Designing and Implementing a Two-Level Community of Practice Project to Develop a Teaching Portfolio Framework

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This study examines the design and implementation of a Community of Practice (CoP) project established by academics at the Hong Kong Baptist University to develop a teaching portfolio framework (TPF). Inquiry into this project drew upon principles of reflective practice that revealed unique features of community structure and
process. These facilitated the achievement of the CoP goal and resulted in its participants’ gains: distributed leadership, scaffolding, and ownership. The inquiry also highlighted the facilitative role of the community’s context and membership in the development of the TPF. These characteristics are discussed in light of existing learning community models, and implications are drawn for best utilization and sustainability of CoPs in higher education.

This article brings together the idea of a teaching portfolio (TP) and the concept of a Community of Practice (CoP) by examining a project conducted at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) to develop a teaching portfolio framework (TPF) through a multidisciplinary academics-based community. The project draws on the principles of a Faculty Learning Community (FLC), which is a distinct type of CoP practiced in higher education (Cox, 2004a). With emphasis on action learning and reflection, FLCs provide an excellent platform for the development of scholarly teaching (Richlin & Cox, 2004), and teaching portfolios are considered a key component of some FLCs in the USA (Cox, 2004a).

Considered the key part of the scholarship of teaching, a TP is a “description of a professor’s major strengths and teaching achievements . . . that collectively suggests the scope and quality of a professor’s teaching performance” (Seldin, Miller, & Seldin, 2010, p. 4). While, in theory, a TP is prepared by the individual instructor alone, it should be prepared in consultation and collaboration with others through deliberation, consultation, and mentoring (Seldin, 1991). One example of this approach has been the department-based TP project undertaken at Miami University to foster portfolio development within the university (Cox, 2003). The Miami initiative was supported by a university-wide FLC that consisted of the facilitators of departmental FLCs. Suggestions were made by that project to provide more generic and cross-disciplinary ways to undertake portfolio development in addition to the department-based approach (Cox, 2003). This article reports on a HKBU project that built upon the above recommendations in establishing an interdisciplinary academics-based community within the Faculty of Social Sciences (SOSC) for the development of a TPF.

About the Project

This project endeavors to (a) develop a multidisciplinary forum for
sharing and documenting teaching and learning practices through the development of a TPF; (b) enhance collaborative reflections on a spectrum of pedagogies for the improvement of teaching and learning; and (c) collaboratively address issues and concerns related to teaching and learning within a range of programs and courses offered by the Faculty.

At the core of the Project lies the establishment of a CoP that consisted of 10 academic staff members from the seven academic departments of SOSC, one person who assisted in the project’s management (a project staff member), and one representative from the University’s teaching development unit. In addition to being multidisciplinary, the CoP was multicultural, as members came from diverse sociocultural and ethnic backgrounds with teaching and work experiences in different cultures. The CoP was led by the SOSC Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching, who has a joint appointment in the Department of Education Studies and was supported by two project officers. All CoP academic members engaged in teaching and shared a passion for teaching. They were motivated to develop a framework for best utilizing the TP.

The article reports on the development of the CoP over a period of more than one year. The project process followed Cambridge, Kaplan, and Suter’s (2005) six phases of a CoP. During this period, the CoP was established, its goals set, and roles and activities defined ("inquire" and "design"). Subsequently, the TPF was developed, piloted, and launched ("prototype" and "launch"). The CoP then moved into the "grow" and "sustain" phases.

As the core CoP activity, members participated in a series of multidisciplinary Forum Meetings held at least once a month. During these meetings, members brainstormed ideas on TPs and shared, reflected on, and documented their teaching and learning practices. They also raised issues and concerns in relation to their pedagogical practices and the surrounding contexts. Continuous reference was made to relevant literature on models and conceptual frameworks of the TP as well as local and international practices.

