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Rationale, restrictions and responses: Online academic development to promote a community of practice

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Casual academics play a major role in higher education in Australia today. In their roles as tutors, demonstrators and markers, casual academics need access to opportunities to develop as teachers. As such, Deakin University has developed an online academic development program designed to better equip new and inexperienced casual academics for their roles. This paper reports on the approach that has been taken to designing one module of an online academic development program for casual academics, considering the influence of information and communication technology (ICT) on this design, and discusses an analysis of the feedback on the module by the participants who completed it. A conclusion is drawn that aligning self paced online learning with induction into a community of practice via ICT presents particular challenges.

Keywords: academic development, casual academics, communities of practice, self-paced online learning

Introduction

The fact that there is something of a misalignment between the concepts of 'professional' and 'casual' means that, although the terms 'professional development' and 'academic development' are regarded by some as interchangeable, this paper deliberately refers to the development of casual academics in terms of developing as teachers in higher education – academic development. Any discussion of the conception of casual academia as a profession is beyond the scope of this paper.

In 2004, following the introduction of a Graduate Certificate of Higher Education for continuing academic staff, Deakin University (Australia) identified the need for an academic development program for casual academic staff to commence in 2005.

A program which would provide introductory academic development for new casual academics at the university was developed by the central Teaching and Learning Support Unit, in consultation with Faculties, Division of Student Life and Human Resources Services Division. A narrow set of exemption categories was established, otherwise the university stipulated that this program was compulsory and was to be completed during the first semester the casual academic was employed at Deakin. The program included one face to face session where casual academics would meet with the Director of the program, and four more academic development modules delivered online through the university's online learning environment – Deakin Studies Online (DSO). A decision was made to modularise the program so as to cater for the differing academic development needs of tutors, demonstrators and markers.

The predominant online delivery focus of the program reflected the university's commitment to 'flexible learning', as well as building on the university's emphasis on the use of ICT in teaching and learning. The educational technology landscape at Deakin has impacted on efforts to generate a community of practice of casual academics, particularly in terms of how to establish the sense of identity that is at the core of the concept of communities of practice, and the building of an effective relationship between the practitioner and the newcomer. This paper discusses the influence of this technology on attempts to develop such a relationship.

The modularised and predominantly online program was implemented in 2005. Modules which focused on an introduction to tertiary teaching, teaching in diverse classrooms, assessment of student learning, small group teaching, lab/prac teaching and teaching with Deakin's online learning system were included in the program.

In late 2006, a review of the program was commissioned. Significantly, this review of the program was conducted by a practicing casual academic with many years experience teaching within the university. The original program, whilst grounded well in the literature of teaching and learning, did not entirely acknowledge the day to day, specific nature of casual academic work, as experienced by the casual academic asked to review the program.

The decision was made to maintain the modular nature of the program, to improve the connectedness with the 'realities' of casual academic teaching, to implement it for 12 months and then evaluate its effectiveness in the revised format. In essence, this maintained the structure and intention of this model of academic development, in that it was primarily delivered in modular format by means of ICT. The decision was also made to try to work with what the technology landscape offered and remain true to the central element of learning in a social world that is the basis of communities of practice thinking.

Academic development and communities of practice

The point made by Chalmers and Keown (2006) that professional development (their terminology) of teachers (in their case secondary teachers) should involve a combination of professional, personal and social elements is relevant here. The internet can easily deliver content, but academic developers need also to focus on the personal and social development of teachers (Chalmers and Keown). The same can be argued for the academic development of casual academics in higher education.

The personal aspect of teacher development involves "each individual teacher constructing, evaluating and accepting or rejecting for herself or himself the newly constructed knowledge about what it means to be a teacher" (Chalmers and Keown, 2006, p.144). The social aspect is that "the renegotiation and reconstruction of the rules and norms of what it means to be a teacher" (Chalmers & Keown, p.144) should be regarded as an equally essential component of any academic development program.

This social aspect can be interpreted as a reference to the notion of communities of practice, and hence the idea of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Accepting, as Chalmers and Keown (2006) point out, that much of what academic development courses provide is directive, a judgement needs to be made as to just how well does academic development delivered online cater for the personal and social elements that Chalmers and Keown promote.

