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Over to you: Lonely professionals and the Thinking Environment

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the application of the Thinking Environment in a virtual community of practice that offers a space for educators to share their experiences and thinking. It aims to give ownership of practice to the members. It argues for communities of practice to draw upon the Thinking Environment as a means of navigating third spaces and boosting group cohesion. This study adopts a phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews as experience collection method. Utilising thematic analysis, it finds that the notion of equality connects lonely professionals, creating a third space for them to think critically. The application of the Thinking Environment leads to high instances of group-serving behaviours. It makes recommendations for subject specific communities of practice, along with continued research into the field.

Context

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic saw many education institutions turn to online working patterns as a means of keeping staff and students safe as the country was instructed to work from home where possible. This study found that some educators felt their connectivity to others with a similar passion for pedagogy dwindle, in turn breeding feelings of discontent in that they could no longer enjoy water-cooler moments, where pedagogy might be the topic of conversation.

By April 2020, a collective of practitioners united in the hope of spreading joy in disenfranchised Further Education (FE) educators. Guided by the principles of Kline (1999, 2009, 2020), an online space was created, titled an Ideas Room. Educators could meet weekly, virtually, and contribute an idea concerning pedagogy, or attend to listen. Ideas sponsors then led breakout rooms, in which the attendees followed an order of names in the chat function, passing onto the next educator only when they had finished speaking.

The Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020) comprises 10 components: attention, equality, ease, appreciation, encouragement, feelings, information, difference, incisive questions and place. These components are upheld in the Ideas Rooms under the strict rule of role, rank and ego left at the door, no interruption and no advice. The facilitator ensures these commitments are met, meaning that independent thinking is valued and appreciated.

This article seeks to explore the connection between the application of the Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020) in a virtual community of

practice (VCoP) (Ardichvili, 2008; Chiu et al., 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the concept of a third space (Wright, 2012). A third space is where members meet online to discuss topics which they are unable to converse about at home with familial units, or at work with colleagues – an online application of a third place (Oldenburg, 1999).

Adopting a phenomenological approach, six educators who participate in Ideas Rooms were interviewed virtually, utilising a semi-structured format (see Appendices A, B & C). In line with the Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020), participants were asked incisive questions and given the opportunity to answer uninterrupted, until they wanted to pass the role of speaker back to the interviewer.

Thematically analysed findings revealed that participants appreciated the Ideas Room for providing a third space they were happy to serve, often returning as facilitator, stating that the feeling of equality was the defining factor for return visits.

Literature

Communities of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a community of practice (CoP) thus: 'a community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge' (p. 98). They elicit that only by sharing existing knowledge with others is new knowledge created and acquired. Wenger (1998) elaborates on his theory, stating that by sharing a common goal, CoP members are motivated to create new knowledge surrounding that goal – whether this goal be as wide as survival or as nuanced as working in a data processing office. Wenger (1998) conveys that the term 'practice' is 'sometimes used as an antonym for theory, ideas and reality, talking or doing' (p. 46). Wenger is suggesting that CoPs encompass much more than knowledge creation, and the process of practice is embedded in a multifaceted approach to being.

'We all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world, and communities of practice are places we develop, negotiate and share them' (Wenger, 1998, p. 46). This creates a secular view of CoPs, whereby they exist to fuel their individual goals. Jewson (2007) critiques the CoP approach, eliciting that CoPs cannot exist without intersecting with one another, that knowledge cannot be created and shared between just one group of people and will find a means to be carried across multiple CoPs.

However, in his interview with Omidvar and Kislov (2014), Wenger counteracts this by stating that 'multiple communities and systems of practice, landscapes of practice' (p. 270) mean that the multiple CoPs that an individual may belong to (work, familial life, social scene, hobbies, etc.) all intersect with one another, and that knowledge is disseminated across multiple planes.

