Transcript - ASU Remote 2022:
Achieving academic transformation
through faculty communities of practice

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JENNY ATWOOD: Hello and welcome to Remote, the Connected Faculty Summit. I'm Jenny Atwood with Every Learner Everywhere. And I'll be moderating today's session. The 3.5-hour sessions in this 90-minute Ask the Experts block are sponsored by Every Learner Everywhere, a non-profit network that advocates for and supports institutions in achieving equitable outcomes in US higher education through advances in digital learning.

This first block of four every learner Ask the Expert session blocks, focuses on students. Our final session with this every learner Ask the Expert block is achieving academic transformation through faculty communities of practice. And our presenters are Mike Brooks and Susan Adams. Susan Adams is the associate Director of Teaching and Learning at Achieving the Dream, where she manages programs and projects designed to build institutional capacity, innovation and meaningful engagement of full-time and part-time faculty in their professional development efforts in teaching and learning that support equitable student success.

Susan produces dynamic thought leadership around equitable instructional design strategies that contextualize student success, work to colleges teaching and learning efforts by connecting institutions to best practices, peer institutions, college examples, and resources. Susan earned her M.Ed. in student affairs administration from the Woodring College of Education at Western Washington University, and a B.A in English literature and women's studies from the University of New Hampshire.

Mike Brooks is a program manager at the Personal Learning Consortium at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. In this role, he leads projects and initiatives focused on digital learning, equity, and evidence-based teaching. His previous experience includes instructional and program leadership roles at Johns Hopkins University and Carnegie Mellon University. Mike and Susan, the floor is yours.

ADAM BROOKS: Thanks, everyone, for joining us. So Susan and I will be discussing specific disciplinary communities of practice initiative that we help to design and facilitate, and maybe offer some insights for others who may be interested in convening a similar faculty learning community or faculty community of practice. So just as an overview of what we're going to be discussing, we're going to define communities of practice and why they're valuable. We'll talk about how we designed ours for emergent learning and how we captured both discipline specific insights as well as cross-disciplinary insights. And then we'll discuss some of our lessons learned and takeaways from designing and facilitating the faculty communities that we worked with.

So a definition of a community of practice that's useful is a group of people who share a concern or passion for something that they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. I think that's pretty axiomatic. But three specific components that were important to us. First, there's a shared domain of interest. So a common theme or purpose that the group convenes around.

Also that community is engaged in joint activities and discussions so that they're built around that structure and that the participants help each other out with problems, share information and resources. Also, the practice part of community of practice means that participants are practitioners. So this is not just about discussion, but it's also about action planning, about developing a shared practice and actually building knowledge together in addition to just sharing knowledge.

So we wanted to share a quote from our colleague, Dr. Krys Zisk Strange, who is an instructional designer, she's a program leader at Tufts University, and she also works for the Online Learning Consortium, which Susan and I is organizational partners. Krys helped us with this initiative. So Krys says "A community of practice essentially divides the work of value evaluation and helps you to focus on what you need. Furthermore, there are too many places to find information and it's too much to try to determine the value."

So there's just an overwhelming amount of information and resources and suggestions out there. Communities of practice really help you to adjudicate which ones are useful for your specific purpose and what your specific contexts with a group of like-minded peers. So we thought this quote was really, really powerful and helpful for us.

SUSAN ADAMS: Great. Thank you so much, Mike. So I'm going to talk a little bit about how we started. So from an instructional design perspective, we wanted to have a foundation of understanding about how other people have actually designed communities of practice. So we gathered information from Tony Bates, who wrote a book on teaching in a digital age. And this helped us to wrap our heads around how to design for what I like to call emergent learning and co-creating knowledge. Tony uses the notion of designing for evolution, which he defines as ensuring that the community can evolve and shift in focus to meet the interests of the participants, without moving too far from the common domain of interest. So we also wanted to make sure that we built in opportunities for that open dialogue and varying perspectives. So today we're going to share how we did that technologically with asynchronous spaces and how we designed our live spaces, but also how we created a domain of interest and how we kept there. And I do want to apologize for the background noise. It was unavoidable today, so hopefully you can still hear me.

