

A Collaborative Self-Study: Reflections on Convening a SoTL Community of Practice

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Communities of practice (CoPs) can provide opportunities for diverse and inclusive groups to convene, share, collaborate, and support others. Using a self-study research approach combined with a visual research method, this study explores both scholarly and practice-based insights to describe the anticipated attributes of a high functioning CoP for the support of collaborative engagement in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The following nine emergent attributes are identified: (1) Structures; (2) Social environments; (3) Diversity; (4) Knowledge, learning and ideas; (5) Support; (6) Shared leadership; (7) Risk; (8) Results and impact; and (9) Growth over time. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge related to the value of visual research methods in collaborative self-study. Moreover, the results of this self-study deepen understanding about the practice and role of convenors and organizers of a grass-roots, campus-wide SoTL CoP initiative.

INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice (CoPs) are dynamic learning communities that operate at different levels and scales (Blackmore, 2010). If we re-imagine a higher education institution to include social learning systems of professional communities and learning communities, new possibilities take place for participation, professional networks and relationships, innovation and collective learning (Wenger, 2010). CoPs are in essence informal, social and situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lea (2019) suggested that the concept of a CoP is a helpful heuristic to guide and support the practice of social learning and social participation. Communities of practice develop into a variety of forms and they practice multiple different activities (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Some additional features of CoPs are that they are voluntary (Mercieca, 2018, Nagy and Burch, 2009), emphasise open accessibility to new members, and offer opportunities to explore competence in domains that invite participation from across boundary organisational structures. The CoP concept reflects a process and not a form or structure to be overtly directed or managed.

Building on the understanding that CoPs have a variety of forms and practice multiple different activities, it is understandable that there will be multiple interpretations on 'how to' convene a CoP. Saldana (2017) identified the role of leadership in the development of communities of practice and suggested that leaders can provide a mediating influence for CoP development. The mediating influence identified by Saldana (2017) included the capacity a leader would have to help a group to socialize, build a common purpose, navigate perspectives and understandings and address problems. Drawing from experience, Reaburn and McDonald (2017) described the CoP leader as a 'champion' who needed "a high level of passion, commitment and determination to create and then sustain the CoP" (p. 134). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) also agreed that some form of leadership is necessary; "Whether you call them leaders, co-ordinators, or stewards, someone needs to do it" (p. 6).

In 2010, Wenger included convening as an element of a CoP and asked, "Who will take leadership in holding a social learning space for this partnership? How can we make sure that the partnership sustains productive inquiry?" (p. 194). Thus, the purpose

of this research was to participate in a mutual collaboration to explore how to advance our practice as convenors and organizers of a grassroots, campus wide SoTL CoP initiative. Before starting a new SoTL CoP, the five authors of this study, hereafter referred to as the convening group, chose to collaborate together to 'make visible' their practice-based understandings and experiences of CoPs and what it takes to nurture them. To achieve the research purpose, the self-study research methodology, known as S-STEP, Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009) combined with a visual research method using Visual Explorer® photo cards, served as a helpful means of systematically reflecting on participation in the SoTL CoP.

Background

Prior to the establishment of the CoP, it became clear in the early stages that each member of the convening group was learning on their own about different forms of engagement in SoTL and missing the opportunity to advance their learning together. Seeking to create a more effective, rewarding, and ongoing learning opportunity, the convening group chose to make a collective commitment to: 1) make their own individual learning visible to one another, and 2) collaborate together to maximize the mutual social learning benefits. In essence, the convening group identified "a need to learn how to learn our way together to bring about improvements in various situations and practices" (Blackmore, 2010, p. 202). The study was timely for the five members of the convening group because each person had experience with CoPs in different aspects of their professional lives. Member 1 had previously convened two CoPs and had recently completed a doctoral dissertation related to faculty CoPs in higher education; Member 2 had extensive experience with CoPs in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL); Member 3 was researching CoPs in online environments; Member 4 supported CoPs through a university centre for teaching and learning; and Member 5 actively participated in CoPs in various academic roles in higher education.

Members of the convening group were curious to explore the diversities and commonalities within their five different interdisciplinary perspectives on CoPs. Discussing this project with one another, the convening group decided that there was much

to learn about the CoP concept through the exploration of one another's personal practice, knowledge, and related experiences (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Next, the convening group decided to consider how each individual, and the group as a whole, could advance their practice as SoTL CoP convenors and organizers. Furthermore, through engagement in a collaborative self-study approach, the convening group sought to explore collaborative approaches to the development of SoTL in the university, and in particular, communities of practice for SoTL collaboration and learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Communities of Practice

The concept of communities of practice developed from Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning (1991) and Wenger's later work on a social theory of learning and communities of practice (1998). Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) identified three components in a CoP: domain, community and practice. These components together create the learning partnership and the basic structure that characterizes a CoP. The *domain of interest* is significant as it represents the area of competence that brings a certain group of people together. As such, communities of practice develop around the things that matter to people (Wenger, 1998). The second characteristic of the learning partnership is *community*. Wenger proposed that learning is associated with our evolving social relationships with others in the group through multiple relational processes. The third characteristic, *practice* connects the CoP concept to the practitioner. In a CoP, the group, through their community relationships, share aspects of the activities and understandings that they engage in within their practice.