Virtual communities of practice

Chiu et al. (2006) conceptualise a VCoP as a meeting online that allows for knowledge sharing and socialisation. Chiu et al. (2006) note that a virtual community is an online space that allows for knowledge sharing and socialisation. The difference between a virtual community and a VCoP is that these are online spaces where members go to learn from one another, share, negotiate and develop among one another. This distinction makes the Ideas Room a VCoP. Amin and Roberts (2008) define a VCoP as an online space where knowledge can be shared, limiting the definition to fitting just two categories, one an online space with innovation-seeking projects with many members, and the other being 'relatively closed interest groups facing specific problems and consciously organised as knowledge communities' (p. 363). Amin and Roberts (2008) also note that the success of an online VCoP relies on the presence of a maintainer – often the originator – and a core group of members who attend regularly.

Ardichvili (2008) conveys the enablers accessing a VCoP, noting trust, tools and corporate culture as

motivating factors to joining a VCoP. The tools of Zoom are simplified as much as possible; however, digital poverty still plays a part in accessing the VCoP. Sarma and Matheus (2015) note that trust comes from the core of the VCoP, and that in order to work the core needs to be stable and have members that join religiously, while the peripheral will dip in and out and form closer bonds with others in the periphery rather than the core.

Zhang and Watts (2008) conducted a case study into online communities of practice by using a forum in which members posted questions about travel. They found that in 7,853 messages in 2,123 threads the formation of community identity was important, with members feeling proud to be part of an online community. They wore the logo of the forum with pride and actively recruited new members.

Third space

The concept of a third place is a physical place where individuals come together outside of work and familial units to informally discuss topics such as politics and philosophy which they may otherwise be unable to discuss in places which they identify as inhabiting (Oldenburg, 1999). In this context, a third space is where this is translated into online contexts (Wright, 2012). Wright argues that third places exist in localised communities, whereas third spaces can be far-reaching by utilising the internet.

McAlpine and Hopwood (2009) explore the definition of the term third space and conclude that: 'Third spaces involve interaction between people who would not normally have worked together, where these interactions are focused on shared (often novel) object (concept, problem idea)' (p. 159). The idea of a third space allows for networking across environments which would not normally be accessible. Whitchurch (2013) identifies integrated, semi-autonomous and independent third spaces. Integrated third spaces are attached to organisations and function within the confines of the organisational structure. Semi-autonomous third spaces bridge the gap between being integrated and independent and are supported by the organisation – these spaces are funded separately to the organisation from which they stem. Independent third spaces are also funded separately from organisations but are more spontaneous and may only occur once. These spaces are the freest flowing of the three, allowing for intra-organisational working.

Knowledge sharing and creation

Polanyi (1966) suggests that tacit knowledge is knowledge which we instinctively know, such as empathy, values and interpersonal effectiveness. Nonaka and Konno (1998) go on to explain the difference between tacit and explicit knowledge, stating that explicit knowledge is more factual, tangible knowledge than its tacit counterpart. They further maintain that tacit knowledge can be shared through socialisation. McLure, Wasko and Faraj (2000) suggest that knowledge shared in a CoP is knowledge as a public good, a tangible good that is shared between members. This commodity is classified as a social practice of knowing.

Lee and Cole (2003) note that knowledge is evolutionary in a community-based model of knowledge creation, that the knowledge is passed between members and developed from the existing knowledge each member has. 'A prominent feature of our community-based model of knowledge creation is a set of rules and structures that encourages critical evaluation of existing knowledge, innovation and rapid elimination of error' (p. 636). Critical evaluation of existing knowledge is integral to the creation of new knowledge.

Intra-organisational working

Intra-organisational working is the process of actively networking among different organisations to create a new, innovative product. Melo (2018) writes that 'intra-organisational informal learning networks are often spontaneous and of a short duration, but they can offer valuable information to

address a specific issue', meaning that knowledge sharing in these networks is unexpected but fruitful. Yu and Chen (2019) conducted an archival data examination for two Taiwanese companies, looking for examples of intra-organisational working and found that this led to innovative practices when the organisation looked outwards for inspiration. Kinnie and Swart (2019) substitute intra-organisational working in this context for trans-organisational working. They argue that where no participant is employed by the same organisation yet work collaboratively, this is trans-organisational working.