The next slide talks about our purpose and structure. So our structure included monthly live sessions and a dedicated asynchronous space to share resources and capture emerging ideas. We designed it so it became a living and breathing asset for participants to take away with them. So the primary focus was not to continue the conversation online in the Canvas site, but to build an asset, which will show you a bit later. And we're going to get some screenshots of that.

So in addition to a structure was disciplined specific, we created discipline specific groups that were given regular and consistent time to contemplate the content together with a focus on contextualizing content in their disciplines. So essentially, we had 20 minute presentations at the beginning of the two-hour session, but then we got them right away into breakout groups to give them that opportunity to really take that content, digest it, and contextualize it specific to their discipline, and that proved extraordinarily valuable to really give them that reflective and contemplative time they often don't get to have with their peers in a discipline specific way.

So on the next slide, I wanted to talk a little bit more about the design features. So we focused on creating opportunities for engagement with a blend of discipline specific. And when they came back to the main group, they got to do some interdisciplinary sharing out. And noticing through line that might happen for some of these strategies across multiple disciplines.

We also had participants do direct to co-create knowledge together. That emergence naturally happened. So we had facilitators that we're helping to capture what was discussed and to allow that to be then may possibly brought into a solution or a project, an action-based research project. And then all of that was captured in the Canvas site for people to reference look back on and continue to build on session after session.

We wanted also to have a sense of active curation of content. That's what a community of practice is. Is this a good set of content? Do we need something more specific or deeper, or is this really relevant to us? And then again, that allows us to tap into the collective knowledge of faculty to drive the development of assets and resources for the field as a whole. And that's what was so exciting about how we did this.

And we wanted to have differentiated levels of participation. Just like differentiated instruction, we wanted to have asynchronous digital spaces, ample workshop time and small groups, and then limit time spent presenting content. So it's not just digesting content, but really getting into the pieces of it.

And then getting back to Tony Bates he really wanted us to offer different levels of information and discussion to engage practitioners with different problems and levels of experience with the same discipline. And it was important in the beginning that we set that clear expectation that this is active engagement, active involvement, and really giving the topics up front with guiding questions to help the cognition of all the peers, of all the practitioners, and offering a clear curriculum of how we're going to do this. And that allowed people to come back and be ready to go for the next session and build on each one.

And so that facilitator piece was really, really important. And the facilitators were faculty in their discipline. So that also was a design feature for this particular community of practice. And back to you, Mike.

ADAM BROOKS: So as Susan and I have both mentioned, the communities were built for evolution, built to evolve and develop. And so it didn't make sense for us to have strictly defined outcomes when we were planning these live sessions and these communities as a whole. So instead, we started with a set of themes and essential questions that guided the development of our content and programming.

So we had overarching themes for the two semesters that we set up for the Communities of Practice. In fall 2021, our theme was getting to know our students

increasing engagement in digital learning environments. And in spring 2022, the overall theme was developing critical engagement in and across our disciplines. Some underlying and intersecting themes, the Genesis of these communities, and the heart of a lot of the work that Susan and I do were evidence-based teaching practices, centering and integrating equity into course design and pedagogy, and then effectively leveraging digital learning and educational technologies.

And some of the essential questions that we started with were how do we inhabit a digital learning space that promotes equity and inclusion in our disciplines, and that facilitates the equitable achievement of learning outcomes. And how do we create a digital learning space that invites interaction, collaboration, and belonging. So these were the guiding principles that we used to structure our programming and our discussions.

In terms of our specific live session topics, as Susan alluded to we had monthly live sessions. They were on Fridays at 12 PM Eastern, and we had three in the fall and three in the spring. So in the fall, we had a session focused on equity using your syllabi, a session focused on diversifying and being flexible with the way that you assess students and being caring and empathetic.

Third session of the fall was about integrating self-awareness, metacognition, and transparency. And then in the spring, our sessions were focused on sharing discipline specific resources for building critical engagement, implementing open pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching practices, and then supporting instructors and students as agents of change and helping faculty to connect students with the social justice issues within their disciplines.

SUSAN ADAMS: Great. So now we're going to take a--

ADAM BROOKS: Yeah. Go ahead Susan.

