

Knowledge Sharing in an Academic Institution: A Case Study on Joint Course Evaluation

Hanne Haave, Ole Jørgen Ranglund, Trygve Stølan and Tone Vold

University of Inland Norway, School of Business and Social Sciences, Rena, Norway

Hanne.haave@inn.no

ole.ranglund@inn.no

Trygve.stolan@inn.no

Tone.vold@inn.no

Abstract: There is an increasing demand in academia for working more effectively. As budgets are tighter and lecturers struggle to find time for all administration tied to each course, we need to work differently, but without losing opportunities of sharing knowledge amongst the lecturers that make up the community of practice that represents a study program. One way of sharing knowledge and to help strengthen the community feeling amongst the lecturers on a study program, is to join forces regarding course evaluations. Often courses can be viewed as connected, particularly within the same study program. Hence, to save time for the students and for faculty staff, it is thus possible to organize for a joint evaluation form. In this paper we will present the students' and the lecturers' feedback on using a joint evaluation form that comprises evaluation for two courses within the same study program for two different study programs; "Organization, leadership and digitalization" and "Knowledge Management", both part time study programs, but with a rather high number of students (approximately 250 and 90). We will investigate how this affects the knowledge sharing amongst colleagues lecturing at the same study program. Our qualitative research approach has consisted of observations and group interviews. One of the most interesting findings was that the students got an improved understanding of the connection between the courses and allowed utilizing their own work background in both courses, the latter enabling them to understand better what happens in their workplace. For the faculty staff it facilitated for more collaboration and a stronger sense of being in a community of practice.

Keywords: Knowledge sharing, Evaluation, Student feedback

1. Introduction

For several years, student evaluations have been conducted jointly for two courses in the autumn semester and two courses in the spring semester within the Knowledge Management study program at Inland Norway University. Initially, this approach was implemented primarily to save time for both students and faculty. The evaluation reports are part of the university's efforts to support quality assurance in its academic programs. In the spring of 2024, this was also introduced in another study program; The Organization, Leadership, and Digitalization study program for part-time students. In this

Amid the ongoing economic challenges in the academic sector in Norway, time efficiency has become a key consideration when discussing the reallocation of resources—prioritizing teaching over administrative tasks, even as administrative demands, such as reporting, continue to grow. This situation may appear paradoxical; while increased reporting may initially seem counterproductive, it could potentially lead to time savings in the long term. To achieve such efficiencies, it is crucial to maintain a clear overview of task allocation to identify opportunities for optimizing resource utilization.

This raised an important question: are there additional benefits to consolidating evaluation reports beyond simply reducing their number?

Our research question thus became:

How can joint evaluation forms for two courses enhance knowledge sharing and cultivate Communities of Practice among faculty members?

Our initiative emerged from a collaborative academic environment where lecturers have engaged in joint research for several years. However, in some study programs, collaboration among lecturers is limited, and many guest lecturers are only present on campus during their teaching sessions. Consequently, academic collaboration often appears fragmented and reliant on informal, personal connections.

1.1 The Study Programs

The Knowledge Management study program is a part-time, half-year program consisting of four courses: two in the autumn semester and two in the spring semester. The program is delivered in a HyFlex format, allowing

students to participate either online or in person. The courses are delivered as two-day seminars and three seminars per semester. The students are primarily adult learners, most of whom are employed.

The three lecturers involved in the program collaborate closely, regularly discussing the program's progress as well as engaging in joint research. For several years, a joint evaluation has been conducted for both courses in each semester—one evaluation for the two autumn courses and another for the two spring courses.

