

## **Empowering Teachers to Write: An Innovative Online Framework for a Community of Practice**

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### **Abstract**

*A veteran and a novice editor teamed up to empower instructors from different institutions to compose chapters through an iterative, inquiry-driven process as an online learning community. Using a scaffolded framework, each mentoring pair co-authored one chapter of a digital collection. The common thread of this voluntary nationwide project, entitled Better Practices (BP), was online writing instruction. It received no institutional support. This professional learning community was organized into three levels of mentorship to address isolation among instructors. Each level, characterized by equity, diversity of experience, transparency and peer review, was designed around protocols for responding to work in progress, such as the charrette protocol which creates a low-stakes environment in which the participants have much to gain from the process, with virtually nothing to lose (McDonald et al., 2013). This reciprocal mentoring report contradicts some conventional methods for communities of practice since a prescribed editorial framework was utilized instead of self-directed professional growth. On the other hand, the author pairings and unstructured mentoring relationships were characterized by unique differences, thus confirming the research which emphasizes self-regulating systems of checks and balances. The overall mentoring process proceeded on a clear timeline, so a final collaborative manuscript was successfully completed. It is recommended that other diverse communities of practice employ this three-leveled framework of mentoring to collaboratively write or publish. Empowering both editors and instructors to write and mentor one another with a framework that prioritizes equity, inclusion, transparency, and editorial collaboration results in a recalibration of the nature of social learning for a community of practice with a common goal.*

### **Introduction**

In 2020, the global pandemic cast the whole world into deep waters; everyone was forced to navigate territories that were unknown and unthinkable. In the middle of this massive tide of uncertainty, a group of educators came together, with the leadership of two editors, to write about their processes in working to better their online writing instructional practices. As participants, the authors of this paper shared the common goal of this writing community: to document ways to apply online teaching guidelines to their practice. Ultimately, this is a tool to guide other teachers in their online writing instruction (OWI). The digital version of Better Practices (BP) was created in a five-month period during the spring of 2021. This paper describes the timeline, critically examines the mentoring process used with participants, and outlines the ways in which the project was unique, innovative, inclusive, productive, and also capable of being recreated across disciplines.

BP was launched by two editors who had a similar goal: In the middle of the pandemic, they saw an intense need for improved OWI teaching tools, so they used their prior expertise to guide a group of volunteers on a writing project. The digital book would provide explicit support and guidance that was discipline-specific to online writing instruction. Contributors within the writing community held a range of professional ranks, including full, tenured professors and program administrators, tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty, contingent faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and administrative positions. This led to a unique situation: a diversely-leveled group of authors and mentors guided by an online writing community and editors who enabled participants to contribute from anywhere in the world. The goal of these writers was to produce a digital manuscript about better practices for online writing instruction.

### **I. Project Stages for a Community of Writers**

#### *Stage 1: Gathering Online Writing Participants*

To encourage writing and publishing through an iterative, inquiry-driven process of chapter development, a veteran and emerging editor created the online learning community for over 20 pairs of online writing instructors in higher education to publish. The accessibility of gathering writers and action researchers via a remote platform is uniquely beneficial for publishing. The goal was for each pair to complete one chapter of a digital handbook while teaching their classes. This case adds to a growing number of writing group models, such as the one presented in the Cassese and Holman article, which

“...discuss writing groups as a mechanism for coordinating a network of peer mentors, which seeks to promote greater scholarly productivity both directly (e.g., accountability, goal setting, and discipline-specific feedback) and indirectly (e.g., social support and professional advice)” (Cassese & Holman, 2018, pp. 1-2).

First, the two editors advertised the project in OWI groups and on social media for interested educators involved in teaching writing online and gathered a substantial list of voluntary participants. They began to pair individuals based on where and what they were teaching, or writers could choose their own colleague to pair up with. The challenge was for one colleague to share a teaching practice that the other would experiment with in their online writing classroom. Each pair would write one chapter together about their experiment using the same chapter framework as the other writing pairs. Co-authors were given a great deal of freedom to decipher how they would approach their collaboration.

