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## THE JOURNEY FROM ISOLATION TO COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

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| Aim/Purpose                       | This paper examines faculty feelings of isolation when teaching in a distance education environment.   |
| Background                        | Faculty who teach in an exclusively online environment often feel isolated, which may lead to decreased cognitive ability, depression, and increased mortality rates. In addition to personal detriments, these issues could negatively impact teaching performance. |
| Methodology                       | Using narrative autoethnography, the authors of this study share their experiences of isolation teaching online and the benefits they felt from joining a Community of Practice (CoP) to help alleviate those symptoms.  |
| Contribution                      | Authors share how helpful their experiences were in adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic.   |
| Findings                          | Results of this study suggest that utilizing the CoP model reduces faculty feelings of isolation and improves teaching performance.  |
| Recommendations for Practitioners | The authors recommend that other faculty consider participating in a CoP, even if they initially feel hesitant.  |
| Keywords                          | isolation, distance education, communities of practice   |

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## BACKGROUND

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At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people struggled with the abrupt transition involved in working from home. Perhaps more significantly, people needed to adapt to the isolation of working from home. To a few of us, this was not a new transition. Long before COVID-19, worldwide shutdowns, and masses of people learning to work remotely, the authors of this paper worked for the same fully online university. In our many years on the same team, we did not see each other or anyone else from our university in a face-to-face setting. Even our video conferencing was rare for us at that time. We all felt isolated from one another and from our university. During 2016 and 2017, our department utilized the Community of Practice (CoP) model to help faculty adapt to significant university and department-wide changes. While this method absolutely helped many of us transition to new expectations and our changing roles, the primary benefit for this team was a reduction in feelings of isolation.

Although we felt initially hesitant to add weekly CoP meetings into our already busy schedules, this team quickly felt the benefits of our group:

- we supported one another through challenges,
- we helped each other become better teachers, and
- we no longer felt isolated from the rest of our university.

In 2020, our previous experiences positioned us to help adapt to distance learning. This article uses narrative autoethnography to share our stories and connect them to the broader world of remote teaching with the hope that others might benefit from our experience and harness CoPs to avoid the feelings of isolation that have been so prevalent since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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Working as an online instructor is appealing because of its flexibility, yet some find it challenging. The instructional form differs significantly from that of conventional higher education teaching, and Major (2015) argues that “faculty are not best prepared or equipped to navigate change successfully” (p. 8). One of the differences between online and traditional education is the prevalent feeling of isolation faculty feel when teaching at a distance.

### *ISOLATION*

Significant challenges are posed to faculty and students in a distance learning environment because they are separated spatially and in time (Liu, 2008). Isolation is a familiar term used among online faculty and students, and it is hard to overlook. Motteram and Forrester (2005) examined the implications of isolation in distance learning and found it can result in: (1) psychological isolation; (2) a sense of loneliness; or (3) disconnectedness. Researchers suggest that physiological (physical and temporal) and psychological responses are two dimensions of isolation in online teaching and learning (Lake, 1999). Physiological isolation is caused when people feel separated by time and space physically; also, we may feel psychological isolation when there is a lack of human contact, interaction, or relationships in teaching and learning (Shin, 2003). Shin (2003) claims that “Psychological distance is more important than physical distance” (p. 69). The lack of physical proximity or the detachment of not being able to share the same office space as an online educator, the physical distance that separates us from our administration team, peers, or students can increase the feeling of isolation. The physical separation can lead to psychological distance, decreasing social distance because the closeness or physical presence is lacking due to the geographical separation (Shin, 2003). Social distance is more important in distance education because it is vital for online educators to have the ability to be perceived as real people. Research suggests that lack of human contact, interaction, and relationships in the online environment are considered psychological isolation (Shin, 2003), disconnecting us from meaningful communication and leading to a looming

sense of isolation and loneliness in the online learning environment (Motteram & Forrester 2005; Rovai, 2002).

Isolation may also contribute to many other health-related issues that impact faculty directly but also impact students and institutions indirectly by reducing faculty effectiveness at work. Social isolation may lead to depression (Ilardi, 2009) and stress (Lerner et al., 2003), both of which are detrimental to well-being (Uchino, 2006). Isolation can also lead to poor choices, which contribute to health problems, such as smoking and a sedentary lifestyle (Theeke, 2010), as well as an increase in health-related issues, such as high blood pressure and low immune functions (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Valtorta et al., 2016). Surprisingly, isolation may also contribute to a shorter life span (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; House, 2001) and even increased suicide rates (O'Connell et al., 2004).