SUSAN ADAMS: So now we're going to do a little tour of some screenshots of the digital space. So a lot of people are very interested in what does this actually look and feel like. So going on actually to the next slide, you'll notice here that what we did is we had a Canvas site. But then inside of the Canvas site we did iframes with a Google Sheet, which allowed students or allowed the faculty and the participants during the live session to actually populate content with prompts inside of a Google document.

And they were able to make comments with each other. But we designed these Google documents with tables, as you can see, that allowed them to write down what their

discipline was, what their idea was. So we created essentially community libraries of resources and also community strategies based on certain topics. So that helped us begin to build assets. So again, between live sessions, the chances of people going to Canvas and going to an asynchronous space is pretty minimal. So why force that?

Most of the building and the connecting and the co-creation of knowledge is going to happen during the live sessions, so we really wanted this space to be more relevant and meaningful and helpful to really capture those ideas, so both participants and facilitators would populate these Google documents, but they would be able to access them during the live session, even though they were in the asynchronous space afterwards, so that really created that alignment. And that moment of this is where I can capture knowledge. This is where I can co-create assets for the whole field.

The next slide shows Miro. So we used that as a technology to have basically a digital whiteboard space. And I would say Miro is one of my favorite technologies, although it can be a little bit complicated to use. But if you give clear instructions, you can see here we had a ton of sticky notes, and each discipline had their own board, and they were able to answer questions.

And when they're in their breakout groups, they went to these Miro boards and the facilitators helped them capture information and ideas and start to bring things together. And then again, these Miro boards were uploaded to the Canvas site. So building a nice robust asset for the whole community of practice as we went along.

ADAM BROOKS: And so Susan mentioned that the facilitators were a really important component of our communities of practice, the structure. So we were grateful to be able to hire eight total faculty leads or faculty facilitators. So we had two facilitators within each of the four disciplines that we focused on, which were chemistry, writing, math, and biology. And within each of those groups, we had one two-year instructor and one four-year instructor as a facilitator. So that structure really was beneficial to us because we were able to represent the perspectives of both community colleges and four-year colleges.

Our participants were from a variety of institutional types as well, so the lead or facilitator structure really helped to people to feel comfortable and to make sure that they were represented, that their voices were heard and their perspectives were represented in the programming that we developed.

Facilitator impact. It's hard to overestimate. It proved essential to incorporate faculty and disciplinary perspectives into the session planning and delivery. I'll talk about that a little bit, I think on the next slide. But just getting the facilitators involved throughout the process was really important.

One quote from one of our writing facilitators, Dr. Elizabeth Sanders Lopez, she said that, "The energy was very good. The structure of the sessions worked well for focused conversation and cross-disciplinary idea generation." So some of our biggest takeaways or insights and opportunities that we wanted to share with you all.

First that closer collaboration with and integration of the faculty facilitators really enriched our session topics and discussions. So throughout the two semesters that we worked with the faculty facilitators, initially we had them involved as the people who led the discipline specific breakout sessions during our live sessions. And they continue to do that throughout the two semesters. But we also realized it was critical to involve them in our planning meetings and to help us develop our programming in general. And we also had the facilitators share during our interdisciplinary portions of our events as well, not just serve as leaders of the discipline specific breakout groups. So the more that we involve the facilitators, we found that the more enriched our session topics and discussions were.

Secondly, we felt that our session design and structure was a really successful fit for our participants. As I mentioned, we had monthly two-hour sessions. And as Susan alluded to we had the general structure that we adopted for each one of our two-hour live sessions is that we would start with a short presentation to the whole group about the topic of interest, whether it was equitizing in your syllabus or supporting students and instructors as agents of change, whatever the topic was.

Then we would ask our faculty facilitators to share examples of specific teaching lesson plans or approaches that they adopt in their classrooms. Then we would have breakout sessions where within specific disciplines, participants would discuss their issues and problems, work on the collaborative documents that Susan mentioned together. And then we would come back to the whole group and share across disciplines, talk for example, how an approach that was discussed in the math community could be adopted in a writing classroom, for example.

