

Article

Towards a ‘Community for Practice’—A Narrative Analysis of the Evolution of Higher Education Scholars

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Abstract: In higher education (HE), collaborative activities that revolve around a core idea, practice, or knowledge base, such as learning circles, communities of practice or inquiry, peer observation, and peer-assisted teaching, are known to support professional learning. This paper explores the experiences of eight HE scholars from Australia and New Zealand, across four years, as they recognized a new means of collaborative professional development that transcends known approaches and extends beyond an immediate focal point. The group originally formed to support the development of HE fellowship applications, but evolved to what they now consider a community for practice (CfP), where the purpose of collaboration has changed to meet the unique learning needs of each member. During their four years of collaboration, meeting discussions were recorded, and individual and community narrative reflections about participation in the group were created. A thematic analysis of these collective data sources revealed the group’s evolution, and the authors draw on their experiences to tell their story with an aim to enhance professional learning in HE. The study highlights that individuals’ distinct and varied needs can be developed and supported through scholarly, collegial engagements such as a CfP, which does not necessarily require an immediate point of practice.

Keywords: higher education; collaborative; community; reflection; teaching practice; professional development; professional learning; collegial engagement; narrative analysis



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1. Introduction

Professional learning and development for higher education (HE) teachers, researchers, and practitioners (which we refer to, collectively, as scholars) is often considered in terms of continuous capability or skill development, expertise or pedagogical upskilling, and knowledge acquisition through continuing education, training, mentoring, coaching, professional communities, or collaborative teams [1–4]. At its core, this learning and development of HE scholars focuses on enhancing academic practice, scholarship, and teacher performance to deliver high-quality education for students [5–9]. When approached through a lens of collaboration or in a collectivist manner, this professional development can support HE scholars to learn and share information among colleagues, co-construct knowledge, support and receive support from others (both instrumental—skill-based or task-focused, or socio-emotional—general guidance and support), and engage in team-based activities [3,10–13].

This paper focuses on our experiences, as of a group of eight HE scholars in Australia and New Zealand, as we recognized a new means of collaborative professional development. We discuss how we found a rhythm and structure to support one another in our discrete aspirations, establishing our individual academic identities, advancing our own teaching activities, while embracing collegial engagement and development as a *Community for Practice* (CfP). The paper begins by providing background to contextualize the study, followed by situating our work within the relevant literature on collaborative learning in HE. A description of the theoretical framework and methodology are then elaborated before key findings are presented and discussed. Our discussion focuses on the collegial approach used for professional development that has cemented the very essence of our community—a place where we open ourselves up to looking at any new challenges and supporting one another to achieve personal and collective academic development. We highlight how reciprocated trust and respect for members' challenges and ambitions, an established process of individual and community reflection, and a focus on individual and collective emergent needs supports a rich and diverse series of practice-based outcomes. We conclude by returning to the gap in the literature, by highlighting how this means of engagement extends beyond the traditional collaborative professional learning and development to support the varied needs of the group's members, while maintaining the collegial professional development of the group.

1.1. Background and Context

As the group of scholars referred to throughout this paper, we are members of a community for collaborative professional development approach called TATAL (Talking About Teaching and Learning), which uses a CoP approach for articulating teaching philosophies and achieving HE fellowships [14]. Through this paper, we use narrative inquiry to explore our experiences as our group has evolved across four years. We commenced our collaboration using this format following a call for expressions of interest in a full day workshop prior to a HE research and development conference in 2019. An open invitation was offered to any attendees who wanted to continue meeting online to progress HE fellowship applications—this was the beginning of the 'TATAL 2019' group. While not all attendees chose to continue, and some members have since ceased their engagement, the eight remaining HE scholars, about whose evolution this paper focuses, attend semi-structured, monthly online meetings.

It is the evolution of this group, to what we now recognize as a CfP, that we discuss through this paper. Leveraging findings from our thematic analysis, we highlight the current focus of the group to support holistic academic development for the nascent demands and objectives of all members, beyond an immediate point of practice, inquiry, or subject matter. That is, the group has evolved from the early focus of developing HE fellowship applications to now using monthly meetings to support the unique needs of each member to develop and shape their individual academic identity.