To best facilitate the development of the CoP, the Project Leader teamed up with three members of the CoP to form the coordinator team. The coordinators met regularly separately from the Forum Meetings to lead, facilitate, advise, and monitor the development of the project and to support team members’ initiatives. These meetings focused on issues raised during the regular Forum Meetings and
suggested ways to address them. These suggestions were then presented to the Forum for deliberation, decisions, and follow-up actions.

The CoP’s aims were supported by three additional activities. First, external consultation with experts in higher education teaching was arranged. Second, e-channels, including e-mail and e-platforms in Blackboard and Dropbox, were established for communication and sharing resources. These channels facilitated members’ communication between regular face-to-face Forum and Coordinator Meetings. Third, small-task groups were established to support the process of developing individual TPs using the TPF framework. Members in these task groups served as “critical friends” by sharing experiences and giving feedback.

The article aims to examine the CoP process as it developed the TPF. Specifically, the objectives are to (a) inquire into the TPF development process through the CoP approach; (b) identify the key milestones and emerging issues in the process of TPF development; and (c) draw implications for employing academics-based learning community practice in higher education. The TPF is now being examined and tested by more colleagues who are using it in the current phase of the project to establish their portfolios. Feedback solicited from colleagues will be used to refine the TPF and will be published and disseminated when the project is complete.

Inquiry Approach

The research methods of a qualitative inquiry into this CoP project drew upon principles of reflective practice that relate to the practitioner’s capacity to think, talk, or write about practice with the intention of reviewing it to find new meanings or perspectives (Gillman & Swain, 2006). In this project, reflective practice was enacted at two levels. The first level relates to the process of “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983), in which practitioners reflect on the outcome of the practice, the means that were used to manipulate the situations and on the reflection-in-action that took place (Tannebaum, Hall, & Deaton, 2013). During the CoP process, the project coordinators actively engaged in reflection-in-action as they constantly reviewed the events and progress to examine how decisions were made and what could be done to enhance the development of the TPF. The second level relates to the process of “reflection-upon-action” (Schön, 1983). It was enacted toward the end of the TPF development, when the Project Leader, one
of the coordinators, and the project staff member formed an inquiry team to examine and reflect on the activities and events that occurred in developing the TPF.

This reflective practice inquiry covered the development of the TPF and built on qualitative data from three sources. The major source consisted of individual interviews, and it was triangulated with the other two sources, namely, focus group interviews and meeting records. Focus group interviews were held with CoP team members halfway through the TPF development to allow for reflection-in-action. The third source of information was derived from records of 17 Coordinator Meetings and 15 Forum Meetings that took place during the first 12-month period. Information gathered was analyzed through an iterative process whereby key themes and issues related to the CoP group process and the development of the TPF were identified. Twelve initial themes were identified through open coding. These initial themes were later refined and combined into an integrated, reflective narrative of the process of developing the TPF through the CoP.

Findings

The inquiry used principles of reflective practice resulting in a narrative highlighting four key features of the teaching portfolio development process supported through the multidisciplinary community. The four key features that came out from the thematic coding—(a) community structure, (b) group processes, (c) gains from participating in the community, and (d) gains from portfolio writing—are presented and elaborated in the following subsections and illustrated by interview extracts.

Community Structure:
Distributed Leadership, Scaffolding, and Ownership

The unique dual structure of the CoP that operated at two levels, Coordinator Meetings and Forum Meetings, was identified as a key component that facilitated the group process. The Coordinator Meetings set general directions for the CoP and proposed options for deliberation at the Forum Meetings. This dual structure allowed the group to make decisions more efficiently and effectively. Coordinator D1 was cognizant of his role:
For example, we have to think about we have to produce a project paper and so on. Or we have to worry about this person or that person.

Members, in general, supported the dual structure because they saw how the coordinators were able to support the CoP members in making progress promptly. Member E remarked,

\[\ldots\] for other general members I think the time constraint is very real that we cannot follow very closely the progress of the project as much as we wish. So the core members' team will be essential, particularly essential in a CoP project like this.

