

Communities of Practice

The Leading Edge in Professional Skills Development

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For over a decade audiology conferences and conventions have been buzzing with the Doctor of Audiology (AuD) topic. The air had been filled with excited anticipation and frenzy about how one would obtain the AuD. The last decade was filled with progress, setbacks, controversy, questions and collaboration. We heard about grandfathering, experience credits, entitlements, portfolios and fairness. The profession was practically mired down by the weight of the details of how to move to a clinical doctorate.

By the time the University of Florida's inaugural class was in its last semester in the spring of 2000, there were 346 students enrolled in UF's distance learning AuD program. The time for hashing over the options had passed and the transition to a doctoring profession had begun.

After three years of educating large groups (over 250 students each of the last seven semesters), we wonder if the transition to the AuD degree is itself changing the profession. Never before have audiologists assembled together to learn in such a singular, organized, and long-term manner. Today, three years into this experiment, we reflect on what the transition to a doctoring profession has taught us about our professional community.

THE OUTCOME WE DID NOT ANTICIPATE

We surveyed our first and second groups of AuD graduates one year after they graduated. We discovered an added bonus to the expected outcomes of increased confidence and respect and improved clinical practices. We learned that one of the most important impacts of earning the degree was their connection to other audiologists. They told us that the process of earning the degree, the peer relationships, the shared learning, and the networking gave them something that continues to be valued after graduation.

Our program currently has 19 regional sites around the country where our students meet every other month during the degree program. Our students also meet weekly with their regional groups in virtual space. In addition, the learning experience takes place via video-taped instruction and readings mailed to the students' homes.



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| Atlanta, GA | Denver, CO | Minneapolis, MN |
| Boca Raton, FL | Gainesville, FL | Philadelphia, PA |
| Charlotte, NC | Greensboro, NC | Seattle, WA |
| Chicago, IL | Hartford, CT | Tulsa, OK |
| Cleveland, OH | Lafayette, LA | Wilmington, DE |
| Cincinnati, OH | Los Angeles, CA | |
| Dallas, TX | Memphis, TN | |

The UF AuD faculty designed the distance learning format to include face-to-face interactions as an essential element in the exchange of knowledge. In fact, each Regional Site has become a "community of practice" for our working professional students to share knowledge in an environment where learning is the common goal.

WHAT ARE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE?

Communities of practice are groups of individuals with shared expertise and knowledge of any practice united by a common purpose. This organizational form can be formal or informal. A community of practice might hold structured meetings with an agenda or a community of practice can consist of loosely structured brainstorming and dialoguing sessions. Whatever form it takes, people in communities of practice "share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems."

THE "COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE" APPROACH IN UF'S DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM

Knowledge sharing within regional communities of practice is a key ingredient to the success of the University of Florida program. The UF AuD program faculty recognize that knowledge is fundamentally social. UF distance learning AuD students are empowered with a structure that encourages interaction in face-to-face and online settings.

Each of our communities of practice is infused with subject matter experts – the Course Instructor, videotaped expert presenters, the site facilitator, and the student members of the learning community. This broad base of experience present in our learning communities highlights an important feature of the community of practice. Communities of practice use an additive approach to knowledge and learning where all members can contribute to the common goal. Communities of practice do not require everyone to be super competent and, likewise, communities of practice do not rely on the most competent member for success.

UNITED BY A COMMON PURPOSE

The University of Florida offers a flexible program, but not a customized one. All students take the same nine courses. Only one course is offered at a time, so all of our students take the same course at the same time. Each regional group follows the same weekly lesson plan. This is an important element in allowing our communities of practice to happen. Our students are united with the same purpose all of the time. The skills of each individual are enhanced in every subject matter when each practitioner's best practices are brought out. Within each community of practice there are invariably some individuals with experience in the content area of the class. One of the best ways to solidify your own knowledge is to be able to transfer it to others. Students are continually engaged in the give and take of sharing best practices.

REGIONAL SITE MEETINGS

The core of the University of Florida's communities of practice approach is the regional site meeting. The course is lead by a Course Instructor, with whom most students will never meet face-to-face. The regional meetings are lead by a facilitator, selected in part on their expertise in the subject matter and on their preferences for participation. Each community of practice is likely to have more than

one facilitator over a nine course sequence. Students meet on the first and last day of each course, for a total of ten weekend meetings during the program. Students can start the program at any time, so affiliations with new members occur continuously over the nine course program. An AuD student might easily share knowledge and learning with over 40 audiologists at his or her regional site during the program. With an average of 15 audiologists per site, it is inevitable that someone in each group of students will bring real-life knowledge, expertise, skills, and experience to the meeting on any given audiology topic.