### *Stage 2: Building the Writing Community*

In many disciplines, editors are not approachable or inclusive in their process. The BP editors were just the opposite. Through a scaffolded framework both editors oversaw the author pairs. The hard deadlines that promoted writers' productivity were embedded within the weekly Zoom meetings where authors were randomly placed with other author pairs to peer-review their content.

The editors participated both as peer reviewers and as project managers each week and stressed that they did so with humility. They provided a structured format of guidelines for completing certain sections of the book chapter before a scheduled meeting. Each week, an outline was sent to the writing community by the editors, which consisted of detailed guidelines for the written content that was to be produced and reviewed. An example from the first written task was to draft a brief vignette and provide a theoretical rationale for the authors' action research. A target page count for each section (along with guiding questions to structure the section) was provided. The editors sent out an email each week with detailed information about the upcoming meeting including:

- An outline of the type of content that authors were responsible to create and share
- Questions for the writing community to consider during the peer review
- A “shared notes document” with links to all contributors' work in progress
- “Parking lot questions” including a list of ongoing questions that came up during meetings which had not been clearly answered
- Zoom recordings from the prior week in case authors were not able to attend

Weekly meetings were designed to provide support through a writing community with a clearly stated purpose for each session. During the workshop sessions, two to four authors from different institutions were placed in breakout groups and shared feedback on the writing. Both editors circulated through the different groups to give advice on the style, structure, and organization of each specific chapter. The breakout groups were different each week and these meetings were voluntary but highly encouraged.

### *Stage 3: Maintaining a Timeline for Publication*

A system of checks and balances emerged organically and promoted ongoing participation from the authors. For example, by participating in the weekly meetings, there was an implied norming process for the tone and organization of the book as authors perused sections of other chapters and offered direct feedback in conversation. The two editors listened to the challenges pairs faced and offered text-based feedback to successfully lead the writing process from chapter to chapter without being heavy-handed.

The overall process produced a digital manuscript that followed a clear timeline and was completed in five months. This framework could easily be reenacted in other disciplines.

## **II. Three Levels of Mentorship**

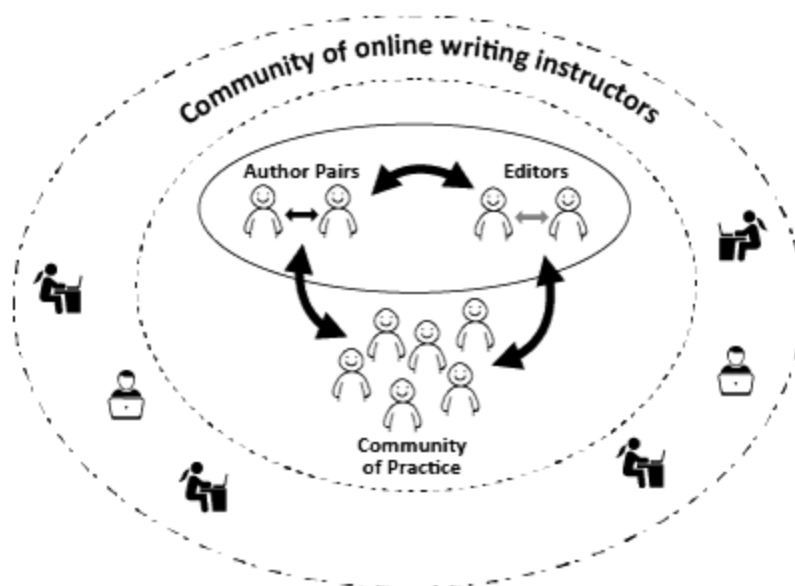
### *Co-authors*

The mentorship between co-authors varied for each pair. Some had the traditional mentor/mentee partnership of a veteran scholar paired with a newer lecturer. Other pairs had more parallel seniority but, as a rule, the mentor had already established knowledge of the practice being adopted by the mentee. As the mentee conducted action research in the classroom, mentors

provided support and guidance. While the writing goals and weekly materials provided by the editors were highly structured and well organized, the writing process completed by the pairs of authors was loosely structured. Authors were free to set their own deadlines, working style and establishing of relationships.