In the interviews, members also appreciated the contributions of Project Leader A in creating an accommodating environment for colleagues to work toward common goals and tasks. Member G remarked, “I really thank Coordinator A and Coordinator B. \ldots\ To have Coordinator A to \ldots get us working together is really good.”

When issues were brought up in the CoP, coordinators would discuss and suggest possible solutions. These solutions were then presented to the members in the Forum Meetings. After getting members’ feedback and comments, coordinators often examined and discussed these inputs before coming up with fine-tuned solutions. This process might be repeated several times until a final decision was made in a Forum Meeting. The emphasis on collective decision making showed how leadership was distributed in the CoP. The iterative decision-making process also revealed the scaffolding role of the coordinators, as illustrated in the reflection of Coordinator B:

I think we have been making use of this [dual] structure to function quite effectively. So, for the coordinators who formed the core team, I think we shouldn't say we are the mastermind but we try to set the general directions, how things will go. \ldots

Through intensive engagement and joint decision making, members believed they deserved the credit and recognition for their contribution to the Project, and they were proud of the TPF as the CoP’s main output. In the interviews, members expressed their sense of ownership in this CoP Project in two ways—the sense of owning the process of the
CoP and the sense of owning the deliverables. Coordinator B remarked,

“I think people see and have a sense of ownership in this project through working together.

Members were proud of the output of the TPF and the guidance notes that the CoP created together, as Member K commented:

“I think we have fruits of our labor now, because we actually came up with a very good framework of a teaching portfolio.

The CoP’s dual structure, marked by distributed leadership and the coordinators’ scaffolding role, were pivotal in instilling members’ sense of ownership of the project and of the deliverables.

The Group Processes: How the CoP Supported Portfolio Writing

The group processes in the CoP facilitated the development of the TPF as well as the preparation of individual teaching portfolios. Four process dimensions were identified through the interviews: mutual goal, team effort, strategic use of small groups, and collegiality.

First, the mutual goal shared among CoP members strengthened individual members’ commitment to teaching and to the use of the teaching portfolio as a tool to showcase their teaching. By engaging in the CoP, teaching that was private in nature was examined with people in the same profession and became shared. Member I pointed out that the CoP had provided a platform to communicate with others:

“And that for me—that is the point of CoP—is meeting after years of years teaching alone, dealing with problems alone, I finally find a set of people sitting around and talking my language.

Second, members felt that team effort in developing the TPF made writing their own teaching portfolios more efficient. Support from project officers also contributed to the teamwork. Coordinator B shared her appreciation of the teamwork:
So it’s not like a single person struggling at least to try to comprehend what TP is, what it comprises, and what it is. So it kind of gave a shortcut so I don’t have to do it all by myself.

The third process dimension is related to the strategic use of small groups. The size of this CoP (12 members) rendered it challenging to have intensive interaction and discussion. Hence, small-group work was introduced at various phases to serve different purposes. In the beginning, extensive and rotating small-group discussion was conducted to draw members’ expertise and experiences to generate ideas for the TPF and give input to TP prototypes. Member K recalled his experience:

And it was just open discussion—I like that as well. Continuously brainstorm as well with different ideas. What works best and what doesn’t work. And then comes to a consensus.

Small-task groups were also formed when members started to write their own TP. Working in task groups of three, members acted as critical friends to provide feedback and comments on others’ portfolio drafts. Most members mentioned that this form of cooperation was their favorite part of their experience in the CoP. Member J said,

I think it’s a very good way to make sure that someone will give you feedback and that you have to read some other’s work. I think it’s very good way to organize our work.

The group process in the CoP was facilitated by a sense of collegiality, the fourth identified CoP dimension. While members came from different academic departments and units, and they barely knew one another before the Project, eventually they found it enjoyable to work together in the harmonious environment of the CoP. This was illustrated by Coordinator D’s remark:

We don’t argue. We work harmoniously, very nice. . . .
When I go to this meeting, I find myself very relaxed.

