Forbes school of business think tanks exploring teaching, learning & relationship building in a virtual learning community

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Abstract

This paper describes ongoing research based on a university faculty Think Tank as a means of establishing and sustaining developmental networks among faculty at a large online university. Specifically, the paper explores the Think Tank as a virtual learning community wherein faculty have shared knowledge and enjoyed personalized learning opportunities for a period of over two years. Approximately 100 faculty members are typically invited to participate in the virtual learning community which meets formally every two weeks (with some summer months off). Between meetings, faculty have developed relationships including multi-directional mentoring and The paper will consider if and how participation in the Think Tank has served faculty and/or why other faculty members who are invited do not choose to participate in the Think Tank. First, the paper describes the Think Tank as a virtual learning community. Specifically, it sets the ground rules that have enabled the community to thrive in a virtual and egalitarian climate. Then, multi-directional mentoring as a means of knowledge sharing in the think tank is explored. Bandura's social learning theory and Kolb's experiential learning model provide the conceptual framework for relationship building in this collegial environment. Next, the research questions that have been posed are shared. Data collection for this study is currently in process; therefore findings are not yet available. Finally, study limitations are briefly discussed and future directions for research are explored.

*Keywords***:** Collaboration, Learning community, Faculty engagement, Online Relationship Building, Online community, Multidirectional mentoring relationships.

Introduction

The increasingly competitive nature of today's universities leads faculty members and researchers alike to consistently seek out different venues for collaborative opportunities. A variety of faculty enrichment activities, if properly presented and organized, can add value and further solidify faculty roles as lifelong learners and seekers of knowledge that benefits others, as well as the faculty. In the *Apology,* Aristotle applauded his teacher, Socrates, for recognizing, "The only real wisdom is knowing -you know nothing" (as cited in Olivier, 2011, para. 12.).

More than two decades ago, Austin and Baldwin expressed their opinion that isolated research ventures conducted by one faculty member locked up in his/her lab are long gone (1992). Furthermore, they defined faculty collaboration in terms of "a cooperative endeavor that involves common goals, coordinated effort, and outcomes or products for which the collaborators share responsibility and credit. This definition is broad and flexible, because faculty collaboration varies in numerous ways contingent upon whether the partnership is for teaching or research as well as on the participants' fields of specialization, institutions of employment, career stages, and a host of other factors" (Austin & Baldwin, 1992, para.2). It is the opinion of the authors that Think Tank participants define faculty collaboration in their own unique way.

This wise attitude toward learning expresses the collaborative nature of an unending learning process, ultimately drawing researchers into conversation, thereby creating avenues for collaboration through peer review, mentoring, brainstorming, engaging in joint research ventures, and creating unlikely learning communities. Geographic boundaries and limitations of one's own intellectual framework are stretched to new limits. The very nature of collaborative learning is at the heart of Think Tank experiences which is the focus of the authors' upcoming research.

Think Tank as a virtual learning community

In order to grasp the intent of the Think Tank as virtual learning community, one must consider what constitutes a learning community. This job of defining may start with a simple question of how the virtual nature of such a community differentiates from other learning communities. Leprade (2015) asserts that professional learning communities have the propensity to engage faculty "in a continuous cycle of inquiry or learning that promotes a collaborative neighborhood or community". A learning community's value depends on the quality of the conversations within the community, as well as the purposefulness of the collaboration (Leprade, 2015). In addition, participants need to have a sense of self as efficient co-creators in the learning community. "To be motivated to collaborate, all participants must first see some personal value in collaboration and believe that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful collaborative partners" (Small, 2002, para. 2). Collaboration in higher education is nothing new and is an accepted practice. Bringing faculty together to foster critical thinking, collegiality, community, caring, collaboration and innovation are constantly in motion. Universities look for new and innovative ways in which to create these communities that drive collaboration and student success. Today, the Think Tank model is one solution for achieving positive results in these

areas. Collaboration cannot unfold without certain challenges which if, "surfaced include a lack of trust over issues such as intellectual property, uncertainty about the potential benefits of working together, and the difficulty on both sides of finding the time for initial exploratory conversations" (Jones & Clulow, 2012, para. 3). Having a non-mandatory brainstorming venue, along the lines of Think Tank, enables faculty to find the space where they can freely engage in dialogue with others within their respective fields, bounce ideas, and at times engage in research ventures if mutual interest exists.

