

Creating a faculty community from a distance

Keisha Valdez Noel

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

A community of practice in higher education teaching is a network of lecturers/instructors who engage in meaningful conversations about teaching and learning, share ideas and resources and problem-solve together for the purpose of improving their teaching. Using a combination of best practices recommended for developing online learning communities, and best practices for developing communities of learners, this paper describes how a faculty training programme offered in a blended format (through a combination of face-to-face and online modalities) was designed to foster community development among eleven teaching staff members at a Caribbean Community College.

Key words: communities of practice, communities of learners, faculty training, professional development, blended learning

Introduction

Communities of practice and their positive impact on effective work production have been explored in many contexts. A community of practice is described by pioneer researcher, Wegner (1998), as a group of people who share common interests or concerns and responsively seek to expand their knowledge base and skill set through ongoing interactions and discourse. Reflective of constructivist ideology, members of communities of practice operate as a collective to create knowledge that is meaningful and useful to their work (Johnson, 2001). The community provides support amongst its members to solve problems, better understand their context and improve practice through ongoing interactions (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

In the contemporary spirit of school-based management and the view of teacher-leaders as being critical to improving student performance, communities of practice are commonly explored and encouraged at the primary and secondary levels. Much emphasis has been placed on encouraging teachers to work together to improve outcomes and learning in their schools. Despite accolades in the literature and testimony from institutions that have benefitted from creating such communities, communities of practice amongst tertiary level lecturers, specifically in the Caribbean, remains less commonplace. There is little ongoing discussion amongst departmental lecturers and even less across faculties. Although individual

teaching practitioners may share common challenges or experience, the practice of teaching is perceived as a very isolated and individualistic activity (Eib & Miller, 2006). Discourse on best practice in teaching and learning, or the sharing of resources, experiences and skill sets among tertiary level teachers remain rare and, in the few instances in which it does occur, it tends to be by happenstance rather than a result of deliberate effort.

A noteworthy characteristic of communities of practice is that they grow and operate somewhat autonomously, responding to their own identified needs and relevant goals (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Although Wenger (1998) describes these communities as being without official titles and overly formal structures, this paper explores the process of creating a community of teaching practitioners with an obligatory, inorganic start. This paper describes the professional development experiences of 11 community college instructors enrolled in a faculty training programme delivered in a blended format (through a combination of face-to-face and online modalities). Therefore, the emphasis of this paper is on the specific application of best practices in both developing a community of practice and developing online learning communities. The contextual application of these best practices facilitated the formation of a teaching-practitioner community that enabled its members to take ownership of their professional development.

Context

Caribbean Community College

Caribbean Community College (CCC), a pseudonym, is a small institution that is the sole tertiary level institution on a small commonwealth island. The College offers a variety of certificate, diploma and associate degree programmes which include fields such as vocational studies, business studies, liberal arts and sciences. CCC has agreements with several universities in North America and other parts of the Caribbean which allow the College to deliver additional baccalaureate and master's degrees. Its faculty is made up of a combination of full time and part time instructors who have a combination of academic qualifications and work experiences within their related disciplines.

The CCC staffs a faculty support centre that provides relevant workshops and support related to teaching and learning; however, a number of full time and part time teaching staff do not have teaching qualifications or formal training. Recognising the need to have their staff engage in informed and responsive teaching in their classroom, the college approached the Centre for Excellence for Teaching and Learning (CETL) of The University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, asking if it could offer the UWI Postgraduate Certificate in University Teaching and Learning (CUTL) to a group of 15 CCC instructors during the 2011/2012 academic year and again in 2012/2013 with a group of 11 instructors.

Certificate in University Teaching and Learning

The Certificate in University Teaching and Learning (CUTL) is a 15 credit, four course, year-long post graduate programme for tertiary level practitioners. The programme, which was initiated in 2008, was designed primarily for new UWI faculty and in its earlier iteration was offered as a face-to-face programme that met for 18-22 sessions or approximately 120 hours over two semesters. Over recent years the programme has become more blended with the UWI faculty cohorts requiring far fewer face-to-face meetings. According to The University of the West Indies, CUTL Student Handbook (2011, p.3) the programme's goals are:

- 1. To enhance faculty members' repertoire of face-to-face and online teaching skills and techniques that exemplify the learner-centred paradigm and enable staff to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and bring to the learning process their on-going experiences within the classroom and vice-versa.*
- 2. To develop a community which focuses on learner-centred teaching, providing a basis for continuing development of teaching competence.*

Since the distance between the University and the College is a budget consuming five+ hour flight it was agreed that the programme would be offered at CCC in a blended format with over 75% of the content to be delivered online and the face-to-face sessions to be held at the College.

