

## LEARNING DESIGN VOICES

### PREPRINT

# Promoting Community and Collaboration: Models Underpinning an Academic Professional Learning Online Short Course

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# **Promoting Community and Collaboration: Models Underpinning an Academic Professional Learning Online Short Course**

By Greig Krull & Nazira Hoosen

## **Chapter in brief**

This chapter examines the theoretical frameworks and models that underpin the design and facilitation of an academic professional learning short course at a research-intensive public university in South Africa. These principles for learning design and facilitation can be applied in a variety of learning contexts to promote community and collaboration. The “Facilitating Online” short course is facilitated through the adoption of an “ethic of care” perspective that promotes modelling, dialogue and the adoption of a critical digital pedagogy stance. The design and facilitation of the course is underpinned by the Community of Inquiry framework for online and blended learning that talks to the importance of three pronounced presences: teacher, social and cognitive. In our view, learning is a social phenomenon that manifests through collaboration between facilitators and participants. We focused on the establishment of a digital community to create safe spaces for learning to occur. Throughout the course, the need for active and responsive facilitation is emphasised. This is modelled for participants to encourage adoption within their own courses and for their own students. The chapter contributes a view of how frameworks and models can be used to inform the learning design and facilitation of courses that emphasise the importance of community and collaboration within a local institutional context.

**Keywords:** critical digital pedagogy, ethic of care Community of Inquiry, academic professional learning,

## Introduction

The 2015–2019 Teaching and Learning Plan<sup>1</sup> of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, South Africa, recognised the need for more flexible and digital learning opportunities. With the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 forcing a transition to emergency remote teaching and learning, as described in Hodges et al. (2020), the need for learning design proficiency among academics working as university teachers became imperative.

Despite substantial investment in learning design expertise and structures at Wits university, there remains an overriding tendency in current design processes to focus on the content and associated technologies. Very little emphasis is placed on the role of the facilitator. Furthermore, many academics are unfamiliar with learning models and frameworks within blended and online learning spaces. Since 2018, the Wits Centre for Learning and Teaching Development, in collaboration with teaching staff within the institution, has reconceptualised an Open Education Resource (OER), the Facilitating Online short course. The focus of this course is to support the professional learning of academics to be able to promote community, collaboration and an openness to diverse voices in learning spaces. The aim is to remind academics of the humanising aspect of learning and teaching with technology, and in so doing adopt a human-centred pedagogy (Karakaya, 2021). A critical digital pedagogy stance is foregrounded, as too often the digital is privileged at the expense of critical pedagogy (Morris & Stommel, 2018).

This chapter argues that learning can be a social process and that through careful and considered design and facilitation, community and collaboration can be promoted in online and blended learning environments. Two frameworks are provided (the Community of Inquiry framework and an “ethic of care” perspective) that can be used in the design and facilitation of courses to promote community and collaboration. The chapter begins by describing the context, learning design approach and evolution of the short course. It then reviews the frameworks that underpin the design and facilitation of the course, particularly the taking of a critical digital pedagogy stance, the use of the Community of Inquiry framework and the adoption of an ethic of care perspective. The learning design implications are discussed before providing a set of recommendations for academics and learning designers.

## Context

Wits University is a public, urban, residential university in Johannesburg, South Africa. It can be considered to be on the periphery, as it is located in the Global South. As a research-intensive university, academic focus and incentives are primarily related to research output rather than teaching and learning. We have found limited focus on learning and teaching in general and limited focus on learning design in particular. This has led academics to grapple with limited online identities and agency depletion around innovating in learning and teaching. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university was slowly transitioning to a blended learning approach. The pandemic necessitated rapid acceleration

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<https://www.wits.ac.za/media/wits-university/learning-and-teaching/documents/Wits%20Learning%20and%20Teaching%20Plan%202020-2024.pdf>

of this approach. To support the transition, Wits offered the Facilitating Online short course, an eight week, fully online offering, creating an opportunity for academics to consider their transitioning and emergent identities as they move into more digital learning and teaching spaces.

