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Third places: cultivating mobile communities of practice in the global south

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ABSTRACT

Research on communities of practice suggests that such groups can be used to support academic staff development, especially during times of crisis. We explore how a group of South African women academics and ‘eLearning champions’ engaged in a mobile community of practice under COVID-19 conditions. Our analysis of WhatsApp chat histories and focus group conversations reflects how the group evolved from a mobile CoP into a multi-modal third place, with implications for community-building, teaching transformation, and organisational change.

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Introduction

It is safe to say that the world currently finds itself overwhelmed by a seemingly unimaginable series of crises, characterised by high degrees of anxiety, uncertainty, and even anger. That said, the term ‘crisis’ often carries a dual meaning, thereby referring to both danger and opportunity. In higher education, the disruption caused by COVID-19 has been simultaneously lamented as the death knell as well as a much-needed disruption, creating space for meaningful, deep-seated cultural and organisational change.

To create a place implies not only a physical location, but also a degree of rootedness and/or connection. Political scientist Ray Oldenburg coined the term ‘third place’ to evoke a meaningful location, one that was defined as neither domestic nor organisational, but somewhere between home (first place) and work (second place) (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). In his earlier conception, third places were fixed public locations, such as cafes, bookstores, or churches. The imposed social isolation of our current crisis reinforced the role, value, and essential components of third places, especially virtual ones. It could even be conjectured that higher education has weathered the onslaught of crises largely through the expansion of third places: informal, now often virtual, semi-

public ‘places’ where academics, staff, and students connect with one another. This is a study of one such third place, started at the height of the lockdown crisis and nurtured by a remarkable group of female academics, all of whom teach various disciplines at a large, public university in South Africa. Although this group started as a Community of Practice (CoP), it expanded to become a flourishing third place.

In nearly all studies of CoPs to date, the focus has either been on the benefits to its members, or the organisation sponsoring them, or both. For this reason, they have been conceptualised largely in the frameworks of either organisational or professional development, but these frameworks often ignore or downplay the larger social and cultural context in which these groups operate, treating academia as operating within its own sociological vacuum. In the context of the global South, we argue instead for a broader framework, one that not only embeds CoPs within their local contexts but elevates that context to their defining feature.

The context

The global COVID-19 crisis has hit South Africa hard. Even before this crisis, South African higher education had already seen a series of major disruptions, in particular over the last five years. The student protests in 2015, 2016, and 2017 have highlighted the inequality that persists within the country’s tertiary system and pointed to the need to rethink approaches to addressing its systemic problems (Mbembe, 2019). The Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) serves a large student population from underprivileged backgrounds, but also from both urban and rural contexts. Many of our students rely on resources offered on campus and in residences, and therefore it could not be assumed that students would have the kind of access to devices, data, and a conducive study environment necessary for continuing the academic project online under lockdown.

Contrary to the experience in other countries and even other institutions in South Africa, CPUT only started what was termed the ‘multimodal project’ on the 1st of June 2020, following a government mandate, with two months of an enforced break. This gave lecturers time to prepare their multimodal teaching and learning strategy, offering not only (low-tech, asynchronous) online learning, but also print-based materials, for students without access to digital technology, data, or network connectivity. However, it also created uncertainty over many weeks and months, with little and sometimes confusing communication from the university management, before decisions around the term continuation were taken.

During this period of profound organisational uncertainty, CoPs emerged to fill in the spaces between individual classrooms and departmental or university board rooms. The emergence of CoPs in the disruptive space generated by COVID-19 is perhaps not surprising, as CoPs have previously been touted as agents of change during periods of transition (Furco & Moely, 2012) and organisational ambiguity (Kietzmann et al., 2013), not unlike the role played by third places in periods of social and economic change. In many ways, the relationship between a third place and a community resembles that between a CoP and an organisation. Each serves mediating roles, providing a middle ground between the individual and the larger, grand structures in which those individuals are embedded. This became particularly important when the usual institutional structures and processes were disrupted and often suspended because of COVID-19.

In their original conception, CoPs (like third places) were defined as geographically bound, with strong emphasis on face-to-face interaction as well as the absence of centralised oversight or control. The conception of the practice has evolved, however, to embrace a wide range of mediums, especially those that allow for geographically dispersed, or in the case of the current crisis, isolated colleagues to be able to connect and learn from one another (Cottom et al., 2018). VCoPs and MCoPs (virtual and mobile, respectively) have joined the ranks of recognised forms of CoPs. Studies have shown that technologically mediated connections can accrue the same benefits as the more conventional face-to-face experience, while perhaps even gaining new levels of immediacy and frequency (Angouri, 2016; Cronje, 2021). In the absence of access to ubiquitous internet connectivity, many South Africans have turned to instant messaging (IM) as a prominent mode of technology mediated-communication (Cronje, 2021; Moodley, 2019).

