

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN A POST- PANDEMIC WORLD

A WORK IN PROGRESS

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I INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of people globally has been significant.¹ The higher education sector has not been immune. In the height of the pandemic, abrupt disruption was experienced within the sector as staff and students had to physically disconnect from campuses and many universities had to swiftly adopt new remote teaching methods in order to overcome the restrictions imposed by government. Many academics worked overtime remotely to ensure that their students' academic progress was not adversely impacted or significantly delayed due to the pandemic.

As we begin to slowly emerge into a post-pandemic world, it is evident that the psychological needs of belonging and agency are critical for learning and teaching in higher education, for both students and academics.² Communities of practice provide an opportunity for members to connect, share knowledge and develop practices to enrich their discipline. Being a part of a community of practice builds staff-to-staff relationships (belonging) and improves teaching practice (agency).

The approaches to establishing communities of practice vary between higher education institutions.³ This paper outlines the pilot project undertaken by a Curtin University innovation and scholarship of learning and teaching (iSOLT) project team, comprised of multidisciplinary academics (from the disciplines of Law, Economics, Nursing and Marketing) who are working towards establishing an international community of best practice for assessment rubrics with a focus on building strong staff-to-staff relationships through mentoring, peer-to-peer learning, and interdisciplinary engagement.⁴

II COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Although the core concepts of community of practice have existed for a long time, the term and practice has gained popularity in the higher education sector and literature thanks to the extensive works of Wenger and colleagues.⁵ Wenger defines communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'.⁶ Wenger identifies three key characteristics that are unique to communities of practice:

- **Domain** – participants collectively share an interest and competence with respect to a common 'domain of interest';
- **Community** – through building relationships with each other, participants engage, share and work together in pursuit of furthering the 'domain of interest'; and
- **Practice** – participants are practitioners in the area of shared practice to which the 'domain of interest' relates.⁷

Research indicates that communities of practice improve organisational performance as they 'drive strategy, generate new lines of business, solve problems, promote the spread of best practice, develop people's professional skills, and help companies recruit and retain talent'.⁸ Beyond the tangible benefits, communities of practice also provide a 'mode of belonging' for participants.⁹ Involvement in communities of practice is voluntary and participants tend to join based on interest and commitment to a common cause or goal. Participants see the inherent benefits of being associated with the community and seek to build and exchange ideas, knowledge, and solutions.

In the higher education sector, communities of practice can operate at many levels – for example, they can be fostered at a school, faculty, university, or cross-institutional level either locally, nationally, or internationally. The advancement of technology and the expansion of the internet has meant that communities of practice may reach beyond traditional geographical limitations.¹⁰ Today engagement within these communities can occur face-to-face, virtually or through a hybrid of both.

III COMMUNITY OF BEST PRACTICE FOR ASSESSMENT RUBRICS

A key aim of the pilot project undertaken by the Curtin University iSOLT project team is to establish an international interdisciplinary community of best practice with respect to the development and adoption of assessment rubrics. The team members share a common understanding of the value of assessment rubrics in learning and teaching and the benefit to the student experience, and the need to drive excellence and innovation in assessment rubric design within their respective disciplines and teaching areas. More specifically, the team members see assessment rubrics as a critical instrument for ensuring assessments align with discipline and profession norms,¹¹ and that there is proper scaffolding of unit learning outcomes, course learning outcomes and graduate capabilities to a standard that complies with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and professional

accreditation requirements.¹² Team members also recognise, perhaps most critically, that assessment feedback through the use of rubrics enables students to reflect on their learning and to identify their level of competency for relevant discipline skills and knowledge.¹³

To evaluate how students and academics understand and interact with assessment rubrics, the project team have conducted focus groups with academic staff and students from the disciplines of Law, Economics and Nursing. This research is on-going and will soon extend to Marketing. From the focus groups conducted to date, it is evident that the use of assessment rubrics is prevalent within the Law, Economics and Nursing disciplines at Curtin University, where the policy is that an assessment rubric must be used by markers.¹⁴

As a part of the pilot, the project team seeks to develop generic assessment rubric models for each of the four disciplines informed by research, best practice and qualitative data gathered from the focus groups. Furthermore, it is intended for the assessment rubric models to be developed to align with and satisfy the legal obligations of universities with respect to assuring assessment and student attainment of learning outcomes and the graduate capabilities pursuant to the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (Cth). True to the essence of communities of practice, the project team will share the generic assessment rubric models with members of the broader discipline community for the purpose of information sharing and promoting best practice, but also for feedback and improvement.

