A case study investigating virtual communities of practice, as a vehicle for teachers' continuous professional development in the further education sector.

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**Thesis Abstract**

This thesis examines Further Education (FE) teachers' experiences in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes within a single case study of an online Community of Practice (CoP) called PDNorth. Guided by Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice and Boyer's (1990) scholarship-reconsidered frameworks, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, using a structured survey (n=20) and in-depth interviews (n=7) to explore the diverse experiences of FE teachers across various educational settings.

This study identifies challenges such as time limitations and resource limitations and difficulties in translating collaborative learning into classroom practice. It highlights the need for adaptive CPD programmes and structures. Benefits include improved teaching skills, methods and enriched networks with collaborative CoPs, which are revealed to be vital for effective practitioners of CPD. The study also uncovers the evolution of engagement over time and the varying levels of engagement with different forms of Boyer's scholarship domains.

The study addresses the limited empirical research on online CPD among FE teachers. It investigates the specific dynamics, challenges and opportunities within the FE context, which is facing evolving reform policies in the UK. Quality was assured through member checks, reflective practices and triangulation of data sources. The study contributes actionable insights

for institutions and policy makers to provide CPD offerings, fostering FE practitioners' growth, collaboration and innovation. Additionally, it offers a nuanced understanding of how online CoPs can support different forms of scholarship in the FE sector.

## Thesis Statement

This research reveals the pivotal role of online Communities of Practice (CoP) within the Further Education (FE) sector in England. Through reflective thematic analysis of interviews and survey data, the study examines the perceived benefits, engagement strategies, challenges and dynamics within these CoPs. The research highlights their transformative impact on teaching practices, networking opportunities and overcoming professional isolation. The study demonstrates how CoPs foster the role of positive online environments for collaborative learning. It also highlights their potential to significantly enhance FE practitioners' CPD experiences. This is particularly relevant given the evolving educational paradigms and policy shifts in the UK.

# Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning

Signed:    K.L. Billingsley
Dated:     24th November 2024

**CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

**1.1. Personal Background to the Research**

My motivation for this study stems from my own extensive experience and involvement in the Further Education (FE) sector. With over twenty-five years of experience as a teacher and manager, I have held various positions such as Director of Curriculum, Head of Learning, Senior Manager and Head of School and my current role in a small FE college in the North of England as Head of Quality, Teaching and Learning. During the past five years, I have primarily focused on English, Maths and English as a Second Language (ESOL) subjects. In my managerial roles I have been responsible for supporting and empowering teachers, ensuring their professional development meets the needs of the College and individual departments, for driving improvements in teaching practices.

The importance of continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers in the FE sector has been well documented in the literature. Broad (2015a) highlights the critical role of CPD in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, while also acknowledging the challenges that FE teachers face in accessing meaningful professional development opportunities. Similarly, Greatbatch (2018) emphasised the need for effective CPD strategies that address the specific needs of FE practitioners and support their ongoing professional development.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) have emerged as a powerful tool for developing collaborative learning and knowledge sharing among FE teachers. Wenger (1998) defines CoPs as groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Within the FE sector, CoPs have been recognised as valuable platforms for teachers to engage in reflective practice, share best practices and support each other in navigating the complexities of their professional roles (Jameson and Hillier, 2020).

As a proponent of professional learning and improvement in teaching quality, I am interested in exploring the role of CoPs in continuous professional development for FE teachers. Collaborative, practice-oriented learning has shown potential for driving positive change and innovation in the FE sector (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008). CoPs may offer opportunities for FE teachers to work together on common challenges and share insights, but their effectiveness and impact on professional practice need to be thoroughly investigated. This study aims to explore how CoPs function in the FE context, considering not only their potential benefits but also any barriers that may affect their use for professional development. This research seeks to contribute to a nuanced discussion about the role of CoPs in FE professional development, acknowledging both their potential and possible drawbacks.

## 1.2. The FE Sector

The Further Education (FE) sector in England plays a pivotal role in providing post-compulsory education and vocational training to a diverse range of learners. FE institutions, including colleges and training providers, offer a wide array of courses and qualifications that cater to the needs of individuals, employers and communities (Foster, 2005). The sector is

characterised by its flexibility and responsiveness to the changing demands of the labour market, as well as its commitment to promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning (Avis, Fisher and Thompson, 2018)

The FE sector has undergone significant transformation in recent decades driven by policy reforms, initiatives aimed at improving quality, efficiency and accountability of post-secondary education (Gleeson et al., 2015). These reforms have sought to align the sector more closely with the needs of the economy, promote greater collaboration between education providers and employers and enhance the professional status and development of FE teachers (Orr, 2012).

Despite its best efforts, the FE sector continues to face numerous challenges, including funding constraints, high levels of staff turnover and the need to adapt to the rapidly changing technological and social economic landscape (Greatbatch, 2018). In this context, the professional development of FE teachers has emerged as a key priority for policy makers and sector leaders, as it is recognised as essential for improving the quality of teaching and learning and ultimately, the outcomes for learners (Aubrey and Bell, 2017). The diversity and complexity of the FE sector pose significant challenges for the design and delivery of effective professional development initiatives (Orr, 2012). FE teachers come from a wide range of backgrounds and often balance teaching with other professional roles e.g., hairdresser, plumber (Gleeson et al., 2015). This diversity necessitates flexible and context-specific approaches to professional development that can accommodate the varied needs and aspirations of FE practitioners (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005).

The FE sector is a crucial component of post-secondary education. However, in recent years, it has experienced considerable changes that have significantly affected both delivery and efficacy of CPD for its teachers. The rapidly changing policy landscape, driven by reforms aimed at increasing marketisation, competition and accountability in the sector (Hodgson, 2015), has prioritised compliance with externally imposed standards and metrics over professional development (Kennedy, 2014a). Furthermore, funding cuts and the increasing work pressures on FE teachers have limited the time and resources available for them to engage in meaningful sustained CPD activities (Orr, 2012). These challenges have highlighted a need for more innovative, flexible and context-specific approaches to CPD that can adapt to the sector's evolving demands whilst still meeting the diverse needs of FE teachers (Broad, 2015b).

## 1.3. The impact of sector changes on professional development and collaboration in FE

The FE sector has undergone significant changes in recent years, driven by a combination of policy reforms, funding pressures and technological advancements (Avis, Fisher and Thompson, 2018). These changes have dramatically altered the landscape of professional development and collaboration in FE, influencing the ways in which teachers and managers engage with professional development and collaborate with each other (Feather, 2010).

One significant development has been the growing prominence of online CoPs as platforms for knowledge sharing, collaboration and continuous professional development among FE practitioners (Jameson and Hillier, 2003). CoPs are defined as groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion for the topic and by interacting on an ongoing basis,

deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). They have emerged as spaces for educators to connect, share best practice and support each other in navigating the complex challenges of the sector (Lloyd and Jones, 2018).

The rise of CoPs can be seen as a response to the increasing pressures and demands placed on FE teachers, who are expected to continually update their skills and knowledge in line with the evolving needs of learners and the labour market (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005). As teachers participate in virtual communities that span organisational and disciplinary boundaries, traditional notions of professional autonomy expertise are being challenged and redefined (Tummons, 2015). This shift raises important questions about the changing nature of professionalism and professional identity in the FE sector, as teachers navigate new ways of collaborating and learning (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005). While not specifically addressing online CoPs, Kennedy's (2014) framework for analysing CPD models highlights the importance of considering the underlying purposes and capacity for supporting teachers' autonomy in professional development initiatives. Applying Kennedy's (2014b) framework for analysing CPD models to online CoPs in FE, their success in supporting professional development of FE teachers may depend on factors such as how they are structured, facilitated and aligned with both individual and organisational goals (Kennedy, 2014b). Given the unique cultural and institutional factors that shape the experiences of practitioners in the FE sector (Jameson, 2008), there is a need for further research that explores the dynamics, challenges and opportunities of online CoPs in this specific context.

## 1.4. Deciding on the Research Focus

Considering this need for further research and driven by my passion for enhancing teaching, learning and assessment in the FE sector, I decided to focus my study on exploring the effectiveness of online CoPs in supporting CPD of FE teachers. The decision was informed by several factors. Firstly, the growing importance of digital skills in both the FE sector and the workplace highlighted the need for teachers to be proficient in online environments. The rapid shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in education, making this research particularly timely (Dabbous and Emms, 2020). Additionally, the potential of CoPs to provide collaborative and flexible professional development aligned well with the evolving needs of FE practitioners (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018). Lastly, I identified a gap in research specifically addressing online CoPs in the FE context, which this study aims to address (Lloyd and Jones, 2018). The study aims to investigate how online CoPs support the professional development of FE teachers, to identify effective practices and challenges and explore how participation in online CoPs may promote different forms of scholarly activity among FE practitioners (Philipsen et al., 2019a).

This decision was informed by my first-hand experience of the pivotal role that CoPs play in teacher development, both within individual colleges and across the wider FE landscape. My observations of the transformative potential of these communities in fostering collaboration, knowledge sharing and reflective practice among teachers. These interactions have led to improved teaching practices and better student outcomes, motivating me to look deeper into their impact on FE teachers' CPD experiences (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

The research study was also motivated by the need to address the limited empirical understanding regarding the impact of online CoPs on FE educators' CPD experiences and the multifaceted challenges they encounter within these virtual spaces. While the potential benefits of these communities are widely acknowledged, there is a scarcity of research that investigates the challenges and opportunities they present within the FE context (Orr, 2012). The decision to focus on online CoPs was additionally influenced by the growing recognition of the importance of collaborative, practice-oriented learning in professional development more broadly (Kennedy, 2014b), although Kennedy's work does not specifically focus on FE. However, the potential for these approaches to address the needs of the FE sector is significant. CoPs provide a framework for understanding how learning occurs through participation in social practices and how knowledge is created, shared and applied within specific contexts (Lloyd and Jones, 2018). The research also aligns with the increasing role of technology in supporting CPD in the FE sector (Dabbous and Emms, 2020). By investigating the effectiveness of online CoPs in supporting CPD of FE teachers, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on CPD within the sector (Broad, 2015a). It seeks to provide valuable insights into the factors that enable or hinder the success of these communities and to identify best practices for designing and facilitating online CoPs that meet the diverse needs of FE practitioners (Jameson and Hillier, 2003).

In addition to examining the effectiveness of online CoPs for FE practitioners' professional development, this study will also draw on Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship. Boyer's expanded view of scholarship includes discovery, integration, application and teaching,

providing a valuable framework for understanding how participation in online CoPs may facilitate different forms of scholarly activity among FE practitioners. This model is particularly relevant to the FE sector for several reasons (Boyer, 1990). It recognises diverse forms of scholarly activity beyond traditional research, which aligns well with the varied roles and responsibilities of FE practitioners (Hillier and Gregson, 2015). The 'scholarship of teaching' directly relates to the primary focus of FE educators, validating their pedagogical innovations and reflective practices as scholarly work (Shulman, 2000). The 'scholarship of application' aligns with the vocational and practical emphasis of much FE provision, acknowledging the value of applying knowledge in real world contexts. The 'scholarship of integration' supports the interdisciplinary nature of FE, where practitioners often need to synthesise knowledge from various fields (Feather, 2012). Finally, Boyer's model provides a framework for conceptualising and structuring professional development activities in ways to enhance both individual and institutional capacity (Huber and Hutchings, 2005). By incorporating this model, the study aims to explore not only the practical benefits of CoP participation but also its potential to enhance academic engagement and scholarly practices within the FE sector (Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes, 2009). Boyer's work in this field contributes to raising the status of FE practitioners' work, bridging the perceived gap between FE and Higher Education (Lea and Simmons, 2012) and developing a culture of scholarship that is tailored to the unique context and needs of the FE sector (Tummons, 2014).

The decision to focus on this research topic reflects my commitment to supporting CPD, teachers' professional development and improving the quality and impact of teaching and learning in the sector (Avis, Fisher and Thompson, 2018). By exploring the potential of online

CoPs as a vehicle for CPD, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to improve the professionalism and expertise of the FE workforce and to support the sector in meeting the evolving needs of learners and society (Tummons, 2015). After establishing the broad research focus on online CoPs for FE teacher CPD, it was necessary to refine the scope and outline specific research questions to guide the inquiry.

## 1.5. Refinement of the Research Focus

To further refine the research focus, I identified several key aspects that warranted closer examination. These aspects became the research questions that guide this inquiry, which are as follows:

1. According to FE practitioners, how does an online CoP benefit their professional development?

2. What techniques and methods do FE practitioners use to engage with online CoPs?

3. What are the challenges within the CoP which impact continuous professional development?

4. To what extent do FE practitioners engage in the work of each of the four domains of Boyer's model of scholarship?

The inclusion of Boyer's model of scholarship as a framework for examining engagement in scholarly activities within the CoP provides an additional dimension to understand how online communities can support not just practical skills development but also broader forms of academic engagement relevant to the FE context. This aligns with earlier discussions on the potential for CoPs to bridge the gap between FE and Higher Education practices.

## 1.6. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods case study approach to investigate the PDNorth online CoP. Specifically, this research uses an instrumental case study design, allowing for an in-depth examination of the broader issues expressed in the research questions through the lens of a CoP known as PDNorth (Stake, 1995). The research design combines qualitative interviews (n=7) with a quantitative survey (n=20), to provide a comprehensive exploration of FE practitioners' experiences and perceptions within the PDNorth online CoP (Stake, 1995). The qualitative methods align with investigating subjective experiences and meaning making, while the quantitative survey data complements the qualitative findings by providing a broader overview of participants' engagement and perceptions. This approach allows for triangulation of data and a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics within an online CoP. The case study design enables a deep investigation of a bonded phenomenon in context (Creswell, 2018). By focusing on PDNorth as an established online CoP within the FE sector, this approach enabled an in-depth examination of participants' experiences and interactions within this specific community. This design aligns with the study's aim to explore how an online CoP may benefit FE practitioners' professional development, the techniques and methods used for engagement, the challenges faced and the extent of scholarly activities within the CoP.

PDNorth, now known as FEtapestry after rebranding, is an established network with the FE sector that delivers CPD to English, Maths and ESOL teachers. Its history, including Educational Training Foundation (ETF) funding and transformation makes it a suitable

bounded case for study. The single case enabled thoroughly examining experiences, interactions and outcomes within this professional exchange network. The quantitative survey was conducted first, followed by qualitative interviews. This design allowed the survey findings to inform the development of the interview schedule, enabling deeper exploration of key themes and issues identified in the survey responses.

## 1.7. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the understanding and improvement of professional development practices of FE teachers through the lens of online CoPs. By employing a mixed-methods case study approach to explore the experiences, perceptions and engagement of FE practitioners within these online communities, this research aims to generate insights that can inform policy, practice and the future research in the field (Kennedy, 2014b). This study makes three distinct original contributions to knowledge: First, it provides the first comprehensive empirical investigation of online Communities of Practice in FE, addressing a significant gap in understanding virtual professional development in this sector. Second it develops a novel theoretical framework integrating Boyer's scholarship model with Wenger's CoP theory, offering new insights into how different forms of scholarship manifest within online professional communities in FE. Third, it generates, new knowledge about how online CoPs support FE practitioners' professional identity and emotional resilience during change, while providing evidence-based recommendations for implementing effective online communities that address the specific needs of the FE sector. The study addresses a gap in the existing literature on the role and impact of online CoPs in supporting the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of FE teachers (Lloyd and Jones, 2018).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of collaborative, practice-oriented learning in the sector (Fuller et al., 2013), there is a scarcity of empirical research that investigates the specific dynamics and outcomes of online CoPs within the FE context (Orr, 2012). By providing a detailed analysis of FE teachers' engagement with online CoPs, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge base on effective professional development practices in the sector (Broad, 2015a). The findings may have practical implications for the design, facilitation and evaluation of online CoPs, offering guidance for educational leaders, policymakers and professional development providers (Hertz et al., 2022). The insights could support the implementation and sustainability of online CoPs and potentially improve teaching and learning in the sector (Kennedy, 2011).

By exploring the extent to which practitioners engage in the four domains of Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship within the context of online CoPs, this study also aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the nature and purpose of scholarly activity in the sector (Feather, 2012). The findings may provide insights into how online CoPs can support the integration of teaching, research and scholarship and how they can foster a culture of inquiry, reflection and innovation among FE practitioners (Tummons, 2022). By highlighting the potential of CoPs as a vehicle for promoting scholarly engagement and professional development, this study may contribute to the development of a more holistic and broader view of scholarship in the FE sector (Gleeson et al., 2015).

Finally, the study's focus on the experiences and perspectives of how FE practitioners themselves can provide valuable insights into the lived realities of those who engage with CPD in the sector (Orr, 2012). By giving voice to the teachers who engage within online CoPs, the research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges, aspirations and motivations that shape their professional development (James et al., 2007). This understanding can inform the development of more inclusive, responsive and empowering approaches to CPD in the FE sector. While not specifically addressing online CoPs, Kennedy's (2014b) work on CPD models emphasises the importance of recognising and building teacher expertise, agency and diversity. Applying the principles from Kennedy's (ibid) work to the data generated in this investigation provides a helpful additional lens through which to study the effectiveness of online CoPs in FE enables in supporting teacher professional development.

Thus, the significance of this study lies in its potential to generate new knowledge, inform practice and stimulate further research on the role of online CoPs in supporting professional development of FE teachers, through contextualised and practice-oriented analysis of the quality, relevance and impact of CPD in the sector. Ultimately, the findings should support the enhancement and improvement of teaching and learning experiences of both practitioners and learners (Broad, 2015a).

## 1.8. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into six chapters, each designed to address specific aspects of the research:

*Chapter 1: Introduction*

This chapter provides the background, context and rationale for the study. It outlines the research focus, introduces key concepts such as CoPs and CPD in the FE sector and presents Boyer's model of scholarship. The chapter also states the research questions and briefly outlines the research design.

*Chapter 2: Literature review*

This chapter provides the background, context and rational for the study. It outlines the research focus, introduces key concepts such as CoPs and CPD in the FE sector and presents Boyer's model of scholarship. This chapter identifies gaps in the current literature and positions this study within the existing body of knowledge.

*Chapter 3: Methodology*

This chapter provides a detailed account of the research methodology. It justifies the choice of a mixed-methods case study approach and describes the specific methods used for data collection. The chapter also outlines the sampling strategy, data analysis, procedures and ethical considerations. It concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and measures taken to address research quality.

*Chapter 4: Findings*

This chapter presents the results from both the qualitative and quantitative data analysis. It begins with the quantitative survey findings, providing descriptive statistics and analyses of demographic differences. This is followed by the qualitative interview results, presented thematically. The chapter concludes with a triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence. Throughout, the findings are organized to address each research question, using direct quotes from interviews to illustrate key themes and statistical data from the survey to illustrate key points.

*Chapter 5: Discussion*

This chapter interprets the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It discusses how the results contribute to our understanding of online CoPs in the FE sector, their role in supporting CPD and their potential to develop different forms of scholarship. The discussion is organised around the four research questions, examining how online CoPs benefit FE practitioners' professional development, engagement techniques, challenges faced and engagement with Boyer's scholarship domains. The chapter considers implications of the findings for policy and practice in FE professional development. The researcher's reflective journey through data analysis and interpretation is integrated throughout rather than as a separate section to maintain flow.

*Chapter 6: Conclusion*

The final chapter summarises the key findings of the study and reflects on their significance. It discusses the implications of research for FE practitioners, policymakers and those responsible for designing and implementing CPD programs. The chapter also acknowledges the limitations of the study and suggests areas for future research. It ends by reflecting on this study's contribution to FE professional development and scholarship.

## 1.9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this introductory chapter has provided a rationale for the research focus on exploring the effectiveness of online CoPs for CPD for FE practitioners. It has provided context on the FE landscape, the importance of the CPD and the potential of CoPs as an alternative model for collaborative professional learning. The specific research questions guiding this inquiry have been outlined in addition to the research design. By investigating the benefits, engagement methods, challenges and scholarly activities within PDNorth online CoP, this study aims to contribute insights to inform more effective CPD policies and practices tailored to the FE context.

**CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

**2.1. Introduction**

Continuous professional development (CPD) is essential for Further Education (FE) teachers in England to enhance their practices not only in response to frequent educational reforms and policy changes, but also to improve teaching quality, adapt to changing student needs and keep pace with technological advancements in education. This literature review provides the theoretical and empirical foundation for the study's exploration of online CoPs as a means of collaborative CPD for FE teachers and managers. The review is structured to address key elements related to the study's research questions. It defines key concepts related to CPD, provides background on the FE context, critically analyses six models of Kennedy's (2005) framework for CPD, relating to how FE practitioners might benefit from and engage with online CoPs. It examines the emergence of online CoPs, their characteristics and potential benefits and challenges, which informs the investigation of engagement techniques and methods used by FE practitioners. Finally, the review introduces Boyer's (1990) framework of scholarship to conceptualise engagement in scholarly activities within online CoPs. While the existing literature offers insights into CPD and online CoPs, there is a gap in understanding how FE participants perceive and experience CPD through participation in online CoPs, directly supporting the study's exploration of how FE practitioners engage with different forms of scholarship.

## 2.2. Understanding Professional Development and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

CPD encompasses the learning and training activities that professionals undertake throughout their careers to develop skills, knowledge and understanding (Day and Leitch (2007). Dewey (1904, p.15) suggests that teachers must be willing to be "thoughtful and alert students of education." This implies that teachers should engage in critical reflection on their practice, ask questions and seek to deepen their understanding of teaching and learning, which is about being a thoughtful and alert student of education, cultivating an inquiry stance and being open to professional development to improve their practice. Research can support this process by providing evidence-based practices, offering frameworks to guide instructional improvement, exposing teachers to new ideas and equipping them with research skills to analyse data on their own students (Education and Training Foundation, 2022). This sustained, reflective approach enables meaningful CPD.

Despite attempts to define CPD, ambiguity and confusion surrounding the concept persist within evolving academic discourse. The lineage of the terms used to describe teachers' development can be traced back to the early 20th Century (Craft, 2002). The overarching concept of CPD remains prevalent, but it has been employed interchangeably with other concepts in the literature, such as teacher development, professional development, in-service development and teacher training. This lack of clarity and consistency in terminology has led to difficulties in establishing a shared understanding among education professionals, increasing the risk of the concept becoming meaningless (Evans, 2002).

It is important to distinguish between CPD and staff development. Staff development refers to the process of providing employees with the skills, knowledge and competencies required to perform their roles effectively within an organisation (Guskey, 2000). CPD and staff development are related but distinct concepts in teachers' professional training. While CPD is specifically targeted at professionals within their field, staff development encompasses all forms of development provided to employees in an organisation, including support staff and administrative personnel (Earley and Bubb, 2004). CPD is recognised as beneficial by all teaching professionals as it enables teachers to be more effective, gain the trust of their students and carry out their work to a high degree of professionalism during their careers (Day and Sachs, 2004). The term 'Staff Development' (SD) has been superseded by "professional development." SD is normally organised in-house by the employer and includes activities that meet the organisation's administrative and business needs, i.e., Pro-solution (register) training. SD takes a passive approach to developing skills and knowledge with information delivered to staff (Kennedy, 2005).

Several authors have offered definitions of professional development that highlight different aspects of the concept. Clement and Vandenberghe (2000, p.82), offer a concise definition of professional development (PD) as "the development of competences needed to perform professional roles and tasks effectively," highlighting the importance of acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out professional responsibilities effectively.

Building upon Clement and Vandenberghe (2000), Day (1999, p.4) provides a more nuanced definition, describing professional development as consisting of:

> "all-natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom."

Day (1999) definition applies the 'professional development' term both to the development of individual teachers and collectively to raising teaching standards for education providers. Day and Sachs (2004) argue that professional development should have a broad purpose, later advocating the inclusion of emotional, social, intellectual and practical engagement in change processes. Day's (1999) holistic characterisation of what professional development means, helps to underline the range of dimensions involved in CPD. Day (1999) states that the professional development of teachers includes all conscious, planned learning experiences and all activities they engage with during their careers, highlighting that this CPD journey is throughout a teacher's career "lifetime", which is different from initial teacher education, that would have a predefined endpoint. This CPD trajectory depends on the teacher's career aspirations, the environment within which they find themselves working and the organisation's goals. This range of activities contributes to the quality of classroom education. Through this process, teachers either alone or together reflect on, renew and expand their commitment to improvement by advancing their knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence. This is necessary for professional planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues throughout each phase of their teaching careers (Day, 1999, p.4).

Earley and Bubb (2004) further support Day's holistic view of professional development. They highlighted the range of experiences of both formal and informal professional development, which is included in a CPD plan and highlights the need to develop the whole person. They state that CPD is greater than the simple acquisition of vocational practice; it also includes passion and commitment to improving the lives of learners, necessitating the 'head' and the 'heart' and thereby emotional commitment. As Earley and Budd (2004, p.4) succinctly state:

"Personal development is an aspect of professional development and wherever possible the two should interact and complement each other."

Day (2017) further validates the inter-relationship between various perspectives of professional development through a theoretical exploration and highlights the importance of considering teachers' individual experiences, relationships and emotional well-being in the context of professional development. Recent empirical research by Chen (2022) reinforces this view, finding that emotional connectedness and trust are essential foundations for effective development in FE settings. This perspective is relevant to understanding the dynamics of online CoPs in the FE sector, as these virtual spaces provide a platform for teachers to connect, share experiences and support each other emotionally as well as professionally. This holistic understanding of professional development aligns well with the aims of this study, which seeks to investigate the perceived benefits, challenges and dynamics of participation in online CoPs within the FE sector.

Despite attempts to delineate key terms, ambiguity persists regarding teachers' professional development in education research literature (Weston and Clay, 2018). CPD and PD are often used interchangeably by scholars such as Bolam and McMahon (2005). Weston and Clay (2018) highlight a range of terms to describe teachers' development and suggest that attempts have been made to clarify their meanings. As Morgan and Neil (2004, p.1) highlighted, CPD may not be interpreted in the same way by different players in the educational sector. Conceptualisations, like those from the European Union, encompass all activities preparing teachers for their roles, further blurring boundaries (Scheerens et al., 2011).

Timperley et al. (2007) provide a critique that the academic literature tends to focus narrowly on the activities developing knowledge for teachers, neglecting the actual contexts and processes through which they apply and develop that knowledge in practice. They argue that clearly defining CPD requires understanding the entire professional development journey–how it impacts teachers' practices, beliefs and identities, not just the delivery mechanisms. This conceptual ambiguity surrounding CPD risks it becoming a meaningless catchall. Precisely defining CPD and related concepts like "professional learning" (Mockler, 2013, p.35) is crucial for shared understanding among researchers and practitioners. In contrast, the Education Endowment Foundation (2021) emphasis CPD's vital role in enhancing teaching quality and improving student outcomes, defining it as structured, evidence-based activities to increase teaching ability. However, broader conceptualisations, such as those from Hendriks et al. (2010) include initial teacher education, blurring boundaries. As O'Brien and Jones (2014) argued, the use of different terminology to define teachers' CPD is problematic for teachers and researchers and may cause confusion if they cannot classify the activity; establishing a

shared understanding within the research is, therefore an essential step. This thesis employs the common term 'continuing professional development' in general discussion as this appears to incorporate a broad perspective of what is involved. However, this is a deceptively simple description of a complex subject, which is concerned with developing teachers' practices and raising the standards of teaching, learning and achievement in a diverse range of settings (Gregson and Nixon, 2015; Gregson, 2020).

Several scholars have also associated CPD with being a professional. Evans (2002, p.225) defines CPD as being "the process whereby teachers' professionality and professionalism may be enhanced." As Evans (2002, p.863) contends, it is essential to have a meaningful conception of professionalism enacted in the daily practices of teachers. Evans (2008) argued that teachers mediate the demanded professionalism to varying degrees, modifying it according to different contexts. Thus, professionalism undergoes continuous renegotiation, reshaping itself through teachers' dynamic agency.

Evans (2008) highlights the difficulties of defining teachers' professionalism over the years, as most studies have failed to depict reality. She suggests that professionalism entails both the influence of others' conceptions and expectations, including broadly accepted societal images of what teachers should know or do and elements that practitioners themselves deem meaningful in their professional work and lives, based on experiences in practice and personal background (Evans, 2008). Some posit that the concept of professionalism strongly influences the way teachers teach, the way they develop as teachers and their attitudes towards educational

changes (Evans, 2008). This understanding is relevant to CPD because it suggests that effective professional development must consider, not only external standards, but also teachers' individual perspectives and values. This concept of professionalism influences various aspects of teachers' work, implying that CPD must be attentive to how it intersects with teachers' professional identities. Ultimately, understanding of professionalism is crucial for developing CPD that engages teachers as active participants in their own development.

In summary, the literature on PD and CPD highlights the complexity and multifaceted nature of these concepts, which encompass a range of learning experiences and activities that contribute to teachers' professional development and the quality of education. Both formal and informal experiences contribute to teachers' professional development, the quality of education and the achievement of organisational goals. Furthermore, the literature (Day, 2017; Chen, 2022) emphasises the importance of considering the emotional, social and personal dimensions of professional development, in addition to the acquisition of skills and knowledge

This view of professional development aligns with the broader conceptions of scholarship in education, particularly Boyer's expanded view of scholarship, providing a foundation for understanding how online CoPs can support professional development and scholarly activities in the FE sector.

## 2.3. The Relationship between Scholarship and PD/CPD

The relationship between scholarship and professional PD or CPD in FE is increasingly recognised as crucial. While traditionally associated with Higher Education, scholarship in FE encompasses systematic inquiry into teaching and learning, application to practice and knowledge dissemination (Feather, 2012). This aligns closely with CPD's aims of improving teaching practices. The integration of scholarship in FE's CPD is evident through research-informed practice, reflective teaching and knowledge sharing among practitioners (Tummons, 2014). This integration is important for maintaining high-quality teaching as the FE sector develops. The link between scholarship and CPD/PD in FE is evident through research-informed practice, reflective teaching and knowledge sharing. These aspects involve applying current research to teaching, critically reflecting on methods and outcomes and creating and disseminating new knowledge among practitioners (Boyer, 1990; Feather, 2012; Tummons, 2014).

To better understand the link between scholarship and CPD/PD in FE, it is helpful to consider Boyer (1990) 'Scholarship Reconsidered Priorities of the Professoriate,' which highlights the importance of scholars demonstrating their capacity for original research, studying intellectual problems and presenting their findings to colleagues. "Every scholar must ... demonstrate the capacity to do original research, study a serious intellectual problem and present to colleagues the same results" (Boyer, 1990, p.15).

Scholarship and research are two related but distinct concepts; scholarship refers to the pursuit of knowledge and the application of expertise in a particular field of study or practice and it is often seen as a way of advancing knowledge through the integration of teaching, learning and service, which is not viewed as an isolated activity (Glassick, Taylor Huber and Maeroff, 1997, p.62). Scholarship emphasises the importance of engaging with the wider community and applying academic knowledge to real-world issues. In contrast, research is a systematic investigation of a particular topic or issue, aimed at generating new knowledge, developing theories, or testing hypotheses (Howard and Sharp, 1983).

2.3.1. Boyer's (1990) Dimensions of Scholarship

Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship emphasises the importance of expanding the scope of research activities to integrate research into practice. This integration is essential to ensure that new knowledge gained is relevant and useful within the practitioner's environment and context (Chen, 2022). Boyer's model provides a framework for understanding the different forms of scholarship, including the scholarship of discovery, integration, application and teaching. Scholarship involves the application of rigorous theoretical, methodological and ethical criteria to construct new understandings, either for personal recognition or practical use (Goodfellow, 2014). Nevertheless, Boyer (1990) contends that academic institutions, particularly traditional universities, are where all forms of scholarship are integrated into practice. Boyer's (1990) scholarship framework is a model for understanding the nature and purpose of the scholarship of teaching in HE (Little et al., 2007). While Boyer's framework provides a comprehensive view of scholarship, its application in the FE context presents unique challenges. Tummons

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(2018) argues that scholarship in FE is often constrained by institutional pressures and limited resources, leading to a focus on teaching and application rather than traditional research activities. This perspective highlights the need to consider the specific context of FE when examining scholarly activities among practitioners. Tummons suggests that the limited engagement in research among FE practitioners is not due to the lack of interest or capability, but rather systemic barriers within the FE sector. This understanding is needed when examining how FE practitioners engage with different forms of scholarship, particularly within the context of online CoPs.

While Tummons highlights the challenges of scholarship in FE, other researchers have explored potential solutions and opportunities. Husband and Jeffrey (2016) argue for a broader view of scholarship in FE, one that includes research and knowledge creation beyond traditional academic boundaries. They suggest that scholarly activities in FE should be seen through a lens that recognises the unique context and practical demands of the sector. This expanded view of scholarship aligns with the diverse roles and responsibilities of FE teachers, who often need to balance teaching, industry engagement and professional development. This provides a framework for understanding how FE practitioners might engage in scholarly activities that are directly relevant to their professional context, even within the constraints identified by Tummons.

For instance, the importance of developing a culture of scholarship and research in college higher education is further emphasised in a report by Simmons and Lea (2013). The authors

argue that College Higher Education (CHE) teachers are uniquely positioned to engage in forms of scholarship that are suited to the FE context, such as knowledge exchange, consultancy and work placement activities. They suggest that Boyer's model of scholarship, which recognises diverse forms of scholarly activity, is particularly relevant for CHE and can help promote and legitimise forms of scholarship, with a focus on improving student learning and serving local employers and communities. However, the authors also note the challenges CHE teachers face in engaging with traditional forms of peer review and dissemination, highlighting a need for the CHE community to develop its own mechanisms for sharing and validating scholarly outputs. Boyer's model of scholarship identifies four interconnected areas: discovery, integration, application and teaching. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding scholarly activities in the FE context.

*Scholarship of Discovery*

The scholarship of discovery involves traditional academic research contributing to the intellectual life of the university discipline or college. Boyer (1990, p.18) defines it as "transforming knowledge through original research and advancement of knowledge, scholarship that makes up intellectual fields and disciplines". The purpose of the scholarship of discovery is to enhance the body of knowledge and intellectual environment of a college or university through investigation, research and freedom in intellectual inquiry, allowing scholars a degree of academic freedom to pursue their research interests and express their views and opinions without fear of censorship or reprisal. Boyer (1990) viewed the scholarship of discovery as not only contributing to new knowledge but also to the intellectual climate of the

institution. He believed that this model of scholarship presented opportunities for organisations to clarify their goals and confidently shape their unique purpose and mission within HE.

However, in the FE context, the scholarship of discovery often faces significant challenges. As Tummons (2018) notes, FE practitioners typically have limited time, resources and institutional support for engaging in traditional academic research. This can result in a reduction of new knowledge through original research by FE practitioners, potentially limiting their influence on broader academic discourse in their fields. The focus in FE tends to be more on teaching and application rather than on discovery, reflecting the sector's primary mission of providing vocational and skills-based education. This tension between the ideal of scholarship as envisioned by Boyer and the practical realities of the FE sector highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how scholarship can be conceptualised and practised in different educational contexts.

*Scholarship of Integration*

Boyer (1990) describes Scholarship of Integration as involving synthesising and making connections across disciplines to provide new insights and represent knowledge. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of a topic and can lead to innovative solutions and strategies that consider the complexity of the system. In the context of FE, the scholarship of integration holds relevance and importance.

The collaborative and non-hierarchical nature of CoPs in FE, as highlighted by Wenger (1998), facilitates the co-construction of knowledge and the development of shared understandings, demonstrating the scholarship of integration in action. FE practitioners often work across multiple disciplines and vocational areas, making them uniquely positioned to engage in integrative scholarship. This multidisciplinary nature of FE is emphasised by Hodgson and Spours (2019), who argue that FE colleges serve as "boundary-crossing institutions" that integrate academic, vocational and professional learning. Similarly, Gleeson et al. (2015) highlights the "hybrid" nature of FE teachers' roles, which often require them to bridge industry experience with educational practice, fostering a natural inclination towards integrative scholarship.

Furthermore, Springbett (2018) discusses how FE teachers often engage in what they term "practice-based scholarship," which involves integrating practical knowledge, theoretical understanding and reflective practice. This aligns closely with Boyer's concept of scholarship of integration and highlights how FE practitioners are uniquely positioned to contribute to this form of scholarship.

