

THE SUMMER OF THE PIVOT: PRIORITIZING EQUITY IN REMOTE INSTRUCTION THROUGH A MULTIDISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE INITIATIVE AT A CANADIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This article is about the multidisciplinary Community of Practice (CoP) initiative that was implemented in the summer of 2020- summer of the pivot- at a Canadian post-secondary institution to prepare faculty, staff, and students for remote teaching and learning while navigating pandemic conditions created by COVID-19. The CoP as a case study using Critical Theory as a theoretical framework examines the experiences of a collective group of faculty and staff from different disciplines leading a multidisciplinary university-wide initiative and the implications of the approach for promoting effective pedagogies for teaching and learning remotely. Findings based on feedback from workshop attendees, reflections from the CoP facilitators, and comments forwarded to senior administrators about the impact and the effectiveness of the program indicate positive results. It is recommended that although the CoP initiative was originally conceived as a response to the summer of the pivot, it should become an integral approach to promoting dialogue and innovative strategies to advance equitable practices in higher education by cultivating community networks. The findings serve to continue constructive dialogues and discussions about how universities can transition, pivot, and mobilize innovatively and creatively to prioritize equitable teaching and learning conditions that challenge the status quo. This requires a long-term

commitment by higher education institutions to break away from historically normalized practices and invest in innovative ways to identify and meet the needs of various stakeholders.

Keywords: community of practice, remote teaching; COVID-19, mentors; critical pedagogy

Community of Practice (CoP)

Beginning in March 2020, with the rise and spread of COVID-19, in-person classes shifted to remote learning across Canada, including at Wilfrid Laurier University in southern Ontario, Canada. Educational institutions at all levels began exploring how to pivot and transition their policies and practices to support teaching and learning in a remote context. This was uncharted territory with many new challenges (Ali, 2020; Safi et al., 2020; Toquero, 2021). Educational institutions adapted to remote learning to continue teaching and learning using platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Equity, inclusion, and access to technology were important topics receiving extensive attention as part of navigating teaching and learning challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferdig et al., 2020). Recognizing that the spread of COVID-19 and the potential next waves would likely continue late into 2020 and beyond, Wilfrid Laurier University announced prior to the start of the summer that the majority of Fall semester classes would be offered remotely. Like educators across the country, and indeed, globally, post-secondary institutions faced the challenges of pivoting to remote pedagogical practices which many faculty and staff were unfamiliar with. Hence, the university administration, including the Vice President Academic Council (VPAC), recognized the need to invest in developing faculty, staff, and instructors in effective pedagogies using online platforms to support best practices for teaching and learning remotely. As part of creating new opportunities for training and professional development, the university initiated a university wide Community of Practice (CoP) program which included collaboration between faculty members from across the institution and staff from the Educational Development team within the Teaching and Learning office.

Guiding Inquiry

This article describes the experiences of facilitators involved with the CoP initiative and discusses why the multidisciplinary low-stakes community approach to enacting the program yielded positive results in helping members of the university prepare for remote teaching and learning and to challenge normalized practices in teaching and learning in higher education. The CoP as a case study used Critical Theory as a theoretical framework to examine the experiences of a collective group of faculty and staff from different disciplines leading a multidisciplinary university-wide initiative and the implications of the approach for promoting effective pedagogies for teaching and learning remotely. The processes involved and documented are just as important as the outcomes of the CoP initiative, particularly in the field for the Scholarship of Teaching of Learning (SoTL) which refers to faculty, staff, and students working collaboratively to undertake systematic inquiry about student learning conditions and processes and how to improve it. As Healey et al. (2019) point out:

Because writing for SoTL [The Scholarship of Teaching of Learning] is entangled with how we see ourselves as writers and as scholars of teaching and learning and how we relate to and are perceived by the discourse community, talking about identity formation matters when we talk about writing in this field. Writing is a scholar's way of being in the conversation and making that attempt for the first time or seeking to contribute to the conversation in a different way or to create new conversations is both intellectual and emotional work (p. 33).

As academics from various disciplines, members of the CoP felt there was value in documenting, analysing, and sharing this initiative to better understand experiences of facilitators involved in enacting the program. Also, this would help to identify collective lessons learned for moving forward in promoting equitable use of technology and pedagogies for effective remote teaching and learning. This was important to advance equitable conditions and approaches for teaching and learning both during the pandemic as well as post-pandemic.

