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## **Constructing Online Collaboratories: Approaches to Building Community among Online Faculty**

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### **Abstract**

Online education provides students with flexibility in their educational experiences. Many universities higher adjunct instructors from around the world to teach in online formats. This type of learning environment creates challenges in how they train their remote faculty. The use of online collaboratories provides platforms to interact and create engaging learning environments to facilitate adjunct instructors' faculty development. Collaboratories were defined by computer programmer William Wulf as "[Centers] without walls, in which the nation's researchers can perform research without regard to a physical location, interacting with colleagues, accessing instrumentation, sharing data and computation resources, and accessing information in digital libraries" (Wulf, 1989). The use of collaboratories provides faculty trainers with a platform to implement training procedures, mentoring, and communication with their adjunct faculty. Higher education institutions do not utilize a set standard for their online training of adjuncts. It varies significantly between institutions. This paper provides an overview of the construction of collaboratories for online higher education instructors. This exploratory case study research examines two types of online collaboratories utilized to provide training, provide mentoring opportunities, connect adjunct instructors with peers, and communicate effectively while teaching in online environments. It shares qualitative insights using case study research to present effective practices to develop, maintain, and sustain online collaboratories.

**Keywords:** collaboratories, faculty development, mentoring, online education, communication

### **Introduction**

Social engagement is a critical aspect of preserving a legacy and executing educational visions for higher education institutions. The collaboration of faculty and students within communities provides opportunities for deeper understandings of a higher education institution's functions and culture. It is a crucial component for creating a socially engaged learning environment. Students learn more from instructors when a social presence is utilized in any classroom setting, online or in-person, and develop a stronger sense of self and improve cognition during the learning experience (Garrison & Vaughn, 2006). Faculty development and training can provide rich experiences for faculty members to develop this area's traditional academic settings skills. However, in online educational settings, the nature of teaching online creates the necessity to purposefully integrate collaboration and community when distance plays a factor in the learning process.

The process of community inquiry provides a platform to help engage faculty and students using a strong teaching, cognitive and social presence in the online classroom. It is imperative to provide opportunities for online faculty members to develop these skills through online collaboratories. Online part-time and adjunct instructors regularly use at most colleges and universities instead of hiring full-time online faculty. For the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the requirement is that the adjunct has professional experience and appropriate educational levels of a full-time faculty member to be hired as an adjunct instructor. In the last decade in the Higher Education marketplace, the advent of online education has created a greater demand for online instructors.

However, with the marketplace for online coursework being over-crowded, and an abundance of course offerings globally, program directors of online programs must examine worldwide for the best-qualified adjuncts and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). This can create a challenge in effectively building social learning environments for consistent students and facilitating a nurturing learning environment where temporary faculty members teach consistently.

Many higher education institutions transitioned to a model of heavily relying on adjuncts to teach online courses or to hire full-time faculty to teach the classes as an overloaded assignment (Romo & Leinen, 2018). This helps minimize costs to maintain a full-time faculty member's salary and reduce the overhead costs of teaching online courses. Many courses utilize prefabricated templates developed by SMEs. Course master shells' development provides instructors with less academic freedom and more consistency in teaching. It provides a platform to ensure course objectives and student learning outcomes are met when utilizing many part-time or adjunct instructors to teach online courses (Romo & Leinen, 2018).

Additionally, reports have indicated that there is really minimal operational reasoning for an online program to limit the number of part-time employees associated with a program (Greive, 2000). Academically and interpersonally, this approach has negatively impacted the student experience's quality in the online classroom. Instructors being unmotivated by the low pay, being overworked, or feeling like they are not directly connected to the institution (Nica, 2018). This problem, Langen (2011) argues, could be curbed by requiring a teaching evaluation process for adjuncts. He states, "While much of the discussion regarding results and assessment revolves around student outcomes, teaching evaluation is inevitably a critical component of the assessment process" (p. 186). Online professional development programs and communities are needed to help engage online faculty members and improve online education social engagement.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study paper is to provide practical approaches to building community among online adjunct faculty in higher education. This paper will utilize an explanatory case study design to explain techniques that help build community among online adjunct faculty. Notably, this paper will use administrative faculty members' perspectives that lead teams of online adjuncts from all over the United States to teach in online programs that facilitate robust instruction for online learners.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Collaboratories and Communities of Inquiry**