*Scholarship of Application*

The scholarship of application holds relevance within FE. As conceptualised by Boyer (1990), it emphasises the importance of applying research that addresses practical and real-world problems. It moves beyond the generation of knowledge to connect that knowledge with the needs of individuals, society and the professions. Boyer calls for a different kind of expertise; the ability to connect to societal problems. Boyer's (1990) argument regarding the scholarship of application aligns with the notion that applied research in the context of FE can yield more consequential and practical outcomes. In this sense, the scholarship of application is about using academic knowledge to make a tangible difference in the world. This is evident in the engagement between FE researchers, teachers and industry partners; it becomes significant when it is understood by others as scholarly work. The scholarship of application concerns how knowledge can be helpful to individuals, society and the professions, by applying research which addresses and resolves practical and consequential real-world problems. Boyer (1990) argues that scholarship requires the application of this knowledge to go beyond conceptions of 'service' to connect our knowledge to life, by collaborating with industry partners to develop job-specific skills which can directly address the needs of the workforce. Additionally, Boyer (1990) argues that the scholarship of application (engagement) must be characterised by rigour and accountability.

*Scholarship of Teaching*

The scholarship of teaching and learning is a field that emphasises the significance of research and scholarly evidence in informing and enhancing teaching and learning practices. The scholarship of teaching aims to narrow the gap between a student's learning and a teacher's

understanding. Boyer argues that 'teaching, at its best, means not only transmitting knowledge but transforming and extending it as well' (1990, p.34). Therefore, teachers must ask themselves how this knowledge can be learned by others. This can involve the use of innovative teaching methods, the development of student-centred learning environments or the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning.

The University Centre of Blackburn (Hammond, 2018) provides a practical example of applying Boyer's Framework to align research and scholarship activities with teaching and learning strategies. The institution established a Research and Scholarship Committee (RSC) to support staff and student research and scholarly activities and adjusted its research and scholarship application criteria to specifically target the priorities outlined in its teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) strategy. These criteria included contributing to disciplinary pedagogic expertise, forming curricula through research and scholarly activity, demonstrating a commitment to integrating research and scholarship with teaching and learning, in line with Boyer's model.

2.3.2. Communities of Practice and Scholarship in FE

CoPs, as defined by Lave and Wenger's (1999), are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they regularly interact. In the context of FE, CoPs are defined by knowledge rather than a single task and provide a safe space

for novices and experienced teachers to collaborate, construct and embed knowledge that impacts on both theory and practice development (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

Boyer's (1990) definition of scholarship and Lave and Wenger's concept of CoPs are concepts that have shaped educational practices within education and FE. The intersection of these two concepts lies in their emphasis on social learning and collaboration in the advancement of knowledge.

CoPs can bring together those with a broad range of experiences, skills and knowledge that can be shared and exchanged, supporting scholarly activity. Boyer's definition of scholarship recognises the various forms of scholarship that contribute to the advancement of knowledge, its application, representation and integration. Improving teaching practice within FE requires knowledge of the theories and practice of teaching and relevant and up-to-date subject knowledge unique to their vocational subject area. FE teachers are required to reflect on their teaching practice and examine the effectiveness of new approaches and their impact on student learning (Education and Training Foundation, 2022).

Participation within a CoP may foster a culture of learning and sharing knowledge, aligning with Boyer's definition of scholarship, which recognises the importance of the application of knowledge. According to Brew (2012), academic CoPs have the potential to facilitate CPD,

research and scholarship by helping members understand the activities involved in integrating research and teaching.

In conclusion, the intersection of Wenger and Lave's CoP and Boyer's 1990 definition of scholarship emphasises the importance of social learning and collaboration in the advancement of knowledge. By engaging with research, scholarship or learning by participating within the CoP, teachers engage as legitimate peripheral participants in academic CoPs (Brew, 2012). These concepts contribute to the development of education by promoting collaboration and the application of knowledge.

The growth of online CoPs and digital technologies for CPD has blurred the boundaries between FE and Higher Education, necessitating a bridge between CPD and Scholarship (Hillier and Gregson, 2015). Online CoPs provide a platform for FE teachers to engage in scholarly activities, share research and discuss intellectual problems. By participating in these communities, teachers can collaborate, share findings and engage in scholarly discussions, fostering a reflective and research-informed approach to practice.

2.3.3. Applying Boyer's Framework to Understanding Scholarly Activities in FE CoPs

This framework, along with other conceptual models, will help to analyse the impact of CoPs on teachers' professional development. Boyer's (1990) framework of scholarship offers a

valuable lens through which to analyse and categorise the scholarly engagement of FE teachers within online CoPs. This framework, alongside others such as Wenger's (1998) CoP theory, will be used to analyse and categorise the various types of scholarly activities that occur within these communities, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how CoPs support both professional development and scholarly activities in the FE sector.

Boyer's four domains of scholarship provide a framework for understanding how scholarship should be conducted (Braxton, Luckley and Helland, 2002). Evaluating the extent to which FE teachers have incorporated these domains into their academic work can help determine the effectiveness of their scholarly practices. The concept of scholarship is crucial in the FE sector's overall context as it emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to teaching and learning (Glassick, 2000).

Recent research has emphasised the importance of recognising diverse forms of scholarship within the FE sector. Springbett (2018) argues that acknowledging practitioner research as a valid form of scholarship can improve teaching quality and develop a teacher's professional identity. This aligns with Boyer's expanded view of scholarship, particularly the scholarships of teaching and application. Springbett's work highlights how FE practitioners' engagement in scholarly activities, such as innovative teaching practices, can contribute to their professional development and the overall quality of education in the sector.

## 2.4. Kennedy's framework for CPD Models

In her seminal work, Kennedy (2005) provides a broader examination of the different forms of CPD beyond the narrow aspects often found in the literature. While much of the previous research compares various CPD models, Kennedy argues that teachers' professional development is an area of growing international interest. The data/examples analysed in her study are from the Scottish educational context but resemble situations found in the English education context and beyond. This framework suggests a spectrum in which CPD activities can be placed, ranging from transmissive to transformative practice and professional autonomy. Fraser et al. (2007) similarly understand CPD and suggest that transmissive models develop teacher compliance, focusing on technical aspects of the job rather than promoting teacher autonomy that features on the other end of the CPD spectrum.
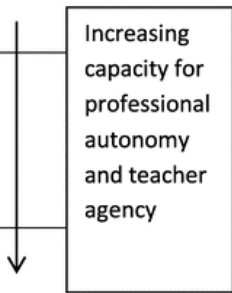
Kennedy (2005) examines the circumstances in which each CPD model might be adopted. She explores the potential for transformative educational practices, which are determined by two factors: 1) the degree of professional autonomy granted to teachers and 2) the extent to which CPD is utilised for accountability purposes. Kennedy's framework utilises terminologies commonly used in the FE sector, such as the coaching and mentoring model. This allows the framework to be easily understood and applied by FE practitioners when examining CPD undertaken specifically within the FE sector, making it highly relevant and helpful for this study.

In 2014, Kennedy revised her work and argued there is a need to 'consider if the components have stood the test of time' (p.5), updating some of the terminology used and replacing the label action research with the broader term 'professional inquiry'. Kennedy also updated the middle category from transitional to malleable and noted that this middle categorisation was most important and could be used for different outcomes depending on the purpose of the CPD; the reason given for this change was to make the terms more understandable.

Within this chapter, six of the nine models have been reviewed and critiqued as they are routinely used within the FE context. The models which are not being discussed in this study are 'coaching and mentoring', 'action research' and 'transformative.' The coaching and mentoring model is well-established and based on a one-to-one relationship, while this study looks at teachers working collaboratively. Action research will be reviewed within the review of the CoP model, as Wenger (2002) argues that action research has a greater impact when shared within CoPs. The transformative model represents the integration of the range of models described, so it is not discussed independently here.

| Purpose of Model | | Examples of models of CPD which may fit within this category |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Transmissive | | Training models |
| | | Deficit models |
| | | Cascade model |
| Malleable | Increasing capacity for professional autonomy and teacher agency | Award-bearing models |
| | | Standards-based models |
| | | Coaching/mentoring models |
| | | Community of practice models |
| Transformative | | Collaborative professional inquiry models |

**Figure 2.1 Overview of Kennedy's (2014b) Professional Development Model**

Kennedy's (2005) framework categorises CPD into three broad categories that can support opportunities for transmissive, transitional, or potentially transformative outcomes. Figure 2.1 presents the eight CPD models organised across this spectrum (Kennedy, 2014b, p.693).

The remaining six models from Kennedy's framework that apply to the FE context and this study are the training model, the award-bearing model, the deficit model, the cascade model, the standards-based model and the CoP model. Each will now be discussed in connection to recent literature from other authors to provide critical analysis. This analysis aims to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of these models within the FE sector, identify their strengths and limitations and inform the selection of the most appropriate model for this study's investigation of online CoPs as a means of collaborative PD for FE practitioners.

*The Training Model*

This model of CPD is the most recognised and most widespread model of CPD. Educational organisations implement this in the form of INSET (in-service training) on training days (Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy, 2014a). These can be organised in-house or away from the organisation and involve teachers attending pre-determined sessions on technical and vocational teaching practice, often identified through the quality assurance and improvement process, based on inspection (e.g., Ofsted). The training model involves the teachers taking on a passive role; training is done to them by an expert (Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy, 2014b; Sachs (2016). Williams (2020) argues that this type of training frequently lacks a connection to the teaching environment but suggests that it supports a high degree of quality assurance and is an effective means of introducing new knowledge. This transmission model of CPD can be viewed as developing compliant rather than autonomous teachers (Kennedy, 2005). This suggests that when designing CPD programmes, the training model may not be perceived by teachers as effective, which could lead to them being demotivated and not participating in CPD.

*The Cascade Model*

The cascade model of CPD, a popular top-down approach, involves teachers disseminating knowledge from external or internal training across the organisation (Hayes, 2000; Kennedy, 2005). While aiming to maximise participation within constrained resources, this model, widely adopted in FE, is not without challenges. The digitisation of CPD through professional bodies increases flexibility and choice for teachers. However, Turner, Brownhill and Wilson

(2017) note the risk of knowledge dilution or distortion as it passes from programme teachers to recipients.

To ensure effectiveness, active participation at all levels is crucial, as concentration of expertise at the top and purely transmissive training are primary causes of failure (Hayes, 2000). The cascade model requires experiential, reflective methods and openness to reinterpretation, inviting teachers to take accountability for growth through collaborative strategies (Hayes, 2000). Kay (2021) promotes external training for English and Maths departments, providing impactful development that can be rolled out in-house, reducing budget impacts. However, a 'one size fits all' approach may negatively impact morale (Kay, 2021) and lack of senior support over time hinders sustained change (Abrahams, Reiss and Sharpe, 2014). Careful planning is needed to identify the right participants to engage in the initial training and effectively disseminate the learning to colleagues, which is crucial for the success of the cascade model (Pang and Wray, 1971). While criticised for potential limitations, the model's effectiveness depends on active participation, reflective methods and careful participant selection.

*Award-Bearing Model*

The award-bearing model is often viewed within a college as sending one person to study on a course, which is validated by a university or professional body qualification. Williams (2020) described an example of award-bearing CPD, such as teachers within England attaining

Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), as being perceived to be more effective in their teaching and learning practices. Kennedy (2005) viewed this as a 'mark of quality assurance'. These training courses are positively encouraged, and teachers' pay scales often reflect an increase in their salaries on successful completion. It is important to point out that this type of teaching qualification is more often associated with initial teacher training (ITT) rather than CPD. Kennedy argues that this mark of quality assurance can also be viewed as the validating and/or funding bodies exercising a form of control, placing increased pressure on award-bearing courses to be focused on classroom practice, with the emphasis on the 'practical' rather than the 'academic'. This discourse has led to debate on an international scale. This has further impacted the changing context of FE teachers due to contradictory changes to government policy regarding mandated teaching qualification requirements in the United Kingdom (UK). Before 2001, FE teachers were not required to have teaching qualifications. This changed briefly from 2001 to 2012 before qualifications again became voluntary in 2013 (Lucas, Nasta and Rogers, 2012). The government removed this requirement to hold a teaching qualification and this was returned to a voluntary activity in 2013, although most FE providers/colleges still expect their teachers to have recognised qualifications (Tummons, 2015). Kennedy (2014) reclassified the award-bearing model of CPD from the transmissive category into the malleable category because this did not convey the message she intended. This change recognised increased numbers of teachers moving away from formalised or prescribed CPD to teacher-initiated CPD. This change of category also recognised the factors of 'who is paying' and the 'motivation for the study,' and how a Masters or Doctorate could be liberating, empowering and a factor in enhancing teacher agency (Kennedy, 2014a, p.693).

*The Standards-Based Model*

Increasingly, teachers' 'professional standards' are being adopted internationally, particularly in developing countries, as a perceived solution to educational challenges. It is believed that utilising a standards framework for teachers to demonstrate professionalism and competencies will improve teaching quality  (Thrupp, 2006). However, international research on teachers' ongoing performance standards based CPD is scarce (Gallie and Keevy, 2014). A study by the Centre of Study Policies and Practices in Education (CEPPE) noted the limited research on standards and raised concerns about the lack of diversity in teaching approaches (Centre of Study for Policies Practices in Education, 2013). Day and Sachs (2004) advocate for standards based CPD as an alternative, not a substitute, for traditional models of in-service CPD.

Within FE, the Professional Standards for Further Education teachers were developed in 2014 by ETF and updated in 2022. This standards framework consists of twenty underpinning standards for professional skills, values, knowledge and attributes (Education & Training Foundation, 2014; Simpson and Gravells, 2014). The standards-based model of CPD relies on a behaviourist view of learning, focusing on the individual teacher's competence in professional performance (Kennedy, 2005). These standards aim to support teaching in the post-16 sector by modelling good practice and helping teachers address areas for development. The ETF recommends integrating these standards into the teaching profession and has sought input from key figures to promote a grassroots approach to policymaking. However, Sachs

(2016) critiques the purposes of professional standards, arguing that they remain technical documents and are insufficient to change teaching practice alone. Sachs (2016, p.416) contends that standards have become the tool for managing and overseeing teacher accountability. Darling-Hammond (2013) warns that applying standards across different settings and judging teachers' competence based on an idealised view of teaching can be restrictive and hinder advances in teaching practice.

*The Deficit Model*

The deficit model is like the training model, which focuses on the standardisation of teachers' practice and performance and is designed specifically to address a deficit in teacher performance (Kennedy, 2005; Williams, 2020). This model of CPD assumes that teachers need to be provided with knowledge and skills which they do not already have, often associated with problems with learner achievement and behaviour. The training will be constructed to address aspects of the teacher's performance. This form of CPD relies on performance management to evaluate individual teacher performance, with an emphasis on competence and standards. It assumes that teaching is a rational exercise and the role of the teacher becomes fixed within narrow performance parameters (Forde et al., 2006). Poole (2022) argues that teachers view statistical-based performativity measures used to evaluate their performance highly negatively. Fraser et al. (2007) place these in the context of the deficit model, arguing that attempting to fix individual performances through individual performance management fails to consider the collective competence model. Boreham (2004) discussed the issue of individual and collective

competence, arguing that collective competence is dependent on leadership. This argument is at odds with the deficit model that blames the individual rather than the collective responsibility of management and the department team.

*The Community of Practice Model*

Central to this thesis is an examination of the impact of the CoP model on CPD. While there are several models for CPD for teachers, such as coaching and mentoring and action research, there is a lack of literature on the impact of online CoPs in FE. Specifically, there is a need to explore the potential of online CoPs as a tool for online CPD within FE. The online characteristics of the CoP will be discussed later in section 2.7.

Kennedy's (2005) framework categorises CoPs as a model of CPD that can create conditions conducive to transformative learning, where teachers have opportunities for professional autonomy and collaboration. This potential for transformation emerges through CoPs when they enable collaborative inquiry, knowledge sharing and the collective development of context-specific solutions by practitioners themselves (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). This theoretical model will also be discussed in greater depth later in the study.

While Kennedy (2005) examined the potential of action research—a systematic inquiry conducted by practitioners to improve practices through cycles of planning, acting, observing

and reflecting (McNiff, 2013)—within CoPs to support teachers' professional development, this study takes a broader perspective by exploring the overall impact of the CoP model itself as a vehicle for CPD in FE.

Kennedy's (2005, 2014) frameworks thus provide a comprehensive analysis of different CPD models ranging from transmissive approaches to those fostering varying degrees of teacher autonomy and collaboration. This research uses Kennedy's spectrum as a theoretical foundation to explore the purpose, potential benefits and challenges of various CPD approaches within the unique FE context. Notably, her positioning of CoPs as a transformative model demonstrates how they facilitate collaborative inquiry, knowledge sharing and context-specific solutions by practitioners themselves.

By critically analysing CPD models through Kennedy's lens, her comprehensive frameworks enable a nuanced analysis of how different models may address the sector's distinct challenges and opportunities. Kennedy's scholarly work conceptualises CPD and provides a robust theoretical grounding for investigating the potential of online CoPs as transformative vehicles for collaborative professional development in FE.

## 2.5. Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a Model for Professional Development

Central to this thesis is examining the impact of the CoP model on the CPD of FE teachers. While various CPD models exist, there is limited literature exploring online CoPs, specifically

within the FE context. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the potential of online CoPs as a tool for facilitating collaborative CPD among FE teachers.

Nelson, Potrac and Groom (2014) highlight the need for further research on the use of CoPs in professional learning, particularly in the context of sports coaching, which shares similarities with the FE sector in terms of the focus on vocational and practical skills development.

The intersection of CoPs and CPD represents a powerful approach to teacher development. While CPD traditionally focuses on individual skill development, CoPs offer a collaborative, context-embedded framework for ongoing professional development. Wenger's (1998) conceptualisation of CoPs as spaces for shared practice and meaning-making aligns closely with the contemporary understanding of effective CPD as continuous, collaborative and practice-oriented (Kennedy, 2014b). By situating CPD within CoPs, teachers can engage in sustained, peer-supported learning that directly relates to their daily practice.

Traditional one-day CPD events have proven ineffective, highlighting the need for long-term, embedded models focused on ongoing collaborative learning (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017). CoPs provide an alternative approach by enabling continuous knowledge sharing and skill development over time, rather than brief, isolated training.

Increasingly, leaders in FE are looking to foster teachers' responsibility and encourage them to take ownership of their CPD (Greatbatch, 2018). This is to enable teachers to take greater responsibility to demonstrate improvements in their skills, capacity and capabilities, to judge their effectiveness and the impact of their work to guide future developments (The Education & Training Foundation, 2021). The discussion on CoPs adds to the growing body of research and literature on collaborative approaches to professional development. By examining CoPs as a model for FE teachers' CPD, this study aims to deepen our understanding of how collaborative inquiry and knowledge-sharing among practitioners can support their professional development and enhance teaching practices in the FE context.

## 2.5.1. Defining Community of Practice (CoP)

The concept of CoPs has gained significant attention in the field of education as a framework for understanding learning and professional development. At the core of the community of practice (CoP) theory are two central tenets: the negotiation of meaning and the development of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). CoP theory has been utilised as a metaphor for how learning should occur (Schwen and Hara, 2003). Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the "Community of Practice" concept, which views learning as a social process enabled by group participation. Since then, there has been a significant amount of literature (Hoadley, 2012) on CoP theory in the field of education, focusing on curriculum reform, online learning, staff development and assessment (Day, 2017). However, the literature on CoPs in education extends beyond just learning, covering a wide range of topics and sometimes providing

conflicting ideas. This is important as it emphasises an alternative perspective to traditional individual-focused approaches (Lloyd and Jones, 2018).

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) define Communities of Practice as groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. To differentiate a CoP from a group simply sharing an interest, Wenger (1998, p.73) identified three essential components of the former: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Tummons (2022, p.4) suggests that the first step in benchmarking a CoP is to identify these components within a social gathering, as this is the foundation of a meaningful description of a CoP. However, these indicators have not been widely referenced in the literature, which may suggest a need for further empirical research to validate and apply these concepts of online CoPs for FE teacher PD.

While CoPs have been used in education for over twenty-five years and their popularity has recently grown, most of the literature and research in the education field still comes from universities and schools (Patton and Parker, 2017). In contrast, literature on CoPs for teaching and learning in FE began to appear at the start of the millennium. However, these studies often focus on broader aspects of teaching within FE rather than specifically addressing teachers' CPD.

## 2.5.2. The Role of CoPs in Facilitating Professional Development/CPD

The CoP literature specific to FE highlights how teachers actively construct new knowledge and share knowledge, collaboratively developing teachers' skills through these communities, and through meaningful interactions (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009; Brandon and Charlton, 2011). Additionally, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the shift to remote learning highlighted their significance in the online environment as isolated teachers sought support from each other (Exley, 2021). CoPs represent a shift from traditional top-down approaches to professional development, empowering teachers to prioritise their own CPD and collectively embed new knowledge, skills and practices. In schools, examples include subject-based teacher networks (Department of Education, 2015) and communities focused on specific pedagogies like lesson study (Sammons et al., 2007; Chapman and Muijs, 2014; Department of Education, 2015). However, Kennedy (2006) notes that CoPs can potentially reinforce dominant discourses uncritically, meaning that if a CoP is centred around a particular educational approach, it may inadvertently perpetuate this perspective without questioning its assumptions or considering alternative viewpoints.

While Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory originated in workplace apprenticeship contexts, Wenger (1998) expanded the concept by introducing the idea of 'learning architectures', suggesting that formal educational settings can be designed that generate the growth of CoPs. This framework enables teaching activities to be designed around functional CoPs that serve as resources for practitioners' practices. In FE, examples could include vocational communities spanning colleges and workplaces (Hodkinson and

Hodkinson, 2004) or cross-institutional subject networks (Loo, 2019). This shift highlights CoPs' potential as an alternative CPD model embedded in FE colleges' operations, facilitating ongoing collaborative learning and knowledge-sharing among teachers. However, this application to educational settings presents theoretical challenges, particularly regarding teacher induction. The CoP model assumes a gradual progression from peripheral to full participation through apprenticeship, yet new teachers must immediately assume full teaching responsibilities without the scaffolded participation that characterises traditional apprenticeship (Tully, 2022). Within FE, teachers often transition directly from industry into teaching roles, having to navigate both classroom teaching complexities and pedagogical development whilst maintaining full professional responsibilities (Tummons, 2022). This creates what Ingleby (2019) describes as a 'participation paradox' where new FE teachers are simultaneously full participants in terms of responsibility but peripheral in terms of expertise and experience. This assumption that expertise flows unidirectionally from veteran to novice members fails to recognise that new teachers, particularly those with recent industry experience, may bring valuable contemporary knowledge and skills to their practice (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018). The model's assumptions about linear progression from periphery to expertise may not fully capture the multifaceted nature of FE teachers' roles. Additionally, recent scholars have identified limitations in Lave and Wenger's CoP framework, with Trust, Krutka and Carpenter (2016) arguing that the model inadequately addresses how hierarchical power structures can undermine equal participation within communities. This limitation is particularly relevant when examining barriers to engagement in online CoPs, as institutional hierarchies in FE settings may restrict participation, with teachers potentially hesitant to challenge established practices when managers are present. A more nuanced theoretical framework may be needed – one that preserves the collaborative benefits of CoPs

while acknowledging the distinct structural and systemic factors that shape professional development in FE.

Recent research has emphasised the importance of collaborative approaches in enhancing teaching and learning practices. O'Leary and Wood (2019) argue that collaboration, rather than competition, is key to improving teaching practice in higher education. While their study focuses on the higher education context, their findings have significant implications for the FE sector. However, the assumption that collaborative models of professional development, such as those facilitated by CoPs, can lead to improved teaching practices and to better student outcomes warrants scrutiny. The effectiveness of collaborative models, including CoPs, may be constrained by instructional hierarchies, time pressures, and competing priorities that characterise the FE sector (Tummons, 2022). While CoPs can support shared learning and collective knowledge construction, several challenges emerge in practice. Power dynamics within institutions may inhibit authentic collaboration, particularly when management-drive initiatives conflict with bottom-up professional development (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016). In the context of online CoPs in FE, while the collaborative approach could be particularly beneficial, allowing practitioners to share best practices, engage in peer learning and work together towards improving their teaching methods and student experiences, questions remain about sustainability, and measurable impact on student outcomes. The assumption that improved collaboration necessarily leads to enhanced student learning requires validation specific to the FE context (Broad, 2015).

### 2.5.3. CoPs in Further Education (FE)

Studies in the school sector indicate CoPs have improved teachers' practice (Sammons et al., 2007; Chapman and Muijs, 2014; Department of Education, 2015), highlighting a need to explore whether similar benefits can be realised in the distinct FE context, given its unique characteristics and challenges (Orr, 2012). However, the literature on CoPs in the FE sector is limited. Practitioner research by Lloyd and Jones (2018) explores research communities within FE and highlights a potential conflict with the cultural and epistemological norms of the sector. These norms may not be conducive to reflective practices that underpin effective CoPs and would not necessarily be taken up by the sector that fosters managerial professionalism. Broad (2015) supports this view and argues that teachers in the FE sector have limited opportunities to develop links with colleagues in the same field, which would hinder the development and sustainability of CoPs. He suggests that CoPs may face unique challenges in the FE context, which need to be addressed to promote effective collaboration and professional development.

Bathmaker and Avis (2005) investigate how trainee teachers' placements within FE impact the formation of their professional identity. They explored Lave and Wenger's concept of apprenticeship within communities of practice, focusing on the experiences of trainee teachers rather than discovering effective methods of enhancing trainees' involvement in established CoPs. Their research revealed a sense of isolation and disconnection experienced by trainees. They argue that this was related to the poor work conditions within FE, lack of resources and perceived lack of management support, which led to negative perceptions of all members of the communities. This finding suggests that CoPs may face unique challenges in the FE

context, particularly in terms of fostering collaboration and professional development. The cultural and epistemological norms of the sector, as well as working conditions, can significantly impact the success of CoPs. To promote effective collaboration and professional development through CoPs in FE, it is therefore necessary to address these challenges and create an environment that supports autonomous reflective practice and encourages positive engagement from all members of the community.

Young (2002) found that FE lecturers teaching HE courses expressed frustration at the lack of time and resources for scholarly activities; she notes that 'scholarship is the word that dare not speak its name' in many FE institutions, highlighting the challenges of developing a culture of scholarship in this context.

## 2.6. The FE Context: Characteristics and Challenges

The FE context in England is significantly influenced by external pressures such as Ofsted inspections, curriculum standards and funding constraints (Coffield, 2000; Forrest, 2015). These factors shape CPD priorities and practices, often emphasising compliance and measurable outcomes over transformative teaching practices and teacher development (Kennedy, 2005). Greatbatch and Tate (2018) summarise that the evidence of how much 'the impact of different forms of CPD on teaching quality and on learners remain unknown' although there is limited research evidence to support this. This gap in understanding the impact of different CPD approaches, particularly collaborative models, represents a significant challenge in the FE sector (Chen, 2022)

Furthermore, FE teachers face the challenge of being "dual professionals" requiring both subject expertise and pedagogical knowledge (Tummons and Powell, 2014; Esmond and Wood, 2017). Updating subject knowledge in response to curriculum developments such as T-Levels is a key area for CPD (Hamer and Smith, 2021). However, the diverse nature of FE curricula, spanning multiple disciplines and both formal and informal learning, poses challenges for developing subject pedagogy (Hanley et al., 2018).

The Augar Review (2018) highlighted the need for investment in FE teachers' professional development, while the deregulation of teaching qualifications and removal of CPD requirements have contributed to declining teacher retention (Department for Business, 2012; Bloom, 2018). Recent government policies, such as the 'Skills for Jobs' White Paper, aim to address these issues by investing in FE teaching and establishing clear standards for proficiency (Department of Education, 2021; Department of Education, 2022). While focused on HE, Green et al. (2013) findings on the different experiences of newcomers and old-timers in CoPs may be relevant to the FE context. They found that newcomers initially focused on pragmatic survival-oriented learning, while long-term members developed more transformative, praxis-oriented approaches over time. This insight could be particularly pertinent in understanding the developmental trajectory of FE practitioners engaging in CPD through CoPs.

Young (2002) provides insights into the specific challenges faced by FE lecturers teaching HE courses. Her research highlights issues such as isolation from academic networks, lack of time

for scholarly activities and difficulties in managing the transition between FE and HE teaching levels. These challenges persist and are reflected in more recent reports on the sector. The ETF's "Training Needs in the Further Education Sector" report (2018) identified key areas for CPD investment, such as maths, English and digital technologies. However, it also revealed concerns about the value and relevance of existing CPD provision, with many practitioners citing workload and lack of incentives as barriers to participation (Broad, 2015; Eliahoo, 2017). Gore and Rosser (2022) research focused on schoolteachers but offers potential solutions to these challenges. Their findings on the benefits of pedagogy-focused learning across grades and subjects suggest that similar approaches could be valuable in addressing the diverse professional development needs of practitioners.

Research Ingleby (2019) reveals tensions between policy-maker visions of HE in FE focused on 'choice' 'competition' and 'employability' and the views of many academic staff who prioritise developing 'reflective practice' in students. This highlights the complex dynamics at play in HE in FE contexts. These tensions further complicate the design and implementation of effective CPD programmes in the FE sector.

The Ofsted (2022) Education Inspection Framework (EIF) emphasises the alignment of CPD with curriculum delivery and the development of teachers' subject expertise and pedagogical knowledge (Ofsted, 2022). This focus on measurable outcomes may lead to a prioritisation of CPD that aligns with inspected competencies over more transformative approaches (Kennedy, 2005).

*Internal Quality Processes and Roles within FE*

The internal quality processes and roles within FE institutions play a significant part in shaping the characteristics and challenges of the FE context, particularly in relation to CPD. The quality assurance processes within FE, influenced by Ofsted, include self-assessment and observation of teaching, learning and assessment. The purpose of these processes is to review pedagogic practices (Lumby, 2001). These quality assurance processes lead colleges to develop action plans, which are intended to inform effective CPD policies. The CPD policies link organisational goals to CPD practices. They also provide skills and competence enhancement opportunities for all leaders and teachers (O'Leary et al., 2019).

O'Leary et al. (2019) state that a three-pronged model of leadership based on trust and constructive interaction between Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs), middle managers and teaching staff has a greater impact on teaching and learning quality. SLTs must facilitate organisation-wide training and development to create a climate of continuous, effective learning. They must provide effective advice and information on national and personal needs and aspirations (Collinson and Collinson, 2021). O'Leary et al. (2019) conclude that a shared, distributed leadership framework achieves a greater buy-in at all levels, with teaching and learning as the focus.

However, SLTs also need to demonstrate awareness of internal and external CPD opportunities and lead staff to understand and demonstrate the impact of participation on student improvement, value, and provider quality (O'Leary et al., 2019). The SLTs are responsible for organisational vision and culture and driving improvements in teaching and learning quality (Stevenson et al., 2016). However, Kennedy (2005, 2014b), argues that SLTs seem to prefer one-off events and individual performance rather than collective responsibility. This suggests that while SLTs oversee the big picture strategy, they may struggle to foster a collaborative culture across the organisation (Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy, 2014b). Consequently, this disconnect may result in a misalignment between the espoused values of collaborative CPD and the actual practices within the institution.

*Middle Managers' Roles and Responsibilities*

Middle Managers (MMs) play a crucial role in shaping teachers' CPD; however, their impact can vary significantly across different contexts. MMs are often tasked with translating college policies into classroom practice and driving incremental improvements while considering technological and pedagogical advances (Stevenson et al., 2016). MMs may focus more on planning daily operations and course organisation rather than long-term development. It is essential to recognise that their views about and approach toward CPD effectiveness are often influenced by external pressures such as institutional goals and accountability frameworks (Corbett, 2017, p.214). The responsibilities of MMs also may encompass initiating organisational change and establishing a collective understanding of policies aimed at improving teaching quality; however, this task can be complex due to varying interpretations

of policy among different stakeholders within educational institutions (Collinson, 2007, p.31). MMs have a responsibility to ensure teaching standards and learner progress align with quality guidelines. While Ofsted's evolving framework establishes these standards, Wolstencroft and Lloyd (2018) caution that it is important not to assume that all managers uniformly embrace these standards or possess equal capability in meeting them effectively (Wolstencroft and Lloyd, 2018).

MMs manage teachers and teams for inspection preparation, provision quality and student achievement (Wolstencroft and Lloyd, 2019). As Brooks (2002) states, "Manager' roles now focus more on monitoring performance in line with centrally determined goals', rather than encouraging organisational learning and reflection" (Brooks, 2002, p.24).


## 2.7. Online CPD/PD


The challenges in the FE sector highlight the need for more flexible and effective approaches (Eliahoo, 2017). Traditional methods have shown limitations in addressing FE practitioners' diverse needs and the changing educational landscape (Taylerson, 2020). In response, attention has shifted towards online digital forms of CPD, offering potential solutions to barriers such as time constraints, geographical limitations and the need for more collaborative learning opportunities (Dempsey and Mestry, 2023).


During the pandemic, Kalman, Kalender and Cesur (2022) reported that there was an increase in teachers sharing issues, acquiring new knowledge of technology and developing materials,

potentially enabling teachers to reconsider and adapt their teaching practice. Chandran et al. (2021) report that virtual teacher CPD can be widely adaptable and replicable for many organisations, especially in situations where distance and finances deter in-person participation, demonstrating significant potential for meaningful impact.

The literature indicates perceived shortcomings of traditional CPD methods for teachers, with less favourable feedback on established approaches (Lloyd and Jones, 2018; Ervin-Kassab and Drouin, 2021). Recent conceptions and approaches to teachers' CPD have emerged, viewing it as a long-term process that includes regular opportunities to meet and share experiences (Caena, 2011). This shift towards more sustained and collaborative forms of CPD has paved the way for the growth of online platforms and communities supporting professional development. The concept of teachers working together beyond organisational boundaries is not new (Leask and Younie, 2013). However, the emergence of online CoPs has offered several advantages for CPD, such as overcoming practical limitations like reducing travel time and geographic barriers (Kennedy, 2005).

Nonetheless, Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn's (2018) systematic review highlighted that there is little consensus on the nature, form and impact of teachers' participation in online professional development communities. Their review identified that a common feature of online teacher communities is the provision of sustained PD, extending beyond individual skills development to foster a collective shift in understanding and the application of new practices. Fullan and Langworthy (2013) also argue that traditional face-to-face CPD

programmes are not sufficient in promoting lasting change and they propose a collective learning approach utilising innovative practices shared within these communities.

Research highlights that digital CPD for teachers worldwide has been growing and its use accelerated during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Liu, 2022). The pandemic brought about a notable change in the delivery of student classes and teachers' CPD, with a shift from face-to-face to online, remote and blended forms of learning (Philipsen et al., 2019). This transition involved more than just putting elements of learning online; it influenced teachers' PD and their beliefs about teaching (Lockee, 2021).

The potential of online communities to address the isolation experienced by FE lecturers teaching HE courses becomes evident when considering Young's (2002) findings. She reported that lecturers felt cut off from academic networks and discussions, a problem that online communities could potentially alleviate.

The impact of the pandemic on FE colleges was particularly notable. A survey by the Association of Colleges (2020) found that half of planned learning hours were being delivered online, with 93% of colleges implementing timetabled live video lessons. FE institutions also adopted various other approaches including personalised tutor support, weekly check-ins and facilitating collaborative online work among peers (Dabbous and Emms, 2020)

Online CoPs represent a convergence of traditional CoP practices and theory with the growing field of online professional development. They offer the benefits of CoPs – such as collaborative learning and shared practice – while using the accessibility and flexibility of online platforms. This combination may address many of the challenges associated with traditional CPD, such as time constraints, making ongoing professional development more feasible for busy educators (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018). However, translating Lave and Wenger's CoP model to online spaces presents theoretical challenges. Their framework emphasises learning through direct observation and physical proximity – elements that are altered in virtual environments. Questions arise about how legitimate peripheral participation functions when physical observation is not possible and how community bonds develop when interactions are asynchronous. While digital platforms offer new possibilities for collaboration, they may also impact the development of mutual engagement and shared practice that Lave and Wenger identified as crucial in CoPs (Roberts, 2006).