When remote teaching hit South Africa, academics across multiple institutions reported an overwhelming need for additional support, particularly in navigating the labyrinth of technology access issues necessitated by the pivot to remote teaching and learning, a demand that was addressed inconsistently by institutional communication channels (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). Instant messaging had proven to be effective in supporting academics through this transition in other contexts facing similar constraints (Darkwa & Mazibuko, 2000; Motteram et al., 2020), so the establishment of a mobile community of practice mediated through WhatsApp for CPUT academics provided what seemed to be a familiar, efficient, actionable, and equitable way forward for its members.

Ostensibly, the primary purpose of a CoP is (often informal) professional learning or within the context of remote learning, academic staff development. There is a considerable literature on the benefits of CoPs as a mode of academic staff development (Abigail, 2016; Newman, 2017), with particular attention paid to the alignment between the model and how academics learn about teaching (Arthur, 2016; Blanton & Stylianou, 2009). As several large-scale studies have indicated, academic staff tend to learn most through experience, that is by teaching, and secondly through engaging with their peers (Oleson & Hora, 2013; Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015). Such peer groups may be part of the elusive backstage of teaching (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009), but CoPs can serve as vehicles for similar 'significant conversations', particularly when peers are defined as those with whom you share a practice (Smith, 2015).

The study

The present study seeks to delineate the central characteristics of this community, framed by third place theory, through the lens of a shared, collaborative reflection by its members (Glazer et al., 2004; Peel & Shortland, 2004). Often used in participatory research methodologies, collective reflection emphasises the social nature of meaning construction and affirms the authentic expression of personal knowledge (Foong et al., 2018). The participants in this collective reflection were all part of an eight-person CoP set up at the onset of the lockdown and facilitated through WhatsApp. For the purposes of this study, we created a second WhatsApp research group composed of six of the original members of the CoP, who expressed interest in being part of this study, plus one external researcher. We chose collaborative reflection as our lens both because the use of similar techniques has proven productive in other studies of CoP, but also because we wanted to

highlight our lived experiences of both the group itself and the broader context of teaching through COVID-19.

The research activity took place in two primary venues. First, we compiled the logs of the WhatsApp exchanges between 4/4/2020 and 7/15/2020 (a 50 pages Word document). Each member of the research team independently reviewed the logs for emergent themes, which were shared via the WhatsApp research group over a period of approximately seven days. These initial themes were compiled and then discussed in the second venue, two interactive interview sessions conducted via Zoom (Ellis et al., 1997). The interactive interviews were facilitated by the external researcher and attended by six of the members of the original CoP, lasted one hour each, and were transcribed and again reviewed by all members of the research team. After a second round of review and feedback, a persistent group of themes emerged, suggesting that, over time, the group went through several stages, evolving from a mobile CoP into an influential third place.

A community of practice

Our first insight was that the group did function in ways that are characteristic of a conventional CoP. In this case, the shared domain of the group was the innovative use of technology in teaching and learning. The members of the group had all previously served as ‘eLearning champions’, who functioned as liaisons between the central support unit and other departments and faculties (Gachago et al., 2017). When COVID-19 started, the institution shut down, and a general sense of confusion and lack of communication emerged, one of the authors, an academic staff developer closely connected to the members in the group, decided to set up a WhatsApp group (invitation text below), to encourage colleagues to share good practice beyond departments and faculties.

Hi everyone! As you suggested I am going to try to connect our e-learning champions across faculties to start sharing good practice

The group that accepted the invitation consisted of seven lecturers from three different engineering programs, two business programmes, and one colleague each from the school of education and the department of architectural technology and interior design.

This exchange of shared expertise is what distinguishes a CoP from an interest group. Our WhatsApp group may have been initially created to bring together lecturers with a common interest in teaching with technology, but the practice that emerged as the core of the group reflected the positionality of the ‘eLearning champions’ within the institution. What particularly bonded this group was an interest in sharing practices in an expanded learning environment that was new to everyone. Four common themes that emerged from the chat logs included technical support (expert tips and tricks for using the LMS), support for pedagogical practice (for instance, remote assessments), academic staff training needs (such as discussion of modalities beyond webinars); and student support (among others, how to support students with patchy access to network connectivity).