This article explores the following questions:

1. What is the experience of a collective group of faculty and staff from different disciplines leading and enacting a CoP initiative at a Canadian university during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did the Faculty Peer Mentors (also referred to as the facilitators) in the CoP adapt to the dynamic evolving conditions of the pandemic as part of the CoP initiative?

Documentation of the CoP experience through regular check-in meetings and sharing of the findings contribute to the research gap about navigating teaching and learning challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically how post-secondary institutions can adapt and mobilize during and after the pandemic to prepare members for large-scale remote teaching using a multidisciplinary CoP approach. The findings discussed are exploratory and in the early stages as higher education institutions continue to navigate remote learning going into 2023 with the rise of new COVID-19 variants and rise in popularity of online course delivery. The findings serve to continue constructive dialogues and discussions about how universities can transition, pivot, and mobilize to break away from historically normalized practices and invest in innovative ways that identify and meet the needs of various stakeholders.

Interpreting the Role of Communities of Practice

At Wilfrid Laurier University, the conceptualization of a Community of Practice (CoP) is informed by Wenger-Trayner's (2015) definition referred to as "[G]roups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and [willing] learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). The goal of CoP is to provide an opportunity and a forum for faculty and staff to come together to discuss issues related to teaching and learning, organized by a series of emerging needs and themes such as student writing, teaching large classes, teaching first year students, effective use of technology, and most recently the shift to remote teaching. An underlying premise of all CoPs is open and honest dialogue that is respectful and non-threatening, in some cases

involving challenging the status quo in higher education, where multiple voices and perspectives are encouraged and honoured.

In CoPs all participants respond to each other in a manner that demonstrates open-mindedness to new ideas and respect for one another, recognizing that community members come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and bring different experiences, philosophies of practice, beliefs, and values to the group. This approach is similar to what bell hooks (2004) coined as a “transgressive learning community” where discomfort is situated as an integral starting point for dialogue and action to initiate new beginnings through spaces of inquiry that are supportive. A critical component of transgressive learning communities is the prioritization of equity and social justice, particularly who is disadvantaged by current normalized practices and in what ways. By extension, the conversations focus on revealing, mitigating, and disrupting oppressive structures, in our context in higher education, with a focus on remote teaching and learning.

Our approach for the implementation of the CoP was similar to what Drane et al. (2019) enacted with their transgressive learning community for underprivileged, underserved, and historically underrepresented graduate students as a response to the limitations experienced by the aforementioned groups within the academy:

These boundaries include what a teacher should look like; what behaviors teachers are allowed to perform in the classroom; what literature teachers should engage in; what good teaching means; and the roles of teaching centers and other spaces of institutional support. Thus, we offer the transgressive learning community as a safe space of transgressive and transformational pedagogical engagement (Drane et al., 2019, p. 107).

Similarly, our CoPs wanted to question normalized practices in teaching and learning in academia and create discussions around what should be prioritized during a pandemic in terms of content and pedagogy, and by extension what should be disrupted, altered, and transformed after the pandemic to serve the needs of all students including those from equity-deserving groups.

Members of a CoP are a social learning network engaged in collaborative problem-solving and knowledge production (Gramsci, 2000; Taylor et al., 2021; Teeter et al., 2011). Our CoP groups were united under the shared goal of improving the quality of remote teaching and learning for the university community and its various stakeholders which aligns with key characteristics of Critical Theory focusing on “redressing oppression and [being] committed to social justice” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 11). In the spirit of open dialogue, collegial discussions were encouraged to invite participants to share their successes, challenges, best practices, questions, ideas, and feedbacks in a positive and constructive manner. Part of this further involved discussing attitudes, strategies, and approaches to challenging policies and practices that have become status quo in higher education but do not serve the best interest of students, faculty, or staff. As Felten (2013) points out, “Learning should be understood broadly to include not only disciplinary knowledge or skill development but also the cultivation of attitudes or habits that connect to learning” (p. 122).

