

Global Educators' Network as an Online Community of Practice

Online Communities of Practice (OCOPs) are often viewed as a voluntary association of online professionals or interest groups who come together intentionally for mutual collaboration and collective value of a final result of resolving common problems, implicitly or explicitly. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, who conducted a detailed research of communities of practice, thought that communities of practice are everywhere – school, work, home, leisure. People usually are involved in the process of collective learning sharing information with one another forming conclusions which often create the basis for future progress in a field of the research the community of practice is conducting (Smith, 2009). Although it is relatively easy to start an online community, at least regarding technology, building and sustaining that community is a real challenge, especially when it comes to online education that spreads all over the world everyday single day. The Global Educators' Network (GEN) OCOP described below is a real-world practice of informal online learning that started as a passion for advancement and regular interaction.

Global Educators' Network is an online community created by educators for educators. In the beginning, the educators were trying to encourage information exchange on the subject of informal online learning. Initially, it was launched in 1999 and was based on asynchronous communication using the web-based Virtual-U software, or university simulator. This software lets one choose how faculty spends time, allocates funds, and decides if special admission to athletes should be given (Sawyer, 2002). GEN was a way to connect small group educators, and researchers focused on online learning. However, the small group proliferated into a large online

community of educators from all around the world. Initially, it was formed as a result of discussions between the three Institute/College presidents and chief executive officers, all of whom were members of an international network, the Post-Secondary International Network. The Global Educators' Network founders saw the potential for an organization providing international experiences for students and a wide variety of staff ("Global Education Network," 2017). As the membership grew, a tool was designed to enable self-registration to the online forums of GEN. In 2001, the Global Education Network was designed by Box Hill Institute in collaboration with Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in Calgary, Canada. Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, USA, joined the Global Education Network in 2004, and the Institute of Technical Education, Singapore, joined in 2006 ("Global Education Network," 2017).

Although all membership and participation in Global Educators' Network OCoP (Online Community of Practice) were voluntary, within two years of its existence it grew to 2,400 members from 75 countries (Harasim, 2012). The primary goal was to encourage collaborative learning related to online education. Most sessions were two-week seminars that eventually expanded to 3 weeks of online peer collaboration that attempted to link conceptual knowledge to real-world problems. The main success of GEN OCoP is in its missions to enhance innovative global learning and collaborative opportunities for students and member institutions. Every couple of years GEN composes a strategic plan to reach its members all over the world on how to improve collaborative learning methods ("Global Education Network," 2017). Online Collaborative learning directly supports the development of a range of high-level intellectual skills, such as critical and analytical thinking, synthesis and evaluation that help find answers and

come to conclusions most efficiently. Online Collaborative Learning influenced more than one study because it is a form of behavior pattern that cannot be referred to pedagogy only. Often the differences of background and skills of learners and researchers are what constitutes to collaboration among them (McLeod, 2015).

Today GEN is mostly known as World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics (WFCP), which includes post-secondary applied education institutions across the globe. The Federation aims to meet the strategic national and international objectives by dissemination of the latest education research and linking joint initiatives between schools and business communities. Employing combined research work, WFCP ensures that the most recent innovations in online collaboration are updated continuously to achieve solutions and share best practices. The membership to GEN or WFCP is not free. Eligibility for full membership is open to higher level colleges or polytechnics, including universities of Applied Sciences and Technology. Individual colleges and schools seeking membership of the Federation must be nominated by their national or cross-national association wherever one exists and is a current member of the Federation (“World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics,” 2017).

The Federation, or WFCP, encourages knowledge sharing among members, develops and implements international research, and continues to promote the applied higher education online collaboration sector worldwide (“World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics,” 2017). The Virtual-U software which provided the GEN platform helped users and researchers to monitor and view participation from various perspectives – the number of seminars, members, change in membership, and level of activity, as well as specific categories. Analysis of these data in each workshop provided an overview of the flow and development of a topic (Harasim, 2012).

GEN's seminars are launched to pose a topic problem or a discussion question, followed by a group discussion that involves debate, different perspectives, new ideas, various approaches, and preliminary conclusions eventually followed by the final verdict. Within systems oriented to individual accreditation, and no real pressure to meet a determined target, the GEN OCoP approach to learning is profoundly challenging. To gain significant focus on relationship through demands on them to meet centrally-determined targets, this approach to education is also problematic. It highlights just how the frameworks for schooling, lifelong learning, and youth function. The main strength of Online Community of Practice is a robust collaborative approach that can lead to profound, academic learning if not better than in a classroom. The amount of knowledge the instructors give online and the amount of work they put into an understanding of the material for students on their own in both approaches often compensate for the lack of physical activity. They can directly support the development of a range of high-level intellectual skills, such as critical thinking, analytical thinking, synthesis, and evaluation. Global Educators' Network is one of the most significant Communities of Practice in Education world that uses a close collaboration of researchers from all over the world to contribute to progress in Distance Education.

References

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