This collaborative self-study aligns with approaching the CoP concept as an opportunity to learn about SoTL practices as individuals and also sharing perspectives around this domain of interest in a collaborative learning community. A recent contribution to social learning in universities, *Communities of Practice: Facilitating Social Learning in Higher Education* encouraged practitioners and researchers to enhance social learning in higher education (HE) and identified an "urgent need for more relevant forms of professional learning in HE" (Mercieca, 2017, p. 5).

Kilpatrick, Barrett and Jones (2003) explored how learning communities are defined in different countries and disciplines. In this study, Kilpatrick et al. (2003) identified the following themes that linked the definition and uses; "a common or shared purpose, interests or geography; collaboration, partnership and learning; respecting diversity; and enhanced potential outcomes" (p. 6). In particular, the learning communities were found to have a human element described as the synergies associated with learning with other people and sharing and developing knowledge through collaboration (Kilpatrick et al., 2003).

As asserted in the introduction to this study, one aspect of CoPs that is essential to their function is the work undertaken in a CoP by one or more convenors. In their exploration of CoPs in academe, Nagy and Burch (2009) noted that CoPs involved "coordination, consultation, communication and co-operation" that "should not be romanticized as easily achieved" (p. 242). In 2009, in a paper written to report on a social learning and innovation project, Wenger referred to group maintenance as social artistry (p. 10) and noted:

Among the many factors that account for the success or failure of the process, I have seen again and again that one of the key ingredients is the energy and skills of those who take leadership in making it happen. I call the people who excel at doing this "social artists" (Wenger, 2009, p. 10).

Wenger further commented that leadership of a CoP tends to rely more heavily on one person; it also takes time, skill and mental effort (2009). When initiating a CoP, the role of convenor is deeply connected to the convenor's understanding of CoPs and social and participatory learning.

This further supports the significant contribution self-study research offers to understand the different attributes of a high functioning CoP.

Opportunities for Collaborative Approaches in SoTL

The academic profession and forms of engagement in academic work are changing in universities around the world (Finkelstein, Conley, & Schuster, 2017; Kezar & Maxey, 2016; Locke, Cummings & Fisher, 2011) affected by macro socio-cultural trends (Knight, 2007) and responses to these trends at global, national, regional and institutional levels (Knight, 2013). As the content of faculty work changes, there is a pressing need for opportunities to discuss the meaning of this change, and also the evolution of practice with other colleagues. Communities of practice in higher education have benefits in supporting scholars and teaching professionals in sharing knowledge and enhancing practice both within disciplines and across disciplines (Tight, 2015; Cox, 2004; Cross, 1998). Faculty-initiated SoTL communities of practice are one approach to developing the opportunity for exploring commitments, understandings and practices related to teaching and learning in higher education and how these insights can serve as a backdrop for individual SoTL-based inquiries (Hamilton, 2014a).

Faculty knowledge work in universities incorporates a significant amount of discretion and self-direction (White and Weathersby, 2005). In addition to the diversity in knowledge and skills in academic work, faculty also work in a dispersed work environment. Within this context it is perhaps not surprising that SoTL scholarship is primarily associated with the work of individual scholars. Boshier (2009) concluded that both SoTL scholarship and also SoTL recognition are primarily associated with the work of an individual faculty member. SoTL studies can be very enlightening for academics seeking more awareness of their own discipline-based scholarship and teaching (Tierney et al., 2020; McKinney, 2018; McKinney, 2013; Dewar & Bennett, 2010). Nevertheless, this disciplinary focus can often lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and frustration as a result of the limited support available (Hamilton, 2014a; McKinney, 2007; Schroeder, 2007; Shulman, 2004). A number of scholars have cited the benefits of developing strategies that offer more interdisciplinary, collective and community-based support for SoTL scholars including department-wide programs (McKinney, 2007), campus-wide institutes (Marquis, 2015; McKinney, 2007; Shulman, 2004), and learning and teaching commons (Hubball et al. 2010; Huber & Hutchings, 2005). Establishing a community of practice amongst a group of SoTL scholars offers an organic and flexible approach that may also serve to complement these more formalized support structures listed above (Cornejo Happel & Song, 2020; Tierney et al. 2020; Hamilton, 2014a; Richlin & Cox, 2004). A sense of connectedness and belonging to a supportive, cross-disciplinary community was

also noted by SoTL scholars participating in more recent studies conducted by Cornejo Happel and Song (2020) and Tierney et al. (2020).

