

Beyond the Lone Island: Leveraging Communities of Practice for Faculty Growth and Scholarly Success

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As former K-12 practitioners, we have seen the dynamic shift from teachers being on lone islands in their building, departments or districts, to working in grade-level teams and learning communities (Glickman et al., 2017). This transformative shift did not happen overnight, rather it took time, vision, intentionality, common planning time, and a need for improvement. As we transitioned out of our roles in K-12, we reflected on the collaborative nature of those positions. Drawing on Schlossberg's (1981) model for analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition, we relied on the collegial support systems available in higher education to help us cope with the transition.

Upon transitioning to teacher education faculty at the university level, we expected the same types of collaboration we experienced in K-12. Instead, we discovered we were housed in separate offices, had varying office hours, class schedules, and course loads. As we had experienced initially in our K-12 careers, we returned to our island to teach our course content with a syllabus and possibly a textbook. As Chang (2009) discussed "teaching is often marked by a myopic focus on day-to-day, separation from other adults, and limited opportunities for reflection (p. 193). We, as educators, were trained in writing curriculum, developing lesson plans, implementing instructional strategies, and creating assessments; therefore, we naturally dove into the pedagogical aspect of our jobs. However, teaching was only a portion of our job description. Service and scholarship encompassed the other parts. As K-12 educators, service also came more naturally as we were accustomed to serving on committees, volunteering for school and community events, and supporting our colleagues, students and stakeholders. What did not seem to come as naturally was scholarship. We are practitioners and did not see ourselves as researchers, rather we viewed ourselves as imposters. Imposter syndrome refers to perceived senses of inadequacy and inauthenticity where entrance into, and progression within higher education (HE) were not earned but rather secured by deception. (Clance & Imes, 1978; Addison et al., 2022). The research we did in the K-12 setting was for the direct benefit of our students in the classroom. We rarely discussed our findings in our department, let alone outside of our building; therefore, what could we share with our new colleagues? Upon hire, we did not perceive ourselves as researchers nor experts; we were teachers in a collegiate teaching institution who had the fortitude to write a dissertation and complete a doctoral program. Within our new role, the expectation to research, write, and publish to be on track for tenure and promotion seemed to be a formidable task when setting our scholarship goals within the first month of employment. The immediate instinct was to "fake it until we make it." We surely knew how to research since we completed and defended a dissertation. Naively, we set goals to author a peer-reviewed article

that would be published within the first year. Realistically, we did not even know where to start, and the other demands of the job kept superseding the desire and need to research.

As three faculty members who joined the teacher education department during the same semester, we quickly saw the benefits of onboarding together. We were able to discuss the transition from K-12, our experiences, and our trepidations. Research was one of the many topics we discussed in our first year with our mentors, and they encouraged us to research and write collaboratively. At the end of our first year, we attended a three-day writing camp, sponsored by our university library and hosted by one of the librarians. Belcher recommends, "the best writing is created in community, with a strong sense of audience" (Belcher, 2019, p.20). Collaborative writing allowed us the opportunity to learn together, discuss those trepidations, encourage one another, and hold each other accountable. Under the tutelage of one of our mentors during the camp experience, a research idea was birthed, and our confidence grew. Through this experience, we recognized the need to sustain the synergistic three-day collaborative atmosphere. According to Mooney (2018), "faculty development programs that are designed as one-time sessions do not necessarily create conditions for deep professional learning" (p. 41).

We continued to meet virtually throughout the summer to finish our first project and create goals for the next academic year including collaboratively reading and completing Belcher's (2019) workbook, *How to Write a Journal Article in Twelve Weeks*. Although our first article submission was accepted at the end of the summer, we knew we were still novices and had much to learn and wondered if others in our department would benefit from a Community of Practice (CoP). Wenger et al. (2011) defined CoP as a "learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular domain. They use each other's experience of practice as a learning resource" (p. 9). Moreover, Lenning & Ebbers (1999) expressed specific benefits from CoP's for higher education faculty including: diminished isolation, shared purpose, and a fresh approach to one's discipline. We invited our teaching and leadership faculty to join our CoP, and several joined in the endeavor.

Mooney (2018) found higher education learning communities were "built from the ground up by individuals who sought out colleagues with whom to learn collaboratively about their shared curiosity or conundrum" (p. 40). Most of the faculty stated during the first meeting they were stuck at some point in the scholarship process and wanted a push to the next phase and/or completion. Initially, we did not have a set format or facilitator and thought we could just come together and discuss the book. To our surprise, our colleagues were hesitant to share, and we quickly saw we needed a plan for subsequent meetings. Collectively, we devised a format and added accountability to the process. The group voted to voice weekly goals, to be held accountable, and to be rewarded for their accomplishments at the end of the study. It was evident that faculty needed support and motivation.

Each meeting began with a goal update from the participants, and colleagues were supportive whether or not goals were met. Next, discussions of the ah-ha moments helped the conversation flow as colleagues made connections and validated others' thoughts. We posed questions or wonderings we had, which led to problem-solving as colleagues encouraged one another through challenges. Lastly, individual goals were established for the next week, verbalized to the group, and recorded in the meeting notes. Once the format became more automated, and shared trust was built, the process became more organic. Faculty started lowering guards and allowing their vulnerabilities to be revealed. Agonsua & Prasertphorn (2020) concluded, "The most valuable and the most essential elements in all learning community development are trust, respect, growth mindset, risk-taking, commitment, courage and resilience" (p. 323). The group became increasingly cohesive and felt safe to share successes and challenges.

The following takeaways from these sessions further strengthened our CoP:

- A clear format and set of expectations were important to stay engaged. This structure provided a sense of direction and accountability, reducing uncertainty, and allowing everyone to stay on track.
- Each participant approached scholarly writing with different levels of confidence, emotional responses, and personal strategies. This exchange highlighted the importance of embracing individuality in collaborative academic work.
- A sense of community around scholarly writing and collegial relationships emerged and participants were motivated to persist through difficulties and celebrate progress together, reinforcing the idea that academic writing thrives in a network of mutual encouragement and respect.

Our transition from K–12 classrooms to higher education faculty roles revealed both challenges and opportunities. Initially, isolation and imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) overshadowed our expectations of scholarship; however, through the formation of a CoP, we discovered a powerful approach for academic writing. Our CoP fostered trust, accountability, and shared purpose, shifting our perception from an intimidating requirement into a public and social experience (Belcher, 2019). This practice emphasizes the importance of structured faculty learning communities that go beyond one-time initiatives. With collaboration, educators can diminish isolation, strengthen collective efficacy, and publish academic writing, ultimately benefiting not only faculty but the students and institutions we serve.

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