What we know about CUTL at the UWI

With the amount of time that the earlier UWI CUTL cohorts and the facilitators spent together in the face-to-face meetings (120 hours total) it is easy to see how relationships were forged and community was built. The regular plenary session discussions were often centred on real problems that were analysed within the context of the day's objectives. Participants would readily apply the complexities of their own teaching conditions to the feasibility of the prescribed best practice and critically examine the application of 'best practice' to their work. Group discussions and activities would highlight resources available on campus; information on how to work around issues to improve one's professional experiences, and their students' learning experiences. In addition to the participant-participant camaraderie, the relationship with the course facilitators/trainers developed into one in which participants would share their individual challenges and triumphs; give unsolicited updates of developments within their courses, and seek advice on teaching strategies. Having the regular and consistent forum to address concerns created a culture of community. In the experiences of the facilitators, the opportunities to share and problem solve is what made the CUTL programme productive and

meaningful for participants. From the CUTL cohorts smaller support groups would emerge and these members continue to communicate and support each other beyond completion of the programme. The undeniable element of success for the previous cohorts was the face-to-face contact hours.

In the absence of the regular and frequent face-to-face contact hours, creating community at CCC required a shift of thinking and approach. This paper examines the critical elements characteristics of the community of practice: what is required for their development and how the facilitators of the CUTL were able to translate these elements to a blended training format in order to support the development of community.

The community of learners and community of practice nexus

Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley (2003) report that *situated learning* and *reflective practice* are core tenants of teacher-communities of practice. Situated learning focuses on the practitioners learning activities being responsive and related to their social context. In this instance, the process of learning can only come from participant interactions with the environment where authentic problems are critically analysed and solutions sought. In situated learning the real application of new information and rich feedback from peers is essential for the practitioner's development. In an effective community of practice, situated learning is symbiotic with reflective practice. The teaching/practitioner would take a look at what (s) he does in the classroom from a critical lens, (s)he then self-evaluates and makes changes based on on-going reflection and new learning acquired from various sources including the situated learning context.

Essentially, the community of learners is also a community of practice. Being a community of learners allows the practitioners to collectively define and create knowledge within a shared understanding of the cultural and social context. Members then use this shared knowledge to make changes in practice and support individual and shared decision making. The result is a sense of ownership of one's practice (Wenger, 1998) which leads to increased productivity and effectiveness (Eib & Miller, 2006).

Examples of combined communities of practice and communities of learners are seen in the Faculty Learning Community examined by Sherer, Shae and Kristensens (2003) where practitioners met twice each week and engaged in various activities such as sharing course syllabi, learning to use new technology sharing and discussing new teaching resource materials. Members of the communities reported personal and professional growth through the experience. A similar positive outcome of creating (learning) communities among faculty was reported by Eib and Miller (2006) who found that faculty who were part of a Faculty Development Institute at the University of Calgary, Canada reported feeling connected and more inspired and innovative in relation to teaching and learning. The participating lecturers described a culture of support resulting from having the space to share ideas. In another case study (Graven, 2004), members of

a South African mathematics teachers' learning community were encouraged to actively reflect on practice, and explore and determine what works best for their teaching. The participants determined the topics in which they would focus. In addition to the members' reported satisfaction with increased peer support and their own professional development, Graven highlighted the added benefit of the mathematics teachers feeling more confident about their teaching skills as a result of being part of a community of practice or professional learning community.

Whether they are called communities of practice, professional learning communities, faculty learning communities, or teaching circles, the fundamentals are the same; faculty can work collectively to share information and experiences; deconstruct knowledge of pedagogy then transform that knowledge to make new meaning and ultimately improve their teaching practice.

Creating an authentic community without an organic start

Despite the research to support its benefits, communities of practice, are not readily found in all higher education institutions. A survey of the literature revealed very few papers that addressed reasons for faculty reluctance to initiate Communities of Practice in higher education settings. Despite the limited direct information, there are some inferences that can be drawn based on what we do know about the culture of higher education. We know that academics tend to focus more on disciplinary research than on teaching and learning. This is probably because at many institutions, promotion and tenure is more often linked to the lecturer's number of publications rather than his/her teaching skills (Attwood, 2009).