The CoP explored ways in which members made meaning of their role before, during, and after the initiative using interpretative and critical theory as conceptual frameworks (Brown & Strega, 2005; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2007) which value experiential processes, thoughts, and feelings (hooks, 2004; Miller, 2000). The authors adopt Brown and Strega's (2005) definition of Critical Theory described as "theories that view knowledge in social constructionist terms as rooted in subjective experiences and power relations" (p. 68). This social constructionist approach with an emphasis on the connection between subjective experiences and power relations aligns with what Lather (1986) calls "research as praxis" where research inquiry is characterized by "negotiation, reciprocity, and empowerment" (p. 257) to advance equitable outcomes and optimal conditions for teaching and learning. Hence, the authors have written this paper collaboratively and with reciprocity through on-going meetings as a community of learners to support and empower each other to constructively express their evolving emotions, feelings, and experiences as they navigated challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members of the CoP became a support group for one another beyond the scope of the CoP initiative guided by love, respect, empathy, and a growth mindset. Members felt empowered to share the learning lessons with others to improve teaching and learning conditions at the university, particularly as a form of advocacy for the needs of equity-deserving groups. This was critical pedagogy in practice where the root causes of unmet needs for various stakeholders were discussed and situated within larger power dynamics embedded in higher education institutional policies and practices. It illuminates the writers' experience of the CoP as a response to the pandemic and the importance of supporting colleagues emotionally and spiritually during the unprecedented transition from in-person to remote teaching and learning, in the process being forced "to confront our own egos and 'the way we've always done it' as instructors and colleagues" (Pope-Ruark et al., 2019, p. 122). The creative process in terms of unfolding of events and the enactment of the CoP on a university-wide level is the heart of the story where the biweekly check-in meetings became a platform to challenge normalized pedagogical practices for instructors and professors. This also shed light on the ways in which trust, love, respect, and empathy through community networks can facilitate empowerment and a growth mindset. Some of our weekly check-in meetings were recorded along with notes taken to further document the big ideas expressed and to use them at later stages to advocate for changes in the university to advance more equitable outcomes through changes in policy or practices.

Our Context

Wilfrid Laurier University is home to 20,000 students across multiple campuses in southern Ontario, Canada. The university has a teaching complement of approximately 500 full-time and more than 350 contract teaching faculty across nine departments. The CoP initiative was designed by the Educational Development Team within the Teaching and Learning Office and approved and funded by the Provost in June 2020. Once approved, a call for nominations and expressions of interest were circulated to departments. Members were confirmed, and after preliminary meetings to discuss the overview of the initiative, each CoP leader was given responsibility for

creating content and facilitating a weekly session through July and August 2020, culminating with a capstone webinar in early September 2020 to align with the start of the Fall term. Facilitators leading the weekly CoP workshops were given the title of Faculty Peer Mentor. Their faculty affiliation and CoP workshop titles were as follows:

- Member from the Faculty of Arts: Creative Approaches to Remote Teaching
- Member from the Faculty of Education: Approaching Assessment in a Remote Environment
- Member from the Faculty of Social Work: Teaching with Inclusion in a Remote Environment
- Member from the Faculty of Music: Building Asynchronous Content for Remote Courses
- Member from the Faculty of Science: Assisting Students to Engage with Data in a Remote Environment
- Member from the Faculty of Science: Approaching Large Class Teaching in a Remote Environment

Members of the CoP appreciated the autonomy provided to share their expertise and lived experiences to plan content for their weekly sessions. The Educational Development Team supported the logistics of content areas and discussion boards and communicated and promoted each CoP. They also supported Faculty Peer Mentors with preparing their culminating capstone webinar. The capstone webinars were recorded and made available through a Remote Teaching Hub on institutional intranet and as a course in the institutional Learning Management System (LMS). Overall, the goal of the CoP initiative was to create opportunities to engage in meaningful constructive dialogues and discussions around remote teaching and preparing for the Fall term through low stakes learning opportunities by promoting alternative approaches and pedagogies that prioritized equity.

Attendance at CoP sessions was open to instructors from all faculties, so each Peer Mentor facilitated sessions that included peers from various backgrounds and disciplines. Each Faculty Peer Mentor was compensated \$5000 for their participation in the initiative. Check-in meetings were held every two weeks between Faculty Peer Mentors and staff from the Educational Development Team to share ideas and resources and to support one another with content for the workshops and arising challenges. Members built collective rapport by sharing critical information about successes and challenges arising from their weekly CoP sessions. Through regular meetings, members took time to listen and learn from each other given each person's unique background and experiences. A community was formulated where members supported one another beyond the realm of the classroom. It became clear that remote planning and teaching had a direct impact on individual health and family circumstances.

