The Contribution of Technology to the Development and Sustainability of an Occupational Therapy Community of Learners in Doctoral Education

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Abstract

This case study describes the pivotal role of technology in developing a community of practice (COP) designed for post professional occupational therapists that enabled doctoral students, alumni and faculty to share information and insights about topics, initiatives and research critical to the Occupational Therapy field. The COP evolved through ongoing development of the post-professional occupational therapy doctorate (PPOTD) program at Jefferson University in Philadelphia.

The conceptual foundation for the COP moved beyond an initial focus on course delivery to an emphasis on development, implementation, and sustainability of a vibrant learning community. Transformation of the COP was greatly facilitated through the evolution of technology that supports vibrant learning communities through the enhanced opportunities for engagement.

Objectives

After attending this session, participants will:

Objective 1: Discuss the evolution of a learning community designed to promote leadership of students in a post-professional occupational therapy doctoral program.

Objective 2: Understand ways that effective use of technology can help develop and sustain post-professional learning communities in occupational therapy.

Objective 3: Apply examples of strategies and lessons learned from the learning community described to current or future program development in their home institutions.

Background: Communities of Learning

"Communities of Practice are 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." (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

"It is key that there is learning that takes place. Think of Community as a verb, an action of bringing together of different voices, to be diverse and learn from one another. In the Jefferson Program, there are researchers, and students at various points of their learning, and educators and alumni and faculty and guest speakers who come together for this common purpose of learning from one another both from their practices and their perspectives and also to better understand each other. This crossing of the boundaries (whether based on policy, practice, research, or geographic silos) – however we are crossing these boundaries, those are learning points where we have a tension to understand–how to translate the research into the practice or to understand the differences from state to state. These tension points become the learning opportunities."

Sample PPOTD Learning Community Sessions

Sample PPOTD Responses

"The continued need for there to be a bridge between academics/research and clinicians. Both in helping clinicians without EBP backgrounds to understand the importance, but also in conducting research that will address the needs and constraints that the clinicians face, so they will be more likely to use it."

"Currently, I am part of a rapidly growing outpatient clinic, however we lack consistency among therapists. This decrease in consistency could affect our overall reputation and the ability to effectively treat children. This has made me think that we need to rethink at how we are implementing assessments."

"The theoretical framework, authentic leadership, puts the critical life events in an important role. Although leadership continuum in South Africa looks different from US and my personal experiences, the role of critical life events should be important for everyone."

"Interpreting how many factors can influence use of a supported program. Aliasing yourself with likeminded, and open-minded professionals may make the difference between taking on new roles and risks as a clinician and becoming stagnant in your practice."

Next Steps/Work in Progress

Qualitative Data Analysis in Progress

Fall and Spring Semesters 2015-2016 and 2016-2017
PPOTD Learning Community Meetings (2 per semester)
Student Reflections Each Semester (n = 285)

Coding Methods Adapted from Grounded Theory for Qualitative Content Analysis

Ongoing NVivo analyses of qualitative reflections for each meeting presentation (for publication)

Coding Categories Identified

New or Enhanced Learning

Statements indicating that some aspect of the project methodology or implementation was new or surprising to the participant or added to or deepened participants’ existing knowledge or understanding

Contribution to OT Profession

Statements indicating that some aspect of the research or project will contribute to the OT profession, such as direct references to Vision 2023.

Connections to Personal and Work Experiences

Statements explicitly connecting current or past personal or work experience to some aspect of the project. This may include statements indicating changes made to current program or work-related policies or procedures as a result of participating in the learning community