RESEARCH PURPOSE

Given that social, participatory learning is the theoretical basis for communities of practice, academic interest in CoP development in SoTL is both understandable and useful for higher education institutions. CoPs offer an approach that may support SoTL scholarship and teaching in higher education through practice-based innovation and sharing of tacit knowledge with colleagues. Moreover, these social learning opportunities create space for horizontal learning that do not necessarily align with organizational structures and structures created within disciplines and academic departments. All the benefits of the CoP cited in the last section apply directly to supporting SoTL scholars. Hence, members of the convening group shared collective and individual experiences in developing, convening and participating in a high functioning CoP to deepen understanding about expertise in overseeing a SoTL initiative. These shared insights are helpful in determining how the theoretical conceptualizations of a CoP align with real lived experiences, especially in its role in promoting social, interdisciplinary-based learning. The research purpose, as stated in the Introduction section, was to participate in a self-study research process utilizing mutual collaboration to deepen understanding and contribute to the existing body of knowledge about the practice and role of convenors and organizers of a grass-roots, campus-wide SoTL CoP initiative. Through a dialogue together, the convening group established the following research questions that align to this purpose:

1. **What are the attributes of a high functioning CoP for the support of collaborative engagement in SoTL?**
2. **How has CoP theory informed our practice in the CoP, and how has our practice informed our understanding of CoP theory?**

METHODOLOGY & METHOD

The self-study methodology, known as S-STEP, Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices, provided an excellent fit with the goals of the inquiry (Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009). Self-study is a methodology for “studying professional practice settings” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817), where teaching professionals situate themselves as both the researchers and the focus of the research process. Lewison (2003, p.100) provides a description of the self-study methodology that aligns well with the purpose of the current inquiry:

[Self-study is] a generally agreed upon set of insider [research practices that promote teachers taking a close, critical look at their teaching and the academic and social development of their students . . . [It] involves classroom teachers in a cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action. In this cycle, teachers question common practice, approach problems from new perspectives, consider research and evidence to propose new solutions, implement these solutions, and evaluate the results, starting the cycle anew.

S-STEP offered an approach to studying one’s own professional practice through a self-initiated, critical, reflexive, and

improvement-oriented lens that supports a collaborative inquiry model (Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009; Hamilton and Pinnegar, 2014). The self-study approach is inherently collaborative because it is almost always carried out with the assistance or mutual engagement of colleagues within the same discipline or across disciplines (Loughran, 2010; Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, Stackman, 2003). Collaboration offers many benefits to the self-study research process such as enhanced clarity of perspectives, checking of assumptions, surfacing of multiple points of view, active engagement through dialogue and discourse and consideration of alternative explanations (Louie et al., 2003)

Consistent with the aims of the self-study process and the goals of this project, a multi-stage photo narrative research process was used to enable the five members of the convening group to use multiple modalities to reflect on their experiences in being involved in the community of practice. The approach used a modified version of the visual storytelling method, “Photo-voice” (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, and Pestronk, 2004; Wang and Burris, 1997). Members of the convening group shared oral narratives with each other based on posters they had created that expanded on one photograph that they had each selected from a large library of over 300 postcard-sized photos contained in a Visual Explorer® kit produced by the Center for Creative Leadership. The Visual Explorer® package consists of a curated collection of photos representing a diversity of images and genres of expression “to facilitate conversations, creating new perspectives and shared understanding” (Palus and Horth, 2010, p.i). The goal of using this approach was to guide participants’ reflective self-expression (Warren, 2005) and stimulate the development of a narrative that could be shared with the other participants in the research process.

The study involved four preliminary data collection methods:

3. Photographs selected by each member of the convening group from the Visual Explorer® photobank in response to the prompt. “Select a photo that best represents your ideal image of a high functioning CoP that can support the development of SoTL projects”.
4. Posters, created by members of the convening group, that expanded on the symbols or imagery within the selected photo and which helped to explain why the particular photo was chosen and which were based on the question: “What are the key connections you are making between your ‘ideal’ image (the photo) and our current initiative? Express these connections graphically on the poster sheet provided. The resulting posters produced by the convening group are provided in Appendix A.
5. Audio recordings of members’ narratives based on each person’s presentation of their post to the convening group.
6. A written record that described the generation of collective themes by the members of the convening group. The members created a ‘gallery wall’ of the five posters and then collectively generated a series of themes that connected most or all of the images presented in the different posters.

Through the use of multiple sources of qualitative data, the S-STEP model enabled the five members to reflect both individually and collectively on their motivations for being involved in

the SoTL initiative, the learning challenges they faced, and the significant insights they gained.

DATA ANALYSIS

The convening group used a grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Robson, 2011), featuring an inductive thematic analysis process described by Huberman et al. (1994) and Mason (1996). The collaborative nature of the inquiry enabled the researchers to employ successive stages of both individual and collaborative analysis to strengthen inter-rater agreement and to enhance the validity of the findings. Using both multiple sources of data and multiple members' contributions supported the triangulation of both data sources and members' perspectives (Patton 2002). Individually, the members reviewed all audio, visual, and written data records and, subsequently, identified initial broad descriptive codes independently (see Appendix 1). Then, the members came together as a group to discuss the codes and develop conceptual categories. Through a collective moderation process, these categories were then narrowed down into the nine interpretive themes described in the next section.

FINDINGS

The themes and sub-themes presented below summarize the findings of this research study. From the visual explorer analysis the following nine themes emerged: (1) Structures and foundations; (2) Social environments; (3) Diversity; (4) Knowledge, learning and ideas; (5) Support; (6) Shared leadership; (7) Risk; (8) Results and impact; and (9) Growth over time.