There are many ways to define collaboratories. However, for contextual purposes in this paper, collaboratories are centers without walls, in which the nation's researchers can perform research without regard to a physical location, interacting with colleagues, accessing instrumentation, sharing data and computation resources, and accessing information in digital libraries, (Wulf, 1989). This paper explores best practices within higher education. The authors would replace "researcher" with "educator"; however, anyone facilitating or documenting learning collaborates. Professional organizations that list themselves as Collaboratories or Collaboratory consultants, such as The New School Collaboratory (2019), boast that technology can bring goal-oriented, like-minded individuals together, educate them, and empower them with task data to create organizational movement.

A complimentary educational model for collaboratories to be considered are Communities of Inquiry (CofI). Inquiry communities bring order to collaboratories, specifically when using online formats to attain higher-order learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

The [CofI] framework identifies the core elements of a collaborative constructivist learning environment required to create and sustain an intentional learning community. The three main elements (teaching, cognitive and social presence) and their overlap provide the structure to understand the dynamic of deep and meaningful online learning experiences (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010, p. 32).

Garrison, (n.d.), a scholar of Communities of Inquiry, specifically in online education, affirms, "Higher education has consistently viewed community as essential to support collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning" (p. 61).

Teaching, training, and facilitation happens beyond formal higher education and should explore and implement these best practices. For example, Fan and Yost (2019) discuss that early childhood educators should consider building collaboratories to educate, train, and communicate with their students' parents regarding their children's needs, learning processes, and practices at the home of the child.

Also, Hughes, Brandford, and Likens (2018) express that Physical Therapy training can be facilitated in an online format effectively and call for more education regarding best practices. These examples share the effective use of collaboratories in non-traditional settings and share similar collaboratories' sentiments to build effective training models that facilitate robust learning environments of many types of students. It is important to note that collaboratories can serve as a means to help students learn from their instructors in a cohesive manner that helps them get the most from their learning environments.

### **Standardization of Higher Education Curricula**

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) strives to determine if quality practices are being implemented in many aspects of academia, including faculty training, although primarily known for checking the standardization of curriculum for colleges and universities (Official HLC Guidelines, 2016). Accreditation bodies that evaluate colleges and universities desire to see that processes in academia are measurable. Although not every college or university in the United States is associated with HLC, it is universally important to accrediting bodies that quality practices are quantifiable. Ideally, it would be best to prove that adjunct and full-time faculty were trained equally for classroom effectiveness. Accrediting bodies would appreciate a college or university that could prove formative and summative assessments in the faculty training process. Collaboratories, with the goal of CoI, could be implemented with this in mind.

Quality Matters is a tool that provides course alignment for universities. It allows course designers to effectively standardize course templates across a study or entire division program that offers online course offerings for higher education institutions (Quality Matters, 2020). Specifically, this tool provides alignment and standardization to ensure that students have a standardized instruction approach. Quality Matters uses a rubrics and assessment, of course, templated to ensure proper alignment. Adjunct faculty are more successful in learning environments that are predictable and have alignment in the standardization process. Quality matters provide many universities use to align course materials to provide a standardized online course instruction approach.

### **Research Questions**

This project proposes three research questions to determine the effectiveness of building online collaboratories for adjunct instructors. The problems will precisely select if theoretical frameworks within the academic disciplines of education and communication studies play a significant role in developing and mentoring online adjunct faculty within collaboratories. These questions also address the standardization of online higher education curricula and how it impacts adjunct instruction.

RQ1: What are effective communication strategies within online collaboratories that engage and motivate online higher education adjunct instructors?

RQ2: Is the CoI model effective in mentoring online adjunct instructors within online collaboratories?

RQ3: What role does the standardization of higher education online curricula play in developing online learning collaboratories for adjunct instructors?