The isolation associated with working online contributes to issues that may indirectly contribute to additional stress. Everything the instructor writes, says, or does in the online classroom has the potential to have a positive or negative influence on students' learning experience, understanding, confidence, and achievement outcomes. Rohfeld and Hiemstra (1995) describe the role of the online instructor as "the responsibility of keeping track, contributing special knowledge and insights, weaving together various discussion threads, and course components, and maintaining group harmony" (p. 95). The instructor today is finding online instruction more than a role of facilitating tasks or lesson plans. Online instructors face a multitude of challenges: social, pedagogical, and technical. Online faculty may be working silently with stress that, combined with daily personal tasks or issues, produces faculty isolation. The isolation associated with working online contributes to issues that may indirectly contribute to additional stress. "When students can see the face of the instructor who is guiding them through a course, they are more likely to trust that professor, and they feel more invested in the course" (Kolowich, 2010, para. 15). Maddix (2013) suggests the best way to gain students' trust and increase satisfaction online is for the instructor to engage actively.

When faculty experience isolation, those feelings could flow downward and affect the students via social presence (Garrison, 2011). Without enough social presence, not only will faculty feel isolated, but students may also be affected as well. "Social presence is defined as the ability of participants in a community to project themselves, socially and emotionally, as real people through a medium of communication" (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). An online teaching presence is essential to establish as an online educator. According to Blignaut and Trollip (2003), "being silent in an online classroom is equivalent to being invisible" (p. 347). Teaching presence is especially vital in online classes to help establish the tone of the class and the overall learning community. Many factors influence success in an online classroom environment, just as many factors can impede students' success. Students who do not feel that they have a positive relationship with the instructor or classmates or do not feel like they are a part of the online learning community may feel isolated. Students who feel the distress of isolation generally experience feelings of loneliness and often feel as if they do not belong to a group or feel separate from other students (Misanchuck & Dueber, 2001). While isolation can be distressing for students, it is often a part of teaching and learning online. Isolation can mix in with mental, physical, and academic stress leading to attrition.

According to Dolan (2011), the isolating environment of teaching online may be due, at least in part, to a lack of communication with colleagues and administration. This poor communication could include inadequate frequency of communication and a lack of depth in communication, both of which can be detrimental to employee satisfaction (Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002). Research also suggests that a correlation exists between communication and organization commitment (Marshall et al., 2007), contributing to low institutional loyalty and high turnover rates. When faculty lack satisfaction in their jobs and lack a commitment to their university, they often leave; however, while they are looking for their next positions, they may not give the same effort and energy they would give if they felt committed to their school/employer. If faculty feelings of isolation are reduced, faculty retention may increase (Fouche, 2006). Reduced employee turnover rates reduce institutional

costs associated with recruiting and training new faculty, a clear institutional benefit, and being taught by experienced faculty is beneficial for students.

### ***COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE***

To combat the negative implications of faculty isolation, some universities turn to Communities of Practice (CoP). When people belong to a community, they feel less isolated (Ravai, 2002), but not all communities fall into the CoP model. CoP groups share an interest that defines their community and regularly interact while building relationships to help learn from one another and develop a shared practice (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The CoP model provides an efficient and supportive method for negotiating significant change and improving teaching practices. It also alleviates the solitude that can be overwhelming for online faculty. This supportive environment can reduce job stress, increase job satisfaction, and reduce employee turnover rates (Tovar et al., 2015), beneficial for all stakeholders involved: faculty, students, and the university.

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In our specific CoP, members identified themselves as online faculty, each of us teaching students how to succeed as online learners, our domain of interest, something we committed to doing and doing well. We met together twice a month and even increased our meetings to once a week when needed to discuss our classrooms, students, changing curriculum, and other work-related challenges. Regular interaction kept us together and kept our practice at the forefront of our minds. It allowed us to avoid the potential pitfall of letting too much time go by without interaction, enabling a community to dissolve. During these meetings, we discussed our shared practice. We shared experiences about teaching in the online classroom. We shared ideas and resources to help and support one another. After we discussed ways to overcome obstacles and become better at what we did, we took that new knowledge back to our classrooms and applied what we learned – our practice. While the initial shared goals of our CoP groups were to support one another as we adapted to department change and become better teachers, we were also pleasantly surprised at the added benefits of increased job satisfaction and no longer feeling isolated.