All members mentioned how interpersonal relationships in the CoP
played a positive role in their participation and involvement. Because of the mutual interest in teaching, as well as friendly interaction among members, they gradually opened up and shared their pedagogical practices and personal concerns.

In summary, members found that the achievement of the Project objectives was facilitated by the above four essential group process dimensions. These dimensions point to the significance of people with shared interests working together and lend support to the CoP model.

**Gains From Participating in the CoP:**

**Reflection, Diversity, and Learning Communities**

Members found their CoP experience beneficial in three ways: reflection on teaching, embracing diversity and individuality, and increased interest in learning communities. Throughout the CoP process, members were involved in reflecting on their teaching at a deep level. Member K identified how participation in the Project had triggered insight on professional development in teaching:

> I think teaching portfolio CoP allowed me to reflect on my own teaching performance, my skills, my knowledge, whatever it may be. And this will really help me in my future career path especially.

Second, the transdisciplinary, multicultural context of this CoP provided members with exposure to a range of academic expertise, experiences, cultural backgrounds, as well as teaching philosophies and practices. Members appreciated this opportunity, and through intensive interaction and in-depth discussion and sharing in the Forum Meetings, they established acceptance and learned from their differences. Member H commented,

> I think another good thing about joining in the meetings is that I can listen to the viewpoints from other colleagues from different disciplines such as social work, sociology. And then I realized that we have different perspectives and different ways to teach.

The small groups for writing TPs were also invaluable in promoting mutual learning. Members mentioned that by sharing portfolios with
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members and receiving feedback, they were exposed to different pedagogical practices and gained from this experience. Member E found exchanges in the small groups very helpful:

What I’ve learned is that many new approaches for teaching for good teaching in terms of in practice what sort of in-class activities we can decide. . . . [H]ow we refine our teaching philosophy and how to put that into practice is an aspect that I’ve learned and other approaches that are different from mine.

In such ways, exposure to diverse pedagogical beliefs and practices helped members affirm their professional teaching values and beliefs.

The third CoP participation gain refers to the increased interest in learning communities. Some members were keen to adapt community approaches to their own work, because they learned a lot from this experience and could see that a CoP was an effective way to work with peers. The experience inspired them to initiate their own learning communities following what they learned from this project. Coordinator D noted,

I’m forming a little learning circle that is also a community of practice for my own research. We form a learning circle research group. I’m also running this along the same kind of model.

In summary, group interaction and sharing involved in the CoP contributed to members’ gains in reflection upon teaching, embracing diversity, as well as increased interest in learning communities.

Gains From Portfolio Writing: Professional Development and Lifelong Learning

The preparation of TPs was a core individual task for each member of this CoP. In the interviews, members indicated that writing the TP had brought about gains in their professional development and lifelong learning. Reflective thinking triggered in CoP group interaction and sharing continued when members started to write their own TPs. They took the opportunity to review their years of teaching experience and started to gain awareness of their teaching styles and methods as well
as of students’ learning needs. As reflection deepened, members examined their own professional values, roles and identities. Coordinator C remarked,

I think by involving in this project, my experience in developing a teaching portfolio not only helps me to think more about my teaching and learning activities in classroom but also it helps enhances my teaching effectiveness too.

Some members indicated in the interviews that writing their TP helped them realize how much they had done in their careers. They developed a sense of achievement, feeling that they had gained something through accomplishing their teaching career goals. Member G, an experienced teacher, felt an affirmation of her professional self:

After I have completed my teaching portfolio, I realized how much I have done over the years in teaching my students and learning from my students. And I’m confident in what I’m doing. . . . Now I think I can raise my head and say, “I did what I’m supposed to do. I pay attention and I do care about how I teach and how students learn.

Through writing the portfolio, members recognized the value of teaching that was sometimes lost amidst heavy pressures for research and publication in higher education. Writing teaching portfolio made them realize the need for teaching improvement. Member F remarked,

I mean I also gained a lot because I normally don’t have time to think about teaching . . . it’s a modest part of our evaluation, and so there is a lot of pressure not to emphasize teaching.

