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Teaching as a connected community practice: Connecting Legal Education and the value of learning from each other

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SOLIDARITY AND SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS

Higher education, and in particular the part of it focused on teaching, education and scholarship, is full of 'grim tales'.[1] Other writers in this series have outlined the structural undervaluing of education-focused roles in the legal academy as seen, for example, in the influence of REF and the downgrading of textbooks.[2] We would add to the list the proliferation of casualised teaching roles and particularly pernicious attempts to create two tracks of academics with significantly different employment terms and statuses.[3] The underlying issues are, of course, broader and not limited to law or even to teaching: 'neoliberal ideologies and performative regimes have exerted considerable pressure on academics in recent years. For many, working in higher education

1 Carol A Taylor, Susanne Gannon, Gill Adams, Helen Donaghue, Stephanie Hannam-Swain, Jean Harris-Evans, Joan Healey and Patricia Moore, 'Grim tales: meetings, matterings and moments of silencing and frustration in everyday academic life' (2020) 99 International Journal of Educational Research 101513.

2 Fiona Cownie, 'Education, education, education …' (2026) 77(RST1) Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly 1–9.

3 Tom Williams, 'London South Bank to create "two track" academic workforce' (*Times Higher Education* 26 March 2026). A number of other UK higher education institutions are currently trying similar tricks.

is characterised by isolation and individualised competition.'[4]

This reflective piece focuses on our collective response to these 'grim tales' and challenges. Teaching is too important to the legal academy (in terms of mission, identity, and resources) to be the subject of a counsel of despair. Beyond that, many of us find deep purpose in helping our students achieve their potential and real joy in the interactions we have in the classroom. Above all, this piece focuses on the need to challenge feelings of isolation and the undervaluing of those who teach law, through solidarity and support structures.

We suggest that communities of practice (CoPs) are one such support structure and that Connecting Legal Education (CLE) has become, organically but also consciously, a valued and useful CoP. CLE is a mostly virtual, international network of legal educators and practitioners founded during the first United Kingdom (UK) Covid lockdown in March 2020 as a simple online space for 'hangouts' and presentations.[5] It has developed into a free and open community of practice with over 400 members that has hosted more than 80 legal education and scholarship events, two in-person social gatherings, and an in-person conference funded by the Society for Legal Scholars and the University of Leeds: CLE Fest 2024.[6]

The CoP literature is extensive but seldom applied in the unique contexts of legal education or UK higher education.[7] Much attention is given to the ways in which CoPs act as knowledge exchange communities. They are distinct from formal and institutional training programmes in emphasising practical, situated and contextual knowledge, and in drawing on the plurality of community members.[8] Within a CoP, individual and collective experiences and narratives matter. This knowledge includes context-based experiences that are harder to capture in scholarly articles

4 Bruce Macfarlane, 'Collegiality and performativity in a competitive academic culture' (2016) 48(2) Higher Education Review 31–50, 45–27, cited in Karen Gravett, *Relational Pedagogies: Connections and Mattering in Higher Education* (Bloomsbury Academic 2023) 83.

5 Connecting Legal Education.

6 Verona Ní Drisceoil, Michael Doherty and Lydia Bleasdale, 'Joy, connection and doing things differently: reflecting on the Connecting Legal Education "Fest"' (2025) 59(1) The Law Teacher 127–135.

7 Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press 1998)

8 Paul Duguid, '"The art of knowing": social and tacit dimensions of knowledge and the limits of the community of practice' (2005) 21 The Information Society 109–118.

or other resources[9] and allow us to move from explicit (*knowing what*) to tacit (*knowing how*) knowledge.[10]

These are benefits of CoPs that we embrace, but this reflection focuses on another aspect of CoPs – the ways in which they can help develop or reinforce identity and promote a sense of belonging and mattering. For us, as the co-organisers of CLE, this sense of community and mattering helps sustain us through the hard parts of being a legal educator and find joy in the many good parts of that role.