The notion of learning as a peripheral participant in a community of practice was kindled by an interest in the master-apprentice model. The master advises, cajoles, instructs, shares with, passes on knowledge and expertise. The apprentice listens, reflects, experiments, experiences, makes mistakes, learns. A relationship develops, not just learning of skills. In this model's original form I suspect that the master meets with the apprentice on an ongoing basis. The apprentice can learn by observation, imitation and questioning. The master can 'teach' by example and guidance. The apprentice moves more towards the status of full practitioner in the community of practice. Lave and Wenger's (1991) 'old timer' plans for his or her own succession. Yet the very nature of modularised, online, flexible, self paced academic development tends to resist this perspective. This type of relationship changes when the apprentice is remote geographically yet connected technologically.

The cognitive apprenticeship model of learning (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) emphasises the necessity of the social interaction factor in the learning process. Well designed online discussion forums are able to support the interactive aspect of constructing knowledge (Rovai, 2007). Despite there being an online discussion forum made available to participants in Deakin's casual academic development program, its use was minimal. In a sense, this is a response to the question posed by Rice (2004) "does an online discussion space provide an effective forum for tutors to communicate and learn from each other" (p.800) in her overview of the program's initiation.

For online discussion forums to be effective, that is, to be collaborative, several elements need to be present: the discussion should be sustained, the discussion should have broad participation, the discussion should focus on topics which act to anchor the discussion (Guzdial and Turns, 2000). In the context of a unit of study over a semester, this is valid. An online self paced learning environment tends to not lend itself well to collaborative discussion, as contrary to a cohort of students monitoring a discussion space over the period of studying a unit, a flying visit into online academic development modules and out again seems to be more the pattern of usage. Such flying visits can and do occur at all stages of semester, with little pattern of synchronicity of participants.

Blogs have the potential to be a transformational technology in higher education (Williams & Jacob, 2004). That blogs are more suitable for promoting the conversations that are difficult to stimulate in discussion forums, is impacted on by the dispersed chronology of self paced online learning. The up to date, shared knowledge construction that Williams and Jacobs identify as a positive outcome of blogging, is less likely to occur in the context of the form of academic development discussed in this paper.

The discussion fora, blogs and wiki components of the landscape of educational technology are designed to generate conversations about practice. Conversations lead to relationships between practitioners. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that these relationships were dialectically constituted as social practice in the lived in world (p.123). Educational technology developments have altered the concept of the lived in world that Lave and Wenger would have envisaged in 1991. The conversations tend now to occur more in electronic format, something which tends to add a different perspective to situated learning in and with the world.

It has been argued that “collaborative activity powerfully positions CMC (computer mediated communication) and other technologically mediated communication processes” in workplace learning (Smith, 2003 p.75). The proposition (Smith) that collaboration between learners and instructors or expert others can occur on a synchronous or asynchronous basis, depending on the context of use at the time, applies here. The context is online self paced flexible delivery of a set of academic development modules for casual academics. The delivery is by means of web-based materials. A decision was made that the communication enabling the collaboration to occur would be via email communication technology. It is the restricted opportunity for synchronous collaboration between learners in the academic development program described in this paper that has influenced the design of its delivery.

The use of email technology, although regarded as low level in the educational technology landscape (Clegg, McManus, Smith and Todd, 2006), is a means of acknowledging what Clegg et al. describe as “one of the forms of talk” (p. 92) which can make up a discourse around teaching. Email puts people in each other’s temporal presence (Kress, 2003, p. 12); it can facilitate dialogue (Clegg, Hudson, & Mitchell, 2005, p. 6); and it can be shared and stored (all cited in Clegg et al, p.92).

The purpose of this paper then is to analyse how effectively can academic development built on the triad framework of Chalmers and Keown (2006) - professional, personal and social - be delivered in an e-learning environment. The question which arises is how effective has the design and delivery of this module of online academic development been, in terms of moving new casual academics more towards the centre occupied by the ‘old timer’, and in terms of what digital technology allows academic developers to achieve. This question is answered by means of exploring the outcomes of the academic development experience as identified by the participants themselves.