Theme 1: Foundations of a CoP

A successful SoTL CoP requires a strong foundation that consists of engaged members who: (1) nurture and support each other, and (2) are willing to share, collaborate, and problem solve as they bring varied and diverse perspectives together. In addition to these attributes, benefits include working with colleagues who have an understanding of diverse bodies of knowledge and the possibility of connections that extend beyond the community itself. As commented by one member, "Structure and strong foundations require essential elements of support, global connections, and diverse bodies of knowledge." Being cognizant of these building blocks is critical to the development of an inclusive CoP where members can be expected to give and receive support, collaborate, and expand their existing knowledge.

Theme 2: Social Environments

Peer support and building relationships are integral to a thriving SoTL CoP where shared values help keep members connected, for example, values of care, community, collaboration, sharing, and celebration. When SoTL CoPs function as social environments, they provide fertile ground for these values to be rooted, grow, and serve as connectors between community members. In this study, social environments surfaced as an emergent theme with the following two sub-themes: (1) relationships; and (2) engagement. A member of the convening group noted that "a social environment thrives as SoTL members work to build relationships of trust through individual and collective engagement." A flourishing SoTL CoP provides a plethora of opportunities for members to engage in knowledge sharing and co-creation while deepening relationships within a healthy social environment.

Theme 3: Diversity

The third theme focuses on the sustainability of the CoP. Members of the convening group noted that for a CoP to meet present needs, as well as function in the future, there is a need to be: (1) respectful of the shared voices and unique opinions; and (2) its members should embrace the varied perspectives evident in the community, thereby allowing the connections to flourish. A member of the convening group used the metaphor of cheese, "together the experience of several cheeses on your cheese plate is more interesting. So that idea of not having a group that's one cheese, but looking at multiple cheeses... there's so much about learning that's about contrast". This analogy also speaks to the sub-themes that emerged from the data, where shared expertise and varied perspectives surfaced, as well as the necessity to approach discussions in a non-judgemental way, thereby enabling the connections within the community to flourish.

Theme 4: Knowledge, Learning and Ideas

A successful SoTL CoP creates an interdisciplinary space for knowledge sharing that: (1) fosters idea generation, creativity and experimentation; (2) explores various tools and techniques; (3) is informed by theory(ies), and (4) is optimistic in its orientation and iterative in its structure. A member of the convening group noted, "You have a shared interest but the people in the group interpret that, live that, culturally experience that in so many different ways ... beginners are welcome, experts are welcome and everything in-between". In this interdisciplinary co-created space, ideas are constantly being built and iterated upon based on the knowledge that each member brings to the group, and the collective new knowledge and associations that are being created as a result of the conversations.

Theme 5: Support

Diverse forms of support are essential for a successful SoTL CoP and these different types of support include: (1) an individual's support for the CoP in areas such as attendance and participation; (2) mutual support from within the group towards one another; and (3) structural support to create a foundation and grow. A SoTL CoP can be effective, productive, and dynamic when it is supported by individual members, the group as a collective working together with collective accountability, and structural support that reflects shared leadership, "it's something we all feel connected to and we grow it". Support is another emergent theme that highlights the SoTL CoP as a functioning group. Sub-themes include: maintenance of the group over time; learning in the group; and progression of the group.

Theme 6: Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is another emergent theme and it is a distinguishing attribute of a successful SoTL CoP that can be expressed in many ways. For example, approaches to shared leadership include the sharing of: vision, knowledge, expertise, responsibilities, purpose, pace/momentum and goals/results "in shared leadership there needs to be an eye on the future and momentum". Furthermore, values demonstrated and fostered within shared leadership require members of the SoTL CoP to reflect on their role and responsibilities as a contributor to success or failure. These values include: working together, compassion, and appreciation for the collective. Sub-themes noted under shared leadership include the following: social convening/facilitation; engagement of

participants; shared leadership within a core group of members; and an ongoing commitment for maintenance and growth.

Theme 7: Risk and Vulnerability

In developing a vibrant CoP, there is a need to consider: (1) having tolerance as a foundation that contributes to safe spaces, thereby allowing participants to embrace uncertainty, and (2) carefully exploring the potential impact beyond the core CoP, so that participants will be encouraged to share their knowledge and to learn from others in the wider community. Capturing the essence of this theme, with its focus on the dynamic, evolving nature of a thriving CoP, a member of the convening group noted that an enduring CoP is, “a place to go... a place to grow”. Exploring this in more depth, members of the convening group noted that safe spaces were created by trust and moving together as a community that accepts both the strength and fragility experienced in a new environment, populated by new and established members. Also encapsulated in this theme were the global implications of sharing outside the community, as well as the connections that were the natural result of learning with others.

