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This study has provided some examples that are transferable for educational development around first year experience, but there are two other areas, which were not discussed significantly in research responses, that I believe are important for future considerations. Firstly, how could we get students involved in staff development to help understanding of FYE and transitions? And secondly, could we, or should we, explore approaches to rewarding lecturers who are supporting FYE and transition? The USA National Resource Center for First Year Experience and Students in Transition has two awards for North Americans committed to FYE: the First Year Student Advocate Award; and the Excellence in Teaching First Year Seminars Award. Perhaps EFYEN should be exploring their own European awards to help motivate individuals and universities to value the role of lecturers, and the educational developers who work with them, in supporting first year experience and students in transition.

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Implementing and evaluating a Communities of Practice model to align diverse learning and teaching styles in a transnational university

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This article reports on a project that was supported by a SEDA Research and Evaluation Small Grant, 2016.

In this article, we report on a project that has explored a Communities of Practice approach to engage academic staff in learning and teaching innovation and improvement in a transnational university in China. The setting was Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), a transnational university whose staff come from all over the world and from highly diverse educational contexts. In addition, and related to having a large cohort of international staff, XJTLU is characterised by high turnover of staff. Furthermore, while around ten per cent of students are international, the majority of XJTLU's student cohort is mainland Chinese, which means they have come from a particular educational background, while at XJTLU they are expected to adjust to a rather different approach to learning and teaching, which

is much more self-directed and active. The aim of this project was to explore ways of effectively aligning diverse learning and teaching styles of both staff and students in a transnational university.

The context: Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

XJTLU is a joint venture between Xi'an Jiaotong University in China, and Liverpool University in the UK. XJTLU, as an English Medium of Instruction (EMI) institution in China, is unique in that it offers a degree which is partly UK-designed and needs to comply with UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requirements, and partly contextualised. As noted, the academic staff at the University are from a wide variety of educational contexts. In terms of learning and teaching, this means that people who come from very different pedagogical backgrounds come together in a higher education institution that strives to be unique, and which needs to strike the right

balance between two educational systems. XJTLU's Academic Enhancement Centre (AEC) occupies a crucial position in achieving this balance. In an effort to achieve a consistent and sustainable impact on learning and teaching across the institution, an attempt was made in early 2016 to implement a Communities of Practice (CoPs) model, and this project has evaluated the implementation of this model.

The aim was to implement seven Communities of Practice across six Faculties (or 'Clusters') and one Language Centre, under the guidance of the AEC's Educational Development team. This approach was chosen because, as a central unit, we wanted to engage with staff at the coalface level, and provide them with a sense of ownership over the implementation of active learning approaches, rather than rely on a top-down regulated approach. Furthermore, it was envisaged that in this process of establishing CoPs, we would identify already existing pockets of informal CoPs around the university.

Why Communities of Practice at XJTLU?

The concept of Communities of Practice has been around since Lave and Wenger (1991) first conceptualised it, and it has been adopted in a variety of higher education contexts (e.g. Viskovic, 2007; McDonald, 2014) as a model for professional development and lifelong learning. Wenger, *et al.* (2002, cited in McDonald *et al.*, 2012, pp. 4-5) define Communities of Practice as 'groups of people who share a concern...and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis...[As they] accumulate knowledge they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. Over time...[they] become a community of practice'. The expectation was that this model would be well suited to the context of XJTLU. Establishing Communities of Practice was expected to firstly develop shared understandings of teaching in a transnational context, and secondly to develop a sense of belonging at XJTLU, thereby potentially increasing the likelihood that staff stay longer at the University.

We explored the role of Communities of Practice in driving the institutional learning and teaching agenda whilst at the same time providing staff with a sense of ownership over that agenda, including the complexities involved in that process, with a specific focus on a transnational and interdisciplinary context in China. Our case study included an analysis of the status of Educational Developers (Huijser *et al.*, 2016), and its impact on their ability to drive learning and teaching strategies via Communities of Practice.

We expect this impact to grow if the Educational Developers are seen as members of a Community of Practice, rather than 'enforcers' of institutional learning and teaching agenda. Similarly, the expectation was that identified, faculty-based, learning and teaching 'champions' would drive the development of Communities of Practice within different faculties, pushing the Educational Developers increasingly towards a background support role, rather than an initial facilitating role. Overall then, the key aim of the implementation of Communities of Practice at XJTLU was to develop a sense of community, identity and belonging.

Implementing and evaluating Communities of Practice

In this project, we measured the impact of this initiative, and collaboration across the institution was a central focus.