ONLINE LEARNING

Not only do students attend the course meeting at their site, they have a corresponding virtual meeting room. The cyberspace meeting place supports both chat and message posting activities. Students are required to attend and participate in weekly regional chat rooms. Message boards are a key component in the exchange of information. All students are invited to attend a weekly national chat hosted by the Course Instructor. Transcripts of National chats are made available online. Weekly chat room discussion topics are designated by the course instructor and presented in the course syllabus. Students are united in cyberspace every week with a common purpose.

PEER EXPERIENCE MATTERS

With peer mentoring an important element of our program, so is peer experience. Our degree program originally required only one year of full-time experience at the post-Master's degree level. Those requirements will change to a minimum of three years of post-Masters experience for students entering the program in the Fall of 2002. We have seen a steady decrease in the number of years of experience each semester since the inception of the program. The requirement of three years of full-time experience will allow our students to continue to benefit from valuable peer mentorship and shared knowledge in their virtual and face-to-face learning environments.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING OUR KNOWLEDGE

The Internet provides the means to bring audiologists together. state and national associations elicit online messages from members. Online audiology meeting places, job searches, equipment sales, professional referrals abound. But, do we really share knowledge, share practices, support one another in communities of practice across the profession? Not nearly as much as we should.

We are experiencing what is referred to as the "knowledge economy." Knowledge is the essential resource that propels everything else. The knowledge economy is fundamentally about people, not products. It is about intellectual capital. Our changing world demands that we endeavor to constantly share up-to-date knowledge.

THE PURPOSE FOR COMING TOGETHER

The following areas are positive examples of how organization and active involvement in communities of practice can help advance our profession:

- Make it easier for individuals to share knowledge in an organized repository of content specific areas;
- Help audiologists respond to patient needs by connecting patients to the right expert, or getting expert support from the community;
- Provide a forum for new audiologists to develop mentoring relationships and guide them with answers and resources;
- Promote innovation by enabling opportunities to share new ideas, ask questions, and come up with solutions;

- Protect our interests by raising awareness of critical issues through debate and the expression and sharing of ideas.

Sharing knowledge can prevent us from reinventing wheels. We can share best practices and foster innovation in our practices. Beyond that, audiologists should be acutely aware of the importance of self-organizing to respond to hazards and perils placed before us by those who do not have our profession's best interest at heart. Communities that are built on an underlying ethic of patient care can prosper, and such communities can sustain audiology by creating a competitive advantage in today's marketplace.

NURTURING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Encouraging knowledge sharing within a group as diverse as the audiology community is difficult. We are made up of many, many self-contained organizations. Participating in a community of practice has to be convenient, there has to be a commitment, and there has to be purpose. Early in the University of Florida AuD program history, we implemented an Alumni message board at the request of our graduates. But, we observe that without a common purpose or leadership, our online alumni board is not very active. This becomes even more evident when individuals come together for a day long or weekend workshop. In the workshop or conference setting, the knowledge sharing occurs during the meeting but rarely continues beyond the face-to-face interaction.

If we are diligent and committed to sharing our intellectual capital, the profession will be advanced. There can be hundreds of communities of practice across the nation. All it takes to form a community of practice is to commit to meeting and exchanging ideas with your peers. But it takes leadership to sustain communities. The fundamental issues are human, not technological. Communities of practice need community leaders to encourage participation, suggest subjects, encourage debate and recruit members.

Audiologists are finding the benefit of interactions and knowledge sharing. We are developing web based resources to facilitate organization and retrieval of information on all of our subject matters. Communities of practice are evolving.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our profession is experiencing an historic era as we advance audiology to a doctoring profession. We have already traversed completely new territory in the process of bringing large numbers of audiologists together for the purpose of doctoral education, and from that, we observe that audiologists value connection to one another. The technology to elicit, organize, and store information is available. Our future must include a commitment to systematic efforts to share knowledge and experiences so that we may achieve greater professional effectiveness and authority. 

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