### **Method**

Qualitative research is used for this research project. Qualitative research seeks to understand and explain phenomena (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research examines the why and how of phenomena that explain within an area of academic interest (Romo, 2016). This research project qualitatively examines online collaboratories to improve higher education instruction among adjunct faculty. Case study research is useful when the researchers seek to explain the how and why of phenomena. Yin (2012) explained, "These methods are advantageous when the research goal is to describe the incidence or prevalence of a phenomenon," (p. 9). This research uses a qualitative case study design to explain the construction of online collaboratories. An explanatory case study design analyzes two artifacts of study for this project. Specifically, an explanatory case study seeks to present and share information with the reader. This type of case study transfers why and how phenomena occurs within the context of real-life situations (Yin, 2012). Case study research seeks to reconstruct and analyze a case from a sociological perspective that provides an approach to answering questions worthy of scholarly pursuit (Patton, 2002).

This research examined online learning collaboratories in an online division within two private universities within the United States of America. This case study utilized a comparative model to explore and determine each university's adjunct training and engagement programs' best practices and the role that standardized teaching curriculum plays in online instructors' instructional and pedagogical experiences. This article's authors are current program directors for graduate-level curriculum, one from a school in the Midwest region and one from the United States' west coast region.

These Program Directors will share their insight into their philosophy and recommendations for best practices behind creating an online adjunct collaboratory, as implemented at their universities. See complete descriptions of the collaboratories they managed in Artifacts one and two explained below.

### **Artifact 1: Non-Standardize Online Collaboratory Format**

Artifact 1 consists of an online learning collaborator that is self-driven and led by a university program director. The program director has full control of the learning model, design, and influence of the online adjunct instructors. There was little guidance from university personnel to the design and construction of the learning collaboratory. This collaboratory met once a semester and utilized an online classroom software program to communicate and meet live with adjuncts twice a year in person or online, depending on their location in proximity to the university's physical location.

Online adjuncts were required to participate in all live meetings and online classroom training modules as a condition of their employment and eligible for course instruction placement. The program director of this online collaboratory sent frequent email updates to instructors and encouraged them to interact with one another while teaching within the program. This method did not provide a lot of oversight or guidance between various departments and divisions within the university to allow for academic freedom and creativity in the adjunct training process.

The collaboratory focuses on keeping adjuncts informed of directives, procedures, and changes to course templates, grading, and general duties assigned to adjunct professors. This online education division utilizes a standardized format of instruction within their course templates. Virtually everything is provided to the instructor to teach. The instructors cannot change anything within the course template and should only offer actual asynchronous teaching in a video lecture. They should also maintain high activity levels in the course discussions and grade assignments within five days of the due date. This format utilized by the university maintains consistency in assessing student learning outcomes within various programs of study to deliver highly reliable data of student learning to assessment teams and outside accrediting bodies. The collaboratory helps with this initiative in ensuring the adjunct instructors teach from a standardized curriculum within their academic discipline.

### **Artifact 2: Standardized Online Collaboratory Format**

Artifact 2 represents an online adjunct collaboratory standardized across disciplines within an online division at a private university. This online collaborator provides adjuncts with a standardized experience and intermix adjuncts from various fields within their weekly meetings during the terms they are active instructors within courses. The collaboratory is developed and distributed through an LMS course shell where instructors become members. Program Directors or Department Chairs have little-to-no input within the training themselves. Instructors are expected to participate and contribute as excellent examples for the collaboratory. Every instructor is required to participate in this digital asynchronous collaboratory. It simulates a loose online course learning experience similar to what the University students would experience. There are discussion boards, announcements, and sometimes even assignments to upload within the LMS. The university uses the location to collect and distribute information from faculty, such as updated Human Resource information, course improvement forms for the instructional design team, and instructor training and best practices. These instructors create fresh content each week, term, distribute information on best practices of teaching online from a University standard, and communicate the University's stance on how best to work with online students in various extenuating circumstances.

A faculty member from the instructional design or faculty development department is appointed to teach the collaborative course. The justification for using a separate department for training instructors on how to teach is with the hope that all instructors, for all disciplines, would adopt the same University best practices. It is also important to note that this University sample also uses the Master Course Shell Model (MCSM) of instructional design at the time of this research. Implementation of MCSM in every course, with the university setting guidelines for how the course should be built, allows various disciplines to consider similar course instruction and course design improvement processes. This standardization of course design makes the collaboratory topics more applicable to all instructors.

