Cultivating a Librarians’ Community of Practice: 
A Reflective Case Study

Corinne Laverty and Nasser Saleh

As librarians engage in new and evolving roles, there is a growing need to unite information literacy educators to extend and share their learning about evidence-based teaching. Although liaison librarians are typically assigned to multiple departments and may be dispersed across a campus, they are encouraged to demonstrate their impact on learning. Mechanisms for quality control and accountability, such as the Quality Assurance Framework mandated for higher education in Ontario, Canada, have resulted in a new emphasis on assessment for librarians. The Ontario Council of University Libraries established a formal Quality Assurance Community which developed a template for writing academic reviews and suggests measures for demonstrating the library contribution to student learning outcomes. In support of information literacy development, it is recommended that librarians collect data that measures learning and formally report these findings to academic units as part of the cyclical program review process. While some individuals have tested different approaches to gathering this data, librarians are not necessarily trained in assessment methods, and assessment of information literacy may not be coordinated systematically across a program or a campus.

In response to these challenges, a librarian Teaching & Learning Working Group was formed at an Ontario university of 25,000 students. The original goal for the group was to develop effective information literacy assessment practices to gather data for quality assurance reports. However, regular meetings and conversations gradually evolved into a community of practice. This case study unravels what a community of practice looks like in action and traces its evolution from a task-oriented working group into a knowledge-based community of practice. The most significant enablers of the community are examined and the value of the learning fostered by the community itself is described. This analysis is an
example of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in that its intention is to study an approach to professional development to help librarians improve their own teaching practice in order to enable students’ information literacy development. The purpose of the Teaching & Learning Working Group addresses Ernest Boyer’s original concern regarding teaching scholarship when he proposed that “pedagogical procedures must be carefully planned, continuously examined, and relate directly to the subject taught.” He suggests that educators must be scholars in the realm of their own teaching to ensure that it evolves and transforms in creative new directions. Although librarians at many institutions do not have the opportunity to study student learning in the context of their own courses, they do need to assess what students learn as a result of librarian-led workshops and library instructional materials.

What is a Community of Practice?

The idea that practical knowledge can be transferred through social interaction in settings that relate to the application of that knowledge or practice was first referred to as a “community of practice” (CoP) by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. A CoP is a group of individuals who come together to learn about something and who, through their learning interactions, develop relationships and build a sense of connectedness to one another and to their purpose. Motivation to learn and share is central to the group, and learning may take many forms, such as problem-solving, exchanging and comparing information and stories, seeking the experiences of others, discussing initiatives, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps, and creating tools. This practice offers the library a mechanism for developing scholarly approaches to teaching and as a pathway to invigorating learning and professional development across the organization.

Communities of practice originate from situated learning theory and exemplify a social learning system. Wenger describes how learning takes place on two levels in this system through individual engagement with others in conversation and shared activities and also by means of the co-creation of artifacts which are the expression of personal and collaborative learning. Over time, this synergy between participation and demonstration of learning develops the essence of community as a result of shared competence, belonging, and awareness of purpose. The word “practice” captures this dynamic and living system where meaning is continually and synergistically negotiated. This practice can be further described through the language of situated learning theory. Individual learning in a community is “situated” in that it is shaped by the cultural norms of those who belong to the practice and a symbiotic relationship ensures as the individual is inducted into the community becoming a member who in turn shapes the practice. CoPs are especially well-suited to the library environment where service provision in a changing information landscape calls for situated learning akin to cognitive apprenticeship.

Although a CoP is inherently fluid and constantly evolving, some features directly impact its cultivation and sustainability. Wenger, McDermot, and Snyder propose seven principles for establishing and fostering a CoP.
1. Design for evolution. Communities are organic and function within a central domain but not with specific terms of reference as in a “working group.”

2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives. Bring in ideas from supporting units.

3. Invite different levels of participation. Acknowledge that members will participate in different ways and for various reasons.

4. Develop both public and private community spaces. Connect through meetings, small groups, one-on-one conversations, and online communication and resource sharing.