Building on (Timperley et al., 2007; Cordingley et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017; Hamer and Smith, 2021) findings about effective CPD strategies, well-designed digital technology has the potential to enhance teacher CPD by making it more cost-effective, purposefully tailored and incorporating supportive coaching. Research advocates that this technology-enhanced reimagining of CPD can enhance teacher engagement, development and application of new knowledge (Timperley et al., 2007; Cordingley et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017).

The literature consistently emphasises the significance of social and collaborative interaction among teachers. Nieto (2003) highlights that teachers are most likely to adopt different teaching practices if they consider the 'what, 'how,' and 'why,' which can be facilitated through digital means. Kennedy (2005) reports that teachers are more likely to adopt new pedagogical approaches when they feel a sense of ownership, which online digital technologies can facilitate by offering multiple opportunities to practise new skills. Online CoPs potentially provide spaces for this collaborative skill practice among teachers. This theoretical perspective suggests that such platforms could enable sharing of lesson materials, peer feedback and collaborative problem solving. While promising for professional development, this potential of online CoPs for FE teacher development requires further empirical research.

However, there are challenges to the effective use of digital technology in teachers' CPD. The Department of Education (2019) listed several barriers including the need for modern data infrastructure, teachers' skills and confidence, awareness of available tools and concerns about privacy and security (Department of Education, 2019, p.7). Additionally, teachers may lack sufficient digital skills and confidence and reasons for not undertaking related CPD include heavy time demands, digital fatigue and CPD opportunities outside regular working hours (Miao et al., 2017).

The concept of teachers working together beyond organisational boundaries is not new (Leask and Younie, 2013). However, recent expansion in digital technology and social media tools has facilitated the growth of online communities and created new opportunities for CPD

(Montebello, 2017; Association for Learning Technology, 2022), potentially overcoming practical limitations associated with traditional CPD (Kennedy, 2005). Digital technologies have increased possibilities for users to participate, contribute and design their CPD experiences (Montebello, 2017). However, while CPD may be undertaken within a virtual online community if the key elements of joint enterprise, shared repertoire and mutual engagement are present (Bond and Lockee, 2014), there is limited evidence indicating that teachers are engaging in this type of CPD (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016).

The growth of digital CPD and online communities has been facilitated by technological advancements and the development of a range of social media tools (Association for Learning Technology, 2022). However, successful implementation of these technologies poses challenges that need to be addressed (Philipsen et al., 2019). Further research is needed to explore the extent to which these online communities are functioning as authentic CoPs, as defined by Wenger (1998) and to investigate the factors that support or hinder the development of online CoPs for teachers' CPD.

Online CoPs have emerged as a promising approach to addressing the challenges of traditional CPD and supporting collaborative learning among teachers. Online CoPs offer benefits for FE teachers, such as overcoming barriers to collaborative CPD knowledge sharing, providing flexibility and connectivity (McConnell et al., 2013), fostering teacher-driven solutions (Exley, 2021) and grounding them in practice. They also offer emotional support and renewal for teachers facing change fatigue by providing peer empathy and validation (Abedini, Abedin and

Zowghi, 2021). Despite these benefits, it is important to acknowledge the challenges associated with the effective use of digital technology in teachers' CPD, as discussed earlier in this review. These challenges, which may also apply to online CoPs, need to be addressed to ensure that teachers can fully benefit from the collaborative learning opportunities offered by these communities.

While the literature on online CoPs, specifically in the FE context, is limited, research in related areas suggests that digital technologies can support teachers in adopting new pedagogical approaches by providing opportunities for practice and promoting a sense of ownership (Kennedy, 2005). Nieto (2003) highlights that teachers are most likely to adopt different teaching practices if they consider the 'what,' 'how,' and 'why,' which can be achieved through digital means.

The literature suggests that several factors influence teachers' participation and engagement within online CoPs, though some traditional assumptions require critical examination. Prensky (2001) introduced the concept of digital natives, suggesting that younger individuals who have grown up with digital technologies may be more comfortable with online collaboration and sharing their experiences in virtual environments. However, recent research challenges this perspective. Reid, Button and Brommeyer (2023) demonstrate that digital competency develops through structured learning rather than merely generational experience. The research has also highlighted gender differences in online learning environments, with studies indicating that women tend to value supportive relationships and a sense of community more than men

(González-Gómez et al. (2012) and show higher levels of engagement and participation in online discussion forums (Rovai and Baker, 2005). These findings reinforce the importance of considering the diverse needs and preferences of members when designing and using online CoPs for professional development in the FE sector while recognising that effective digital engagement requires intentional support and development regardless of demographic factors.

To maximise the potential of online CoPs for teachers' CPD, careful consideration of facilitation strategies is crucial. Maintaining active participation and engagement is essential for the success of online CoPs. Abedini, Abedin and Zowghi (2021) conducted a systematic review to examine the influence of online CoPs on FE practitioners' CPD opportunities. Their review highlighted several factors which hindered adult online engagement in CoPs, including age, fatigue, a lack of prior experience of learning activities, lack of personal evaluation, learning new technology, directed rather than independent learning and diverse experiences. However, their review also identified factors that support engagement, including providing autonomy for members, facilitating interactive discussions, enhancing intrinsic motivation, promoting self-directed learning, allowing flexibility in participation and exposing members to diverse perspectives and experiences (Abedini, Abedin and Zowghi, 2021).

The Association for Learning Technology (ALTC), undertook its first audit of online CoPs in the FE sector in 2020, revealing critical findings, such as inadequate signposting and collaboration amongst new networks, limited benefits of closed-door communities for the sector, commercial sector bodies operating in 'broadcast mode' with minimal sustained active

engagement and a strong focus on practical resource-sharing communities. Significantly, the number of CoPs within the sector has seen exponential growth, surging from 100 to 264 across the sector, an increase of over 200% in two years (Association for Learning Technology, 2020; The Education & Training Foundation, 2021). This rapid growth demonstrates the increasing popularity and potential of online CoPs to support FE practitioners' development. However, to optimise their effectiveness, it is crucial to address the challenges identified in the audit and leverage the growing interest to deliver high-quality, collaborative learning experiences that enhance teaching and learning in the sector.

In summary, the literature on online CPD and online CoPs in the FE sector highlights both the potential benefits and challenges of these approaches. While online CoPs offer promising solutions to many limitations of traditional CPD, their effective implementation requires careful consideration of various factors, including facilitation strategies, demographic considerations and the specific needs of the FE sector. Further research is needed to fully understand how these online communities can best support the professional development of FE practitioners.

## 2.8. Conclusion

This review has revealed significant complexities in how CPD is conceptualised and implemented within the FE sector. The ambiguity surrounding terminology can lead to difficulties in establishing a shared understanding of CPD and its purpose, hindering the development of effective CPD that distinguishes it from related terms. Therefore, there is a

need for a clearer conceptualisation of CPD and a coherent framework for understanding its nature and objectives in the context of the FE sector.

The review then explored the external and internal pressures influencing CPD approaches in FE colleges and provided a comprehensive critique of various CPD models used in the FE context, drawing on Kennedy's (2005, 2014) frameworks. Online CoPs have emerged as a promising alternative model for collaborative CPD that may be better suited to the unique challenges of the FE sector.

This review has critically examined the concepts and challenges related to CPD in the FE sector in England, highlighting the need for a clearer conceptualisation of CPD. It explored how Boyer's (1990) framework of scholarship aligns with conceptions of CPD in the FE sector. Boyer's model provides a comprehensive lens through which to understand the various scholarly activities that may contribute to PD in FE. The review discussed the potential benefits and challenges of CoPs in facilitating knowledge sharing, collaborative learning and PD among FE teachers and aligns with the sector's need for a more holistic approach to PD that includes not only teaching skills but also research, knowledge application and the continuous improvement of teaching practices.

However, the literature on CPD in the FE sector highlights several gaps and areas that require further research. One significant gap is the lack of research on the use and impact of online

CoPs as a means of collaborative CPD for FE teachers and managers. While some literature highlights the potential benefits of CoPs for sharing good practices and developing teachers' skills (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009; Brandon and Charlton, 2011), research specific to the FE context is limited. The literature also indicates that CoPs may face unique challenges in the FE setting due to the sector's cultural and epistemological norms and its managerialist performance-based demands (Broad, 2015; Lloyd and Jones, 2018).

Further research is needed to explore how these online communities can be effectively implemented and sustained in the FE environment, considering the sector's specific challenges and characteristics. Another area that requires investigation is the intersection of online CoPs and scholarly activities, such as research and the application of knowledge to practice. Research is needed to understand the extent to which they facilitate or hinder different types of scholarly activities and how these activities can contribute to professional development and the transformation of teaching practices.

Overall, while the literature provides insights into the potential of online CoPs for CPD in the FE sector, there is a need for empirical research that examines the practical implementation, challenges and impacts of these communities within the specific context of FE. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to the development of effective strategies for leveraging these online spaces, to support the continuous professional and academic development of FE teachers and managers.

In conclusion, this review has synthesised the existing literature on CPD, online communities and scholarship in the FE context, providing a robust foundation for further research. By addressing the identified gaps and building on the findings of this review, further studies can contribute to the development of effective strategies for using online CoPs to support the CPD, academic development and pedagogical transformation of FE teachers and managers.

# CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of an online Community of Practice (CoP) in supporting the continued professional development of FE teachers. CoPs have gained significant popularity in the field of education as they serve as valuable platforms for knowledge management and facilitating teachers' CPD (The Education & Training Foundation, 2021). This study investigated whether an online CoP provides a vehicle for influencing meaningful professional learning of FE teachers. The study also examined practitioners' engagement in the four domains of Boyer's scholarship model: discovery, integration, application and teaching (Boyer, 1990). To ensure a systematic approach, the research design and data collection methods were aligned with specific research questions that explored various aspects of inquiry in relation to the engagement of FE teachers in online CoPs.

The following research questions were addressed:

1. According to FE practitioners, how does an online CoP benefit their professional development?

2. What techniques and methods do FE practitioners use to engage with online CoPs?

3. What are the challenges within the CoP which impact continuous professional development?

4. To what extent do FE practitioners engage in the work of each of the four domains of Boyer's model of scholarship?

To address these questions, a mixed-methods case study approach was adopted, combining qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey to provide a comprehensive exploration of the PDNorth online CoP (Stake, 1995). The qualitative methods align with investigating subjective experiences and meaning-making, while the quantitative survey data complement these qualitative findings by providing a structured overview of participants' engagement and perceptions within the CoP. The case study design enables a deep investigation of a bonded phenomenon in context (Creswell, 2018).

This chapter begins by discussing the ontological positioning of the researcher, considering the researcher's beliefs and values that shaped the chosen methodology. It then explores the dominant paradigms in education research, namely qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods and justifies the predominantly interpretive paradigm adopted in this study. Additionally, the chapter discusses the epistemological considerations and the integration of qualitative and quantitative data. The chosen research approach, a mixed-methods case study, is also explained in detail, highlighting its suitability for the study. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the various data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews and an online survey, as well as the processes of analyses employed to gather evidence and gain insights into the experiences and practices within the chosen CoP. Finally, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the ethical considerations which guided the research process. It emphasises the importance of adhering to guidelines and principles that prioritise the well-being and rights of individuals when conducting research involving people.

## 3.2. Methodological Approach

3.2.1. Ontological Positioning

Ontology concerns the nature of being and understanding the world that exists around us (Thomas, 2013). It involves an individual's perception of social reality as either external and objective or socially constructed and subjective (Bryman, 2016). Within educational research, this ontological understanding becomes particularly significant when investigating professional development and learning communities. This study adopts a predominantly social constructionist perspective while incorporating pragmatic elements. This positioning emphasises selecting research methods based on their practical usefulness in addressing the research questions rather than strict adherence to a single philosophical position (Denscombe, 2021).

The Further Education sector presents a uniquely complex environment for ontological consideration, as it encompasses: Conceptualising knowledge through an interpretivist paradigm lens highlights the subjective constructed nature of reality within given social environments (Flick, Von Kardorff and Steinke, 2004). Understanding teachers nuanced institutional context of FE practitioners proved vital for investigating CPD experiences within this diverse CoP. The research acknowledges the unique concept of PDNorth, where participants from diverse institutions - including colleges, private training providers, universities - bring different institutional practices, policies and cultural factors that influence their learning and development. By adopting an interpretive approach, the researcher can

examine the complexities of the educational environment and capture the nuances of teachers' experiences within the CoP (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

My understanding of these ontological considerations has been shaped by my professional experience, informed by over thirty years of experience observing, supporting and enhancing teaching practices in FE. Throughout my professional life, I have made objective judgments on teaching practice and ensured that evidence supports my decisions as a manager. This dual role as both researcher and experienced FE professional creates both opportunities and challenges. Embracing reflective interpretivist research paradigms is essential for exploring alternative viewpoints and sharing power (Watts, 2019). This combination of practical experience and interpretive understanding aligns with both pragmatic and interpretivist orientations.

My position reflects this interplay between experience and interpretation. My aim is to develop my own authoritative yet participatory voice, approaching it reflexively and co-constructing findings that reflect participants' realities while acknowledging that my subjectivity may shape interpretations of the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017).

This positioning informs my approach to knowledge creation and interpretation. The pragmatic elements of this research acknowledge that while social reality is interpreted through individual and collective meaning-making, some observable patterns and practices can be measured and analysed (Denscombe, 2021). This aligns with Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) argument that

pragmatism supports using both qualitative and quantitative methods to best answer research questions.

Having established my personal position, it is important to situate this research within broader theoretical perspectives. In education research, positivist and interpretivist paradigms provide contrasting perspectives guiding investigations (Mackenzie, 2006). Positivism aligns with quantitative methods seeking cause and effect using factual, measurable evidence, differing substantially from interpretivism's qualitative, constructivist emphasis on subjective meanings, shaped by sociocultural contexts (Thomas, 2013; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Rather than adhering strictly to either paradigm, this study takes a pragmatic approach while maintaining a predominantly interpretivist orientation that recognises the socially constructed nature of meaning within the online CoP.

The Integration of quantitative data and qualitative data derived from interviews enriches the understanding of this community through multiple complementary epistemological angles (Creswell and Clark, 2017). This approach aligns with both interpretivist aims of capturing subjective perspectives and pragmatic goals of measuring observable patterns of participation. Semi-structured interviews explore "how" and "why" experiences arise based on member voices (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). To provide a balanced overview, a survey measured participation through descriptive statistics frequencies regarding "what" activities and online tool usage among community members. These statistics gave a quantified overview of the broad landscape, contextualising the specific stories that emerged from teacher interviews.

From an interpretive perspective, interviews centred on teachers' "why" voices, explaining dynamics and offering in-depth insights into experiences from members. Surveys provided data on the activities members engaged in across the whole community, with a continued emphasis on understanding how participants interpret and construct meaning within their professional context (Robson and McCartan, 2016). This research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm that acknowledges multiple socially constructed realities, recognizing that knowledge emerges through participants' lived experiences and interpretations. This ontological approach aligned with examining how FE practitioners made sense of their experiences within the online CoP (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002), acknowledging that meaning is negotiated through social interaction and individual contexts (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018).

As the researcher, I recognise that my perspectives, beliefs and values may shape my interpretations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). Guba and Lincoln (1994) advocate that researchers reflect on their role in the research process to become aware of their own biases and assumptions. Therefore, I must acknowledge the significance of unpacking and clarifying my own ontological and epistemological assumptions throughout this study. This reflection is essential for my own development as a researcher and for conducting the research effectively (Robinson, 2002; Creswell, 2018). I recognised that I was an active participant in the research process. Whilst the knowledge produced is reflective of the participants' realities, my own subjectivities also influenced the interpretation of the data gathered. Therefore, while acknowledging my subjectivity, I aimed to approach the research with openness and reflexivity

and engage in the process of co-creation of knowledge with the participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017).

In conclusion, this research adopts an ontological position that combines interpretivist emphasis on socially constructed reality with pragmatic attention to practical utility. This perspective informed the approach to understanding how FE practitioners make meaning of their professional development experiences within the PDNorth CoP. While acknowledging my own subjectivity as a researcher, I aimed to capture the multiple realities and interpretations that exist within this bounded case, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and individual meaning-making processes. This ontological positioning provided the foundation for examining how participants understand, experience and derive meaning from their engagement in this online CoP.

3.2.2. Research Approach - Instrumental Case Study

The study employed an instrumental case study approach to examine the effectiveness of online CoPs in supporting the CPD of FE teachers (Stake, 1995). This methodological choice enabled the researcher to focus on the issue as the dominant aspect, rather than simply examining the case *per se*. These issues include the benefits of online CoPs, engagement techniques, challenges impacting CPD and the extent of scholarly activities within the CoP.

PDNorth, established in 2017, operated as an online CoP within the FE sector with approximately 800 members focusing on English, maths and ESOL teacher development (Yin, 2014). By selecting PDNorth as an information-rich exemplar case (Patton and Parker, 2017),

the study examined experiences and interactions within this bounded system. This instrumental case study approach facilitated the investigation of issues using a bounded case to understand broader phenomena (Stake, 1995). This design enabled the construction of knowledge regarding online CoPs through PDNorth's specific characteristics, with findings potentially relevant to other online CoPs within the FE sector (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998).

PDNorth, now known as FEtapestry[1] after rebranding, functions an established network within the FE sector that delivers CPD to English, Maths and ESOL teachers. Its history, including funding from the Education Training Foundation (ETF) and subsequent transformation, made it a suitable bounded case for study.

## 3.3. Recruitment and sampling

To recruit participants for the survey and interviewees for this study, a gatekeeper approach was employed by contacting the facilitator of the Professional Development Network (PDNorth) in the first instance (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). The role of gatekeepers in granting permission for research and the dynamics between insiders and outsiders who may lack professional experience in a specific context have been explored Plowright (2010, p.163). They state that the function of the gatekeeper in accessing populations is a crucial factor to consider, as their cooperation determines the researcher's ability to obtain adequate access to participants and yield favourable outcomes. Fortunately, in this case, I had met the curator of PDNorth in 2019 at a CPD event and was able to establish a positive relationship with her. PDNorth is a collective of professionals in the Further Education Sector who collaborate to enhance their

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[1] https://wakelet.com/wake/cfL6eBIxSp79Y1HKpbVnQ

practice. The Curator of PDNorth, being a trusted and respected figure among the participants, was selected as the gatekeeper due to their access to an established contact email list of 1,000 members. The PDNorth curator was contacted and I provided them with information about the research project. They agreed to invite members of the CoP to participate in the research through their October 2022 newsletter, which included a link to a webpage on the PDNorth website with details of the research project and an invitation to respond to the survey. The gatekeeper approach was important as it allowed potential participants to contact the facilitator with any questions they had about the research study, providing them with reassurance and trust (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). The curator was also informed about the ethical considerations of the research and the confidentiality of the participants was emphasised. Overall, the gatekeeper approach proved to be an effective method of recruitment for this study as it provided access to a specific population and ensured that the participants were well-informed about the research topic.

While PDNorth reported approximately 800 members, determining actual active membership presented challenges. Through the gatekeeper distribution method, the survey reached potential participants via a monthly newsletter and website. The response rate of approximately 2.5% ($n$ = 20) reflects several factors typical of online community research. Drawing on Stake's (1995) approach to case study research, the low response rate was viewed as an opportunity for deeper inquiry rather than a methodological limitation. Membership status in online communities is often fluid (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018), making it difficult to verify active versus nominal members. The mixed methods design allowed for a comprehensive exploration that went beyond quantitative representation.

While the gatekeeper approach provided legitimate access, it may have influenced reach and engagement (Plowright, 2010). The decision to avoid participation incentives, through impacting response rates, helped ensure authentic engagement (Tummons and Duckworth, 2013). Despite these considerations, the respondents represented an information-rich sample of actively engaged community members. While the survey provided quantitative data, the participants, as active members of the CoP, offered valuable insights into successful engagement patterns. According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), it is these core participants who typically drive meaningful exchange in CoP's. This focused sample, supplemented by the qualitative depth from subsequent interviews that Stake (1995) values in case study research, provided a more comprehensive understanding of the CoP dynamics than would be possible through a larger but shallower sample.

The sampling technique for the survey was purposeful, self-selective and all participants were teachers who met the inclusion criteria, which were as follows (Fowler, 2014):

1. Current Teachers/Lecturers/Practitioners/Managers of English, Maths and ESOL subjects within the FE sector in England;
2. Teachers who have undertaken professional development within the last academic year;
3. The participants participate in CoP activities, which are located online or blended.

All 21 survey respondents met these criteria, of those, 7 participants were purposively selected for interviews based on maximal variation in experience across subject areas and roles to elicit a breath of perceptions (Suri, 2011).

## 3.4. Data Collecting Instruments

Two complementary data sources were pursued and aligned sequentially to address the study's research questions focused on perceived benefits, techniques, challenges and types of scholarship within this online CoP (Creswell and Clark, 2017). As Table 3.1 demonstrates, the qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys were designed to provide breadth and depth in exploring perceived benefits, engagement techniques, challenges and scholarly activities within this online CoP. While there is some overlap in the areas explored by each research instrument, they offer complementary perspectives that enrich the overall study.

**Table 3.1 Research instrument details for data collection**

| Research Instrument | Objective | Research Question | Quantitative and or Qualitative | Data Collection method | Details or data process | How data was analysed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Quantitative Survey | To obtain demographic data: age, role, experience and information about length of time engaged with PDNorth<br><br>Perceptions of CPD and the CoP activities they have undertaken within the previous two years. | 1, 2, 4 | Quantitative | JISC online survey | JISC online survey<br><br>Downloaded into SPSS Software<br><br>Stored on JMU cloud | SPSS Non-Parametric Independent samples, Kristi Wallis, Manley-Whitney Inferential statistics which allowed the researcher to draw inferences and measure differences from quantitative data and review whether there are significant correlations between |

| | | | | | | demographics and responses. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Qualitative Individual Semi-structured interviews | To gain a deeper understanding and provide clarity on the survey results; Additionally, this research seeks to examine their perceptions of CPD and the factors that influence it, while acknowledging the existence of multiple realities within the CoP. | 1,3,4 | Qualitative | Virtual On-Line Zoom/Teams, Permission will be requested; cameras will be requested to be on, interviews recorded and audio transcribed. | Obtain Consent<br><br>Record the interviews.<br><br>Transcribed the interviews.<br><br>Store on JMU cloud | Reflective Thematic data analysis |

To answer RQ1, the researcher aimed to discover how online CoPs benefit the professional development of FE practitioners. Specifically, the researcher sought to identify the features of an online CoP that are considered useful and commonly employed by most teachers within the CoP. This may include aspects such as knowledge sharing and collaborative learning, including access to resources being used by the teachers to develop their practice. RQ2 seeks to identify the specific techniques and methods employed by FE practitioners to engage with online CoPs. This involved examining the frequency of participation, types of contributions made, utilisation of technology tools and strategies for active engagement within the CoP. RQ3 addressed the challenges encountered within the CoP that impact CPD, such as time constraints, technological issues, lack of participation or engagement from other members and conflicting priorities. These considerations were reflected in both the questionnaire and interviews.

The research questions for this study incorporate a mix of "How," Why" and What" questions, each requiring different approaches to data collection and analysis. According to Robson and McCartan (2016), exploratory "how" and "why "questions are best addressed using qualitative methods. In this study, the "how' and "why" questions, such as "How does an online CoP benefit FE practitioners' professional development?" and "Why do FE practitioners engage with online CoPs" were explored through both survey and semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives.

3.4.1. Online Survey

The survey was designed to gather descriptive statistics documenting participation levels, activities and self-reported perceptions via Likert scale items around teachers' professional

development opportunities. The survey questions aligned with the four guiding research questions guiding this study (Table 3.2). While the questions were designed to assess participants' perceptions and experiences, they indirectly provided insights into engagement techniques and challenges, connecting with RQ2. Likert scale items such as "I do not get time to engage with others within the PDNorth community" addressed potential barriers to engagement related to RQ3.

These items enabled an assessment of participants' attitudes, perceived behaviours and experiences within the CoP, providing indirect insights into their engagement techniques and challenges.

**Table 3.2 Mapping Research Questions to Survey**

| Research Questions | Examples of Items |
|---|---|
| RQ1 | <ul><li>Belonging to PDNorth has benefited me in evaluating my teaching practice.</li><li>Being part of the community has developed my confidence in trying new things.</li><li>Online Discussions with CoP colleagues have helped me to think more deeply about my subject.</li></ul> |
| RQ2 | <ul><li>I find reading PDNorth/FE Tapestry community publications reports interesting and informative.</li><li>I feel comfortable engaging with the community online events</li><li>Watching the PDNorth community teaching and learning videos via the YouTube channel has helped me to find solutions to challenges in my professional practice.</li></ul> |
| RQ3 | <ul><li>I do not get time to engage with others within the PDNorth Community.</li></ul> |
| RQ4 | Survey items related to Boyer's domains of scholarship:<ul><li>It is important to me that I can explain what concepts or theories underpin my teaching.</li><li>Collaborating to do research with colleagues</li><li>Conducting research into independent practice</li><li>Collaborating with FE/HE institutions</li></ul> |

| | • Reflecting with reference to a journal article/blog |
|---|---|
| | |

These items from the survey instrument illustrate how different questions were designed to address specific research questions. Items measuring barriers to participation are addressed (RQ3), while items assessing scholarly activities aligned with (RQ4) focus on Boyer's domains of scholarship.

The survey comprised two types of items: Likert scale questions (6-23) assessing attitudes and perceptions and frequency measures (24-25) examining levels of participation in specific activities. The Likert items explored perceptions of benefits (RQ1), engagement experiences (RQ2), barriers (RQ3) and scholarly activities (RQ4). The frequency items measured how often participants engaged in various professional development and scholarly activities, such as attending workshops, collaborating on research and participating in professional discussions.

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for each survey item, summarising response distributions. This facilitated the identification of patterns in perceptions, behaviour and engagement levels. Analysis was also conducted using SPSS non-parametric independent sample, Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney Inferential statistics. This allowed the researcher to draw inferences and measure differences from the quantitative data and review whether there were significant correlations between demographics and responses. Additionally, non-parametric inferential statistics helped determine significant differences in responses between demographic groups, given the relatively small, specialised sample size (n=20). Specifically, a Kruskal-Wallis H test assessed variability across three age subgroups

and four time-engaged subgroups. A Mann-Whitney U test further analysed differences by gender and role. These distribution-free tests enabled valid statistical conclusions from a limited population despite non-normality (Denscombe, 2021). An online survey is a cost-efficient method for collecting quantitative data characteristics and practices of teachers (Creswell and Clark, 2017). The data provided an overview of the CoP, enabling the identification of patterns and trends of the larger population of the CoP landscape.

Before distribution, followed best practices for survey design, particularly the importance of pre-testing survey instruments (Fowler Jr, 2013). Two experienced teachers/managers within FE completed the questionnaire as part of the pilot study. Their feedback led to several revisions, including clarifying definitions, adding options for responses and improving question wording. This process helped to ensure the survey was clear, comprehensive and appropriate for the target population.

### 3.4.2. Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews served as a flexible research tool that involved person-to-person interaction and places the interviewer as the research instrument through the use of interpersonal skills. An interpretive approach was utilised to understand how the teachers and members of the CoP think and perceive their lived experiences within the CoP (Bryman, 2016). To achieve this, it was necessary to directly ask about individuals' thoughts and perspectives, as dialogue and questioning allow for exploration of their experiences, emotions and perceptions. This interaction allows us to uncover the world in which others live, gaining insight into their perceptions and experiences. Face-to-face interviews have been a traditional form of generating

data in qualitative studies (Briggs, Coleman and Morrison, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method for this study as they provide an effective means of gathering information; they are flexible and by using scheduled and unscheduled questions, this approach facilitated the collection of more detailed responses from the participants. In contrast, structured interviews that follow a set order of questions would only provide limited responses and would lack a flow of conversation. Therefore, by using semi-structured interviews, I was able to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences and thoughts (Creswell, 2018). In summary, the use of semi-structured interviews was a deliberate and informed choice based on a thorough consideration of the research aims and objectives.

To gain a deeper understanding and provide clarity on the survey results, the research sought to examine participants' perceptions of CPD and the factors that influence it while acknowledging the experience of multiple realities in the CoP. Subsequently, individual interviews further investigated teachers' perceptions, experiences and motivations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the intricacies shaping CPD engagement within this specific CoP.

Selecting interviews as a qualitative data collection instrument enabled gathering rich, detailed accounts grounded in participants' voices regarding the sociocultural and contextual factors that inform their teaching practice participation choices and meaning derived from the community (Creswell and Clark, 2017).

The semi-structured interviews were guided by key topics aligned with the research questions while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions and deeper exploration of emerging themes. Key discussion topics included:

1. "Can you talk about your experiences and perceptions of the CoP?"

2. "What would you consider to be the advantages of being part of the CoP?"

3. "How do you think your participation with PDNorth will affect your scholarly or research output?"

4. "Have you found anything that you've read within the CoP to be directly impactful on your practice?"

5. With PDNorth being virtual, have you found that to be an advantage or a disadvantage?"

**Table 3.3 Mapping Research Questions to Interview Questions**

| Research Questions | Examples of Questions |
|---|---|
| RQ1 | Please talk about your experiences and perceptions of the CoP. <br> What did you consider the advantages of the CoP? <br> Did you learn anything new or solve a problem? |
| RQ2 | What specific features or resources do you find most useful for engaging with other members? <br> How has your engagement with PDNorth changed over time, if at all? |
| RQ3 | What did you consider were the disadvantages of the CoP? <br> What were the issues with working together in the CoP? |
| RQ4 | How does participation in the CoP result in you making changes in the way you teach or conduct research? <br> Did you find yourself more interested in pursuing research with students or other teachers? |

These questions were designed to explore participants' personal experiences, perceived benefits, challenges faced and the impact of the CoP on their professional development in greater depth.

The interview approach was informed by the findings and analysis of the questionnaire. For instance, survey responses indicating high levels of agreement with statements about the benefits of the CoP "Belonging to PDNorth has benefitted me in evaluating my teaching practice" ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.00$), led to more focused interview questions about specific ways participants felt the CoP had impacted their professional development.

The decision to conduct the interviews online was primarily driven by the fact that the study participants were experienced and comfortable with an online space, as they were members of an online CoP and had attended previous events online. These interviews were live and on camera, taking place in real-time. I chose to conduct online video conferencing interviews for several other reasons. Firstly, it was more convenient and cost-effective to reduce the time and costs associated with traveling to geographically dispersed locations across the United Kingdom (Weller, 2015). All the study participants were outside of my organisation and were spread across the country. In preparation for the interviews, participant information sheets and consent forms were sent via email, copies of which are included in Appendix 1 (Mirick and Wladkowski, 2019). I decided not to provide the interview questions to the participants beforehand, as this would ensure their responses were spontaneous (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010).

The participants in the study were not known to the researcher, although some had been encountered at previous CPD events within the FE sector. This professional distance supported objectivity during data collection and analysis (Creswell and Clark, 2017). A shared understanding of the FE context enabled effective rapport-building during interviews. Additionally, the participants' willingness to share detailed experiences suggested that the lack of close professional relationships did not hinder data collection or interpretation (Denscombe, 2021).

The interviews were organised around the interviewer's and interviewees' work and life schedules (Tummons and Duckworth, 2013; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). This approach allowed for flexibility and accommodated the participants' work commitments. Nevertheless, this posed certain challenges. It took longer for myself and participants to respond and arrange suitable times that suited both parties' schedules and this proved more difficult than I initially anticipated, also highlights as common in small-scale social research projects. (Denscombe, 2021)

Despite these scheduling challenges, the advantages of conducting online interviews outweighed the difficulties. The online format offered several benefits:

- Convenience to participant – reduces the impact of travel over wide demographic areas.
- Interviews are transcribed and available immediately.
- Participants have experience and have undertaken online MS Teams calls.
- Cost effectiveness.

The semi-structured interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of all research questions, particularly RQ3 on challenges. They provided rich, contextual data that complemented the survey results, offering a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences within the CoP.

The researcher considered the recent newness and transient nature of data obtained through online interviews, where both audio and visual (camera turned on) were utilised via MS Teams (Thunberg and Arnell, 2022). Gray et al. (2020) provide a 10-point list for conducting online interviews that was integrated into the participant information sheet or discussed at the start of the interview. This ensured acknowledgement of the current and efficient nature of online interviewing.

**Table 3.4 Considerations and Actions Taken for Online Interviews Using MS Teams**

| Number | Things to Consider | Action Undertaken |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Test MS teams ahead of interview | All participants and the researcher had experience of using MS teams. |
| 2 | Provide technical information, this was included in the participant information sheet emailed prior to interview | All participants were asked if they had access to a device and were comfortable with MS teams. |
| 3 | Have a back-up plan | Researcher would ring the participant if difficulties arose or rearrange interview. |
| 4 | Plan for distractions | This was discussed by the researcher at the start of each interview, as participants were in a variety of locations i.e., home, work. |
| 5 | Provide a direct link to the meeting | When a MS Teams meeting was scheduled, a meeting invitation was generated with live link to the meeting. This link was pasted into the email invitation to study participants and included in a MS Office calendar invite to participants. Participants entered the online interview with one click of this link. |
| 6 | Consider storage needs | Sufficient storage space via LJMU MS OneDrive. |

| 7 | Hardwire computer to the internet | Majority of interviews scheduled to take place when researcher had access to Home Computer which is hardwired into internet router. |
|---|---|---|
| 8 | Uninterrupted internet connection | All researchers' other devices were disconnected prior to scheduled interviews. |
| 9 | Create a visual reminder | Visual reminders appear on the screen to notify participants that they were being recorded. |
| 10 | Manage consent process | Written consent was completed and each participant was asked verbally at the start of each interview. |

Adapted from (Gray et al., 2020, p.1297).

Together, these two forms of data instruments were distinct yet connected (Creswell and Clark, 2017). While the survey was used to provide broad insights and statistical data, the interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions. In conclusion, the combination of survey and interviews provided a comprehensive approach to addressing all research questions. This mixed-methods approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the PDNorth online CoP and its impact on FE practitioners' professional development.

## 3.5. Study Population

The population for this research study consisted of teachers, practitioners and managers of English, Maths and ESOL who had engaged in professional development activities over the past two academic years. These participants were recruited from members of the Professional Development Network (PDNorth), a Community of Practice (CoP) in the FE sector.

A gatekeeper approach was employed, whereby the facilitator of PDNorth served as the gatekeeper. In October 2022, PDNorth members were sent the link to the survey via a

participant information email through the gatekeeper and the survey was also featured as a monthly spotlight on PDNorth's website[2]. This provided participants with an opportunity to have their voices heard, as noted by Collins and Hynes (2023).

3.5.1. Survey Sampling

The survey facilitated investigating the issues outlined through the lens of members themselves (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Target participants were purposively recruited based on relevance as Further Education English, Maths and ESOL professionals who had recently undertaken development activities (Robinson, 2002; Fowler, 2014). The non-random recruitment used the community facilitator to efficiently access this specialised population (Bethlehem, 2010; Tummons and Duckworth, 2013).

Through the PDNorth newsletter, the survey link was distributed to the community membership of approximately 800 practitioners. Twenty-one responses were received, with twenty complete responses retained for analysis following data cleaning. While this 2.5% response rate appears low, the respondents represented an information-rich sample of actively engaged community members (Tummons and Duckworth, 2013). This enabled meaningful analysis of participation patterns and experiences within the CoP (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

In November 2022, 21 completed surveys were collected and analysed. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted, non-parametric inferential statistics enabled drawing conclusions from

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[2] https://PDNorth.org.uk/2022/10/04/cop-research/

the relatively small sample size (Denscombe, 2021) appropriate for ordinal Likert scale data (Norman, 2010).

Towards the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to volunteer to complete an online semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams, lasting approximately 60 minutes. Participants who responded positively to this question were asked to include their email. This approach facilitated voluntary consent as participants could choose whether to provide their email addresses.

3.5.2. Interview Sampling

Participants were selected through purposeful self-selective sampling (Robinson, 2002). This is because a truly random sample is unlikely to be feasible as the interviewee must be willing to participate and this involves an interest in the subject or in the research itself (Denscombe, 2021). This may give a skewed view within the results, which must be considered in the analysis (Briggs, Coleman and Morrison, 2012).