If there is less institutional reward and focus on teaching and learning there may be less incentive for lecturers to seek opportunities to discuss classroom experiences and pedagogy. Further, lecturers are generally hired to teach because of their discipline-related research, impressive academic qualifications and/or specialised industry experience; again diminishing the relevance of pedagogy. In my own experience with faculty, when asked to participate in teaching and learning focused conversations or training, the response some is, "*What could they possibly teach me that I don't already know?*" Few lecturers at The University of the West Indies opt to participate in professional development training or attend seminars on teaching and learning (The University of the West Indies, 2010) which is not uncommon in higher education globally. If the interest in talking about teaching and learning is lacking then it can be assumed that the notion of creating a community of teaching practitioners would certainly be an afterthought.

Proponents of communities of practice suggest that these communities thrive best when they are organic. Within organisations the active communities are borne out of a perceived shared interest or response to a problem. Wenger (2000) describes the development process of Communities of Practice as occurring in the following five stages:

<i>Potential</i>	Members find common interests amongst themselves
<i>Coalesce</i>	Members start to bond and form community
<i>Active</i>	Members establish commitment to the community
<i>Dispersed</i>	Members become less actively engaged in the community
<i>Memorable</i>	Members are not directly linked into the community but still consider the experience as part of their identity.

At the start or the *potential* stage, individuals are said to find each other out of shared needs and interests. The challenge for creating community in many higher education contexts is glaring. If our local and regional lecturers and instructors (potential members) never “find each other” because they never engage in discourse about pedagogy, share their teaching experiences, or never considered that the solutions to their classroom concerns lie amongst themselves, then the likelihood of becoming a supportive community is quite slim. The bottom line here is that in the absence of a formal situation (e.g. CUTL) our lecturers would probably not naturally find each other.

The facilitators of the CUTL programme recognise that a critical element to the long term success of the programme is when the participants continuously reflect on their teaching and take a scholarly approach to their practice. This works best when they have the skills and know-how to reflect and engage in critical discussion about their experiences. Reflection and critical discussion occurs with the support of the CUTL programme facilitators and the general design of the CUTL programme, but the greater, more desired impact is long term - for participants to continue reflecting and continue conversations to support each other as part of a community of practitioners independent of CUTL.

As previously stated, the original format of the CUTL programme required participants to meet for over 100 hours over the course of one academic year. The face-to-face time was structured to use learning activities to critically analyse, problem solve and reflect based on the related learning outcomes. When teachers come together for the purpose of inquiry large amounts of time are required. In such a situation, Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1999) explain that over time “ideas have a chance to incubate and develop, trust builds in the group, and participants feel comfortable raising sensitive issues and risking self-revelation” (p. 294). The regular opportunities to generate ideas; create meaning based on theory, and offer feedback and insight to their colleagues helped the CUTL participants move to the *active* stage of Wenger’s stages of development. At the pinnacle of the programme, participants were engaged as active members of the CUTL community where they recognised their own professional, and often personal, growth as a result of the experience.

To adapt the 100+ hour face-to-face programme to one that is offered in a blended format without losing the distinct characteristics of community building required different ways of engaging and interaction through innovative use of technology.

Robertson, Grant and Jackson (as cited in Pelkey, n.d.) identified six facilitator practices that foster community among distance learners:

- 1) *Frequent participant- participant and facilitator-participant dialogue,*
- 2) *incorporation of cooperative learning activities,*
- 3) *active learning opportunities,*
- 4) *provision of prompt and quality feedback,*
- 5) *clear articulation of expectations and*
- 6) *respect for the diversity in the group.*

In adapting the programme for the CCC group the CUTL facilitators took these recommended practices into consideration in the delivery design (see Figure 1). Ensuring the curriculum remained intact, the facilitators restructured the courses and the programme so that the programme was able to use the face-to-face time and online activities to establish a rapport and create a culture of support and reflective thinking.