In the pursuit of best practice, the project team also seeks to facilitate research and explore additional pedagogical support that academics and students can use with assessment rubrics to fully utilise the direct and indirect benefits associated with the use of rubrics. For example, the team promotes facilitating law students' use of additional support such as assessment exemplars, self-reflection exercises, guided peer-review activities, group discussions, targeted assessment feedback, etc, *in conjunction with* assessment rubrics to provide students with further opportunities to develop their evaluative judgement and reasoning.¹⁵ Drawing on the knowledge and expertise sharing that is characteristic of communities of practice, the project team believes that building on and exploring further additional pedagogical supports within the community of best practice will yield the best results as participants will undoubtedly have varying teaching expertise, experiences and approaches.

The project team intend to expand this community of best practice beyond Curtin University (Perth and Dubai campuses) and to welcome academics from other institutions and disciplines. Participation in this community of best practice will continue virtually, to accommodate international participants from the Curtin campuses in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as other academics around the world.

IV CONCLUSION

The full effects of the pandemic are still unfolding, particularly in the Australian higher education sector. Many academics are having to contend with budgetary restraints and increasing workloads, on the back of a few hard years of working overtime through the height of the pandemic. In these trying times, the psychological needs of belonging and

agency are critical for academics. Engagement in a community of practice is a viable solution to assist academics to feel a sense of belonging and agency, to stay grounded, feel supported and reduce stress, all the while facilitating knowledge sharing and capacity building.

The community of best practice for assessment rubrics was created with the focus of building strong staff-to-staff relationships to facilitate a sense of belonging and camaraderie between colleagues at school, faculty, university and cross-institutional levels. If you are interested in being a part of this virtual international interdisciplinary community of best practice for assessment rubrics, please reach out to one of the authors for further information.

ENDNOTES

- 1: 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health Cannot be Made Light of', World Health Organization (Article, 16 June 2022) <<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-mental-health-cannot-be-made-light-of>>.
- 2: Lydia Woodyatt, 'Five Meaningful Minutes: Small Changes to Support Psychological Needs, Wellbeing & Motivation Online in 2020' (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Webinar, 7 May 2020) <<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/event/webinar-five-meaningful-minutes-lydia-woodyatt/>>; Lydia Woodyatt, 'Mental Wellbeing for Equity Practitioners and University Staff' (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Webinar, 9 July 2021) <<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/lydia-woodyatt-mental-wellbeing-university-staff/>>.
- 3: While some higher education institutions have taken an informal approach to the establishment of communities of practice, others have formalised the process by establishing guidelines. See, eg, 'Guidelines for Establishing Communities of Practice', The University of Notre Dame Australia (Guidelines, 2022) <https://www.notredame.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/4295/Guidelines-for-Establishing-COP.pdf>.
- 4: This project is funded by the Curtin Academy iSOLT Grants Scheme. The Curtin Academy is an active, honorary network of Curtin University staff who, as nominated Curtin Academy Fellows, participate in promoting excellence in learning and teaching at the university. See 'Curtin Academy About Us', Curtin Academy (Web Page, 2022) <<https://www.curtinacademy.com/home>>. Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this research project (HREC number: HRE2021-0649).
- 5: See, eg, Etienne Wenger, 'How We Learn - Communities of Practice - The Social Fabric of a Learning Organization' (1996) 39(4) *Health Forum Journal* 20; Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Etienne Wenger, Richard Arnold McDermott and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Harvard Business Press, 2002).
- 6: Etienne Wenger, 'Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction', *Semantic Scholar* (Article, January–February 2000) <<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Communities-of-practice%3A-A-brief-introduction-Wenger/a93df1e3ae4a54850b1c0ec0a2455059457e31f>> 1.
- 7: Ibid 1–2.
- 8: Etienne Wenger and William Snyder, 'Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier', *Harvard Business Review* (Article, January–February 2000) <<https://hbr.org/2000/01/communities-of-practice-the-organizational-frontier>>.
- 9: Etienne Wenger, 'Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems' (2000) 7(2) *Organization Articles* 225, 227.
- 10: Wenger (n 6) 6.
- 11: See, eg, Sally Kift, Mark Israel and Rachael Field, 'Bachelor of Laws Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Statement' (Standards, December 2010) <https://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/54827/1/altc_standards.pdf>; 'Australian Law School Standards with Guidance Notes', Council of Australian Law Deans (Standards, 30 July 2020) <<https://cald.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Australian-Law-School-Standards-v1.3-30-Jul-2020.pdf>>.
- 12: *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (Cth).
- 13: See Hugh Finn et al, 'Developing the Evaluative Judgement of Law Students through Assessment Rubrics' (2022) 15 *Journal of the Australasian Law Academics Association* 13.
- 14: Curtin University, 'Assessment and Student Progression Manual' (Policy, 2021).
- 15: Ibid.

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