

Share Sessions: A Solution to Cross-Disciplinary Academic Professional Learning and Development in Higher Education



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Abstract Continuing professional learning and development (CPLD) in higher education is critical for improving the quality of teaching. Major change or crisis events often bring to light the need to upskill teaching staff to manage successful transition through those periods. When the COVID-19 pandemic caused our institution to pivot to emergency online teaching and learning, we identified a need to provide additional support to academic staff as they moved to online teaching. We introduced an approach called Share Sessions, where staff presented their innovative online teaching practice in a Zoom session. In this chapter, we introduce the Share Sessions as an informal cross-disciplinary approach to CPLD. We report the results of in-depth interviews with ten academics who presented in the Share Sessions. By employing hermeneutic phenomenology as an overarching research methodology, we thematically analysed the interviews and categorised the data into three broad categories: academics as connected learners, community of practice, and sense-making of informal sharing. Suggestions are provided for implementing this approach with a three-step process of planning for before, during, and following the Share Sessions.

1 Introduction

In this chapter, we introduce a continuing professional learning and development (CPLD) approach called *Share Sessions*, implemented at the University of Sydney Business School (USBS) during the crisis period when the COVID-19 pandemic caused our institution to pivot to emergency online teaching and learning. USBS is one of the highest-ranking business schools in Australia and a global leader in business education. Whilst blended and online delivery modes are used, more traditional

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D. Forbes, R. Walker (eds.), *Developing Online Teaching in Higher Education*, Professional and Practice-based Learning 29,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5587-7_11

face-to-face teaching methods are the ‘norm’, and the pandemic seriously challenged our thinking about quality online learning and teaching.

The Business Co-Design (BCD) unit is a mix of professional and academic staff covering a range of roles from educational development, learning design, and media production to educational research and evaluation. The three authors of this chapter are affiliated with this unit, whose main aim is to focus on strategic and innovative educational development initiatives such as the Connected Learning at Scale project (Wilson et al., 2021; Wardak et al., 2021). During the Covid-19 lockdown period, the staff in this unit pivoted to support our Business School colleagues as they transitioned to emergency remote teaching (e.g. Zeivots & Shalavin, 2021).

One of the support channels that BCD offered during the pivot was the ability for staff to share practice informally with their colleagues in the Business School. These sessions ran every few weeks via the online web conferencing platform Zoom. The format of each Share Session was three short (5 min) presentations from academic staff on how they were teaching online. The Share Sessions were facilitated by Educational Developers who invited questions for discussion, both verbally and through the text chat function. In the context of our organisation, Educational Developers are academic staff who are tasked with supporting educators to improve their teaching and course design practices. More broadly, they are referred to as academic developers and often have research and teaching commitments (Aitchison et al., 2020). There were about 30–40 attendees at each of the 11 Share Sessions we facilitated, and all Business school staff were invited. Whilst the sessions were introduced at the Faculty level as a response to the pandemic, extensive positive feedback from teaching staff has led us to continue with them embedded in a wider programme of CPLD.

1.1 Literature Review

CPLD in higher education is critical for improving the quality of teaching. A report by the Grattan Institute on the status of teaching at Australian universities highlighted that academics often have little or no preparation for teaching and that they are expected to develop this crucial skill on their own with limited support (Norton et al., 2013). In addition to lack of time as a key constraint, casualisation of teaching staff was another restriction identified by the report, which limited the possibility of developing a more systematic approach to CPLD. Two later reports (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016; Norton et al., 2018) found that three relevant aspects linked teaching quality to improved student satisfaction: teacher training, connecting teaching performance with academic promotions, and research into teaching methods.

Australian universities have generally followed the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), offering teaching staff professional learning opportunities through a number of centralised qualifications including formal courses (Jacob et al., 2015). These one-size-fits-all models often fail to target specific learning needs of the staff (Layne et al., 2004). The Grattan Institute report (Norton et al.,

2013) supported this point and recommended that CPLD needs to be designed and implemented around teachers' specific needs and that the teachers should have the opportunity to apply what they have learned. Our Share Sessions are filling this important gap by offering staff the opportunities to observe practice and discuss their own issues with colleagues.