An additional to consideration of the blended format was the amount of face-to-face hours that would be allotted per course. Time only allowed for approximately 40 face-to-face (F2F) hours, a 70% reduction of the face-to-face hours previously allotted. Therefore, the web-based content was maximised to align with the best practice recommended for online/blended learning and the development of community. Table 1, outlines the time considerations.

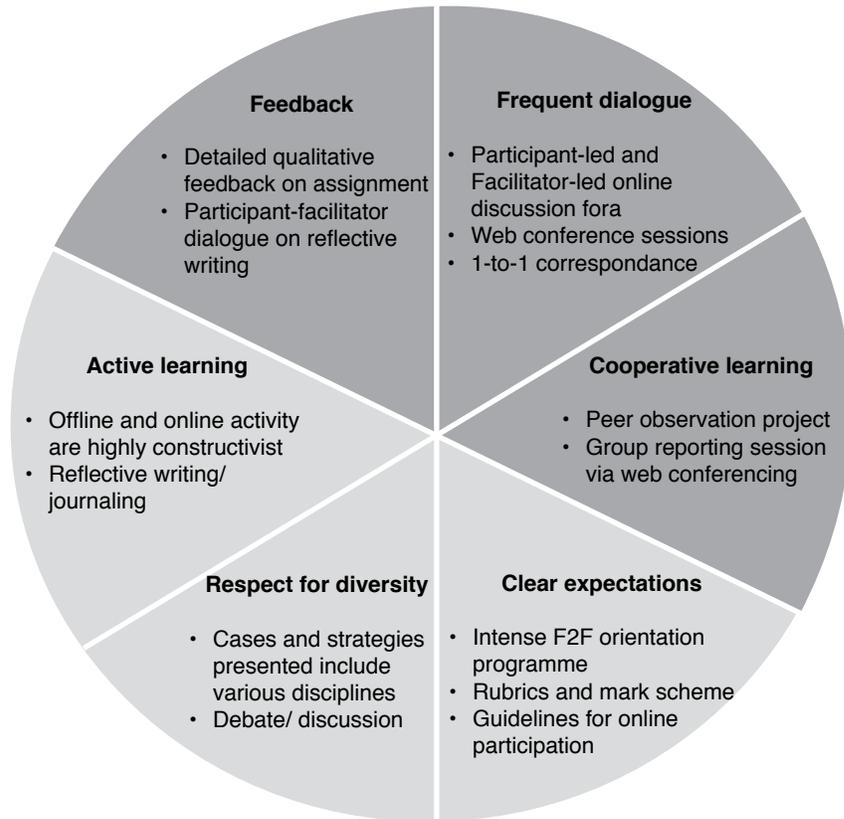


Figure 1. CUTL application of best practices for community building in online teaching

Table 1. Breakdown of CUTL course and taught hours

Course	Credits	'Traditional' F2F hours	Blended CUTL at CCC	
			F2F hours	Web-based contact
Orientation	0	10	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitator-led topic discussion Fora Open discussion fora 25 hours of web conference sessions Online interactive journaling Web messaging and email
CUTL 5001	3	30	10	
CUTL 5104	3	40	10	
CUTL 5106	3	30	10	
CUTL 5207	6	10	0	

Community through coursework

It is important to point out at this time that the aforementioned six facilitator practices (Figure 1) highlight the considerations that support the development of an online community in a generic sense. This community that the CUTL facilitators anticipated creating was to be an *online-higher-education-teacher/practitioner* community that could exist beyond the CUTL programme, therefore the six practices were applied with this context in mind. While all six practices were incorporated, there were three closely interwoven practices that specifically supported the CUTL objective of developing a community that provides a basis for continuous professional development. The three practices, *Frequent dialogue*, *Feedback* and *Cooperative learning*, provided the experiences necessary to move the participants beyond a community of learners to a community of practitioners.

An orientation was conducted to start the programme. This two day face-to-face workshop was crucial for setting the tone and giving clear expectations of working online and offline, but beyond this, it was the time in which we began to open the door for participant-participant and participant-facilitator dialogue. The highly interactive activities were about more than just the content to be covered; they also emphasised dialogue and sharing of teaching contexts and experiences. In addition to introducing participants to the level of engagement expected in the CUTL interactions and learning activities, participants were also getting used to their colleagues' "voices", perspectives and personalities. From the onset of the programme, facilitators modelled being a critical friend and using dialogue to encourage reflection and deeper analysis. Participants were expected to justify their ideas or positions while respecting diverse experiences and ideas. Using Wenger's (2000) framework of the developmental stages of the community of practice, these early interactions allowed participants to move to the *coalesce* stage where they begin to gel, recognise and negotiate the meaning of membership within this community.