While CoPs are not unique in and of themselves (Ferdig et al., 2020), this initiative is significant in a couple of ways. The project was developed as a multidisciplinary collaboration among six faculty members from five faculties, including a combination of full-time, part-time, sessional faculty, and four staff from the Educational Development Team. The Educational Development Team supported the CoPs by managing registration, logistics, organization of the

meetings, and participating in CoPs by providing subject matter support and connecting participants to literature and resources related to best practices. This diverse interdisciplinary collaboration encouraged adaptability and flexibility to address a wide range of needs and concerns preparing for remote teaching and learning such as logistical (class sizes), pedagogical (assessment adjustments), and technological (comfort with new technologies and online platforms) intersecting with themes related to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Preparation

While many universities developed contingency plans for emergency situations to ensure academic continuity (Day, 2015), the pivot towards pandemic teaching brought on by COVID-19 left many faculty apprehensive about how remote courses could provide academic continuity. The CoP preparation was an exercise in emergency academic continuity planning “to maintain appropriate learning environments when conventional face-to-face teaching and learning is impossible” (Day, 2015, p. 76). SoTL pedagogical strategies are effective at helping faculty “prepare for an academic environment of changes and challenges” (Auten & Twigg, 2015, p. 11). Preparation for the CoP initiative put these strategies into practice by asking Faculty Peer Mentors and their session attendees to analyse their teaching and course content and reflect on intentional adjustments and adaptations in the midst of a pandemic to holistically support student learning and well-being with the use remote technologies (Auten & Twigg, 2015; Drane et al., 2019). While the pandemic pivot did not necessarily cause faculty to undergo full redesigns of their courses, it did create conditions where adjustments were to be made to content and pedagogy, which in turn meant rethinking assessments, content, engagement methods, and learning activities counter to the status quo and business as usual practices. A key methodological strategy for such an adjustment is self-reflection of teaching practices with input from peers (Brookfield, 1997; deBraga et al., 2015). Preparation occurred within this framework, as mentors sought to develop sessions that fostered self-evaluation, growth mindset, and dialogue to develop best practices for the pending pivot.

Preparation broadly involved interrogating what successful remote learning environments might look like and feel, and how to present this material in a format that is accessible, engaging, and supportive. The process of planning content for weekly sessions required faculty to think reflexively about their own practice in the classroom and to seek ways to communicate this effectively to their session attendees. Faculty Peer Mentors had varying amounts of experience with online and remote learning. For instance, only two members mentioned having previous Zoom experience. Some had previous experience building online courses. All began acquiring or increasing their working knowledge of video conferencing platforms.

On top of the technological side of preparation, considerable energy was spent on content preparation. This involved self-teaching and growing as facilitators prior to sharing new learnings and insights with session attendees. Many mentioned seeking current literature on remote learning (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016; Darby & Lang, 2019; Flynn & Kerr, 2020; Nilson & Goodson, 2018) and the aesthetics of how to present information to students in digestible and accessible

chunks (Skop, 2020; Uras, 2019). Blogs from scholars such as Sue Beckingham's *Social Media for Learning* (Beckingham, 2020) were helpful for exploring ways educators can leverage social media platforms in remote learning environments. One member from the Faculty of Science also joined multiple social media groups dedicated to online chemistry instruction. Another member attended a webinar on a new cloud-based statistical platform and read a range of published literature concerning specific difficulties with teaching statistics and data management courses online. A few mentors mentioned reaching out to colleagues to solicit their thoughts about the upcoming semester and pooling together a range of resources to be shared with others.

Since the participants for each CoP and their concerns were not known ahead of time, there was flexibility in content selection and pedagogy within each session to empower the session attendees by addressing their unique concerns and anxieties (hooks, 2003; Lather, 1986, Freire, 1970). This aligned with a key characteristic of critical theory which advocates for practical solutions via critical enlightenment. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2002):

Critical theory analyses competing, power interests between groups and individuals within a society, identifying who gains and who loses in a specific situation. In this context, to seek critical enlightenment is to uncover the winners and losers in particular social arrangements and the process by which such power operates (pp. 90-91).