### **METHOD**

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This team chose narrative autoethnography as a method because this method utilizes personal experiences to examine social issues (Jones et al., 2013). Since facts do not interpret what they might mean or tell us how people feel about them, a narrative provides researchers with a way to find meaning from experiences that might otherwise be missing from our literature (Bochner, 2001). Narrative as a research method utilizes the writing process to reflect on connected events and uncover meaning from people's experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We learn how to talk about our experiences, how to understand them, and hopefully, how to deal with them (Bochner, 1994). Autoethnography combines autobiography and ethnography to understand "cultural perspectives" (Creswell, 2007, p. 123). This type of research blends scholarship and personal reference, weaving academic research with self-narrative (Chang, 2008). It begins with personal accounts of the author or authors (*auto*), then analyzes (*graphy*) those experiences to understand cultural practices (*ethno*) (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography explores a common theme, "connections between personal troubles and public issues" (Denzin, 2014, p. 31). In this case, our collaborative autoethnography explores the personal trouble the three authors experienced teaching

online prior to creating our CoP group in 2015, and the public issue of so many others experiencing the same transition starting in 2020. Using this method allowed us to re-live and re-examine our experiences of feeling isolated when we taught online, but then forced us to examine those experiences in connection with other online faculty.

Each reader interprets a story differently, depending on what that person brings to the story from personal experience. The connection between readers, writer/author, text, and what the text represents exemplifies the key difference between narrative and other research methods (Ellis et al., 2011). Readers actively participate in narrative text; they become a part of the process, so the text is interactive. Readers construct the text (Denzin, 1989), applying what they read, what they learn, and what they feel to their own situations. They find elements of their own lives in the experiences of others and feel connected to those others. In this way, many people can benefit from a single story, each reader uncovering meaning applicable to their own specific circumstances. In this way, the narrative autoethnography may reach a wider audience than offered through traditional methods (Jones et al., 2013).

For this study, each team member wrote about past experiences feeling isolated while working online. After we wrote our experiences, we reflected on them, connected them with existing literature, and compared them to our experiences working together in our CoP groups throughout 2016. We found that our feelings of isolation were significantly reduced by participation in our CoP groups. Not only did our CoP teams help alleviate our sense of isolation, but they also helped us reduce stress, highlight our individual strengths, and improve our teaching. We share our stories here in hopes that they may inspire others feeling isolated to consider a CoP to help feel more connected. Our autoethnographic study became both our method and our text, our process and our product (Ellis et al., 2011)

## **RESULTS: OUR NARRATIVES AND REFLECTIONS**

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In our narrative sections, each team member wrote about past experiences of feeling isolated while working online. After we wrote our experiences, using as much detail as possible to help us remember the situation, we reflected on those experiences. Then we connected them with existing literature and compared them to our experiences working together in our CoP groups from January 2016 through the end of 2017. Our experiences reveal how much our feelings of isolation were reduced by participation in our CoP groups. Not only did our CoP teams help alleviate our sense of isolation, but they also helped us reduce stress, highlight our individual strengths, and improve our teaching.

During these narratives, the italic font will represent interior monologue.

### ***ISOLATED WORK BUT HESITANT TO CHANGE***

#### **Angela 2011: Working in isolation**

The platform we used did not have camera access, so I typed my name into the chat box after logging into my first faculty meeting early, muted my computer, and listened to a bell ring as new people joined. A number at the bottom of my computer screen kept track of how many leaders and participants attended; two leaders and the participant number kept rising to 45, 50, 60, and the number just kept increasing. *Good grief! I work with over sixty other faculty members, and I've never seen any of them!*

The early years of teaching online felt incredibly isolating. I never stopped by the secretary's desk to visit for a few minutes because we were the only people in yet. I never bumped into anyone in the mailroom or the hallways, joined anyone for coffee or lunch, and never walked through campus with a friend every Wednesday because we were both free at the same time. The loss of those seemingly simple interactions left me feeling incredibly disconnected from the rest of my peers.

### **Angela, December 2015: New expectations, a new role**

The dean of my department spent the first 20 minutes of our meeting glossing over upcoming changes to institutional learning outcomes and expected outcomes of the specific courses in our department, in addition to changes in course design, assessments, and grading rubrics, that one of my teams would begin working on soon. “I made the course level changes to align with the new learning outcome changes, but I know that’s a lot of change at once.” *Good grief, this place loves change! Don’t most universities change slowly, gradually?* “To make transitioning to that change easier, I’m hoping that each one of you will step up and lead a new Community of Practice team and start training as a coach/mentor for those groups. Each of your groups will meet with your teams once a week to discuss expectations and challenges meeting those expectations, then work together to support one another through those changes. The leads will then meet with administration biweekly to update us on progress, be our touchpoints with faculty.” Questions were already flying into the chat box, but I closed my eyes and tried to think of puppies. I had not gotten used to the new cameras we used in our meetings but knew I did not have a good poker face.