1.2. Collaborative Professional Learning—A Review of the Literature

Before exploring the development of our group, we situate our study within the broader literature on collaborative professional learning. Researchers have considered formal and informal approaches to academic development initiatives to develop academic identity, build professional networks, promote reciprocal learning, and foster community development beyond individual teacher effectiveness [15–18]. Further, collaborative professional learning in HE has been found to have a positive effect within a faculty, and acts to support creativity, motivation, and knowledge sharing. Moving beyond the individual focus, a collaborative approach enables participants to leverage the experiences of others to learn about managing vulnerability, overcoming errors, various teaching and learning (T&L) practices, and navigating the complexities and uncertainties of HE [9,19,20]. Indeed, collaborative learning for academic development in HE has been recognized as a means to

work through problems, collectively reflect on common issues, and individual challenges, promote innovation, build capacity, and socialize among those with shared values [9,21–24].

Such collaborative learning approaches include learning circles or faculty learning communities [25–28]; communities of practice (CoP) or inquiry [22,29,30]; small, significant networks [16,31–33]; peer observation and mentoring [21,23,34,35]; and peer-assisted teaching [36,37]. The benefits of the collegial nature of such approaches include the ability of communities to evolve, collaboration and generation of ideas with colleagues, and encouragement for critical reflection through supportive relationships [9,28,38]. Often, these approaches are built on a collective desire for enhancing a specific aspect of the HE profession. Researchers have also found that professional learning communities often function well or revolve around disciplines, experience or stage of career, emphasis on teaching within a role, or approaches to teaching and learning [39–43]. That is, the professional learning community is brought together and evolves because of common ground; it is based on a shared question, activity, skill development, or focus of investigation [2,29,44,45]. Even when the community is focused on reflection, there is a commonality of this reflection on specific teaching practice [10,11,46]. As such, there is limited focus on collegial professional learning or development that fosters individual aspirations that might differ from the group.

The conversations and common ground that bind the above approaches provide a useful approach for academic development when a specific set of skills, areas of knowledge or expertise, or practices are the focus. However, we suggest there is room for more discussion of collaborative learning and development that situates the people at the center, and where they might focus on individual and varied practices, while still benefitting from the collegiality of the group. Though some literature exists to focus on professional learning with the community rather than the practice at the center [47], there remains a need for more research to explore this type of community development. It is this gap in the literature to which our paper contributes. The narrative of our group's evolution offers a collaborative approach to professional development that transcends known approaches. Our discussion focuses on our engagement as a group of eight HE scholars from varying disciplines and institutions, and explores the story of our evolution toward what we suggest as an additional approach for collegial development.

2. Methodological Framework and Research Design

We apply a methodological frame of reflective practice as a means for HE professional development [48–51]. Using this frame, we were able to critically examine our practice, consider alternate perspectives, and become aware of how we were developing as HE scholars [52,53]. We reflect using cyclical models to examine and evaluate our own experiences, actions, and reactions in order to improve our professional practice [54,55]. That is, we engage in conscious, systematic review and analysis to consider and evaluate our actions and decisions, extract meaningful lessons from our experiences, and apply insights to establish new goals and objectives while giving due consideration to our development based on reflective insights [56].

Having established and enhanced our abilities to engage in reflective practice through TATAL, we embraced this as a purposeful strategy for collegial development toward our T&L activities [57]. Further, we leveraged the community environment of TATAL to engage in collaborative reflective practice, which has been shown more effective than individual reflection alone, and as a means to promote empathy and wellbeing through shared experiences [58,59]. Using this frame allowed us to engage in narrative inquiry as a means to explore and reflect on our experiences, discussions, and written reflections in order to learn, grow, and tell the story of our individual and community development into a CfP [60–62]. Underpinned by the TATAL structure, and through the research design below, our narrative inquiry of our collaborative reflective practice has offered a means to consider and articulate what our community has become.

Narrative inquiry was ideally suited to our research design, as our data sources included the spoken and written lived experiences of the eight individuals that comprise our TATAL group, across four years [63,64]. A rhetorical approach to narrative analysis [65] was used to consider a total of 35 documents, with all eight members of the group privy to all shared individual and collaborative reflections and monthly meeting recordings. The written documents comprised the basis of the analysis, with the recordings supporting interpretation and nuance as required. At intervals of two and four years of engagement after the initial 2019 TATAL meeting, individual and community reflections and recordings of meetings were used to conduct an inductive, iterative narrative analysis. Approaching our experiences in this manner, using analysis and reflection of our experiences enabled us to engage in a process of discovery, wherein the themes and ideas emerged as we came to understand our group's evolution.