*Figure 1*

*Three Levels of Mentorship Within the OWI Community*



### *Editors*

The two editors met in Spring 2021 as co-instructors on a Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE) certification course for new-to-online writing educators of all ranks to acquire foundational knowledge of OWI research and practice. From this context, they realized that more pedagogical scholarship about the details of teaching writing online was needed, so in Fall 2021 they teamed up to create a digital collection and initiated a search for contributors. The mentoring process was designed around protocols for responding to work in progress, such as the charrette protocol, which creates a low-stakes environment in which the participants have much to gain from the process. A modified charrette process, is used to improve a piece of work. Individuals or teams call for a charrette when they are stuck — when the members of the team have reached a point in the process where they could use other perspectives that will help them move forward. They bring their current ideas, or the actual work in progress, to the charrette and then ask the group to “work on the work” with them. (Modified Charrette Protocol)

### *Writing Community of Practice*

The online learning community embraced equity, valued diversity of experience, and employed established methods of transparency and peer review in the writing process. So, as the community met to discuss practices, dissect theory, or give feedback on specific sections of writing, mentorship was intentionally integrated into three levels. In addition to the co-authors’ mutual teaching and writing collaboration, a third layer of weekly horizontal feedback across chapters was created. This horizontal collaboration addressed isolation among instructors, particularly in light of the pandemic, and recognized a diversity of experience. Despite the pairing of so-called “emerging” and “veteran” instructors, most authors’ teaching and mentoring experience fell somewhere between the two. The main weekly requirement was for authors to share their chapter. The size and weekly formation of the Zoom breakout groups were very flexible offering an opportunity to compare writing. Peer readers were encouraged to comment based on the editors’ suggestions. Some authors wrote margin comments, yet others simply offered reader impressions. Most importantly, the authors were receiving consistent feedback from a wide range of colleagues, yet every person was treated as an equal member of the writing community. It is worth noting that every participant in the project volunteered their time and effort without knowing if or when the book would be published. The fact that the community remained cohesive and completed the project within the set timeframe could be attributed to the

supportive environment established by the editors and the consistent mentorship of the writing community.

### III. Key Methodology

#### *Group Dynamics*

Utilizing a reciprocal, unstructured mentoring process, each author pair had a unique working style. This is common in communities of practice (CoP's), especially among educators who are accustomed to working alone. In a classic guide to CoP's in higher education by Felten et al., a typical recipe for successful community formation is described; "*You do not need permission from anyone; there is no need for a budget; there are no minutes, no articulated outcomes, no product. This is not a rigid process but a highly local, specific, and organic one. Basically, all that is needed is the shared hunger for a deeper conversation among companions and colleagues*" (Felton et al., 2013, p. 66). In this spirit, the BP online writing community collaborated organically to step out of their academic silos. The resulting group dynamics revealed common mentoring themes.

For example, Patton and Parker (2017) studied the dynamics and group processes of over 36 physical education teacher educators who participated in CoP's for professional development. These international CoP's pursued interests in their domains and interacted either face to face or remotely. In the study results, two themes emerged: 1) "*Three legged stools: better together than apart,*" since the educators concluded that their collaboration through CoP's dramatically reduced isolation and "breathed new life" into work with like-minded colleagues. Participants revealed these opinions in the follow-up surveys which were conducted as part of the study; 2) "*Paving the way: moving to collaboration,*" because educators reported how both their process and professional accomplishments were unleashed through collaboration. In other words, they felt like learners who would not have achieved such professional growth on their own. Both the three-legged stools and paving-the-way themes appear similar to the BP writer's community approach, yet a lack of participant surveys or formal reflection on the process leaves the full nature of the BP group dynamics unclear.