The university my colleagues and I used to work for functioned much more like a business than a university and had an exhausting habit of frequent and significant change. We often did not enjoy the changes but became adaptable. That adaptability would become indispensable during the COVID epidemic but felt overwhelming in 2015.

### **Miguel, January 2016: Navigating changes**

*Another change, great! It’s been months since we needed to make significant changes, so I guess it’s about time. This change seems like a good idea, though. It might not be too bad. Students might have more learning how to research for a presentation instead of a traditional research paper. Grading presentations might be more fun than grading papers, less tedious, maybe? Our old rubrics don’t really match it anymore though. I wonder how I should handle that. I wonder what everybody else is doing about it.*

Like my colleagues, I used to teach a course that introduced students to online learning and how to succeed during the first year of college. In most cases, this was also their first experience with online learning. In our institution, as with many online universities, there was no face-to-face contact that students and faculty would experience in a traditional teaching and learning environment. In my early years of teaching in this online format, I often felt isolated and alone. Our department met quarterly, and we received guidance from our leadership through email, course reviews, or phone conferences, but I couldn’t run next door and confer with a colleague. For me, that meant feeling isolated and frustrated. Attempting to work around that, I often sent my colleagues email, waited for a response, and then continued the process over a period. This process of messaging back and forth took time and became frustrating. Many times, isolation left me feeling like a lonely fish in a big sea, and sometimes it hindered my teaching. *Did that make me or any other instructor who falls prey to isolation a bad teacher? No, it was an obstacle to overcome.*

### **Donna, January 2016: Not Another meeting!**

*Why me? – I must find a way to put my personal problems aside and focus on my job, attend a funeral, complete the group project for my Ph.D. course by tomorrow, complete an individual presentation for another course, finish writing a grant proposal which I can’t ignore because it’s a part of my fellowship, cook dinner tonight, and deal with the fact that I just ran out of gas and need to wait on AAA to bring me more. Did I mention that running out of gas caused me to miss a very crucial meeting?*

*Wow, grades are due tonight before midnight; a family member just called me to come help them with a personal situation, a close friend would like to borrow money, and I have a CoP meeting tomorrow.*

Thinking back to that one stressful week reminds me of how overwhelmed I felt. There were times when I would procrastinate and avoid writing for my doctoral group project and dissertation

proposal or put off writing for the grant proposal because of work commitments. The last thing I wanted to do was add another weekly meeting to my already packed schedule.

### ***CONNECTIONS: FROM HESITATION TO APPRECIATION***

In our specific CoP, members identify themselves as online faculty, each of us teaching students how to succeed as online learners. It is not just our jobs but our domain of interest, something we are committed to doing and doing well. We met together twice a month to discuss our classrooms, students, changing curriculum, and other work-related challenges. This regular interaction kept us together and kept our practice in the forefront of our minds. It allowed us to avoid the potential pitfall of letting too much time go by without interaction, allowing a community to dissolve. During these meetings, we discussed our shared practice. We shared ideas, resources, and experiences of teaching in the online classroom. We talked through obstacles and supported one another while adapting to the changes we encountered at work. After discussing ways to overcome barriers and become better at what we do, we took that new knowledge back to our classrooms and applied what we learned to our practice. While the initial shared goals of our CoP groups were to support one another as we adapted to department change and became better teachers, we were also pleasantly surprised at the added benefit of no longer feeling isolated.

#### **Angela**

In October of 2015, my mother experienced complications after surgery and spent three weeks in intensive care. We did not want to leave her alone, so my brother, sister, and I took turns staying in the hospital with her. I took the first shift, to be there when the doctors made their morning rounds. I talked with her while waiting for the team to reach her room. The surgeon and other specialists stopped by throughout the morning to examine her stitches and check her responsiveness. Nurses and assistants came in and out of the room to check her heart rate and blood pressure or change her IV. In between medical visits, I would sit in a chair beside the hospital bed and check in on my classes. My heart was not in the work. My heart was stuck in the hospital room with my mother. My brain skimmed over student submissions but only processed part of it. I gave my students cursory responses and minimal feedback, making those horrible weeks some of the most stressful and least productive of my teaching career.