Theme 8: Results and Impact

A CoP focused on having an impact should: (1) support participants’ efforts to produce tangible outcomes such as conference papers and publications, as well as (2) generate improvements and innovations in teaching practice. The ways in which this shared orientation was developed, as well as strategies for achieving results and impact, were highlighted by members of the convening group. As one member described, “We can expect changes in people that we will never know” through the work of a SoTL CoP. Setting goals (short-term, intermediate and longer) to facilitate tangible outcomes and working together to achieve sustainable impact through the work of a CoP were identified by members as the end goal of a CoP. The valuing of collective and individual benefits experienced through the work of the CoP was deemed essential to fostering a climate that was open to change and resulted in new ideas and approaches.

Theme 9: Growth over Time

An effective CoP should acknowledge and celebrate the complexity of SoTL work that leads to emergent design, iterative growth and evolution over time. As one member reflected, “The CoP we created in the beginning may not be the one that emerges next year or five years from now”. By remaining open to new learning and being optimistic, the CoP is able to grow over time. Coupled with a willingness to share expertise and ideas in an ongoing manner, the CoP is then able to demonstrate resilience in the face of physical, organizational, and intellectual challenges. Through supporting reciprocal and shared leadership, the SoTL CoP was identified as being able to grow and evolve over time to meet the needs of the members.

DISCUSSION

Starting this co-inquiry about collective and individual experience in developing a CoP led the convening group to explore interpretations, perspectives and practices and thereby build shared understanding. Drawing from a shared lived experience convening CoPs in the past in a variety of settings (face-to-face and online), members of the convening group were better able to understand some of the insights, opportunities, and tensions of engaging in a CoP. In this section, we return to the two primary

research questions and emphasize the links between them and the subordinate themes.

Research Question 1

What are the attributes of a high functioning CoP for the support of collaborative engagement in SoTL? The thematic analysis identified multiple themes that related to collaborative engagement that included *Social Environments* (Theme 2) *Diversity* (Theme 3), *Knowledge, Learning and Ideas* (Theme 4), *Shared Leadership* (Theme 6), and *Risk* (Theme 7). In *Social Environments* (Theme 2) the members noted that a high functioning CoP is a social place. This supported Wenger’s discussion regarding the community domain in a CoP. The community is associated with learning through social relationships with others reflecting a relational process (Wenger, 1998). *Diversity* (Theme 3) and *Knowledge, Learning and Ideas* (Theme 4) reflected the perception that a CoP should respect and welcome varied perspectives, knowledge levels or abilities. The introduction and study of CoPs in universities has indicated that CoPs in higher education settings are inherently diverse and distributed (Nagy & Burch, 2009). James (2007) argued that Lave and Wenger’s research (1991) suggested that CoPs were places of coherence, agreement and harmonization. It is hard to reconcile these characteristics of coherence and agreement with universities where the stratified and changing nature of faculty work (Metcalf et al., 2011) is often unstable, fractured and dynamic. *Diversity* (Theme 3) is a reflection of approaches to a high functioning CoP in a university context. The content of the theme *Diversity* recognizes that varied perspectives are an inherent attribute of a CoP in a university context. The content of *Knowledge, Learning and Ideas* (Theme 4) also reflects the interdisciplinary context of SoTL that tends to attract scholars from multiple disciplines and backgrounds (Robinson et al. 2013). *Shared Leadership* (Theme 6), and *Risk* (Theme 7) both relate to the work of convening a CoP. The *Shared Leadership* theme reflected the impressions that a CoP is a place where leadership is shared, and where sharing is supported by core values for the CoP that are consistently held and followed. The theme also relates to the practicalities of convening and leading such as, establishing purpose, retaining pace and momentum, and working together. Based on a practice-based reflection on convening communities of practice in CoPs in HE in Australia, McDonald and Star (2008) identified the continuity of the CoP as an essential concern for convening and leading CoPs. Additionally, *Risk* (Theme 7) related to ensuring trust was maintained in a community where there was both strength and fragility in learning openly with others.

Of note are also *Results and Impact* (Theme 8) and *Growth over Time* (Theme 9). The content of these themes align with an approach to CoP development that reflects a *nurtured* model that is formal but grass-roots organised with some acknowledgement and support from the university; or, *intentional* where the CoP is formal and university endorsed, funded and supported (Reaburn and McDonald, 2017). *Results and Impact* (Theme 8) supported a tangible outcome focus for a SoTL CoP related to conference papers and publications and improvement in teaching practices and innovation. This expectation relates to the SoTL domain for the CoP that was the genesis of this study and the academic SoTL CoP traditions formulated and shared by SoTL scholars (Felten, 2013; Glassick et al, 1997).