We collaborated both with Faculty Heads of Department and with identified learning and teaching 'champions', who were tasked with driving the development of their respective Communities of Practice. To provide an initial impetus for the CoPs idea at XJTLU, to create awareness around it, and to explore potential implementation issues, Etienne Wenger and Beverly Wenger-Trayner were invited to provide the keynote address and a series of workshops during XJTLU's Annual Learning and Teaching Colloquium in April 2016 (for more about their visit, please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/y8rdt3nw>).

For this project, we initially developed, distributed and promoted a survey to all academic staff (around 400 in total), which was carried out in April and May 2016. The survey data was then collated and analysed during June and July 2016. Based on the observation of the rates of establishment of CoPs in different Faculties, we decided to revise our initial plan, and changed the focus groups into individual interviews with CoP 'leaders' instead. We initially expected that all Faculties (Clusters) would establish a Community of Practice, but this proved difficult, so the overall number of CoPs initially established was three rather than seven. Moreover, informal conversations suggested considerable differences in the way CoPs were implemented in different Faculties, and we decided to explore these different iterations on a case by case basis, rather than in a focus group situation, as the latter would have meant that considerable time would need to be spent on explaining individual contexts to each other. The interviews were conducted and recorded during November and December 2016, and the transcription and analysis of the interview data took place in January and February 2017.

Five interviews in total were conducted, and were digitally recorded with the interviewees' consent. The five interviewees were based in three different departments – Chemistry, Environmental Science, and the Language Centre. Each Cluster (Faculty) at XJTLU consists of a number of different Departments. The initial plan was to establish one (interdisciplinary) CoP per Cluster. However, in practice, some Departments preferred to establish their own CoP, and in the case of the Sciences Cluster, there was a combination of Departmental CoPs, which sometimes come together as an overall Cluster-based CoP. For this reason, we decided for this project to focus largely on Departmental CoPs.

The five interviewees included three male and two female teachers, whose teaching experiences at XJTLU varied, ranging from one year to four years. One interview was planned but was ultimately abandoned due to a lack of progress in the establishment of a CoP in that particular Department. It is clear from the numbers that we have been unable, until now, to establish official CoPs across all Faculties, so we have had to adjust our plans to incorporate those Faculties and Departments where CoPs were successfully established, in particular, the Faculty of Sciences and the Language Centre. Anecdotally, and more informally, we did identify other Departments where various models of CoPs were established, for example the Department of Urban Planning and pockets of the International Business School Suzhou (or 'Faculty of Business'), but these were not structurally and officially implemented as such, and we (as Educational Developers in the AEC) were not directly involved in them.

Are Communities of Practice useful?

For the survey, we received 122 survey responses (around 30%). The responses were quite positive in terms of the perceived and/or potential 'value' of CoPs. However, there was significant variety in terms of understandings of what CoPs actually are. For those who engage in established CoPs, areas such as 'curriculum design' and 'teaching strategies' were discussed regularly. Interestingly, some respondents objected to the word 'meeting' (as in 'CoP meeting') as being too formal, so there was a perception that the informal nature of CoPs was crucial for them to work. At the same time, a concern was expressed that they could potentially turn into 'moaning meetings' about administrative processes, indicating that they should be carefully managed and facilitated.

The interviews were designed to address three main themes: understandings of CoPs, how specific CoPs were implemented, and perceptions of the roles and effectiveness of CoPs. An additional theme emerged around the difficulties in setting up CoPs at an institutional and departmental level.

Theme 1 – Understandings of CoPs

Broadly speaking, the interviewees' understandings, or their own definitions, of CoPs seemed to be in line with those in the literature, for example:

'A group of people get together regularly to reflect on how things are going, to try to brainstorm, trouble shoot together, to try to figure out solutions, share ideas, what's working, what's not working. So basically, a group of people get together regularly to share ideas, and build each other up, and help make the whole community stronger through that, and it has to be a voluntary community...' (Interview 3)

Some, however, were actually not familiar with the concept:

'Well, something I never really had, no idea what it was, and then it's a term that you see, and then when I looked at it further, it's one of these terms I realise that we do anyway, so...' (Interview 4)

In addition, and interestingly, three interviewees asked why we used CoPs instead of other approaches:

'So what's the intention of the Centre in this?' (Interview 5)

2 – Implementing CoPs in context

Overall, CoPs were implemented in the departments in two ways: formal and informal meetings. Interviewees thought CoPs should be informal rather than formal. On the flip side, however, as Interview 3 noted, initially it was easy for staff to hold CoPs meetings but it became more and more difficult to do so later on, which may be related to the informal nature of such meetings, which become the first to go when workload pressure increases.

There was some variety in formats of CoPs across departments, including a more social approach, such as informal conversations over coffee/lunch and even a beer and pizza, and a more professional approach, e.g. through departmental learning and teaching committee (DLTC) meetings.