The Facilitating Online short course was adapted from an openly licensed OER that makes use of active and experiential approaches to learning and teaching. The OER was developed at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa (Carr et al., 2009), published under a creative commons attribution, and has been adapted in other higher education contexts (Mallinson & Krull, 2015). As an OER, the course could easily be adapted according to the needs of the local institution. While both UCT and WITS are research-intensive and compete with the Global North in terms of rankings, the use of locally developed OER represents a shift in practices that enable access to multi-layered knowledge and a heterogeneity of identities and interpretations. We recognise that within higher education, there are questions around voice, power and authority (Freire, 1972) that aim to dismantle knowledge conceptions that reproduce hierarchies support the wider need for decolonisation<sup>2</sup> in the South African higher education sector.

The move from an elitist<sup>3</sup> South African higher education system to a massified system raised the need for widened access. One of the approaches to dealing with this challenge is to use design principles that support innovative open education practices (Cronin, 2017). The use of OER is one form of open practice that enables provision of materials associated with free costs, ease of use and freedom to reuse (Conole & Brown, 2018). These principles align with the open access practices described in the National Research Foundation's (2015) "Statement on Open Access to Research Publications in South Africa".<sup>4</sup>

We support education as a "public good", which needs to be shared openly through collegiality, in line with the principles of the open education movement (Conole & Brown, 2018; Cronin, 2017; Veletsianos, 2015). We recognise that open education practices "are shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political factors" (Veletsianos, 2015, p. 202) and are aware that the technologies used to support openness are influenced by the values and assumptions of learning designers. The intention for choosing this OER was to start with a tried and tested resource, instead of "reinventing the wheel". Adapting an OER made it easier to start from a solid theoretical and experiential base, while also (re)conceptualising the learning activities for contextual relevance.

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<sup>2</sup> Decolonisation within the context of South African higher education refers to a deconstruction of Eurocentric standards, epistemologies, social practices, symbols, marketised systems and institutions, thereby capturing the agency of the current collective (Heleta, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Due to the previous apartheid dispensation in South Africa, higher education symbolised a system that was designed for an elite minority who retained cultural and economic capital as well as their social standing and superiority due to inherited wealth.

<sup>4</sup>

<https://www.nrf.ac.za/media-room/news/statement-open-access-research-publications-national-research-foundation-nrf-funded>

## The Facilitating Online course

This section describes the course structure as well as any adaptations made to the original UCT course. It also describes the process of building community through surfacing different voices.

### Course description and adaptations

The Facilitating Online short course is a professional learning course for academics. Based on the principles of fostering playful yet reflective online learning communities (Carr et al., 2009), the purpose of the course is to assist academics in developing an awareness of the skills and specific tool sets available to support online facilitation. The course foregrounds designing and facilitating online activities through the use of an appropriate combination of technologies (Armellini & Aiyegbayo, 2010; Conole & Brown, 2018;). Within this approach, the use of technologies for learning and teaching purposes requires content specialisation and grounding in pedagogy (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

The Facilitating Online short course consists of approximately 100 notional study hours and spans eight weeks. It is offered twice a year and each iteration is different, owing to continuous improvement by a rotating group of co-facilitators and the varying needs and experiences of each iteration's participants. This is aligned with the view of seeing good learning design as being primarily about redesign (Armellini & Aiyegbayo, 2010). Typically, there are three to four co-facilitators and a maximum of 25 participants. The participant-to-facilitator ratio is purposefully kept low to support the creation of a learning community in a short timeframe. Participants are required to complete a series of weekly (asynchronous) activities and participate in a weekly live (synchronous) session. Each week builds on the focus of supporting the creation of online learning communities, aligned to specific themes. Table 1 provides a summary of the course model.