Eleven participants volunteered to take part in the interviews. However, only seven were conducted due to challenges in recruiting participants, attributed to an extremely busy time within the teachers' academic calendar. This final sample size was deemed sufficient for the study, aligning with recommendations for qualitative education research (Creswell, 2013).

The final sample of seven participants represented a diverse group of FE practitioners with varying levels of experience, roles and subject specialties. The age range of participants was

30 – 65 years, with a mix of genders and professional roles including teachers and managers. This diversity allowed for a range of perspectives on the research questions.

**Table 3.5 Profile of Interview Participants**

| Participant | Age | Time engaged with PDNorth | Role | Length of time within FE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anne Shirley | 30-45 | 2-5 years | Teacher | 15-25 years |
| Jo March | 45-65 | 2-5 years | Line manager | 15-25 years |
| Jane Eyre | 30-45 | 2-5 years | Teacher | 15-25 years |
| Katniss | 45-65 | Less than 1 month | Line manager | 15-25 years |
| Offred | 45-65 | Less than 1 month | Teacher | 15-25 years |
| Hermione | 30-45 | 2-5 years | Teacher | 10-15 years |
| Clarice | 30-45 | 6 month's – 1 year | Teacher | 3-6 years |

## 3.6. Ethical Framework

Following ethical guidelines was an essential consideration when conducting this research involving people. Guiding principles for recruitment emphasised voluntary participation and informed consent, with potential participants receiving detailed information sheets outlining the purpose, processes, rationale and data usage (Wiles, 2012) (Appendix 2, p. 224). They could withdraw at any stage without reproach (Wiles, 2013). During data analysis and report,

diligent efforts were made to represent findings honestly and avoid misrepresentation, heading guidelines from the Economic and Social Council (Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 2023) regarding integrity in analysis.

While the study aimed to maintain open communication with participants about evolving study goals and processes (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018), written consent was obtained through participant information sheets and verbal consent was reconfirmed at the start of each interview, where participants' right to withdraw was also reiterated. As an inexperienced researcher, I consulted with my supervisors regularly to ensure appropriate consent procedures were followed.

Confidentiality received priority, with anonymisation through pseudonyms and secure password-protected data storage on encrypted drives helping to protect participant privacy (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). Data was stored securely on the university's OneDrive system and retained for five years after completion of the study in line with institutional requirements. As an experienced manager within my field of study, my insider status prompted reflection on positionality that could shape interpretations. Braun and Clarke (2023) argue that researcher subjectivity is an unavoidable and even valuable part of analysis in reflective thematic analysis. However, transparency regarding assumptions and conscious efforts to avoid bias are still important. Regular supervision discussions helped maintain awareness of how this positioning might shape analysis while ensuring rigor in the research process.

Member checks with two interview participants aided in validating findings as a novice researcher, incorporating their feedback. Overall, I strove to uphold ethical educational research principles (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018), recognising my perspective shaped analysis while prioritising participant voices. This study posed minimal risks to participants and aligned with guidelines valuing autonomy, dignity and transparency.

However, it is crucial to note that the researcher's stance, beliefs and assumptions may have influenced the study, making the data not entirely value-free. Briggs, Coleman and Morrison (2012) state that a researcher's perspective inevitably shapes their interpretation of qualitative data. Remaining aware of this throughout the study, I strove for transparency about my position as an experienced manager within the FE sector. While I could not eliminate bias, I aimed to approach analysis reflexively, questioning my assumptions and prioritising participant perspectives. This reflexive engagement is further elaborated upon in my statement included in Appendix 5 (p. 254). This aligns with Creswell (2018) who points out that acknowledging one's biases can help mitigate, though not remove, their influence. Overall, I recognised that complete neutrality was impossible given my background but made ethical efforts to represent participant viewpoints in the data fairly.

**3.7. Analysis**

3.7.1. Quantitative Survey Analysis

The data collected from the JISC online survey were exported into SPSS version 27 software. Initially, the dataset underwent cleaning through the removal of one survey respondent because

they did not complete most of the survey, to improve the accuracy of the data, leaving 20 complete responses.

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for each of the thirty-three survey items on a Likert scale to examine the distribution of responses (McHugh, 2013).

Given the small sample ($n = 20$) and non-normal Likert scale data (Norman, 2010), non-parametric tests were used for inferential statistics. Specifically, the Kruskal-Wallis H test compared age groups (30-45 vs 45-65) and experience levels, while the Mann-Whitney U test analysed gender differences (male, n=4, female n=16). Outcomes presented in the findings reveal certain activities were valued differently between demographic groups. These techniques facilitated some conclusions to be drawn from the limited sample size (Castellan, 1988). The integration of descriptive and non-parametric statistics provided an overview of the CoP landscape (Creswell and Clark, 2017). Detailed results are presented in the results chapter (p. 108).

3.7.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns of meaning across data sets and its suitability for rich, complex data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The reflexive approach acknowledges the researcher's active role in knowledge production, which aligns with the study's aim to understand FE practitioners' experiences within the CoP. This method

allows both inductive and deductive approaches, enabling consideration of emergent themes and those informed by existing literature (Braun and Clarke, 2023).

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to construct and generate themes, allowing for the uncovering of and making meaning from the data. Thematic analysis (TA) can be approached in various ways, ranging from systematic and scientific to intuitive and creative ways (Finlay, 2021). The effectiveness of TA is contingent on the research aims, context and methodology adopted. Braun and Clarke (2023) describe TA as a family of methods, not a singular method, which implies that the researcher must make known the processes of data coding and analysis. Using TA in a deductive manner implies that the lens through which the data is analysed and interpreted is provided by existing research and theory. This approach may involve a narrow exploration of evidence for themes that have been identified in previous research (Braun and Clarke, 2022a; Braun and Clarke, 2023).

However, Braun and Clarke (2006) have continued to develop and evolve TA and now use the term reflexive TA (RTA). This identifies RTA as a particular approach and highlights the significance of the researcher's subjectivity as an analytic resource. Thematic data analysis has been described by Finlay (2017) and Braun and Clarke (2023) as a conceptualised art, not a science. This overview of TA provides context on the approach adopted for this study. The developed themes align with the flexible, inductive-deductive TA process described.

I analysed the interview transcripts using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis. This provided a systematic framework well suited for a novice

qualitative researcher (Terry, 2017). The developed themes align with the flexible inductive-deductive RTA process described.

Before beginning the analysis, I first needed to prepare the interview transcripts. As Bryman (2016) noted, interviews can result in an overwhelming amount of data that is difficult to analyse effectively. To simplify the data, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then transcribed twice more for accuracy. I removed filler words like 'um,' 'yeah' to eliminate unnecessary pauses and facilitate coding. A summarised and edited example transcription is included in Appendix 3. Initially, I uploaded transcripts into NVivo software. However, I opted for a manual coding process with paper printouts and coloured highlighters. This allowed me to immerse myself fully into the data compared to computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.

### Phase 1 Data Familiarisation

I immersed myself in the data through repeated close readings and making summary notes (Byrne, 2022).

### Phase 2 Initial Coding

I began open, inductive, line-by-line coding using printed transcripts, highlighting then labelling relevant passages line by line, labelling one full transcript before moving on to the next. Constant comparison enabled categorising codes into conceptual groups related to professional development, challenges, research activities, etc. My initial NVivo deductive coding struggled to capture the nuanced meaning evident in transcripts. Switching approaches to manual coding enabled patterns to emerge directly from participants' voices. This open

coding process resulted in many descriptive codes grounded in the data, which I tracked in a codebook containing defined analytic units (Braun and Clarke, 2021). I used a "complete coding" approach (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 206) to comprehensively identify relevant passages with each transcript before advancing, enabling a robust thematic situation. While time intensive, this systematic protocol ensured rich yet uncontaminated analysis by focusing closely on one full dataset before comparative pattern analysis across the data sets.

In reflexive thematic analysis, codes capture the essential meaning related to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To ensure the participants' perspectives were adequately represented, a combination of inductive and deductive coding approaches was used. It is important to note that (Braun and Clarke, 2022b) pure induction is not feasible due to the subjective processes involved in research. Researchers bring their perspectives to make meaning of the data and how they interpret and present the participants' stories goes beyond simply giving voice. In this study, several themes were identified from the literature review and used as a basis for analysis. The themes developed through my systematic analysis of the data were shaped by my own interpretive lens and the participants' accounts. I documented my coding decisions transparently to ensure others can understand how interpretations were reached, as noted by Braun and Clarke (2006) and (Bryman, 2016). The analysis was conducted in a way that accurately represents the participants' responses and my own observations; however, it is important to recognise that the analysis cannot be value-free, as noted by (Lichtman, 2023).

*Phase 3 Developing Themes*

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After generating the open codes, I needed to synthesise them into broader conceptual categories and potential themes by labelling and organising data items into meaningful groups around issues like skills gained and barriers faced. I searched for themes by grouping related codes into categories. I organised related open codes into conceptual categories like "fostering community" "accessing resources" and "empowerment." Creating these draft categories allowed me to see the bigger picture beyond granular codes. Thematic analysis involves the identification of themes, which are multi-faceted shared core concepts, broader and more difficult to identify in advance of the analytic work (Clark, Braun and Hayfield, 2021; Clarke, Braun and Hayfield, 2021). At this beginning stage, tentative themes were created by summarising what unified each coded group. This phase aimed to assemble codes into possible themes which described repeating ideas whilst still being reviewed to ensure this wording worked. Grouping codes into logical clusters enabled progress towards interpreting the bigger picture within the patterns. These themes were identified using a constant comparison approach, which involves comparing codes and categories to identify similarities and differences.

*Phase 4 Reviewing Themes*

By reviewing the coded categories, clustered into initial candidate themes, I reviewed the data set as a whole. The visual concept map allowed me to experiment with different logical groupings related to categories to ensure they were coherent and that they were supported by the data. I checked whether the draft groups accurately captured participants' experiences by re-reading associated data extracts. Early theme attempts like 'teaching practices, and " online engagement' underwent tweaks when data better supported alternative themes. Themes were combined when analysis showed strong overlap. For example, the early themes of 'belonging'

and 'Community' were merged into one theme of 'cultivating connections and community, benefits of belonging.' Comparing within and across data sources facilitated determining robust accuracy of themes representing the bigger picture takeaways. This process ensured coded extracts and themes told a credible story.

*Phase 5 Defining and naming themes.*

I checked how well each theme matched the actual data by reviewing associated extracts. Some initial themes collapsed, i.e., 'expanded networks' while new unanticipated themes like 'resilience' was constructed. I reworked early themes like 'innovation' that spanned multiple initial themes. This iterative process resulted in concise themes capturing key patterns. In this refinement phase, I aimed to identify the 'essence' of each theme and determine clear, concise names. For example, the theme related to maintaining student-centred priorities evolved from 'knowledge exchange' to specifically capture upholding student-focused values amid changing policies. 'Cultivating connections and community, benefits of belonging' evolved from student-focused innovation, relationships and a sense of belonging fostered in the CoP.

*Phase 6 Writing up.*

The final stage involved writing up the analysis, which included the presentation of the themes and supporting quotes from the data. I carefully defined each theme by the story it told about the data using supporting extracts. The final theme names aimed at communicating the essence and I considered connections between themes to form a narrative.

## 3.8. Quality Issues

To enhance the credibility of the mixed-methods findings, as noted by Bekhet and Zauszniewski (2012) the interviews and survey, percentage responses enabled a fuller evaluation of how participants engage in this online community. These were triangulated to identify areas of convergence, divergence synergy and tensions (Carter et al., 2014). For example, a key tension emerged between the qualitative theme showing teachers highly value autonomy for classroom innovation gained through the CoP versus the survey revelation that barriers persist in successfully applying these creative ideas to enhance teaching and outcomes. Additionally, while interviews depicted higher member-led bottom-up solutions, survey engagement implied that there was more passive activity, focused on knowledge consumption rather than generating original knowledge.

However, alignments also existed across data sources. The survey highlighted unanimous agreement that CoP discussions encourage deeper thinking ($M$ = 5.00), mirroring the qualitative theme of questioning institutional status quos. Further synergy was found regarding the role of the CoP exchanges in strengthening confidence to experiment beyond normative practices.

By comparing the datasets through an integrated analysis, examination of multi-layered dynamics was possible. This included tensions between aspirational accounts of ground-up innovation versus difficulties actualising this creativity within constrained contexts, indicating supports needed to bridge the divide. Additional variances emerged regarding member agency and participation types, from passive consumption versus generative contribution. Integrating

the complementary qualitative and quantitative findings enabled investigation of this case study from multiple angles to reach a more comprehensive understanding of members' engagement in this CoP.

In every research paradigm, concerns about the quality of research findings are common and the approach to addressing these concerns varies significantly. The traditional quantitative criteria of validity, generalisability and reliability are based on the concept of measurement, which may not be highly relevant in predominantly qualitative studies as noted by (Bryman, 2016). The accuracy, dependability and credibility of information depend on addressing these criteria, making them essential in all research studies. However, in contrast to the quantitative paradigm, qualitative research often adopts different criteria to ensure quality in research. The emphasis for qualitative research is often on answering questions about experience, meaning and perspective from the standpoint of the participant. Qualitative research is unique and there is no expectation of replication (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, the quality of qualitative research is evaluated using terms such as quality, rigour, or trustworthiness, rather than validity and reliability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

As case studies are unique, one-off events that cannot be replicated, the concept of reliability, which refers to the consistency and stability of results over time, is not practical for evaluating the quality of case study design research (Yin, 2014). Instead, a case study focusses on in-depth exploration of a particular phenomenon, context or individual, and the emphasis is on understanding the complexity and richness of the data rather than generalising the findings to other contexts (Stake, 1995). The primary goal of case study research is to provide an in-depth understanding of a particular case, and the researcher must ensure that the data collected is

credible, trustworthy and relevant to the research questions (Bassey, 1999). As this study utilises a predominately descriptive qualitative approach informed by constructionist values, quality was addressed through detailed documentation of procedures, critical collaboration and research reflexivity.

As the sole researcher conducting all interviews and analysis, I recognised the need for transparency regarding my position to identify any biases. I wrote a reflective statement (See Appendix 5) elucidating my insider perspective as an experienced manager in FE who has led English, Maths and ESOL departments. To surface any assumptions rooted in my leadership background, I engaged in extensive critical dialogues with my doctoral supervisor to interrogate how my professional experiences could shape my approach. For instance, we discussed how my improvement quality-focused agenda could inadvertently influence my view of teacher development initiatives. This reflective exercise highlighted how my standpoint might affect the research process.

Furthermore, I collaborated with two participants, Participant 2 and Participant 3, to conduct member checks by sharing preliminary themes and verbatim excerpts from the interviews via email to obtain feedback on my initial results. They both confirmed that the themes resonated with their experiences. This member checking aided in substantiating my analysis by confirming that my interpretations accurately represented their perspectives. This process enabled me to identify any unrecognised biases, ensuring that participant voices aligned with the study's constructionist epistemology.

As an instrumental case study of a specific bounded network, transferability was not an expected outcome. However, the detailed documentation of context and procedures enables readers to assess the relevance of findings to their settings (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Stake, 1995). The aim was an in-depth constructionist perspective on this case, not generalisation. Overall, through collaboration, transparency and reflexivity, I worked to uphold quality standards appropriate for the philosophical paradigm and methodological approach underpinning this research.

## 3.9. Values in Research

As the researcher conducting this study, I acknowledge the importance of recognising my own position about the research process and the ethical considerations that arise from it. I undertook ethics research training at LJMU on the 19th of April 2021 (see Appendix 4). To ensure ethical conduct, I committed to following a code of ethics that underpins the academic practice and informs my interpretation and application throughout the research process (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018), Childress and Beauchamp (1994) discuss the idea that principles require judgement, which is dependent on an individual character's moral judgement and a person's accountability and their responsibility within the research. As someone who believes that teachers work best in reflecting on their own experiences and I am a supporter of teachers sharing their knowledge and skills with others to gain insights from their peers, I acknowledge that I would be less receptive to others who were critical. (Braun and Clarke, 2022b, p.268) advocate that the researcher maintains a curious and open stance, to keep their adventurous spirit alive and encourage a fresh perspective on the data.

As a researcher, I recognise that my own beliefs, values and biases can influence the research process and therefore, I must remain vigilant in ensuring that my actions and decisions align with the principles of ethical research. During the research phase, I kept detailed notes of each interview, including how I interpreted each individual interview and noted any additional details as additional entries to these notes. To adopt a more reflexive stance, I maintained a log of reflections on my positionality and assumptions throughout the data analysis process. Banks (2015) highlights the importance of maintaining integrity as a researcher, which involves being aware of and committed to the standards of the discipline, even in challenging circumstances, making sense of ethical considerations as a whole and striving to uphold these standards throughout the research process (Emmerich, 2018).

## 3.10. Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological approach for a mixed-methods case study that explored an online CoP for FE teachers' professional development. Grounded in a social constructionist perspective while incorporating pragmatic elements, this research combined interpretive emphasis on subjective meaning-making with practical attention to capture the subjective experiences of members within this bounded case. Research questions focus on the perceived benefits, techniques, challenges and types of scholarship associated with the CoP. Data collection involved an initial survey gathering descriptive statistics about participation levels, demographics, engagement with CoP activities and participants' experiences. This was followed by semi-structured interviews for in-depth perspectives. The analysis involved quantitative techniques like non-parametric tests for survey and thematic analysis for the interviews. Key quality considerations covered included triangulation between data sources,

reflexivity regarding researcher positionality and member checks, reflecting both interpretivist emphasis on co-constructed knowledge and pragmatic attention to research trustworthiness. Chapter four will present the key findings regarding the complex dynamics shaping members' engagement and professional development within this bounded case.

**CHAPTER 4 RESULTS**

This chapter presents the key findings from the mixed-methods investigation of the PDNorth online community of practice (CoP) and its impact on the professional development of FE practitioners. The results are organised into two main sections:

1. Quantitative findings from the survey responses ($n = 20$), including descriptive statistics and analyses of demographic differences.

2. Qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews ($n = 7$), presented as key themes that developed through interpretative engagement with the data.

The chapter concludes with a triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data, highlighting areas of convergence, divergence and complementarity between two data sources. This integrated analysis provides a comprehensive picture of FE practitioners' experiences and perceptions within the PDNorth online CoP, addressing the study's four research questions on perceived benefits, engagement techniques, challenges and scholarly activities.

**4.1. Results from survey responses**

In this section, the key findings for the survey of 20 FE practitioners will be presented (Appendix 1), which explored both how members perceive the value of various aspects of participating in the PDNorth online CoP and the frequency of their engagement with different CoP activities, will be presented. The survey participants were predominantly female ($n=16$), aged 30-65 years ($n=19$), with varying experience in FE ($n=8$ having 15-25 years). The majority were teaching practitioners ($n=14$). The results reveal clear patterns in how FE teachers view the impact of collaborative learning activities, knowledge sharing, innovation

exchange, reflective practices and networking opportunities, all falling under the umbrella of professional development enabled by the online network.

**Table 4.1 Profile of Survey Participants (N=20)**

| Characteristic | Category | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female | 16 | 80% |
| | Male | 4 | 20% |
| Age | 30-45 | 9 | 45% |
| | 45-65 | 10 | 50% |
| | 18-30 | 1 | 5% |
| Time Engaged with PDNorth | Less than 1 month | 6 | 30% |
| | 3-6 Months | 4 | 20% |
| | 6-12 months | 4 | 20% |
| | 2-5 years | 6 | 30% |
| Experience in FE | 1-3 years | 4 | 20% |
| | 3-6 years | 4 | 20% |
| | 10-15 years | 4 | 20% |
| | 15-25 | 8 | 40% |
| Role | Teaching Practitioners | 14 | 70% |
| | Line Managers | 6 | 30% |

Additionally, the findings highlight variations in the frequency and types of engagement with CoP activities among members. Statistically significant differences were generated about some perceptions and levels of engagement based on age, gender and length of time involved with the PDNorth CoP. The data suggests that newer members tend to engage more frequently with resource-sharing activities, while longer-standing members show higher participation rates in

collaborative projects. Younger participants report frequent use of online discussion forums and female members demonstrate higher engagement levels across most CoP activities. However, as illustrated below, the survey found that overall, members, regardless of their demographic, viewed participation in the community as beneficial.

## 4.2. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics including the mean, median and standard deviation were calculated to analyse two distinct aspects of PDNorth CoP participation. Table 4.1: Level of Agreement with Statements about PDNorth CoP Benefits and Impact presents participants' level of agreement with statements about CoP benefits and impact measure on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Table 4.2: Frequency of Participation in PDNorth Professional Development Activities examines the frequency of engagement in specific CoP activities, measured on a 5-point scale from never (1) to at least once weekly (5). Both tables rank items from highest to lowest mean scores to highlight patterns in responses.

4.

Reporting these descriptive statistics provides a numeric summary of the distribution of responses to each survey item to identify patterns and trends within the data. The most highly valued aspects, as evidenced by five unanimous positive responses with means of 5 to survey items and lack of variance ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.00$) included 'belonging to PDNorth has benefitted me in evaluating my teaching practice' (*Survey item 6*), 'I enjoy online events' (*Survey item 7*), 'online discussions with community colleagues have helped me to think more deeply about my subject' (*Survey item 13*), 'I feel comfortable engaging with the community online such as FE reading circle, ESOL forum, FE research Circle'(*Survey item 18*) and

'Collaborating with FE/HE institutions' (*Survey item 28*). This indicated that members perceived that they strongly benefitted from the mutual exchange of insights and peer-to-peer development afforded by the network.

Knowledge sharing and raising expertise levels were perceived positively by CoP members. This is evidenced by high scores on two survey items: 'Supporting others new to teaching and sharing ideas has re-energised my own teaching' (*Survey item 11*), 'I believe that working together has raised the level of expertise of the community members' (*Survey item 12*) both achieve scores of ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.7$). These results indicate that members value the opportunity to support newer teachers and the collaborative nature of the CoP in enhancing overall expertise.

Despite moderately positive responses, survey items related to the implementation of CoP insights and active participation in the community received comparatively lower average scores. For example, 'applying insights to improve student outcomes' *(Survey item 9)* and 'I like to share my teaching experiences with the community by writing online blogs/commentaries as communication in virtual spaces' *(Survey item 21)* both achieved scores of $M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.707$.

As shown in Table 4.2 regarding frequency of participation (Table 4.2), collaboration with institutions showed the highest level of regular engagement *(M = 5.00, SD = 0.00)*, while discussion with colleagues about practice issues showed the lowest frequency ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.707$).

The descriptive statistics demonstrate that FE practitioners perceive clear benefits from belonging to the online PDNorth CoP. Overall, the quantitative results indicate a solid foundation of an engaged online community of mutual learning and development, with opportunities to further increase direct impacts on teaching practice through online activities.

**Table 4.2 Agreement with Statements about PDNorth CoP**

| Survey Item No. | N | Mean | Median | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6. Belonging to PDNorth has benefitted me in evaluating my teaching practice | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 7. I enjoy Online PDNorth Events | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 13. Online Discussions with community colleagues have helped me to think more deeply about my subject | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 18. I feel comfortable engaging with the community online events such as FE reading Circle, ESOL forum, FE research Circle | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 11. Supporting others new to teaching and sharing ideas has re-energised my own teaching | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 12. I believe that working together has raised the level of expertise of the community members | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50. | 0.707 |
| 19.Gaining new insights and hearing about other teachers' experiences has made my professional practice better | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 20. I have gained confidence to try different innovative approaches | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 22. To develop my practice, it is important that I attend conferences, meetings or courses about teaching and learning | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 23. It is important to me that I can explain what concepts or theories underpin my teaching | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 10. Being part of this community has developed my confidence in trying new things | 20 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.000 |
| 14. I find reading PDNorth/FE tapestry community publications or reports i.e., blogs/Spotlights interesting and informative | 20 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.000 |
| 16. Through the community online blog, I feel I have remained up to date with the latest teaching developments | 20 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.000 |
| 9. The feedback from PDNorth community has informed my teaching in such a way that it has improved student outcomes | 20 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 0.707 |
| 15. It is helpful to browse around and see what can be found on PDNorth Community publications or reports | 20 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 0.707 |
| 21. I like to share my teaching experiences with the community by writing online blogs/commentaries as communication in virtual spaces | 20 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 0.707 |
| 17. Watching the PDNorth community videos via the YouTube channel has helped to find solutions to challenges in my professional practice | 20 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 0.000 |
| 8. I do not get the time to engage with others within PDNorth community | 20 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 1.414 |

Note. *Scale: 1 = Strong Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree*

**Table 4.3 Frequency of Participation in PDNorth and Professional Development Activities**

| Survey Item No. | N | Mean | Median | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 28.Collaborating with FE/HE institutions | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 26.Collaborating to do research with Colleagues | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 27. Conducting research into independent Practice | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 33.Coaching/Mentoring others | 20 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.00 |
| 25.Facilitating CPD sessions within college | 20 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 2.121 |
| 24.Attending PDNorth Workshops/Training | 20 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 1.414 |
| 32.Reflecting with reference to a Journal Article/Blog | 20 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 1.414 |
| 29.Searching internet for information related to Course Delivery | 20 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 0.000 |
| 30.Participating in department meetings | 20 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 0.000 |
| 31. Discussion with colleagues about practice issues | 20 | 1.50 | 1.50 | 0.707 |

Note. *Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = At least once Annually, 3 = At least once per Semester, 4 = At least once Monthly, 5 = At least once Weekly*

4.2.1. Age Differences

As shown in Table 4.3, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were differences in survey responses between three age groups: 18-30 years old ($n = 1$), 30-45 years old ($n = 9$) and 45-65 years old ($n = 10$). However, the 18-30 age group only had one respondent. Groups with extremely small sample sizes can distort statistical analyses, so this age group was excluded from the comparative analysis between age categories.

The Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were differences in survey responses between the age groups with enough respondents for analysis: 30-45 years old ($n = 9$) and 45-65 years old ($n = 10$). This nonparametric test was selected due to the small sample size of the groups and non-normal distribution of the data (see Table 4.3). The test revealed significant differences between two age groups for Survey item 13 'Online discussions have

helped me think more deeply about my subject' ($H(1) = 4.254$, $p = .039$), Survey item 14 'I find reading community publications informative' ($H(1) = 5.114$, $p = .024$) and Survey item 18 'I feel comfortable engaging in online events' ($H(1) = 4.620$, $p = .032$).

For Survey item 13, the 30-45 age group had a higher median ($Mdn = 5.00$) than the 45-65 age group ($Mdn = 4.00$). For Survey item 14, the 30-45 age group again had a higher median ($Mdn = 5.00$) compared to the 45-65 age group ($Mdn = 4.00$). Lastly, for Survey item 18, the 30-45 age group had a higher median ($Mdn = 4.00$) than the 45-65 age group ($Mdn = 3.00$).

These results indicate that younger participants in the 30-45 age range valued online discussions more for promoting deeper thinking about their subject, found reading community publications more informative and felt more comfortable engaging in online events compared to older participants aged 45-65. No other significant differences by age were observed.

**Table 4.4 Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis H test outputs for ages 30-45 and 45-65**

| | Ages 30 - 45 | | Ages 45 - 65 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Survey Item | Median | SD | Median | SD | Sig |
| 6 | 4.00 | 0.667 | 4.00 | .0726 | 0.125 |
| 7 | 4.00 | 0.782 | 4.00 | 0.527 | 0.175 |
| 8 | 3.00 | 0.782 | 3.00 | 0.707 | 0.242 |
| 9 | 4.00 | 0.527 | 3.00 | 0.333 | 0.087 |
| 10 | 4.00 | 0.441 | 4.00 | 0.441 | 0.876 |
| 11 | 4.00 | 0.441 | 4.00 | 0.667 | 0.263 |
| 12 | 4.00 | 0.833 | 4.00 | 0.441 | 0.270 |
| 13 | 5.00 | 1.014 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 0.040* |
| 14 | 5.00 | 0.527 | 4.00 | 0.601 | 0.025* |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 15 | 5.00 | 0.726 | 4.00 | 0.333 | 0.095 |
| 16 | 4.00 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 0.105 |
| 17 | 3.00 | 0.726 | 3.00 | 0.500 | 0.775 |
| 18 | 4.00 | 0.833 | 3.00 | 0.667 | 0.032* |
| 19 | 4.00 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 0.105 |
| 20 | 4.00 | 0.667 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 0.177 |
| 21 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 3.00 | 1.00 | 0.300 |
| 22 | 4.00 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.601 | 0.103 |
| 23 | 4.00 | 1.000 | 4.00 | 0.441 | 0.354 |
| 24 | 4.00 | 0.882 | 4.00 | 0.928 | 0.645 |
| 25 | 4.00 | 1.302 | 4.00 | 1.054 | 0.444 |
| 26 | 3.00 | 1.130 | 5.00 | 0.972 | 0.540 |
| 27 | 4.00 | 1.509 | 4.00 | 0.928 | 0.824 |
| 28 | 4.00 | 1.093 | 4.00 | 0.833 | 0.592 |
| 29 | 2.00 | 1.167 | 2.00 | 1.581 | 0.217 |
| 30 | 1.00 | 1.000 | 1.00 | 1.500 | 0.758 |
| 31 | 1.00 | 1.014 | 2.00 | 1.225 | 0.603 |
| 32 | 4.00 | 1.225 | 4.00 | 0.866 | 0.813 |
| 33 | 3.00 | 1.453 | 2.00 | 1.323 | 0.226 |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

### 4.2.2. Gender Differences

A Mann-Whitney U test (see Table 4.4) was run to determine if there were differences in survey responses between males ($n = 4$) and females ($n = 16$). This nonparametric test was selected due to the small sample size and non-normal distribution of the data.

The test revealed significant differences between genders for Survey item 6, 'Belonging to the CoP has benefitted evaluating my teaching practice' ($U = -2.182$, $p = .029$) and Survey item 11, 'Supporting others has re-energized my teaching' ($U = -2.651$, $p = .008$).

For Survey item 6, females had a higher median ($Md = 4.00$) than males ($Md = 2.50$). For Survey item 11, females again had a higher median ($Md = 4.00$) compared to males ($Md = 3.00$).

These results indicate that female participants valued the benefits of the CoP and found collaborative activities more re-energising for their teaching compared to male participants. No other significant differences by gender were detected.

**Table 4.5 Mann-Whitney U test outputs Differences by Gender**

| Survey Item | Females | | Males | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *Sig* |
| 6 | 3.94 | 0.659 | 2.50 | 0.707 | .042* |
| 7 | 3.94 | 0.659 | 3.00 | 0.659 | .126 |
| 8 | 3.06 | 0.748 | 4.00 | 0.000 | .126 |
| 9 | 3.35 | 0.493 | 3.00 | 0.000 | .516 |
| 10 | 3.82 | 0.393 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .516 |
| 11 | 4.12 | 0.485 | 3.00 | 0.000 | .021* |
| 12 | 4.00 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 1.00 |
| 13 | 4.18 | 0.809 | 3.00 | 0.000 | .063 |
| 14 | 4.24 | .0664 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .263 |
| 15 | 4.24 | 0.562 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .211 |
| 16 | 4.06 | 0.659 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .379 |
| 17 | 3.35 | 0.606 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .674 |
| 18 | 3.88 | 0.781 | 2.50 | 0.707 | .095 |
| 19 | 4.06 | 0.659 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .379 |
| 20 | 4.00 | 0.612 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .379 |

| 21 | 3.06 | 1.144 | 2.50 | 2.212 | .758 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22 | 4.24 | 0.664 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .316 |
| 23 | 3.88 | 0.781 | 3.50 | 0.707 | .442 |
| 24 | 3.76 | 0.903 | 3.00 | 0.000 | .316 |
| 25 | 3.65 | 1.222 | 4.00 | 1.414 | .674 |
| 26 | 3.94 | 1.088 | 3.00 | 0.000 | .379 |
| 27 | 3.71 | 1.263 | 3.00 | 0.00 | .516 |
| 28 | 3.88 | 0.993 | 4.50 | 0.707 | .442 |
| 29 | 2.29 | 1.359 | 4.50 | 0.707 | .063 |
| 30 | 1.88 | 1.269 | 1.00 | 0.000 | .421 |
| 31 | 1.59 | 1.004 | 2.00 | 0.000 | .263 |
| 32 | 3.24 | 1.033 | 2.50 | 0.707 | .351 |
| 33 | 2.71 | 1.490 | 3.00 | 1.414 | .853 |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

### 4.2.3. Time Engaged Differences

A Kruskal-Wallis H test (See Table 4.5) was conducted to determine if there were differences in survey responses between groups with different durations engaged with the CoP: less than 1 month ($n = 6$), 3-6 months ($n = 4$), 6-12 months ($n = 4$) and 2-5 years ($n = 6$). This nonparametric test was selected due to the small sample size and non-normal distribution of the data.

The test revealed significant differences based on time engaged for Survey item 7, 'I enjoy online events' ($H(3) = 7.852$, $p = .049$) and Survey item 26, 'Collaborating on research with colleagues' ($H(3) = 8.735$, $p = .033$).

For Survey item 7, those engaged for less than 1 month had the lowest median ($Md = 3.00$), while those engaged 2-5 years had the highest median ($Md = 4.00$). For Survey item 26, those

engaged for less than 1 month had the lowest median (*Md* = 3.00), while those engaged for 3-6 months and 6-12 months had the highest median (*Md* = 5.00).

These results indicate that newer members reported lower enjoyment of online events and less interest in collaborative research compared to those engaged with the CoP for longer periods of time. No other significant differences by time engaged were detected.

**Table 4.6 Length of Time Engaged with PDNorth**

| Survey Item | <1 Month | | 3-6 Month | | 6 Months – 1 Yr | | 2 – 5 Years | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *Sig* |
| 6 | 3.33 | 0.816 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.707 | 4.25 | 0.463 | .329 |
| 7 | 3.17 | 0.408 | 4.00 | 0.00 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 4.25 | 0.463 | .029* |
| 8 | 3.33 | 0.816 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 2.63 | 0.518 | .062 |
| 9 | 3.17 | 0.408 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 3.38 | 0.518 | .714 |
| 10 | 3.67 | 0.516 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 3.88 | 0.354 | .671 |
| 11 | 3.83 | 0.753 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.13 | 0.354 | .404 |
| 12 | 3.67 | 0.816 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.38 | 0.518 | .185 |
| 13 | 4.00 | 0.894 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 4.13 | 0.991 | .981 |
| 14 | 4.17 | 0.753 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.50 | 0.535 | .156 |
| 15 | 4.17 | 0.753 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.38 | 0.518 | .460 |
| 16 | 3.83 | 0.983 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.25 | 0.463 | .607 |
| 17 | 3.33 | 0.516 | 4.00 | 0.00 | 3.00 | 0.000 | 3.38 | 0.744 | .287 |
| 18 | 3.67 | 1.033 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 3.63 | 0.916 | .900 |
| 19 | 3.83 | 0.753 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.756 | .822 |
| 20 | 3.50 | 0.548 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.13 | 0.641 | .281 |
| 21 | 2.50 | 1.643 | 3.00 | 0.000 | 2.50 | 0.707 | 3.50 | 1.069 | .552 |
| 22 | 4.00 | 0.632 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.13 | 0.835 | .507 |
| 23 | 3.67 | 1.033 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.50 | 0.000 | 3.88 | 0.641 | .551 |
| 24 | 3.33 | 0.816 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 3.75 | 0.886 | .303 |
| 25 | 3.00 | 1.414 | 3.50 | 2.121 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.926 | .381 |
| 26 | 3.00 | 0.000 | 5.00 | 0.000 | 5.00 | 0.000 | 3.88 | 0.835 | .048* |
| 27 | 3.17 | 1.602 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 3.75 | 1.035 | .541 |
| 28 | 4.00 | 0.894 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 3.88 | 1.126 | .791 |
| 29 | 2.50 | 1.643 | 2.50 | 2.121 | 1.50 | 0.707 | 2.50 | 1.309 | .486 |
| 30 | 1.17 | 0.408 | 2.50 | 2.121 | 3.00 | 1.414 | 1.88 | 1.356 | .286 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 31 | 1.67 | 0.516 | 1.50 | 0.707 | 1.50 | 0.707 | 1.75 | 1.389 | .885 |
| 32 | 2.67 | 1.211 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 2.00 | 0.000 | 3.63 | 0.744 | .118 |
| 33 | 2.17 | 1.169 | 2.50 | 2.121 | 3.00 | 1.414 | 2.88 | 1.553 | .524 |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

## 4.2.4. Role Differences

A Mann-Whitney U test (see Table 4.6) was conducted to assess differences in survey responses between those in a teacher role ($n = 14$) and a line manager role ($n = 6$). This nonparametric test was appropriate due to the small sample size and non-normal distribution.