### **Analysis and Findings**

Explanatory case studies seek to explain the why and how of phenomena through the examination of artifacts. This analysis will explain how to construct an online collaboratory through the analysis of two artifacts identified in the methodology section of this paper.

Specifically, the study of these artifacts will be conducted using the creative analytic practice ethnography model. The innovative, analytical practice ethnography model (CAPE) is an inquiry method that seeks to explain critical aspects of phenomena (Patton, 2002). This method is used in case study research to explain phenomena held to a high standard, and mere novel explanations do not suffice (Patton, 2002). It utilizes five points of analysis to make assertions related to artifacts used in case study research. The five points of analysis focus on the artifact's substantive contribution, the artifact's aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of reality (Patton, 2002). The CAPE model provides a method of analysis that utilizes qualitative reporting of education models in higher education.

CAPE helps explain each artifact through its five points of analysis that explain how six best practices shape online collaboratories for adjunct training. Each of the five points of analysis will describe four best practices developed through direct observation and evaluation of each artifact. This analysis uses the CAPE method as an evocative form of inquiry within this explanatory case study project. The research is organized into four themes that are best practices observed during the evaluation of each artifact; non-standardized online collaboratories and standardized collaboratories. These themes are explained by sharing each artifact's analysis and observations and using the CoI and CAPE method. These analysis shares findings from each artifact's observations that will evaluate the best practices or themes in the evaluation section of the paper.

### **Theme 1: The Collaboratory should use a central point of contact for the instructor.**

Collaboratories can provide instructors with the opportunity to receive information in a centralized manner. Regardless of how the collaboratory is organized, it is essential to serve as a centralized point of contact for instructors. The flow of communication is vital to the collaborator's success and the instructor's effectiveness in working on a contract or full-time basis. Practical communication standards should be utilized in both types of collaboratories, non-standardized, and standardized, to serve as a useful, centralized point of contact for instructors. Organizations function as open systems that allow for social interaction to evolve (Katz & Khan, 1966). An open system within an organization should not obstruct the flow of communication. Open systems do have permeable boundaries and codes that help interpret potential inputs (Mumby, 2012). Central contact points should rely on the limits within a plan but not obstruct the flow of communication.

Non-standardized collaboratories provide leaders of these groups with the autonomy of organizing the flow of communication in a manner that is beneficial to the group members. Leaders of the collaboratories can create open systems within this micro organization to be effective in their communication between the organization and the instructors. This can work well for instructors and also be problematic. The lack of structure can create confusion between instructors that operate in more than one discipline. Also, it can be difficult for instructors when there is a transition in leadership within a collaboratory. However, the autonomy provided by the group's non-standardization allows for the ability to build community organically as there is more flexibility in the group design.

Like students, instructors often need a contact point who will reach, train, and keep them accountable. It is best when instructors, who may not have direct access to the physical campus, have one point of contact who can direct digital traffic (i.e., email, inquiries, or provide resources to fix problems). In standardized collaboratories, this can be accomplished by anyone in the university that works in a capacity to assist faculty interdisciplinarily. Standardization within the collaboratory allows interdisciplinary instructors to have expectations of how to receive and respond to communication in a centralized manner. Leaders of standardized groups have less autonomy in the way the collaboratory functions and are used more as a point of contact for the group members.

### **Theme 2: The Collaboratory should provide asynchronous and synchronous options for the instructor.**

Education is a social activity that relies on effective communication. Students and instructors using online courses rely on their learning management platforms to facilitate community building (Hendricks, 2016). Online education can provide students and instructors synchronous and asynchronous formats. Asynchronous formats of instruction give an advantage to online learners programs that allow for global enrollment. The use of an asynchronous design will enable users to access online material instead of synchronous learning when users must meet at the same time to learn. Synchronous learning facilitates a similar experience to in-person instruction but is not always a feasible option for learners and instructors. It is essential to create a viable and accessible environment in online collaboratories to construct a well-balanced community and communicative experience.