Design of an academic development module

Staff developers should act as facilitators and allow casual academics to transform their own practice (Orsmond and Stiles, 2002). It is not an academic developer’s responsibility to “direct practitioners or provide answers for them” (Orsmond and Stiles, p.255). Such notions reflect the personal development component identified by Chalmers and Keown (2006), and it was a significant element of the rationale for the design of the academic development module that is the focus of this paper. The ‘content’ of this module was structured so that the participant was taken on a journey through the various stages of a casual academic’s experience of a semester teaching (and marking) with the university.

There was a strong emphasis on the critically reflective practitioner (Brookfield, 1995) in the design of this academic development experience, with a range of questions devised to facilitate self reflection about each individual participant’s approach to teaching, set against some advice from a more experienced casual academic – the ‘old timer’. The participant is prompted to reflect on Brookfield’s “assumptions about what we think ought to be happening in a particular situation” (p.3).

Each ‘step’ through semester was introduced with a brief narrative entitled “Presumptions”. This narrative for each step highlighted what a novice casual academic might anticipate or expect to happen. For example, Step 1 explained that many organisations commonly induct new employees and help them to settle into their new work environment, perhaps with a guided tour. There then followed a section called “Tips and Tactics”, the purpose of which was to bring to the participants the differences between what a new casual academic might expect with what she or he would be likely to find. This section of Step 1 advised new casual academics not to expect the ‘guided tour’ and to make sure they took the

initiative and ask their supervisor for resources to allow them to perform effectively – texts, study guide, readings, handbooks, access to Deakin’s online systems, timesheets for pay claims, office space.

There was not always necessarily a large divergence between the ‘ideal’ and the ‘reality’, but what the participants were reading was authentic as it was the collected observations, insights and experiences of an old timer casual academic.

The subsequent ‘steps’ placed more emphasis on developing as an effective teacher, again with a practical tips and tactics focus – possibilities in your first class, establishing expectations of students, being nervous is normal, consider a range of lesson structures and strategies, uses of learning objectives, the idea of passive compared with active learning, providing feedback on learning. Again, this was designed to support the newcomers, using the collected wisdom of the old timer blended with the literature on effective teaching and learning, without being overly directive.

Each section of the module included a self test as a means of assisting participants to reflect on what they were reading, and to reinforce their learning in a formative sense. Then to complete each step, participants were presented with a series of self reflective questions, designed to guide thinking on the key issues and concepts presented in the “Tips and Tactics” section. Such questions as *What will my approach to teaching be? Am I giving them too much information?, What do my students see as the role of tutorials?* were regarded as a means of supporting participants’ reflection and development rather than a teacher-centred instructive approach.

The self reflection was a deliberate design decision, as most of the participants would be actually completing the module during semester whilst they were teaching. This allowed them to reflect on both the module’s content and on their own development as a teacher at the university, and to evaluate and contextualise for themselves the teaching and learning advice of the old timer. Such thinking acknowledged the trajectories that new participants in a community of practice may follow (Lave & Wenger).

The principal driver here was how best to align the technology with the learning design and how best to align the learning design with the capabilities of the technology. Part of the learning design was based on the identification of the need to somehow use the technology to attempt to ‘replace’ the talk about teaching that occurs everyday in communities in the corridors of university faculties, and which would occur in face to face academic development sessions. Email messaging was seen as the online version of corridor chat – the ‘online corridor’; an attempt to use an element of the technology landscape in an effort to acknowledge the importance of relationship building with newcomers to communities of practice.

Participants who completed the module were asked to write a reflection on what they felt they could take from the module and apply to their teaching. Participants were advised that they could be as honest as they wished, and that what they wrote would be read by the old timer, who would respond to each reflection individually. The ‘instructor’ read these reflections, added some feedback comments in terms of sharing thinking about good pedagogy, and sent these responses directly to each individual participant by email.

This design tends to support and echo Oh’s (2003) argument that “how content is prepared, how and to what extent person-to-person interactions are arranged, and how the whole learning environment matches learner needs should be the important issues for technology-supported learning”(p. 135). It also mirrors the ‘just-in-time’ idea of providing support for casual academics contextualised to their learning needs (Harwood & Clarke 2006).

Method

Every casual academic who completed this particular module, *Introduction to Tertiary Education*, submitted a reflective piece via the online assignment drop-box. The reflections of 104 casual academics submitted over three semesters form the basis of the discussion in this paper. During this timeframe, 355 participants were enrolled into the professional development program. Some did not need to complete the *Introduction to Tertiary Education* module, as they were enrolled only as ‘Markers’, who therefore only needed to complete the module on assessing student learning. Others were only required to complete the lab/prac teaching module. Many started but did not complete the program.