The Organization, Leadership, and Digitalization study program is also a part-time program, primarily catering to working students. Unlike the Knowledge Management program, its courses are delivered in a seminar-based format and are not available online. There are five two-day seminars per semester. In the spring semester of the first year (in a two-year program), a single joint evaluation has been conducted for the two courses. Additionally, two semesters ago, students requested a joint mandatory assignment for the courses "Digital Workforms in Organizations" and "Project Management." As a result, students were given the option to complete either separate assignments for each course or a combined assignment that addressed both courses.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Communication among lecturers within a study program is desirable but not always achievable. Certain structures exist to facilitate this communication, such as one mandatory meeting per semester. However, the agendas for these meetings often do not allow for collaboration or joint research opportunities. Additionally, some lecturers only participate online due to varying contract types, with some colleagues only coming to campus for lectures while attending other meetings virtually. Communication in organizations involves sharing information to achieve specific goals (Brønn, 2024). For lecturers in a study program, these goals include coordinating deadlines for assignments and addressing issues related to the program.

Enhanced communication can also lead to the formation of Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Within CoPs, scholars can share knowledge and learn from one another through shared interests and interactions aimed at learning and improvement. Potential benefits include problem-solving, skill development, and the creation of new connections between practices, competencies, meanings, and technological advancements (Bicchi, 2024).

Communication also plays a critical role in Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI model (Nonaka, 1994, Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). To share tacit knowledge, individuals must engage in socialization and externalization before the recipient can combine and internalize the conveyed knowledge. However, CoPs are not solely about facilitating learning and knowledge sharing; they are also essential for fostering innovation and value creation (Nicolini et al., 2022). In the context of innovation, potential outcomes of CoPs include generating new ideas, fostering innovative behavior, and improving work practices.

One significant issue to consider is the proximity of interaction among CoP members (Nicolini et al., 2022). The question of proximity has become increasingly relevant during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with the rise of hybrid work arrangements. To sustain the social interaction that defines CoPs, it is essential to explore whether proximity can be maintained in Virtual Communities of Practice (Ergan et al., 2014). Alternatively, the question may be whether physical proximity is a prerequisite for maintaining the essence of CoPs in virtual environments.

3. Methodological Approach

This study is a qualitative case study conducted during the academic years 2024 and 2025. The primary aim was to explore whether reducing the number of evaluation reports offers any benefits. Data for the study were collected through both formal and informal group interviews, as well as personal reflective notes on evaluation practices and the experiences of teachers and students with these practices.

The informants consisted of a strategic sample of approximately 40 students from two different courses, and 5 student representatives. Additionally, 3 faculty members were interviewed to gather their perspectives on the use of common evaluation schemes. The discussions and reflections were integrated with theoretical studies in an abductive process. The data have been analyzed using thematic analysis.

This approach provided valuable insights into the processes of evaluation in education, as well as the meanings, emotions, and reflections of the various participants. These insights align with what Geertz (1973) refers to as "thick descriptions." The outcomes of these processes have led to the establishment of new practices for collaboration and education.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the findings from our investigations and the corresponding discussion. The results are divided into two subsections: one focusing on the findings from the students and the other on the findings from the faculty staff.

4.1 Students as Informants

The interviews (both formal and informal) with students confirmed our initial assumption: students found it time-saving to complete a single evaluation form for multiple courses. This sentiment was shared by students across both study programs. The student informants, who volunteered for the study, were also engaged in group work—both for mandatory assignments and during seminars.

Interestingly, many students in the "Knowledge Management" study program reported using the curriculum interchangeably across courses. They attributed this to recognizing connections and overlaps between the courses. One quote from a student group was: "We collaborated and combined the literature to be able to answer both mandatory assignments in each course. Hence, we have used the literature interchangeably".

Another notable finding pertained to the joint assignment in the *Organization, Management, and Digitalization* study program. Students in previous cohorts had initiated the joint assignment for the courses *Digital Workforms in Organizations* and *Project Management.* Both the previous and current cohorts found the joint assignment useful, as it helped them better understand the relationship between the courses.

One of the student representatives observed: "We quickly realized that the assignment highlighted two complementary perspectives on the same case: the 'what is needed to solve the case' perspective, as addressed in the course *Digital Workforms in Organizations*, and the 'how to implement it' perspective, as explored in the *Project Management* course."