Conversely, Willcock (2013) writes of silo working, the practice of working as a lonely professional, isolated within a team and missing being part of the wider context. Johnson et al. (2018) note isolation within organisations. They suggest that silo working has a negative impact on partnerships within organisations and inhibits growth.

The Thinking Environment

Kline (1999, 2009, 2020) conceptualises the Thinking Environment as 10 components which engender an environment that evokes independent thinking through listening. There is limited research into the application of the Thinking Environment so this literature review will explore the 10 components. These components are attention, equality, ease, appreciation, encouragement, feelings, information, difference (formerly diversity) (1999, 2009), incisive questions and place.

'Attention, the act of listening with palatable respect and fascination, is the key to a Thinking Environment' (Kline, 1999, p. 37). Shteynberg (2015) argues that shared attention makes it harder to give one speaking person undivided attention when we have external factors requiring our attention, be it the ticking of the clock or a mental list of chores.

Equality in the Thinking Environment means 'regarding each other as thinking peers, giving equal turns and attention, honouring boundaries' (Kline, 2009, p. 46). It links to attention in that by giving equal turns, members can offer their complete attention knowing that they will get their turn to express their views. Simon and Sturmer (2003) researched respect in group situations with 163 students at the University of Kiel (66 men and 67 women) and found that group-serving behaviours were displayed more in groups where respect and positive regard were utilised, compared to those where disrespect was encouraged. Renger and Simon (2011) found that by being treated as an equal in a group the motivation to serve the group is heightened, compared to those who found they were treated unequally.

Kline (1999) defines ease as the absence of urgency or rush. Qamar et al. (2017) referred to those with 'urgency addiction' (p. 86) as using the addiction as a fast track to artificial self-worth, and that it is considered an issue as it exacerbates existing problems and worsens functioning.

Kline (2020) regards appreciation as the notion of praising someone, stating that it is an act of respect to appreciate a good thing about someone and that by being a recipient, 'oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine dash around their cortex; [...] they think better and better' (p. 45). hooks (1994) describes passionately caring for the other as an act of love. Words of affirmation were deemed to be the most wanted language of appreciation (White, 2017) in a study of 100,000 employees; 47% wanted words of affirmation to be their primary means of receiving appreciation, compared to other categories such as gifts, acts of service and quality time. Kumar and Epley (2018) studied how appreciation and gratitude is undervalued; in their study of questionnaires to 80 recipients of gratitude letters, they found that expressors of gratitude underestimated how valued recipients would feel and overestimated how awkward they would feel.

Feelings should be felt, acknowledged and used as strength, argues Kline (1999). Shteynberg et al. (2014) found that emotional coactivation occurs when in group settings, and that empathy exists in

group contexts by expressions of feelings changing the group mood. They also found that we feel more deeply in groups, reacting to external factors with more vigour than when alone. Brown (2012) explores vulnerability and shame, finding that these two emotions are difficult to process, however integral to entering the arena and being brave, suggesting that these emotions are often neglected and shunned.

Kline (1999) explains encouragement as being anti-competitive, that all members of Thinking Environments are equal. Dima (2010) argues that knowledge acquisition and sharing is traditionally a competitive battlefield and is an example of an anti-trust environment. When this is reversed, organisations can openly own their knowledge and practices and flourish.

Information mirrors knowledge sharing, in that it concerns the supplying of information as knowledge, but supplying knowledge at the correct time (Kline, 1999). Lee and Cole (2003) state that knowledge is evolutionary and that by sharing knowledge, individuals can process this information to further critically think on their own to create new knowledge.

Difference in working relationships is shown as important (DiBenigno & Kellogg, 2014), bringing differing statuses, perceptions and viewpoints together to create a melting pot of experience. Difference is captured by Gitterman (2018), suggesting that similarities and differences are key in acknowledging and causing us not to replicate the heteronormative world within our working groups.