**Table 1:** Facilitating Online short course model

Week	Theme	Short description
0	–	A short pre-course engagement to become familiar with the course information and environment.
1	Arriving	Participants “arrive” and navigate the online space, introduce themselves and evaluate their facilitation capabilities.
2	Conversing	Participants consider how to work together to form a learning community through getting to know each other, creating shared goals and discussing how to facilitate engagement.
3	Facilitating	Participants practice using key strategies and skills for online facilitation.
4	Creating	Participants consider issues of diversity and inclusion and create an authentic learning activity.

5	Applying	Participants reflect on their course experiences and learnings and create plans to continue learning after the course.
6	Consolidating	Participants work on their ePortfolios to consolidate their learning.
7	Showcasing	Participants showcase their e-portfolios and receive feedback.

Over time, the course was reconceptualised to be more relevant to the specific and evolving needs of academics at Wits. This highlights the need for contextualised learning design. While the principles of the original course remained the same, three aspects were modified.

### ***Flexibility***

The first change was around enabling greater flexibility (as a part-time course) in terms of when participants were required to complete activities and engage in discussions. In the Wits context, some participants compounded their workload to complete it at the end of the week while discussions by other participants had been concluded in the preceding week. The course coordinators elected to provide greater flexibility while allowing participants to engage anytime, anywhere through meaningful discourse.

### ***ePortfolio***

The second change focused on a summative assessment component, based on Herrington et al.'s (2014) authentic assessment principles.<sup>5</sup> The final assessment took the form of developing and showcasing an ePortfolio that consolidated and added to the activities completed each week. The ePortfolio comprised a short background of the participant, a synthesis of weekly reflections, a professional learning plan extending beyond the course, a consolidation of course research completed and a sample of learning activities designed. Peer assessment, together with facilitator reviews, served as a feedback mechanism. The ePortfolio was then showcased at the end of the course, resulting in an increase in the notional hours of the course.

### ***Mentor-mentee***

The third aspect focused on a mentor-mentee relationship. Each participant was paired alongside a facilitator who also acted as a mentor for a group of participants. The aim was to provide more personal assistance and support, as well more general advice for participants. These changes reflect the need to redesign the course to suit participants' workloads and contexts as a form of critical practice. Table 2 provides a summary of the adaptations.

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<sup>5</sup> Herrington, Reeves and Oliver's (2014) authentic assessment principles include assessments that are complex and collaborative, have real-world relevance, take place continuously and show evidence of work activity.

**Table 2:** Summary of course adaptations

Category	Original (UCT)	Adaptation (Wits)	Implications
Pacing	Limited flexibility in activity completion	Greater flexibility in activity completion	Enable participation when suitable to cater for busy workloads
Assessment	Formative assessment only	Inclusion of an ePortfolio as a summative assessment (including an increase in course notional study hours)	Participants use their learnings from weekly activities to build an ePortfolio that is showcased at the end of the course, enabling a cumulative and authentic approach to assessment
Mentoring	N/A	Establish mentor-mentee relationships	Greater support for participants to foster relationships and communities that extend beyond the course.

## **Incorporating voices from the community**

The short course afforded us the opportunity to incorporate different voices from the university community. These voices were incorporated in three ways. The first was to rotate the co-facilitators of the course each year among various members of the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development and faculty Teaching and Learning Units. Secondly, we invited previous participants to be facilitators in the next course iteration so that their voices emerged through co-facilitation. Thirdly, engagement in course evaluations (by participants) and focus group reviews (by facilitators) after each course iteration allowed for consolidation of feedback that was taken into consideration for the next iteration of the course.

Aligned with the cry for decolonised education (Heleta, 2016), another focus for the course was to highlight the need for (and benefit of) embracing diversity and inclusivity. By enacting and conceptualising liberatory forms of conscious and adaptive material (OER) and facilitation (through co-facilitation and enactment of critical practices) in the online space, we coupled openness with critical digital pedagogic practice. This conceptualisation in turn supported conscientisation and critical thinking skills that course participants could use to connect to the lives of their students, irrespective of the learning environment.