THE EVOLUTION OF CONNECTING LEGAL EDUCATION

The steady growth in CLE's size and scope might suggest a concerted strategy for membership, publicity and impact from the start: this is far from the truth. In our first year, our mantra was 'if you keep turning up, we'll keep putting talks on' and our members kept turning up. Our sessions, what we originally called 'hangouts' and which are still run through the Microsoft (MS) Teams platform, normally include a formal presentation on a legal education issue or project (pedagogy, assessment, wellbeing, learning technology, etc) from a community member. The presentation part of the hour is normally around 20–25 minutes which leaves lots of time for initial social chat and then some intense Q&A where we unpack the formal knowledge from the presentation and explore how it might play out in our own practice. Other types of events we have had include co-creation activities, writing sessions and reading groups. The discussion and interaction is where a lot of the situated learning and sharing of tacit knowledge takes place. One notion of CoPs is that they are a form of 'vicarious experiential learning',[11] and we have seen the benefit of hearing plural accounts of how big ideas on learning theory and pedagogic tools play out in real-world practice.

Regularity of presence is an important element in the organic evolution of CoPs,[12] and we initially hosted events roughly every fortnight for the first four months, before taking our first summer break. With the return to in-person teaching and scholarly/research events (albeit in a socially distanced way) following the initial lockdowns we had anticipated a drop-off in interest, but this

9 M McLure Wasko and Samer Faraj, '"It is what one does": why people participate and help others in electronic communities of practice' (2000) 9 Journal of Strategic Information Systems 155–173.

10 Duguid (n 8 above).

11 Christopher Myers, 'Coactive vicarious learning: towards a relational theory of vicarious learning in organisations' (2018) 43 Academy of Management Review 610–634.

12 Wenger (n 7 above).

never came. Instead, through word-of-mouth, the development and maintenance of a dedicated Twitter (now Bluesky) account, and invitations to speakers (who then became part of the community), we steadily increased our membership. Whilst we had a developing archive of materials within MS Teams, we realised that the absence of an externally facing online presence limited the ability of our presenters to evidence their work, and for us to evidence our impact. We developed a LinkedIn site and secured funding through Inspera for a website.[13] In addition, we welcomed a fourth member of our team to support all aspects of keeping the community running and to further develop how we capture our 'shared repertoire' of resources.

The evolution of CLE has therefore seen changes in the scale of its membership and activities, but with a deliberate retention of its original culture of warmth, informality, friendliness, community, support and belonging. As co-organisers of CLE, we have actively sought to foster connections through, for example; individual introductions, by offering support with specific tasks (such as reviewing promotion applications), and by building in opportunities for informal connections (we always start our sessions with five minutes of general conversation and encourage people to use the 'chat' function). At our inception, these connections were less focused on, for example, innovative pedagogy or career progression and more on how to 'do the basics' of teaching online (which the majority of the community had no experience of), as well as on providing a regular, friendly space in which to see familiar faces. Some of our members were living alone and/or separated from family overseas. Others were not isolated at home but felt so at work, and we are particularly proud that we could provide a safe arena in which to voice concerns, let off steam, and generate hope when many people were scrambling for connections.

Some people and some topics of concern have stayed with us over the years, such as career development (particularly for those on education-focused pathways, who can find it more difficult than others to establish routes to promotion),[14] and teaching innovations, but others have

13 Inspera.

14 Lydia Bleasdale, 'Legal academic careers: examining student education-focused law teachers through the prism of self-determination theory' in Caroline Strevens and Emma Jones, *Wellbeing in the Legal Academy* (Springer 2023); Stephanie Bull, Alison Cooper, Anita Laidlaw, Louise Milne and Shelley Parr, '"You certainly don't get promoted for just teaching": experiences of education-focused academics in research-intensive universities' (2025) 50(2) Studies in Higher Education 239–255; Advance HE, *Embedding Reward, Recognition and Promotion in Teaching and Learning* (2025).

