to conduct, as are presentation sessions and discussion sessions. We have even seen online wine and cheese receptions.

- Depending on the size of the institution or department, the process might start small and grow or provide for several different groups/ processes running at the same time, but focused on slightly different topics or disciplines. For instance, some communities might develop around investigation and action research on assessment strategies for courses heavily reliant on inquiry approaches. Others might focus on effective use of new and emerging technologies and applications like wikis, podcasting, social bookmarking, or mobile technologies, in general. Still others may look deeper into how to make learning activities more authentic and relevant. Whatever the specific focus, the overall goal should be for every individual to learn, to share that learning with colleagues, and to apply the learning to improve their teaching.

While the Faculty of Social Work's Blended Learning Institute was not designed to produce formal research, we are of the opinion that it is a logical next step. We would welcome the opportunity to work with others to design similar projects in the future, especially one tailored for an open and/ or distant environment.

In conclusion, through providing a blueprint for implementing our approach to professional development in a distance or open university context, this paper attempts to show that effective faculty learning and development can happen and it can happen at a distance. A core criterion for an effective faculty development process is that, through the act of participating, faculty perceive greater connectedness to a community of practice that encourages, engages, and supports them in their teaching practice. As Senge (1990) points out, "When teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise" (p. 10). Critical factors for success, whether in face-to-face or online environments, lie in effective design of the teaching and learning environment, facilitation, and support of the process and, underlying all of this, commitment to the goal of developing communities of practice and learning organizations by those in decision making roles.

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