

## Building a community of practice – the ‘Mental Health in Higher Education’ website

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*Mental Health in Higher Education, a project of the Higher Education Academy, aims to enhance learning and teaching about mental health in UK higher education. This article introduces the Mental Health in Higher Education website which has recently been relaunched. It outlines its key role in the development of our emerging community of practice.*

Mental health is a complex arena with diverse, changing and, sometimes, competing ways of understanding and intervening. There is a need for interdisciplinary dialogue, not only in practice settings but also in higher education. The internet is a rich source of information about mental health policy and practice on the one hand, and about new developments in higher education on the other, but there has been little specifically aimed at those involved in learning and teaching about mental health. What does exist tends to focus on a specific disciplinary group.

Mental Health in Higher Education (mhhe), a project of the Higher Education Academy <[www.heacademy.ac.uk/](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/)>, aims to enhance learning and teaching about mental health through increasing networking and the sharing of approaches across the disciplines in UK higher education. Our website enables educators, across disciplines, to:

- *find out about developments in mental health policy, practice and education;*
- *locate and advertise forthcoming events;*
- *network with others involved in mental health teaching, across the disciplines and regions;*

- *read and contribute accounts of teaching innovations;*
- *access thousands of links, of relevance to learning and teaching about mental health;*
- *find out about funding opportunities.*

The site enables an educator to develop an understanding of professional training in disciplines other than their own and acts as a window on the diversity of approaches to learning and teaching about mental health. It was redesigned and relaunched in May

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2008, with a new design and a content management system (the ‘Treeline’ system devised by Ichameleon <[www.ichameleon.com](http://www.ichameleon.com/)>). In this article, we provide a brief tour of the site’s key features, some of which are still at an early stage of development.

### **Educators learning with, from and about each other**

Interprofessional education has been defined as ‘two or more professions

learn[ing] with, from and about each other to improve collaboration and the quality of care’ (CAIPE 2002 <[www.caipe.org.uk/about-us/defining-ipe/](http://www.caipe.org.uk/about-us/defining-ipe/)>). The Mental Health in Higher Education project aims to create opportunities for educators to undertake such learning too.

We have found Wenger’s notion of a ‘community of practice’ helpful. He defines three key elements of this: a joint enterprise; mutual engagement; and development of a shared repertoire (Wenger,<sup>1</sup> p.73). A joint enterprise is a domain in

which shared interests and shared identities are negotiated. Members engage and interact with each other through joint activities, sharing information and the provision of support. From these, a shared repertoire of resources (tools, concepts or artefacts) can develop.

These three dimensions are all present in our work. Through an evolving national database, people are drawn together at national and regional workshops to share ideas and perspectives. These are then captured in resources for the website

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(e.g. workshop reports and presentations) and opened up more widely to trigger debate. Two examples of outcomes from networking are: (i) two educators from nursing and social work departments who developed a podcast for use by students from both departments; and (ii) a lecturer in psychiatry who showcased an exercise she uses in class to help students develop their ability to make use of personal experience meaningfully and safely in their practice. Through this process of mutual sharing, themes of interest have emerged and a portal of resources developed which can act as a source of interest and inspiration to other educators. Wenger refers to this as a process of 'reification' and 'participation'.<sup>1</sup>

## How has our website helped develop communities of practice?

Our website is, therefore, more than a tool for promoting our project. It is an important arena within which discussion can take place, good practices be shared and tangible resources created. The fostering of a community of practice has been compared to the design of a good

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'park'.<sup>2</sup> A passerby may first enter a park if it provides a useful short-cut to their destination; some may use it to sit on a bench and feed the ducks or to access the children's play area; in the summer, there may be a festival with bands and stalls. The park, in our case, is a space in which a wide variety of activities related to teaching can take place. Like a park, we have designed our website to enable educators to participate at different levels of engagement. People can choose to be an observer, or more actively engage in the sharing of ideas and experiences. They may beckon to others, inviting them to become more involved. We have devised a range of different pathways to help people navigate their way around the space, whilst enabling them simply to stand and

contemplate if they so wish. The site operates in a variety of ways:

1. Providing a short cut to information and opportunities.
2. Developing a repertoire of resources.
3. Contextualising the disciplines.
4. Promoting dialogue and networking.

## Providing a short cut to information and opportunities

According to an external evaluation in 2007, people find the **news and events sections** <[www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/news-and-events](http://www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/news-and-events)> most useful and they attract new people to our site. The mhhe website serves as a window for educators, absorbed in day-to-day teaching, to catch up on news about workforce development, mental health policy developments or funding opportunities for teaching projects. We also have an updated list of regional, national and international events and conferences related to mental health education. An educator, keen to access information from across the disciplines, can be saved a time-consuming trawl through single-discipline websites by a visit to our news and events section.

