The Community of Practice Initiative at Hong Kong Baptist University: A Message From the Editors

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This special online-only issue of the Learning Communities Journal includes noteworthy contributions—indeed, breakthroughs—in the field of faculty learning communities (FLCs) and communities of practice (CoPs). For the first time, a hybrid model of an FLC/CoP has been designed, implemented, and assessed. The survey designed and implemented by Beach and Cox (2009), which has assessed the impacts of FLCs on members’ educational development and their students’ learning in the U.S., has been used again to measure the impacts of this hybrid FLC/CoP model. Direct comparisons have been made between FLC and hybrid FLC/CoP outcomes, and they are published in this issue. In addition, this issue contains the robust scholarship of teaching and learning that these hybrid FLC/CoPs have generated. Also of note, this project has taken place in Hong Kong, providing an international perspective and application of the FLC model in a different culture.

At this point, as Editor-in-Chief, I acknowledge and thank four colleagues who have contributed greatly to the publication of this special issue:

Eva Wong, Co-Editor of the Special Issue; Director, Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning, Hong Kong Baptist University

Patrick Blessinger, International Education Consultant for the Special Issue; Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education
I now welcome comments from my co-editor of this special issue, Dr. Eva Wong, who provides descriptions of and comments about these momentous developments.

It is with a deep sense of gratitude that I begin to write this message from the co-editors for this special issue of the Learning Communities Journal that describes the Community of Practice (CoP) Initiative at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). Against the background of a research-led liberal arts university, and with the ethos of whole person education (WPE) being the University’s focus since its inception in 1956, the establishment of CoPs to enhance teaching and learning may not be considered as a major endeavor. After all, quality teaching and learning is the bread and butter of any liberal arts institutions worthy of this label. Yet the emphasis and reward for, as well as the pressure exerted on, faculty members to excel in research can, at times, make teaching and learning innovations seem to take second priority. Notwithstanding, the CoP Initiative at HKBU has brought about some important changes to the culture at HKBU that enhance its teaching and learning practices.

First and foremost, teaching and learning are no longer an individual endeavor with no one knowing what happens behind the closed door of a classroom. Important CoP concepts of faculty members sharing experience and cross-disciplinary collaboration to solve common issues for the enhancement of student learning are fully embraced and practised by all members of the various CoPs. Secondly, the notion and process of collecting data and evidence to ascertain whether and why some pedagogies are beneficial while other teaching innovations are less effective become standard practices in CoP-initiated activities. With the data and evidence collected, not only can members of the CoPs review and study their results for further enhancement, but also these results can then be shared within and outside of HKBU, making the scholarship of teaching and learning more apparent, extending the reach and benefits of the CoPs beyond that of participating members only. Putting it simply, the CoP Initiative at HKBU has assisted HKBU to develop positively in the direction of a research-led liberal arts university.
Making any new initiatives successful in organizations is not without its fair share of hard work and woes, and the initiative to set up CoPs at HKBU to enhance teaching and learning is no exception. To begin with, back in 2012 the concepts of CoPs were totally new, not just to HKBU, but to the entire higher education sector in Hong Kong. Of course, generous support from our funding agency, the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong, and from our University in the form of seed and matching funds, were great encouragement. But having the funding is one thing, and making faculty members interested enough to apply for the funding and carry out the work as stipulated in their proposals is quite a different matter. In this case, we are most fortunate, and I am deeply gratified, that we were able to engage a most knowledgeable and expert CoP consultant, Dr. Milton Cox, and to gather a group of dedicated and innovative teachers to form CoPs to engage their interests.

Dr. Cox is our mentor and partner in the entire CoP Initiative. Apart from providing guidance and advice, Dr. Cox has worked incessantly to ensure the success of our various CoPs and the high standard of the presentations and publications resulting from the CoPs’ activities. In the process, not only have the CoP members gained a lot of valuable experience, but empirical data and results as described in the articles in this issue also assure us that our students have benefitted from this endeavour and are learning more effectively. The coordinators (called “facilitators” in FLC terminology) of the various CoPs are exceptional individuals, exemplary academics who excel in both teaching and research as well as have the necessary leadership skills and qualities to lead other academics to get involved and maintain the good work of their respective CoPs. We have all heard the saying that “it is easier to herd cats than to lead a group of academics,” so we know how talented these CoP coordinators are. Members of the individual CoPs are the most important group of colleagues and are instrumental for the success of the entire Initiative. There is no doubt in my mind that the CoP Initiative would not have survived, let alone continue thriving as it is now, without this group of open-minded, risk-taking, and learning-centered teachers.

There are always risks associated with trying something new. Despite the fact that educational research has been telling us for years that a teacher-centered, “sage on the stage” type of teaching leads to passive learning that is not suitable for students in the 21st century, experimenting with learning-centered pedagogies still may result in negative feedback from students. At the worst, such negativity could be disastrous to an academic career. Hence, these CoP participants are the pioneering teachers making changes in teaching and learning within their respective disciplines for the benefit of their students, and they
are making full use of their respective CoPs for support and guidance. This effort is considered by some as a major paradigm shift at HKBU in opening up the study of teaching and learning to the same scrutiny and academic vigour as any discipline-specific research.