The virtual aspect of the learning community adds both benefits and challenges due to geographic dispersion of participants and other aspects of organizational culture. The university culture itself needs to be open to allow their faculty to organize, self-regulate, and participate in similar venues. Participation in the sessions is not mandatory. Furthermore, other than a true desire to learn, collaborate, and participate, faculty have no further incentives to join on a bi-weekly basis, except to be part of a community of scholars. Over time, as is often true of communities, the regular sessions have evolved due to the diversity of topics and presenters, as well as the ever changing climate of the sessions – in part created by the focus of each presenter. One may venture out to say that Think Tank had some aspect of, "'Sandboxes' that allow groups to focus on and experiment with ideas without fear of failure, or a permanent 'café culture' where academics and business people alike can drop in at any time and be sure of finding someone with common interests to bounce ideas off" (Jones & Clulow, 2012, para. 7). The flexibility of Think Tank is in the fact that is facilitated by fellow faculty members, with optional participation component, which promotes the welcoming and non-judgmental environment at the very core of each session creating a setting where casual conversation may result in a research idea sharing and collaborative opportunity.

The beginning sessions were mainly focusing on ensuring that the new body of remote faculties are comfortable with some procedural matters pertaining to doing research and getting one's research approved by the university. Shortly thereafter, the sessions changed quite a bit from its original design hosting one or more presenters each week. Each of these presenters were in charge of presenting their ongoing or completed research, sharing best teaching practices, or sharing their insights after attending an interesting conference. Think Think's bi-weekly sessions are currently hosted by two faculty members, both of whom are full time and remote from campus; as are the majority of participants. Every two weeks the faculty facilitators invite colleagues to attend, peer-review research, and/or present their own research in varying stages of progress, by phone and/or computer. A portion of the

meeting is devoted to questions and answers pertinent to "project refinement, potential future collaborations, ongoing coaching, and multi-directional learning characterized by informal collegiality." (Reed, Zelihic, Davis, 2014, p.1). Presenters are sometimes contacted by the hosts proactively, based on their current and past research, or their recent conference presentation. However, at times, presenters proactively contact two hosts with a presentation idea ranging from their current research, past research, best teaching practices and/or summary of the recent presentation they attended. Having a good mixture of different topics keeps audience members engaged and eager to hear more. The session agenda is shared with all participants beforehand allowing them, if they chose to do so, to educate themselves on a particular topic they may not be as familiar with, and ask some engaging questions during the session.

In the venue of this article, the authors will present the very nature of online community, multidirectional mentorship relationships and mentoring in the context of a true learning community which is at a very core of Think Tanks.

Relationship building venues for the online faculty community

An interpersonal relation is a relatively long-term association between two or more persons. These types of relationships appear as a, "special domain of the social system, involving direct, spontaneous contacts among individuals, differing from the general, formal character of the relations within the group, class or collectivities" (Lazarescu & Stan, 2013, pp.65-69). In general, brainstorming venues with faculty members sharing ideas, research, and best practices in an informal setting are not necessarily present with many universities. While there is a significant pressure for faculty members to engage in research and present at the peer review conferences, there is not a significant pressure for faculty to share their current and upcoming research amongst their internal peer group within a particular university. As a matter of fact, sharing of research is frowned upon by some due to the delicate nature of faculty position within a modern university of today- where one tries to balance collegiality and competiveness at the same time.

Faculty members are under a great amount of pressure regardless of the university. As such, sometimes hearing that another faculty member just completed a successful research may not be welcomed as favorably, if one hears about it through the university wide announcements or a quick email. However, with Think Tank being in place, faculty members are able to hear in depth information about a particular research, provide feedback, ask questions, gain some new ideas or engage in the future collaborative efforts with either a

presenter or participating faculty. This gives them a sense of a vested interest in the success of a particular research venture and university wide research process. The sense of collegiality and collaboration suppresses some less admirable feelings of professional envy and exclusion.

Literature review

In the venues of this article, authors focus on several key concepts impacting Think Tank sessions: Mentoring in the context of a learning community, Online community, Multidirectional mentoring relationships, Kolb Experiential Learning and Bandura's Social learning theories, and Collaboration.