Surveying academics from 31 institutions across the UK, King (2004) reported that the top three forms of CPLD frequently undertaken by academics included discussions with colleagues within their department, networking with those from other institutions, as well as supporting colleagues to develop their own teaching. Surprisingly, participating in workshops was in sixth place while studying or holding a learning and teaching qualification came in at eighth. This indicates that academics often prefer learning scenarios that offer opportunities to connect and are tailored to their specific needs. It seems that informal opportunities such as 'brown-bag' lunch meetings (Sambell et al., 2017) and conversations between peers remain a prominent form of CPLD for academics (Crick et al., 2021).

According to Roscoe (2002), CPLD is often focused on three main areas of professional learning: extending technical knowledge and skills, development of personal transferable skills such as teamwork or problem-solving, and development of managerial skills. Our Share Sessions are primarily concerned with the first type, developing technical knowledge and skills and links to wider contexts of pedagogical knowledge and sharing teaching practices. This form of CPLD is often taken spontaneously in relation to specific needs (Roscoe, 2002), which in our case came to light in the wake of having to teach online during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a need for USBS academics to explore Zoom and other technological teaching tools and learn how to apply them to online delivery more efficiently. In our context, where most of the teaching was conducted in face-to-face mode on campus, the change to online teaching was felt strongly and required a tailored CPLD approach. This is in line with the literature that notes that many academics who have little or no experience with teaching online simply translate their face-to-face teaching strategies to the online environment (McQuiggan, 2012). It is thus important to provide tailored CPLD opportunities for academics if we wish them to provide quality online learning experiences for their students. Such CPLD approaches can add disciplinary nuance and appeal to differing levels of online teaching expertise. An added benefit is that when academics learn how to teach online, they also reflect on and consequently improve their face-to-face teaching (McQuiggan, 2012).

The idea of learning through a Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is well established in the field of education. A CoP requires an event (e.g. Share Sessions), leadership (our Share Session facilitator), connectivity (our Educational Developers who helped build a rich fabric of connectivity (Wenger, 2000), membership (our teachers), projects (our pivot to online teaching), and artefacts (our teachers' stories, video recordings as future resources). Warhurst's (2006) study showed that new pedagogic meaning and practice can emerge through academic dialogue and recommends that academic developers should prioritise the facilitating of meaning-making among cohort peers. Reilly et al. (2012) found that careful planning is needed to execute CoPs for faculty CPLD successfully and that

they are best accomplished with a team approach. Our Educational Development team achieved this through collaborative discussion and knowledge sharing of colleagues' practices.

The strategic importance of online learning has led many universities to implement innovative and efficient approaches towards improving academic CPLD. In addition to visible physical and logistical implications of the sudden move to online mode, there have been less obvious factors that affect the quality of teaching and learning. Sudden transition can situate many academics as novice learners in a new environment and affect their motivation and emotions (Lockee, 2021). In fact, teaching can become emotionally charged with anxiety and fear when teachers must change their practice and professional responsibilities, particularly in the transition to online teaching (Scott & Sutton, 2009). A systematic review by Philipsen et al. (2019) concludes that individual professional development components like context, teachers, and student learning matter; however, other studies (Newell & Bain, 2020) argue that so do collaborative components. They should all be seen as inter-related rather than separate from one another.

2 Methodology

The investigative focus of this study draws on hermeneutic phenomenology as an overarching research methodology to ensure a close examination of academics' experiences and insights of Share Sessions. It is an approach that, on the one (phenomenological) hand, focuses on the lived experience of humans and their perceptions (Langdrige, 2007), and on the other (hermeneutical) hand, involves interpretation and application of their lived experience (Schmidt, 2016).

In this study, combining phenomenology and hermeneutics helps recognise the dynamic, complex, and situated experiences educators talk about in Share Sessions and examines how they make sense of these experiences. The rationale was to give voice to the presenters and illuminate their perspectives, values, and sociocultural aspects (Adams, 2013).

To investigate the impact of and experiences from Share Sessions, ethical approval was granted to conduct in-depth interviews with the presenters of the sessions. The interview consisted of three parts: revisiting lived experience in a Share Session, linking this experience to CPLD, and providing overall feedback on Share Sessions. Ten presenters participated in the interviews from across eight disciplines within the Business School. The interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was carried out using manual coding (Saldaña, 2009). The three authors of this chapter worked in parallel to code the shared body of data and then came together to clarify interpretations and juxtapose various perspectives. In the next section, we present some of the prominent themes from this interview data and then discuss their relevance in contemporary online CPLD.