The awareness of improving teaching indicated the pursuit of lifelong learning. Members recognized that teachers are life-learners, and it is important to engage in continuous professional development. Writing a TP was, thus, recognized as an effective way to engage teachers in the process of lifelong learning. As Coordinator A
remarked,

I realize that we are able to continue learning—as I said, we are lifelong learners. This is great because a good teacher in my view must be life-learner, and this is part of our professional development.

Lifelong learning was the thread that ran through the recursive coupling of pedagogical practices and TPs. It showed the importance of TPs in contributing to professional development of teaching in higher education.

**Discussion and Implications**

This article portrayed and examined the formation and development of a learning community established by a group of HKBU academics to develop a TPF. While the process resembles a multidisciplinary topic-based FLC (Cox, 2004a), it revealed six distinctive aspects: driving force, structure, process, outcomes, cultural context, and membership.

The first aspect concerns the driving force of the CoP: the need to develop a TPF. The Project brought together academics from different disciplines who shared the practice of teaching and saw the development of a portfolio as their shared domain of interest. The formation of the CoP and its domain were shaped largely by the growing need for the development of TPs in Hong Kong higher education and, specifically, at the University and Faculty levels. Being part of a task-oriented community, members were involved in a process of collaboration and sharing that established commitment and brought with it personal, social, and professional gains, ranging from feeling supported to learning new skills.

The second aspect has to do with shaping the community structure based on the need to achieve its goal of developing a TPF. The CoP was rather formal and held its meeting on campus. Enjoyment, as a result of social interaction in various non-formal settings off campus, has often been regarded as a significant quality for community development in FLCs (Cox, 2004b). The lack of interaction in informal settings in this CoP did not seem to affect team building and collegiality, however. The process of sharing and reflecting on practices with colleagues from other disciplines was perceived as both enjoyable and insightful, even though it was done within a formal and focused setting. The bonding
established within this formal setting was also attributed to members’ opportunity to discuss something they were passionate about with colleagues who shared the same interest. Such bonding could have overridden the need for interaction through social settings off campus. It was like a “special break” in academics’ mundane and loaded schedules, and the Forum Meetings overcame members’ possible sense of isolation that can exist in higher education.

Another important element of the community structure was its leadership. The CoP was led by an experienced academic who undertook a similar role to an FLC program director (Cox, 2004b). Having the theoretical knowledge of TP and accumulative experience of running another CoP among the Faculty, the Project Leader was able to guide and provide theoretical and practical support to the CoP. The Leader collaborated with the group of coordinators to facilitate and monitor the development of a TPF and support members’ initiatives and activities. This collaborative effort created a dual structure of coordinators and team members. Even though the adoption of such a structure could potentially affect the sense of ownership and create a power struggle, it was found to be efficient in this CoP. During the process of developing the TPF, members looked to the coordinators for their expertise and pedagogical knowledge. In that respect, the leader and the coordinators served an important facilitative function. In the USA, the FLC facilitator often plays a similar role in the process of engaging a learning community in higher education. Such a facilitator needs to set the conditions for community members’ sharing and interaction so that mutual learning will occur (Sandell, Wigley, & Kovalchick, 2004). The dual structure of the CoP not only reinforced its egalitarian process, but also supported those in the coordination role. This model goes hand in hand with the CoP ecology of leadership that moves away from the rigid structure of specific leaders and followers (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Much has been written about the necessary qualities of FLC facilitators (Cox, 2004b) and the ways different universities have prepared FLC facilitators to undertake their roles (Sandell et al., 2004). In many cases, facilitators have coordinated FLCs alone. While the coordinators in this CoP were academics with expertise in education, for most, this was their first experience as active members of a learning community. The coordinators were new to the CoP model and, therefore, novices in developing their own TP, making them equal to other members in terms of experience. This feature facilitated
involvement in joint and collaborative learning among members and coordinators. While the dual structure worked well within the CoP, it is important to note that the coordinators’ role was more demanding and intensive compared to other members’ activities. FLC facilitators are frequently supported by funding and course release, or their contribution is counted as part of their normal course load (Sandell et al., 2004). In this Project, the only support granted was project administration.