Research Question 2

How has CoP theory informed our practice in the CoP, and how has our practice informed our understanding of CoP theory? By highlighting the aforementioned attributes, this study builds upon existing elements of Wenger's domain, community, and practice components which is directly relevant to the second research question that addresses the interconnections between CoP theory and practice. The themes developed in this study contribute to members' practice-based understanding of how CoPs function in a formal HE context. Hence, this research is relevant and useful for faculty who aim to purposefully foster SoTL CoPs within their programs, schools, and the broader university community. Furthermore, this study surfaced some theory-practice tensions that exist when convening SoTL CoPs. Firstly, there was a theory-practice tension between a focus on structure and a focus on relational process and degrees of formal or informal in the development of a CoP. Members of the convening group demonstrated evidence of this theory-practice tension through the visual explorer diagrams as some members highlighted a structured, formal arrangement of a CoP while others had a looser, more organic approach. CoP theory originated from studies on informal, situated learning in apprenticeships (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The cultural and contextual background of the empirical research by Lave and Wenger (1991) is very much removed from a more institutionalized university context and formalized roles and structures. The question related to formal or informal orientation may indeed also reside in the argument that communities of practice often start from an informal foundation, and that once they become visible, they somehow lose their informal orientation and essential nature. This distinction is worth consideration as it suggests that task forces and working groups that are often associated with organization-wide change are not learning partnerships as theorised for a CoP because they are oriented to a specific mandate or task. For example, Tight (2015) suggested that once communities of practice are "...seen as a managerial tool, its usage in other contexts appears compromised in some ways" (p. 120). Although, there is a broad spectrum of informal and formal conceptualizations of CoPs noted in the SoTL-based literature (Marquis, 2015; McKinney, 2007; Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Richlin & Cox, 2004), the convening group worked within the formal structures and processes embedded in the HE context to create a more fluid and informal approach to the SoTL CoP. Most notably, this tension was evident in the *Foundations of a CoP (Theme 1)*; and the *Support (Theme 5)*.

Wenger-Trayner has cautioned on the association of a community of practice with a group, preferring to emphasize that communities of practice are a "social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time" rather than a formation or group (Farnsworth, Kleathous & Wenger-Trayner 2016, p. 5). CoPs are perhaps best understood as functioning on a continuum between informal and formal. Sometimes they are invisible to the institution where they exist operating more informally, and sometimes they are formal and university-supported or endorsed. Reaburn and McDonald (2017) reflected on creating, sustaining and facilitating CoPs in higher education settings and helpfully summarised the key characteristics of three types of CoPs in higher education: organic, nurtured and intentional. The *organic* model has an informal group structure with no formal university awareness. The *nurtured* model is formal but grass-roots organised with some acknowledgement and support from the univer-

sity; and, *intentional* is formal and university endorsed, funded and supported. The tension related to informal and formal CoPs potentially reflects these different possibilities for CoPs and the preference among some members of the convening group for one of these types of CoP over the other.

The higher education context for CoPs has been identified as a limitation for communities of practice (Roberts, 2006, Nagy & Birch, 2009). Nagy and Birch (2009) identified multiple differences between knowledge work practices in academe compared to corporations. Nagy and Birch posited that communities of practice in academe (CoP-iA) are a reflection of a work context that is related to both the institutional context, and the individual. Turning to the individual, Jawitz (2009) found that professional experience and histories have a significant role in how faculty members perceive and negotiate their identities and their role as academics. Often these contextual nuances, both institutional and individual, are challenging to surface, yet they affect how we convene CoPs, and navigate meaning making and learning practices.

Reflecting back on the second research question, the convening group found that the intersection of members' understanding of theory with practice was critical. Members experienced the theoretical aspects of a CoP in a more intimate way which then enabled them to weave together the theory with practice in a way that reflected the context of their work.

Finally, using the visual explorer activity to examine the SoTL CoP allowed members to reflect individually and collectively on the value of SoTL and the CoP approach. The process of engaging with the visual explorer was helpful to surface mental models that made the implicit explicit, which was evident through the metaphors shared in the gallery walk. As such, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge related to the value of visual research methods in collaborative, self-study inquiry. Because self-study methodology focuses on engaging in collaborative reflective activities, the use of the visual explorer approach is highly appropriate for helping to surface tacit assumptions about practice and challenging them in a "safe space".

CHALLENGES

When reflecting on the attributes of a high functioning CoP that would support collaborative engagement in SoTL, the convening group identified the need for a core group to foster momentum and sustainability. Hence, the convening group also participated in the larger SoTL CoP composed of core and sessional faculty with different motivations and expectations for being a part of a SoTL CoP. The lack of institutional resources to sustain this cross-institutional SoTL CoP resulted in the convening group stepping back from providing broader support. As soon as the convening group stopped engaging and nurturing the institutional CoP, wider faculty engagement became less visible, and seemed to lose some momentum. This lack of continuity emphasizes the need for various forms of institutional support to help with the continued engagement of the broader university community in SoTL initiatives. Several authors (Boose & Hutchings, 2016; Marquis, 2015; Martenson et al. 2011; Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Richlin & Cox, 2004) have previously reinforced the value of a supportive activities on faculty members' motivation to sustain their engagement in SoTL-based inquiries through such initiatives as faculty learning communities, writing retreats, special SoTL research grants, peer support strategies, and university-wide project showcases. These activities help people feel they are engaging in SoTL research, not

as individuals, but with the support afforded by a community of scholars.