Additionally, students felt that the study program was thoughtfully designed and that the collaborative efforts of the lecturers reassured them that the courses were carefully planned to support their learning outcomes.

An unexpected finding was that students also gained an understanding of how the faculty staff collaborated. Students from both past and present cohorts expressed an awareness of the joint efforts among the lecturers.

Building on this observation, the second round of data collection with current students provided further insights. Students described their perception of the lecturers' collaboration, not just within one program but across both programs, as resembling a Community of Practice (CoP). Students explained that they saw the lecturers as actively seeking to improve their work practices and foster innovative behavior, aligning with Nicolini et al.'s (2022) description of CoPs. This perception arose from students' understanding that the lecturers conducted joint research and shared knowledge about best practices to facilitate better learning opportunities and enhance the workplace relevance of the study programs.

Moreover, students noted that the lecturers' communication and proximity—despite being in different physical locations—also reflected a Virtual Community of Practice (Ergan et al., 2014). This was particularly evident as two faculty members worked primarily online and were based in different locations, yet maintained close collaboration.

4.2 Faculty Staff as Informants

Discussions with faculty staff confirmed that their collaborative efforts resembled Communities of Practice (CoPs). However, they were unaware that students had observed and recognized this dynamic.

The faculty staff acknowledged that their collaboration was driven by a desire to test innovative and nontraditional methods, which facilitated knowledge sharing and communication. This aligns with the original definition of CoPs, as described by Lave and Wenger (1991). The primary goal of this collaboration was to enhance both the students' learning outcomes and the workplace relevance of the study programs.

One key initiative involved designing assignments that allowed students to draw upon their professional backgrounds. Some of these initiatives had been tested prior to this study, and it was the sharing of tacit and explicit knowledge among faculty members that enabled new approaches to enhancing relevance. Here the SECI-model was employed as we firstly discussed our experiences based on our previous experiences with lecturing and evaluation(socialization), then we were clear about sharing our knowledge with each other (externalization), before reflecting together on our new experiences and how this would change our previous knowledge (combining) and then we sought to change our practices based on our new tacit knowledge

(internalization) (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). As part of this process, findings from initial investigations were documented and developed into research papers. This collaboration not only generated new ideas but also improved the faculty staff's work practices (Nicolini et al., 2022; Bicchi, 2024).

5. Conclusion

The collaborative efforts and knowledge-sharing practices among faculty staff were recognized by students as resembling Communities of Practice (CoPs). Faculty members indeed formed CoPs to conduct research on innovative and time-saving initiatives, such as joint assignments and evaluations. These efforts began with the development of assignments that allowed students to apply their workplace experiences, alongside investigations into how students perceived these initiatives. Faculty staff, through their collaboration, effectively shared both tacit and explicit knowledge, leading to the establishment of CoPs.

The students' recognition of these collaborative efforts was unexpected but positive. They perceived the lecturers' joint actions as contributing to the relevance of the study programs and enhancing their learning outcomes.

5.1 Future Research

The students' perception of faculty collaboration has inspired further research and new initiatives to broaden collaboration and share insights with other faculty members. Until now, collaboration has primarily occurred among faculty teaching in the same semester. Future research will explore the potential for extending CoPs to include collaboration across an entire academic year or even across the entire study program. This will involve engaging additional scholars from both study programs to investigate how such collaboration impacts learning outcomes across the full program. We will aim to use more evaluation forms (mid-term assessment as well as end evaluation) provided students on the last day of seminars in order to increase the number of respondents. Also, we will do the interviewing during each seminar with both the student representatives and group interviews with the students attending both physically and virtually.

AI declaration: In this paper, we used the language model GPT-4 via Sikt AI-chat at the University of Inland Norway, as well as Google Translate, to identify and correct grammatical errors, improve sentence structure, and receive suggestions for synonyms to avoid repetition. This was done in accordance with the general guidelines from the university library. We have not used chatbots to generate academic content, but solely to refine our own text.

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