These two points in time (2021 and 2023) represent instances when our group sought to focus conversations and written work toward reflections on engagement with one another through TATAL. In 2021, we were acknowledging the disruption of COVID-19 to our work in HE, and reflecting on how individually and as a community we were navigating challenges. At this time, we had come to realize our monthly meetings were no longer simply focused on HE fellowship applications, and we agreed to record reflections. In doing so, we recognize the disruption of COVID-19 as a trigger for the evolution of the group [66]. As the group evolved through reflecting on challenges and the impact of COVID-19, the design of our TATAL engagement and the outcomes of iterative reflection resulted in an evolution of our data analysis from 2021 to 2023. Later, in 2023, we continued to reflect on our collective recognition of COVID-19 as a pivotal point for our group's development, and dedicated focused time reflecting again on the evolution of our group. That is, while we were engaged in ongoing reflective practice through the very nature of our monthly TATAL meetings, it was when we delved into the complexities of the stories and how they were changing alongside the challenges of the pandemic that we were able to recognize what was being revealed during our evolution toward a CfP.

The data collection and analysis used for our narrative inquiry are detailed below; however, we briefly outline the overarching approach here. While all members of 2019 TATAL engaged in co-creation of the coherent, overarching story [67,68], early coding and thematic analysis using NVivo software was undertaken by individuals (M.-A.S., J.P., N.B.R.), before returning to the full group to refine emergent themes and make sense of the chronological accounts of the evolution of the group [65]. We used the approach of story analyst (those undertaking the coding of themes) and storyteller (those crafting the narrative) roles [69] to develop the overall narrative. This supported the iterative approach described below, to ensure the elements of each reflection were interpreted objectively by separate members of the group before shifting to create the broader group narrative [70,71].

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study are the ongoing members of the TATAL 2019 group, comprising eight HE scholars employed across five Australian universities and two New Zealand universities. All members are female, and all have an association with teaching in HE as part of their role. However, the years of service working in HE, the functions and emphasis on teaching within roles (e.g., support, teaching, consulting, or research) and the disciplines represented vary, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of ongoing TATAL 2019 members.

Country	Years Worked in HE	Discipline	Role
New Zealand	9	Biomedical Science/ Pathology	Professional Teaching Fellow
New Zealand	12	Business	Senior Lecturer—Teaching and Research Academic
New Zealand	21	Biomedical Science/ Anatomy	Professional Teaching Fellow
Australia	21	Arts	Lecturer/Teaching Specialist—Academic Support
Australia	23	Physiology/ Biomedical Science	Lecturer—Teaching and Research Academic
Australia	24	Business	Academic Head—Teaching and Research
Australia	24	Health	Learning and Teaching Consultant
Australia	25	Physiology/ Biomedical Science	Senior Lecturer—Teaching and Research Academic

2.2. Data Collection

Across the four years of engagement, the group held over 40 meetings, taking place almost every month since the initial TATAL workshop in July 2019. All meetings were held online, except the initial TATAL workshop and breakfast, held in person, and seven members reconnecting at one conference held in July 2023. These online meetings were all recorded, with recordings made available in a shared online folder.

The 2023 written reflections focused on the development and achievements over the past four years that each individual attributed to their engagement with 2019 TATAL. They also included reflections on why members each continued engaging with the group, and articulation of how each member perceived the evolution of the group to a CfP. These reflections were written individually, not discussed with the group, and anonymized before analysis. The individual who collated and anonymized the reflections was not one of the members undertaking initial coding.

2.3. Data Analysis

The analysis at the two-year interval (in 2021) involved five iterations of thematic coding using NVivo software (version 12). The thematic coding included sections of text being selected and tagged to nodes within the software, each time being considered a single frequency of occurrence [72]. Each iteration comprised two individuals (M.-A.S., J.P.) separately coding themes, before working together to present an agreed analysis to the full group for further discussion. After each group discussion, the two individuals returned to refine their coding separately, then with each other, before returning to the full group. For the data reported at the two-year interval, only main themes are included, along with frequency of coding. The reported themes are the final agreed themes coded in NVivo.

At the four-year interval (in 2023), there were six iterations of analysis. Each of these followed the process wherein two individuals (J.P., N.B.R.) separately coded themes from written reflections in NVivo (version 12), before working together to present their combined and agreed analysis to the individual acting in the role of the storyteller (J.S.). After each discussion between the story analysts and storyteller, the analysts returned to repeat the process of coding individually, then combining refined themes, and returning to present the amended themes to the storyteller. For the data reported at the four-year interval, the final agreed main themes, first level sub-themes, and second level sub-themes are reported, along with their frequency of coding in NVivo. Analysis was completed using both thematic coding, as above, and the sentiment functionality in NVivo, which allowed the analysts to tag data as positive or negative [72]. Once the themes were agreed and the story was crafted into a draft narrative, the full group was presented with the themes and narrative to ensure ideas had been represented objectively and nuances had been captured.