#### *Feedback Categories*

Flexibility in types of feedback or advice is also typical for educators working together in communities of practice and largely depends on the temperament of the group. In the BP group, the editors remarked that regular participants in weekly meetings seemed compelled to participate and actively contribute in many different ways, aligning with Felton's description:

In contrast to a meeting, a group is more than the sum of its parts. A group has a life of its own – a personality, a heart, and perhaps even a soul. This quality allows the ideas and experiences that emerge from a group to be more than any of the members can access alone. While group dynamics have been extensively studied and documented, this elusive and expansive quality evades empirical measurements. (Felten et al., 2013, p. 79)

To understand the broad nature of feedback fostered in this online community, three categories of feedback are useful: substantive feedback, professional advice and moral support (Cassese & Holman, 2018, pp. 3-4). In the BP community, substantive feedback was particularly encouraged as a weekly goal for the Zoom breakout groups. Group members read one to five pages of new material and wrote margin comments or discussed the material. Since all writers were referencing several common OLI principles, professional advice on how to interpret or apply those principles was also discussed. The backdrop of the pandemic, coupled with the usual isolation of online writing instructors, heightened the need for moral support in this project. It appears that the opportunity to be part of an action-research community with familiar faces indirectly lent a refreshing dynamic.

#### *Empowering Writers*

Writing is discipline. In the field of teaching, educators struggle to carve out time for reflection or publishing, especially as caregivers during COVID-19. For non-tenured instructors in higher education, publishing or writing articles is not a required aspect of the job, yet many have mastered instructional techniques worth sharing. In an email, one BP editor writes, "Research on faculty publishing productivity has shown that finding the time and support needed to produce published scholarship often intersects with issues of equity, including a writer's rank, teaching load, gender, age, and ability to find the time and environment necessary to produce writing (Sax et al., 2002)" (Amy Cicchino, personal communication, May 10, 2022). Through the efficiently structured peer review meetings, ease of fully digital tools, and the editors' transparency, a steady and replicable model was created so writers were not left behind.

## IV. Discussion

As the community of writers drafted chapters about “better” teaching practices, innovation simultaneously emerged through their “best” mentoring practices. Numerous studies over the last three decades have suggested a wide range of benefits associated with institutional or departmental mentoring programs. They highlight the positive influence of these programs in guiding institutions to recognize the developmental nature of teaching careers.

In a 2020 meta-analysis and comparison of numerous case studies of mentoring across many fields, seven key criteria needed to professionalize “best practices” were identified and include: 1) adequate planning and preparation; 2) appropriate duration; 3) regular exchanges between mentoring partners; 4) definition and pursuit of clearly defined goals; 5) importance of mentee-mentor matching; 6) training and ongoing support for mentees and mentors; 7) design and production of educationally meaningful offerings for participants (Stoeger et al., 2020). It appears that the BP project adhered to five of these seven criteria, neglecting only the areas of attention to mentor-mentee matching and adequate training.

Also of interest is a comprehensive literature review on faculty mentoring in higher education between 1989 and 2014 in which Fountain and Newcomer discovered five widely-reported primary benefits of mentoring programs. Two of the mentoring benefits reach beyond an educator’s institutional context to include: 1) increased productivity among both emerging and senior mentors; 2) increased networking. Therefore, determining the effectiveness of a mentoring process involves multiple criteria. For example, another essential component, based on the literature, is that both formative and summative evaluation should be used and include, at a minimum, a survey of participants. Although the BP editors’ goals were to maintain a low-stakes environment, a basic survey of the participants’ experience- perhaps a few months into the process- might have improved writers’ collective experience in this online community. A summative evaluation of the process, to offer a more comprehensive perspective on each person’s accomplishments, would be even more beneficial since it would measure long-term results, such as progress toward networking or a scholarly identity. Such an assessment might also measure enhanced self-esteem inspired by writing and publishing, or increased recognition of a writer within their home institution or in the field. This type of evaluation could still be offered by the BP project editors, for example, one or two years after publication.