Incisive questions are designed to remove limiting assumptions (Kline, 1999). Echoed by Koster and Bisbee (2016), incisive questions are tools used to unmask ingrained assumptions, usually subconscious to the individual, and encourage the thinker to think past these assumptions. Andenoro et al. (2017) found that 170/191 university students felt that incisive questioning as part of a wider model helped to raise their self-awareness, and that 145/191 participants found a heightened sense of systems thinking.

To Kline (1999), creating a physical space that addresses all the needs of those involved in a Thinking Environment is the concept of place. However, when online, this is shifted slightly. Shteynberg (2015) notes shared attention, meaning that each individual environment cannot be controlled as it would be in a physical space, leading to distractions in multiple arenas, rather than just one. Kline (2020) writes of 'digistractions' (p. 91), saying that we inhabit the online world, with our phones and laptops being a place of their own, and that our minds are almost always linked to these spaces. This 'digistraction' is tenfold when we are in online spaces as the temptation to check emails, connect with the internet and other online spaces that are ingrained into our minds is present.

Research design

Research aims

Reviewing the literature scrutinised previously, two research questions were formulated. The gaps in the literature show that there is little research around the efficacy of the Thinking Environment in various settings. Therefore, the research questions were:

- How does the application of the Thinking Environment influence the experience of a VCoP?

- To what extent is the experience of community built using the Thinking Environment?

Methodology

The Ideas Room is a novel CoP which convenes twice a week and has done so since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a historic participant, I chose to study this area as communities of intra-organisational working are under-researched. Phenomenology as practice, according to van

Manen (2016), takes the approach that research using this methodology should seek to uncover experiences and the nuances that individuals may report. By uncovering experiences, the researcher can objectively see what the participant reports and analyse it effectively. Phenomenology influences this study by helping to frame the research questions to reflect experience. It governs the way in which data is referred to, as experiences, and how the data is collected. The decision was made to collect the experiences through in-depth interviewing, semi-structured, to help guide the process. Seidman (2013) notes that to interview phenomenologically, interviews should be split into three sections, the first establishing the interviewee's current position, the second asking about the experience itself and the third aiding the interviewee to make sense of the experience. Influenced by this, the semi-structured interviews followed this pattern, asking for demographic information first, then about the experience and finally probing to interpret the experience.

Experiences collected in a phenomenological study are subjective. The further hermeneutics where the researcher then interprets the participant's interpretations can lead to fractures between what the participant was trying to convey and the research publicised (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). Cohen et al. (2018) suggest that phenomenology may lack objectivity, focus on small events and not be generalisable.

Method

This research chose to adopt semi-structured interviews as the method for experience collection in this study.

Ezzy (2010) describes interview as communion when an 'open attentiveness' (p. 164) is adopted. Ezzy goes on to suggest that to do so the interviewer must recognise the participant as an equal. 'Good interviews are not dominated by either the voice of the interviewer or the agendas of the interviewee. Rather they feel like communion' (p. 164). Therefore, interviewer input was kept to a minimum to allow the participant to fully respond in a manner they were comfortable with. Intervention when a participant was talking only occurred if they were dominating the interview with their own agenda. Kohler Riessman notes that listening intently in an 'emotionally attentive and engaged way' (2008, p. 26) exposes the interviewer but offers up new possibilities within the interview. This engaged listening allowed for the participant to become an informer as opposed to a responder (Atkins & Wallace, 2012), whereby the participant is informing the research rather than simply responding to questions, hence the addition of new prompts as the interviewing schedule progressed (see Appendices A, B & C).

Interviews were conducted using Zoom to reach the participants who are all geographically dispersed (O'Connor & Madge, 2016). This technology allows recording of the audio to input into transcription software Otter.ai. Transcripts were then edited to include pauses and fillers, reinstating the human aspect. All participants were assigned appropriate pseudonyms to further anonymise them.

Sampling

Initially, a self-selecting sampling approach was utilised, allowing for participants to take part of their own free will. Five positive responses were received within a day to an open call on Twitter, an online social media platform that members of the Ideas Room are encouraged to use to build community. The self-selection technique is an example of convenience sampling, whereby participants are recruited based on their proximity to the researcher. The limitations to self-selected sampling methods include selection bias, where the participants consent to take part in the research to impart strong beliefs about the research subject.

