

ICED 2020 proceedings:

Towards sustainable transformative, universal and lifelong learning: Emerging regional communities of practice in educational development

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Abstract

Despite increasing calls from different global stakeholders in education for transformative, universal and life-long learning, a shortage of educational developers to drive the above agenda exists in the global South. This article examines the role of technology in enhancing academic practice in an emerging community of practice of educational developers across universities in East Africa. The results of an online survey of 25 multipliers who completed a 6-week asynchronous online course indicate that they found it flexible in terms of time and space. Future-ready educational developers may need to rethink educational development activities conducted in physical settings, with a view to moving the activities online.

1 Introduction

Future-ready graduates need both broad and specialized knowledge (UNESCO Futures of Education; OECD Education, 2030). This implies that students' learning spaces have to expand to locations such as online spaces, the community, businesses, social media, living laboratory and incubation spaces. However, learning spaces for lecturers, especially workshops in physical settings, may be limiting in terms of space and time. Lecturers need to be exposed to other learning spaces to enable them facilitate students' learning in the abovementioned learning spaces. Sutherland (2018) proposes a holistic approach towards academic development to include academic roles such as research service and leadership. This approach may not be possible if lecturers' time to learn how to teach is rigid and their learning spaces are confined to physical settings. In this article I propose that online platforms are likely to be learning spaces for future-ready educational development and future academic developers, especially if development practice has to grow across universities, countries and continents. It may also be appropriate and necessary in the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic, where lecturers have been forced to utilize online platforms for students' learning. I analyze the online experience in enhancing the practice of 25 lecturers from four universities in East Africa – two in Uganda and two in Tanzania – who participated in a 6-week asynchronous online course moderated by academic developers from Kenya and the UK.

2 Learning as practice

Learning as practice is about doing but not just doing in and of itself, but through linking thinking with doing and people with contexts (Boud & Brew, 2013, p.212). According to Wenger (1999,

p.5) practice is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. Wenger further argues that if learning is an integral part of our everyday life and a way of being in the social world, then, to learn, a person has to negotiate and renegotiate meaning through active participation in the world. Wenger explains that negotiation of meaning involves participation and reification. One cannot learn if one does not participate, and learning would not have taken place if there is nothing tangible to show that it took place.

Boud and Brew (2013) advocate viewing learning from a practice perspective which goes beyond acknowledging the importance of activities and agency and focuses attention on the nature of associations connecting people and artefacts. Boud and Brew (2013, p.214) explain that from this perspective learning focuses on “what is done and what needs to be done and not on individuals enacting the doing.” They further emphasize the importance for academics of “changing work demands to drive learning.”

3 Methodology

The methodology used in this article was to analyze the online survey on the participants' experience. 13 out of the 25 participants responded to the following questions: How was your online learning experience? What are the existing plans to cascade the training to colleagues?

I transferred the responses into an MS Word document and read through the responses; reflecting on the meaning of each response. Most of the responses were on the flexibility that the platform provided, the intrinsic motivation for completing the course and the high level of confidence in facilitating the courses.

4 Results

4.1 Online learning experience

The analysis showed that a number of participants found online learning a great learning experience as it provides space and time to practice.

I found the online learning process convenient in terms of planning my time. I also had time to pause and reflect on the feedback as I was not required to respond immediately as I would in a workshop in a physical setting. It was asynchronous and thus enabled me to work at my own pace but complete my tasks within the prescribed deadlines. (P1)

Whereas attendance of a face to face workshop is extrinsically motivated for some participants, comments by participants show that they were intrinsically motivated to learn in the online course.

Although I had to do most of the things on my own like navigating the different features in Moodle, I found it effective and motivating. It pushed me to do more to keep up the pace with others. I had that self-drive to complete this training as it has become increasingly necessary to acquire such skills. (P2)

Some participants found the course interactive and useful for their professional growth. They learned by doing and also from the moderators' feedback.

The online learning process was an interactive one that improved my online skills further with constant feedback from my peers and moderators. It was useful for my capacity-building. I also found the feedback given to my peers very useful. (P3)

In summary, the online learning process was a great learning experience, as the participants had to learn by doing and reflected on the feedback provided by the moderators. They were intrinsically motivated to learn. The course was useful for their professional growth as it helped them improve their online skills.

4.2 Emerging communities of practice

The educational development activities for this group were structured in such a way that they first attended face to face workshops on course re-design and gender responsive pedagogy as participants. They were then trained as multipliers on the abovementioned courses. During the second workshops, at their universities, they co-facilitated under the guidance of educational developers from Kenya and the UK. In the third round of workshops the multipliers facilitated, but with the support of the educational developers. The final online training course was on how to facilitate lesson planning. At the end of the online course, most of the participants were confident in their facilitation role, as indicated by the comments “I am one of the multipliers. I can fit almost in every area of the training” (P5) and “I am active in our meetings and I am ready to train and mentor other colleagues” (P6).

At the time of writing this article, multipliers from one of the universities had trained their colleagues.

We are actually doing it; training colleagues. It is real. Before the training started, I was doubting my potential; now that the training has begun, I am amazed by what we have done so far. (P7)

5 Discussions and implications

5.1 Discussions

In this article, the online platform provides perfect space and time for lecturers to negotiate and renegotiate meaning on their practice (Wenger, 1999). They critically reflect when they interact with the online resources, the moderators’ feedback on their lesson plans and feedback on their peers’ lesson plans. This is in line with Boud and Brew’s (2013) view of focusing attention on what is to be done, the lesson planning, and not on the individuals enacting the doing; and Wenger’s (1999) idea of negotiation of meaning which involves participation and reification. The reification/artefacts in this case are the lesson plans that were produced by participants.

Further, lecturers were intrinsically motivated to participate in the online course because of the new work demands of teaching students online. Boud and Brew (2013) contend that the most powerful influence on educational development is not the provision of learning opportunities, but changing work demands. This requirement has precipitated the training of other lecturers at institutional level, enhancing the realization of communities of practice.

5.2 Implications

Unlike educational development activities that are traditionally conducted in physical settings at scheduled times that may not be convenient to all lecturers, lecturers can comfortably participate in asynchronous online courses at their own time and pace. Future-ready educational developers may need to rethink the conducting of workshops in physical settings and move educational development activities online in order to reach a wider audience across universities, countries and continents. Lecturers also need to experience the learning spaces available to future-ready graduates. Future educational developers may need to expose lecturers to these learning spaces.

6 Conclusions

Technology is likely to play a great role in future educational development as it enables lecturers to learn at their own pace in their own time. The educational development model of training multipliers across universities and countries discussed in this article could be used for future educational development to ensure sustainable, transformative universal and life-long learning for all. A study on lecturers' learning experience in an industrial and/or community-based engagement may be useful for future educational development.

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