Casual academics from all four of Deakin’s faculties completed the module. The reflective pieces indicated that many participants were new to teaching of any form, some had formal teacher training,

some had taught at other higher education institutions, some were new to higher education teaching but had taught at primary or secondary school level.

At the completion of the *Introduction to Tertiary Education* module, participants were provided with the following instructions:

Write a self reflective piece about your reactions to this module. Aim for about 300 - 400 words, but please feel free to write more if you wish. We are interested in whether your view about teaching has been confirmed or altered at all, and more specifically, what types of things do you think you will be able to take from this module that will assist you in your role as a Tutor at Deakin. Alternatively, you may wish to challenge or discuss the ideas raised in the module, and reflect on your personal philosophy of teaching and learning.

The rationale for these instructions was to allow the participants to frame their thoughts about what they felt teaching and learning at university involved, supported by the scaffolding of the module, rather than them merely parroting good teaching principles presented to them in a didactic manner.

These framed thoughts were analysed from an interpretive perspective. I was interested in how the participants perceived their experience of being inducted into a community of practice by means of communication and educational technology. The hermeneutics basis of the interpretive perspective aligns with analysis of the reflective writing by participants and was regarded as an appropriate means of investigating the ways the participants in the module contextualised its content in this particular technological setting.

The reflections of 104 casual academics were explored by means of the qualitative data analysis tool NVivo. The analysis reflects the interpretive approach of grounded theory originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), with its emphasis on not entering an analysis seeking support for a predetermined theory.

Analysis of the data involved coding the categories of comments which emerged from the reflections of the participants. Once it became apparent that this analysis had exhausted the possibility of any new, distinctive codes appearing, single codes were grouped into categories based on similarity of code 'titles'. Subsequent to this process, the feedback comments contained in each category of codes were revisited in order to substantiate the clustering as well as to look for common themes running through the feedback allocated to each category. This process incorporated those original codes which appeared to be isolated comments and negative cases which initially did not seem to 'fit' with the many 'multiple entries' codes.

It should be acknowledged that interpretive research of this nature cannot deny the pre-existing values, beliefs and suppositions of the researcher. However, the process of coding the reflections of participants, the constant concept comparisons within the data which the original account of grounded theory emphasised, and the emergence of categories from the data, did begin to allow commonalities of views to come to light.

Participants were encouraged to be open and honest. The wording of the task requirement deliberately asked participants to reflect on what they believed teaching and learning involved, and to begin to reflect on approaches to, and their philosophy of, teaching. Just how open and honest the reflections were was a judgement which needed to be made by the experienced old timer who read them. As with any reading of learners' writings, and as part of the notion of communities of practice in higher education, those charged with reading and providing feedback to learners are expected to apply significant judgement. In the case of these participants' reflections, there were no set criteria against which to 'evaluate' learning, no need to use 'academic' judgement, no grading of responses, just an exploration and judgement of the participants' own thoughts of the phenomenon as they experienced it.

The categories which emerged from the reflections provided insights into how the participants perceived the module in terms of them developing as casual academics, as well as their perceptions of the usefulness of the 'stepping them through semester' design. Hence, two main themes emerged. It is these two core themes which frame the following discussion.

Participant reflections and reactions

Participants' reactions to the module were overwhelmingly positive as well as being quite varied in their focus. From the many comments by participants, two main themes emerged. There were many comments

directed at the actual content of the module, and, quite a few remarking about the chronological design of the module.

Module content

The coding process was used to group all comments which indicated what participants declared they found 'useful' in the module. Any and all comments which included the word 'useful' were grouped under this code. So too were comments which the researcher judged indicated 'usefulness'. A secondary analysis of this code's comments presented an opportunity to explore more thematically just what it was that participants could identify as being useful to their role as casual academics. Was the old timer providing what the newcomers perceived they needed?

The newcomers identified that they found the tips and tactics sections of the module most useful. These were deliberately designed from both a 'what' and 'how' perspective. As with the master and apprentice, the apprentice needs to know what to do as well as how to do it. Responses also clearly indicated that many participants felt better equipped to plan and prepare and deliver a tutorial or classroom session.