Purposeful sampling was later employed to reach saturation for the experience collection. There are advantages to this approach, such as being able to select appropriate participants who have sufficient knowledge of the research area. To this end, a

participant known to have been involved since the conception of the VCoP was selected.

The sample comprised five females and one male, all ranging between 27 and 65 years old and scattered across England (see Appendix D). Their job roles varied from lecturer to quality manager to head of department. The sample had a ratio of 5:1 women to men. This does not reflect the ratio of women to men in the Ideas Room which stands at 10:1.

Experience collection and analysis

'Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns in data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Therefore, this method was adopted to seek out themes within the collection of experiences. The experiences are honoured to each participant within the Findings section, in line with the phenomenological methodology that this research employs.

Transcripts were analysed, coded and themed. Five major themes emerged: equality and the Thinking Environment, networking and the lonely professional, third space, subject specific vocational communities of practice and scepticism and rule. This article focuses on the themes of third space and networking and the lonely professional.

Findings

Third space

The concept of a third space stems from Oldenburg (1999). He suggests that third places exist where people physically go to discuss topics that wouldn't be discussed at work or at home. He describes this as a physical place. The Ideas Room fits the context of Wright's (2012) definition of third spaces – an online space that functions as a third place. Calling the Ideas Room a third space conveys that knowledge sharing and creation occurs within the space (Nonaka & Konno, 1998). The format encourages independent thinking to fulfil this brief.

> 'Why I keep going back, you know, it's because there's a gap, you know, even with family. I think family relationship is complex, and it's never easy to discuss certain things, you know, because too much emotion is involved, the feelings involved. And I suppose hierarchy to some extent. Work – worse, even worse.'
>
> Lily – a 43-year-old mother of a young child. She is waiting for her viva for her PhD but is a learning and quality practitioner in her full-time role. Lily has 18 months' experience with the Ideas Room, online from her own home in East Anglia.

Lily comes back to the Ideas Room as it is a space where she feels she can be heard. It is a space away from family and work, where she is encouraged to think independently. The disconnect Lily feels at work when talking about her passion for innovation is bridged by the Ideas Room. It is inferred that Lily does not always feel comfortable taking her ideas to her workplace because of the hierarchy involved. The Ideas Room remedies this by leaving role, rank and ego at the door. A practice of equality to build trust in the group, leading to group-serving activities (Simon & Sturmer, 2003). Feelings are a core component of the Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020). Lily believes that the family environment is overwrought with feeling and emotion, and it can be difficult to navigate. Opposingly, by having feeling as a component, being in a Thinking Environment can help members to be more proactive about their feelings, feel them, have the time and space to process them before proceeding mindfully.

> 'I've got another group of people who I work with, my work colleagues. They're not like [the organisation], they're not, I don't know how to explain it without being offensive. They're not, you know, their authentic selves. And we appreciate each other and all that stuff, which is completely who I am, but it's not who they are.'

> Rebecca – a 37-year-old woman with one year of experience with the Ideas Room. She is based in the East Midlands and is a university lecturer with two young children under the age of five. Rebecca has utilised connections made in the community to publish 17 pieces of work in 12 months.

Rebecca, like Lily, experiences a different playing field when at work compared to when in an Ideas Room. She acknowledges this difference and is at peace with it; however, she also feels a disconnect. She mentions appreciation, which again, is a component of the Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020). In the Ideas Room, appreciation manifests as both respect and as explicit appreciation among members. Kumar and Epley (2018) found that people often overestimate how awkward someone may feel when receiving appreciation, and it is inferred that Rebecca feels awkward appreciating her colleagues and is hesitant about their reaction. The application of the Thinking Environment in the Ideas Room encourages vulnerability (Brown, 2012), and therefore the presence of authentic self, as Rebecca states.