The test did not reveal any significant differences in perceptions between teachers and line managers across all survey items (all $p > .05$). Managerial roles therefore did not significantly influence survey responses.

**Table 4.7 Mann-Whitney U test outputs Teacher versus Line Manager Role**

| | Teacher | | Line Manager | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Survey Item | M | SD | M | SD | Sig |
| 6 | 3.79 | 0.893 | 3.80 | 0.477 | .866 |
| 7 | 3.86 | 0.770 | 3.80 | 0.447 | .933 |
| 8 | 3.14 | 0.864 | 3.20 | 0.864 | 1.000 |
| 9 | 3.36 | 0.497 | 3.20 | 0.447 | .672 |
| 10 | 3.79 | 0.426 | 3.80 | 0.447 | 1.000 |
| 11 | 4.07 | 0.616 | 3.80 | 0.447 | .497 |
| 12 | 3.93 | 0.730 | 4.20 | 0.447 | .395 |
| 13 | 4.07 | 0.917 | 4.00 | 0.707 | .800 |
| 14 | 4.14 | 0.770 | 4.20 | 0.447 | .933 |
| 15 | 4.14 | 0.663 | 4.20 | 0.447 | .933 |
| 16 | 4.00 | 0.784 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 1.000 |
| 17 | 3.21 | 0.426 | 3.80 | 0.837 | .168 |
| 18 | 3.93 | 0.917 | 3.20 | 0.447 | .197 |
| 19 | 4.00 | 0.679 | 4.00 | 0.707 | 1.000 |
| 20 | 3.93 | 0.616 | 4.00 | 0.707 | .866 |
| 21 | 2.86 | 1.292 | 3.40 | 0.894 | .349 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22 | 4.36 | 0.633 | 3.60 | 0.548 | .119 |
| 23 | 3.93 | 0.829 | 3.60 | 0.548 | .306 |
| 24 | 3.57 | 0.938 | 4.00 | 0.707 | .306 |
| 25 | 3.50 | 1.286 | 4.20 | 0.837 | .266 |
| 26 | 3.86 | 1.167 | 3.80 | 0.837 | 1.000 |
| 27 | 3.79 | 1.311 | 3.20 | 0.837 | .445 |
| 28 | 4.14 | 0.949 | 3.40 | 0.894 | .306 |
| 29 | 2.36 | 1.499 | 3.00 | 1.414 | .445 |
| 30 | 1.64 | 1.082 | 2.20 | 1.643 | .687 |
| 31 | 1.36 | 0.497 | 2.40 | 0.497 | .197 |
| 32 | 2.93 | 1.072 | 3.80 | 0.447 | .156 |
| 33 | 2.71 | 1.590 | 2.80 | 1.095 | .933 |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

## 4.2.5. Teaching Experience Differences

A Kruskal-Wallis H test (see Table 4.7) was run to determine if there were differences in survey responses between groups with different levels of experience teaching: 1-3 years ($n = 4$), 3-6 years ($n = 4$), 10-15 years ($n = 4$) and 15-25 years ($n = 8$). This test was selected given the small sample size and non-normality of the data.

The test did not reveal any significant differences in perceptions based on years of experience across all survey items (all $p > .05$). The amount of teaching experience did not significantly impact survey responses.

**Table 4.8 Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis H test Length of time working in FE**

| | 1 – 3 years | | 3-6 years | | 10 – 15 years | | 15 – 25 years | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Survey Item | Md | SD | Md | SD | Md | SD | Md | SD | Sig |
| 6 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 3.50 | 0.957 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.00 | 0.928 | .727 |
| 7 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 3.50 | 0.957 | 3.50 | 0.577 | 4.00 | 0.707 | .749 |
| 8 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 2.50 | 0.957 | 3.00 | 0.707 | .204 |
| 9 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 3.50 | 0.577 | 3.00 | 0.500 | 3.00 | 0.441 | .663 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.00 | 0.500 | .556 |
| 11 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.00 | 0.816 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.00 | 0.601 | .775 |
| 12 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.00 | 0.577 | 4.00 | 0.667 | .287 |
| 13 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.816 | 3.50 | 1.291 | 4.00 | 0.667 | .600 |
| 14 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.50 | 0.577 | 4.50 | 0.707 | .641 |
| 15 | 4.50 | 0.500 | 4.00 | 0.816 | 4.50 | 0.577 | 4.00 | 0.577 | .375 |
| 16 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.50 | 0.577 | 4.00 | 0.667 | .164 |
| 17 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 3.00 | 0.577 | 3.00 | 0.00 | 3.00 | 0.726 | .489 |
| 18 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 3.50 | 0.957 | 3.00 | 1.000 | 4.00 | 0.972 | .884 |
| 19 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.00 | 0.500 | 4.00 | 0.782 | .455 |
| 20 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.00 | 0.816 | 4.00 | 0.000 | 4.00 | 0.782 | .983 |
| 21 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 3.00 | 1.414 | 2.00 | 1.732 | 3.00 | 1.054 | .790 |
| 22 | 4.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 0.816 | 4.50 | 0.577 | 4.00 | 0.707 | .443 |
| 23 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 3.50 | 1.291 | 4.00 | 0.957 | 4.00 | 0.333 | .538 |
| 24 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 3.50 | 0.577 | 4.00 | 1.155 | 4.00 | 0.882 | .836 |
| 25 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 3.50 | 1.291 | 3.00 | 1.732 | 4.00 | 1.167 | .963 |
| 26 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 4.00 | 1.500 | 4.00 | 1.258 | 3.00 | 0.833 | .705 |
| 27 | 2.50 | 1.414 | 3.00 | 1.414 | 3.00 | 1.258 | 4.00 | 0.833 | .280 |
| 28 | 3.00 | 0.000 | 3.50 | 1.291 | 3.50 | 0.577 | 5.00 | 0.726 | .197 |
| 29 | 3.50 | 2.121 | 1.50 | 1.414 | 2.00 | 1.414 | 2.00 | 1.481 | .445 |
| 30 | 1.50 | 0.500 | 1.00 | 0.500 | 1.00 | 1.500 | 1.00 | 1.453 | .816 |
| 31 | 1.50 | 0.707 | 1.50 | 0.577 | 1.00 | 0.00 | 1.50 | 1.225 | .376 |
| 32 | 3.50 | 0.707 | 2.50 | 0.957 | 2.00 | 1.258 | 4.00 | 0.707 | .118 |
| 33 | 4.00 | 1.414 | 2.00 | 1.000 | 1.50 | 0.577 | 4.00 | 1.618 | .164 |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

## 4.3. Analysis of Survey Results Through Boyer's Scholarship Framework

Building upon the statistical findings presented above, the survey results can be further understood through Boyer's (1990) framework of scholarship, which provides additional insight into how PDNorth CoP supports different forms of scholarly activity among FE practitioners. This framework is particularly relevant given our earlier findings showing strong engagement in collaborative activities ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.00$ for online discussions) but lower scores for implementing insights into practice ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.707$). This analysis helps

address our research questions about professional development by examining how members

engage with different types of Scholarship: Discovery, Integration, Application and Teaching.

## 4.3.1. Scholarship of Discovery

While traditional research activities were not a focus of the Online CoP, as evidenced in the

earlier participation frequency data, some survey items indicate engagement with aspects of

the scholarship of Discovery:

**Table 4.9 Rank of Survey Items aligned with Scholarship of Discovery**

| Survey Item No. | N | Mean | Median | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26.Collaborating to do research with Colleagues | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 27. Conducting research into independent Practice | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |

These relatively high scores for collaborative research contrast with the lower engagement

scores we saw earlier for individual activities, suggesting that participants value and engage in

research-related activities, perhaps in forms more closely tied to practice than traditional

academic research.

## 4.3.2. Scholarship of Integration

Building on this, strong engagement was evident in integration activities aligned to Boyer's

scholarship of integration. These findings align with earlier statistical analysis where several

items received positive responses with means of 5.00 and no variance ($SD = 0.00$), including

'Online Discussions with community colleagues have helped me to think more deeply about

my subject' (Survey item 13), 'I feel comfortable engaging with the community online events such as FE reading circle, ESOL forum, FE research circle (Survey item 18) and 'Collaborating with FE/HE institutions' (Survey item 28). As previously noted in the descriptive statistics, this indicated that members perceived significant benefits from collaborative learning, cross-institutional partnerships and engagement in community events.

Knowledge sharing and raising levels of expertise were perceived positively by the CoP participants. This is evidenced by high scores on survey items such as 'I believe that working together has raised the level of expertise of the community members' (Survey item 12) and 'Gaining new insights and hearing about other teachers' experiences has made my professional practice better' (Survey item 19), both achieving scores of ($M$ = 4.50, $SD$ = 0.707). These results suggest that members value the collaborative nature of the CoP in developing teachers' expertise and professional practice.

Professional development activities were highly rated, with 'To develop my practice, it is important that I attend conferences, meetings or courses about teaching and learning' (Survey item 22) and 'It is important to me that I can explain what concepts or theories underpin my teaching' (Survey item 23), both scoring ($M$ = 4.5, $SD$ = 0.707). This indicates a strong emphasis on continuous development and the integration of theoretical knowledge with practice.

Participants reported an inclination towards integrating knowledge from various community resources. This is evidenced through high scores for 'I find reading PDNorth/FE tapestry community publications or reports i.e. blogs/Spotlights interesting and informative' (Survey

item 14) and 'Through the community online blog, I feel I have remained up to date with the latest teaching developments' (Survey item 16), both achieving ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.000$). These results suggest that participants actively engage with diverse community resources, synthesizing information from different sources to inform their practice. This aligns with Boyer's concept of integration, which involves making connections across different sources of knowledge and interpreting them within a larger context.

**Table 4.10 Rank of Survey Items aligned with Scholarship of Integration**

| Survey Item No. | N | Mean | Median | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13.Online Discussions with community colleagues have helped me to think more deeply about my subject | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 18.I feel comfortable engaging with the community online events such as FE reading Circle, ESOL forum, FE research Circle | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 28.Collaborating with FE/HE institutions | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 12.I believe that working together has raised the level of expertise of the community members | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50. | 0.707 |
| 19.Gaining new insights and hearing about other teachers' experiences has made my professional practice better | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 22.To develop my practice, it is important that I attend conferences, meetings or courses about teaching and learning | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 23.It is important to me that I can explain what concepts or theories underpin my teaching | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 14I find reading PDNorth/FE tapestry community publications or reports i.e., blogs/Spotlights interesting and informative | 20 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.000 |
| 16.Through the community online blog, I feel I have remained up to date with the latest teaching developments | 20 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.000 |
| 33.Coaching/Mentoring others | 20 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.00 |
| 21.I like to share my teaching experiences with the community by writing online blogs/commentaries as communication in virtual spaces | 20 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 0.707 |
| 25.Facilitating CPD sessions within college | 20 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 2.121 |
| 32.Reflecting with reference to a Journal Article/Blog | 20 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 1.414 |

## 4.3.3. Scholarship of Application

Connecting to our earlier analysis of implementation challenges, the survey data revealed levels of engagement with Boyer's scholarship of application, which involves translating

knowledge into practice. As shown in Table 4.10, members reported moderate to high confidence in applying new approaches, but challenges in implementation:

'The feedback from PDNorth community has informed my teaching in such a way that it has improved student outcomes' (Survey item 9, $M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.707$) relates to the application of knowledge gained from the CoP to improve teaching practice and learning outcomes. This moderate score aligns with our previous findings about implementation challenges.

'I have gained confidence to try different innovative approaches' (Survey item 20, $M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.707$) suggests that participation in the CoP supports members to apply new methods in their teaching. This result indicates strong engagement with the scholarship of application through innovative practice.

'Being part of the Community has developed my confidence in trying new things' (Survey item 10, $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.000$) further supports the idea that the CoP encourages members to apply new knowledge and approaches in practice.

'Watching the PDnorth community videos via the YouTube channel has helped to find solutions to challenges in my professional practice (Survey item 17, $M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.00$), indicates that members are using CoP resources to address practical challenges in their work, although the moderate score suggests potential for increased engagement in this area.

'Facilitating CPD sessions within college' Survey item 25, $M = 3.5$, $SD = 2.2121$), involves applying knowledge gained within the CoP to support colleagues' professional development, demonstrating a broader application of learning beyond individual practice.

These results suggest what while the CoP builds members' confidence to apply new knowledge, there may be barriers to translating this into classroom practice. The contrast between high confidence scores and moderate implementation scores warrants further investigation.

**Table 4.11 Rank of Survey Items aligned with Scholarship of Application**

| Survey Item No. | N | Mean | Median | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20.I have gained confidence to try different innovative approaches | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 10.Being part of this community has developed my confidence in trying new things | 20 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 0.000 |
| 9.The feedback from PDNorth community has informed my teaching in such a way that it has improved student outcomes | 20 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 0.707 |
| 25.Facilitating CPD sessions within college | 20 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 2.121 |
| 17.Watching the PDNorth community videos via the YouTube channel has helped to find solutions to challenges in my professional practice | 20 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 0.000 |

The results indicate that the cultivation of connections and sense of community within the CoP aligns closely with the scholarship of integration. Participants sought to make connections across the disciplines and contexts to address common challenges in their practice. The collaborative and non-hierarchical nature of the CoP may have facilitated the co-construction of knowledge and development of shared understandings, demonstrating the scholarship of integration in action.

4.3.4. Scholarship of Teaching

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Teaching scholarship was particularly event the descriptive statistics show strong engagement with activities aligned with Boyer's scholarship of teaching practices, which shows the development and critical examination of teaching practices. As previously highlighted in section 4.2, several items demonstrated that members perceive benefits in this domain.

'Belonging to PDNorth has benefitted me in evaluating my teaching practice' (Survey item 6, M=5.00, SD=0.00), 'I enjoy Online PDNorth Events' (Survey item 7, $M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.00$) and 'Online Discussions with community colleagues have helped me to think more deeply about the subject' (Survey item 13, $M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.00$) all received unanimously positive responses. These findings reinforce our earlier analysis showing that the CoP strongly supports reflective practice and engagement in teachers' subject matter among its members. The high enjoyment of online events (item 7) indicates that members find the CoP's activities engaging and valuable, which likely contributes to their active participation in scholarly teaching practices.

Building on our previous analysis of knowledge sharing, 'Supporting others new to teaching and sharing ideas has re-energised my own teaching' (Survey item 11, $M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.707$) indicates that members find value in peer learning, key aspects of the scholarship of teaching. 'It is important to me that I can explain what concepts or theories underpin my teaching' (Survey item 23, $M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.707$) suggests that members are engaging with the theoretical foundations of their practice, an important element of the scholarship of teaching. 'Gaining new insights and hearing about other teachers' experiences has made my professional

practice better' (Survey item 19, *M* = 4.50, *SD* = 0.707) further reinforces the collaborative nature of learning within the CoP and its impact on teaching practice.

This analysis through Boyer's framework helps to explain the patterns we observed in the demographic differences and engagement levels discussed earlier. The findings suggest that members perceive that the PDNorth CoP supports the scholarship of teaching by providing an environment where members have numerous opportunities to critically examine and develop their teaching practice, engage with pedagogical theory and learn from peers.

**Table 4.12 Rank of Survey Items aligned with Scholarship of Teaching**

| Survey Item No. | N | Mean | Median | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6.Belonging to PDNorth has benefitted me in evaluating my teaching practice | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 7. I enjoy Online PDNorth Events | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 13.Online Discussions with community colleagues have helped me to think more deeply about my subject | 20 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 0.00 |
| 11.Supporting others new to teaching and sharing ideas has re-energised my own teaching | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 19.Gaining new insights and hearing about other teachers' experiences has made my professional practice better | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |
| 23.It is important to me that I can explain what concepts or theories underpin my teaching | 20 | 4.50 | 4.50 | 0.707 |

This analysis reveals the CoPs' effectiveness in supporting multiple forms of scholarship, particularly in integration and teaching domains, while highlighting areas for potential development in discovery and application activities.

## 4.4. Summary of Quantitative Findings

The analysis of survey responses through both descriptive and Boyer's framework suggests that members find agency and empowerment through engaged participation in the online CoP for professional development. Survey responses revealed unanimously positive scores on items measuring gains in teaching practice, enjoyment of online events, deeper thinking through discussions and comfort with collaborating ($M = 5.00$, SD $= 0.00$), demonstrating how members actively embrace and value opportunities for mutual exchange and knowledge construction.

As evidenced in both the demographic analysis and Boyer framework, variations based on age, gender and time in the CoP indicate differential patterns of engagement, with younger members (30-45 years) showing significantly higher engagement in discussions ($H(1) = 4.254$, $p = 0.39$) and demonstrating greater comfort with online collaboration.

However, both analyses reveal that while CoP successfully facilitates professional development and collaboration, the data reveals significant implementation challenges. Lower scores on applying insights, writing blogs, facilitating development and accessing videos point to challenges in translating collaborative learning into changed classroom practices. The low rankings related to time constraints and accessibility further highlight real-world barriers to participation. This is evidenced by lower scores on items related to applying insights (Survey item 9, $M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.707$) and sharing experiences (Survey item 21, $M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.707$). The quantitative results demonstrate a clear divide between members' positive perceptions of professionals within the CoP and their ability to implement changes in their teaching contexts.

The combined statistical analysis and Boyer framework examination emphasise several key priorities for development. First, there is a need for more structured mechanisms and support systems to help participants translate their CoP learning into classroom practice. Second, understanding specific barriers – including institutional constraints, curriculum intent, budget cuts and shifting government policies – is crucial for developing effective interventions. To maximise the benefits of this community, additional efforts are needed to help members translate theoretical insights into contextualised improvements that positively shape their classroom enactment.

In conclusion, both analytical approaches reveal the transformational potential of this community for professional development while identifying crucial areas for improvement. Moving forward, research should focus on three key areas: facilitating peer exchange and knowledge construction within the CoP, supporting members in applying insights to pedagogical practice and evaluating impact on student outcomes. These directions will be crucial for maximising the impacts of CoPs as vehicles for professional development within FE.

## 4.5. Interview Findings exploring Teachers' experiences

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants across teaching and management roles within the FE sector, who were active members of the online CoP PDNorth. The goal was to uncover deeper levels of understanding on how this virtual CoP facilitates effective CPD for teachers within the FE sector. In analysing and presenting the findings, the researcher focused on presenting rich, descriptive language to convey participants' subjective experiences and perspectives. The aim was to preserve the participants' voices and capture the nuances and complexities of their lives within the CoP through interpretation. Table 4.12 provides a comprehensive overview of the participants' backgrounds, subject areas and the length of time with which they had engaged with PDNorth.

**Table 4.13 Details of Participants**

| Pseudonym | Age range | Gender | Length of time engaged with PDNorth | How long worked within FE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jane | 30-45 | Female | 2-5 years | 15-25 years |
| Hermione | 30-45 | Female | 2-5 years | 10-15 years |
| Offred | 45-65 | Female | Less than 1 month | 15-25 years |
| Anne-Shirley | 30-45 | Female | 2-5 years | 15-25 years |
| Jo March | 45-65 | Female | 2-5 years | 15-25 years |
| Clarice | 30-45 | Female | 6 months – 1 Year | 3-6 years |
| Katniss | 45-65 | Female | Less than 1 month | 15-25 years |

This analysis firstly involved multiple close readings of the interview transcripts to discern significant patterns and themes. Following the process of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial coding generated over 40 preliminary codes relating to participants' experiences, challenges and benefits of CoP participation. These codes were iteratively refined and grouped into broader categories through constant comparison. For example, codes relating to "challenging policies," "student needs" and "teacher autonomy" were eventually merged into a broader theme about teacher-driven alternatives to top-down approaches.

Through this systematic process of combining and refining related concepts, eight initial thematic categories were condensed into three final key overarching themes that best captured the key patterns in participants' experiences. The presentation of these themes is supported by relevant extracts from the interview transcripts, serving as substantiating data: The three themes are: 1. Student-focused teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies, 2. Sustaining emotional resilience, 3. Cultivating connections and community, benefits of belonging.

**Theme 1: Student-focused, teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies**

The analysis process revealed how PDNorth enabled practitioners to maintain student-centred practices while navigating institutional constraints. Members expressed deep frustration with government policies and qualification standardised learning objectives that were often misaligned with daily classroom realities and constrained their ability to meet students' needs. These directives are typically established at a broader administrative level, such as government agencies, educational institutions, or bureaucratic bodies. These policies may aim to

standardise and regulate various aspects of education, including curriculum, assessment, teaching methods and other related practices. Despite feeling limited by top-down decisions, their commitment to addressing student needs remained strong.

In contrast to the challenges they faced, the open non-hierarchical culture enables the reclaiming of professional discretion to ignite teachers' passion and understanding, unconstrained by bureaucratic paradigms. Through regular participation, members build solidarity and purposeful deviation from the status quo by directing their expertise towards learner advancement, despite contrary pressures (Norris et al., 2017). The data also demonstrates that the CoP provided its members with autonomy to innovate beyond rigid policies, by giving its members the confidence to make professional judgments and tailor their teaching methods to best suit their students.

This engagement within the collaborative community of practice empowered educators to enact student-centred, teacher-driven solutions. The CoP facilitated and enabled these alternative approaches, which were tailored to improving learner experiences rather than conforming to top-down requirements. These solutions often run counter to bureaucratic paradigms in favour of flexibility grounded in lived experiences.

For example, Anne-Shirley integrated experiential learning into her courses based on 15 years of understanding her student population's needs; she took her students on experiential walks to connect learning to their lives and spark interest (e.g., to explore local history, religion and suffragettes), inspired by CoP conversations of engaging students. Clarice, a relatively new teacher with 3 years' experience, adjusted her teaching focus on learners' needs rather "than

rigid syllabi" enabled by the new perspectives and strategies she gained through participation. Through such collaboration with more experienced teachers, Clarice gained new perspectives and strategies for student-centred teaching.

Similarly, Katniss gathered curriculum insights from PDNorth research and newsletters to shape and enable responsive planning grounded in classroom realities, not just top-down mandates. "The newsletters from PDNorth keep me updated on the latest trends in education and I often share these insights with my teams to improve our practices."

This collaborative approach extended to practical initiatives. Clarice had faced changes at her organisation, as her college was restructuring, but the skills cultivated through the CoP were equipping her to lead new initiatives like securing digital skills grants and pursuing a leadership qualification. Clarice emphasised that securing these new grants enabled the purchase of technologies and the design of programmes tailored to learners' evolving needs, enhancing student-centred instruction. Clarice appreciated the input from other practitioners and found it empowering her to trust her professional instincts and adapt teaching rather than conforming with top-down requirements.

This flexibility allowed them to innovate their teaching methods and materials to address shifting priorities and students' needs and make adjustments that were more responsive, often in contrast to top-down, externally imposed mandates. Anne-Shirley's language reviewed perceived power imbalances and frustration with top-down directives. "We kind of want to be rebels", emphasising the collective spirit within the CoP to challenge the status quo."  Her use

of phrases like "resist that push" and desire to "be a rebel" conveyed a sense of struggle against bureaucratic policies and external reforms that constrained agency.

She stated, "we discussed with each other the classes that we would like to do for our students to be something coming from them, what they wanted and what they needed..." "it keeps my energy going for things that I would like to change and reminds me of the values that underpin what I do. "And we just talked around together about where we had space to kind of resist that push" ... "we kind of want to be rebels."

Katniss, a manager, gathered insights from the CoP about using technology to supplement mandated materials: "I'm in the middle of curriculum planning at the moment and for next year, I've got quite a few changes...So as I'm going through my list of things that I want to look at, I'm using PDNorth to be able to look at the research, being one or any previous work, or whether it's been in a newsletter, so I can look through things...Look at what's relevant to what we need to plan for the future."

The interview data reveals a dynamic transformation where teachers have become more proactive, exercising agency to make student-centred pedagogical choices that creatively navigate systemic constraints. The CoP empowers teachers as it provides a space for its members to exchange creative strategies to adapt methods and collaboratively work through these changes and make adaptations together. Shirley, a veteran teacher, reinforced the importance of flexibility, creativity and adaptation to enact her vision of effective teaching and maintain her professional identity during times of change. "It allowed me to learn from others and provided lots of interesting ideas floating around." She gave the examples of attending the

reading circle - an online fortnightly meet up of teachers and reading the newsletters, blogs and insights from other members that sparked for her own practice.

Clarice highlighted the transformative impact of participation in the CoP:

> "[It] allowed me to adjust and adapt continuously to what my learners need."

Through the CoP, teachers could exchange strategies for adapting their methods and materials to shifting conditions and student needs. The CoP provided space for discussing pedagogical risk-taking, gaining confidence in developing these ideas and trust amongst the members to voice their innovative ideas. The CoP enabled such things as collaborative problem-solving and the exchange of strategies for navigating systemic shifts.

The CoP encouraged teachers to see educational change as an opportunity for innovation to better serve students' evolving needs. This perspective is evident in Anne-Shirley's comment: 'in the reading circle, we talk about the importance of education being about more than exams, more than assessment preparation.' This quote demonstrates how the CoP promoted discussions that went beyond traditional assessment-focused approaches.

Anne-Shirley gave the example of "using Chromebooks once a week to increase students' and other staff's digital literacy, as Chromebooks are idiosyncratic; they do not have a mouse and they do not have a right-click button. And use it as a resource to supplement what we are doing or provide a practice activity or a space for collaboration."

She valued the CoP for sparking ideas like using this technology to supplement the curriculum, viewing change as an opportunity. The CoP provided a forum for teachers to exchange innovative strategies that break away from status-quo practices, thus viewing change as an opportunity for beneficial innovation, promoting student-centred innovation.

Clarice's quote emphasises gaining knowledge from others: "The advice came from practitioners. So, I appreciated that I had access to this." Hermione actively discussed engaging in discussion – "being able to actively share and listen" implying two-way collaborative meaning-making. Teachers want alternatives to bureaucratic policies, performance management led by managers and directives that lack relevance for classrooms. The CoP generated active, teacher-led solutions as a valued alternative.

Participants expressed frustration with bureaucratic policies and rigid requirements that constrained teaching and can be perceived as a lack of agency. As Anne-Shirley explained, "there is often little space to diverge from mandated learning objectives." Other teachers echoed this frustration, discussing rigid syllabi and extensive bureaucratic requirements. This reflects a noticeable lack of agency felt within the work environment. They expressed how there is a distinct lack of absence of opportunities for teachers to share their experiences, research, or good practices. This lack of agency is further exacerbated by the absence of dedicated spaces and encouragement for teachers to share and collaborate.

In contrast, the PDNorth CoP provided a space for teachers to exchange creative strategies and regain autonomy. As Anne-Shirley expressed, "We kind of want to be rebels; we want to be

the teachers who maybe take our students for a coffee and who do something about fostering connections rather than always what the learning objective is."

The term 'rebelling' suggests that teachers were reasserting their professional discretion over administrative directives perceived as misaligned with student development.

Katniss gathered insights from the CoP to inform her planning. The CoP equipped teachers with teacher-led solutions grounded in classroom realities. Offred noted how PDNorth has played a crucial role in supporting her to overcome her lack of agency; it has provided her with a platform to actively engage, share and learn from each other in a supportive environment, to freely contribute and highlight her research and experiences.

Katniss also gave an example of how she gathered insights from the CoP. She said, "I found the resources that they pointed you towards were amazing." The CoP provided teacher-driven solutions grounded in practice and has helped participants regain a sense of agency by providing a space where their contributions are encouraged and appreciated. The teacher-led knowledge creation and exchange within the CoP generated targeted, relevant strategies and has become a hub for practitioners to actively collaborate. This collaborative hub stood in contrast to the lack of sharing and collaboration reflected in the participants' workplaces.

Anne-Shirley emphasised tailoring teaching to students' needs:

"The classes that we do for our students, they are something coming from them, what they wanted and what they needed. It keeps my energy going for things that I would like to change and reminds me of the values that underpin what I do."

By doing so, she prioritised the student-centred approach, reminding herself of the core values underpinning her commitment to delivering the best educational experiences for her students. The interviews show how the CoP played an integral role in participants' ability to continuously adapt their methods and materials to meet shifting conditions and student requirements. Participants were not only open to change but actively sought ways to improve and innovate their practices.

It also demonstrated how the CoP encouraged innovative strategies and pedagogical risk-taking:

Anne-Shirley provided an example of this stating: 'So in fact, thinking about my blog come from an attack club, autumn meet where we heard from somebody who was a cartoonist and talking about how easy it is to teach and that sort of inspired me to go away and try a few things.' This illustrates how the CoP inspired members to incorporate new, creative approaches into their teaching.

Jo March highlighted how the CoP supported the implementation of research-based innovative approaches: "So what the research enabled me to do was to support the teachers who teach English and maths and ESOL, to look at the trauma informed learning to support young people to understand those barriers and how they can cross the barriers to access English and maths resources".

These examples highlight how the CoP and its participants viewed change as an opportunity for innovating and sought alternative ways to create a more student-centred learning environment. Through the CoP, they gained the confidence to develop inventive ideas and apply them in their classrooms. These ideas were not driven by top-down mandates but were grassroot solutions that originated from teachers' direct experiences within the classroom.

It serves as a platform for pedagogical risk-taking, offering participants the confidence to develop innovative ideas and apply them in their classrooms. The CoP promoted teacher-driven grassroot solutions grounded in classroom realities.

The CoP's role in fostering the exchange of innovative strategies and knowledge sharing was apparent. A prominent benefit consistently emerged of participants highly valuing their access to a wide range of resources and materials within the online platform. These resources included newsletters, YouTube videos, spotlight blogs and events through the CoP. Participants discussed how the CoP equipped them with relevant targeted strategies and inspired them to view change as an opportunity for beneficial innovation. Clarice shared her perspective: 'the advice came from practitioners. So, I appreciated that I had access to this.'

Moreover, Clarice further discussed how resources like English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) case studies provided exposure to new concepts she lacked experience with before and allowed her to explore. The CoP promoted active learning through self-directed engagement, going beyond passive consumption of knowledge. This further illustrates the CoP's role in promoting knowledge exchange, the teachers within the CoP are driven by a

desire to provide the best possible educational experiences for their students and the CoP serves as a valuable platform for this pursuit.

The interviews revealed different perspectives on knowledge sharing within the CoP. Much like the personalised adaptations discussed earlier, the CoP provides a space for members to construct knowledge in ways aligned with their context, facilitating teacher-driven alternatives.

The CoP's role in fostering the exchange of innovation strategies and knowledge sharing was apparent; a prominent benefit consistently emerged as participants highly valued their access to a wide range of resources and materials within the online platform.

Jane Aye emphasised:

"... I have attended various community events and meetings... Being able to actually share and listen... It was just nice to hear different people's ideas... The engagement part of it was good."

Hermione emphasised the value of exchanging ideas through interactive events and meetings. Her use of 'share and listen' suggests a desire for active dialogue, indicating an eagerness for engaging discussions rather than passive consumption of knowledge. She appreciated exposure to diverse 'people ideas" within a highly engaging environment. As a new entrant to the field and CoP, she may be keen to learn from others' perspectives to shape her own practice. Her views align with survey findings indicating that members gain new insights through CoP

collaborations. For Hermione, the CoP provided a forum to actively participate in reciprocal sharing of knowledge, that shapes her professional identity.

Clarice highlights gaining new knowledge from peers:

"... from my point of view, I think that all the case studies that I looked at were almost like, teaching me what I could improve."

Hermione and Clarice's statements reveal differing perspectives on sharing knowledge within the CoP. While Hermione emphasised the value of reciprocal dialogue, saying "Being able to actually share and listen...It was just nice to hear different people's ideas," Clarice focused more on a one-way transfer of knowledge by enhancing her skills. She comments "all the case studies that I looked at were almost like, teaching me what I could improve."

These stances likely reflect their differing levels of experience and goals. As a newer teacher, Clarice seems focused on acquiring concrete practices and guidance to implement in her classroom. Her statement implies viewing knowledge as residing in artefacts for individual consumption. In contrast, Hermione as a more established member seeks to co-construct knowledge through interactions. She appreciates exposure to diverse perspectives, indicating an eagerness for engaging discussions rather than passive learning.

Their differing conceptions of knowledge sharing relate to their state of career and sense of belonging within the CoP. As a newcomer, Clarice adopted a more acquisitional stance, while Hermione's emphasis on dialogue reflected her comfort and agency in collaborating with peers.

Their views highlight how the CoP promotes flexible knowledge exchange to empower teacher-driven solutions tailored to their contexts.

This example of the CoP's role in promoting knowledge exchange and self-directed engagement is woven through the other participants' goals within the community – providing the best possible educational experiences for their students. The CoP is a valuable platform to facilitate this endeavour, creating a culture of collaborative learning and mutual support. In conclusion, the interview data strongly supports theme 1 by highlighting how the CoP empowers participants to maintain student-centred priorities, through fostering connections and promoting flexibility, adaptation and innovation in their teaching practices. The examples provided show their commitment to student-focused education and their willingness to embrace change as an opportunity for improvement.

In summary, this theme demonstrates how PDNorth empowered participants to exercise agency and evolve practices which seemed to run contrary to or not pay much attention to policies. The teacher-led solutions enabled the establishment of student-centred and responsive teaching amid the changing environment.

The non-hierarchical culture of PDNorth facilitated this teacher autonomy and agency in response to top-down policies. This manifested in several ways: Validation of professional judgment: Through regular interactions, teachers supported each other's decisions to depart from policies misaligned with their contextual knowledge. Collaborative innovation: Members shared strategies for enacting practice-based changes without fear of judgment, fostering teacher-driven innovation. Adaptive response to reforms:  The CoPs bottom-up knowledge

exchange enhanced teachers' capacity to respond to changing bureaucratic policies while maintaining student-centred practices.

**Theme 2 Sustaining Emotional Resilience through Community**

Recent educational reforms and policy changes, such as Maths and English condition of funding implemented in 2014 and which have been updated over 22 times since, have taken an emotional toll on teachers, leading to feelings of stress, uncertainty, isolation and burnout (Tully, 2023). Participants also emphasised the significant personal costs of coping with continuous educational reforms, including stress, uncertainty and burnout. The PDNorth CoP served as a vital source of community support that helped sustain teachers' emotional resilience during turbulent times

The CoP developed several key mechanisms to support members' resilience. Through ongoing participation in CoP activities, teachers found validation, empathy, motivation and renewal from peers, helping them to maintain resilience despite reforms that jeopardised their wellbeing. Hermione's interview demonstrated the processing of difficult emotions and finding relief through empathetic support of the CoP community:

"There's been quite a few of us that have been tearful in those spaces, but then by the end of it, you know, we've all kind of felt like I'm so glad that we came and that's happened."

Members developed both individual and collective approaches to building resilience. For example, Anne-Shirley conveyed how the mutual understanding and shared experiences with peers facing similar challenges instilled greater confidence despite the issues they continue to face in their jobs.

"I think that feeling of connection was one thing and it just gives you a bit more confidence. You talk to other people who were facing the same issues."

This further demonstrates her persistence in the face of adversity at her workplace. Clarice attested to the confidence boost she gained from CoP meetings during uncertain times, stating that the CoP meetings gave her "confidence in teaching". The researcher interpreted her quote as evidence that validation from empathetic peers acts as an emotional anchor amid instability and uncertainty.

Interviews revealed the actions participants take to actively sustain resilience, including self-care techniques and preserving their professional identities during demanding reforms. Offred highlighted the depth of sharing possible within the CoP, implying she perceives her contributions and scholarship will be supported non judgementally which is in stark contrast to her workplace for open sharing.

"Particularly the one where I want to write a little article for them about contextualised maths and English. She was really supportive and says you know, if you want me to look over it before you submit it, I am happy to be that critical friend."