developed as the world around us changed. Teaching innovations, for example, have morphed from how to engage and teach students online during the pandemic, to how to support students who are juggling ever-more competing demands,[15] and the value of taking the classroom, well … out of the classroom.[16] We gather our topics from community suggestions, recently published articles, and conference papers. GenAI has, of course, featured heavily within CLE presentations, whether this was the focus of the work or not, but we have sought to be guided not by the current 'favourite child/bugbear' of pedagogy, but instead by what our community is interested in talking and/or hearing more about – their real needs. We have, for example, had focused series on assessment, on undertaking and publishing legal education research/scholarship, on career development, and have a forthcoming series on everyday sexism within academia.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

As we have indicated, when we started CLE we did not pay much attention to the sort of entity that we were or could become. We were too busy doing the work of organising sessions, finding platforms, and so on. When we later realised that our community had momentum and was likely to continue to evolve, our thoughts turned to our place in the legal education landscape. The dominant features of that landscape include the learned associations and *The Law Teacher* journal. The Association of Law Teachers has had a pedagogic focus from its formation in 1965, whilst the Society of Legal Scholars and the Socio-Legal Studies Association have more recently developed legal education streams. As co-organisers we had, and have, strongly positive connections to those existing organisations having served them variously as editors, section leads, trustees, committee members and chairs. Any continuing rationale for our existence would have to involve identifying what was distinct and complementary about our nature and activities. We found a conceptual model for that distinctiveness in Etienne Wenger's theory of CoPs.[17]

There are a range of structures that can support legal educators, from formal bodies such as learned societies with corporate personality, constitutions and subscribed members, to informal groupings of colleagues who work together on single time-limited

15 See, for example, Advance HE/Higher Education Policy Institute, 'More than two-thirds of full-time students now undertake paid work during term time, major survey reveals' (Student Academic Experience Survey 2025).

16 See, for example, 'Post Office scandal play "incredibly important"' (*BBC News* 28 January 2026).

17 Wenger (n 7 above).

projects. Somewhere along that spectrum lie CoPs, 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'.[18] As we have suggested, CoPs can have a positive impact not just on tacit and 'soft' knowledge management and expertise sharing but also on feelings of identity, connection and self-actualisation. They can help develop a 'shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction'.[19]

CoPs need a shared *domain*,[20] and ours is a commitment to effective learning and support that sees our students as humans worthy of respect and our colleagues as people engaged in a socially useful and ethical practice – we collectively care about teaching. Our *community* is drawn from a majority of the UK's law schools (including pre and post-92s and private providers) but also includes academics from 13 other countries and colleagues in law firms, NGOs and regulators. It includes distinguished researchers and people on teaching-focused pathways. Our shared *practice* is in learning from each other to develop our capabilities and identities as legal educators.

Wenger and colleagues also point out that CoPs need cultivation, co-ordination and leadership.[21] Whilst this is true for us – we have had a leadership group of three or four people throughout – we are also pretty informal. There is no membership fee, no constitution or code of conduct, and we have no expectations as to the level of engagement. The warmth and informality of our structure and communication style is also an important part of the character of our community. Whilst pessimism is the dominant tone around higher education in recent times, we want our CoP to be a place of realistic optimism where our values are shared and our work celebrated; where members feel they belong.

CONNECTING LEGAL EDUCATION: A SPACE OF BELONGING AND MATTERING

Fostering a 'sense of belonging' is built into numerous higher education policies and has, rightly, been part of higher education discourse for decades. For the most part, the literature on the topic has

18 Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, 'Introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses' (*Wenger-Trayner* June 2015).

