

Chapter 5

The Teaching Assistants' Community of Practice Facilitates Undergraduate Online Learning in a Blended Course

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter describes a peer-led community of teaching assistants. The aim is to illustrate ways in which peer-led mentored training enables the creation of a teaching assistant community in which all actors are encouraged to contribute to the establishment of a body of knowledge and expertise about the effective use of technology for educational purposes. There is an expectation that instructors would be taking the lead in the use of technology, as well as establishing a body of knowledge and experience about the effective use of technology. Little scholarly research, however, has been conducted in either the training or support of faculty and graduate teaching assistants in their methods to teach within the online learning environment. The community of practice model supports this shift in roles and activities for teaching assistants and faculty by increasing peer-to-peer engagement and offering new opportunities to engage with experts and expert practice. Specifically, this chapter will illustrate these ideas by referencing one undergraduate blended course (combining online and face-to-face settings).

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present the development of a teaching assistants' community of practice within a blended course for pre-service teachers. Within this community of practice, a technology-enhanced learning environment was set up to achieve two goals: (1) to encourage individual teaching assistants to work as a team on their weekly teaching tasks, and (2) to equip these assistants with teaching skills needed to further their development as future faculty. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the community of practice literature and the context of the teaching assistant community of practice at a large Midwestern university in the USA. The second section addresses strategies that were utilized in facilitating the sense of community in a blended course for pre-service teachers.

The teaching assistants' group for a blended learning course for undergraduates is conceptualized as a Community of Practice (CoP) in this chapter. A Community of Practice consists of a group of individuals working together towards a common goal. Essential to the development of a CoP are the practices, activities, and rituals that set the group apart from other groups or organization (Wenger, 1998). In Wenger's (1998) CoP model, learning happens best when it is relevant to the individual's goals and interests (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). Four major processes, in addition to learning itself, must be established for a successful CoP: (1) a practice to be learned, (2) a community within which to learn that practice, (3) meanings developed as part of learning the practice with a group of individuals, and (4) an identity formed as part of membership in the community (Wenger, 1998). In the present chapter, both formal training activities and 'extracurricular' social interactions among teaching assistants are assumed to foster the development of a sense of community throughout said assistants' teaching careers (Browne, 2003; Johnson, 2001). Within a CoP, the community members draw from each other, thereby collaborating to develop and validate a shared understanding (Browne, 2003; Collins, et al., 1989; Johnson, 2001). The interactions within most CoPs involve members with varying amounts of expertise (Wenger, 1998), but can also include novice to novice relationships (Hertzog, 2000). Regarding the teaching assistants' Community of Practice as discussed in this chapter, the focus is on both supports for teaching assistants provided at an organizational level and the influence(s) of these supports on the interaction between teaching assistants and the head instructor as a team.

A continued review of the best practices of a Community of Practice has been considered as one indicator of quality for a teaching assistant program. The best practices which have been demonstrated to be effective can be provided in a number of ways, including a substantive orientation, a comprehensive set of written materials, instruction in discipline-specific instructional skills, classroom observations with feedback, and reflection by TA supervisors on the effectiveness of TA training efforts

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