Even though I was not my best, it did not even occur to me to reach out to anyone from work for help. I did not even consider sharing my troubles with anyone from work just to share and connect, to have someone from work know what was going on in my life. I had never interacted with any of them outside of meetings, so I did not know them well enough to trust them with my personal problems. I felt completely isolated from them as if we had nothing to do with one another. This type of social isolation leads to stress (Ruis et al., 2001), and both social isolation and stress can negatively impact performance (Ali & Kohun, 2007). I know my teaching performance was low during that terrible time, but I felt that there was nothing I could do about it. Looking back on that time now, I see that I may have had options, but no options occurred to me then. I felt too overwhelmed and alone to think clearly or see any options. Social isolation negatively impacts an individual's ability to function (Hortulanus et al., 2006), which may help explain my hesitation to reach out to colleagues for help. My hesitation may have been understandable, but the situation was not ideal, not for me, my family, or my students.

That was before my CoP team. Several of my colleagues probably would have offered support back then, even before the CoP teams, but it never occurred to me to reach out and ask for help. We never passed in the hallways or bumped into each other in the mailroom. We did not join each other for lunch or a coffee break. We never even spoke outside of meetings. We weren't friends, so I did not even stop to consider asking any of them for help. Nothing like that will ever need to happen again, not to me and not to my peers.

With my CoP, I felt a definite sense of community support. With them, I would not hesitate to reach out to anyone on my team and ask them to check on my students for me, and I would not hesitate to do the same for any of them. Emergencies may not develop every day, but the knowledge that I had their support helped me feel better about work. I could share small victories and minor stresses with my team, and they would do the same. Our simple act of sharing with one another helped alleviate much of the stress I used to feel about work. I stopped hating my job for taking me away from where I needed. My team and I had each other, and that support lightened the weight of my work responsibilities, reduced my work-related stress, and increased my job satisfaction.

An additional benefit from participation in our CoP teams turned out to be the fountain of teaching experiences shared with one another. When one of us found something difficult in the classroom, we brought our issue to a weekly meeting and shared it with the team. Inevitably, that problem was met by a combination of sympathy and solution. In one of our first meetings, Miguel used a coaching metaphor to talk about guiding and encouraging our students instead of lecturing them. Hearing his metaphors helped me visualize how I could apply the same techniques to my students to encourage critical thinking. That theory may have been hiding in my brain before our meeting, but until I heard his coaching metaphors, I had a hard time imagining how I would put that theory to practice in my classrooms. Observing her classrooms and hearing how Donna communicated with her students helped me understand how I could facilitate student engagement with questioning techniques without coming across as cold and unfeeling, something I had worried about from the onset of our curriculum change. These are only two examples of how much my team helped me, but the impact of collaborating with them is far more reaching than that – they helped me feel less stressed when working, look forward to our meetings and other communication, and appreciate my job more than ever before.

### **Donna**

During the last several years of working from home, I have enjoyed the flexibility in my start time for work. I had always appreciated not having as many time constraints or the days when I did not have to leave the house. Working as an online educator is constantly evolving and can be rewarding and challenging. The beginning of 2016 presented me with a few personal challenges, which caused me to feel overwhelmed and concerned about my ability to keep up with work. I felt stressed out, lonely, and isolated. May of 2016 is when problems hit me the hardest. It seemed as if the challenges were multiplying, and regardless of what I was experiencing on a personal level, I still had a job to perform.

I was scared about what might happen if I shared with someone on my job what I was experiencing. I thought to myself - *Can I trust that others will understand? Will I be able to perform my job according to the organization's standards? What will happen if I can't focus on the new concepts being developed? Who will be there for me?* I am now confident my team will be there for me. After weighing the advantages of community support and the disadvantages of extra meetings in our already busy lives, I could visualize the possible outcomes of the CoP initiatives. I could start to see the benefits of working as a community and then appreciate the value of being able to learn from others. "Communities of practice are voluntary; what makes them successful over time is their ability to generate enough excitement, relevance, and value to attract and engage members" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 1). I felt excited about working with my team, and I know they felt the same.

When our CoP teams began to speak openly to each other about things going on in our personal lives that I began to open up with them about certain things. I worried about my colleagues saying, "Let's stay focused on the weekly topics of CoP!" But the responses I received surprised me. Some of my team members confessed issues similar to my own – personal issues. It was comforting to know I was not alone. I felt the kind of support I had needed during that stressful time. Being a part of the "Magnificent Five," meeting on a bimonthly basis, email or call each team member with a question or when I needed help with an issue was instrumental in helping me overcome my feeling



of isolation. Through this method of being a part of a team, I learned more about their personalities, work habits, and online classroom coping mechanisms. Most importantly, we developed relationships to possibly help talk about personal matters and how we dealt with them. Our relationship and support system strengthened over time. We worked as team members because we felt comfortable talking about our personal lives, which I believe was helpful in me overcoming the feeling of isolation. This feeling of isolation made me feel insecure, and I did not want to reach out for help because I did not want anyone to think that I could not deal with my work obligations or personal life. I did not want my feeling of isolation to come across as a weakness. I had to realize that all my problems were not going to be resolved with the snap of my fingers. Through the time spent in my CoP group, I gained the courage to start asking for help or opinions when needed.