Jo felt "reassurance that you're not alone", suggesting it helps to mitigate the isolation many experience amid turbulent change. Her sentiment indicates that teachers may feel alone in their frustrations and the CoP provided a sense of community support.

The outcomes of this community support were evident across participants' accounts. Their accounts indicated peer validation and support in sustaining emotional resilience. Hermione brought a unique perspective, highlighting the depth of sharing within the CoP, where teachers openly discussed emotive and personal challenges, they rarely shared with other work colleagues. "People have kind of like shared things, quite emotive things that maybe they've not even shared with any other colleagues in that space." Her portrayal of members sharing deeply 'emotive things' indicates the CoP provided a uniquely trusting space for authentic self-expression.

This space within the online CoP provided participants with a place where they can openly share their self-doubt, anxieties and frustrations related to reforms and local policies, allowing them to preserve their personal well-being and professional identity. Participants share their experiences of finding the motivation to continue developing and evolving. It serves as a space for reflection and personal growth, enabling members to renew their enthusiasm for teaching despite continuous reform.

As Katniss remarked, "it just gives you that empowerment..." which can be interpreted as sustaining motivation despite adversity. The relationships and shared experiences within PDNorth appear to provide vital validation and normalisation of the demands of this sector,

rather than suppressing the frustrations that accompany change; the community enabled open acknowledgement and processing of these emotions.

In conclusion, the theme of sustaining emotional resilience through community support is richly illustrated through interviews with teachers and managers participating in PDNorth's CoP. The data demonstrates the emotional toll of change on participants, the role of peer support, the importance of resilience and renewal and the agency teachers exhibit in maintaining their emotional resilience during challenging times.

## Theme 3 Cultivating connection and community, benefits of belonging

The interviews showed that belonging to the PDNorth CoP provided members with a powerful sense of connection, inclusion, mutual relationships and community. This theme captures how participation facilitated relationship-building, knowledge exchange and other benefits that enriched members' professional identities and capabilities.

Participants consistently described their experiences of being part of PDNorth as "supportive, collaborative and transformative". For instance, Jane described PDNorth as:

"... Yeah, really, really comfortable. So welcoming, very warm, very friendly. Straight right from the off. Yeah, absolutely so, supportive and friendly, warm, open and collaborative."

These comments from Jane demonstrate the open, welcoming culture that members perceived within the CoP. The repetition of positive adjectives like "supportive", "friendly," "warm" and "collaborative" emphasise the immense value Jane placed on this inclusive atmosphere. Having felt immediately welcomed "straight right from the off" appears to have shaped her entirely positive view of belonging to this community. Jane's experience of over 15 years of teaching in FE and between 2-5 years of being a member of the CoP explains her strong affinity for the supportive environment, which she contrasts against potential isolation and competitiveness in other contexts. This sense of connection and belonging was echoed by Anne-Shirley, who discussed her sense of connection and not feeling isolated while engaging with other members:

"I think that feeling of connection was one thing and it just gives you a bit more confidence in going back into your workplace when you talk to other people who were facing the same issues."

This extract highlights how Anne-Shirley portrays a strong "feeling of connection" within the PDNorth community, despite its online nature. For her, the relationships formed through engaging with peers facing similar professional challenges were enormously valuable in reducing isolation. They imply that the mutual understanding and shared experiences within the CoP instilled greater confidence in navigating issues in her workplace.

As a mid-career teacher of 15 – 25 years, Anne-Shirley seems to have moved beyond the novice phase but not yet reached veteran status. This stage often involves managing complex responsibilities which can be isolating. Belonging to the CoP appears to provide the connections and validation that counteract this sense of isolation. The specificity of her

comment, "talking to other people facing the same issues", suggests that sharing lived experiences with peers is more valuable to her than exchanging content knowledge. Overall, she powerfully articulates how meaningful relationships within the CoP transform perceptions of isolation into confidence. For mid-career professionals like her, the relationships formed through a shared understanding of common challenges provide crucial support for their continued development. Within this inclusive culture, participants appreciated the sense of belonging, diverse perspectives and the many opportunities for networking, knowledge sharing, reflection and professional development that PDNorth offered.

Offred and Anne-Shirley, who feel included, supported and connected within the CoP, noted PDNorth's diversity and relationship-building as assets. For example, Offred valued the "supportiveness" she experienced and people being "willing to include you and be interested in your experience." Anne-Shirley similarly stated that the CoP provides a "feeling of connection" and confidence from being able to "talk to other people who are facing the same issues." This underscores that members highly valued the mutuality and breadth of perspectives presented in the CoP. Both the survey and interviews demonstrate how belonging to this community provides significant advantages for continuous development. The diversity of experiences and collaborative relationships were seen as conducive to members' CPD and peer learning. This sentiment was echoed by Hermione, who reinforced this in her interview, saying:

"Friendly, warm, open, collaborative atmosphere... The whole environment feels very supportive... There is a lot of trust in the community... It is a very safe space where you can just be honest about things."

This vividly demonstrates the CoP's ethos that resonates across the interviews. She implies that such openness enables authentic sharing and belonging, which appears critical for members' development. Importantly, the participants found solace and highlighted a keen sense of connection and not feeling isolated while engaging with other members. Hermione is a teacher with over 10 years of teaching experience.

"I have attended various community events and meetings … Being able to share and listen … It was just nice to hear different people's ideas… The engagement part of it was really good…."

Hermione extolled the value of working together to exchange ideas through interactive events and meetings. Her language of 'being able to actually share and listen' implies an appetite for two-way dialogue, not just passive consumption of knowledge. She appreciated exposure to diverse 'people ideas' within a highly engaging environment. This environment of trust and open communication was seen as conducive to professional growth. As Clarice commented:

"I became so confident in my instinct, I basically, I think in our meetings, we came to realise that teaching was something very natural and learners are letting you know what's working and what's not working."

The findings from interviews conducted with members of the PDNorth community revealed that belonging to this online community of practice provided a strong sense of connection, community and belonging among members. Participants highlighted how the CoP enhanced

their professional confidence and growth through collegial interactions. PDNorth offered a non-judgemental, inclusive environment where members felt comfortable sharing ideas, resources and strategies. The flexible online platform facilitated accessible networking and collaboration. Teachers described the mutual trust, respect and understanding cultivated through ongoing CoP engagement. Their engagement with PDNorth enhanced their confidence but also facilitated the implementation of new teaching strategies and encouraged scholarly pursuits. Importantly, interviews highlighted a keen sense of connection, community and belonging among PDNorth members. The narratives shared by the interviewees demonstrate the intangible assets of connection and collaborative ethos.

They emphasise the value that members placed of belonging, sense of connection and collaborative relationships to PDNorth in enhancing and shaping members, their professional identities and capabilities. Overall, these aligned perspectives demonstrate how the CoP's participatory culture of mutual support and openness facilitates transformational professional development experiences through relationships built on trust, care and a shared purpose of growth.

This exploratory case study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of professional development among FES practitioners within the context of online CoPs. Key findings highlight that the PDNorth CoP facilitates collaborative activities, grants access to resources and supports professional network expansion. Across these perspectives, personal connections and lived experiences seem to bring the CoP's interactions to life. Participants reported benefits in terms of evaluating their teaching practices and engaging in more profound reflections on their professional development roles. While the online technologies provide accessibility, the quotes

indicate that human relationships, which developed online, resulted in transformational impacts on practice noted by members. However, it is important to note that while members reported these positive impacts on their professional thinking, they also indicated challenges in implementing concrete changes in their classroom practices. This gap between enhanced professional reflection and practical implementation represents a key area for further investigation and support.

## 4.5. Triangulation of Results

This section triangulates the findings from the 20 survey responses and semi-structured interviews with 7 members to provide a comprehensive understanding of FE practitioners' experiences and perspectives within the PDNorth online CoP for professional development.

### 4.5.1. Summary of Survey Findings

The survey findings revealed several important insights into FE practitioners' perceptions of their participation in the PDNorth CoP, with the data indicating strong positive perceptions of enjoyment, deeper thinking and collaboration among members (Survey items, 6,7,13,18,28). Additionally, knowledge sharing and raising expertise levels were seen as positive benefits by CoP members (Survey Items 11, 12). However, despite these positive outcomes, survey items related to practical application and implementation received comparatively lower average scores, suggesting challenges in translating collaborative learning through the CoP into changed classroom practices in the respondents' own organisations (Survey items 9,21,25). The survey also revealed demographic differences, with younger members reporting increased online engagement and critical reflection compared to older members (Survey items 13,14) and females valuing CoP benefits and collaborative activities more than males (Survey items 6,11).

### 4.5.2. Summary of Interview Findings

The qualitative interview analysis identified three key themes. The first theme, "Student-focused, teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies," highlighted how participation in the

CoP empowered teachers to develop and implement teaching practices that prioritised student needs and professional judgement over bureaucratic directives. The second theme, "Sustaining Emotional Resilience through Community Support," emphasised the role of the CoP in providing a supportive space for members to share their challenges and draw strength from their shared experiences. Finally, the third theme, "Cultivating Connections and Community, Benefits of Belonging," demonstrated the value of the CoP in fostering meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging among members, which contributed to their professional development and well-being.

The key themes and findings from the qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys were then brought together through a process of integration and comparison. This involved performing comparative passes examining areas of alignment, synergy, differences and interpretations between the two datasets (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). An iterative process was undertaken, going back and forth between the datasets and emerging interpretations to find connections and explanations for deeper meaning.

The unanimity and lack of variance in survey responses regarding enjoyment, deeper thinking and collaboration (Survey items 6,7,13,18,28) aligned with the interview themes of an inclusive, welcoming culture that facilitated reciprocal knowledge building through relationships and emotional connections. While interviews depicted an openness that enabled authentic sharing of challenges and pressures, the survey results also demonstrated how collective participation contributed to raising expertise. Together, these data sets indicated that the online CoP supported member-driven innovation and grassroots solutions to countering bureaucratic policies.

More nuanced findings also emerged from the different data sets. The survey revealed increased online engagement among younger participants, while women valued connections to a greater extent than men. The interviews, on the other hand, uncovered an evolution trajectory with members' professional learning: Members initially sought practical support and resources to address immediate teaching challenges. As engagement deepened, participants reported enhanced reflective practices and critical thinking about their teaching methods. Long-term members described developing a more holistic view of education, engaging in scholarly activities and taking on mentoring roles within the CoP. This progression suggests that sustained engagement in the CoP facilitates not just skill development but also a transformation in professional identity and approach to teaching. Despite the strong coherence on developmental gains, both data sets exposed struggles in applying insights to transform rigid teaching contexts, highlighting the need to address implementation barriers.

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to achieve corroboration and completeness through merging findings. As Denzin (1978, p.291) explained, this involves "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon." The triangulation process of both data sets ultimately revealed five key themes:

1. Student-focused, teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies,

2. Sustaining emotional resilience through community support,

3. Cultivation of connections and sense of community,

4. Evolution of impacts over time,

5. Barriers to classroom application.

The findings supported the assertion that participation in the online CoP empowered teachers to develop and implement teaching practices that prioritised student needs and professional judgement over bureaucratic directives. The CoP promoted teachers' agency, autonomy and teacher-led solutions grounded in practice. Quantitative findings showed unanimous agreement that the non-hierarchical online discussions enabled deeper critical thinking, while qualitative accounts illustrated how collaboration within a supportive culture attuned to practice-based priorities helped members gain confidence in relying on situated judgments.

The CoP served as a platform for mutually encouraging exchanges that motivated members to persist in their dedication despite challenges posed by demanding systemic changes. Participants described the CoP as a space for restorative discussions that reignited their passion through mutual inspiration, contrary to cultures fixated narrowly on problems. The development of trusting relationships within the CoP played a crucial role in restoring and sustaining participants' emotional resilience during turbulent times of change.

The CoP cultivated a keen sense of community and connection among participants despite the online nature of the platform. The regular online events, discussion forums and collaborative projects enabled substantive professional relationships to develop, even though members were physically distant. These expanded connections provided developmental opportunities, capabilities enrichment and practice advancements rarely possible in their own isolated institutional climates.

Differences emerged in the survey responses based on the length of time engaged with the CoP, indicating that the CoP's impact evolves as members gain confidence in engagement and collaboration over time. This aligns with Lave and Wenger (1991) the concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' and Wenger (1998) the argument that sustained participation enables identify shifts from peripheral to core member.

A prominent theme that emerged was the substantial barriers FE teachers faced in applying insights gained from PDNorth to enhance their teaching practices and impact student outcomes in their classroom contexts. Institutional constraints, budget cuts and shifting policies presented barriers between CoP gains and learning and changed enactment. Teachers struggled to effectively bridge their experiences gained within the CoP back to their daily practice and transform student learning experiences due to rigid institutional constraints and continuously shifting external policy environments. This theme underscores the challenges members faced in translating the benefits of peer exchange and development within PDNorth into tangible improvements in student outcomes. Overcoming this divide is important for members to maximise the potential of the CoP. Therefore, understanding the specific barriers, ranging from restrictive learning objectives to budget cuts and curriculum limitations, can inform the development of strategic supports that allow teachers to navigate these obstacles to improve student centred practice.

The triangulation process allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of FE practitioners' experiences and perspectives within the PDNorth online CoP. By leveraging the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data, this study uncovered aligned synergistic and

nuanced findings that depict the multidimensional impacts of participation in the online community for professional development. This mixed-methods approach demonstrated how the CoP empowers teachers, promotes agency and supports professional development, while also highlighting challenges in translating insights into practice due to institutional constraints. These finding provide a comprehensive view of the CoPs impact on FE practitioners' professional development, illuminating both its strengths and areas for improvement.

## 4.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from a mixed-methods investigation of the PDNorth online CoP and its impact on the professional development of FE practitioners. The results address the study's four research questions.

The quantitative findings from survey responses ($n$ = 20) showed positive perceptions of the CoP, particularly in areas of collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, reflective practices. Participations showed high agreement on the benefits of CoP participation, such as evaluating teaching practice ($M$ = 5.00, $SD$ = 0.00) and strongly endorsed collaborative activities like online discussions (M=5.00, $SD$ = 0.00). However lower scores were observed for implementing insights into practice, such as improving student outcomes ($M$ = 3.5, $SD$ = 0.707) Notable demographics differences where observed, with younger participants (30-45) reporting higher engagement in online discussions and critical reflection. Female members showed higher participation in collaborative research activities.

Qualitative analysis of interviews ($n$ = 7) identified three main themes student-focused, teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies, sustaining emotional resilience's through community support; and

cultivating connections and community, benefits of belonging. These themes highlight how the CoP empowers teachers to develop student-centred practices, provides emotional support during challenging times and develops a sense of professional community.

Analysis through Boyer's framework indicated varying levels of engagement with different forms of scholarship. The Scholarship of Integration and Teaching within the CoP appeared to be strongly supported, while moderate support for the Scholarship of Application and limited but present engagement with the Scholarship of Discovery.

Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data showed areas of convergence and divergence in participants' experiences and perceptions of the CoP. While both data sets indicated strong positive perceptions of the CoPs benefits, they also highlight challenges in translating CoP insights into classroom practice.

These findings provide a comprehensive picture of FE practitioners' experiences within the PDNorth online CoP, addressing the study's research questions. The implication of these findings and their relationship to existing literature will be explored in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

## 5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the key findings that emerged from this mixed-methods investigation of the PDNorth online community of practice (CoP) and its impact on the professional development of Further Education (FE) practitioners.

The discussion is organised around five overarching themes identified through triangulating the quantitative survey responses and qualitative interviews:

1. Student-focused, teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies

2. Sustaining emotional resilience through community support

3. Cultivating connections and a sense of community

4. Evolution of impacts over time

5. Barriers to classroom application.

The discussion will now explore these themes in relation to the study's four research questions (cross-referenced below):

1. How does an online CoP benefit FE practitioners' professional development? (Themes 1,2,3)

2. What techniques and methods do FE practitioners use to engage with online CoPs? (Themes 3,4)

3. What are the challenges within the CoP that impact continuous professional development? (Theme 5)

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4. To what extent do FE practitioners engage in the work of each of the four domains of Boyer's model of scholarship? (Themes 1,3,4)

This chapter explores how these findings extend and relate to concepts and theoretical frameworks like legitimate peripheral participation (within the CoP framework) (Lave and Wenger, 1991), CoP theory in the broader sense (Wenger, 1998) and models of CPD (Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy, 2014a). It also examines the convergence between PDNorth's online CoP and Boyer's four scholarship domains (Boyer, 1990), offering insights into the extent and nature of FE practitioners' engagement in various scholarly activities within this digital space.

By situating the results within the FE sector's unique context and challenges, the discussion aims to inform policies, practices and future research directions for optimising online CoPs as vehicles to cultivate collaboration, knowledge sharing and transformative learning experiences, ultimately enhancing continuous professional development for FE practitioners.

## 5.2. Synthesis of Key Findings and Emerging Themes

This short section presents an overarching analysis of the study's findings, synthesising insights from both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the online PDNorth CoP supports FE practitioner's professional development as expressed in the themes listed above.

Theme 1, 'Student-focused, teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies,' emerged strongly across data sources through practitioners' empowered decision-making within the CoP. Survey and interview data consistently highlighted how the CoP enabled practitioners to take greater control of their professional development. This aligns with Trust, Krutka and Carpenter (2016) findings on increased teacher agency in online professional learning networks. The nature and depth of the teachers' engagement evolved, influencing both participation patterns and scholarly activities. This evolution reflects Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation, extending Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn's (2018) work on varying levels of participation in online teacher communities.

The study revealed several interconnected tensions. A significant challenge evidenced through the data was between collaboration and implementation. While the CoP facilitated robust knowledge sharing and collaborative learning, both data sets revealed difficulties in translating these insights into classroom practice. The high value placed on collaborative learning within the CoP often contrasted with the challenges practitioners faced when attempting to implement new practices in their individual teaching contexts. This tension was evident in responses related to benefits, challenges and engagement with Boyer's scholarship domains. This reflects the complex relationship between collective knowledge construction and individual practice described in Wenger's (1998) CoP theory and echoes Broad (2015a) identified barriers to implementing CPD insights in FE settings.

The study uncovered a disparity in the types of scholarship developed within the CoP. While the community successfully supported the development of the scholarships of integration and teaching, it showed limitations in supporting the scholarship of discovery. This aligns with Tummons' (2018) observations about constraints on research activities within FE and reflects broader challenges in the FE sector regarding research engagement and institutional support for scholarly activities noted by (Lea and Simmons, 2012).

The study's findings build upon each other in several ways that reflect Kennedy's (2005) interconnected nature of professional development. For instance, the benefits of CoP participation (RQ1) directly inform the engagement techniques used by practitioners (RQ2). The challenges identified (RQ3) provide context for understanding the varying levels of engagement with different forms of scholarship (RQ4). This interplay suggests that the CoPs impact on professional development is multifaceted and cumulative.

The quantitative and qualitative data both complemented and diverged from each other echoing Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) observations about mixed-methods research. While the survey provided a broad overview of engagement patterns, the interviews offered rich contextual insights. Notably, perceptions of research engagement differed between data sets, reflecting ongoing debates about what constitutes 'research' in FE contexts (Lloyd and Jones, 2018)

This triangulated analysis reveals the complex ecosystem of online professional learning in the FE sector. It highlights both the potential of CoPs and the persistent challenges in translating collective learning into individual practice. By examining these cross-cutting themes, interrelationships and tensions, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how online CoPs can support FE practitioners' professional development, contributing to the broader discourse on CPD in the FE sector.

I will now return to the research questions and discuss the implications of the answers.

## 5.3. Answering the Research Questions

*RQ1: According to FE practitioners, how does an online CoP benefit their professional development?*

The findings illustrate the transformative potential of online CoPs in supporting collaborative learning, reducing isolation (which limits development opportunities within single institutions), expanding professional networks, promoting active engagement in knowledge sharing and reflective practice and empowering teacher-driven solutions (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016). Recent empirical research by Chen (2022) evidences that CoPs can effectively support professional learning when underpinned by emotional connectedness and trust. Her findings showed that creating a safe space for discussion and reflection was essential for engagement in professional development activities. This aligns with theories of situational learning and shows the importance of the social-emotional dimensions of CoPs.

Legitimate peripheral participation suggests that learning occurs through participation in social practices with newer members focused on acquiring practical skills and resources, while experienced members are engaged in reciprocal meaning co-construction through reflective discussions. This embodies core CoP characteristics of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). The PDNorth CoP facilitated active collaboration, a shared commitment to improving FE teaching practices, sharing perspectives and experiences, providing professional development opportunities often limited within single workplaces.

These findings reflect a transformative model of CPD (Kennedy, 2005), highlighted by the participants' reported experiences of collaborative learning, enhanced confidence and the application of new knowledge and skills in their teaching practice. The CoP facilitated meaningful changes in teachers' practices, beliefs and professional identities through collaborative learning and reflective dialogue (Wenger, 1998; Kennedy, 2014b), fostering transformative outcomes such as, increased motivation, reflective practice and the co-construction of knowledge. Participants also reported that being engaged in the CoP led to shifts in their teaching approaches (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017).

These findings align with Green et al. (2013) study, which found that long-term members of a faculty-based teaching CoP developed more transformative, praxis-oriented approaches over time. This suggests that the benefits of online CoPs for FE practitioners may evolve and deepen with sustained participation.

The findings of this study, however, revealed nuanced differences in perceptions based on age and gender. In the survey, younger members reported increased online engagement in the CoP

and critical reflection compared to their older counterparts. This observation aligns with Prensky (2001) concept of digital natives and the findings of (Helsper and Eynon, 2010), which suggested that younger participants felt more comfortable with online collaboration and sharing their experiences in virtual environments. The collaborative and non-judgemental culture developed within the PDNorth online CoP may have particularly resonated with younger members, encouraging their active participation and reflection. However, these findings should not be taken as definitive or generalisable to all online CoPs or FE contexts (Tummons, 2022).

Furthermore, the survey established that female members placed a higher value on the benefits and collaborative activities offered by the CoP compared to their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that women tend to prioritise supportive relationships and a sense of community in online learning environments (González-Gómez et al., 2012) and exhibit higher levels of engagement and participation in online discussion forums (Rovai and Baker, 2005).

While the age and gender differences are notable, it is important to interpret them cautiously. The observed variations suggest that age may influence the extent to which teachers challenge top-down policies and develop student centred alternatives through online CoP participation (Kennedy, 2014b). Similarly, gender differences in perceptions of belonging and connection within the CoP were evidenced, which may suggest that females were also more active in this regard. However, these findings should not be taken as definitive or generalisable to all online CoPs or FE contexts (Tummons, 2022). One plausible speculation, which requires further investigation, is that women may have greater inclination towards collaboration, community

building and deriving value from supportive professional development in this context. However, this interpretation is not substantiated by prior research to online CoPs in the FE sector (Lloyd and Jones, 2018).   Whilst the supportive and inclusive environment cultivated within the PDNorth CoP may have been particularly conducive to developing a sense of belonging and professional development among female and younger participants, this would require further investigation of other online CoP populations.

The CoP's collaborative, non-judgmental culture facilitated knowledge creation, reducing isolation through asynchronous participation that was accommodating of practitioners' workloads (Broad, 2015a). The online connectedness enabled expansive subject-specialist networking channels, enabling valuable reciprocal development among participants spanning roles and regions. This aligns with research from Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn (2018) that found online teacher communities support knowledge exchange across geographical and institutional boundaries, leading to the development of shared practices and resources.

Thus, the findings demonstrate the transformative potential of online CoPs in supporting the professional development of FE practitioners. As Kennedy (2014) explains, transformative CPD models, such as CoPs, focus on promoting collaborative learning, critical reflection and the co-construction of knowledge, leading to meaningful changes in teachers' practices, beliefs and professional identities. The PDNorth CoP demonstrated this transformation through its cultivated reciprocity, trust and openness, providing ongoing support for practitioners to challenge norms, question established practices, develop new understandings and enact meaningful practice changes through critical reflection and discourse (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

Rather than relying on institutional investment, as mentioned earlier, PDNorth was crowd-funded by the FE practitioners themselves, highlighting how online CoPs can be practitioner-driven initiatives. While the success of this grass-roots model demonstrates the commitment and value FE practitioners place on such initiatives, it also raises questions about sustainable funding models and ownership (Broad, 2015b). On the one hand, practitioner funding ensures autonomy and direct alignment with members' needs. However, relying solely on individual contributions may limit accessibility and long-term sustainability (Eliahoo, 2017). The funding approach for professional development initiatives like online CoPs is a complex issue that merits further exploration. Future research could explore the benefits and challenges of various funding approaches, including public funding, institutional support from FE colleges and organisations or hybrid models combining multiple funding sources, to ensure the long-term viability and accessibility of such CoPs. Each approach has potential advantages and drawbacks in terms of sustainability, accessibility, autonomy and alignment with sector needs (Kennedy, 2014a). The ideal funding model may vary depending on the specific context and goals of the CoP. Regardless of the funding source, this study suggests a crucial need for practitioners to take ownership in terms of active participation, content creation and community leadership (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016). By collectively investing their time, expertise and engagement in developing and maintaining such online communities, FE practitioners can harness the substantial benefits for their own CPD and enhance teaching and learning across the sector (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018)

*RQ2 What techniques and methods do FE practitioners use to engage with Online CoPs?*

Engagement methods involved structured collaborative activities, such as live online workshops, regular sharing meetings and monthly community circle events focused on topics like literacy strategies. For example, within the Reading Circle forums, members discussed teaching-related books and shared insights. The CoP also organised regular "Spotlight" events featuring guest speakers on topics like integrating technology in the classroom. Additionally, live-streamed video panels with guest speakers from diverse specialisms fostered cross-subject insights on pressing challenges, aligning with Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn (2018) findings regarding the value of sharing and collective knowledge creation in online teacher communities. These activities, facilitated remotely via conferencing tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, proved pivotal in cultivating relationship development and fostering critical exchange and insights among geographically dispersed members.

Knowledge sharing practices occurred using multimedia discussions on platforms like Padlet, resonating with Wenger (1998) the concept of 'mutual engagement'. Online, mutual engagement works differently. People can interact at different times using digital tools, facilitating engagement across time and space, allowing for more flexible and diverse participation. Interview accounts also highlighted practitioner advice sharing and valuing diverse perspectives. CoP members consistently reported the benefits of hearing from colleagues with different levels of experience and expertise and the value of engaging in reciprocal dialogue around teaching practice. This resonates with the literature reviewed by Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn (2018), which demonstrates the significance of sharing

and collective knowledge creation in fostering learning within online teacher communities. These ritualised sharing practices nurtured an open culture, providing newer members access to veteran insights, establishing foundations for sustained participation (Kennedy, 2005).

The sustainability of participation was achieved through several factors. Regular, structured activities created a sense of routine and expectation, while diverse engagement opportunities catered to different interests and expertise levels. The ongoing value participants derived from shared insights and collaborative problem-solving, coupled with a supportive environment that encouraged continued involvement, led to deepening relationships over time. These elements combined to create a cycle of engagement where members found ongoing value, leading to sustained participation and community development (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

Trust-building was facilitated through various features and strategies, each contributing to a supportive online environment. Customisable notification settings allowed members to adjust frequency based on urgency, respecting individual preferences and time constraints. Archived meeting captions with embedded text provided transparency and accessibility, allowing members to review discussions at their convenience and creating a shared history that developed a sense of continuity and collective knowledge building. Video meetings (Zoom) enabled face-to-face interactions, even in a virtual space, allowing for more personal connections. Non-verbal cues and real-time dialogue facilitated deeper understanding and empathy among participants. These features collectively contributed to trust-building by respecting individual needs and preferences that encouraged members to share challenges and experiences, leading to candid vulnerability exchanges and reciprocal peer mentoring, as

described by interviewees. The openness and honesty displayed during these video meetings exemplified aspects of the multifaced approach called for by researchers (Philipsen et al., 2019a) to enable effective online teacher professional development. By enabling both structured professional dialogue and informal social exchange, the meetings created what Lantz-Andersson et al (2018) describe as spaces for authentic professional dialogue. These dual functions – developing both formal and informal relationships – align with the findings of Philipsen et al.'s (2019) that effective online teacher development requires an integrated approach.  In summary, FE practitioners employed a range of engagement and trust-building strategies to create a supportive environment that encouraged open sharing and peer mentoring. This multifaceted approach aligns with research recommendations emphasising diverse engagement opportunities for effective online teacher professional development (Philipsen et al., 2019a).

*RQ3 What are the challenges within the CoP which impact continuous professional development?*

The central obstacles that emerged were time limitations and intensive workload demands, aligning with the literature, highlighting the lack of time as a significant barrier to CPD participation in the FE sector (Broad, 2015a; Eliahoo, 2017).  Chen (2022) reported similar barriers in her study, noting that time constraints and workload pressures were significant barriers to CPD engagement, with teachers struggling to balance CPD activities with their professional responsibilities.  Her research highlighted how institutional policies and managerial oversight may limit teachers' ability to implement new approaches learned through

CPD. This finding highlights the persistent tension between the perceived value of professional development and the practical constraints faced by FE practitioners. As previously mentioned, the analysis also uncovered subtle differential participation barriers related to career stages, with veterans displaying lower interest in online activities than newcomers. This signals a need for interventions that balance diverse priorities across the professional spectrum to avoid marginalisation (Villeneuve-Smith, West and Bhinder, 2009). Additionally, female members valued CoP benefits and collaborative activities more than their male counterparts. These differences in online engagement may relate to various factors like communication preferences and cultural norms rather than implying marginalisation. Nonetheless, it presents an opportunity to explore tailoring specific aspects of the CoP experience to better engage and support diverse participants.

These challenges faced by FE teachers in implementing CoP innovations reflect broader systemic issues in the sector. As highlighted in the Augar Review (2019) and the Skills for Jobs White Paper (2021), the FE sector continues to face significant pressures that impact professional development opportunities. For example, the findings on time constraints and workload pressures mirror the Augar Review's emphasis on the need for increased investment in FE teachers' professional development. Similarly, the institutional barriers identified in the study align with the Skills for Jobs White Paper's plans to support high-quality professional development in the sector. The findings of this study provide empirical evidence of how these sector-wide challenges present at the individual teacher level impact their ability to fully utilise the benefits of online CoPs for their professional development.

Ingleby (2019) research provides additional insights into these challenges, highlighting a disconnect between policymakers' emphasis on 'choice,' 'competition,' and 'employability' in HE in FE and the priorities of academic staff, who tend to focus on developing 'reflective practice' among students. This tension shapes the complex landscape in which FE practitioners operate and influences their professional development needs. The study revealed how this disparity between policy expectations and pedagogical priorities creates particular challenges for practitioners seeking to improve practice. Online CoPs emerged as valuable spaces where practitioners could collectively navigate these competing demands while maintaining their commitment to effective teaching and learning.

The triangulation of data sources also revealed obstacles regarding potential inequities in long-term engagement with the CoP, which may have impacted members' ability to gain knowledge over time. Specifically, the survey data showed that members who had been engaged with PDNorth for longer periods (2-5 years) reported higher levels of enjoyment in online events (Survey item 7) and more frequent collaboration on research (Survey item 26) compared to new members. This suggests that sustained participation may be necessary to fully benefit from the CoP.

Career stage and role-based variances are demographic differences that do not inherently lead to marginalisation but could potentially result in uneven participation distribution and knowledge exchange, potentially leading to the gradual exclusion of marginalised members within the community over time. As Wenger (1998, p.77) cautions, 'forms of mutual engagement can become exclusionary and restrictive' if deliberate efforts are not made to actively cultivate inclusion. Whilst the findings from this study do not explicitly demonstrate

exclusionary practices, the observed variations in engagement across demographic groups prompt us to consider how CoP facilitators can proactively design strategies to accommodate diverse needs and preferences, ensuring the CoP remains responsive to its diverse membership. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and accommodate these demographic variations through deliberate efforts to create an inclusive environment within the community.

The survey also evidenced minimal discussion of professional insights gained through CoP participation when members returned to their local institutions, suggesting that breakthrough concepts rarely diffuse into FE educators' own teaching organisations despite lively exchanges among community peers. Participants faced managerial constraints on experimentation, encountering rigid oversight in the form of strict institutional policies and procedures that limited their discretion and autonomy to implement contextualised, responsive learning approaches.

The literature provides insights into why organisations might limit teacher autonomy. Coffield et al. (2014) and Tummons (2022) describe this as 'institutional gatekeeping' policies intended to maintain quality standards. However, the findings suggest such measures applied too rigidly, can hinder progress. Kennedy (2005) argues that overly restrictive policies can perpetuate the status quo in teaching practices. In this study, participants reported that strict institutional policies limited their ability to implement innovative approaches learned from within the CoP. This aligns with research by Villeneuve-Smith, West and Bhinder (2009), Eliahoo (2017) and Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn (2018), who found that excessive oversight can discourage innovation and reduce teachers' ability to respond flexibly to student needs. Thus, while quality control measures are necessary, the findings highlight the importance of

balancing oversight with sufficient autonomy to allow teachers to apply new knowledge and skills gained through professional development activities like online CoPs.

These demographic differences suggested by our limited sample highlight the importance of considering the complex interplay of individual, social and technological/digital factors that shape participation and learning within online CoPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). While the study did not find evidence of disrespectful or non-inclusive interactions within the CoP, the variations of participation and perceived benefits across different demographic groups demonstrate the need for CoP facilitators to be proactive in designing and implementing strategies that accommodate diverse needs and preferences. This can involve creating a variety of engagement opportunities to ensure that the CoP remains responsive to the changing needs of its diverse membership. By acknowledging and accommodating these differences, CoP facilitators can help mitigate potential disparities in participation and ensure that as many members as possible feel valued and supported (McConnell et al., 2013).

The triangulation of the survey and interview data, therefore, reveals a range of challenges within the online CoP that impact FE practitioners' CPD, including time limitations, intensive workloads demand (Broad, 2015a), differential participation barriers related to career stages, managerial constraints on experimentation and the inadvertent perpetuation of the status quo through restrictive policies. While power imbalances related to institutional constraints and managerial oversight can hinder the enactment of new pedagogies (Kennedy, 2005), age and gender differences in participation do not necessarily reflect power dynamics within the CoP itself.

Rather, these demographic variations highlighted the importance of intentionally considering the diverse needs and preferences of members and their experiences when designing and facilitating online CoPs (Wenger, 1998; Philipsen et al., 2019b). The study's findings emphasise that a uniform approach is inadequate in addressing the unique perspectives and participation barriers faced by members across different career stages, age groups and genders. Instead, CoP facilitators must remain vigilant and proactive in creating an environment that actively promotes and sustains inclusive engagement for all participants (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016; Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018).

*RQ4 To what extent do FE practitioners engage in the work of each of the four domains of Boyer's model of Scholarship?*

The analysis of FE practitioners' engagement with the PDNorth CoP through the lens of Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship reveals a complex interplay between the four domains of discovery, integration, application and teaching. Tummons (2018) argues that scholarship in FE is often constrained by institutional pressures and limited resources, leading to a focus on teaching and application rather than traditional research activities. This study's findings both support and extend Tummons' observations, demonstrating how online CoPs can facilitate engagement with different forms of scholarship within the unique context of FE.

This study aligns with Husband and Jeffrey (2016) who argue that scholarship in FE should be viewed through a broad lens, a conceptualisation that extends beyond conventional academic parameters to include diverse forms of research and knowledge creation. The PDNorth CoP emerges as an exemplar of this broader perspective, offering FE practitioners a platform to

engage in scholarly pursuits that are connected to their professional realities. By supporting these context-specific scholarly activities, the CoP bridges the often-perceived gap between academic scholarship and the practical demands of FE teaching.

The findings indicate that the Scholarships of Integration and Teaching emerged as areas of strong engagement within the CoP. The cultivation of connections and a sense of community within the CoP aligns with the scholarship of integration, as members actively seek to make connections across disciplines and contexts to address common challenges in their practice. This aligns with the qualitative themes of 'student-focused, teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies' and 'cultivating connections and community,' which highlights how practitioners actively synthesise knowledge from various sources and collectively reflect on their teaching practices. The collaborative and non-hierarchical nature of the CoP facilitates the co-construction of knowledge and the development of shared understandings, demonstrating the scholarship of integration in action. This aspect of online CoPs appears to address a significant need in the FE sector. The value placed on connections and community by participants in this study contrasts with Young (2002) findings where FE lecturers who were teaching on HE courses reported feeling isolated. This suggests that online CoPs may be providing the academic networks and sense of community that Young found lacking in traditional FE settings.