LIMITATIONS

As noted in the Methodology and Methods section, the multi-stage photo narrative research process was used to enable the convening group to use multiple modalities to reflect on their experiences in being involved in the community of practice. With this research method, attention to and reflection on the self are explored in relation to the perspectives of others. A limitation of this method is that accounts of experience in CoPs are retrospective and by nature subjective. Furthermore, there is the possibility that members may have limited sharing elements of their own self-disclosure directly with their colleagues. While this self-study resulted in thick descriptive data, additional limitations include small sample size, limited variation in institutional experience represented by members of the convening group, and lack of triangulation from a third party. In addition, the self-study research methodology does not allow for generalizability, is difficult to replicate, and has a potential for increased researcher bias.

CONCLUSION

As a result of working on this project, members of the convening group identified subsequent research questions that would be useful to pursue, including: (1) How can CoP convenors support other faculty members interested in engaging in a SoTL Community of Practice?; and (2) How does professional practices and varied understandings affect members' contribution to the next SoTL CoP? Moving forward collectively, the convening group is examining ways to encourage other faculty members from the institution to engage more deeply with the reflection and critical self-examination process that is central to SoTL studies, recognizing that there are challenges associated in developing a sustained commitment to CoPs over time. Additional data were collected as part of this project that may also be fruitful to analyze and incorporate into a broader institutional approach to sustaining a SoTL CoP.

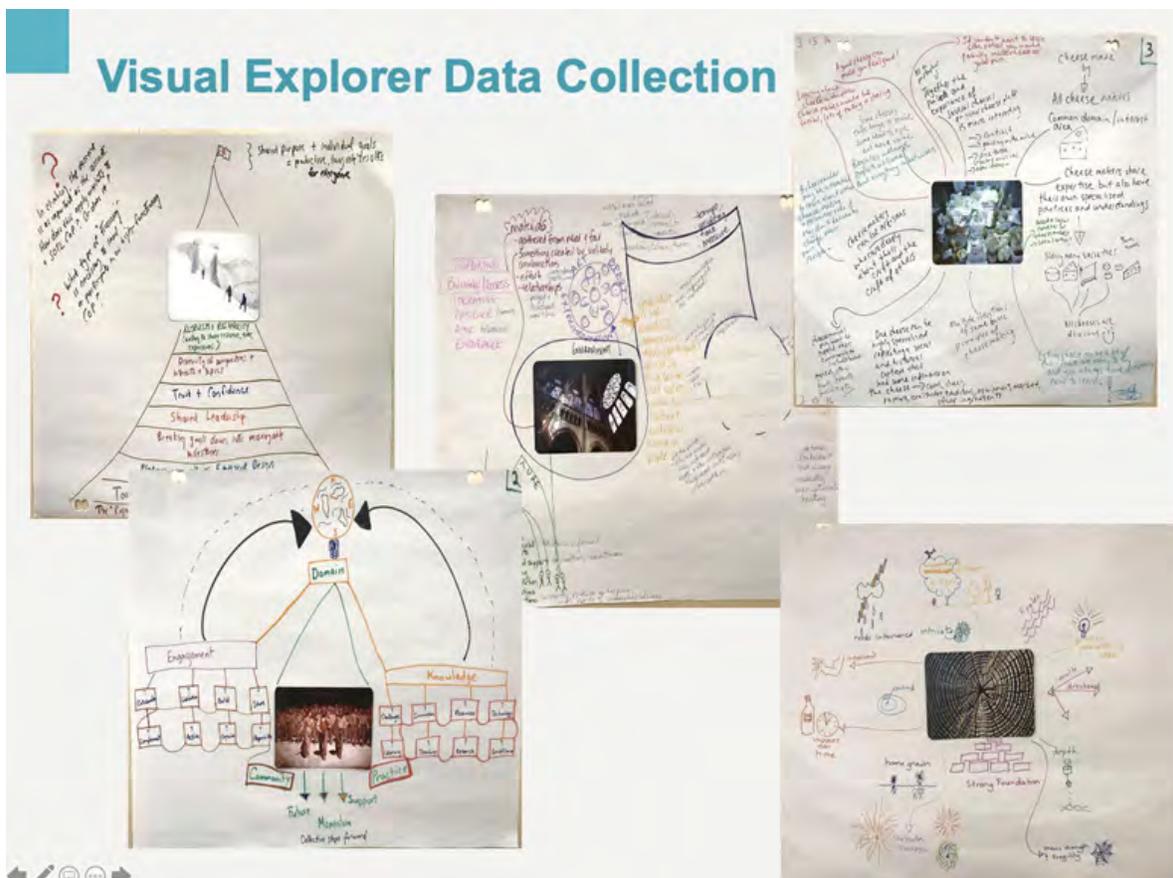
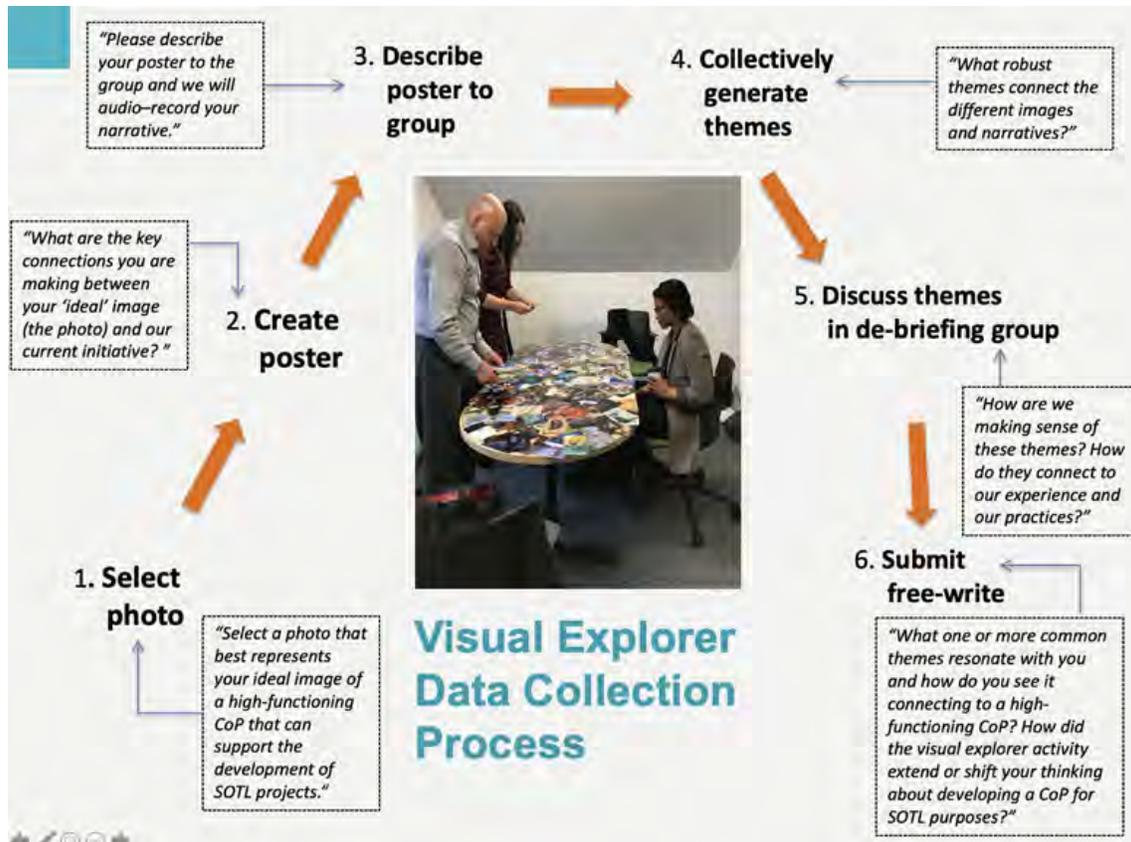
Ongoing and sustained discussion within the CoP, took the loneliness out of the SoTL research, and acted as a catalyst for reflection, thereby allowing members of the convening group to engage in a research approach that was congruent with the creation and support of a thriving CoP. While leadership of a CoP is shared, there was value in having a convening group that made a commitment over a period of time to nurture and sustain the CoP. Counter to the siloed approach that can often be taken in discipline-focused SoTL work, this SoTL CoP provided an opportunity for deepening collegial relationships and inspired the convening group to expand more purposely into the larger university community. In addition, this research reaffirms the importance of metaphors and stories, and encourages making meaning from our own and others' experiences. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of knowledge related to the value of visual research methods in collaborative self-study. In essence, this aligns with the research purpose which was to deepen understanding and contribute to the existing body of knowledge about the practice and role of convenors and organizers of a grassroots, campus wide SoTL CoP initiative.