Wenger et al. (2002) defined Communities of Practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion, about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). After months of working in my CoP, I finally understood the benefits that can help me develop a host of skills that are increasingly important as an online educator. Working throughout the year on different projects for our courses allowed me to work with a team, learn from others’ classroom experiences, and gain knowledge from a different point of view. Surprisingly, my CoP team was well structured. We learned from each other, kept an open mind, and recognized that every group member possessed a unique set of strengths, knowledge, skills/abilities, and both classroom and life experiences. These are strong characteristics that are important for the success of ‘Communities of Practice’ (Wenger et al., 2002). As a part of a ‘Community of Practice,’ we all gained experience through our willingness to participate. Wenger (1998) defines participation as a concept that:

refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. Participating in a playground clique or in a work team, for instance, is both a kind of action and a form of belonging. Such participation shapes not only what we do but also who we are and how we interpret what we do (p. 4).

## **Miguel**

Feelings of isolation felt especially pronounced during times of significant change, which used to occur about every two years. With these changes came new texts to use, new material to teach, new assessments to use, and many different approaches to disseminating the information intended for the students. As teachers, we are accustomed to change; however, there are times when the change seems to happen in an instant, and there is no time to transition. As a teacher, I like to be able to go through the new content to know what I am teaching, how to teach it, and to ensure that any foreseen obstacles can be averted. There was no face-to-face contact that we would experience in a traditional teaching and learning setting when online. For me, this had meant feeling isolated and frustrated that I could not run to the next-door classroom and confer with a colleague. What many colleagues would do in the online format is send an email for help, wait for a response, and then continue the process over a period. This process of messaging back and forth for assistance takes time. It can get frustrating, which leads to the feeling and obstacle of isolation, especially for those who like quick action or results to know that they are doing their part of the job correctly.

Using our CoP group to support one another, we observed peer practices and combined our different strategies to help improve student participation in the course. Within the group meetings and observations, we shared how we handled policies, procedures, and teaching tasks within the course. Through the CoP, all of us agreed that there is no formal or truly correct way to teach; however, by being able to share, merge, and create ever-evolving practices, we can effectively engage and produce greater student results. Since we connected as a team and started working together in our CoP, we all became more productive and involved instructors. We each felt more connected to

one another and to our university. Not only did we feel less isolated, but we also became better instructors because of our interaction.

The distance separating online faculty from their universities could potentially hinder faculty loyalty toward management and the institution (Dolan, 2011). Isolation is a feeling and phenomenon that is very real and prevalent amongst online instructors. This isolation could lead to a lack of focus, a sense of unimportance, a depressive state, and many other characteristics. In turn, this could lead to a poor instructor-to-student presence and performance on both ends. As Dolan (2011) states:

It is not uncommon to encounter feelings of frustration in the absence of the social cues that occur in a face-to-face environment. This has an impact on motivation, trust, reciprocity, and ultimately job satisfaction with many remote employees citing plans to leave their jobs or at least expressing a lack of interest in organizational outcomes (p. 67).

Therefore, one must ask, how can isolation be overcome. One practice that seems to be effective and is still yielding preliminary results is the use of a Community of Practice (CoP). Much like team teaching in a traditional setting, online instructors are placed into groups of five or six colleagues. However, in team teaching within a traditional classroom setting, the teachers share the workload and the teaching responsibilities. In the CoP setting, colleagues all teach sections of the same course with the same course content and delivery method. This allows for all in the group to share their positive and negative practices. The groups would meet weekly to share effective practices, observations of a colleague's classroom, and any other thoughts and/or ideas that could help facilitate teaching better than in the past. Dolan (2011) concludes:

regardless of the channels people choose for communicating with one another, that is, via technology or face-to-face, management must create opportunities for all stakeholders to share their ideas regarding the ongoing improvement of the institution's services and reputation. This in turn will provide students with a more positive and fulfilling experience (p. 72).