To further understand how the community was developing during the course of the programme a review of the participants' reflective journals and discussion forum contributions was conducted. These reflective journals were not just a requirement of the programme but were particularly useful for tracking individual experiences as they developed into community. Journals/diaries are able to capture everyday experiences (Kenton, 2010), learning episodes and feelings about events as they are being experienced.

The following journal entry highlights how a member starts to identify the usefulness of being in a community.

I think when faculty can share like this, it creates a network of professionals who will feel much more comfortable to share and exchange ideas on what they are doing. It would also establish better working relationships among faculty, as we get to realise that two

heads are really better than one, and that no one person can know everything on a subject

(Journal Entry, Participant C)

Participants soon discovered that having targeted conversations about teaching and learning helped to clarify ideas and create more room to improve teaching skills. As the programme continued and the participants became more comfortable with the talking and sharing, and became better ‘critical friends,’ they eventually experienced dialogues as another form of feedback. While the facilitators would always provide the rich qualitative feedback on course assignments and through discussions, there was equal emphasis made on the point that feedback for development does not have to solely come from the CUTL facilitator, but can come from their colleagues. Throughout the programme, participants were often asked to peer-review each other’s teaching materials (e.g. teaching plans, course outlines, teaching philosophies and assessment designs etc.) to further promote cooperation and self-reliance rather than seeking the approvals, solutions or assistance solely from an outside authority. The dialogue in Table 2 is an excerpt from a discussion forum after one participant (B) had shared her teaching philosophy (TP) with the group for feedback.

Table 2. Discussion forum entries

	<p>Re: TP Draft: first one I've ever written by PARTICIPANT A - Wednesday, 17 October 2012, 10:11 AM</p>
	<p>[PARTICIPANT B], You began lecturing in the same way I was doing it when I had you as a student! That was life before smart boards, it seems so long ago.</p> <p>I think you are on the right track with your six approaches to reaching your students. You might want to include that through tests and assignments you are able to tell not only which ones are getting it, but which approach works for which student, that way you can adjust your approach to meet their various learning styles. I'm looking forward to [web conferencing] on Friday.</p>
	<p>Re: TP DRaft: first one I've ever written by PARTICIPANT B - Wednesday, 17 October 2012, 04:52 PM</p>
	<p>Good point about evaluating via test and assignments. I do as well, but didn't think to include it in my TP, thanks! It is at this point I pull students aside and speak to them privately.</p>

In this discussion the feedback allowed participants to both reflect *and* feed-forward to support a colleague. By receiving and giving feedback, the CUTL participants learned that it is acceptable and worthwhile to rely on each other for advice and use their collective knowledge to problem solve and improve their practice.

The last course of the programme (CUTL 5207) was quite significant for the feedback process because it required the participants to work in teams and design and conduct peer observations of their teaching. As indicated in Table 1 there was no facilitator directed traditional (F2F) classroom hours for the course. Notably, CUTL 5207 was six credits as opposed to the other three courses which were each three credits, yet it required the least amount of facilitator-led time. Because the course was comprised of a cooperative project, the participants were required to plan together, create together and problem solve together. Interestingly, in addition to meeting face-to-face as a team when needed, most teams shared in their reports that they used technology such as web-conferencing applications, email, text messaging, phones and online discussion forums to facilitate discussion and work around scheduling conflicts. We can conclude that the use of the technology to communicate and plan is probably attributed to them having the CUTL experience of appropriately using a blend of offline and online formats to communicate about teaching and learning.

The final course of the CUTL programme served as a transition or cementation from community of learners to community of practitioners beyond CUTL; their experiences in the programme not only provided a framework of *how* to support each other professionally, but also helped them to be acclimatised to using technology to maintain a professional connection. This poises them for the *dispersed* stage of Wenger's community of practice where the members may not be bound formally by the CUTL programme, but they know how to rally support and get feedback when needed to improve their teaching practice.