19 Ibid.

20 Wenger (n 7 above).

21 E Wenger, R McDermott and W Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Harvard University Press 2002).

focused on students.[22] However, recent scholarship, especially during and post-pandemic, focuses more widely on the need for all who work in higher education to belong, and matter – and how a sense of belonging closely connects to wellbeing.[23]

Unsurprisingly, much of the literature on belonging takes Abraham Maslow's hierarchical needs pyramid as a starting point.[24] Belonging, according to Maslow, is an emotional attachment; a feeling of 'home', a feeling of being part of something.[25] Such emotions, and needs, come or develop, *after* one's basic physiological and safety needs are met.[26] He notes that 'if both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge love and affection and belongingness needs, and the whole cycle will repeat itself with this new centre'.[27] For Morris Rosenberg and Claire McCullough, belonging is about 'mattering'; a feeling of connectedness that one is important or matters to others.[28] Terrell Strayhorn builds on this mattering and connectedness point in the education context; belonging (albeit with a focus on students) is perceived social support, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued, is important to the student community and others on campus such as staff and peers.[29] In other words, to *be seen*. The consequences of belonging are, for Strayhorn, profound. A sense of belonging,

22 For example, see Barbara Read, Louise Archer and Carole Leathwood, 'Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of "belonging" and "isolation" at a post-1992 university' (2003) 28(3) Studies in Higher Education 261–277; Liz Thomas, *Final Report: 'What Works?' Students Retention and Success Programme: Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change* (Paul Hamlyn Foundation/HEFCE/Higher Education Academy/Action on Access 2012). See also Verona Ní Drisceoil, 'Critiquing commitments to community and belonging in today's law school: who does the labour? (2025) 59(2) The Law Teacher 181–199.

23 See, for example, Gravett (n 4 above); Strevens and Jones (n 14 above).

24 See further Abraham H Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being* 1st edn (Van Nostrand Reinhold 1962); Abraham H Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being* 3rd edn (Wiley 1998).

25 Ibid; Ní Drisceoil (n 22 above).

26 See also William Glasser, *Control Theory: A New Explanation of How We Control Our Lives* (Harper & Row 1985).

27 Abraham H Maslow, cited in Terrell Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students* 2nd edn (Routledge 2019) 4.

28 M Rosenberg and B C McCullough, 'Mattering: inferred significance and mental health among adolescents' (1981) 2 Research in Community and Mental Health 163–182, cited in Strayhorn (n 27 above). See also Gordon Flett, 'An introduction, review, and conceptual analysis of mattering as an essential construct and an essential way of life' (2022) 40 Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment 3–36.

29 Strayhorn (n 27 above) 4.

he writes, 'is a basic human need, a fundamental motivation, sufficient to drive behaviours and perceptions. Its satisfaction leads to positive gains such as happiness, elation, wellbeing, achievement, and optimal functioning.'[30] In sum, the position taken is that a sense of belonging is important, and necessary; that people share a strong need to belong. What belonging means, though, is not homogenous,[31] can be political[32] and should be 'situated'.[33]

More recently, in *Relational Pedagogies: Connections and Mattering in Higher Education*, Karen Gravett notes that, like students, 'connections, mattering and relationality' are fundamental to how we, as educators, experience our work.[34] She suggests that 'we are inherently relational beings' and 'that we experience a sense of self through relationships with and in relation to other people'.[35] For Gravett, mattering is about feeling valued by others.[36] Our starting ambition at CLE was just to be a quick, easy, temporary place where people could share information (tips, tools, methods) on how to teach in an emergency and to continue to talk about educational innovation. We have come to realise, not least on the basis of feedback from our members, that connection and mattering has emerged as a core value of CLE – creating a regular space, in a non-hierarchical way to matter and be relational. At its core, CLE is a community where, we hope, members feel that they matter, belong and are valued and are seen for their work and the contribution they make to teaching, students and legal education no matter their career stage, role or contract.

Ultimately, the 'community' in CoPs is key to the ethos of the CLE network. Connection, as per the name, is at the heart of who we are and what we stand for. Connections, belonging and mattering within this community help us show up for our students and each other; they help us to be better teachers. This connection, and community, sustains us.

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30 Ibid 9.

31 Rola Ajjawi, Karen Gravett and Sarah O'Shea, 'The politics of student belonging: identity and purpose' (2025) 30 Teaching in Higher Education 791–801.

32 Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging' (2006) 40 Patterns of Prejudice 197–214.