Almost as a reinforcement of the idea of moving into a community of practice, many participants nominated the video of an experienced Deakin tutor in action in the classroom, which was included in the module, as being most useful. This tends to highlight the point underpinning the legitimate peripheral participation concept, of observing how others in the community do things, and trying to emulate or adapt this practice. Another aspect of the module's content commented upon more than others was the usefulness of advice on assessing student learning and providing feedback.

It is not surprising that participants were focusing on the basics of teaching in higher education – tips and hints, all of a specific nature: preparing for and conducting a class; the importance of setting ground rules and expectations; assessing student learning and giving effective feedback. Given that Maslow's (1970) needs hierarchy influenced the design of the module in terms of what does a 'new' academic need in order to begin moving from uncertainty to acceptance, this is understandable.

Yet also, roughly as many participants as those commenting on the basics also commented on the fact they found that the module encouraged them to reflect on there being different approaches to teaching, and to determine what approach best suited them, their students and their particular teaching and learning context. Such responses indicate that the design of the module was recognised by some as being valuable to their development as teachers.

Module design

The reflections indicated how useful many participants found the fact that the module was divided into steps that a casual academic could expect to go through during a semester. In some participants' views of their experience with the module, usefulness was found in the provision of a framework to understand the stages both teachers and students go through; in understanding a tutor's responsibilities at different stages; in allowing for planning for a whole semester rather than for individual teaching sessions, and about the value of some suggestions for conducting their first tutorial.

Repetitive themes of reassurance, practical guidance, a structure for reflecting on experiences had prior to completing the module, identification of stages of semester, greater awareness of responsibilities at various points of semester and identifying and thinking about stages as they were experienced, emerged from the feedback.

But also, the reflections of the participants stimulated some reflection by the old timer on the content of the module. Feedback about how some stages of the semester didn't apply to particular individuals, about the content not aligning well with what casual academics teaching in practicals or clinical environments experienced and about teaching in online learning environments rather than face to face (which the module focused on), are thematic.

Such commentary highlights the challenges of designing academic development for online delivery to a disparate group of casual academics. Finding a balance between generic and discipline specific is a major issue. Knowing that the design has been set and despatched to participants and only receiving feedback in the trickles which online self paced academic development generates, means that timely adjustments and refinements are made quite difficult online. The relationship between the master and the apprentice in its original conception of sharing and cajoling and observing and trialling has changed in the modern technological landscape.

Discussion

Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory has influenced the design of this module – and of the whole academic development program. New casual teachers need to feel safe and supported in their new environment before they are able to earn the respect of the community of practice and actually feel the belongingness that allows them to believe that they are able to contribute to the work of this community.

In commenting about the usefulness of the step by step nature of the module's design, participants were reinforcing the need for newcomers to be provided with practical advice which meets their immediate teaching needs, rather than immediately enlightening them on the principles of good teaching. In the context of communities of practice, the 'practice' element needs to be emphasised. The more experienced surely must teach the newcomer not only skills, but also the context in which different skills are used, and to some extent how the use of different skills will be emphasised at different stages of the peripheral participant's development and induction into the practice tasked to the particular community.

Analysis of participants' reflections reaffirms the belief that for newcomers to be moved into communities of practice, the experienced old timer needs to know what he/she is talking about. Lave and Wenger surely had this in mind in their writings. Wenger (1998) himself phrases it as "ensuring new generations of members" (p.7). If academic development of casual teachers in higher education is to be effective, it is imperative that the perspective from and by the casual academic is central to any design. The pressing needs of the new and inexperienced casual academic are not so much 'what to do' (principles, policies and procedures) but 'how to do' (teaching and learning advice). It is this aspect of academic development which dominates the design of the module at the centre of analysis in this paper.

The use of ICT to convey principles, policy and procedure (the 'what') is efficient and effective. As a carrier of advice (the 'how') to new casual academics, as well as a means of participating in a community of practice, much more thought needed to be devoted to synthesising the learning design with the capabilities of the educational and communication technology.