Dolan (2011) continues to state, "If the school enables faculty to enrich their own academic life and thereby become better teachers by arranging face-to-face meetings, then the sense of loyalty that instructors feel toward their students will presumably extend, by virtue of its intermediary role, to the institution as well." (p.73). Thus, in using CoP, faculty can engage in face to face like settings with the use of tools such as Adobe Connect to help facilitate growth, sharing of ideas, and much more. This, in turn, produces great productivity within the classroom and camaraderie amongst faculty that extends to the students and university alike.

In my specific CoP group, we may have been colleagues, but we also began our meetings as strangers. We had never reached out to share problems, solution strategies, or even commiserate. However, from the first meeting of the group through the following months, the group was able to know one another personally and professionally. They learned valuable teaching strategies from each other, helped each other notice the strengths and weaknesses in teaching methods, and relied on each other for support while undergoing teaching responsibilities. This has led to a better core group of faculty teaching and reaching their students. Students have been more receptive and have shown improvement through their coursework submissions and grades received. The faculty also feels rejuvenated and very much a part of the process of teaching and more importantly a part of the university as a whole.

### ***COVID SHUTDOWN 2020***

By the summer of 2018, all three of us had moved on to different schools, but we all instinctively reached out to one another after the COVID epidemic surged, killing some people and leaving others isolated in their homes.

## Angela

A chime from my computer alerted me to new mail, so I stopped grading and looked at my email screen. “To follow up on the president’s earlier message, I am writing to ask all offices to implement remote work to the extent it is possible.” The email continued, but the primary objective was clear from the start – if possible, to work from home. I sighed and looked away from my computer toward the snow blowing past my window. *Out of the house and teaching in person again for two short years, and now I’m forced back home again.* Even though I had been expecting it, I still felt a little bit disappointed. The previous university where I taught for seven years had been exclusively online, and I had only been working at a traditional university for a year and a half. Although not excited about the return to online teaching, at least I felt prepared to do it this time around, unlike so many of my colleagues. I could already hear grumbling and imagine the stress they must feel, so I started pulling together some of my old resources about distance education best practices and strategies for success to share with them.

## Donna

In March 2020, the pandemic forced higher education institutions to resort to remote learning for the first time in my academic career to ensure continued teaching and learning. As I reflect, I realize that the pandemic impacted everyone in the education community in one way or another: all students were forced to adapt to remote learning, educators were faced with adapting to the increasing demand of taking on other roles in schools, in their profession, and personal lives, administration staff having to work from home to attend online meetings and make decisions regarding education.

Nervousness was starting to settle in, but those feelings only lasted 30 minutes. I do not know why I felt this way; after all, I have years of experience and excellent resources to use. How would I keep myself from feeling isolated or overwhelmed? How would I keep my students from feeling overwhelmed or isolated? Would I have all the help that I need to make this one of the best learning experiences for my students? What would my students make of their online experience? What would I do for students who struggled to make the transition? What did I need to do to ensure my students could grow and succeed?

The intent is not to answer all of those questions, but to share the thoughts that were going through my head and how the pandemic caused so many emotions within me. I shared the questions to show that no matter how many years of experience you have in teaching, you will always look for ways to grow – so there will be questions you will ask yourself. When I first was grouped with my CoP team, I had many questions: would we get along? Would I benefit from working in this group every week? Let me be clear that I recognize that community of practice was one of the best professional development trainings that I received as an educator. I am forever grateful to my former department director for forming this group. Although it was a department-wide initiative, I only shared my thoughts and experiences working within my group.

At first, it seemed to be the perfect fit for me. After all, I taught online full-time for the past eight years and taught face-to-face courses part-time. As much as I promote online learning as a modality, most of my teaching would now be conducted 95 percent via my remote classroom, where I was responsible for making intelligent and informed decisions to support my students. My teaching approaches and styles would now dominate 100 percent. In addition, I was not only responsible for teaching the curriculum, but I also now had to go beyond my responsibilities to address the successes, challenges, and day-to-day support of my students. Immediately, I had to keep my social and well-being in check. That “perfect fit” feeling made me remember the sense of isolation I felt before working in my CoP group during 2015-2016. I immediately had to put myself in my “best-practices” educator mode to avoid slipping back into feeling like I was alone.

Although I no longer work at the same learning institution as my former CoP team members, I still keep in touch with Miguel and Angela. We keep in touch, and little that they know, it’s uplifting when

we email each other. I genuinely know I have a great support system with my CoP team we developed in 2015-2016. I still search for new methods to meet the unforeseen crisis's demand in this uncertainty. The typical happy world of online education came abruptly with the March 2020 lockdown. Like the authors in this article, online educators feel that the awkwardness of isolation can be caused by working exclusively online (Dolan, 2011). While online faculty continue their daily teaching routines to adopt alternatives to online teaching, some faculty are left to feel alone in their pedagogy responsibilities.