> 'I'm the only academic in my family, in my immediate family. So, to talk about some of the things we talk about in an Ideas Room […] to be able to chat philosophy, or be able to chat about teaching, to be able to chat about students and the patriarchy through with a group of people who know what those words mean […] I feel like I'm coming home, I feel like I'm coming to my family.'

> Jessica – a 35-year-old woman from the East Midlands is a programme area leader for humanities. She is currently studying for a PhD and attends the Ideas Room to connect with people. Jessica has been attending for six months.

Feeling lonely professionally has been an emerging theme in this research; however, Jessica talks about feeling academically lonely in her family life also. She feels unchallenged at home and enters the Ideas Room as a third space for intellectual stimulation (Oldenburg, 1999). Jessica was passionate about the Ideas Room, a place where she feels she belongs, and she is motivated to serve the group by hosting Ideas Rooms, writing rooms and writing for the organisation's magazine (Simon & Sturmer, 2003). By referring to the Ideas Room as her 'family', Jessica is placing an emotional value on the group. The sense of community she feels is more than professional and has an attachment to the group. Jessica actively sought out community when embarking upon her PhD in a bid to feel more intellectually challenged. She stumbled across the organisation six months ago and has been an active member ever since.

> 'I'm a big believer, and I say this a lot where I work, that if you box up a sunflower, it can't grow. And I think we're the same as innovators, that if you try and push us into the constraints of, not the organisation, but the constraints of teaching and learning, we can't, you know, grow and develop and do what we want to do, aim high. So, we've got to look outside of the organisation.'

> Sophie – a 28-year-old woman from the South East who has 18 months' experience with the Ideas Room. She is a teacher specialising in English who uses the Ideas Room for innovative pedagogical practice.

Sophie describes herself as an innovator, which drives her to look outside of her organisation for continuous professional development opportunities. Her metaphor of the sunflower shows the importance of third spaces as fertiliser for independent thought. The Ideas Room creates conditions for Sophie to grow and develop and eventually bloom into a sunflower as her ideas grow and take shape through knowledge sharing (Nonaka & Konno, 1998) in a community-based model (Lee & Cole, 2003). She speaks of the constraints and makes a point of not blaming the organisation for

which she works for these shackles, but implies that she feels stuck at work, shut in a box.

Networking and the lonely professional

Intra-organisational working has provided fruitful opportunities for participants to come together to share knowledge in a community-based model (Lee & Cole, 2003). Participants belong to an organisation (their workplace) yet visit the Ideas Room to express themselves outside of that organisation. This is an example of trans-organisational working, according to Kinnie and Swart (2019).

> 'Going into different spaces with different people is a really positive experience because you don't really know who you're going to be there with, it could be people you've never shared ideas with before, it could be new people who have come for the first time. You're helping people to solve problems and people are helping you to solve problems.'

Sophie spoke about knowledge creation and sharing in the bid to solve problems. She noted that knowledge creation and sharing is crucial to the Ideas Room format, with a sponsor participant bringing ideas into the space to be discussed further in breakout rooms. This is explicit knowledge sharing (Nonaka & Konno, 1998). By drawing on personal experience, participants can share their thinking without offering advice – a pivotal rule of the Thinking Environment and the Ideas Room (Kline, 2020). McLure Wasko and Faraj (2000) suggest that knowledge is a public good, and that by sharing personal experience and knowledge in the Ideas Room, participants are in fact gifting knowledge to one another. Networking with new people is an important factor to consider when exploring the Ideas Room.

> 'I think there's an analogy about females working around a queen bee and there's no kind of hierarchy, and they're all whizzing around the queen and then go in different directions and report back.'
>
> John – a 65-year-old male quality manager in FE. He has two years' experience with the Ideas Room and is based in the Midlands. His attendance in the Ideas Room can be intermittent.