Instructors in a primarily adjunct and online program can reside anywhere in work globally, and synchronous meetings may not be feasible. However, instructors may feel they need to have access to a human presence when overcoming some professional obstacles. It is a best practice to allow for communication, programming, and check-in processes to be available through asynchronous and synchronous options.

In standardized collaboratories, creating a standardized digital space accessible by all university faculty, one suggestion is an LMS shell. LMS systems allow for secure and internally controlled access for faculty and collaboratory leaders.

Non-standardized collaboratories allow the group to select the most feasible format to interact with to succeed in faculty training and community development. A non-standardized design to faculty interaction will let instructors meet in a way that is optimal for learning and online instruction. In some semesters, you may see synchronous or asynchronous offerings to allow the collaboratories to interact in an organic manner that builds community and facilitates effective instructional practices that strive to reach all areas of the CoI. The CoI is used to ensure equitable teaching, cognitive, and social presence in an online classroom. Collaboratories should provide instructors with the chance to touch on all three aspects of the CoI. Non-standardize groups allow instructors to use the CoI in a manner that is appropriate for their group.

**Theme 3: The Collaboratory should be available every time an instructor teaches.**

Communication is a circular process where participants are both senders and receivers of information. Participants code and decode messages based on their lived experiences (Tawil, 2019). Collaboratories should be offered every semester and provide information to all instructors each time they teach to build community and effectively disseminate knowledge in an educational organization. Policies and procedures are updated continuously, and it should not assume that an unattached adjunct instructor will understand changes. Training conducted at the time of hire, with no follow-up, is ineffective, whereas collaboratories should provide continual training and communication regarding university needs.

Lack of communication is a type of communication. It is not, typically, perceived favorably in groups. It is better to provide instructors with information each time they teach in a collaboratory rather than provide them with any information. This offers better customer service to both the instructor and the student. In standardized collaboratories, the faculty of any discipline can access the resource at the time of hire. SMEs design coursework; they may not be teaching the coursework developed. A collaborator should provide a place for an instructor to feel empowered and encouraged to change the course, programming, or otherwise. Collaboratories offer each term to allow the collaborator to act as a central location for course improvement reporting if necessary. This helps when providing updates to course templates and important teaching information in a course.

**Theme 4: The Collaboratory should allow the instructor to network with other instructors, both full-time and adjunct.**

A collaboratory platform could create a Learning Module System (i.e., Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas, Angel), or a task-organization software. These digital environments can house appropriate institutional contact information. In standardized collaboratories, interdisciplinary instructors are invited to collaborate. Instructors will be less likely to be influenced by groupthink as they will be able to hear and create new ways of instructing based on the ideas and resources available to their colleagues in other departments. Non-standardized collaboratories also benefit from the use of LMS as a place to interact with each other and house valuable material for instructors.

LMS platforms serve as a repository for information and help facilitate communication in a collaboratory. Tawhil (2019) mentioned that lack of communication is a communicative act that enables non-communication and negative experiences for those in a collaboratory or online learning environment (p.151). The use of supportive words or phrases and frequent communication provides an engaging experience in an online learning environment. The LMS platform allows for effective communication between those in the collaborator and serves as an information source when instructors need assistance while teaching in an online learning environment.

**Evaluation of Analysis and Findings**

Four best practices identified in the analysis section explained the case study artifacts. These practices helped explain how to create an online collaboratory for online instructors teaching in higher education settings. The best practices focused on communication, community, and elements of online instruction using the CoI methodology. The best practices in the analysis determined and provided steps to effectively implementing online collaboratories for instructors. It explored two ways to implement these groups using non-standardized and standardized organizational methods. When considering these themes which set goals of best practice, it is best to address the research questions:

**RQ1: What are effective communication strategies within online collaboratories that engage and motivate online higher education adjunct instructors?**

The evaluation of both collaboratory structures shows that a sense of community and collegiality must be created for an instructor to engage at a high level within a collaboratory. The collaboratory does not have to take on a particular structure but must feel inclusive, incorporate faculty expectations, and expect an academic acumen level from its instructors. Effective communication strategies can be fluid for each institution; however, there is an expectation that communication in a formal capacity will be implemented in a collaboratory. Specifically, experiential communication is experiential in online collaboratories. Experiential or ritualistic communication relies on building community and interpersonal communication tactics to engage with group members. This was identified in themes one and four. Each of these themes focused on the point of communication and networking.