5. Focus on value. Communities thrive on the value they bring to the members, the group, and the institution, and the nature and worth of that value emerge over time.

6. Combine familiarity and excitement. Create a place where members ask questions and share opinions but are also challenged with divergent thinking and new ideas.

7. Create a rhythm for the community. Establish regular meeting patterns to ensure momentum and vibrancy.

The Teaching and Learning Working Group

The Teaching and Learning Working Group was composed of five core volunteer members. They were given Terms of Reference outlining tasks, including professional development on teaching for librarians. The group adopted a “process approach” (table 27.1) to conceptualize what the librarians needed to know to meet the assessment requirements for quality assurance. Working from the end target of having librarians apply more informed and meaningful approaches to assessment and incorporate assessment evidence into library quality assurance reports, the group identified a set of five sequential learning stages forecasted to achieve the group’s goals (shown in table 27.1 under Process Approach). This orientation toward knowledge-building rather than as task-delivery transpired during ongoing discussions about the requirement for professional development. By framing the task as a learning process and applying a scholarly lens to that process, we inadvertently shifted toward a community of practice framework to accomplish meaningful and sustained learning. We could have simply listed possible PD topics and planned their delivery. Instead, we explored what we knew about how people learn and how we could apply that to our context. Following an inquiry-based model, we asked questions such as:

- How does institutional context reflect the need for scholarly teaching?
- How do we go about applying scholarship to our teaching?
- How can this learning be scaffolded to build skills gradually?
- What type of learning environment best supports this learning?
- How can we sustain learning and support over time?

This exploration enabled us to separate core learning concepts and then sequence how they could be introduced to allow time for personal practice and group interaction. Once
our learning plan was initiated, the collective community of learners began to shape the process through their own collegial interactions and feedback.

Table 27.1. The Process Approach of the Working Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextual Analysis</th>
<th>Theories of Teaching &amp; Learning</th>
<th>Librarian Needs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality Assurance Requirements</td>
<td>• collect evidence • incorporate evidence in reports</td>
<td>• backward design • assessment as learning • student engagement</td>
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**Process Approach**

1. Investigate information literacy needs within departments.
2. Develop information literacy outcomes and curriculum.
3. Map information literacy learning outcomes to program/course curriculum.
4. Assess information literacy outcomes.
5. Develop teaching strategies that support student achievement.

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<tr>
<th>Workshops</th>
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<td><strong>2011</strong></td>
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<td><strong>2014</strong></td>
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<td><strong>2015</strong></td>
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**Intended Outcomes**

Incorporate evidence of student learning in quality assurance reports.
Adopt a backward design approach to planning instruction.
Apply student engagement techniques during instruction.
Gather assessment of learning data during instruction.
As a means of rooting the process in evidence-based methods that support the achievement of student learning goals, we drew on three foundational learning principles. The backward design approach to curriculum prescribes setting desired learning outcomes and alignment with assessment methods prior to choosing learning activities. Use of assessment as learning emphasizes the use of formative feedback to help students develop their own self-assessment skills and gradually develop their learning abilities. Learner engagement through problem-based and interactive activities is also a hallmark of good instruction and constructivist learning. These three principles informed our outcomes for the training program as well as our own delivery of it and they exemplify a scholarly approach to teaching. The intention of scholarly teaching is to change teaching practice by studying and contextualizing the research literature in order to apply ideas in the classroom and ultimately improve student learning. The distinguishing feature of SoTL is the production of scholarship where changes in practice and student learning are systematically studied as educational research. Our learning goal was to introduce scholarly teaching practices and embrace them in our own delivery of content. In retrospect, this goal prompted our first step toward initiating our own authentic SoTL research project.

This process approach was also informed by a Theory of Change model. “A theory of change articulates how a project or initiative is intended to achieve outcomes through actions, while taking into account its context” and can also be used as a project evaluation plan. The elements of the project are illustrated following the components of a theory of change model:

- Analyze the challenge in the present context (contextual analysis).
- Identify outcomes and impacts for the intervention describing how they will address the challenge (intended outcomes).
- Develop a theory outlining how to move from the current state to the desired state (learning theories and process approach enacted with workshops/meetings/supporting resources).