Mentoring in the context of learning community:

Pressure to research, collaborate, and work together is present not only at many traditional universities but also in a private university sector. Scholarship requirement is strictly enforced throughout the vast majority of universities. The encouragement to research is now translated to a requirement to engage in research as part of faculty's tenure, promotional opportunities, and regular annual evaluations. Mentoring at the university level is encouraged and promoted as one of the core requirements without which research collaboration goals would be hard to obtain.

If mentoring between colleagues happens in the context of relationships, then that explains why structured mentoring programs are only intermittently successful. Some partnerships flourish; others flounder. "Relationships may emerge when partners are randomly paired, but they certainly are not an automatic outcome. Just as teachers mentor some but not all students, some collegial relationships move beyond the pleasant exchange of strategies and discussion of instructional details, and some do not "(Weimer, 2015, para. 2015). A a matter of fact, some mentors are not doing such an admirable work due to their personal calling but due to their obligation towards the university itself. Such, "mandatory" mentorship tasks are not always effective for either one of the two parties. Once mentor becomes a colleague and eventually a fellow research collaborator, true productive relationships are possible.

Therefore, relationship is at a core of each mentorship effort. Good or bad mentorship relationships evolve over time with the strength of relationship impacting the strength and ultimate success of mentorship efforts. No research disputes the significance and impactful nature of mentorship. If done in a meaningful manner, Penner claims that "There is less

likelihood that persons will fall prey to personal or professional bad decisions or moral failure if such persons are in an open, caring, ongoing mentor relationship." (2001, para. 3). Therefore, good mentorship is closely connected to the decision making mechanisms, which one may say is quite crucial in every arena, academic setting being no exception.

Lankau and Scandura (2002) defined mentoring as, "functions establish a protégé's sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in his or her role in an organization" (p. 780). Furthermore, the authors promote an idea how the personal learning through mentorship among one's peers decreases "role ambiguity" which plights many different industries, universities not being excluded (2002, p. 781). This level of mentorship is achieved at many universities through collaboration of willing peers who present their research at the faculty enrichment functions, collaborate, and engage in joint research ventures. Moreover, this is achieved through the observation of how others learn and teach others, and how others' knowledge quest translates into a beneficial venture for the passive or active audience within the faculty arena. It is in fact the observational nature of Think Thank that promotes collegial dialogue, non-judgmental review of one's current research, while creating a significant opportunity for future research.

Online community:

Think Tanks build community, collegiality and most importantly, they build collaboration and drive innovation. Collaboration has always been a driving force in furthering student success. In higher education it is encouraged. As a faculty member, one has to develop relationships with each other and share best practices. A productive dialogue of how to create the best learning experience for the students is one constant amongst faculty colleagues. The learning experience, at the core of Think Tank, is very much connected to its delivery format (online collaboration) and it is very much correlated to the nature of online learning communities.

Garrison states that a learning community as "a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct meaning and confirm mutual understanding" (as cited in Wilcoxon, 2011, para.7). Constructing meaning in the environment of mutual understanding portrays the very nature of each Think Thank Session. While the brainstorming and collaborative processes take place, a sense of faculty community is created; not an easy task in an online setting.

As per the old saying, "People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care", one can never underestimate the importance of human connection in all venues

of life, the world of academia being no exception (Hartman, 2010, p.42). Human connection is at a core of relationship building, which is not easily obtained in an online learning environment. The other story in itself is how one needs to work on building similar relationship in an online setting without having a benefit of seeing his/her students and being able to communicate with them in a more traditional face to face manner. The authors do not want to put a label of increased difficulty on the relationship building ventures in an online setting but are venturing out to establish that the relationship building path in an online setting may require some increased creativity, flexibility, and persistence on behalf of the online faculty members (Zelihic, 2015, p.2). The peer review process is a springboard to get into this world of relationship building while creating a sense of an online learning community.

In each Think Tank, ideas are shared and explored through collaboration and discussion. Innovation occurs while research and teaching practices are discussed. The end result is creation of not only a virtual Think Tank community but also furthering faculty collaborations outside of the Think Tank creating a true sense of faculty community. Sense of community is quite often a driving force for positive change. Ideas emerging from Think Tank can lead to innovative improvements, fine-tuning which has a potential of driving quality and faculty delivery in the classroom. Virtual environments do benefit faculty. Read (2010) states, "virtualization is not new. It can be, and is, used at any scale: between institutions to share different applications on the same computer, or within a university or college to run applications from different departments on a central facility" (Read, 2010). As such, virtualization potential is interpreted differently by different institutions. The somewhat old fashioned view that virtual setting, by its very nature, is not prone to encourage building the sense of community, encourage collaboration, and sense of deep rooted relationship is to a certain degree rejected by the presence of venues similar to the one analyzed in this article.