These are some examples of topics discussed:

- Does anyone know if there are Blackboard [institutional LMS] issues for students to carry out uploading of assessments?
- Can you set up the gradebook so that students cannot see their marks?

- Found this article very interesting. I have been using most of them but in this article the author has beautifully and sequentially put them in order which can be used as a line of assessments.
- Just wanted to extend a word of thanks to [name of group member]. She's been encouraging me toward online midterms for years by sharing her pedagogy. Well, it took the pandemic . . . And I did it . . .

The group was particularly concerned with student access issues. One member stated: 'I fear that we can't ignore [the fact] that some students have no access at all. We can't ignore them'. For this reason, topics such as cell phone data packages and zero-rated websites were among the most prevalent. The challenge of equitable access remains to this day, a major concern of our group and indeed of many South Africans, as evinced by persistent student protests relating to educational access more broadly.

As previous researchers have noted, CoPs are fundamentally about the facilitation of professional learning, often through informal means (Viskovic, 2006). As the following excerpts reflect, the members of the group highlighted the advantages of learning this way, from immediacy to affirmation, especially in a time of crisis, uncertainty, and isolation:

We are all very time limited with multiple responsibilities so formal studying is not in the cards, but this is 'just in time'. Tapping into collective wisdom instead of seeking it out on my own, suits our lifestyles. Because we are dispersed it is hard to do this in any other way.

You get affirmation that you are doing something right. When you have moved to a fully online platform, there are things you have done but maybe not in a formal way, you want to make sure that you are not affecting the learning outcomes or engagement negatively.

As the latter quote especially attests, the group found itself moving beyond the boundaries of a conventional CoP (Duguid, 2008). The group may have had its roots in supporting eLearning, but its members began to embrace an extended vision of learning, whether the object was themselves, other staff, students, CPUT, or higher education more broadly.

Creating a third place

In geographical theory, place is about the meaning people may attach to a particular space. The distinction could be thought of as being analogous to the difference between a house and a home. The nature of home, and the conventional patterns of relationships that exist within it, are subject to the influences of both history and culture (Sarti, 2002). For this reason, scholars have begun to posit the home as a microcosm of larger dynamics at work in a given society, including representations of gender, even if these representations are contested via the mechanisms of colonisation (Baderoon, 2014; Blunt, 1999). A similar case could be made for workplaces as meaningful sites of identity as well as of social, economic, and cultural interaction (Geldenhuys & Henn, 2017; Scholtz & Prinsloo, 2001; Van Breda, 2011). Third places, on the other hand, are characterised by social levelling, with informal conversation serving as the critical link between an individual and society writ large (Butler & Diaz, 2016). Indeed, the primary value of third places is neither social nor educational but civic; this value is located in the meaningful associations that take place in these third places, which lay the groundwork for a peaceful, pluralistic, and, above all else, democratic society (Hickey, 2012).

That said, South Africa has had a troubled history as a democratic society, one that has been mired in a post-colonial legacy that has left significant fissures in the fabric of its civil society. The intersectionality of privilege across axes of race, gender, and class still plays out in complex ways that are difficult to change. While racial transformation has been high on the higher education agenda, gender has been foregrounded less often. A recent report confirmed that while some progress has been made towards demographic transformation in the case of academic staff generally, and specifically in relation to the recruitment, progression, and retention of black South African academics, overall progress remains slow. Significant barriers still exist in the South African university system, and black South African and female academics remain underrepresented (Mosoma et al., 2019).

Accordingly, groups such as that on which we focus in this paper are particularly important for female staff members in South Africa, who are fighting highly conservative and patriarchal structures in both their institutions and society as such. While the roots of the group lay in shared pedagogical practice, the context of the on-going crisis served to deepen members' collegial bonds, fostering an environment that increasingly functioned as a third place, with conversations that could at times be funny, even touching and personal. By not being about either home or work, third places can serve as the primary site for the development of social capital, or the strengthening of social bonds between individuals. Because these social bonds are often expressed through tacit forms of knowing and communication, researchers measure social capital through the outcomes, or products, of its accumulation, including qualities such as trust, cooperation, and belonging; all of which can have repercussions for the other spaces members of a CoP occupy.