Focusing on the immediate needs of the participants and the challenges with their course offerings allowed attendees to express their immediate concerns for areas they felt the most anxious about and wanted more support in. Several members of the CoP saw their roles as facilitators who would seek out relevant material for subsequent sessions at the suggestion of those in attendance to help empower them in their decision-making as they prepared for their courses in the Fall semester. While this may have increased the workload for the presenters, as they could not necessarily anticipate where the CoP's curiosity and concerns would lead them from week to week, it ensured that the attendees would be engaged in the subject matter and discussions based on authentic practical needs expressed. The CoP members also recognized that some subjects would be better explored with the assistance of specialists from across the university community and therefore for some of their weekly sessions invited guest contributors.

Discussion: Tale of Two Emerging Communities Internally and Externally

At the beginning of the CoP initiative there were feelings of anxiety among the Faculty Peer Mentors. On top of questions around who is involved with enacting the program, they were discussions about what exactly was expected of them, what kind of workload it would entail, and what level of autonomy offered. They were also anxious over how to deliver their session in a pedagogically sound way that was socio-culturally relevant, responsive, and inclusive in a remote environment. Following the first two sessions, Faculty Peer Mentors expressed a variety of feelings ranging from nervousness and worry to excitement. Feelings of worry related to mentors' concern that topics discussed would not be applicable to all participants who were from diverse disciplines. Others expressed that the first session helped to decrease worry due to robust attendance and active

engagement from attendees who provided helpful feedback to adjust future sessions to meet their needs and course planning challenges. On the other hand, one mentor reported feeling inspired by the richness of the conversations due to the multidisciplinary nature of it. Some reported that these feelings were eased in future sessions once a consistent group of attendees were established in their sessions.

Throughout the various sessions offered by Faculty Peer Mentors, they identified pedagogical shifts, topic relevance and applicability, and technology issues as common challenges with CoP attendees. One mentor reported that pedagogical strategies varied based on the number of attendees in each session. Another mentor reported challenges pertaining to the applicability of the topics. They described concerns that the asynchronous teaching strategies outlined and shared were specific to their discipline and may not have been applicable to other departments. However, they reported feeling “more confident as we moved through the sessions recognizing that my job was to share my knowledge and facilitate community sharing instead of knowing all the answers.”

Technology challenges were slowly overcome as mentors’ familiarity with Zoom increased over the weeks. One mentor shared that they were experimenting with Zoom and its various functionalities during their weekly sessions. For example, breakout rooms in Zoom were used to facilitate discussions involving sessions with large number of attendees whereas more intimate discussions were facilitated for sessions involving smaller number of attendees. By the end of their sessions, they gained increased comfort and confidence in the pedagogical use of Zoom features with support from the staff in the Teaching and Learning Office. Another mentor shared their plan to record all CoP sessions so they could develop a set of summary notes to provide to people who were not able to attend the synchronous sessions. Other mentors chose not to record their weekly sessions to encourage open dialogue and rich discussions amongst the participants, in some cases discussions about how to navigate and challenge inequitable practices upheld by higher education policies and practices, without worrying about being policed or reprimanded for expressing their anger and frustrations.

The level of collegiality within the CoP fostered a collaborative spirit. Members expressed that two communities emerged. The first was the community of attendees within each CoP and the second a community amongst the Faculty Peer Mentors internally as a support group for one another emotionally and pedagogically. Knowledge and resources were co-constructed and shared in a multi-directional manner amongst the group and with the attendees rather than through a linear hierarchical manner (hooks, 2014; Weiner, 2014). Faculty Peer Mentors supported one another by attending each other’s workshops and discussing arising challenges from their on-going sessions. They became closer over the weeks, through their bi-weekly check-in meetings, as they got to know each other better academically, personally, and professionally which provided socio-emotional support while navigating pandemic conditions. This also helped with peer mentors becoming more confident and braver in presenting the content in their weekly sessions. This aligned with the study by Pope-Ruark et al. (2019) focusing on team teaching which emphasized, “When we examine our experience through the lenses of a trust and empathy-based team relationship; equal ownership of teaching and learning; shared power, responsibility, and

accountability; and ongoing critical conversations, we know we have all grown personally and professionally” (p. 132).

Through clear communication, consistent support, and biweekly check-in meetings with each other and the Educational Development team, members grew an affinity for one another, embracing each other’s frustrations, vulnerabilities, lived experiences, resource sharing, and innovative pedagogical strategies. One mentor stated they were pleasantly surprised by the depth of the conversations which transported them to their days as a doctoral student taking seminar courses filled with analytic conversations. Our collective experience was similar to what Drane et al. (2019) experienced as part of their transgressive learning community where, “[M]eetings served as brave spaces for members to discuss issues, situations, and problems unique to our communities” (p. 113). We became an internal community with a passion to advocate for change to support the needs of students, and on a larger scale to advocate for disruption and institutional change within university policies and practices to advance equitable outcomes through sharing within brave spaces (Campbell & Eizadirad, 2022).