3 Findings

From the rich data that was collected, we present three broad categories and associated underlying themes. Quotation marks and indented texts indicate excerpts from interview transcripts.

3.1 *Academics as Connected Learners*

The largest category that appeared from analysing the interviews was related to learning. This learning for academics happened on three broad levels, described here as themes. The first theme was *learning from others*. For instance, when asked why they participated in the Share Sessions, one interviewee stated, “I wanted to see if I can learn from others – what tricks there are – because I know there are some teachers in the Business School ... that’s what they’re really good at. Best learn from them.” Most comments in this theme were about academics trying to learn how others had solved problems that they themselves faced.

The second theme was *helping colleagues learn*. In this theme, the interviewees exhibited an explicit awareness that others attending or presenting at the Share Sessions were also learning. Some interviewees stated that this was a motivating factor for them when they decided to present at the Share Sessions: “I really feel motivated to be able to help people have their own ‘a-ha’ moments.” Another interviewee stated that they had made some changes to their assessment that proved successful, “I suspected that other people would be facing similar challenges, and it might be a useful idea for other people.”

Another aspect was linked to *dealing with challenges together*. Share Sessions were a safe space to discover how others struggled with online teaching, learning management systems (LMS), and Zoom. At least four presenters shared genuine care for fellow colleagues in sharing what worked well in their early pivot to online teaching: “I really wanted to get that [good practice] out to help people.” For more than half of interviewees, these sessions sparked a conversation that continued afterwards. In one instance, the discussion was taken to a weekly departmental discipline meeting: “Some of my colleagues from the accounting discipline were there and spoke to me at our coordinators’ meeting ... about some of my ideas and copying them over into their units.”

The third theme was learning as a result of *self-evaluation and reflection*. Share Sessions participants could observe different teaching and technology strategies and practices online. At times that led to discussing similarities and differences across different disciplines in the Business School and how best to address common challenges. This was a source of self-evaluation and reflection on one’s own academic practices. There were two main ways that self-evaluation and reflection were evident. One was in response to conversation with others:

I find that it [Share Session] does start that conversation ... where people contact me and go, 'Oh, that's a really great idea! I was thinking about doing that. Do you think I could do it in this environment?', and 'I would never have thought about that'. And I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, let's go down that track'. So it's stretching me, and it gives me an opportunity to start the conversation, stretching what has already been done.

Another way self-reflection played out was when academics kept in mind their colleagues when they prepared presentations and communicated their findings:

The main benefit for me, I think, was to perhaps step back, focus for a little while and pay some attention to what might be most valuable to my colleagues. So, rearranging my thoughts and putting [them] into a different style of presentation that would enable my colleagues to get some value from seeing how I'd tried some things in the past.

3.2 *Community of Practice*

A strong theme running through our participant interview data was the increasing occurrence of rich *discussion with colleagues about teaching*: "... I was also asking people about whether my existing approach would work online." There was an underlying need to create a space to discuss critical issues experienced by most and to leverage the power of the community behind it: "We should be having the opportunity to talk about shortcomings in Zoom, ... and their design improvements." Academia has long been a 'siloed' endeavour both within disciplines and within one's own teaching space (Trust et al., 2017); it was even more apparent during COVID-19 as we increasingly conducted our teaching remotely. A number of participants emphasised the need to get the balance right between Share Sessions presentation and discussion: "I like the discussion when I go to those sessions. The more discussion we can have, the more we benefit from hearing from one another." This has always been a concern in designing CPLD sessions since academics' time for professional development is so scarce (Handal & Huber, 2011). So how best to divide and use the precious moments they have available?

Another theme in this category is the ability to develop *social processes* through a community of sharing practice. For example, when people interact in groups, they adjust and readjust their behaviour and narrative in response to the social interaction occurring in the group.

Because we were three speakers, based on what the person before you told already, and based on the questions that they got, it shaped a little bit how the next speakers were talking. I think usual training sessions have much more of like a curriculum approach, where you go through certain sets of things that are discussed in a workshop.