In his metaphor, John refers to the queen bee as a central point around which the female drones work. The queen bee in the Ideas Room is the core value of the organisation, rather than the host. It is interesting to observe how John spoke about female bees rather than bees in general, perhaps noting that he himself feels differently about the structure of the collective. Implying that only females work in this anti-competitive, collaborative manner, he isolates himself from the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I inferred that John felt uncomfortable when speaking about how the Ideas Room operates compared to traditional meetings with a hierarchical structure and an obvious leader. This may be associated with his gender, with Ideas Rooms generally having a 10:1 ratio of women to men.

The need for connection and networking is what draws some participants back to the space at every available opportunity, particularly those studying for PhDs, or those experiencing problems at work. Silo working (Willcock, 2013), working with minimal connection to the wider environment, is prevalent among all six of the participants interviewed, and all cited their attendance of the Ideas Rooms as a form of connection.

> 'People are talking about things you didn't really even consider, particularly when you are down the PhD rabbit hole […] it's quite nice to think about the wider context. […] when I was working at the centre, I would often be the only art tutor in.'
>
> Emily – a 27-year-old woman who works in adult community learning as an artist tutor while studying for her PhD. She is based in

> Essex and has six months' experience with the Ideas Room which she attends weekly.

Here Emily refers to the wider context as a comfort to her. She finds studying for a PhD lonely and feels isolated operating as a silo at work (Johnson et al., 2018). She attends the Ideas Room in order to connect with others, and 3/6 participants that I interviewed were studying for PhDs, meaning that Emily has found some common ground with other Ideas Room participants where she is able to bring ideas around research to the table. The connection that Emily has made is built on trust (Ardichvili, 2008), which draws her back to the Ideas Room every week – religiously (Sarma & Matheus, 2015).

Two of the participants described the lack of traditional staffrooms in their respective FE colleges. They spoke of the loneliness felt in open-plan spaces at work, that even though they were surrounded by colleagues, they often felt alienated.

> 'The ideas space and the Thinking Environment, I've described it as a staffroom. I've described it as a place you go, you get your brew, and you talk to people that you know respect you and you know are going to listen.'
>
> Jessica

> 'I think it's going back to when staff could talk about teaching. And I don't know of any college that has got a staffroom.'
>
> John

Jessica and John refer to the Ideas Room as a virtual staffroom where participants go to talk about teaching and learning, not to work. They both implied that they feel lonely at work, working in silos and with their departments compartmentalised (Willcock, 2013). Attending the Ideas Room gives them an opportunity to connect with other practitioners to share and create knowledge (Nonaka & Konno, 1998). They found this exchange invaluable, and while it reminds John of the past when key performance indicators (KPIs) weren't as relevant, it is a welcome novelty for Jessica who hasn't been working in FE for as long as John. The comparison to the staffroom is notable, as it pulls all the participants together as if they worked for the same organisation and shared the same values and ethos. The core values of the collective and the 10 components of the Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020) which supports the Ideas Room are shared by all participants.

Discussion

The connection felt by those attending the Ideas Room is a notable one. They all return to experience the connection that they feel is lacking at work, or at home in their familial units. Whether that be from silo working (Willcock, 2013), or from the lack of traditional staffrooms in modern FE buildings. John elaborated further how his staffroom at work is open plan, and this prevents him from having meaningful conversations about pedagogy at work, when he is expected to work, eat and exist with colleagues all in the same room. The concept of staffrooms and the Ideas Room offering an alternative space to work out ideas surrounding pedagogy is interesting. The notion that members do not know who they are going to meet at any given time to discuss pedagogy or research, yet still hold every participant in equal esteem, stems from the application of the Thinking Environment. The Thinking Environment components are key to ensuring that all members feel they are heard.

Using the Ideas Room as a springboard to networking with like-minded professionals has proved as important as having a third space. Participants stated that they felt lonely at work, as though their values were not the same as their colleagues, creating a disconnect in the work environment. The Ideas Room has attracted a wide variety of members over the past two years, from a range of backgrounds within education, from many corners of the globe. Bringing together members with similar values and similar experiences has proven to be transformative for participants. Even referring to the Ideas Room as 'family', Jessica feels

warmth towards these people she has never physically met, with whom she shares a common goal: to think. Having this need met, participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences with one another, often linking to their freshest thinking. The Thinking Environment has provided a space free of hierarchy which brings individuals together to think collectively on topics that are meaningful to them.