The third aspect centers on the community process that involved several forms of grouping and communication. In addition to the regular Forum Meetings, the CoP utilized two more forms, namely, rotating small-group discussions and small-task groups through e-communication. While the rotating group discussions led to members’ being better acquainted at the beginning of the process, the small-task groups operating through e-communication allowed for a more intensive interaction while writing TPs. This removed the need for face-to-face meetings over the summer break. The small-task group interaction was a natural continuation of the regular Forum Meetings, and its success can be attributed to the good rapport established during these forums.

The fourth aspect lies in the CoP outcomes. In addition to the development and dissemination of the TPF, the community process also resulted in successful development of scholarly teaching and contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Richlin & Cox, 2004). During their interactions, members shared their practices and suggested principles for developing a TPF. These were examined in the light of existing frameworks and literature about TPs. Throughout this process, members also reflected on their own practices while making references to these sources. Upon completion of the TPF, members were also engaged in SoTL activities, including developing a video clip for promoting TPs, conducting seminars about the TPF, and conducting research on the CoP process. These, in turn, contributed to their professional development and lifelong learning.

The last two aspects are rooted in the cultural context of the CoP and its membership. The CoP was developed within a Chinese cultural context, where hierarchy is a preferred social structure and those at the top undertake more duties (Pye & Pye, 1993). This explained the role of the coordinators and the respect they gained from members. The Chinese collectivistic culture that cherishes collaboration over competition (Satow & Wang, 1994) also contributed to the smooth development of teamwork in the CoP. At the same time, despite its
development within the specific Chinese context of Hong Kong, the CoP consisted of members from different cultural backgrounds. Even though this characteristic was not explicitly acknowledged in members’ accounts, it may have enriched the members’ learning processes. It would be useful to further examine the effect of cultural diversity in the development of other CoPs. Such examination is of high value, especially in view of the growing advocacy for diversity within learning communities in higher education (Decker Lardner, 2003).

Based on the community experience, several implications can be drawn for employing academics-based learning community practice in higher education in Hong Kong:

1. It is useful to set a specific goal for the community and plan its development toward achieving this goal;
2. The use of a dual structure of coordinators and members with distributed leadership is an efficient way to facilitate and monitor community progress;
3. It is important that the community leader and coordinators have a certain expertise relevant to the community’s goal, and it is beneficial to find ways to support them in undertaking these roles;
4. For more intensive and in-depth collaboration, it is recommended to adopt different forms of sharing such as rotating small-group discussions and small-task groups;
5. In addition, utilization of e-channels for communication in addition to face-to-face meetings could highly facilitate the community’s progress; and
6. A multidisciplinary and multicultural community could be an advantage in terms of shared learning and creation of new knowledge.

The CoP’s experience shed light on important issues related to the development of academics-based learning communities in higher education. Whereas the focus of this community was on the development of a TPF with the intention to enhance teaching and learning, CoPs could be utilized in other academic areas, such as
research and service. For best implementation of CoPs in higher education, there is a need for both internal and external support. The internal support comes from those who join a CoP. This experience taught members that they should have a passion for a shared domain, a desire to bring about changes and improvements to their practices, and a willingness to engage in ongoing sharing and reflection. Externally, for CoPs to be sustainable in higher education, they should be supported with ongoing funding and be recognized for their contribution to the academic fields of knowledge and practice.

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Footnotes

1Alphabetic codes are used to present community members.

References


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http://www.uwec.edu/CETL/bundles/upload/ApproachingDiversityThruLearningCommunities.pdf


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