As evidenced by the articles in this issue of the Journal, the CoP Initiative at HKBU has produced some very good results in terms of enhancing teaching and learning. However, the funding provided to support this endeavor is “seed money”; there is no guarantee that the support will continue after the initial funding has been exhausted. While this may be a cause for concern, being an optimist at heart, I have faith that the excellent work started by our CoPs will continue. First, the seeds planted have germinated and are growing into strong plants. The momentum established by the CoPs to share experience and expertise, as well as to collaborate on new ways of teaching, will not, and cannot, be stopped. Once the doors to the classrooms are open, they will not be closed again because faculty members welcome the inputs from, and exchanges with, other colleagues, very much akin to other research activities. Second, the scholarship of teaching and learning is beginning to take hold in various disciplines, which means that finding out how to help students learn more effectively within the various disciplines will be just as important as doing discipline-specific research. This is particularly pertinent in a research-led, liberal arts university like HKBU. Finally, I am convinced that our group of pioneering teachers, our critical friend, Dr. Milton Cox, and my colleagues in the Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning (CHTL) will work tirelessly to ensure that the good work started by the CoPs will continue and expand to benefit more teachers and students as well as further enhance teaching and learning at HKBU.

A brief description of the nine articles in this issue follows.

Wong et al. provide an overview of educational developments in Hong Kong and the resulting CoP Initiative at Hong Kong Baptist University. The authors offer a holistic view of the seven hybrid FLC/CoPs and the dynamics of addressing related start-up opportunities and challenges. The seven Graduate Attributes of the university are described, as well as the 11 scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) papers generated by CoP members and presented at conferences in 2015.

A broad look at Wenger’s perspectives of CoP characteristics, stages of development, and knowledge management is presented by Chaudhuri and Yin. The authors discuss their CoP on student eportfolios and
introduce the model of “networked learning communities” (NLC) that bridge the gap between a community of learners and a community of administrators. The concept of social capital is extended to NLC capital. Evidence to confirm eportfolio outcomes was collected by the CoP from student surveys and from CoP members.

A CoP designed and implemented to study and develop a faculty teaching portfolio framework is reported by Sivan et al. A new structure developed by this CoP featured a dual approach of coordinators and members with distributed leadership developed within a Chinese cultural context, where hierarchy is a preferred social structure and those at the top undertake more duties. Six implications are given for employing academics-based learning community practice in higher education in Hong Kong.

The “Rainbow Team” CoP, named because of the group’s diversity, is described by Cheung et al. This CoP investigated ways that problem-based learning (PBL) enhanced student attainment of the university’s seven Graduate Attributes. Students in 10 CoP members’ courses using various PBL approaches reported pre- and post-self-perceived attainment of the attributes using 17 sub-categories, and student focus groups described specific PBL activities that enabled those achievements.

Lau and Kwong, members of the Rainbow Team CoP, report on their CoP project: piloting and analyzing the results of the Comprehensive Assessment of Team Member Effectiveness Survey to measure students’ teamwork skills in a group project. They summarize key characteristics of effective team-based learning that their CoP members can use to address and develop students’ teamwork skills. The authors identified suitable tools and project designs that instructors could integrate into their courses. This research study adopted a mixed-methods approach that involved quantitative and qualitative data. Related student attainment of the Graduate Attributes is included.

As members of the Rainbow Team CoP, Ng and Lau discuss their CoP project: incorporating peer tutoring into a general English course to consolidate the grammar knowledge of adult learners of English. Included in the project is the degree of student attainment of 17 subcategories of the seven Graduate Attributes as a result of peer tutoring. Students found the peer tutoring experience a positive one in terms of enhancing their disciplinary knowledge, life-long learning skills, problem-solving skills, oral communication, and teamwork. Factors leading to peer tutoring effectiveness are provided.

Mak et al. describe a CoP of 11 science faculty from various departments. The CoP’s focus was to enhance student learning through a
A holistic mentoring program with the major theme of strengthening the communication skills of first-year students via a more structural and systematic mentoring approach. Three major activities were selected and outcomes analyzed: FameLab competition, Science Video Production completion, and TED.com. A mixed-methods approach involved pre- and post-student and mentor surveys and semi-structured individual student interviews. Resulting graduate attribute attainment was also determined.

Zhang et al. report the progress of Whole Person Education in Medical Services, a CoP in the School of Chinese Medicine. This CoP focused on service-learning comprising a series of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities that foster student attainment of the Graduate Attributes. For assessment, CoP members used a questionnaire developed by HKBU: The Whole Person Development Inventory. Two interdisciplinary general education courses were developed and received positive feedback in teaching evaluations. Two service tours have been organized to serve rural locations in China.

A master assessment of the CoP Initiative is presented by Kwong et al. Preliminary findings from CoP members’ self-reported changes indicated that the majority benefited from their participation in CoPs in ways ranging from changes in teaching attitudes to adoption of various teaching, learning, and assessment methods. The Beach and Cox (2009) survey, with minor adaptations, was used. Comparisons are made with findings at U.S. institutions. Almost all of the assessments used by the HKBU CoP participants had means significantly higher than the ones in the U.S. study. Focus group interviews used semi-structured questions based on the categories and results of the quantitative survey.

I began this message from the co-editors by expressing my gratitude to the experience and learning we have gained from this CoP Initiative at HKBU. I would like to end by thanking the following organizations and individuals for their special contribution to the CoP Initiative and/or to this issue. In no specific order, they are as follows:

The University Grants Committee (UGC) of Hong Kong
Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU)
Dr. Milton Cox, Miami University
Professor Franklin Luk, Vice President Academic, HKBU
The CoP Coordinators at HKBU:
Professor S. Y. Cheung, Department of Physical Education
Finally, I would like to dedicate this issue to the memory of a good
friend and mentor, Professor Edmond Ko, who passed away suddenly
on April 20, 2012. It was due to his tremendous contributions to educa-
tion in Hong Kong, and to the UGC publication *Aspirations for the Higher
Education System in Hong Kong: Report of the University Grants Committee*
her2010-rpt.pdf), that the concepts and practices of communities of prac-
tice were introduced to the tertiary sector in Hong Kong. In essence, we are
still benefitting from Professor Ko’s innovative insights in bringing CoPs
to enhance teaching and learning to our University and to Hong Kong.

References

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