And we would sometimes do this several times within a session. Sometimes we would have two breakout rooms followed by two cross-disciplinary share outs. But we felt that

structure worked really well. Third, we thought that we did have a

issue where attendance was higher at the beginning of each semester and dropped off

as the semester went on, which makes sense, because the semesters get very busy

with teaching and grading, but we felt that we could increase engagement and

attendance with more intentional action planning and also with more intentional

community building.

So an example of the action building piece or the action planning piece would be, if we

have a session about equitizing your syllabus, maybe during the next session, we ask

the participants to come back with a revised syllabus and to seek feedback on it. So just

to have some assignment or deliverable that gets woven throughout the semester and

that people work on, we think that would be one way of building coherence and

community.

And another thing is that we thought, if we were doing this again, we would want to

incorporate more low stakes discussion and just check-ins. We tended when we started

our sessions to jump right into the meat and substance of the topic. But it might have

been easier for people to get to know each other if we just started out by saying, how is

everyone feeling? What are you thinking about? What are you concerned with? What

kinds of problems are you working on? So we felt that before we jump right into the high

stakes substantive discussion, it might be good to check in with people and have them

feel comfortable and get to know each other that way.

And then finally, we felt that our takeaways from each session could be shared more

broadly and beyond the communities themselves. So we had a lot of really great

knowledge that was generated, a lot of great resources that were shared within each

one of our sessions. And I think we did a really good job of sharing that back with the

full group and with the people who might not have been able to attend that session. But

there's really no reason why that knowledge needs to be constricted or restricted to the

community itself.

So we felt that we could share on LinkedIn or share with our colleagues on other

initiatives, et cetera a lot of the takeaways that were generated within the communities.

So we felt that we could have a bigger ripple effect or impact overall. But so those are

some of our main takeaways. Hope that gives you a sense of what we did, and hope

that gets you thinking about what you might do if you're interested in a faculty

development initiative such as this one. And I think we have about 10 minutes or so for questions.

JENNY ATWOOD: Thank you so much, Mike and Susan. And I see that we do have some questions for the audience and for everyone else. Please go ahead and submit any additional questions in the Q&A tab. So to begin with, is there a platform you found that works better than others for conducting faculty learning communities?

ADAM BROOKS: I can start to answer this one. I think we use Zoom as a platform for our live sessions. That worked super well for us, because the breakout room feature was very conducive to the discipline specific communities that we wanted to set up. So we were able to just pre-create for breakout rooms for writing, math, biology, and chemistry and then set it up so that participants could choose which room they wanted to enter when we did the breakouts. So I thought that worked really well. But, Susan, maybe you might want to talk a little bit about the Canvas site, the asynchronous platform that we use.

SUSAN ADAMS: I think it could be utilized in any learning management system. It's a great tool that you likely already have at your institution. I tend to like Canvas. It's got a clean interface to me, but Blackboard, Moodle and Brightspace now are also opportunities. So whatever's existing on your campus can also be a helpful tool. Since faculty are already there, you're likely you're teaching and learning center. Your instructional designers could help set up that home or master shell there to help support a community of practice on your campus.

ADAM BROOKS: And then the only other thing I would mention is the collaborative documents that Susan referred to. We use Google Docs and we use the Miro boards. Those tools were super important for structuring and capturing knowledge from our discussions, instead of just having them be discussed and forgotten about.

JENNY ATWOOD: Well, we actually had a question. If you could speak a little bit more about the Miro boards and how it works and how you've been able to use it successfully.

SUSAN ADAMS: The Miro boards are best utilized when you have a really strong prompt. So you want to direct people with a relevant and meaningful question. And then the second element is giving them at least three to five minutes of quiet time to actually populate it with the sticky notes and watch that emerge.

And then you really want to have the facilitator look at that and come up with a summary statement to then direct the conversation and guide it. But again, it's a Canvas. It's a blank Canvas. So you can create whatever you want and design it in so many creative ways, but you want to help guide it cognition. You want to help guide faculties thinking, help guide connections that you see, themes that are emerging. And that's what's the beautiful thing about it is here we have a Canvas together and we all have the same paintbrush. And we get to paint it together and have things emerge. So anything goes with the Miro board. And that's what makes it so beautiful.