In terms of the content of the CoPs meetings, not all the departments set up their meetings to be theme-based, even if one department tried to do so but found it difficult to agree on themes that would be interesting to all. When people did meet up, there was not always a clear distinction between topics about logistical and administrative issues on the one hand, and teaching practice on the other. Moreover, for many academics the discussions were often about research issues rather than teaching practice. Interestingly, interviewees (or perhaps academics at XJTLU in general) were not clear on where to seek support for their discipline/academic learning and teaching practice outside of the CoPs meetings.

Theme 3 – Role and effectiveness of CoPs

Not all of the interviewees were clear about the advantageous roles a CoP played in their work and departments. For example, one interviewee did not seem convinced about the benefits he may have gained from his Faculty-based CoP until he was asked that question explicitly:

Interviewer: *'Are there any visible benefits that you or somebody else gets from the Community of Practice?'*
Interview 5: *'They got free food that day...the only thing I can see is that people from different departments can recognise each other, perhaps they are in the same building, like Biology and Chemistry, they might not know each other. We now recognise more faces. Perhaps people might be interested in talking about other things, but you didn't know before. I mean, basically you are immersed in your own work. I mean, the momentum has been gained, and perhaps people now...at least this is on the radar.'*

Thus, networking and gaining momentum are two main benefits that Interview 5 observed. In addition, Interview 3 felt that professional development was actually greatly supported by the University, and CoPs helped him to see his professional foci more clearly.

However, not all the interviewees considered the CoPs in their departments as 'successful' for complex reasons. For example:

'I don't feel great about it. I think I'm a part of many communities of practice. I don't feel the XXXX one has been successful due to several issues. One is just the general mind-set about what Communities of Practice are supposed to be per se and what professional development is, and so these things seem to be constantly clashing.' (Interview 2)

This was a different (if not fully contradictory) view from a fellow interviewee in the same Faculty. The interviewees touched upon many challenges throughout their interviews, for example:

- It was difficult for keen people to get support from the institute, i.e. the institutional/departmental leaders
- Management issues
- Heavy workload prevented academics from holding regular CoPs meetings
- Lack of communications between colleagues
- Planning of format and structure of CoPs.

As noted, one additional theme that most interviewees mentioned was that it was perceived to be hard to get CoPs

running efficiently at the institutional and departmental level, despite individual enthusiasm for it.

Project implications, conclusions, and suggestions

The project created some momentum around the idea of meeting in a relatively informal way to discuss learning and teaching-related issues. This can lead not only to peer support that was previously untapped, but it can also lead to collaborations between peers (and in some cases Educational Developers) on learning and teaching-related scholarship projects. Furthermore, while AEC-based Educational Developers were initially invited to help set up the CoPs, and to provide logistical and conceptual support, some of these CoPs became self-sustaining and independent very quickly after being established, which in our opinion is a positive development.

The key challenge has been to implement CoPs consistently across the whole institution, and then to keep them functioning in a sustainable manner. This relates to a number of factors, including support and buy-in (or lack thereof) from Heads of Department. In those Departments where CoPs were successfully established, the Heads of Department were both supportive and actively involved. In other Departments where this was not the case, identified 'champions' struggled to get a CoP off the ground, and in some cases failed altogether.

Ironically, high staff turnover rates, which were one of the things that we hoped CoPs would diminish (through developing a community and sense of belonging), were also a factor that often got in the way of building momentum. In other words, once some of the enthusiastic staff members leave the institution, it is often a challenge to find someone who will assume their role.

Some suggestions for future implementation and sustainability at XJTLU include the following:

- Treat CoPs as one element of a suite of professional development opportunities that include a structured workshop programme, the CPS programme, the Learning and Teaching Colloquium, etc.

- Reinforce and increase high-level support for CoPs (including resourcing)
- Locate new pockets of functioning CoPs and offer support and create visibility of their achievements
- Involve current 'champions' and CoPs 'leaders' in planning and events, such as the Learning and Teaching Colloquium
- Consider Wenger's Evaluation Framework to reinforce and make explicit the added value of CoPs, which in turn can help build momentum and help to gather support from senior administrators (accessible at: <http://wenger-trayner.com/resources/publications/evaluation-framework/>)
- Introduce and advocate the CoPs model and our experience of implementing it in the Induction Week in each new semester to new staff and/or students.

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What role for educational developers in sharing learning about exemplary educational practices from teaching award schemes?

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Teaching excellence award schemes are widespread in Higher Education as a mechanism to identify and reward

effective and exemplary teaching practices. Land and Gordon (2015) undertook a piece of desktop research

on behalf of the Higher Education Academy to explore initiatives and strategies for fostering, recognising