Our group exemplified trust in multiple ways. It could take the form of knowing that one could share a question or an idea without fear of judgment or retribution, as one member remarked: 'when people respond, it doesn't feel like they're doing you a favour or wasting their time. You're not bothering them to ask – it's a creative challenge'. It also meant not having to hide one side of one's identity, as women in academia often have to (Y Muhs et al., 2012). As one member put it: 'we enjoy what we do, [even though] we all evolved differently, (through different levels and pathways). We are interesting to each other. We see our limitations – we are who we are – but we adapt to that and accept it'. Another member stated simply: 'it is a more honest space'.

Despite their different academic affiliations and diverse disciplines, the group members connected through shared experiences, whether as academics, women, or simply as humans (Warhurst, 2006). As two members described it:

One of the reasons for being part of this group is to have the feeling of commonness amongst each other. This is in terms of what we are going through in our professional life, what we tried but didn't work, what worked but wasn't approved, etc. There is so much that resonates with each other. Many a time it makes me feel good, makes me feel heard and also that it's not a journey that I am carrying forward alone.

I definitely get more than professional help out of this engagement. There is a lot around how to do teaching and learning ethically and in a caring way, but also how to live our own lives ethically and in caring ways. There is a reassurance that I am not alone with my thoughts and doubts from the group, that others are as concerned, confused, or angry as I am at systems.

Those shared experiences carried with them a growing sense of shared responsibility. One member suggested that 'we feel responsible to each other', and another said that particularly

in times of crisis ‘being responsible, taking on the responsibility, builds up as human beings’. A poignant response to the initial invitation noted: ‘until today, I had no-one. I’ve been speaking with [two other members] but today feels like the beginning of community’.

Third places as levers of change

Geographer Edward Soja suggested that third places can be both ‘real and imagined’ (2006, p. 57). In other words, these places could serve as the basis for a shift in the locus of control, towards a desired but not yet obtained future. In this sense, a third place can be a powerful tool for social or cultural change while also serving as the basis for new ways of thinking about the values and beliefs of a given society or, in this case, higher education as an institution. Third place theory has been used to conceptualise changes in the power dynamics within a classroom, but we posit an application of the theory across classroom in service of practice as a lever of teaching transformation and organisational change.

Conceptualised this way, third places became spaces ‘we inhabit when we cannot continue with our usual ways of working, living and being, neither can we move to new ways as they do not yet exist’ (Bhabha, 1994, as cited in Hulme et al., 2009). This liminal space can be characterised as ‘a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise’ (Turner, 1997, p. 97). Such places facilitate what Berger (2004, p. 337) calls ‘transformational reflection’, reflection that challenges assumptions and long-held beliefs, while simultaneously exposing new perspectives. That reflection then serves as the basis of individual and collective agency, in the form of tactics for navigating through the remnants of existing power relationships in search of what is to come (Hulme et al., 2009; Wright, 2012).

In our own collaborative reflections, we spoke about not knowing, being uncertain, discomforted. Over time, we made ourselves increasingly vulnerable and showed the ‘edges of our understanding’ (Berger, 2004, p. 339). Indeed, we chose to follow Berger’s advice as she suggests that we can support each other by ‘[providing] openings for people to push against the edge and then be company for them as they stand at the precipice; once they are there, the growing edge is its own teacher’ (Berger, 2004, p. 345). The female academics in this group have served as one another’s company while standing on the precipice, as the following quote demonstrates:

There is diversity among peers with whom we do not work directly. Against this backdrop sharing good practice or evaluating new practices becomes more meaningful as this group either supports or enlightens these practices. There is also the feel good factor that as pioneers in our various academic areas we are not going completely off the farm.

And they have been there for each other as they step off that precipice:

The fact that you are thinking about it [an action] feels to me that you are on the right track. If you consider all aspects, [that] means that whatever you decide to do will be ‘considered’. There isn’t a right or a wrong or gold standard. For most of us, whatever we decide to do now probably won’t be the best thing to do when we look back at it in hindsight next year. I think you should just trust your instinct. You have your students’ best interests at heart. I think you should be brave.

Our experience suggests that while being on the edge can be a ‘variable experience’ (Berger, 2004, p. 344), and many may feel scared or lost, our group felt energised and excited and saw the current crisis first and foremost as an opportunity to find new ways forward.