Similarly, online faculty may feel less motivated and belong as part of the learning community without the support from other faculty in similar situations. They may also feel as though no one understands their situation. Lack of understanding and isolation can lead to frustration or a withdrawal from special teaching interests and strong relationships they previously appreciated.

### **Miguel**

When I began teaching, I was fortunate to be in a 100 percent asynchronous accredited online university. It was also at a time when many brick-and-mortar schools, kindergarten through 12th grade, and Higher Education were trialing or transitioning to online learning. I had taught in this type of evolving environment for 12 years. I was then allowed to go to a traditional classroom setting. I have been teaching in the traditional classroom setting for the last three years. Much of it is the same in methods, but delivery is far different. That is, until March of 2020.

In March of 2020, the United States and the world succumbed to the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools were closing and transitioning to online learning or a distance style of learning. Many classroom teachers in traditional brick-and-mortar settings, were scrambling to learn how to deliver their lessons. For the conclusion of the 2019-2020 school year, many schools offered education, but it was not mandatory to finish the school year traditionally. Many teachers offered their services to keep “normalcy” for the children, but many were not mandated or required to do so.

For the 2020-2021 school year, most schools had moved to an online or hybrid format of teaching. Teachers were trained to use Zoom and create and design classrooms to be both synchronous and asynchronous. This is now where my story begins again. After teaching online for 12 years, my skills were ready to go into action. I was able to take our Physical Education class, which is a hands-on class, into a fully online hands-off course. I could see physical play as well as noticeable improvement.

I was not stressed about making this transition happen or getting the class ready for the children. I was excited and proud to use my skills from the online learning experience and teach my colleagues how to be successful in the online learning format. I was able to set up our online course pages, clone pages, and incorporate technology more into our class instruction than ever before. The children became little experts in using different modes of technology and creating assignment submissions using various apps and technology. When we transitioned from 100 percent online to a hybrid model, my colleagues and I were then able to see our classes in person and continue to see them online. We set up cameras and monitors in the classroom to see our online students and were able to deliver our traditional lessons to our online learners as well. Using my CoP strategies, online learning experience, and traditional classroom experience was an asset that my school was happy to have.

Having a CoP in online learning and traditional learning settings is vital to education. Educators must be able to have a communication and team-like setting to succeed in their teaching environments. Being able to succeed helps advance our education community as a whole. It also helps in times like a pandemic. Being able to use these different skills for a COP, online learning, and traditional classroom learning has helped not only myself but all my colleagues excel during these difficult and different times. A pandemic is once in a lifetime while teaching and learning last an entire lifetime. Therefore, we must be able to navigate, explore, create, advance, and enhance to succeed and survive.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

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While our team felt extremely pleased with our experiences together, not all CoP teams feel so connected. Studies of what makes some teams more successful than others could offer future CoP teams invaluable guidance about making the most of their practice. A regression analysis of previous CoP participants could reveal some of the specific variables that predict successful outcomes for teams. Additional quality studies should delve further into the experiences of the teams that worked well together and compare them with the experiences of those teams less satisfied with their CoP experiences. A combination of both quantitative and qualitative research could reveal important evidence about what allows some teams to achieve more than others. The results of these studies could provide guidance for future CoP teams to maximize their time together.

## CONCLUSION

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Our findings suggest that teachers across institutions with shared learning methodologies and general teaching principles can be a source of mutual support to help ease the feeling of isolation during teaching exclusively in an online environment. A community of practice is a group of people “who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better” (Wenger, n.d., para. 1). Practically, sharing our experiences of being a part of our CoP helped us feel less isolated at work. This analysis describes how Community of Practices can support teachers coping with departmental change, reduce work-related stress, and support the development of professional communities. For our team, the experience of being a part of our CoP helped us feel less isolated at work, share ideas to help us become better teachers, and develop a greater appreciation for our jobs. We still reach out to one another when we have questions, do voluntary group work, and share research ideas even though we have all moved to new CoP teams, a benefit none of us ever expected. This knowledge revealed a unique, narrative perspective of educators working together and allowed us to look more deeply at additional ways through which teachers can connect to the broader world of remote teaching with the hope that others might benefit from our experience and harness CoPs to avoid the feelings of isolation.

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