Multi-directional mentoring as means of knowledge sharing:

Out of Think Tank sessions, a research idea came about to explore the very nature of Think Tank effectiveness measuring its impact amongst the participating faculty. The research about the effectiveness of Think Tank venue for establishing and sustaining developmental networks among faculty at a large online university is currently being conducted. The research aims to discover if Think Tank participation assists faculty in feeling as members of a learning community, whether new research ventures and ideas came about as a result of bi-weekly Think Tank participation, and ultimately to measure how many collaborative

research instances occurred as a direct result of bi-weekly Think Tanks.

Think Tank was never created as a mentoring venue but its very nature it is a great environment for informal mentorship relationships. More senior colleagues take their younger counter parts "under their wings" as a result of their relationships and mutual understanding formed through Think Tank interactions. While research pertaining to the effectiveness of these newly formed relationships is still under way, the authors are already familiar with at least several instances where research ventures resulted from Think Tank participants primarily getting to know each other during one of the sessions. Think Tank witnessed many instances of "group mentoring" where several faculty members listen to one's best practices and tips, implementing some of those after the actual section. Multi-directional mentoring results when this collaborative faculty mentorship relationships transcends from faculty setting into the classroom setting, with faculty members benefiting from shared practices, thereby enriching the classroom experience for their students and becoming unofficial mentors to some of them.

Regardless of the nature of mentorship endeavor, where there is no trust, there can be no mentoring. Wade, Cameron, Morgan & Williams (2011) discuss the phenomenon of student perceptions, "of the importance of interpersonal relationships in online groups affect their perceptions of trust within the group" and how that ultimately impacts their learning experience (p.383). The sense of trust is a reoccurring theme in both sets of relationships between both students and faculty /student relationship in an online setting. Therefore, the trickle-down effect of good communication practices which lead to a successful relationship building between faculty members and students impacts the communication patterns and interpersonal relationship between students themselves ultimately resulting in trust building amongst all parties. Relationship cannot exist without trust and trust cannot be built without a relationship. The cycle of trust and relationship can be present in an online classroom equally effective as in the traditional setting if proper effort is put into nurturing these at times sensitive concepts (Zelihic, 2015). Trust is at a very core of mentoring and such an important ingredient for a successful relationship. Participating faculty members have a significant amount of trust in their Think Tank community, which is truly required when one presents ongoing research or his/her thoughts on teaching practices in a group setting. Without this, informal mentorship relationships would not exist.

Bandura's social theory and Kolb's experiential learning:

The concept of social learning expressed in Bandura's social theory as a concept of, "reciprocal interaction, which holds that the person and the environment affect each other. In fact, the environment, person and behavior influence each other in an interaction known as reciprocal causation (Sung, Seung-Bong, Seung-Hwa, 2014, pp.97-111) is one of Think Tank's foundations. At the core of Bandura's theory is the learning process through observation influenced by behavior and attitude of others and the learning environment in general. "Bandura (1977) believes that humans are active information processors and think about the relationship between their behavior and its consequences. Processing presented information is very much part of the action-driven learning approach within the Think Tank venue. Observational learning could not occur unless cognitive processes were at work." (as cited in McLeod, 2011, para. 1). As faculty engages in Think Tank, they truly learn through an act of observation first and foremost. This creates a phenomenon of observational learning with later founded "coded information" used as a "ground for action" –future research ventures in this instance (Bandura, 1997).

Grusec dissect the social learning theory even further in emphasizing the crucial value of motivation if observation is to result in productive learning "The final process governing observational learning involves motivational variables. There must, for example, be sufficient incentive to motivate the actual performance of modeled actions "(1992, pp. 775-786). Faculty members show their motivation through attending Think Tank sessions which offer no direct incentives and are non-mandatory venues and often not connected with their professional development activities. They see value in what Think Tank venue offers and the potential one gets from attending those sessions, which is motivation in itself.