The post-secondary pivot from in person instruction to remote teaching has been rewarding in terms of growth experienced by Faculty Peer Mentors and the depth of strategies shared by mentors with colleagues to support their learning, yet also frustrating and challenging as often higher education institutions are resistant or slow to change. Sharing and building new multidisciplinary connections were identified as signs of success. Seeing and talking to other faculty in the midst of a pandemic was “collegial and fun” and every mentor finished their CoPs with the knowledge that they, as educators, were not alone, confirming Lee and Son’s (2015) observation of the value in comparing teaching practices among educators. Beyond the intended goal of sharing best practices, the CoP provided emotional and spiritual support which fostered interpersonal connections amongst the participants which promoted empathy, flexibility, and empowerment (hooks, 2004; Miller, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021).

Overall, the CoP initiative was guided by prioritizing equity, practical solutions, and a growth mindset: acknowledging that the process would not be perfect, leaving room for flexibility, adaptability, and learning from mistakes (Ali, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). As Drane et al. (2019) point out, “learning communities focused on radical pedagogy and identity can/should be flexible rather than fixed” (p. 115). This flexibility allowed Faculty Peer Mentors to feel more confident presenting to their peers from various disciplines, seeing their role not as experts that would share knowledge via lecturing but rather as facilitators utilizing dialogical approaches (Eizadirad, 2019; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2007; Miller, 2000) to help others find their agency and put their strengths to use based on their local needs and circumstances related to their course and discipline.

Emerging Themes: Learning and Growing on the Go

Despite the diversity of CoP topics and different approaches implemented to lead the sessions, common themes emerged across the CoP sessions. There were constant discussions about equity in a remote context. Common examples identified were the disparities in access to technology among the student body, students attending remote classes from different time zones,

equitable online assessment strategies, acknowledgment of the precarious position of contract faculty in expending unpaid labour to pivot to remote learning, how to balance synchronous and asynchronous classes, and un/comfortability with various technological tools and platforms. These themes demonstrated consistent concerns by instructors in higher education about equity and inclusion issues for students and faculty. These are shared and documented via this article to assist in promoting larger discussions of how these topics should be prioritized and addressed by higher education institutions to advance equitable outcomes through changes in post-secondary policies and practices, particularly to meet the needs of students from equity-deserving groups.

Within the CoP communities, many negative emotions were expressed ranging from feeling nervous and anxious to fear of the unknown or technological challenges. Colleagues expressed concerns about the amount of time and energy required to transform courses to remote instruction and assessment while simultaneously learning how to navigate new technologies and platforms. Many concerns identified were rooted in feelings of uneasiness over being forced out of one's comfort zone and having to learn how to use new pedagogical strategies to transform courses from in-person to a remote format in a short span of time, while navigating pandemic conditions personally and professionally. Creativity in an emergency remote environment needed to be infused with a large dose of reality. What was possible technologically? What could be redesigned in a relatively short period of time for remote learning? Ultimately, creativity was not about fancy bells and whistles. Instead, it was about the intent to create brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Eizadirad & Campbell, 2021) in a remote environment that embraced challenges, adaptability, flexibility, and an equitable growth mindset that would lead to deeper and stronger connections between instructors and students. As Drane et al. (2019) emphasize, "By altering the ways in which we think about learning communities, from producing a tangible product to facilitating personal transformations, we can create a model that better serves underprivileged, underserved, and historically underrepresented future faculty" (p. 115). Developing and cultivating caring relationships with students and amongst faculty that prioritized equity in the midst of feelings of discomfort was at the core of this process, which was just as important as content and pedagogy adjustments. This speaks to the importance of centering and implementing critical pedagogy (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Felten, 2013; Freire, 1970; Wismath & Newberry, 2019) which seeks to capture multiple voices rooted in different lived experiences.