33 See further Karen Gravett and Rola Ajjawi, 'Belonging as situated practice' (2022) 47 Studies in Higher Education 1386–1396.

34 Gravett (n 4 above) 1.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

CONNECTING LEGAL EDUCATION: A SPACE OF CONNECTION AND JOY

Cox notes that 'part of the role of a community of practice is to make work "habitable"'.[37] Similarly, Gravett notes that learning from others 'offers sustenance in a profession that can be difficult and is almost always challenging'.[38] Indeed, as working in higher education becomes ever more pressurised (for a variety of reasons from universities behaving like profit-motivated businesses to GenAI changing the way our students interact with us and their education), CoPs, including those that are not limited to one institution, are increasingly important. A CoP cannot on its own dismantle the structures that isolate and undervalue law teachers or prevent burnout, but it can open a space to share frustrations and challenges and thereby feel some of the weight of those challenges lifted, and to be reminded of why we continue to love this job.

Gravett also points to a belief that supportive communities can, against the backdrop of the everyday pressures of higher education, offer 'moments of resistance' and joy 'that enable us to enjoy our work as teachers in higher education'.[39] Carol Taylor and colleagues echo this, referring to the moments away from the 'grim tales' (affective grimness of their workplace) of higher education.[40] Regular CLE hangout 'moments' provide a shared understanding of the higher education landscape but equally a space away from individualised pressures within our own workload, and our own institutional demands and politics – a place where we can connect, share and remember that teaching does, and can, bring us joy.

Teaching in higher education can, as Gravett reminds us, 'be both rewarding and enjoyable and relationships with others are a key part of this'.[41] Affective attunement to glimpses of joy within the everyday can be viewed as 'a strategic response to the well-documented debilitating impacts of academic neoliberalism'.[42] 'Joy is an act of resistance' as the poet Toi Derricotte puts it.[43] According to Gravett, 'micro-connections between colleagues can harness feelings of joy and

37 Andrew Cox, 'What are communities of practice? A comparative review of four seminal works' (2005) 31(6) Journal of Information Science 527–540, 533.

38 Gravett (n 4 above) 95.

39 Ibid 83.

40 Taylor et al (n 1 above).

41 Gravett (n 4 above) 83.

42 Susan Gannon, Carol Taylor, Gill Adams, Helen Donaghue, Stephanie Hannam-Swain, Jean Harris-Evans, Joan Healey and Patricia Moore, '"Working on a rocky shore": micro-moments of positive affect in academic work' (2019) 31 Emotion, Space and Society 48–55, 48.

43 Toi Derricotte, 'From the Telly Cycle' (*R* 12 December 2009).

positive connection that can buffer the strains of the neoliberal forces afflicting academics' daily working lives' and 'appreciating and developing these micro-moments for connection can offer spaces, however small, between the cracks of daily working practices'.[44]

CLE's growth and development into a supportive CoP has come about organically as law teachers, and others committed to educating future lawyers and critical thinkers, have found us and joined our community. Some have been invited to present their pedagogical research or share an aspect of their teaching practice; others have asked to attend a specific 'hangout' they saw advertised on LinkedIn. Many keep returning and become active members of the community because CLE's overall ethos resonates with them and its friendly and welcoming vibe is a partial antidote to the isolation and stress of modern academic life.

While we do not expect any minimal level of participation from those who join our events, many of our members become active attendees and supporters and have contributed to the development of CLE's identity as a CoP. According to Alexander Ardichvili and colleagues, 'members are motivated to become active participants in a CoP when they view knowledge as a public good, a moral obligation and/or a community interest'.[45]

In addition, a CoP provides a space where learning is not just transmitted and received but adapted, adopted and practised. Our members act on what they learn and move from participating in hangouts in various ways to incorporating new ideas into their practice. One of us adopted podcasting as an alternative assessment mode directly from hearing about it at a CLE session. Other sessions on, for example, arts in legal education have prompted a range of creative endeavours and further collaborations. In this way, an hour-long CLE hangout can produce ripples of value and connection that are felt by colleagues and students long after the Teams meeting ends.

