# Creating responsive on-line Communities of Practice expedited through Covid; re-aligning the creative landscape for showcases

**Dorota Watson and David Thomas**
**London School of Film, Media and Design,**
**University of West London**

UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON — The Career University

## Introduction & Objectives

The identified research Gap explored how adverse external factors fostered cross course school collaborations, creating communities of practice (CoPs). These 'CoPs' were created through innovative teaching and learning pedagogies facilitating on-line showcases. A showcase as defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary is 'a place or event where something, especially something new, can be shown or performed.' The showcase is the research focus, undergraduate final year (level 6) work from two schools; film, media, design, performing arts and music at a London university. Showcase events for creative degrees are pivotal for graduates to exhibit their work to an external audience, targeting industry professionals.

Showcases have traditionally been physical events and 'are critical for launching careers and introducing new blood into the creative industry' (Denoncourt, 2016, p13). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, government guidelines during the summer of 2020, resulted in physical events being re-defined in Higher Education (HE) in the UK. Re-defining in this context, translated into alternative platforms for exhibiting students' work; transitioning from physical to virtual presentations and celebrations.

The research focused on CoPs underpinning synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning, facilitating level 6 students' work featured in the showcase. This retrospective study reviewed the period between March 2020 to July 2020. An interpretivist philosophical theoretical positionality was applied to the research, (Crotty, 1998); an retro-ethnographic methodology (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

## Methodology

Purposive sampling was employed (Newman, 2003) for this study, participants that fit certain criteria were identified, being consistent with the research aim and question (Punch and Oancea, 2014). The criteria included staff members from creative subjects n = 9, and alumni n = 5.

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The research was conducted through a qualitative approach; focus groups were supported through open-ended questionnaires for both staff and alumni. These methods facilitated a more conversational discourse with the researchers, allowing deeper and broader responses that were nuanced to individual experiences. This was followed by semi-structured interviews, creating a grounded theory, identifying themes from the experience (Chamraz, 2014).

## Abstract

Key Words: Community, online, showcase, learning & teaching. Did (CoPs) support effective learning and teaching experiences through the pandemic for level 6 students, supporting their final showcase outcome? Has online delivery redefined the creative landscape in re-aligning showcases?

CoPs are situated within the broader context of *landscapes of practice* and specifically in this context within the creative landscape, where divergent CoPs may collaborate extending their own practice (Wenger-Trayner et al, 2014). Individual courses created their own CoPs, and these were situated within a broader creative landscape (Pryko et al, 2019), comprised of courses within the two schools.

The university swiftly implemented alternative learning and teaching methodologies, creating online interactive experiences. New pedagogies were implemented for studio practice-based disciplines; culminating in a digital showcase. Interpretations of CoPs differ from face to face to online, synchronous to asynchronous; their analysis needed to be nuanced (Baran et al. 2010).

The courses adapted collaboratively in order to think together if these new communities were to be successful (Pryko et al, 2016; Sadiq, 2021). A retro-ethnographic study reviewed the experiences and their impact on the digital showcase. The focus groups and semi-structured questionnaires created themes relating to participants' experiences and the success of the digital showcases, specifically highlighting that physical and hybrid events (Marshall et al. 2015) were favoured.

## Conceptual Framework

Communities of Practice are underpinned by social learning theories, namely Social Constructivism underpinning the student's academic journey, scaffolding their learning and gaining knowledge (Kim, 2001). Social positioning highlighted the significance of '*Habitas*' as defined by Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2012) where socio/ cultural interactions impact on learning.

Drawing on the seminal work on situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and CoPs as defined by Wenger (1998), this study is further underpinned by *cultivating* CoPs as knowledge management (Wenger et al. 2002). As seen in figure 1, participants share and develop knowledge, advancing organisational practice from creating meaning and knowledge, 'both explicit and tacit' (Scott et al. 2017).

Figure 1 illustrates how CoPs are facilitated through mutual interaction though online learning, teaching and showcase formation. Staff and students interacted through joint enterprise, staff supported students creating individual digital platforms these contributed to collaborative course events, forming the wider school online landscape. The online landscape was nurtured through a shared repertoire and awareness of discipline specific identity and aesthetic.

The staff managed and cultivated the outcomes illustrated to co-create a visual narrative with the students targeting an external audience. The CoPs success was predicated on digitally agile staff being able to disseminate and induct other participants into the community.

**Figure 1**
Online landscape that facilitates communities of practice, adapted from Wenger et al. 2002



## Results and Conclusions

In creating the showcase, social learning underpinned the students' and staff co-creation of a new CoP, unifying their sense of belonging and purpose during lockdown. Extended engagement through the community offered additional support for participants' health issues associated with isolation. The research highlighted issues with maintaining this new CoP, being predicated on participant's capabilities and their interaction with it. Determining factors included levels of digital poverty and dexterity in relation to participants' access to relevant software and hardware. Migrating teaching online within a restricted timeframe proved challenging, creating anxiety and perceived positive and negative competition. There was a steep learning curve for all involved in interacting with online platforms; the creation of interactive materials for synchronous and asynchronous delivery was unprecedented.

Courses with more digital content such as graphics, were more adept to online delivery, but studio practice-based courses such as fashion design found the delivery challenging, but scoped out innovative ways of filming workshops and conducting 'live' studio experiences with the students.

All participants favoured tutorials and guest speakers to be on-line, where possible, including 'visits' to design studios. The online showcase was accessed by a wider audience and there was a sense from all participants that interaction with a live audience was important. Supported by an online platform and a blended learning model, Covid-19 expedited online CoPs, re-aligning the creative landscape. Digital pedagogies were extended and building on these will refine showcases and grow their reach in the future.

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