Conclusion and Future Areas for Exploration

Many of the tools shared during CoPs not only aided the immediate shift to remote learning, but also impacted the authors' future teaching praxis (Freire, 1970) across multiple settings and modalities, including what needs change at an institutional level to create more optimal conditions for effective teaching and learning. The use of a critical theory framework was instrumental in the insights gained from this CoP initiative as it allowed us to have authentic honest conversations within brave spaces about the intersections of the personal, political, and professional domains involving oppositional discourses in higher education. Central to this inquiry process was a critique of the power relations and processes associated with preparation, administration, and delivery of

courses in ways accepted by the university. We aligned with the works of Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) who emphasize:

[C]ritical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the way that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system. (p. 90)

These disparities in relation to inequities of access to opportunity became even more explicit in the midst of the pandemic as it impacted students, faculty, and staff.

The trial by fire into the world of remote education during a global pandemic resulted in increased comfort levels with implementing numerous technologies and practices, but also led to greater advocacy by Faculty Peer Mentors across multiple disciplines to challenge traditional practices in post-secondary institutions to advance equitable outcomes. How many of us will now host Zoom office hours when we either cannot travel to campus, or in the case of contract faculty, are not furnished with private office spaces from our institutions? How many of us will be more considerate of the needs of international students in our classes due to different time zones or more limited access to support services? Perhaps some of us will continue recording or live streaming lectures for students that cannot be physically present even post pandemic. New pedagogical approaches also include forms of hybrid course delivery where classroom discussions provide options for participation through a digital chat application for shy or differently abled students. There is an increase in the number of faculty that continue to make use of learning management systems to offer asynchronous and synchronous content and assessments. And no doubt the frozen screens, muted microphones, uncontrollable background noises, accidental appearances of family members and pets, and the general stress instructors experience teaching remotely will lead to being more empathetic and flexible towards students in vulnerable or inequitable circumstances. There is great potential to continue the role of Faculty Peer Mentors in different capacities, beyond navigating crisis situations such as the pandemic, to advance equity as relationship-building, both between colleagues and faculty and with students. The objective would be to implement a critical theory paradigm to further continue constructive dialogues and generate innovative ideas rooted in diverse experiences to help universities transition, pivot, and mobilize to improve teaching and learning conditions. This must include breaking away from historically normalized practices that perpetuate systemic inequities and barriers to meet the needs of various stakeholders in higher education more holistically including students, faculty, and staff.

Overall, this article presented the case study of how a university-wide CoP initiative originated, gained approval, and was implemented at a Canadian university using a collaborative, low-stakes approach involving faculty and staff from various disciplines. Members of the CoP became a support group for one another beyond the scope of the CoP initiative guided by a critical theory paradigm and values of love, respect, empathy, and a growth mindset. Members felt empowered to share the learning lessons with others to improve teaching and learning conditions for various stakeholders at the university, particularly as a form of advocacy and activism for the needs of equity-deserving groups. The level of collegiality within the CoP fostered a collaborative

spirit where two types of communities emerged: one was the community of attendees within each CoP session and the second an internal community amongst the Faculty Peer Mentors. Feedback from weekly workshop attendees, reflections and themes shared by the Faculty Peer Mentors throughout bi-weekly check-in meetings, and the comments forwarded to senior administrators about the impact of the program indicate positive results with how the CoP initiative supported faculty, staff, and instructors. This effort was recognized by the university administration in letters of appreciation sent to Faculty Peer Mentors, which was especially important for contract teaching faculty whose contributions predominantly remain underappreciated and undervalued by senior administration. Overall, more funding and research is needed in examining the use of CoPs in higher education involving multidisciplinary teams to gain further insight into long-term impacts of low-stakes professional development initiatives and their effectiveness. To continue building on the success of the CoP initiative, the following areas are outlined for further exploration: inclusion of university staff in CoPs, student-led CoPs, developing hubs to continue exploring equity in education, and prioritizing self-care and collective care of instructors to mitigate burnout. It is recommended that although the CoP initiative was initiated as a response to the summer of the pivot, it should become an integral approach to responding to challenges in higher education by prioritizing the cultivation of community networks through an ethics of care to advance equitable outcomes. At Wilfrid Laurier university, a series of Communities of Practice focusing on specific topics have been initiated as of Fall 2022 focusing on ungrading, pedagogies of care, and inclusive pedagogies in response to the positive results from the original CoP initiative implemented in the midst of a pandemic. Investments in CoP initiatives requires a long-term commitment to finding innovative ways to continue to improve and optimize teaching and learning in higher education.

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