There were a number of participants who suggested that the Share Sessions provided opportunities to get noticed, "not knowing many people before, we all went on Zoom; it was a good way to actually meet people" and to build connections. At times, participants experienced a sense of coming together: "At the end, we all stayed behind, and we high-fived each other on the screen ... I find being involved

in those sorts of things, the camaraderie you get is really lovely. It's terrific. I get a lot out of it."

3.3 *Sense-Making of Informal Sharing*

Share Sessions were commonly seen as an *informal space* to aid CPLD. The informality of these discussions was highlighted as beneficial in comparison to presenting more formal research-based findings: "You want to have more of an informal discussion ... and less about how we use this methodology." The format and audience of the sessions were described as "not a formal training environment," "voluntary," "more relaxed," and involved specific characteristics such as "people trying something new" and "explaining it in a simple way." Informality was also described through limited hierarchy and authority. Some presenters saw themselves as participants who not only presented but also listened to and learned from others, enabling a more personalised CPLD experience. Share Sessions were praised for using a bottom-up approach as presenters were invited to share experience to address issues immediately relevant to their teaching. Although some Share Sessions had naturally emerging themes such as student engagement and assessment, other Sessions were not theme-driven.

Sharing the presentation and receiving feedback were regarded as helpful and often led to enriching professional practices. The prevalent view was that presenters heard from other people who provided them with "feedback about what I was doing. They were suggesting potential alternatives and new directions." One presenter was motivated to understand their practices at a deeper level and ready to have critical discussions. After working in one space for a long time, they reflected, "It's really good to be challenged on what leads you to this way, why didn't you go that way?" One participant believed that academic staff have limited knowledge about initiatives or research outside their familiar circle of colleagues. Share Sessions were a useful way of "bringing it back to people – make sure that what you're doing is still legitimate and has value outside of your small cohort."

Frequently, Share Sessions were described as building cross-disciplinary community and attempting to extend disciplinary silos. According to participants, "you hear what people are doing, particularly in other disciplines"; breaking the boundaries of disciplines "it means that I can, as a qualitative marketing unit, go and talk to ... who's in accounting ... neither of us would ever have thought that there was something [in common]"; and promoting a bottom-up approach "encouraging people to offer something which may not fit the themes." These narratives indicate that there was an interest and need to explore good practice from disciplines across the Business School.

The benefits of the informal sharing were associated with "room to make mistakes," where presenters can be "more candid and frank" and "more casual and open to conversation and feedback." The online environment offered new avenues to connect, which were unlike face-to-face CPLD workshops. "Something that really

surprised me,” revealed an interviewee, “you don’t get to do the chit chat only on the way in and the way out [of face-to-face training], but you do get to do the chit chat the entire [Share] Session.” The academic was hopeful that their students practised similar informal chat conversations to discuss content and assignments. The interviewee was impressed by the frequency of informal chats during the Share Sessions and is considering ways to integrate informal student conversations when they return to a face-to-face context.

4 Discussion

4.1 Impact

Our findings indicate that Share Sessions were a successful CPLD intervention that left an overwhelmingly positive impact on participating staff. The pandemic crisis that resulted in the pivot to online teaching and learning presented academics with a need to learn (Roscoe, 2002) and urged them to connect. The online mode was the primary option to do so, and Share Sessions were embraced as a medium to connect through discussions on practice and professional development.

Learning was among the main benefits of participating in Share Sessions. In addition to learning from, and helping, others to deal with teaching challenges, which were prominent avenues to learn, emergent learning was often linked to a community of practice. The need to talk to someone and get peer feedback were common motivations to participate and present in Share Sessions. The impact of interaction was pivotal and led to genuine exchange and synergy: “There was a lot of real enthusiasm to learn. There were lots of questions being asked. There was a lot more interaction, even with people without [their] cameras on.” This aligns with the systematic review by Kyndt et al. (2016), which validates that sharing, collaboration, and interaction are significant informal learning opportunities. They conclude that academics learn from the interplay between individual and shared activities rather than one or the other.

