

# Online communities of practice

Developing scholarship & professional development in FE



**KAREN LESLEY BILLINGSLEY & GILLIAN PEISER**  
LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

Research into professional development in FE reveals persistent challenges amid resource constraints and evolving pedagogical demands (Broad, 2015). This investigation examined how PDNorth,<sup>1</sup> an online community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998), enhanced professional development through survey data (n=20) and semi-structured interviews (n=7) with English, maths and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) practitioners.

## COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Boyer's (1990) scholarship framework for FE online communities reveals nuanced patterns of scholarly engagement, where practitioners participate in collaborative learning and knowledge exchange through regular online interactions. These scholarly activities manifest distinctly in the FE context.

Cultivating connections and identity development emerged as fundamental to the CoP's success. One participant became 'confident in my instinct' through community participation, explaining that 'we came to realise that teaching was something natural' – demonstrating professional identity development. The community facilitated expanded professional networks, with practitioners reporting that 'talking to other people facing the same issues' reduced isolation and built confidence in their practice.

**Scholarship of integration** thrives in this connected environment, as practitioners combine knowledge across disciplines. ESOL and maths teachers developed approaches for learners with multiple barriers, one participant noting how collective problem-solving led to contextualised materials addressing both language and cultural issues.

**Scholarship of teaching** develops through critical reflection. One experienced practitioner described taking students on walks exploring local history, inspired by CoP discussions. Survey respondents unanimously agreed that collaborative discussions helped them 'think more deeply' about their subjects.

**Scholarship of application** occurred as practitioners implemented new approaches in their teaching. Survey data quantified an implementation gap, revealing high confidence in trying new approaches but lower scores for successfully applying them to improve outcomes.

**Scholarship of discovery** remained least developed, reflecting Tummons' (2018) observation that institutional pressures constrain scholarship in FE.

The findings show that online CoPs provide transformative spaces for professional development, balancing support with practitioner autonomy (O'Leary & Wood, 2019). Stakeholders can implement successful online CoPs through regular scheduled discussions, collaborative resource sharing and cross-institutional networking opportunities supported by dedicated time and resources, while preserving the practitioner-led ethos for sustained community engagement (Tummons, 2022).

<sup>1</sup> <https://pdnorth.org.uk>

## REFERENCES

- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Broad, J. H. (2015). So many worlds, so much to do: Identifying barriers to engagement with continued professional development for teachers in the further education and training sector. *London Review of Education*, 13(1), 16–30.
- O'Leary, M., & Wood, P. (2019). Reimagining teaching excellence: Why collaboration, rather than competition, holds the key to improving teaching and learning in higher education. *Educational Review*, 71(1), 122–139.
- Tummons, J. (2018). *Learning architectures in higher education: Beyond communities of practice*. Bloomsbury.
- Tummons, J. (2022). *Exploring communities of practice in further and adult education: Apprenticeship, expertise and belonging*. Routledge.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.