Conclusion

the more we as teachers can share a common form of life and common experience with others in our institutions, the greater the possibility is that we will be able to extend our horizons to encompass a fuller understanding

(Donnelly, 2007, p. 119)

Communities of practice can positively impact the teaching and learning in a higher education institution if members buy in and can find ways to stay connected despite busy schedules and tight deadlines. As the *dispersed* and *memorable* stages of community of practice development suggest, members may not have cause to meet formally or regularly, but the critical piece is that the members know how to find each other when there is a need or when they want a like-minded person to

bounce ideas off. The community of practice that was formed during the 2012-2013 academic year had the experience of opening their classrooms and themselves to their colleagues for ongoing professional development.

...let me say in conclusion that I am really enjoying this program, I really enjoyed this course even though it has taken me some time to catch on and I look forward to what's next. I am building a strong interpersonal relationship with my fellow CUTLERS (team building - leave no one behind). Our LITTLE college is really a BIG family and this program only serves to tighten the knit. I have received very helpful support from the members of the first co-hort of CUTLERS. At my lowest ebb I confided my frustrations to [Participant X from a previous cohort] and he turned me right around. There is not a single former CUTLER or current one who doesn't view this program as an uplifting experience. I can only say that I think the end result of all this will be beneficial to our students as we all try to invent new ways to reach our variety of learners.

(Journal Entry, Participant D)

The scope of this paper ends when participants concluded the programme - which was just ten weeks prior to writing this manuscript making it too soon to tell how this group of 11 colleagues will interact in the future, but if we assume that the greatest predictor of behaviour change is attitude change then there is a likelihood that this community of practitioners will be sustained. It is also likely that the members of the CCC CUTL cohort have developed the community of practice approach to other areas of their work.

The idea of "building a community of practitioners" is appealing to me because if I learned so much from this ONE observation session, I can only imagine that I would learn so much more by reviewing peers in other disciplines. I have several colleagues who teach courses that interest me, so sitting in on their sessions would not seem unnatural, and I'm sure I could observe former CUTL students to see how they've incorporated what they've learned into their teaching. I look forward to continuing the learning process and hopefully encouraging my peers to do the same. I will happily open up my classroom to anyone who wants to sit in.

(Journal Entry, Participant E)

Communities of practice have the potential to bring together teaching colleagues in a way that is more meaningful than just networking. These communities allow members to develop a family-like relationship where individuals are supported, can share resources and exchange ideas to affect change in their practice. In the teaching profession, communities are not always readily created,

but formal programmes such as CUTL can create the space for lecturers to produce a culture of positive interdependence.

References

- Attwood, R. (2009, December 10). Pedagogy a poor second in promotion. *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/409511.article>
- Buysse, V., Sparkman, K.L., & Wesley, P.W. (2003). Communities of practice: Connecting what we know with what we do. *Exceptional children*, 69(3), 263-277.
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S.L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of research in education*, 24(1), 249-305.
- Donnelly, R (2007). Perceived impact of peer observation of teaching higher education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19(2), 117-129.
- Eib, B.J., & Miller, P. (2006). Faculty development as community building: An approach to professional development that supports communities of practice for online teaching. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 7(2). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/issue/view/24>
- Graven, M. (2004). Investigating mathematics teacher learning within an in-service community of practice: the centrality of confidence. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 57(2),177-211.
- Johnson, C.M. (2001). A survey of current research on online communities of practice. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 4(1), 45-60.
- Kenton, C. (2010). Narrating oneself: Reflections on the use of solicited diaries with diary interviews. 11(2), 507-521.
- Pelkey, M. (n.d.). Best practices for creating a community of learners in a distance learning environment. Retrieved from <http://www.decadeconsulting.com/decade/papers/Pelkey.pdf>
- Robertson, J S., Grant, M.M., & Jackson, L. (2005). Is online instruction perceived as effective as campus instruction by graduate students in education? *The Internet and Higher Education*, 8, 73-86.
- Sherer, P.D., Shea, T.P., & Kristensen, E. (2003). Online communities of practice: A catalyst for faculty development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 27(3), 183-194.
- The University of the West Indies. (2010). Instructional Development Unit, St Augustine Report to the Board for Undergraduate Studies. St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.
- The University of the West Indies. (2011). Postgraduate Certificate in University Teaching Student Handbook. St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: Instructional Development Unit.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization*, 7(2), 225-246.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W.M. (2002). Seven principles for cultivating communities of practice. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business Review Press.