The data indicated a predominance of scholarly activities centred on collaborative knowledge building and the practical application of knowledge to improve teaching practice, aligning with Boyer's (1990) scholarship of application. Engagement with the Scholarship of Application was moderately evident, as practitioners reported applying insights gained from the CoP to

their teaching practices. Members actively engaged in activities that directly informed their teaching practices, such as sharing classroom strategies, discussing pedagogical approaches and collaboratively developing teaching resources. While members reported challenges in implementing all their learning, they did describe instances of applying new ideas and strategies in their classrooms when institutional constraints allowed. However, the findings also revealed challenges in translating these insights into classroom practice, suggesting that while the CoP supports this form of scholarship, institutional and systemic barriers may limit its full realisation. This form of teaching emphasises the practical implementation of new ideas and strategies in the classroom to make a direct impact on student learning. The emphasis on application in the PDNorth CoP reflects the 'hybrid' nature of FE teachers' roles, as described by Gleeson et al. (2015). Gleeson et al. (2015) describe FE teachers as having 'hybrid' roles, meaning they often balance teaching responsibilities with industry experience and expertise. This requires them to integrate academic knowledge with practical, vocational skills. While not explicitly stated by participants, the analysis suggests that the CoP provides a valuable platform for practitioners to navigate this hybrid role, sharing strategies for applying theoretical knowledge to practical teaching situations and industry-relevant contexts.

The data revealed that engagement with different forms of scholarship may evolve over time, with newer members focusing more on the Scholarship of Teaching, while longer-standing members showed increased engagement with activities related to the Scholarship of Integration and Discovery. For example, the survey results indicated that new members reported lower levels of engagement in certain activities, such as enjoying online events and collaborating on research with colleagues, compared to those who had been involved with the CoP for a longer period. These findings align with Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral

participation, suggesting that the CoP provides a structure for newcomers to gradually increase their engagement and contribution over time. These findings suggest that members' engagement and participation in the CoP may evolve as they gain more experience and familiarity with the community which aligns with Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning model. However, the data did not provide conclusive evidence of a clear progression from novice to expert or distinct forms of scholarly participation based on career stages. While there were some indications of early career teachers showing emerging scholarship skills and veteran teachers engaging in more advanced reflective knowledge sharing, these findings were not consistent across all participants or activities. When viewed through the lens of Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship, this varied engagement suggests that participation in different forms of scholarship within the CoP is not strictly tied to career stage. For instance, while newer members might engage more in the scholarship of teaching as they develop their practice and more experienced members might contribute more to the scholarship of integration by synthesising knowledge across disciplines, these patterns are not universal. The data suggests that engagement in Boyer's four domains of scholarship within the CoP is influenced by a complex interplay of factors beyond career stage, including individual interests, institutional context and specific CoP activities.

The lack of conclusive evidence for a clear novice-to-expert progression highlights the complex nature of professional development in the FE sector, where practitioners often bring significant industry experience to their teaching roles. This complexity may influence how individuals engage with the CoP and its activities. Further research is needed to examine how members' participation and scholarly activities within the CoP may change over time and how

these changes align with the theory of legitimate peripheral participation in the context of FE professional development.

However, participation, specifically in rigorous research activities associated with the scholarship of discovery (Boyer, 1990) remained limited. This aligns with Tummons' (2018) assertion that FE practitioners often struggle to engage in traditional research activities due to workload pressures and institutional cultures that prioritise teaching over research. Tummons suggests that this limited engagement in research is not due to lack of interest or capability, but rather systemic barriers within the FE sector. The study's findings extend this understanding by demonstrating how online CoPs can provide alternative avenues for engaging with scholarship, even in the face of these constraints. This limited engagement in the scholarship of discovery reflects broader challenges in the FE sector, where practitioners often face barriers to conducting and disseminating research (Broad, 2015b). The survey revealed a notable lack of discussion among FE practitioners and their internal colleagues about practices developed within the CoP, suggesting institutional barriers to the dissemination of innovations within local colleges. This limited engagement in the scholarship of discovery, which involves the creation of new knowledge through original research, has two significant implications. First, it may hinder the development of new context specific knowledge about teaching and learning within FE. Second, it may impede the spread of innovative practices developed within the CoP to the wider FE community (Tummons, 2022).The lack of engagement in research activities and the limited dissemination of CoP development practices both contribute to a gap in the scholarship of discovery within the FE sector.

While the scholarship of discovery was less prominent, the findings suggest that the online CoP provides a platform for what Springbett (2018) terms 'practice-based scholarship.' Survey responses indicated that practitioners valued understanding the theoretical underpinnings of their teaching. However, the data showed limited evidence of explicit integration between theory and practice. This suggests that while the CoP has the potential to support practice-based scholarship, further development may be needed to strengthen the theory-practice connections. While Hodgson and Spours (2019) describing FE colleges as 'boundary-crossing institutions, the findings suggest this theoretical integration remains an area for development within the CoP. The data indicated that while practitioners actively shared vocational and classroom experiences, there was limited evidence of explicit connections to educational theory or research. This gap in integrative scholarship is particularly noteworthy in the FE context, where practitioners often need to bridge academic, vocational and professional learning.

While the CoP facilitates practice-based scholarship, it is important to note that engagement in more traditional forms of scholarship, particularly the scholarship of discovery, remains limited. Several factors may contribute to this limitation. Time constraints and workload pressures, as highlighted earlier, often leave FE practitioners with little capacity for research activities. Additionally, the institutional culture in many FE settings may not prioritise or support practitioner research, focusing instead on teaching and administrative duties (O'Leary et al., 2019). FE practitioners may also lack the necessary research skills or confidence, particularly if they have limited training or experience in formal research methodologies (Lloyd and Jones, 2018). Furthermore, the value of practitioner research may not be fully recognised or rewarded within FE institutions, potentially reducing motivation for engagement (Eliahoo, 2017).

The scholarship of teaching was evident in the CoP through members' engagement in reflective practice and sharing of innovative teaching methods. This aligns with Boyer's (1990) view that teaching, at its best, involves not just transmitting but transforming and extending knowledge. The CoP supported this transformative approach to teaching by providing a space for practitioners to collectively reflect on and refine their teaching practices. For instance, members share innovative teaching strategies they had developed, receive feedback from peers and collaboratively refine these approaches. This process of collective reflection and refinement potentially leads to the development of FE-specific pedagogical knowledge, exemplifying how CoP develops the scholarship of teaching as envisioned by Boyer.

The online nature of the CoP appears to play a role in facilitating certain forms of scholarship, particularly Integration and Teaching, by engaging geographically dispersed practitioners to collaborate and share knowledge. However, it may also present limitations, especially for the Scholarship of Discovery, which often requires more intensive, sustained research efforts.

The intersection of Boyer's scholarship model and Wenger's CoP theory in the PDNorth online community reveals both opportunities and challenges for FE practitioners' engagement with different forms of scholarship. While the CoP supported strong engagement with the scholarship of integration, application and teaching, it struggled to support the scholarship of discovery. This aligns with Tummons' (2018) observations about constraints on research activities in FE settings. These findings have significant implications for how we conceptualise and support scholarship in the FE sector. The findings suggest that online CoPs can be powerful

tools for developing certain forms of scholarship, but additional support and resources may be needed to develop engagement with the scholarship of discovery.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that the PDNorth online CoP facilitates engagement with Boyer's scholarship domains in ways that are uniquely suited to the FE context. While engagement across Boyer's domains of scholarship is uneven within the PDNorth CoP, the findings suggest that the CoP provides a valuable platform for FE practitioners to engage in forms of scholarship that are uniquely suited to their professional context. This aligns with Husband and Jeffrey (2016) the argument that scholarship in FE should be viewed through a broader lens that encompasses research and knowledge creation beyond traditional academic boundaries. This highlights the potential of online CoPs to support a more inclusive and context-appropriate conceptualisation of scholarship in the FE sector, one that acknowledges the specific constraints and opportunities inherent in FE practice. The CoP's ability to develop engagement in integration, application and teaching scholarships, despite limitations in Discovery, suggests that it offers a nuanced and adaptable approach to professional development in the FE sector, which bridges the often-perceived gap between academic scholarship and the practical demands of FE teaching.
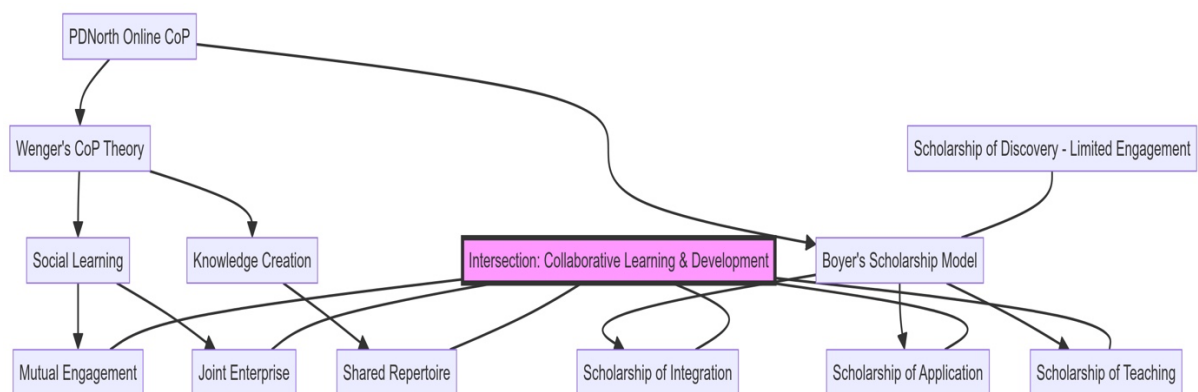
## 5.4. Intersection of Boyer's Scholarship Model and Wenger's Communities of Practice

The study contributes to an integrated understanding of Boyer's model of scholarship and Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice by demonstrating its applicability in the context of online professional development for FE practitioners. The PDNorth CoP exhibited

strong engagement in Boyer's scholarships of integration and application, facilitated by the CoP's culture of trust, reciprocity and inclusivity – key social factors that enable meaningful participation and learning in online CoPs, as emphasised by Wenger.

While Boyer's model provides a framework for understanding different forms of scholarship, the study also reveals the crucial role that digital technologies play in actualising the forms of scholarship within the PDNorth CoP. The online nature of this CoP significantly enhances its capacity to facilitate connections, collaboration and the exchange of knowledge among geographically dispersed FE practitioners. This highlights the need to extend Wenger's CoP theory to account for the unique affordances of online environments.

Figure 5.1, illustrates the structure of PDNorth Online CoP, integrating elements from both Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice and Boyer's (1990) Model of Scholarship. The diagram shows how the CoP integrates elements from both theoretical frameworks.



**Figure 5.1 Intersection of Wenger's Communities of Practice and Boyer's Model of Scholarship in the PDNorth Online CoP**

On the left side of the diagram, Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice is represented by social learning and knowledge creation, which are further broken down into mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). The right side of the diagram represents Boyer's Model of Scholarship, encompassing the four domains of discovery, integration, application and teaching.

At the centre of the diagram is the intersection, representing collaborative learning and development within the PDNorth CoP. This intersection connects to all key elements from both theories, demonstrating how the CoP facilitates a dynamic interplay between these concepts. The study reveals that the non-judgmental, supportive culture within PDNorth CoP fosters this integration, enabling members to engage in various forms of scholarship while participating in a CoP. It shows that members engage in collaborative practices, share experiences and integrate knowledge from diverse disciplines to improve their teaching practices (Kennedy, 2014a) (Boyer's scholarship of integration) and they also apply this knowledge to address real-world challenges (Boyer's scholarship of application). However, as the study's findings indicate, engagement in rigorous research activities associated with the scholarship of discovery remains limited within the CoP.

The intersection of Boyer's scholarship model and Wenger's CoP theory in the PDNorth online community reveals both opportunities and challenges for FE practitioners' engagement with different forms of scholarship. As illustrated in Figure 5.1, the CoP facilitated strong engagement with the scholarships of integration, application and teaching, it struggled to support the scholarship of discovery. In contrast the lack of direct arrows connecting the CoP

to the scholarship of discovery suggests the domain was not extensively supported within the online CoP context. These findings have significant implications for how we conceptualise and support the scholarship in the FE Sector. They suggest that online CoPs can be powerful tools for promoting certain forms of scholarship, but additional support and resources may be needed to facilitate engagement with the scholarship of discovery.

## 5.5. Online CoPs as a Way Forward in FE

The findings of this study highlight the transformative potential of online CoPs in supporting FE practitioners' CPD. In the evolving FE sector, characterised by demands for flexible, collaborative and contextualised learning opportunities, online CoPs emerge as a promising CPD model(Kennedy, 2014a; Greatbatch, 2018). Their unique affordances, such as overcoming geographical barriers, enabling asynchronous participation and accommodating diverse preferences, make them well suited to address the complex needs of FE practitioners (Wenger, 1998).

Central to the effectiveness of the online CoP under investigation was its non-hierarchical, practitioner-driven nature, which develops a culture of openness, sharing and collaboration among FE practitioners (Wenger, 1998). This environment encourages the co-construction of knowledge, the exchange of innovative practices and the development of shared repertoires, aligning with principles of effective CPD (Kennedy, 2014b). As shown in the PDNorth case study, this supportive culture empowers practitioners to challenge established norms, engage in critical reflection and collaboratively develop student-centred solutions, enabling them to overcome the limitations of traditional CPD models and to engage in meaningful learning experiences, overcoming the isolation and resistance to change often encountered within institutional contexts (Broad, 2015a; Lloyd and Jones, 2018).

However, it is important to recognise that online CoPs may not be the optimal CPD form for all FE practitioners. Their success hinges on active participation, shared commitment and self-directed learning from participants (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Some teachers may prefer more structured, face-to-face CPD experiences or require additional support to effectively engage with online technologies and collaborative practices. By providing a spectrum of CPD opportunities, FE institutions can ensure that all practitioners have access to learning experiences that align with their unique requirements, ultimately leading to enhanced teaching practices and improved student outcomes.

Therefore, while online CoPs offer a transformative approach to CPD in the FE sector, they should complement rather than replace other forms of CPD (Kennedy, 2014a). A balanced, diversified CPD ecosystem that caters to varied needs and preferences is essential for developing a culture of innovation and ongoing improvement in the section (Kennedy, 2014a; Greatbatch, 2018). This diversified approach aligns with the principles of inclusive education, ensuring that all practitioners have access to learning opportunities that meet their unique requirements (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

This approach directly aligns with Boyer's (1990) expanded view of scholarship, which encompasses discovery, integration, application and teaching. The connection is evident in how online Cops can support different forms of scholarly engagement among FE practitioners. For instance, CoPs can facilitate collaborative research projects, encouraging practitioners to engage in action research within their institutions, thus supporting the scholarship of discovery. They also provide platforms for synthesising knowledge from various disciplines, allowing practitioners to draw connections across different areas of expertise, which aligns with the scholarship of integration. In terms of the scholarship of application, CoPs enable direct application of knowledge to solve real-world problems, supporting

practitioners in implementing evidence-based practices. Finally, CoPs offer opportunities for sharing innovative teaching methods and developing and refining pedagogical approaches, which supports the scholarship of teaching. By developing a culture of continuous improvement through a range of CPD options that address these different forms of scholarship, FE institutions can support the ongoing professional development of their teachers (Coffield et al., 2014). This comprehensive approach to CPD encourages practitioners to engage in various scholarly activities, enhancing their professional practice and contributing to the broader knowledge base in the FE sector (Boyer, 1990; Tummons, 2022).

The key findings and their implications for FE practitioners' professional development emphasise the potential of online CoPs in developing transformative learning experiences and improving CPD. Further research, however, is needed on the direct impact of online CoPs on student outcomes and the exploration of demographic variations in participation. Such research would need to account for the complex interplay of factors affecting student achievement, making it difficult to isolate the specific influence of teacher participation in online CoPs.

Institutional investment in online CoPs and the development of policies and practices that support their development and sustainability are essential for harnessing the substantial benefits these communities can offer for FE practitioners' CPD and the improvement of teaching and learning in the sector. However, a delicate balance must be struck between institutional support and the grassroots, practitioner-driven nature that has made these CoPs successful. By understanding both the challenges and opportunities associated with online CoPs, these communities can be better designed and facilitated to support the diverse needs and preferences of members across various career stages, demographic groups and institutional

contexts, enhancing the impact of these communities on professional development and student outcomes.

To maximise the impact of online CoPs, they should be strategically integrated into the overall CPD framework, creating clear links to institutional goals, priorities and support structures, without compromising the autonomy that has been key to their success. This requires ongoing discussions between CoP members and institutional leadership. Ongoing research and evaluation are crucial to inform design, implementation and sustainability of online CoPs in the FE sector (Lloyd and Jones, 2018), focusing on how institutional integration can enhance rather than constrain the CoPs development and innovation.

In conclusion, online CoPs represent a promising way forward for CPD in the sector, offering a transformative approach to professional development that aligns with the evolving needs of practitioners and the sector. However, their success relies on a nuanced understanding of their affordances, limitations and the wider context in which they operate.

# CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

## 6.1. Introduction

The inspiration for this research stemmed from the recognition that traditional models of professional development in the FE sector, often involving one-off sessions on designated staff development days, may not effectively improve teachers' practice or meet the evolving needs of learners, teachers and education policy (Greatbatch, 2018). This study sought to investigate the potential of online CoPs as an alternative, more collaborative and sustained approach to CPD in the FE context. This study explored the PDNorth online CoP through the lenses of Boyer's scholarship and Wenger's CoP theory, providing insights into how these theoretical frameworks intersect in the context of FE practitioners' professional development.

The research was further motivated by the growing prominence of online CoPs as a strategy for knowledge management and teacher CPD (The Education & Training Foundation, 2021) and the need to understand their effectiveness in the FE context. By examining the PDNorth CoP as a case study, this research aimed to provide insights into the benefits, challenges and dynamics of online CoP participation for FE practitioners' CPD, with the goal of informing the design and implementation of more effective CPD initiatives in the sector.

This conclusion chapter will synthesise the key findings from the investigation into PDNorth online CoP and its impact on the professional development of FE practitioners. This chapter will also discuss the implications of these findings for policy and practice, acknowledge the

limitations of the research, provide recommendations for further investigation and reflect on the study's significance and contribution to the professional development in the FE sector.

## 6.2. Summary of Key Findings

The study of the PDNorth online community revealed several key findings that address the research questions and have significant implications for FE practitioners' professional development.

6.2.1. Overarching Themes

The study identified five key themes through the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data:

1. Student-focused, teacher-driven alternatives to top-down policies.
2. Sustaining emotional resilience through community support.
3. Cultivating connections and a sense of community
4. Evolution of impacts over time.
5. Barriers to classroom application.

These themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex dynamics within the PDNorth online CoP.

6.2.2. Benefits of Online CoPs for FE practitioners' professional development

The study revealed demographic differences in engagement and perceptions, with younger members and female participants generally reporting higher levels of engagement and perceived benefits. The CoP also played a crucial role in addressing feelings of isolation and

lack of agency among FE practitioners. The online CoP significantly benefitted FE practitioners by empowering them to develop student-focused practices. It provided a space for FE practitioners to collaboratively develop and share innovative teaching strategies that prioritised student needs and teachers' professional expertise (Wenger, 1998; Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016). This empowered members to challenge top-down policies and implement contextualised approaches to support learners (Kennedy, 2014b; Sachs, 2016).

Furthermore, the CoP provided crucial emotional support during challenging times and helped them to maintain their emotional well-being and motivation in times of educational reform and policy changes (Coffield et al., 2014) by offering an environment for members to share experiences, validate each other's concerns and provide mutual encouragement (McConnell et al., 2013; Abedini, Abedin and Zowghi, 2021).

The CoP also developed a strong sense of belonging and fostered a sense of community that enhanced professional growth and identity development among FE practitioners from different institutions and regions (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This expansive network enabled members to access diverse perspectives, share best practices and engage in collaborative learning, enhancing their professional development and identify (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016; Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018).

6.2.3. Engagement techniques and methods used by FE practitioners

FE practitioners engaged in the online CoP through various collaborative activities, such as participation in discussion forums, attending virtual workshops and webinars and contributing

to shared resource repositories (Wenger, 1998; Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018). These activities facilitated knowledge sharing, critical reflection and the co-construction of new practices (Kennedy, 1997; Kennedy, 2014b; Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016).

As FE practitioners continued to engage with the online CoP, they adopted trust-building techniques, such as using video conferencing for more personal interactions and creating smaller subgroups based on their shared interests. These methods helped them create a psychologically safe environment that encouraged vulnerability, honest sharing and deeper learning over time.

The research highlighted an evolution in engagement over time, with newer members focusing on resource sharing and longer-standing members engaging more in collaborative projects and research activities.

6.2.4. Challenges impacting continuous professional development

Despite the benefits, FE practitioners encountered significant obstacles in translating the knowledge and strategies gained from the online CoP into their classroom practices (Broad, 2016; Eliahoo, 2017). A significant challenge that emerged was the difficulty in translating CoP learning into classroom practice. This was evident in both quantitative and qualitative data, suggesting a gap between the knowledge gained in the CoP and its practical application in teaching contexts. These barriers included institutional resistance to change, limited resources for implementation and conflicting priorities driven by shifting educational policies (Villeneuve-Smith, West and Bhinder, 2009; O'Leary et al., 2019). Additionally, balancing the

time demands of CoP participation with heavy workloads also posed challenges for sustained engagement (Kennedy, 2014a; Broad, 2015a).

6.2.5. Engagement with Boyer's Model of Scholarship

The online CoP facilitated varying levels of engagement with Boyer's scholarship domains. Strong engagement was observed in the scholarships of integration and teaching, with moderate engagement in application and limited engagement in discovery. This pattern reflects the unique context and constraints of the FE sector. The online CoP facilitated FE practitioners' engagement in the scholarships of integration and application, as evident from their efforts to connect ideas across disciplines, share evidence-based practices and apply new knowledge to improve their teaching (Boyer, 1990; Wenger, 1998; Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018). However, the scholarship of discovery, involving new original research, was less prominent within the CoP, potentially due to institutional constraints and limited support for practitioner-led research (Lea and Simmons, 2012; Tummons, 2022).

These findings highlight the transformative potential of online CoPs in supporting FE teachers' CPD, while demonstrating the challenges that need to be addressed to maximise their effectiveness. They provide valuable insights into how online CoPs can be designed and implemented to better support the diverse professional development needs of FE practitioners.

**6.3. Implications of Online CoPs for FE Professional Development and Scholarship**

The study's findings reveal significant implications for the design and implementation of effective online CoPs for FE practitioners' professional development. The research suggests that online CoPs can develop a collaborative, non-judgemental culture that encourages knowledge sharing, critical reflection and the co-construction of new practices. This can be achieved by promoting open communication, providing opportunities for asynchronous participation and facilitating regular interactions among members.

The study revealed a significant intersection between Boyer's scholarship model and Wenger's CoP theory in the context of online professional development for FE practitioners. This intersection provides a novel framework for understanding how different forms of scholarship can be supported and developed within online CoPs. Section 6.4 will explore in more detail how this integrated framework can guide the design and implementation of online CoPs to deliberately promote various forms of scholarship among FE practitioners.

Building on this framework, the findings suggest that online CoPs should utilise the affordances of online platforms to enable expansive networking and the exchange of diverse perspectives and experiences (Trust, 2016; Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016), which can contribute to the development of new teaching practices and enhance the professional development of FE practitioners.

The findings suggest that online CoPs play a crucial role in addressing isolation and lack of agency among FE practitioners. By providing a platform for collaborative learning and shared problem-solving that transcends institutional boundaries, online CoPs can support practitioners who may otherwise feel constrained within their individual institutions. This has important

implications for developing a more cohesive, empowered FE workforce capable of responding effectively to evolving demands.

Considering diverse needs and preferences is crucial when designing and facilitating online CoPs. The study highlights the importance of considering the diverse needs and preferences of members when designing and facilitating online CoPs (Philipsen et al., 2019a). The findings suggest that age and gender differences in participation do not necessarily reflect power dynamics within the CoP itself but rather emphasise the need to create an inclusive environment that supports the professional development of all members (McConnell et al., 2013). To address these differences, CoP facilitators should consider employing strategies such as providing targeted support for older members who may be less comfortable with online engagement, ensuring that the CoPs activities and discussions are relevant and accessible to all members, regardless of demographic differences. This may involve offering a range of participation options, such as asynchronous discussions and synchronous events, to cater to different learning preferences and schedules. Moreover, the design and facilitation of online CoPs should focus on cultivating a supportive and inclusive culture, using diverse digital tools and platforms for collaboration and engaging members in shared activities and discussions that are closely aligned with their professional needs and interests (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Practitioners should be encouraged to actively participate in online CoPs and share experiences, knowledge and challenges with their peers (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016).

Overcoming obstacles to applying professional learning is essential for the success of online CoPs. The research also indicates that it is crucial to overcome the obstacles that may hinder

the application of professional learning (O'Leary et al., 2019), such as institutional constraints and shifting policy priorities, to enable FE practitioners to effectively translate their professional development gains into enhanced teaching practices and improved student outcomes (Tummons, 2022). This may involve providing resources, recognition and the dedicated time for participation, as well as addressing institutional barriers that hinder the application of learning to practice (Villeneuve-Smith, West and Bhinder, 2009). By doing so, online CoPs can serve as powerful vehicles for improving the professional development of FE practitioners and improving the quality of teaching and learning in the sector.

Investing in online CoPs like PDNorth offers significant value for the FE sector. Based on the findings, there are several reasons why investing in online CoPs like PDNorth could be valuable for the FE sector. Firstly, CoPs can facilitate collaborative learning, reflective practice, co-construction of knowledge and application of new skills in ways that lead to meaningful changes in teaching practices, beliefs and professional identities (Wenger, 1998; Kennedy, 2005; Kennedy, 2014b). Secondly, Online CoPs can address unique challenges facing FE practitioners, such as feelings of isolation, lack of agency and the need for flexible, contextually relevant professional development (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005; Lloyd and Jones, 2018). Thirdly, online formats of CoPs increase accessibility and enable geographically dispersed members to connect, collaborate and access diverse perspectives. Finally, members reported benefits like increased confidence, expanded networks and the ability to maintain resilience and motivation (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). The success of PDNorth highlights the potential for replicating similar online CoPs elsewhere in the sector, provided that the necessary resources and support are in place. This may involve allocating funding for

platform development and maintenance, dedicated staff time for facilitation and co-ordination and institutional recognition of CoP participation as a legitimate form of CPD.

The findings highlight the need for promoting scholarship among FE practitioners. The analysis reveals a strong emphasis on the scholarships of integration and application, with members actively making connections across disciplines, collaboratively sharing strategies, co-constructing knowledge and applying knowledge to improve teaching practice (Boyer, 1990; Wenger, 1998). However, participation in rigorous research activities associated with the scholarship of discovery remained limited (Boyer, 1990), suggesting a need for further support and encouragement for FE practitioners to engage in research and contribute to the intellectual life of their institutions and the broader FE sector (Lea and Simmons, 2012).

Implementing recommendations for promoting scholarship in FE focuses on institutional support and recognition. To promote scholarship among FE practitioners, several recommendations are proposed. FE institutions should recognise and value diverse forms of scholarship embracing Boyer's expanded view (Boyer, 1990; Lea and Simmons, 2012). These policies should explicitly outline how different scholarly activities are valued, evaluated and rewarded, including practitioner research and teaching innovations (Springbett, 2018). Institutions should allocate dedicated time within practitioners' workloads for research activities and create research funds to support scholarly pursuits (Greatbatch, 2018). To foster a culture of inquiry and collaboration, regular research seminars and collaborative projects between FE practitioners and university researchers should be organised (Lloyd and Jones, 2018). Developing research skills and capacity could involve partnering with universities for

research methods training and establishing mentorship programmes (Tummons, 2022). Encouraging participation in scholarly communities (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018) might include supporting membership in professional associations. These actions require leadership commitment, financial investment and a cultural shift to prioritise scholarship alongside teaching, potentially leading to improved practices and student outcomes

## 6.4. Implications and Recommendations for FE Leadership and My Role as Head of Quality

The findings of this study viewed through the lens of Boyer's (1990) scholarship framework and its intersection with Wenger's CoP theory have significant implications for FE leadership and my role as Head of Quality. These implications span across all four domains of Boyer's model: Discovery, Integration, application and teaching, while also considering the unique dynamics of online CoPs.

6.4.1. Recommendations for Policymakers and section leaders

Policymakers and sector leaders should recognise and promote online CoPs as a valuable form of CPD that supports all forms of Boyer's scholarship. This approach aligns with (Ingleby, 2019) findings which highlight the need for approaches that bridge the gap between policy expectations and pedagogical realities in the FE sector. To this end, policymakers should provide funding and resources to support the development and sustainability of online CoPs,

recognising their potential to develop the scholarship of discovery by creating spaces for collaborative research (Boyer, 1990).

Integrating online CoPs into the sector's overall professional development strategy is crucial, acknowledging their capacity to support the scholarship of integration by facilitating cross-disciplinary knowledge exchange (Hodgson and Spours, 2019). This integration could involve creating a dedicated funding stream for online CoP development that supports the scholarship of application, enabling practitioners to apply research findings to their teaching practice (Gleeson et al., 2015). Furthermore, incorporating CoP participation into formal CPD frameworks would recognise its potential to enhance the scholarship of teaching through peer learning and reflection (O'Leary et al., 2019)

To implement these policy-level changes effectively, institutional leaders and managers have a crucial role to play. They should encourage and enable staff to participate in online CoPs as part of their CPD, recognise CoP participation in formal professional development structures and requirements and consider what internal resources are needed to support participation. Institutional support for CoP participation could effectively address this issue. To support this, institutions should consider allocating dedicated time within staff workloads for CoP participation and investing in necessary technological infrastructure such as reliable internet and video conferencing tools. These measures would ensure that FE practitioners have the resources and opportunity to engage fully in online CoPs, thereby enhancing their professional development across all domains of Boyer's scholarship framework.

6.4.2. Recommendations for Institutional Leaders and Managers

Institutional leaders and managers play a crucial role in implementing and supporting online CoPs within their organisations. They should encourage and enable staff to participate in online CoPs as part of their CPD, recognise CoP participation in formal professional development structures and requirements and consider what internal resources are needed to support participation.

CoP facilitators and designers should use the key features of successful CoPs identified in this study to guide design, aim for a balance of structured activities and informal knowledge sharing and consider how to address common challenges like competing time demands and contextual constraints on applying learning. Essential resources include a dedicated online platform, high-speed internet access and videoconferencing software licenses. Funding could be sourced from reallocated CPD budgets, government grants focused on improving FE teaching quality, or partnerships with EdTech companies. To persuade funders, institutions should present case studies that demonstrate the return on investment of online CoPs. These case studies should highlight specific improvements in teaching quality and the impact on students' educational experiences resulting from CoP participation.

By explicating the potential benefits, resources required and recommendations for different stakeholder groups, the practical impact and application of this research can be increased, supporting the wider implementation of online CoPs as an effective means of professional development in the FE sector (Tummons, 2022). The implementation of these recommendations could help address the tensions identified by Ingleby (2019) between

policymaker visions and the priorities of academic staff by providing a space for practitioners to develop reflective practice while also addressing sector-wide goals.

In light of these findings, FE institutions and policymakers should prioritise the development and support of online CoPs as a means of fostering collaborative professional development among practitioners (Tummons, 2022). This aligns with the recommendations and may involve providing resources, recognition and dedicated time for participation, as well as addressing institutional barriers that hinder the translation of professional development gains into classroom practice (Villeneuve-Smith, West and Bhinder, 2009). By taking these steps, stakeholders can create an environment that maximises the benefits of online CoPs for FE practitioners' professional development. By explicating the potential benefits, resources required and recommendations for different stakeholder groups, the practical impact and application of this research can be increased.

Furthermore, the findings of this study should be disseminated to FE practitioners, managers and policymakers to raise awareness of the potential benefits and challenges of online CoPs for professional development. This can be achieved through workshops, seminars and publications aimed at the FE sector, as well as through the incorporation of the study's insights into teacher education and professional development programmes.

 While this study highlights the transformative potential of online CoPs, the findings are based on a single case study and may not be fully generalisable across all FE institutions and contexts. Institutional leaders could consider supporting studies comparing outcomes across different PD models in the FE sector. Such research would be beneficial to evaluate how they compare

with other approaches. Such studies could provide the robust evidence base needed to persuade institutional leaders and budget holders to invest resources in developing and supporting online CoPs. Nevertheless, the current study provides compelling initial insights that warrant further exploration of online CoPs. The recommendations outlined in this chapter provide a roadmap for how FE institutions can thoughtfully design and implement online CoPs to enhance the professional development of their practitioners. By selectively piloting and evaluating online CoP initiatives, institutions can build an evidence base to demonstrate the value and impact within their own contexts. Ultimately, the FE sector may need a multi-pronged approach, incorporating online CoPs alongside other PD models, to cater to the diverse needs of practitioners. With careful planning, implementation and ongoing assessment, the potential of online CoPs to improve teaching and learning quality can be fully realised. However, institutional-specific research and a phased approach may be necessary to justify the required investments and drive widespread adoption.

## 6.4.3. Implications for my Role as Head of Quality in an FE College

The findings of this study have significant implications for my role as Head of Quality in an FE college, where I have overall responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning and developing a culture of scholarship within the college. As a proponent and facilitator of CPD and improvement in teaching quality, the insights gained from this research will inform my efforts to support and empower teachers in their own CPD.

Firstly, the study highlights the transformative potential of online CoPs in developing collaborative learning, reflective practice and the application of new knowledge to teaching

practice. As Head of Quality, I will advocate for the integration of online CoPs into the college's CPD strategy, recognising their value in developing meaningful, sustained professional development and recognising their potential to support all forms of Boyer's scholarship. This will involve providing resources, recognition and dedicated time for participation. I will also work to address institutional barriers which may hinder the translation of professional development gains in classroom practice, such as inflexible policies or limited opportunities for experimentation, supporting the scholarship of application. Securing buy-in from senior leadership will be crucial, as I will need to present a compelling case for the value of online CoPs, drawing from data and examples from other institutions.

The study highlighted several challenges, including time constraints and difficulties in translating online learning to classroom practice (Broad, 2015a; Eliahoo, 2017; Gore and Rosser, 2022). To address these, I will advocate for protected time for CoP participation within teachers' schedules and work with department heads to create structures that support the implementation of new ideas and practices developed through CoPs. This aligns with Kennedy's (2014a) emphasis on the need for institutional support in effective CPD implementation. Negotiating with department heads and navigating institutional policies around workload allocation will be key to overcoming these challenges.

To implement these initiatives, I will need to support from senior leadership. This will involve presenting a compelling case for the value of online CoPs, drawing from data from this study and examples from other institutions. Additionally, I will need to collaborate with the IT department to ensure we have the necessary technological infrastructure in place.

The findings show the need for a more holistic and broader view of scholarship in the FE sector, one that recognises and values the integration of teaching research and scholarly activity. This aligns with Tummons' (2018) assertion that scholarship in FE is often constrained by institutional pressures and limited resources, leading to a focus on teaching and application rather than traditional research activities. As head of quality, I will advocate for the recognition and support of various forms of scholarship within my college, encouraging teachers to engage in inquiry, reflection and innovation as part of their professional development. This will involve creating opportunities for teachers to share their scholarly work. For example, I will establish regular workshops, seminars and online forums where teachers can share their research, collaborate with colleagues and contribute to the wider knowledge base in their fields, fostering the scholarships of discovery and teaching. I will also encourage teachers to participate in external online CoPs, such as PDNorth and other emerging communities in the FE sector, to expand their professional networks and access diverse perspectives and experiences.

In line with Boyer's (1990) expanded view of scholarship, I will encourage and support various forms of scholarly activity within our college. This includes not only traditional research but also the scholarship of integration, application and teaching. For example, I will create opportunities for teachers to present their innovative teaching methods, collaborate on cross-disciplinary projects and engage in action research within their classrooms.