Another short-cut people find helpful is the **Gateway section** <[www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/links](http://www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/links)> which signposts to hundreds of external websites of relevance to learning and teaching about mental health. The vast array of information is organised in three different ways. People can use the 'search' function, the A-Z function or follow the questions to trawl the information we hold on the site:

- 'who?' (searching for specific disciplines and stakeholders);
- 'what?' (searching for content such as specific areas of the curriculum or practice models);
- 'how?' (searching for teaching methods, approaches or tools);
- 'where?' (searching for regions and/or countries); and

- 'how well?' (searching for quality information on evaluation or quality).

This 'question' function is particularly useful for providing new lecturers with a grasp of what resources are available for teaching purposes.

## Developing a repertoire of resources

Apart from the links to external websites through the Gateway section, we have a **resource section** <[www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/resources](http://www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/resources)> including reports of past events and conferences, case studies of a module or a programme, good practice guides, reading lists and links to audio visual resources. We encourage people to share their resources through our website, to provide inspiration to others and avoid re-invention of the wheel.

Resources are also categorised under 'countries and regions' and 'themes'. The **countries and regions section** <[www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/countries-regions](http://www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/countries-regions)> enables people to access resources local to them. Through this we aim to foster an ethos of shared knowledge and expertise, counter-balancing any barriers created by institutions placed in competition with one another.

The areas identified under the **themes section** <[www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/themes](http://www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/themes)> ('user and carer involvement', 'the use of self in learning and teaching', 'student mental health', 'new ways of working and the mental health workforce', 'interdisciplinary education in mental health' and 'physical health and the mental health curriculum') have emerged through discussion at meetings and events. People are actively encouraged to develop work on these areas. Our site is a place to capitalise on synergies between educators from different disciplines or to discuss how best to teach a certain topic area. It is also a space for individual educators who share similar interests to flag up underdeveloped areas of the curriculum. A recent example has been the work emerging under the theme of 'physical health and the mental health curriculum'.

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## Contextualising the disciplines

When an educator from one discipline contemplates joint work with a colleague from another, there is essential information that they have to know. The **subject areas section** <[www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/subject-areas](http://www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/subject-areas)> of our site sets out to identify, for each discipline: what is being taught, the structure of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, the occupational standards of relevance, cutting edge areas of

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practice, areas of good practice in teaching and research, and key professional or accreditation bodies. Each professional discipline has its own training route, for example, nursing students specialise in mental health at pre-qualifying level, whereas it is only at post-qualifying level that a social work student can specialise in mental health. Developing interprofessional understanding within the educator workforce in this way is an important precursor to inter-professional initiatives for students.

## Promoting dialogue and networking

mhhe project workers play an active role in engaging people with the site, in brokering ideas and facilitating the exchange of resources. We aim also to promote the kind of dialogue that takes on a life of its own through our **networks section** <[www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/networks](http://www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/networks)>. We have an email discussion list through which people can post queries or seek help from others. We have also piloted the use of wikis to sustain discussion following events. The educator list in each country and region page, a new capability on our website, enables educators to find and make direct contact with others with similar interests, both regionally and nationwide (see the list for West Midlands, for example, <[www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/countries-regions/england/west-midlands/](http://www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/countries-regions/england/west-midlands/)>). It is too early to know what role this function may play in brokering dialogue and exchange, but it is hoped that development of an online directory will play a

significant role in developing membership of our community of practice and a sense of pride and enjoyment in its development.

## Conclusions

This article introduces the Mental Health in Higher Education website and outlines its role in development of our emerging community of practice. People with an interest in learning and teaching about mental

health are invited to engage at different levels. A mental health service user browsing our website may encounter for the first time the growing body of expertise in user involvement in teaching about mental health. This may inspire the user to share experiences and get involved in teaching.

An experienced lecturer can share experience and good practice with colleagues across higher education institutions and regions. People who are more adventurous can invite those from other disciplines jointly to develop new modules or learning resources. The mhhe project, with the help of our new website, is committed to promoting dialogue between mental health educators and further developing our interdisciplinary community of practice.

## References

1. Wenger E. *Communities of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.67.
2. Wenger E, McDermott R, Snyder, WM. *Cultivating communities of practice: a guide to managing knowledge*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Publishing, 2002.

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