This sense of propinquity was particularly evident in our coming together as a community at our CLE Fest conference held in June 2024. As we wrote shortly after, this was a conference about 'joy, connection and doing things differently', even a loose manifesto to the wider legal education community that it is possible to do conferences 'otherwise' while still maintaining critical thought and rigorous engagement.[46] Reflecting on 'a great day with wonderful people', we concluded by recognising that

44 Gravett (n 4 above) 42–43, 109.

45 Alexander Ardichvili, Vaughn Page and Tim Wentling, 'Motivation and barriers to participation in virtual knowledge-sharing communities of practice' (2003) 7(1) Journal of Knowledge Management 64–77.

46 Ní Drisceoil et al (n 6 above) 127.

the Fest was made possible by those:

> who travelled to Leeds (with some garden greenery), painted their own tote bag, crafted and presented a super-short paper, gave a speech to a tree, asked a penetrating question (rather than a comment), danced at the silent disco, and went away with a head full of actionable ideas.[47]

The Fest truly captured the power of community and the importance of joyful interactions. We did not come up with these ideas because we purposefully wanted to be wilful or quirky. We surveyed our members on what they loved and hated about attending conferences. What they told us (feeling like an imposter, isolated and not part of the 'in-crowd'; the experience is too passive and needs more interaction and all participants should be able to contribute; the loudest voices shouldn't take up too much space) informed how we designed each aspect of the day.

We have embraced the affective aspects of what we do at CLE and emphasised them in this reflection, but we would not want to give you the impression that we see ourselves as some sort of counselling circle or holistic wellbeing phenomenon. The sharing of knowledge about teaching law is at the heart of what we do. It is a serious knowledge development endeavour that also has serious and positive outcomes in relation to feelings of belonging and mattering. In 2024, we asked our members to give us some feedback on what they valued about CLE (and what they wanted us to do more or less of). Their responses gave equal weight to the knowledge-management and community-belonging aspects of our work. They talked about learning about other teaching styles, how the sessions complemented other methods of keeping up with pedagogic developments (eg through reading the literature), the benefits of hearing about new ideas directly from the source, and the value of discussions that included dissenting voices. They also highlighted the affective domain: it is a safe space to share thoughts without the 'usual academic showing off', that 'it helps you feel part of something', the 'lovely welcoming atmosphere', and 'I've valued the contact with others so much.'

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Whilst the dominant mode of thinking about teaching in the legal academy remains that it is 'a very personal and individual activity',[48] we see things slightly differently. All educators remain accountable for the individual

47 Ibid 135.

48 Chris Kible, Paul Hildreth and Isabelle Bourdon, *Communities of Practice: Creating Learning Environments for Educators: Volume 1* (Information Age Publishing 2008) x.

decisions they make in designing their lessons and learning activities, but we believe that these decisions are better when they are informed by the sorts of situated and tacit knowledge that CoPs are particularly adept at sharing. We all have responsibilities to be scholarly teachers who inform our teaching through expert substantive knowledge and awareness of current pedagogical developments. CoPs, because they are normally organisationally 'light', can be particularly suited to providing low-cost, accessible and convenient access to discussions on the latest thinking on both substantive and pedagogic issues.

Even though we already work in communities in our schools and institutions, many academics feel isolated. We might be the only substantive specialist on a particular topic in our school or feel that our focus on education and student support is at odds with some of the values and priorities of our school. In each case, a community of practice can help us to feel seen, that our expertise and our values are valid and important and that we belong.

One distinct joy of CoPs is that you don't have to ask anyone for permission to create or join one: not your line manager, your research director, your faculty grants officer, no one. They can be a very DIY solution to your knowledge and belonging needs. So, think about joining us at Connecting Legal Education or another existing community, or speaking to us about starting your own community and finding your own tribe. For us, teaching will always be a community-informed and community-supported activity.