

Communities of Practice: A Mindful Opportunity

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Abstract:

This personal reflection describes a Community of Practice (CoP) that brought together colleagues who shared a passion for mindfulness in teaching and learning and were interested in connecting and enhancing their work through regular gatherings. I share the words of participants that reveal the importance of interpersonal connection, mutual learning, and appreciation of diversity. After providing some background on the formation and context of the CoP, I consider what the CoP has meant to the participants and me and I reflect on the importance of communities in higher education.

Key Words:

Community of Practice, mindfulness, interpersonal, inter-disciplinary, professional development.

Reflection

So much of academic life can be a solo journey. Yet, many of us long for a greater sense of community and connection. A Community of Practice can offer both increased interaction with other people and a useful developmental opportunity in a chosen domain. In fact, a classic definition of a Community of Practice (CoP) is a group "... of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2016) and its essential characteristics are a joint enterprise, engagement in mutual learning, and shared repertoire of resources (Wenger, 1998).

In the fall of 2014, at the University of Alberta, a CoP formed as an expression of the growing interest in mindfulness on campus. Although there are diverse meanings associated with "mindfulness," for our purposes, it entails paying attention in the present moment, on purpose without judgment, with acceptance and compassion (cf. Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Our group was born from those who had attended a session (open to everyone on campus) on mindfulness sponsored by our Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). I had been intrigued by the idea of creating a mindfulness CoP since

attending a workshop (Gross & Gardner, 2014) and discussing how such communities had been created and implemented at other universities. Our original impetus was to explore and share how we were using mindfulness practices in our teaching and there was what seemed like an unspoken desire to pursue practices together for our own well-being. We have gathered bi-weekly and we have evolved to be a community who shares mindfulness exercises, who discusses pedagogical applications of mindfulness, and who supports each other in our own journeys of contemplative and transformational practices. As one colleague, who was a member of the CoP, noted, “Mindfulness practice is about trusting the process. As a community we have also “trusted the process” and allowed the group to develop organically.” Although I initiated the CoP and continue to take on the organizing and communication, I have sought to create a community in which leadership for gatherings and ownership of the CoP is shared.

I often describe my own history as having “wrestled with a meditation practice since 1986.” Coupled with my participation in yoga since 1998, I have watched what felt like fringe undertakings become progressively mainstream. I was delighted to see “the mindful revolution” on the cover of *Time* in February 2014, (Pickert, 2014) feeling like my strange habits were being widely embraced. In that spirit, I wanted to harness the enthusiasm for mindfulness that was shown by the attendance at the CTL workshop. Yet, the wave of interest seemed to become a cultural tidal wave and concerns about the “McMindfulness Craze” (Rubin, 2015) followed not long after. This has been an important backdrop for our CoP as our regular attendees include long-time meditation practitioners and scholars of the ancient traditions that underpin our work. We frequently discuss such things as the growing use of mindfulness “apps” and other ways in which mindfulness has been appropriated.

Many of us seem to share my “two-headedness” in that it is exciting to see more people engaging in beneficial practices, yet there is reason for concern as we witness how the “commercialization of a centuries old Buddhist meditation practice has devolved into slogans that sound as if they were lifted from embroidered wall hangings” (Strozzi-Heckler, 2015). Hence, we are seeking to be inclusive and welcoming in supporting the growth of mindfulness while concomitantly looking for ways to honour and connect people to the richness and history of this phenomenon.

More than anything, the CoP feels to be about connection, support, validation, and togetherness. The implications and manifestations seem to range from the subtle to the sublime. While one professor noted, “the benefit has been connecting with people where I don’t have to feel like I have to explain myself in terms of my background and where I’m coming from in my thinking,” a department chair shared, “I have felt somewhat isolated professionally in the last couple of years. The Community of Practice has reduced this feeling of isolation.” More striking to me, was a colleague who noted that the CoP had given her the support she needed to attend a 10-day silent retreat. She proffered, “I wouldn’t have done that ... there needs to be a critical mass of people saying this is not flaky, go do it.” In general, I believe our learning community served to be effective for reinvigorating faculty, one of the major benefits noted from such groups (Cox & Richlin, 2004).

Another element that has made me value the CoP has been the diversity of membership across disciplines and roles at the University. As one graduate student

noted, “I just think it is helpful to have a place where we all sit together and everyone shares equally. It doesn’t matter what faculty you are from or what kind of tenure you have, or even myself – I’m not on faculty, but I’ve been very welcomed here and I’ve learned a lot through listening to the discussion.” I also note that this student and another member who is a sessional instructor have enormous experience and have been welcomed as leaders in our circle, who have often guided us through practices. In an environment where we are often in silos (cf. Kreber, 2009), it has been wonderful to share with faculty colleagues from Business and Medicine, to Education, Human Ecology, Physical Education and Recreation, Fine Arts, and Theology, as well as graduate students and staff members. We seem to be less separated by rank and discipline and more connected by common humanity. CoPs are one way in which we can create more community and relationship in an otherwise frequently solitary environment.

There is also very practical mutual learning. A colleague who joined the University recently remarked, “what draws me here a fair bit is hearing other peoples’ experiences and how they are trying to promote and teach other groups about mindfulness ... and everyone’s individual process in engaging with mindfulness; I find that very fascinating.” A research staff member said she appreciated that others “can give you pointers about things and create a learning space but in an informal, relaxed atmosphere.” The leader of a student mindfulness group, who joined us, offered that he enjoyed “the opportunity to connect with other mindfulness enthusiasts from all around campus. This expanded my point-of-view and understanding of mindfulness and the extent to which it has made a mark on an array of disciplines.”

We have also shared a “repertoire of resources” including demonstrating varied mindfulness activities; circulating articles, and conference and retreat opportunities; and we have brought books and artefacts, and displayed sundry mindfulness technology “toys.” But, personally, what has brought me to gatherings, even while on sabbatical this year, is the sense of belonging and connection. Whereas most of my academic world seems at least a bit tarnished with undercurrents of competition, posturing, or bureaucracy, the CoP has been an interpersonal haven. In my workshops on teaching, I frequently highlight the importance of human connection between teacher and students and among students. I talk about how we all yearn to connect with other human beings, yet we also dread rejection; we move towards others at a cellular level, but our DNA likely also harbours the fear of being pushed out of the herd, which not long ago could mean your death. What I have seen is my own strong desire for such connection that has gone unfulfilled in many of my professional involvements. Although conversations bring us together, we meet and bond at a deeper level when we sit in silence. There is vulnerability in shedding academic discourse and sharing space.

When I’ve used classroom assessment techniques to understand how students experience mindfulness practices in my courses, I frequently hear how they enjoy the chance to calm down and it does help to foster a sense of community and a positive learning environment in the classroom. I have been able to feel those same benefits of peace, serenity, and being part of something that provides meaning and making a difference. We have shared our passion. We have made friends. We have, through our interactions, become better practitioners. Most of all, we are practicing community.

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