Pushing those ways forward, outside such safe spaces, can however lead to resistance. Sharing strategies on how to navigate resistance encountered in different departments and faculties became one of the most important functions of this group. In one particularly telling example, the staff in one CPUT faculty had been determined to conduct final assessments (FISAs) face-to-face, regardless of the progress of the virus. Working completely behind the scenes, one of our group members advocated relentlessly for online assessment. Backed up by her positive experiences and reinforcement from other group members, she was able to achieve a temporary halt of face-to-face assessments with a clear directive to move all assessments online. This self-described ‘miracle’ took place despite the continued resistance of a number of high-ranking colleagues, many of whom were male. This we would argue is an example of how third places (or spaces) allow lecturers to reimagine teaching and learning and return to the original spaces to make change (Flessner, 2014). So, rather than being an end in itself, Flessner argues that ‘reflective third spaces are simply means that lead to an end that is purposeful change in the first and second spaces’ (p. 233).

As early adopters on ‘the edge’, the members of this group have accrued social capital, responsibility, and even power. They are often consulted when issues around adoption of innovation arise; they regularly present at or facilitate departmental, faculty or institutional meetings or workshops; and they invest considerable time in supporting their colleagues. All of this comes at a considerable price. Increased – often relentless – demands on their time leaves them tired and exposed. In this case, the third place, as mentioned before, is deeply gendered: as a group, the ‘eLearning champions’ are almost all women, who struggle to carry these multiple roles, invest deeply in their students’ learning but also in their academic careers, while simultaneously juggling multiple family responsibilities. They often experience academia as a hostile and uncaring, lonely place. Being part of this CoP and third place allowed them to do academia *differently*, even if just for a short period of time; it allowed them not only to use technology innovatively in their practice or develop strategies to push innovation in their departments, but also to create more caring, generous, participatory, and equitable ways of being with each other: a place that values vulnerability, that offers female solidarity and support. They imagined and created an antidote, an alternative universe to a still male-dominated and competitive academic space.

Discussion and implications

This study has chronicled the personal and professional evolution of a small group of women who started out as a CoP focused on eLearning. As we have reflected on our history, we have also begun to think about our future. Scholars have noted that CoPs go through phases, eventually moving from active to what Wenger (1998) describes as ‘memorable’, meaning that the former members look back and recognise that the group had been ‘a significant part of their identities’. History tells us that global crises, too, eventually reach a turning point, after which the collective experience fades into memory. When asked what they thought the future of the group might be, members were unsure of what form it would take but they each affirmed that it would continue. As one member stated: ‘our whole situation has changed now as we moved to lower levels of

lockdown and so we don't need as much comfort and support; however I feel it is still there'. Even if the group might not engage in such intensive engagement in the future, what will remain is the social capital – that is, the trust and cooperation, the teaching and learning innovations, and the knowledge that one small group of remarkable and determined women can have a significant impact on how an entire university weathers a period of profound crisis.

Or so we believe. This study did not attempt to measure or even document that impact; rather our evidence base invited us to focus on the individual and collective transformations that occurred within the group. We do not make any claims to speak for all women, all academics, all people of South Africa, or any group other than the six of us. Nor did we attempt to collect systematic or replicable data about our experiences, as that felt anti-thetical not only to the authenticity of the group, but also to the unsettled nature of ways of knowing that occur in third spaces. Rather, we chose to reflect both in and on our actions, and to do so together, much as we had conducted the work of the group (Schön, 1987).

During lockdown, faculty were allowed a glimpse into our students' and colleagues' living, working, and study spaces and places, both physical and virtual, literal and metaphorical. Even when we move our learning and teaching back to campus, what we have seen cannot be unseen. Especially in highly unequal contexts such as South Africa, our experiences during lockdown need to lead not only to longer-term changes in how we think about teaching and learning, but also in how we 'do' academia. In the field of academic staff development, several leading scholars have made the case that transforming teaching and learning is not primarily about changing individual practice, but rather transforming entire institutions into vibrant, caring, generous third places of teaching and learning for all (McKee et al., 2013; Stark & Smith, 2016). This, in turn, places academic staff developers in the role of community activists and organisers. There is not necessarily consensus in the literature as to the relationship between CoPs and academic staff development, but in our case there is an important reciprocity. In order to fulfil the role of academic activists and community organisers, academic staff developers need support: a community on which to draw.

Creating connections between academics across disciplines and faculties to facilitate engagement, could then lead to more sustainable and self-perpetuating CoPs, which in turn would transform departmental practices, strategies, and policies as they develop into a third place. As one of our members noted: 'the group keeps me on my toes, it makes me think [positively] and carry on doing what I do'. In the wake of an unprecedented global crisis, we can probably all use some of that.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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