While attempting to foster the idea of working collaboratively in a community (which does not form organically unless there is a shared objective and a safe space with common interests), the course made it possible for participants to become a community when practices were shared. This aspect links the importance of pedagogy while emphasising community; a community in which participants openly drew from one another through decisions around tool selection, how to facilitate, how to support the lived realities of their students, and so

forth. In this way, participants were reminded of the humanising aspect of technology integration through the course facilitators enacting a critical digital pedagogy that transitioned participants' thinking and engagement while creating spaces for democratic participation in the online space.

## **Creating a safe and empowering course environment**

An important aspect of the course was to provide a safe environment for participants to develop trust with the facilitators and each other. This was achieved in several ways. Firstly, facilitators acted in an authentic manner by sharing their own experiences and vulnerabilities in the live sessions and online discussions. Facilitators were open about the mistakes they made and where they could improve their design and facilitation skills. This encouraged participants to feel safe enough to do the same.

Secondly, there were two introductory activities at the start of the course where participants and facilitators had to introduce themselves (one of which was in video) and get to know others. Participants also needed to complete a pre-course introductory survey about their skills and experiences and share some (limited) personal information about themselves. An activity in Week 1 was designed for participants to reach out to another participant (not known before the course) who shares some identified similarity. Participants received constructive feedback from facilitators for virtually every activity, either through the live sessions, online discussions, or mentor-mentee interactions. While there were structured weekly activities, some space was left in the course for additional topics that participants wanted to explore.

During Weeks 3 and 4, as participants transitioned from being participants to co-facilitators in the course, they had to jointly facilitate a discussion forum or live session where they selected the topic for discussion. This encouraged participants to bring in their own perspectives and experiences, while practising their facilitation skills in a safe space. Acting as mentors, facilitators support and motivate participants to succeed. Through reflection activities, participants were encouraged to discuss how they were feeling and what they felt was working or not working well in the course. Critical digital pedagogy

## **Frameworks underpinning the Facilitating Online short course**

The learning theories, frameworks and models that underpin the design and facilitation of the Facilitating Online course are discussed in this section.

### **Critical digital pedagogy stance**

A critical digital pedagogy stance was adopted throughout the course, as it exposes power differentials, inequalities and dominance (Freire, 1972), even when the digital dimension is integrated into learning and teaching (Morris & Stommel, 2018). In line with this approach, the focus was on identifying learning design principles and approaches that could be used to support achievement of the desired outcomes of the course. As the idea of enacting critical