I will implement a mentoring programme that pairs experienced teachers with novice practitioners, drawing on the study's insights into the value of legitimate peripheral

participation in online CoPs. This programme will provide a supportive environment for teachers to share their knowledge, experiences and challenges, fostering a sense of community and collaboration within the college.

Drawing on the study's findings about the importance of trust and reciprocity in online CoPs (Wenger, 1998), I will work to develop these qualities in our college's professional development initiatives. This might involve creating 'safe spaces' for teachers to share challenges and uncertainties and recognising collaborative efforts that contribute to the college's overall teaching quality.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of giving voice to teachers' experiences and perspectives for shaping CPD policies and practices. As Head of Quality, I will prioritise the inclusion of teachers' voices in decision-making processes related to professional development, ensuring that our CPD offerings are responsive to their needs, challenges and aspirations. This will involve regular discussions, consultation and collaboration with teachers, as well as the creation of feedback mechanisms that enable continuous improvement of the CPD provision. This approach is in line with Ingleby (2019) findings on the need to bridge the gap between policy expectations and practitioners' needs in the FE sector.

As a new researcher, this study has proved a valuable learning journey for me. I have gained a deeper understanding of the research process, from designing the study and collecting the data to analysing the findings and drawing conclusions. One of the surprising aspects of the findings was the extent to which online CoPs can develop a sense of community and belonging among geographically dispersed members despite the lack of face-to-face interaction. This insight has

reinforced my belief in the potential of online CoPs to support meaningful professional development and collaboration in the FE sector.

By incorporating these implications into my professional practice, I aim to create a culture of CPD, collaboration and innovation within my college, one that empowers teachers to take ownership of their professional development and to make a positive impact on the lives of their students.

## 6.5. Limitations of the Study

This research was designed as an instrumental case study examining PDNorth online CoP through both qualitative interviews ($n = 7$) and survey responses ($n = 20$). While not aiming for broad generalisability, the mixed methods approach provided rich, in-depth contextual understanding of how this specific community can support FE practitioners' professional development (Creswell; and Clark., 2017). The detailed documentation of context and procedures enables readers to assess the relevance of findings to their own settings (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

The study's trustworthiness was strengthened through techniques like member checking (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). As an insider researcher with valuable knowledge of the PDNorth CoP and the FE sector, my positionality enriched the interpretation of the results. This perspective provided a deeper understanding while requiring careful reflection on how findings were shaped by my own perspectives and experiences.

Furthermore, the self-reported nature of the data collected through both survey and interviews may be subject to social desirability bias, where participants respond in a manner that presents them in a more favourable light (Grimm, 2010).

Drawing on Stake's (1995) approach to case study research, this study prioritised depth of understanding over numerical representation. The response rate of approximately 2.5% was not a limitation but an opportunity to explore the nuanced experiences of highly engaged community members. By embracing the concept of "naturalistic generalisation," the research provided a detailed narrative that allows readers to vicariously experience the PDNorth online CoP.

The mixed methods design, combining quantitative survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews, enabled a comprehensive exploration that transcends traditional statistical generalisability. These participants represented the core of the community – those more actively involved in collaborative professional development. There rich, detailed accounts provided valuable insights into the potential of online CoPs.

Methodologically, the research embraced Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) concept of transferability. Through comprehensive documentation of the PDNorth CoPs characteristics, participant experiences and analytical process, the study enables readers to make informed comparisons with their own professional learning environments.

Finally, the study's focus on a single online CoP within the FE sector provides transferable insights for other contexts. While the online CoP provides valuable understanding into the experiences of FE practitioners, the specific dynamics and outcomes observed can inform approaches to other online CoPs or professional development initiatives within the sector.

As case study research, this investigation offers an in-depth exploration of a specific online CoP, providing rich insights into the experiences and perceptions of its members. Through detailed examination of case study research (Yin, 2013), the findings contribute an important understanding of online CoPs and their potential for supporting CPD in the FE sector; they cannot be directly extrapolated to all online CoPs or professional development initiatives. While each context is unique, the study contributes valuable insights into the experiences of FE practitioners within an online CoP and highlights the potential for supporting collaborative professional development.

Future research could extend these findings by exploring the experiences of FE practitioners in other online CoPs to further develop an understanding of the transferability of the findings and identify additional factors that contribute to their effectiveness (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018). Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of online CoPs on FE practitioners' professional development and student outcomes (Trust, Krutka and Carpenter, 2016). Additionally, researchers should investigate strategies to overcome the barriers that hinder the application of learning from online CoPs to classroom practice (Broad, 2016; Eliahoo, 2017).

## 6.6. Reflections on the Doctoral Journey

This doctoral research has proven to be a deeply transformative experience, one that has significantly improved my capabilities as both an FE professional and an emerging researcher. Throughout this journey, I have developed a more nuanced, critical understanding of professional development in the FE sector, moving beyond simplistic notions to recognise the complex interplay of individual, social and organisational factors that shape practitioners' experiences.

The process of designing, conducting and analysing this study has challenged me to question my own assumptions, expand my theoretical horizons and engage in continuous reflection on my positionality as an insider researcher. These insights have not only strengthened my research skills but have also shaped my approach to quality assurance, teaching and learning initiatives and staff development within my role of Head of Quality. As I look to the future, I am excited by the prospect of applying these lessons to drive meaningful, sustainable change that empowers FE practitioners and improves the quality of education for learners within my college and across the sector.

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# A Case Study to investigate effective teachers' Professional Development within the Further Education Sector and the emerging role of virtual communities of Practice (CoP) as a vehicle for teachers' Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Page 1: Privacy Notice

This online questionnaire is for teachers who have engaged with PDNorth/FE Tapestry and asks questions about your views and feelings about being part of a Community of Practice.

The main purpose is to investigate an online Community of Practice (CoP) as a vehicle for the professional academic development of Further Education teachers. To explore how they engage with each other and if, when undertaking CPD activities, they undertake scholarly activities. A CoP is defined as a group of people who share a passion for something they do and together through regular interaction, learn to do it better (Wenger, 2006).

The questionnaire should take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete. All data will be anonymous, although you will be asked for a contact email address, should you wish to volunteer for a follow-up interview. This data will only be accessible to the researchers and will be password protected.

The results of this survey will be presented as part of a doctoral dissertation or academic journal articles. Only references to the full set of responses will be made and it will not be possible to identify you in any way. Should you choose to volunteer for an interview, I will anonymize any responses you provide during the interview.

This study has received ethical approval from LJMU's Research Ethics Committee. Completion of the questionnaire indicates your consent to participate in the research.

Should you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact K.L. Billingsley at K.L.Billingsley@2019.LJMU.ac.uk.

Thank you in advance for completing the questionnaire.

Page 2:

About you and your role. Please select which most applies to yourself.

1. Which category below includes your age?
 18-30
 30-45
 45-65
 65+

2. What is your gender?
 Female
 Male
 Other              (Specify)
 Prefer not to say

3. How long have you been engaged with PDNorth/FE Tapestry, i.e., read the blog, watched or subscribed to the YouTube channel, subscribed to the newsletter, attended events including FE Research Circle, ATS Staffroom, FE Reading Circle and/or Northern ESOL forum in partnership with National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA)?

| Less | than | one | month |
|------|------|-----|-------|
| Less | than | three | months |
| Three | to | six | months |
| Six | months | - | 1 | year |
| Three | to | six | months |
| 2 - 5 years | | | |

4. What is your role(s) as a CoP member?
 Practitioner/teaching          professional
 Researcher
 Line Manager

5. How long have you been working within Further Education?

| 1 | - | 3 | years |
|---|---|---|-------|
| 3 | - | 6 | years |
| 10 | -15 | | years |
| 15 | - | 25 | years |
| less than a year | | | |

Page 3: Survey Questions

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

6. Belonging to PDNorth has benefited me in evaluating my teaching practice.

   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

7. I enjoy online PDNorth events.

   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

8. I do not get time to engage with others within the PDNorth community.

   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

9. The feedback from the PDNorth community has informed my teaching in such a way that it has improved student outcomes.

   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

10. Being part of this community has developed my confidence in trying new things.
    Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

11. Supporting others new to teaching and sharing ideas has re-energized my own teaching.
    Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

12. I believe that working together has raised the level of expertise of the community members.
    Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

13. Online discussions with community colleagues have helped me to think more deeply about my subject.
    Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

14. I find reading PDNorth/FE Tapestry community publications or reports, i.e., blogs/spotlights, interesting and informative.
    Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

15. It is helpful to browse around and see what can be found on PDNorth community publications or reports.

   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

16. Through the community online blog, I feel I have remained up to date with the latest teaching developments.
    Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

17. Watching the PDNorth community teaching and learning videos via the YouTube channel has helped me to find solutions to challenges in my professional practice.
   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

18. I feel comfortable engaging with the community online events such as FE Reading Circle, ESOL forum, FE research circle.
   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

19. Gaining new insights and hearing about other teachers' experiences has made my professional practice better.
   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

20. I have gained confidence to try different innovative approaches.
   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

21. I like to share my teaching experiences with the community by writing online blogs/commentaries as communication in virtual spaces.
   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

22. To develop my practice, it is important that I attend conferences, meetings, or courses about teaching and learning.
   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

23. It is important to me that I can explain what concepts or theories underpin my teaching.
   Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

Page 4: Frequency of CPD activities over the past two years. Please check the box that best represents your views.

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

24. Attending PDNorth workshops/training
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a. Facilitating CPD sessions within college
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a.i. Collaborating to do research with colleagues
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a.i.a. Conducting research into independent practice
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a.i.b. Collaborating with FE/HE institutions
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a.i.c. Searching internet for information related to course delivery
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a.i.c.i. Participating in department meetings
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a.i.c.i.a. Discussion with colleagues about practice issues
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a.i.c.i.a.i. Reflecting with reference to a journal article/blog
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

24.a.i.c.i.a.i.a. Coaching/mentoring others
Never | At least once Annually | At least once per Semester | At least once Monthly At | least once Weekly

Page 5: CPD Activities over the past two years

25. What CPD Activities have you undertaken over the past two years?
  - Attending Workshops/Training
  - Facilitating CPD Session within College
  - Collaborating to do research with Colleagues
  - Conducting research practice
  - Collaborating with FE/HE Institutions
  - Searching the internet for information relating to course delivery
  - Participating in Department Meetings
  - Discussion with colleagues about practice/teaching issues

- Reflecting through a journal/blog
- Coaching/mentoring others

Page 6: Participation in Individual online Interviews

26. Would you be willing to participate in an online interview? Please leave your email address and contact details. These interviews will be arranged at a time to suit you and take no more than 30 minutes.

Page 7: Final page

Thank you for participating in my research study.

**Appendix 2 Information Sheet (Participants)**

**LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET** *Teachers, Trainers, Assessors*

**Research Ethics Committee Reference Number**: *22/EDN/029*

**Title of Study: An investigation of effective teachers' professional development within the Further Education Sector (FES) and the emerging role of virtual Communities of Practice (CoP) as a vehicle for teacher's Continuous Professional Development (CPD).**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. Please read this information, which will help you decide.

1. **What is the purpose of the study?**

   The main purpose is to investigate an online Community of Practice (CoP) as a vehicle for the professional academic development of further education teachers. A CoP is defined as a group of people who share a passion for something they do and that together through regular interaction, learn to do it better (Wenger, 2006). This concept was originally proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in *Situated Learning*. This study will inform the Thesis of the principal investigator for the Doctorate in Education. This study is organised by Liverpool John Moore's University
   This study will answer the following questions…

   1. According to FE practitioners, how does an online CoP benefit their professional development?

   2. What techniques and methods do FE practitioners use to engage with online Communities of Practice?

   3. What are the challenges within the COP which impact professional development?

   4. To what extent do FE practitioners engage in the work of each of the four domains of Boyer's model of scholarship?

2. **Why have I been invited to participate?**
   You have been invited because you are a member of PDNorth, are currently teaching within further education and have undertaken professional development within the past year.

3. **Do I have to take part?**
   No. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether to take part. If you do not want to take part that is OK. We will ask you to sign a consent form and will give

you a copy for you to keep.  Submitting the questionnaire implies your consent to participate in this study.

You can stop being part of the study at any time, without giving a reason, but we will keep information about you that we already have. You may withdraw from the study by contacting me.

4.  **What will happen to me if I take part?**

This study will be conducted via an online survey and an interview.  It is anticipated that the survey will take a maximum of one hour to complete

The survey will also request volunteers for Phase 2 which is an online interview. The investigator will conduct the interview remotely and this will take place via MS Teams and should take approximately 1 hour. You will be offered regular breaks as necessary. You can also ask to pause or stop the interview at any time. Please remember, you have the right to decline to answer any questions you do not want to.

5.  **Will I be photographed, or video/audio recorded and how will the recorded media be used?**

You are free to decline to have your camera on during the online interviews. You should be comfortable with the virtual online meeting process and this is essential to your participation, but you should be comfortable with the recording process.  You are free to stop the recording at any time and therefore withdraw your participation.

The video recordings of your meetings made during this study will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission.

6.  **Are there any potential risks in taking part?**

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantages or discomfort. The potential physical and/or psychological harm or distress will be the same as any experienced in everyday life

7.  **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

There will be no personal benefit to you from taking part in this study. The potential or hoped for benefits of the study for the wider society will be a greater understanding of virtual communities of Practice as a vehicle for teachers Continuous Professional Development.

8.  **Payments, reimbursements of expenses or any other benefit or incentive for taking part**

There will be no payment or any benefit or incentive for taking part in this study. Unfortunately, we cannot reimburse any expenses you may incurred.

9. **What will happen to information/data provided?**

The information you provide as part of the study is the **study data**. Any study data from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as **personal data.**

Your participation in this study will involve the collection/use of personal data. We will keep all information about you safe and secure. People who do not need to know who you are will not be able to see your name or contact details. Your data will have a code number instead.

Once we have finished the study, we will keep some of the data so we can check the results. Data may be stored on backups or server logs beyond the timeframe of this study. We will write our reports in a way that no-one can work out that you took part in the study.

Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; for example, due to the limited size of the participant sample, the position of the participant or information included in reports, participants might be indirectly identifiable in transcripts and reports. The investigator will work with the participant in an attempt to minimise and manage the potential for indirect identification of participants.

10. **Whom do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Karen L Billingsley or G. Peiser and we will do our best to answer your query. You should expect a reply within 10 working days. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at Liverpool John Moores University who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:
Chair, Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee; Email: FullReviewUREC@ljmu.ac.uk; Tel: 0151 231 2121; Research Innovation Services, Liverpool John Moores University, Exchange Station, Liverpool L2 2QP

11. **Data Protection**

Liverpool John Moore's University is the data controller with respect to your personal data.

Information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from:

- https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/legal/privacy-and-cookies/external-stakeholders-privacy-policy/research-participants-privacy-notice
- www.hra.nhs.uk/patientdataandresearch

- by asking one of the study team or contacting us using the information below

**12. Contact details**

Should you have any comments or questions regarding this research, please contact the investigators:

| | |
|---|---|
| Principal Investigator: | Karen Lesley Billingsley |
| | LJMU postgraduate research student |
| LJMU Email address: | K.L.Billingsley@2019.LJMU.ac.uk |
| LJMU School/Faculty: | School of Education |
| LJMU Central telephone number: | 051 231 2121 |
| Supervisor Name: | Dr Gillian Peiser |
| LJMU Email address: | g.peiser@ljmu.ac.uk |

*Online Survey*

Please note that you may only participate in this survey if you are 18 years of age or over.

☐ I certify that I am 18 years of age or over

If you have read the information above and agree to participate with the understanding that the data (including any personal data) you submit will be processed accordingly, please tick the box below to start.

☐ Yes, I agree to take part

### Appendix 3 Exemplar Transcript

So, is it would it be possible, Clarice if I put this on record so that it would transcribe as well?

**Clarice**
Yes, that's fine and thank you and apologies I'm at home with my little one.

**Researcher**
That's fine. So, I've got a few questions to ask you. Regarding your experience with PDNorth in particular and sort of communities of practice within FE.

All right. So, can you describe your experience and perceptions of PD north and how you got involved and what your involvement is?

**Clarice:**
So, I think my involvement began with them, constellation constellations. So, I expressed my wish to participate in a round of FE constellations, which were designed for people that were not confident going into research yet, but looking and exploring how they could help their basically their organization with ideas to improve on areas where they, they, they struggled. So, after the constellations, I was recruited into the community of practice because I began looking at other aspects that weren't quite clear to me in my delivery. So, I appreciated them just the whole experience of it because I remember it was immediately after we looked at how to recover from COVID We looked at understanding better what teaching online meant, understanding how to become better at delivering to students for students.

our awarding body that somehow raised the National Award to rate so there are lots of benefits to me attending to, but it all began with the constellations my recruitment in constellations and then into PDNorth in March. It's been just the continuous adventure since then.

**Researcher:**
So, was that for like the advanced teaching practitioners or was it? Yeah, yeah. Okay. So, you where you were involved. What do you think were the advantages of being part of or the disadvantages of being part of this cop?

**Clarice:**
Um, I couldn't find any disadvantage, really. But advantages were numerous. I mean, we. So, the framework that they introduced to me was simply so beneficial. I found that it worked so well to just take turns and to listen to the others and to have their input. And it works so well that it was the advice came from practitioners. So I appreciate it that I had access to their insight. It was in a way similar to my experience, but somehow it expanded my understanding on what I could improve. Then I remember that in one of our last meetings, we actually had access there was someone there from the curriculum team and then it was just a level up as I proceeded at the moment. It really helped me think what I could do more.

**Researcher:**

What's your specific location or your specialism? What do you teach? What's your subject area

**Clarice:**
So, at the moment at that when I when I started, I was teaching functional skills, English and maths, how I'm teaching functional skills, English and essential digital skills. And I benefit I benefited from in this area as well because I was new to teaching essential digital skills. I had lots of practice on the EPF and I'm managing the EPF dashboard for digital teachers, but they just encouraged me to get one of those grants for digital features and then we've completed the DAT grant and then my organization applied for another grant. So from that on, it was simply as I said, just advantage of the advantage. It gave us so many ideas and we were starting to be involved in so many more things.

**Researcher:**
So, everything led on to something different.

**Clarice:**
Yeah, yeah, exactly. But I think that yeah, the result of our CO production was actually that it gave us ideas how we could explore other

Types of practitioner's research because in my organization's or in my organization, we are. So the teachers are not basically aiming towards research at this stage. We don't want to become like to pursue a PHD. or similar, but we are very keen on understanding where we are with our practice and what we could improve or what if there's evidence of best practices in other organizations how we can get to that?

**Researcher:**
You're using it to read the research, to become more aware of the research so you could then implement it into your own practices. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Was there anything that you thought you read which directly impacted on your practice?

**Clarice:**
From my point of view, I think that all the case studies that I looked at were almost like, teaching me what I could improve. But I think that the biggest impact was actually the advanced practitioners guide that was something that I'm still implementing and unfortunately, in my organization, the advanced practitioners, both of them we had two people sharing this role. They found other opportunities. So, at the moment in my organization, we haven't got any advanced practitioner and they've recently actually had the discussion about that. And they were surprised so surprised to hear that. My contribution to the advanced practitioner guide was actually recognized they gave me credit which was so so lovely.

yeah, everything that I read around the framework. I mean, the evaluation framework helped me a lot. And but obviously we couldn't have done this without the sub circle meetings online and reading circle and then obviously with the meetings that we had for the other forums because without all my questions would have just been left unanswered type thing.

We're happy to lead to know that actually, I've just been approved on to NHS program for leadership. And it will sorry about that. And I think that program is going to complement what I started with. I'm thinking about the forum format, similar to the format that we had when we met online I mean to do the CO production

but I will see because they've got modules that they're offering that they're quite sad, but they're asking me to take on a small research project. And actually, I'm going to continue one of the ideas that I started with the, in our last meetings, basically, I have identified that our learners struggle with several skills in speaking listening and communication because they've got multiple barriers like English second language, but also cultural barriers. Like they can't critically think about the topic, or they find unfamiliar topic. Really unfamiliar because they haven't been exposed to them. So, I'm, I'm now focusing on a sort of guide to make the speaking listening and communication for functional skills a little bit friendlier. So, I'm thinking at addressing the most popular topics I think that our Awarding body is using in the reading and the writing and to make those accessible through speaking. So

**Researcher:** So again, is and participating in the cop. How did it impact on your teaching? Did

you make any conscious changing changes to what or how you deliver it?

**Clarice:**
And absolutely, I became so confident in my instinct, I basically, I think the in our meetings, I think I be we came to realize that actually. Teaching was something very natural and learners are letting you know what's working and what's not working. And you can just assess and use the feedback from them to make teaching a very natural process and one that gives them confidence and because they feel they are listened to and they feel their input is valuable. So, I began working a lot more on I would say, guiding the learners. My results are just fantastic. I mean, I'm I've exceeded in all my evaluations. I'm seen as a teacher that performs, I am like currently a top performer. I just have this confidence of adjusting and adapting continuously to what my learners need. I'm not to just step outside my scheme of work or step aside my Learning Plan. I'm not I'm currently teaching to, to my learner's needs.

**Researcher:**
were there any dynamics within the comp which caused any issues was were their relationships or I don't mean issues like confrontation but or difficulties or barriers that you had to overcome?

**Clarice:**
Ah, I don't understand. I'm afraid I don't understand the context. Do you mean like during my participation in our cop meetings or

**Researcher:**
yes, your new participation? So, was there the terminology or the language or the times that they brand, that sort of thing?

**Clarice:**

No, I think it really all helped that, as I said, we were all practitioners. So, we were all very much aware of very similar situations. I mean, obviously, we came from our different organizations, but somehow, we encountered more or less about the same issues. So, we were all very focused on how to simplify the problem, how to verbalize the problem and how to listen for advice or give our input in. In a way that made sense completely. For the situation. So we, we basically only judged on the situation that we received. So I think there was a minimum of if there were any sparks for conflict or something like that, because it was so very well framed. We all focused on the results or the solutions or so it was very practical, very solution based very, I would say very well framed, to be honest and this made a huge difference.

**Researcher:**

Yeah, so where you will subject specific as in functional skills, English essential. So is that what made it easier that you had a shared language or terminology?

**Clarice:**

Yeah. And also, obviously, not all the meetings. I mean, I remember having two very successful meetings where we were matched with practitioners with the similar background because obviously, I'm teaching for a community learning provider. So, this is a little bit different. From let's say, the prison probation environment or it's very different from colleges. Essentially, the problems would be the same but it's so much more. It was a successful when we had about the same type of background for our learners because it made much more sense. But in all other meetings, no matter if because I had meetings where I had the met people with a prison background and it was all fine because eventually, as I said, we all verbalized our problem and we all came with solutions. We were just thinking and focused on a solution. And it didn't matter as much the background or I think that eventually it wouldn't have made the difference if I were teaching the different subject because as I said, all the ideas that I have used in essential digital skills, I also put forward in the group and they were the Teacher of teachers of English or teachers of math. I think it was more about the process rather than what subject you are teaching or where are you teaching or who are your learners. It's more about the practice eventually, our delivering so

**Researcher:**

and in other forms of CPD. Because looking at it, you you've been part of this cup for three years now. Have you participated in other forms of CPD for that length of time or is this different?

**Clarice:**

Oh, this is absolutely different. I mean, the I think I perceive it as maybe one of the most open experience that I had, because all CPD that I'm doing it's more like either teaching you something for example, like the level five that I have done with the ATF for my English and for my mat. They were really discussing teaching the subject to the topic. But in order in other workshops like all the other specialized workshops or even the workshops with prevent or safeguarding you know that the topics are somehow chosen for you and you attend them because you are interested in the topic, but was what was new with the cops was that we never

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knew what are the situation with come from the situation that way? Because when we were having the meetings, obviously you had the situation in mind and you exposed it and then you discussed it and you receive solutions. But from a situation you could have linked to another issue so it was all very much live. I don't know if I can explain it very clearly. But it wasn't a topic that you expected. You may you had the freedom to connect it to. Other things that you may only have processed only during the solutions because you had you had the opportunity to say the solutions would work for you or what you choose and what you leave out of it. So when we had that opportunity to voice that, yes, the solution is what I was looking for. Thank you or No, I think the solution doesn't work. Actually, it was like your reflection and you could have improved based on add on other possible problems. At least this is how I used it.

**Researcher:**
So, were you able to reflect on your practice when they were offering solutions? Is that what you mean? So you could then bring in your own practice?

**Clarice:**
Yeah and potentially if there were similar problems involved in you could elaborate on that or you could find you could find ways to apply what you are offered as a solution to other potential problems. Or you could have expanded more because we had also around where we could add if we if we needed to. We could add on some new solutions. or new issues that we were thinking of I will say

**Researcher:**
With the community of practice going online and being virtual. Was that an advantage or a disadvantage, or you?

**Clarice:**
100% advantage? Yeah, I'm absolutely sure I couldn't have met people from Manchester. Because, yeah, who's putting that much traveling into CPD? Nobody. But they were, as you said, only one click away. I mean, I remember someone was in their car. Someone was in the staff room. I was mostly at home with my son in the background. So obviously we will we're all having extremely busy lives. But yeah, I am so grateful. This was one of the great, great things about the lockdown that they went online because yeah, they became virtual and stayed virtual. Fantastic. Yeah, so has become more accessible and more accessible CPD?

I admit some people I would have never had the chance to meet them because they were just simply for someone to organize an event and for me to as I said to go to Manchester travel now I would and to be honest, I don't know if now I would ever travel for CPD. Because I've just I just found that it's such a great thing not to take away that take the Think about the pressure of putting in the traveling or not having the time because even it was very flexible timewise for me, because actually I booked time off to be able to pick up my daughter around that time. So I remember most of them taking place like 4.30 For me it was excellent.

**Researcher:**

I think that's it, thank you very much for taking time out of your day for me taking up your precious time. I do appreciate it and hopefully, eventually when I get round to writing everything up, I will send you a copy. Thank you very, very much.

**Clarice:**
Have a lovely afternoon.

## **Appendix 4 Ethics Training Certificate**

Certificate as requested.


**From:** LJMU Research Ethics Committee <noreply@quizresults.net>
**Sent:** 19 April 2021 12:08
**To:** RECtraining <RECtraining@ljmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** Certificate of completion - LJMU Research Ethics Training


This is an automatically generated email to certify completion of the LJMU Research Ethics Training. You are receiving this because the LJMU REC has specified your email address for sending the certificate of completion.

| | |
|---|---|
| Name | Karen Lesley Billingsley |
| LJMU Email address | k.l.billingsley@2019.ljmu.ac.uk |
| ID number | 890276 |
| | |
| Date/Time | **19 April 2021 12:07** |
| Answered: | **3 / 3** |
| Your Score | **3 / 3 (100%)** |
| Passing Score | **3 (100%)** |
| Time Spent: | **32 sec** |
| Result | **Passed** |

| # | Question | Awarded | Points | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Research Ethics Committees: Select one or more correct answers from the choices below | 1 | 1 | ✅ |
| 2. | Research ethics is the set of principles and guidelines that help us to uphold the things we value Choose whether the statement is true or false | 1 | 1 | ✅ |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3. | Ethical approval must be in place BEFORE starting participant recruitment<br><br>Choose whether the statement is true or false | 1 | 1 |

# Appendix 5 Reflective Statement

This reflective statement aims to encapsulate my journey through thematic analysis (TA) during my research, specifically focusing on the critical examination of my biases as an experienced manager in Further Education (FE). It highlights the personal and academic growth I experienced as I navigated the complexities of this method.

Confronting Biases in Methodology

The flexibility of TA, which had initially drawn me to the method, now seemed daunting. I knew that this flexibility demanded a series of active choices, each of which would shape the direction of the research and I wanted to get it right. As Braun and Clarke (2019) state reflexive thematic analysis requires a researcher who is aware of their philosophical and theoretical assumptions. My challenge was to balance my managerial background with the need to authentically represent the voices of FE practitioners.

I refined my approach as I worked through the analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis framework. Immersing myself in the data, reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. I found myself noting down things and reflections and began to see the impact of my positionality. This led me to question whether I was seeing the data through a manager's analytical lens rather than truly understanding the participants' experiences? This internal dialogue prompted me to consider my approach to coding: should I code semantically or latently? Inductively or deductively? I decided on an abductive approach allowing me to both theory-driven and data-driven, I started with simple semantic codes but as I progressed, I found myself delving deeper, coding both semantically and

latently, I moved from initial coding to more interpretive analysis, identifying overarching themes and connections between them. For instance, I noticed how the themes of "Teacher Driven alternatives to Top-down policies," and "maintaining student centred priorities," were interconnected, both reflecting participants commitment to adapting their practices to best serve their students.

Navigating Initial Impressions and Coding Process

Upon first engaging with the interview transcripts, I was struck by the passion and depth of reflection and richness exhibited by the participants narratives. Their narratives were rich with personal anecdotes, professional insights and emotional resonance, exemplifying what Brookfield (2017) refers to as the autobiographical lens of critical reflection. Initially, I felt overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of the data. However, I realised that this complexity was a testament to the richness of the participants' experiences and the multifaceted nature of professional development in the FE sector. I had to confront the presumption that my managerial experience could fully inform my understanding of teaching practices and learning experiences.

One narrative that particularly stood out was Jane Eyre's experience of engaging with PDNorth through social media and appreciating the transformative environment developed by the community. Her emphasis on the supportive, collaborative and friendly ethos contrasts sharply with the more hierarchical approaches she experienced previously. This notion of emotional safety in professional development spaces, as noted in my analysis of the theme

"sustaining emotional resilience." An aspect I may have underestimated due to my managerial perspective.

As I began the coding process, I was mindful of my own positionality as an experienced manager within the FE sector. Reflecting on Brookfield's (2017) concept of hunting assumptions, I made a conscious effort to approach the data with an open mind, allowing themes to emerge organically rather than imposing preconceived categories. I used both deductive and inductive coding approaches. My deductive codebook included categories such as "People," "Domain," "Community" Practice" and "Confidence," which helped me organise the data initially. Yet, I remained open to new codes emerging from the data itself.

Emerging Themes

The process was messy and frustrating. My initial coding attempts left me with transcripts covered in scribbles and notes. I felt overwhelmed by the volume of the data. But I persevered, patterns began to develop. I started to see connections between codes, potential themes taking shape.

This process was challenging but rewarding, as it led to insights I had not anticipated. For instance, Anne Shirley's description of the reading circle as a safe space for vulnerability and emotional support was particularly poignant:

"People have kind of like shared things, quite emotive things that maybe they've not even shared with any other colleagues in that space."

This quote exemplified a recurring theme that I had not initially considered - the role of the CoP in sustaining emotional resilience. As I delved deeper into the coding process, I found myself grappling with the sheer volume and complexity of the data. This theme gained further substance as I analysed Hermione's reflections on the shift to online meetings which highlighted how the online format provided flexibility and convenience, enabling deeper connections among participants.

The interviews with Jo March and Anne Shirley added new dimensions to my initial impressions. Jo March's perspective as a deputy principal provided insights into leadership challenges and strategies for empowering teachers, aligning with research on distributed leadership in education (Harris, 2013). Anne Shirley's experiences with the reading circle highlighted the importance of informal, peer-driven learning, resonating with theories of social learning in professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

I found myself constantly questioning my process, was I doing it right? Were these really themes, or just topic summaries. I returned repeatedly to the literature on TA, also seeking advice from my supervisor. Throughout this process I maintained a dialogue with her, her feedback challenged me to think more deeply about how my themes fit together and how they told a coherent story about my data. She pushed me to move beyond description to interpretation to really engage with what my data was telling me about the experiences of the participants within the CoP.

Through the analysis, several key themes emerged, some of which expanded on my initial expectations while others were surprising:

1. Empowerment and Professional Autonomy

2. Cultivating Connections and Community

3. Sustaining Emotional Resilience

4. Evolving Scholarly Practices

The theme of "Sustaining Emotional Resilience" was particularly unexpected. It emerged strongly from interviews like Anne Shirley's, where she described the reading circle as a safe space for vulnerability and emotional support. This theme wasn't part of my initial research focus but became crucial to understanding the full impact of the CoP, For instance, Hermione's comment that CoP was "a safe space where you can be just honest about things: highlighted the emotional support aspect that I hadn't initially considered aligning with recent research on the importance of emotional support in teacher professional development (Day, 2017).

I now realise that this theme reflects a significant aspect of professional development that is often overlooked in formal CPD programs. It suggests that effective professional development must address not only cognitive and skill-based aspects but also emotional and relational dimensions. This was exemplified by Clarice's statement: "The advice came from

practitioners. So, I appreciated that I had access to this." This shift broadened my understanding of what constitutes valuable professional development in the FE context.

As I delved deeper into the analysis, I noticed interesting patterns and connections between themes. For instance, the sense of community fostered by PDNorth seemed to directly contribute to participants' feelings of empowerment and resilience. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) concept of CoPs as spaces where practitioners can negotiate meaning and develop shared practices. Jane's description of the CoP as "really, really comfortable, so welcoming, very warm, very friendly" illustrated this beautifully.

Jo March's interview highlighted how leadership approaches within institutions can either support or hinder engagement with CoPs. This added a new layer to my understanding of the organisational context in which CoPs operate, reflecting Brookfield (2017) emphasis on the importance of considering institutional factors in critical reflection. Throughout this process, I became increasingly aware of how my own experiences as an FE manager influenced my interpretation of the data. I had to consciously check my assumptions and remain open to perspectives that challenged my preconceptions. For example, Anne Shirley's reflections on the reading circle made me realise the significance participants placed on informal learning, promoting me to broaden my understanding of valuable professional development.

I found that these connections challenged my initial conception of professional development as primarily an individual process. Instead, I now see it as deeply embedded in social and organizational contexts, which has significant implications for how we design and implement CPD programs. I also observed how different demographic factors influenced participants'

experiences. For example, younger participants placed more emphasis on networking and connections, while older participants focused more on the availability of resources. These patterns helped me to understand the diverse needs within the CoP. This observation aligns with research on distributed leadership in education (Harris, 2013) and theories of social learning in professional development (Lave and Wenger, 1991)

Reflexivity in action

Throughout the analysis process, I became increasingly aware of how my own experiences as an FE manager influenced my interpretation of the data. This aligns with Berger (2015) discussion on research positionality and reflexivity. Hermione's perspective as a teacher with over 10 years of experience provided a valuable counterpoint to my managerial viewpoint. I had to consciously check my assumptions and remain open to perspectives that challenged my preconceptions.

One area where I noticed potential bias was in my initial emphasis on formal professional development activities. As I engaged more deeply with the data, particularly with Anne Shirley's reflections on the reading circle and Hermione's appreciation of "being able to actually share and listen" to colleagues' ideas I realised the significance participants placed on informal, peer-to-peer learning within the CoP. This prompted me to broaden my understanding of what constitutes valuable professional development in the FE context.

As I write this reflection on my analysis of the interview data, I am struck by how my understanding of thematic analysis has evolved and developed. What initially seemed like a straightforward method revealed itself to be a complex, creative process that demanded constant reflexivity. I have learned that good TA is not about following a set of rigid steps, but about engaging deeply and thoughtfully with my data, questioning my assumptions and decisions.

This analysis enriched by insights from participants like Hermione, has highlighted the transformative potential of online CoPs for FE practitioners' professional development. Hermione's experiences highlight the importance of creating safe, supportive spaces for teachers to share not just knowledge, but also emotional experiences and challenges. The findings suggest that such communities can provide much-needed support, connection and opportunities for growth in a sector often characterized by isolation and rapid change. The emphasis on emotional resilience and informal learning that emerged from the analysis suggests new directions for research and practice. Future studies could explore how CoPs can be designed to better support the emotional well-being of FE practitioners alongside their professional development

This thematic analysis informed by diverse voices has deepened and expanded my understanding of how online Communities of Practice can support the professional development of FE practitioners. The process challenged some of my initial assumptions, particularly around the nature of valuable professional development and the role of emotional support in CoPs. Moving forward, I am excited to further explore the potential of CoPs to

foster collaborative, teacher-driven professional development that addresses both the intellectual and emotional needs of FE practitioners, while remaining critically reflective of my own assumptions and biases in this process. This experience has not only enhanced my research skills but also transformed my perspective on professional development in profound ways.