Another theory very much at works within the Think Tank venue is that of Kolb's experiential learning. "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it (Kolb, 1984, p.41). Faculty truly "grasps" experience of others during Think Tank sessions and in certain cases transforms the way they themselves think and approach research or transform the thought processes of others within the Think Tank community. Kolb (1994) define the learning process in terms of having it, "portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner "touches all bases"—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a

recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. (as cited in Schenck & Cruickshank, 2015, p. 73). We see all of these stages at works in Think Tank- from sharing research and teaching experiences, reflecting on those experiences, through collaboration and brainstorming to taking action and engaging in further research and future collaborations.

Collaboration:

The Think Tank model is just one example of a model for collaborative learning and innovation. Technology today has changed the teaching landscape. Today, it allows for many more networking opportunities. The more faculty members connect and collaborate at the universities, the more ideas are generated and explored. All of this leads to new approaches for course design and delivery. Furthermore, it leads to innovations, fine tuning and transitional changes that all come together to further student success. Burns (2015) states "widely shared innovation can yield new levels of efficiency and productivity to make higher education more affordable and, therefore, more accessible. At the same time, deeper collaboration can encourage institutions to put their goals in a broader national context" (para.1). Defining the university goals through collaborative efforts of its faculty is at a very core of innovative thinking.

Think Tank venue encourages team building, collegiality, and relationship building which are not always easy to achieve in an online setting. Jawadi, Daassi, Favier, and Kalika (2013), studied Leadership Behavior Complexity Theory (BCT) highlighting, "the behaviors and roles of effective leaders in a context with a high level of ambiguity and complexity" (p.200). Furthermore, the researchers indicated that virtual leaders have multiple communication channels with "various level of richness" through "task related actions and positive and dynamic behaviors" (p. 302). This positive dynamics and action driven approach is truly present with every Think Tank session. Faculty members have an opportunity to their current or future research amongst their peers in a non-judgmental, collegial environment, where free flow of ideas and productive comments are encouraged. This action-driven, interactive approach assures researchers are given some instantaneous feedback on their research. At times, Think Tank discussions generate some new ideas as research findings are analyzed by other fellow other researchers and Think Tank participants alike. Despite some skeptical views, online classroom and online faculty enrichment opportunities may be equally positioned for relationship building as their traditional counterparts. As long as the setting itself is effective in promoting encouraging and collaborative environment, successful relationships may be formed and maintained.

Think Tank's significance

The authors are of a strong belief that Think Tank Venue is a prime example of their university's core mission and values. As such, it is very much aligned with the university's mission of pursuit of high level and innovative learning opportunities. Considering that the venue Think Tank is held virtually, unlike the vast majority of similar venues within other universities, it will be an interesting to study its findings in particular the ones dealing with its potential success in building the sense of faculty community in an online settings. It will also be enlightening to study its long-term consequences on both faculty learning practices, collaborative opportunities, and future research directions. An important indication of Think Tank's effectiveness will be to measure how many research ventures resulted directly from faculty members' Think Tank participation and interactions.

The authors hope that this research will not only enrich the existing body of research within the arena of online community, but also provide an example of a future model for other universities to follow in similar circumstances.

Closing

In the venue of this particular article, the authors explored the ground rules that have enabled the community to thrive in a virtual and egalitarian climate through bi-weekly Think Tanks. Furthermore, multi-directional mentoring as a means of knowledge sharing in the Think Tank was explored. Bandura's social learning theory and Kolb's experiential learning model provided the conceptual framework for relationship building in this collegial environment.

The authors are currently emerged in an ongoing research *Think Tanks – Exploring Teaching, Learning, & Relationship Building in a Virtual Learning Community.* The research on Think Tank sessions, during which faculty members share their ongoing or past research, discuss best teaching practices, and report their impressions from attending research presentations, will attempt to explore the effectiveness of these sessions from a standpoint of future and past research collaboration, enhancement of teaching practices, and ultimately building the sense of online community.

It is the authors' hope that upcoming analysis of research findings may show evidence of research collaboration and well-established sense of online community by those participants, whose research ideas came out of Think Tank brainstorming or who had the

opportunity to engage and ultimately work on another research venture with other Think Tank participants. The authors hope that their research may provide valuable findings which may benefit Think Tanks, similar in a nature to the one presented in this article, and may provide a model of faculty collaboration, self-organization, interaction, collegiality and cooperation for other learning institutions to follow.

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