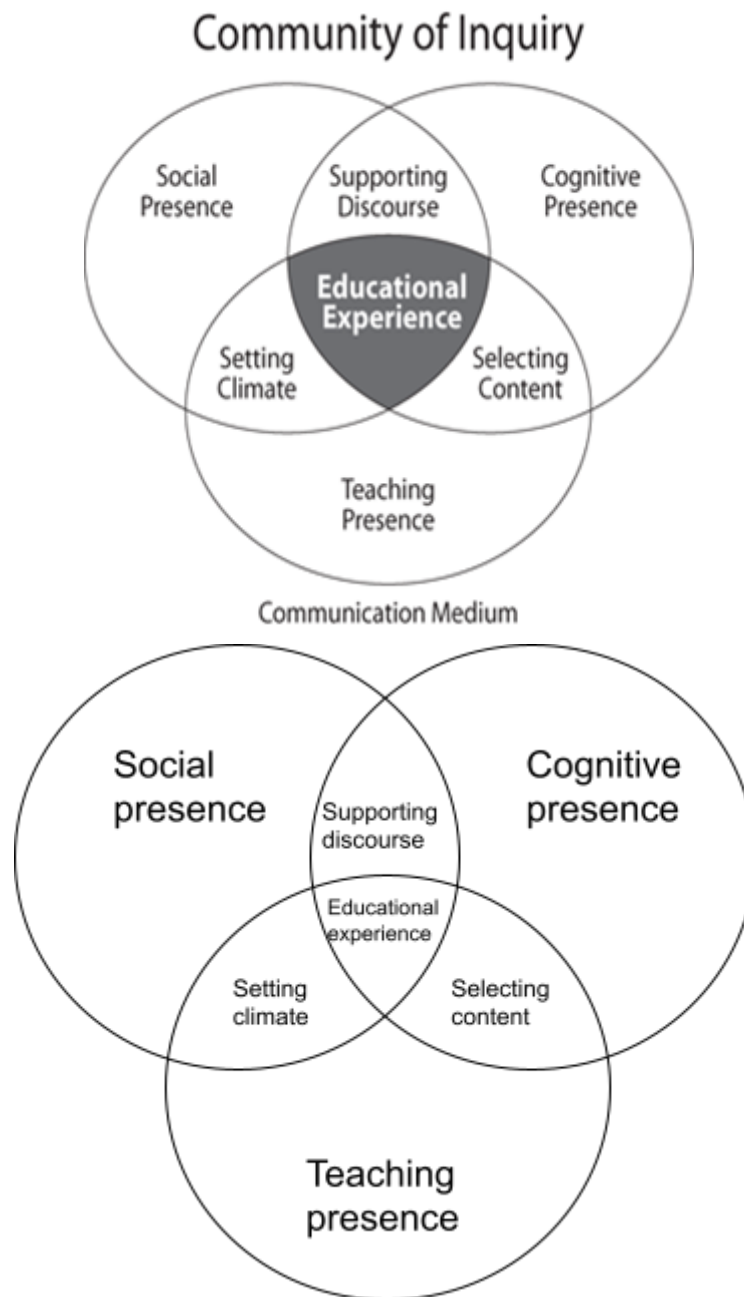
digital pedagogy manifests through the facilitation of the course, we focus on the individual in the collective exchange of ideas in participative groups with a need for “intimate pedagogy” instead of automated “embodiment”, as our belief is that critical digital pedagogy is a habitus at its nucleus. This enactment was further strengthened through normalising conversation and dialogue at the core, so that educational technology could be integrated in a humanising way at the periphery.

## **Community of Inquiry framework**

Many educators venture into teaching blended or online courses without a solid understanding of how learning in this environment is different to traditional in-person learning. This impacts on the learning experiences of students in these courses.

In the higher education sector, community is seen as essential to supporting discourse and collaborative learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The Community of Inquiry framework emerged from the textual interactions within online courses in higher education (Garrison et al., 2000). The aim of this framework is to design and facilitate a learning environment that will support meaningful collaboration and purposeful inquiry. A community of inquiry involves “questioning, reasoning, connecting, deliberating, challenging, and developing problem-solving techniques” (Lipman, 1991, as cited in Garrison et al., 2000, p. 91). The Community of Inquiry framework is based on socio-constructivist approaches to learning in higher education (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

The use of asynchronous text-based communication in online learning enables reflection and critical thinking (Garrison et al., 2000). Transcript analysis was used to define the categories of the three presences. **Cognitive** presence is “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). It focuses on higher-order thinking processes that occur across four phases: a triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution (Garrison et al., 2001). An educational community occurs within a broader social-emotional environment. **Social** presence is “the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). Relevant cognitive and social presence requires the presence of a teacher. **Teaching** presence consists of “the design of the educational experience” and “the sharing of the facilitation function” (p. 90). The design of the educational experience includes “the selection, organization, and primary presentation of course content, as well as the design and development of learning activities and assessment” (p. 90). The role of the teacher is to facilitate discourse and reflection by “presenting content, questions and proactively guiding and summarizing the discussion as well as confirming understanding through various means of assessment and feedback” (p. 102). Figure 1 provides an overview of the framework.



**Figure 1:** Overview of the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000)

Within online and blended learning, the Community of Inquiry framework has attracted the attention of many scholars and practitioners (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The framework has been used in different settings and scholars have continued to test and enhance the framework. Garrison et al. (2010) used a survey instrument to explore the causal relationships among between the three presences. Stenborn (2018) found that 102 journal articles used the survey between 2008 and 2017 to collect data about learning experiences. Over time, several authors have suggested additional presences should be incorporated into the framework, including emotional and learning presence (Kozan & Caskurlu, 2018).