Just as students come to learning environments with a variety of experiences and knowledge and skills, so too do casual academics come to teaching from a multiplicity of backgrounds. Just as students have multiple entry points, so do teachers. Just as effective teachers try to cater for and build on the manifold nature of their classrooms, effective induction of casual academics as legitimate participants needs to acknowledge and try to cater for the differing entry points and needs of new and inexperienced higher education teachers. This is a challenge in the classroom. It is also a challenge in computer supported academic development environments.

Interestingly, very few participants commented on the fact that the delivery of this academic development module was by means of ICT. These comments centred on the advantage that the self paced, flexible and online nature of the delivery of the module afforded them.

Overall, the reflections suggested quite strongly that in terms of developing as a higher education teacher, online modules such as this one can be quite effective. If we regard academic development as providing strategies, tactics, tips and scaffolded self reflection, the technology delivering this development was adequately suited. The 'professional' component of Chalmers and Keown's (2006) triad appears to be achievable via an e-learning environment.

Designing the module with self reflective questions rather than express principles of teaching did help to cater for the individual casual academic's personal development in a community of practice. Yet it is debatable just how well casual academics can develop their views about, and philosophy of teaching, without the face to face social sharing of perspectives which self paced online academic development doesn't effectively allow for. Commentary from participants about the video of a colleague in action in her classroom suggests that to develop your personal philosophy of teaching, you need to evaluate what others believe and demonstrate about higher education teaching. There is a danger in online academic development of the participant being exposed to too insular a perspective of developing as a teacher; or of the perspective being too broad and thin to be effective at promoting personal development.

The real limitations of the e-learning environment became apparent with the social aspect of being inducted into the norms and culture of the casual academic's environment. The old timer conveyed what he believed the norms and practices of the casual academic community are in the context of this university. The participants broadly responded positively to this perspective, yet this technology supported induction provided little in terms of collaboration which social constructivist theory would

claim is essential to learning. There remains a lingering doubt that the online 'old timer-newcomer' model provides adequately diverse perspectives of what it means to be an effective casual academic, and hence, insufficient breadth of perceptions for casual academics to synthesise and evaluate as they develop.

Whilst being alert to the potential contradiction of presenting statistical results in a qualitative analysis of data, it is apparent from analysing all comments from participants in the program that 93.6% of comments were coded as 'positive'. All comments which were coded as 'negative' were analysed again in order to detect themes. The negative comments tended to challenge answers given to some questions in the self tests, to want more detail in some of the tips and tactics, and to see little worth in the module's content.

These issues have been responded to, with the module's content being reviewed and updated at the end of 2007. But it does highlight the restrictive nature of online, self paced learning, in that in face to face or synchronous online learning environments, such feedback from participants could be responded to 'on the spot', as is exemplified by the thinking behind social constructivist learning, and to an extent, the idea of legitimate peripheral participation.

So, where am I in the educational technology landscape? My own reflections tell me that some aspects of the technology are advantageous for delivery of academic development, but less so for timely opportunities for socially constructed meaning and relationship building. With this particular form of online academic development delivery, the ability to have conversations about teaching is restricted mostly to the old timer and the newcomer individually. A community of practice conversation more broadly is a challenge.

Conclusion

In terms of the rationale for its design, it is safe to say that the module was effective. As a means of providing academic development to casual academics, the module catered adequately for meeting their needs in terms of professional and personal development. From a socialising perspective, a limited achievement was the outcome.

Whilst this paper has considered the use of ICT to implement academic development for casual academics, further investigation is needed into the perceptions of the participants themselves of entering a community of practice electronically. There also needs to be an investigation into the extent to which ongoing development and support for casual academics' development over time, rather than the initial induction, can be facilitated via the use of technology.

Even though the online program of academic development appears to have been effective initially, how can the university be assured of the quality of casual academics' teaching once they 'fly out' of the online academic development environment? As noted in the RED Report (Percy et al 2008) on sessional teaching in sixteen Australian universities, most universities have "no clear distinction between induction, professional and career development" (p.13).

The disciplinary differences in teaching are not well accounted for in this module design. Further exploration is needed of how e-learning environments such as this one can respond effectively and efficiently to the comments of several participants that some elements of the module did not accurately apply to, nor reflect, their particular teaching context.

An online learning environment, with a self paced emphasis, presents considerable challenges for academic development design and delivery, particularly from a communities of practice perspective.

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