**Participants’ Feedback: Evidence of a Community of Practice in Action**

Our learning program served twenty-two liaison librarians and extended over four years (September 2011 to February 2015) during which time the group hosted twenty-two events driven by an assessment of librarian needs and the direction provided by participants. Average attendance at each event was sixteen people. Guiding members of the Working Group scheduled meetings every two weeks and supported librarian events by developing resources such as ACRL information literacy standards with examples of learning outcomes, a map of IL in all courses across campus, an action plan template for guiding IL instruction, a LibGuide outlining the process approach, and internal how-to documents on teaching (examples of assessment, outcomes, learning materials). These materials were made available on a shared wiki and in the university repository.

During the process approach, feedback forms were collected following sessions that included knowledge sharing and interaction to capture reflections on learning and
support needs going forward. Short-term feedback at meetings was gathered using open-ended questions and long-term feedback on impact was gathered in one-minute papers, summaries from disciplinary library units, and individual action plans.

Twenty-two sessions were offered over forty-one months. Three were practice sessions and three were led by individuals outside the liaison librarian pool, including specialists on accessibility, instructional design, teaching, collection management, and information technology. Feedback was gathered after sixteen face-to-face meetings, which included presentations, discussion, and interactive problem-solving, using three questions:

1. What was the most important thing you learned today?
2. What is one thing you still don't understand?
3. How can the Teaching and Learning Group support your teaching?

The anonymous feedback from question three was analyzed to better understand the enablers and success factors of the growing community of practice. The outcome was eleven categories grouped into four overarching themes that characterized our CoP. For each category, the number of coded comments within that category is indicated.

- **Community building**: 107 comments relating to establishing relationships and learning from one another (categories: create a learning environment (n=44), build knowledge (e.g., provide expertise and content) (n=38), share ideas and experience (e.g., “someone to chat with,” “free-flowing questions”) (n=25))

- **Personal growth**: forty-seven comments relating to individual development (categories: provide opportunities for self-reflection (e.g., comments on personal change) (n=33); provide personal help (n=14))

- **Leadership and organization**: forty-six comments relating to the role of the core group in organizing opportunities to meet and share (categories: organize meetings and workshops (n=28), provide a strategy to achieve learning goals (n=14), advocate for librarians (n=4))

- **Supporting tools**: forty comments relating to creating and sharing resources (categories: create learning materials (e.g., assessment examples, communication toolkit, lists of learning outcomes) (n=18), provide online participatory spaces (n=12), share resources (n=10))

This analysis describes a single community of practice in action. Its most significant enablers were community-building features, opportunities for personal growth, a leadership and organizational infrastructure underpinning the community as an evolving and continuing entity, and provision of a range of supporting tools. These enablers clearly map onto the core characteristics of a CoP and the principles by which it is fostered. These are illustrated in table 27.2. Aspects of community-building that were most remarked on included those relating to facilitating participatory sessions with interactivity, discussion, problem-solving, modeling of real examples in context, with underlying and supportive expertise from others.
Table 27.2. CoP case study enablers mapped against principles for establishing and fostering CoPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles for Establishing and Fostering CoP (Wenger, McDermot, and Snyder, 2002)</th>
<th>Summary of Enablers in CoP Case Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design for evolution</td>
<td>Adopted process approach; organic and flexible; knowledge-driven</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dialogue between inside and outside perspectives</td>
<td>Liaised with supporting colleagues/units external to the group (e.g., accessibility hub, student writing, technology support, instructional design, online learning)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invite different levels of participation</td>
<td>Core group took on a leadership role to organize and sustain; other members adopt roles such as leading workshops, creating tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop public and private community spaces</td>
<td>Regular meetings and workshops, online communication via listserv and resource sharing via a repository (e.g., presentations, guides, teaching ideas, examples, scenarios) and public LibGuide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on value</td>
<td>Community building; authentic learning in shared practice; developing an identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combine familiarity and excitement</td>
<td>Personal growth through reflection; inclusivity and belonging through interaction; enacting change in practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a rhythm for the community</td>
<td>Regular gatherings to share and discuss over four years</td>
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</table>