Interestingly, Share Sessions uncovered sociocultural vulnerabilities of university structures and practices such as individualised academic work and limited knowledge of activities occurring outside one’s unit. The Sessions were not necessarily seen as a solution, yet they provided an opportunity to observe emerging practices beyond existing silos and hierarchies. This demonstrates that building skills for quality teaching and learning online can benefit from being cross-disciplinary, a finding supported by a recent study in higher education (Beaumont, 2020).

Initially, Share Sessions were built as a space for academics to share their experience, especially on overcoming challenges or on teaching successes. Although Share Sessions had a simple structure – three presenters, 5-min sharing, discussion – they did not have a well-defined agenda or must-cover topics, nor an explicit

link to CPLD. As a result, presentations and discussions covered a variety of topics that appeared more multifaceted or cross-disciplinary. Looking at a sustainable learning trajectory, we observed that presenters mentioned Share Sessions as the first point of interaction with others. At times it triggered further exchange of resources and materials, and practices were shared within and across disciplines. Informal conversations, networking, and reflections on academic staff's own work were mentioned as other longer term CPLD benefits. The authors observed that during and after Share Sessions staff asked for permission, and granted access, to view each other's LMS sites. Before similar practices were scarce, and sessions encouraged more open and transparent sharing, which now has become more common in USBS. In another instance, a Share Sessions presenter illustrated how to embed a Padlet in the LMS. Following this presentation, at least two large subject coordinators with over 1500 students used this strategy to incorporate the collaborative tool in their LMS.

Participation in Share Sessions also helped academics to better understand online learning from a student's perspective. For example, teachers hoped that students engaged in similar peer chats during online classes as academics did during Share Sessions. This indicates that after presenting in Share Sessions academics can better empathise with their students and their journey through learning.

4.2 Transferability

The idea of Share Sessions is relatively straightforward to set up and is not time consuming for the organisers nor the participants. Delivering Share Sessions through the very platforms that teachers are learning to use for their teaching can achieve two goals at once: practise use and build community. Due to the flexibility of videoconferencing tools, participants can easily share a range of practices through shared visuals, LMS examples, and useful resources and links. Share Sessions are particularly beneficial during unexpected or crisis situations when teachers experience significant changes and are time-poor or overloaded with new information. Studies have shown that innovative practices can and do take place in such trying circumstances (Ellis et al., 2020). In addition, Share Sessions offer informal opportunities to discuss, practise, and reflect – all important contributors to CPLD.

4.3 Implementation

Finally, we provide practical steps on how to implement this approach and what we have learned from this process. There are essentially three parts, which include planning for before, during, and following the session.

1. Before the session, contact the potential presenters and invite them to share their innovative online teaching practices, tools, or ideas. In our context, Educational Developers were best placed to use their knowledge of current practices, speak to colleagues to find suitable case examples, and then invite them to present at a Share Session. We recommend someone in a similar, preferably academic, role as this approach ensured that we attracted a diverse set of quality presentations. We organised 30-min sessions, which included three short presentations as well as time for questions and discussion. This attracted a time-poor audience and encouraged the presenters to focus on specific practical aspects that would be of benefit to others. Academics were encouraged to use visuals and show real working examples.
2. During the session, the Educational Developers acted as facilitators to keep time, manage the flow, engage the audience through probing for questions, and facilitate discussion (Warhurst, 2006). This worked well since the facilitators had already built a rapport with the presenters and were often involved in helping to decide suitable topics for, or takeaways from, presentations. The informal format of the Share Sessions fostered lively discussion, which often continued well beyond the session. Frequently, it resulted in further conversations between members of different disciplines who may not always have such opportunities.
3. Following the session, with the permission of the presenters, we uploaded the Zoom recording and presentation slides, which included the presenters' contact details and any accompanying resources on our dedicated LMS page. We pursued this with an announcement to remind staff of the resource availability. This enabled further contact and point of reference, particularly for members of different disciplines, to continue their academic CPLD. The Share Session materials are now used as a CPLD resource on our dedicated LMS site with 381 enrolled staff.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that Share Sessions are a timely and practical solution that can be easily implemented in a CPLD programme and contribute to cross-disciplinary learning. From our dataset of presenters' reflections, we extrapolated three overarching benefits of Share Sessions: academics as connected learners, community of practice, and the value of leveraging opportunities for informal discussions and creating camaraderie to overcome challenges together.

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