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APPENDIX A: VISUAL EXPLORER DATA COLLECTION



APPENDIX B: INITIAL BROAD DESCRIPTIVE CODES

Our individual analysis resulted in a variety of broad, descriptive codes including some of the following:

Theme 1: Foundations of a CoP

“Willingness to share, collaborate and problem solve”, and “nurture and support each other”.

Theme 2: Social Environment

“Peer support and building relationships are integral to a thriving SoTL” and “CoP where shared values help keep members connected”.

Theme 3: Diversity

“Sustainable CoP is respectful of the shared voices and unique opinions” and “members embrace the varied perspectives allowing the connections to flourish”.

Theme 4: Knowledge Learning and Ideas

“Creates an interdisciplinary space for knowledge sharing” and “is optimistic in its orientation and iterative in its structure”.

Theme 5: Support

“Individual’s support for the CoP in areas such as attendance and participation” and “mutual support from within the group towards one another”, “structural support to create a foundation and grow”.

Theme 6: Shared Leadership

“Sharing vision ,knowledge, expertise, responsibilities, purpose, pace/momentum and goals/results” and “values include working together, compassion, appreciation for collective”.

Theme 7: Risk and Vulnerability

“Tolerance that contributes to safe spaces thereby allowing participants to embrace uncertainty” and “implications beyond the core CoP allow participants to share their knowledge and to learn from others”.

Theme 8: Results and Impact

“Support members’ efforts to produce tangible outcomes” and “innovations in teaching practice”.

Theme 9: Growth Over Time

“Acknowledge and celebrate the complexity of SOTL work” and “emergent design, iterative growth and evolution over time”.