In light of such research, although the BP framework is innovative, several characteristics of this online mentoring community contradict conventional conclusions which insist that mentees and their respective institutions of higher education will definitely benefit from mentoring if certain conditions are in place. Unclear aspects of the BP online community included: a) an absence of institutional support for this project; b) the absence of any mentor training or attention to mentoring dynamics during the process; c) a community of practice that engaged in mostly transactional dialog (rather than interactional) and may not have fully trusted each person’s authenticity as a peer reviewer; d) a prescribed (not organic) editorial framework of mentoring rather than a negotiated process; e) a lack of transparency in author pair collaboration, since some relationships may have been hierarchical or democratic; f) unclear results for increased career development, visibility or networking opportunities for the author participants; g) no opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their mutual writing process or collaborative experiences.

Here it is important to note that reflection is widely viewed as a crucial component of any mentoring process - online or in-person. Although no reflection was elicited during the BP writing or mentoring process, it is important to note that the common task itself was for practitioners to write about a successful online teaching practice. Since this form of reflection was indeed the content of the writing, it might have been too much to ask participants to also reflect on how their mentoring process was going. In other words, the ongoing, iterative and dialogic process between author pairs did embed one type of reflection. So, collaboratively, this community engaged in reflection about exemplary teaching practices as emphasized for online mentoring models:

Pedagogical transformation begins with faculty who investigate their practices with the deliberate focus on successful online practices [...] a practice that is often used in Online Learning Communities (OLCs) through sharing research on exemplary online teaching practices, including concerns, challenges, and solutions found in the literature. (Pearson & Kirby, 2018)

In addition, a prioritization of equity and inclusion, along with the transparency of editorial collaboration resulted in a recalibration of the nature of social learning for the BP community. As stated in Dorner et al.,

Mentoring must create space for [...] cross-fertilization that also necessitates reversing the roles of the mentor and mentee based on the expertise and experience they each bring to the process. Online mentoring, a computer-

mediated activity, provides learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modeling. It is a distinctive approach that has become a viable alternative to in-person mentoring in higher education, as it extends the limitations of time and space and creates egalitarian dynamics. (2020, p. 99).

## V. Conclusion

In this case, the online writing community enhanced accountability and productivity. As participants in this experiment, the authors of this paper experienced firsthand the motivation and deliberative dialogue of over 40 community of practice members who were all uniquely qualified as online writing instructors. As a mentoring group, this community revealed six benefits: a) a simplified mentor-mentee pairing process; b) easier scheduling and availability of participants; c) more frequent community of practice cross-pollination through multiple digital modalities (Google spreadsheets, margin comment tools; email conversations, interactive Zoom meetings, partner text messaging); d) horizontal interactions; e) transparency through ongoing availability of both editors; f) tailored guidance and timelines to adjust to the groups' needs.

Three questions that remain unanswered are: 1) how the mixed types of author pairings affected the feedback process (since some author pairs had just met while others were from the same institution); 2) how peer mentor training would have improved the overall COP experience; 3) what might have changed if the editors had surveyed the writer participants to reflect on their experience during and after the process. Despite the well-prepared nature of these educators, this innovative case can also be replicated in other communities of practice, or in fully online peer mentoring efforts, particularly those which seek to write, publish or present.

It was both appealing and motivating to participate in this project. The broad scope enabled individuals at all career stages to feel included and equally valued. Although high-quality evaluations would have revealed a clearer understanding of all participants' experiences, this descriptive study may shed light on the features of a process combining online writing groups with a scaffolded mentoring process.

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