## **The ethic of care perspective**

In addition to the use of the Community of Inquiry framework in the course, we adopted an ethic of care perspective which emphasised modelling and dialogue. Central to the ethic of care perspective is “listening, dialogue, critical thinking, reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among the disciplines and to life itself” (Noddings, 2012, p. 771). In this context, a caring relationship exists between a teacher and a student, which involves a teacher being attentive to the expressed needs of the student and, after listening and reflecting, requires a response that maintains the caring relation. This caring relation underpins the work teachers do (Noddings, 2012). Noddings (1988) proposes a model of moral education, consisting of: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. Using this approach, a teacher can model caring through a perspective that is broader than academic achievement. Teachers model patterns of intellectual activity as well as patterns of interacting with others. Open dialogue ensures the development of trust and maintaining caring relations. Practice in caring creates opportunities for students to practice their learning in a safe space, to engage with other students (peer interactions and group work), support each other, and reflect. Confirmation involves trust and continuity, to affirm students through knowing them and by encouraging “responsible self-affirmation in their students” (Noddings, 1988, p. 222). The ethic care perspective emerged more strongly globally as a response to the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Bali, 2020; Karakaya, 2021).

## **Discussion**

As this is a professional learning short course for academics, the distinction between facilitator and participant is a small one. The distinction is further blurred during the course as participants are encouraged to take on more active facilitation roles. The course is a work-in-progress. Through ongoing reviews that bring in different voices and critical practice, the course is updated with each iteration, based on participant feedback through a course survey and a facilitator focus group conducted after every iteration. This emphasises a redesign approach to learning design.

The course is guided by models and frameworks that highlight the importance of establishing digital learning communities that promote collaboration and an openness to diverse voices. Using an ethic of care perspective ensures that facilitators model the types of practices that they would like to see participants adopting. It also ensures continuous dialogue between participants and facilitators in the synchronous and asynchronous activities. An ethic of care perspective ensures that care is demonstrated in the course philosophy and design, and in how it is facilitated. It can also be demonstrated by going beyond the professional interactions by caring at the personal level (Bali, 2020). Facilitators are encouraged to show their vulnerabilities and share about themselves in an authentic manner to encourage participants to feel safe enough to do the same. Aligned with a view that learning does not take place without reflection (Loughran, 2002), the final activity in each week is a reflection activity. Participants are also required to synthesise their reflections at the end of the course.

The course aims to support academics to transition from classroom to online learning environments. Participants are also sensitised into the online course space through the use

of Salmon's (2004) five-stage model that scaffolds structured activities and support in a new learning environment. This is underpinned by the establishment and interconnection between the three presences of the Community of Inquiry framework: cognitive, social and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). This is done in a way that supports a holistic view of learning and teaching in higher education. For example, fostering a sense of willingness to understand the people around you, knowing how to choose appropriate technological tools and how to apply learning design principles. This goes beyond the focus of a specific professional learning short course for academics, extending these learning design considerations and principles to courses throughout the university.

The move to greater use of digital learning and teaching environments brings about the emergence of transitioned identities and diverse voices. This includes the voices of the course designers, facilitators, participants and (indirectly) students. From ongoing discussions with participants after course completion, many academics continue to question their learning and teaching assumptions and practices, transitioning their identities from "being" to "becoming" (Barnett, 2009). The focus on encouraging diverse voices within the course sometimes results in challenges for facilitators, but these are also opportunities for learning. For example, a previous participant with strong views severely disrupted a live session. However, this incident forced the facilitators to look at the particular topic through a different lens and to identify with the lived experiences and context of this participant. By adopting an ethic of care perspective, it became a learning experience for both participants and facilitators.

Aligned to the Community of Inquiry framework, a key principle in the design and facilitation of this course is a strong initial focus on creating a community, and then only focus on the learning. This requires the creation of safe spaces and building trust to support learning once these aspects are in place. As part of this, the facilitators open up about their own experiences and vulnerabilities, which in turn encourages participants to do the same, thus promoting a sense of community and collaboration. In addition to the foregrounding of social presence, aspects of the cognitive and teaching presences are also explored.