The use of interpersonal communication provides instructors with a way to connect with the university; they are working uniquely. Messages and conversations are interpersonal communication tools that are effective in online collaboratories. Language increases effective communication and provides the platform for dynamic socialization in online or face-to-face interactions (Gamble & Gamble, 2014). Affection exchange theory helps describe how people disclose information during interpersonal interactions (Littlejohn, 2015). This theory explains that we construct boundaries as we disclose information depending on the communication setting. Online collaboratories provide healthy boundaries to disclose information and build interpersonal interactions in higher education settings. Instructors have a safe space in these environments to share their teaching experiences with their peers.

### **RQ2: Is the CoI model effective in mentoring online adjunct instructors within online collaboratories?**

As previously defined, Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung (2010) layout that CofI's must be purposeful to be sustainable. The three elements of teaching, cognitive, and social presence must also be incorporated into a proper CofI if it is to have meaning. When considering the themes laid out in the analysis, it is evident that collaboratories allow for peer mentorship and programmatic and institutional mentorship without being overwhelming. Whether collaboratories are standardized or non-standardized, it is the intentional communication that creates a deep and meaningful online learning experience simply because of the intent of establishing collaboratories in the higher educational setting.

Non-standardized and standardized collaboratories can provide instructors with opportunities to receive effective mentoring through the collaboratory function. The collaboratory structure provides instructors with the potential to receive practical training that utilizes all aspects of the CoI model. Effective mentoring of online adjunct instructors provides them with the tools needed to become effective teachers in higher education courses. If the CoI is modeled for them in their collaboratory, they can model these behaviors in their classrooms.

### **RQ3: What role does the standardization of higher education online curricula play in developing online learning collaboratories for adjunct instructors?**

Accrediting bodies are put in place to create standardization within curricula, processes, and programmatic evaluation, which includes instruction and course design in any modality. At this time, it may not be evident that collaboratories and CofI's create standardization of instruction by adjunct instructors; however, it does allow for a potential communication outlet for professional development, institutional expectations, and overall adjunct awareness of an institution's academic goals. Institutions could implement strategic plans for standardizing assessment plans, teaching or instruction, and programmatic outcomes because of these potential outlets.

As many higher education institutions determine and research best practices for training, developing, and retaining quality adjuncts and SMEs in their programming, colleges and universities must collaborate and share successes and failures. As online learning continues to become a more competitive job market, and instructors with stellar credentials are recruited globally, higher education institutions are looking to hire more adjuncts than full-time employees to cut costs. However, many program directors are concerned that a resume or CV does not mean that an individual will be a proficient online adjunct instructor; nor buy into the institution's mission or goals.

Additionally, many online adjunct instructors teach at multiple institutions; institutions require collaboratory participation and creating a CoI is enhancing the expectation of the adjunct employment experience. If institutions are creating CoI through a collaboratory experience with their adjuncts, perhaps it could be assumed that they are subsequent training adjuncts for other institutions with online instructor best-practices.

We recommend that program directors and administrators become dedicated to growing a body of literature surrounding the collaboratory development process. Collaboratories are constructed in many ways, uniquely tailored to an institution, to create a CoI. Collaboratories do not have to be high cost but should require a commitment of reliable communication delivered in a consistent and accessible modality with an option of return feedback and communication from the instructors themselves.

## **Conclusion**

With the increase in adjunct hires for many colleges and universities due to budget constraints, there may be a debate about whether institutions are paying adjuncts enough compensation for the instructor to devote time beyond their course to participate in a collaboratory. Also, institutions may argue that due to the pay-scale, and the physical detachment to the school, an adjunct may never truly feel buy-in or devotion to the college or university. As authors of this article, we hope that collaboratories will be implemented by institutions seeking to counter this mindset and intentionally onboard their instructors with the mentality that they are preparing them to be the best online instructors who are knowledgeable and empowered; *not* just a facilitator of coursework.

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