Conclusion

This study aimed to uncover the link between the application of the Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020) and the feeling of community in a VCoP. It explored how by utilising the 10 components of a Thinking Environment, independent thinking was evoked and how this led to group-serving activities (Simon & Sturmer, 2003). The key findings were that by setting and practising equality as a requisite for the group, group-serving activities followed as a result (Simon & Sturmer, 2003). It also found that the VCoP acted as a network for lonely professionals, whether from silo working (Johnson et al., 2018), or from undertaking further study programmes such as PhDs. The concept of third spaces has arisen from this research (Oldenburg, 1999).

The research questions explored the experience of the Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020) and the experience of community. I conclude that overall, the experience of the Ideas Room is a positive one, community is built as a third space (Oldenburg, 1999), where lonely professionals meet to explore topics of interest outside of familial units and across organisations (Kinnie & Swart, 2019). This study highlighted the importance of trans-organisational working to further continuous professional development opportunities for those working in FE. It explored the model of the Thinking Environment to facilitate this and showed that where practices of equality and care were put into place to guide independent thought, group-serving activity was present (Renger & Simon, 2011).

The study was conducted using semi-structured interviews under a phenomenological lens. The sample size was six participants, and if possible, I would recommend extending the sample size. Due to the nature of a self-selecting sample, it could be possible that those who came forward to be interviewed could have a specific reason for doing so, to get a point across that they had been harbouring. I would recommend repeating the study with a random sampling technique.

The ratio of female to male members of the Ideas Room is approximately 10:1. Perhaps by interviewing more men, I could have obtained greater insight, but this remains an unanswered issue.

These findings can be used to model the use of the Thinking Environment (Kline, 1999, 2009, 2020) in continuous professional development opportunities for those working in FE, crossing organisational borders to produce new knowledge in a community-based model (Lee & Cole, 2003).

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Appendix A

Research interview demographics and prompts
Demographics
Gender:
Age range:
Years of experience with the Thinking Environment:
Situation:
Job role:

Prompts
Experience of events
Hi there, how are you today?
What does the TE look like to you in the Ideas Room?
What works and what doesn't?
How do you personally experience the TE?
Why?
Community
Rhizomes – do you participate in the wider organisation? Was the Ideas Room the first interaction you had with the organisation? Why? Why not?
What does this mean for you?
What's live in you?

Appendix B

Research interview demographics and prompts 2
Demographics
Gender:
Age range:
Years of experience with the Thinking Environment:
Situation:
Job role:

Prompts
Experience of events
Hi there, how are you today?
What does the TE look like to you in the Ideas Room?
What works and what doesn't?
How do you personally experience the TE?
Why?
Community
Rhizomes – do you participate in the wider organisation? Was the Ideas Room the first interaction you had with the organisation? Why? Why not?
What does this mean for you?
Vocational Communities of Practice
What's live in you?

Appendix C

Research interview demographics and prompts 3
Demographics
Gender:
Age range:
Years of experience with the Thinking Environment:
Situation:
Job role:

Prompts
Experience of events
Hi there, how are you today?
What does the TE look like to you in the Ideas Rooms?
What works and what doesn't?
How do you personally experience the TE?
Lightbulb moment
Why?
Third space
Vocational Communities of Practice
Community
Rhizomes – do you participate in the wider organisation? Was the Ideas Room the first interaction you had with the organisation? Why? Why not?
What does this mean for you?
What's live in you?

Appendix D


Inverness
Aberdeen
SCOTLAND
HEBRIDES
Dundee
Edinburgh
Glasgow
United Kingdom
Newcastle upon Tyne
NORTHERN IRELAND
Isle of Man
Great Britain
Manchester
Dublin
Ireland
Liverpool
Limerick
Birmingham
Cork
WALES
ENGLAND
Bristol
Cardiff
London
Southampton
Brighton
Plymouth
English Channel