As many academics experienced during the rapid transition to emergency remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing social presence online could be challenging. While this may occur more naturally in an in-person setting, it may not occur online without facilitators establishing the appropriate environment and support mechanisms to enable participants to establish this presence. In previous iterations of the course, many participants came in to complete the required activities without wanting to engage with other participants. Accordingly, the course requires that facilitators highlight the importance of social presence in higher education and encourages the adoption of principles of community building. One of the great joys associated with facilitating this course is seeing the continuation of some of these connections once the course is complete as well as the development of new communities of practice between participants and their own networks.

The intersection between theory and practice is complex. This chapter has highlighted just a few of the frameworks available to support the design and facilitation of learning. Many academics rely on their own expertise and experience in approaching learning design, but the use of models and frameworks can provide a theoretical grounding to design and

facilitation. These frameworks are also brought into discussions around their impact upon learning and teaching practices. The use of theoretical aspects may not be appreciated if these do not manifest in practice. Perhaps there is too little action or embodiment of changing practices taking place.

## **Recommendations**

This section highlights several recommendations for learning design emanating from the discussion. Our central recommendation is that learning design needs to be thought of holistically to include the facilitation of courses. Considerations for how courses are facilitated are as important as how courses are conceptualised and designed. This is something that academics do not often consider as their focus is often on course design. Enabling academics to enhance their active and responsive facilitation skills can help to improve learning design generally.

Many academics moving into online and blended learning environments are unfamiliar with available theories and frameworks. We recommend that academics and learning designers engage with the theories and frameworks discussed in this chapter to ensure a solid theoretical basis. Additionally, there are other frameworks that can be utilised for learning design that are beyond the scope of this chapter. These frameworks and models can be applied to improve the design and facilitation of courses in higher education. We recommend that an activist stance be enacted to use theory to guide practice, to foreground the practicality to make sense of the theories so we meet the needs of our students.

Aligned with the elements of the Community of Inquiry framework, we recommend an intentional focus on the formation of learning communities to create safe spaces and build trust among participants. This can be supported by facilitators sharing their experiences and vulnerabilities, and in so doing encouraging participants to do the same. It also requires facilitators to get to know their participants. Once these social presence elements are in place, there are supports for learning to take place.

The adoption and promotion of OER supports the incorporation of resources and ideas created in different contexts and the incorporation of different voices. By adapting an OER created at another South African university, the practices of openness and sharing are encouraged across higher education institutions. In order to promote contextually appropriate good learning design and facilitation practices, we further recommend the adoption of open education practices and a focus on reflective practices.

## **Conclusion**

Within a South African higher education context, we have shared our voices as learning designers and facilitators who provide learning and teaching support to academics. This chapter has shared how particular models or frameworks can be used to influence the design and facilitation of online and blended courses. The adoption of the Community of

Inquiry framework, an ethic of care perspective and a critical digital pedagogy stance can inform learning design and facilitation processes that promote collaboration and community. In particular, the adoption of the ethic of care perspective required us to be responsive to participant needs and their contexts, by, for example, paying attention to their workloads and identities. The adoption of the Community of Inquiry model enabled us to first establish social presence that then empowered learning to take place. In order to promote community and collaboration, we believe that the social aspect needs to be emphasised in online and blended learning spaces. We have argued that learning design needs to be considered holistically, which includes how courses are facilitated. This is an area upon which future research can expand. We have illustrated these principles through an example of the design and facilitation of a specific professional learning short course for academics. Adapted from an OER, this online facilitation short course for academics encourages a transition in thinking and learning and teaching practices. We have further argued for greater adoption of open education practices to support learning design in higher education that encourages adaptation for local needs. Finally, the chapter has affirmed that learning design is not static; it needs to be flexible to the contexts of students and requires a continuous focus on (re)design.

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