The community of practice enabled professional development apart from conventional PD scenarios. The learning environment could be described as one of apprenticeship where learning focused on becoming a practitioner rather than learning about practice. Members weren't engaged in acquiring abstract knowledge as isolated individuals using resources that were separated from practice. Instead, learning was fostered by access to the community and its members and the enculturation that resulted from a situated, shared, contextual practice that related to an authentic workplace. The constructivist learning approach within the group triggered divergent views, spontaneous thinking, and proactive innovation and interpretation. Social constructivism further supported learning following Vygotsky's zone of proximal development where collaboration with more experienced or knowledgeable peers further enables problem-solving and enriches learning.

SoTL Project Sparked by Community of Practice

An unintended outcome that was sparked by the community of practice was a SoTL project involving collaborative investigation of librarian assessment practices across twenty-one universities in Ontario. Scholarship on teaching and learning is frequently triggered by intrinsic motivation when practitioners decide to examine challenges in
their own classrooms. Most academic librarians do not have the luxury of developing their teaching during an entire course where student learning can be observed over time. Without sustained opportunities for instruction, there are significant challenges in progressing along the trajectory from good teaching to scholarly approaches originating in the research literature to becoming SoTL researchers in our own right. Social networks can also be transformative in developing a positive institutional culture toward SoTL. Williams describes how a community of practice offers a sustained mechanism for providing expertise and knowledge-sharing that has the potential to bridge micro (individual), meso (departmental), and macro (institutional) levels in postsecondary education.

This last outcome supports the strong correlation outlined in a study measuring the relationship between good teaching and scholarly teaching and between scholarly teaching and SoTL. It also highlights the power of a community learning together. As our community of practice continued to explore an evidence-informed approach to teaching, the group members were motivated to learn about approaches to engaging librarians in learning about assessment across other institutions. The learning environment was conducive to critically reflective practice because it was fluid and self-transforming. In studying how others have investigated their own teaching, it isn’t much of a leap to pose questions about one’s own practice. Had it been slated as a two-hour PD presentation, the transition toward SoTL thinking would have been unlikely. Instead, the escalation of learning prompted questions that became the impetus for a research study.

A provincial survey of fifty-three teaching librarians completed in 2014 helped to inform the group’s approaches to their professional development needs. Analysis of survey results revealed that library staff engaged in teaching have a very wide baseline of pedagogical knowledge and abilities. Many people have not had sufficient training in this area. Every institution addresses information literacy development in different ways and there is no consistent approach to professional development for teaching librarians. With regard to quality assurance, the library is not automatically included in quality assurance processes unless there is a dedicated advocate representing the library voice. This study confirmed the need for professional development in assessment and teaching practices.

Moving Forward

This case study seeks to provide an understanding of how a community evolved from a task-oriented working group into a knowledge-based community of practice. The community was facilitated by group leaders through workshops and social interactions resulting in a learning environment that fostered trust and sharing. These features proved conducive to learner-driven professional development by providing continuing, collegial, and contextually relevant meetings with clear goals for teaching and learning. The emerging CoP included librarians with different levels of experience in different stages of their careers who do not often work directly with one another. The group-driven process also exemplifies the role of SoTL as a professional development area in creating a dynamic knowledge-based professional practice in academic libraries. Our group interactions led us to deeper
questions about our own practice and provoked us to think about how we could actually study it. Without these enduring and rich conversations, we might not have been compelled to initiate a formal SoT project.

This case study confirmed findings in the reviewed literature in that it is entirely possible that a community of practice may form in an organization without its members being fully aware of its formal existence. However, the most significant aspect of the CoP framework is in helping us to understand the essential characteristics of social learning and how they can be applied to the larger concept of developing a learning organization.

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ENDNOTES


20. Ibid., 51–63.


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