So it would take kind of a group of thoughtful, I would not do it in a vacuum just yourself. But to really work with another person as a thought partner to help design what that set of questions might be, what that set of activities might be for using those sticky notes or using an area for them to add text, like with inside of a Google Doc.

JENNY ATWOOD: Wonderful. So our next question, what is the best time of year to run a faculty learning community, and ideally, how often should they meet?

ADAM BROOKS: I think that depends on the nature of your community. Our initiative was about connecting faculty across lots of different institutions and several time zones. So we felt that Fridays at 12:00 PM Eastern worked well because it was not too early on the West Coast. And not too late. And the Friday worked well. A lot of people don't teach on Friday, even though there are obviously exceptions to that. So that's what we did during the first semester. And then we decided it worked well. So we continued. I think it definitely would depend on your context. If you are getting instructors together just at one institution, you could probably pay more attention to their teaching schedules, and maybe you would want to-- just so that you're giving everyone an opportunity to participate, you might want to have it at different times. Maybe some of them are on Tuesdays and some of them are on Fridays, just so that you can work around everyone's teaching schedules. But that's just one example. But I think it's really context-dependent.

JENNY ATWOOD: Now what are some of the constraints that you've met in constructing your communities the future educators should avoid in creating their communities of practice?

ADAM BROOKS: That's a good question. I mean, one of them that I mentioned was just getting people engaged and getting people to participate throughout a semester. So I

think that having really dedicated communication and messaging when you're starting up the communities as well as when you're reconvening them is important.

One thing that we expected was to have-- have the same-- we had two semesters of these communities of practice. We expected to have many of the same participants across the two semesters, and instead we had two wonderful groups, but only 10% or 15% of the people who attended in the fall continued to attend in the spring. So I guess one constraint from my perspective was trying to redouble the outreach at the beginning of the next semester to try to ensure that people come back. So just one example of a constraint that occurred to me.

SUSAN ADAMS: I think the other constraint is really how do we articulate the value of a community of practice? Even the word itself I think, to me is a great word. A community of practice, I think, is even stronger than a faculty learning circle. But what do people understand that to be in their own context?

And again, promoting that on your campus, to me, the constraint is the relationship building that we need to have and the trust building to say, am I really going to spend two hours with you every month, and what Am I going to get out of that? So we really do have to market it in a way and also gain that trust. Create a culture on the campus that invites that this is going to be something that's thriving and generative for you, and it's not going to be numbing and consumptive is what I often say, and how do we strike that balance and how do we share that with people, is the constraint that I think we really had to get people actually involved in finding value in it.

JENNY ATWOOD: So likely our last question of the session is do you recommend offering faculty a stipend or some other incentive to be part of a community of practice? And another part is how do you reengage faculty who've maybe dropped off?

SUSAN ADAMS: I would absolutely say stipends are really, really important. And obviously we all would love that. We can't do a big buffet lunch anymore in so many ways, so a stipend would be a great thing. So I would say yes to that.

And the engagement question I would say is as long as it's relevant and meaningful. So when they feel connected to the content and they feel like they're actually going to get real solutions and feedback that's responsive to their context, that's going to motivate them to come back and re-engage. And that's why having the facilitators be disciplined, specific facilitators in our case, but also well trained facilitators that can be responsive

in the moment so that people feel heard and they feel a part of it is really key to me, or one strategy that can super help people coming back and to stay highly engaged.

ADAM BROOKS: That's great. And I think the only thing I wanted to say is that we were able to offer a stipend to our facilitators. I think that went super well. They were engaged throughout the semester and we couldn't have done it without them. They made each session. We would love to have been able to offer a stipend too for all of our participants from a lot of different institutions.

What we were able to do is offer them a digital badge. And I think that was somewhat helpful in getting them to attend and engage. But overall, if the resources are available, I think it's definitely a good idea to compensate people for their time and for what they will learn.

JENNY ATWOOD: Wonderful. Well, thank you again so much, Mike and Susan both. And thank you to everyone who has attended the session. Now we're taking a break so you can explore the event. Be sure to check out our partner hall to access valuable resources and engage with sponsors, as well as the networking lounge to mix and mingle with attendees. We encourage your participation in theme networking chats that align with today's topics. And again, thank you so much.