Whilst the focus for the main narrative and discussion of this article are based primarily on data from reflections created at the four-year interval, to consider the group's evolution to date, we recognize the chronological nature of the data, and also report on the analysis at the two-year interval [64,73].

Rigor and credibility of data analysis and interpretation were achieved through applying techniques for verifying qualitative accounts and embracing reflexivity to acknowledge the nature of this research, where members of the group were also those coding, analyzing, and crafting the story [74]. Specifically, we ensured inclusion of multiple investigators, peer debriefing and member checking at each iteration [75], and leveraged our prolonged engagement, which was available for review as recordings [76–78].

These techniques supported our analysis by ensuring we were well oriented to the context of the group, enabled analytical probing to uncover any assumptions or biases, test emergent narratives, and fostered dialogue that resulted in a narrative that tells the story of the group's evolution, as objectively as possible. This approach ensured the interpretation of the data, and the story that emerged was founded on a collaborative effort that captured implicit meanings and hidden information, and ensured the synthesis of multiple perspectives [65].

3. Key Findings

As described in the Section 2, coding of reflections was undertaken at two intervals: after two and four years of engagement as 2019 TATAL. This section first presents the themes coded after two years before the more substantial results of the narrative analysis undertaken after four years. The codes from the two years reveal both continuity and evolution in the focus of the CfP. While TATAL remained the central theme throughout, it has evolved into a multi-faceted and layered framework. In the tables below, where frequency of references in lower-level sub-themes does not equal a sum as shown in the higher-level theme, references were coded directly to the higher-level theme only.

3.1. Results of Narrative Analysis after Two Years (in 2021)

The coding of written reflections and meeting notes after two years of engagement as 2019 TATAL supported the conception of articulating our group as a CfP [79]. Although 'CfP' was not an articulated theme, when the main themes were studied as a narrative, they led us to consider that our group was more than a CoP focused on developing teaching philosophies and achieving HE fellowships. These main themes and their frequencies are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Main themes and frequencies from analysis after two years of engagement.

Main Theme	Frequency of References
Teaching and learning	222
Wellbeing	186
Students	114
TATAL	83
COVID-19	57
Caring	45
Collegiality	43
University models	34
Workloads	34
Time	30
Work–life balance	27
Interactions with staff	20
Working from home	21

Acknowledging that many of the reflections used for the first round of coding were completed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was reasonable that many of these themes centered around the impact of COVID-19. At the time of coding, many

institutions were still operating within government-mandated restrictions in response to the ongoing waves of the pandemic. The analysis undertaken at this time supported the early recognition that our collaborative development occurring as members of 2019 TATAL focused more on the changes in HE in response to COVID-19 and the wellbeing and holistic development of members, rather than solely on achieving HE fellowships, which was our group's initial focus [79]. What was evident through this exercise was that our engagement shifted to include a focus on T&L practices, offering support for others, and attending to each member's personal and professional development. We acknowledged our group's activities were expanding beyond focusing on the singular HE fellowship development.

Specifically, exploration of these themes highlighted the evolution of our group from a CoP that was thriving as a nurturing, supportive, and trusting environment, to a CfP that benefitted the various needs of all members [79]. Although 'evolution' was not apparent as a theme, when exploring the themes at the two-year interval, we recognized that our engagement with the TATAL process as a CoP, through a shared disorienting dilemma of COVID-19, had resulted in a transformation to a group engaging beyond a single domain (i.e., one focused on a single professional development area, such as T&L practice or HE fellowships). This story of the evolution of the group is evidenced further in the results below, and expanded on in the Section 4. The characteristics of what 2019 TATAL members began to identify as a CfP, which were evidenced at the two-year mark, became more defined and extended in the data from the reflections at four years.

3.2. Results of Narrative Analysis after Four Years (in 2023)

The main narrative analysis that supports the development of this story comes from the coding of all members' individual reflections after four years of engagement. The inductive and iterative manual coding resulted in four main themes, each with sub-themes, as shown in Table 3. These themes provide a frame or storyline that support the story of the evolution of the group and the characteristics of a CfP. To clarify, the group considered TATAL an example of a CoP, and so the themes of CoP and TATAL acknowledged the differences between the general concept of a CoP and TATAL. Further, there was a recognition of the changes or evolution of the group and an articulation of the group as a CfP, both of which were evident as themes. This storyline is represented in Table 3, with the main themes listed to show the development of the group, while the subthemes are listed in descending order based on frequencies of coding.

Table 3. Main and sub-themes identified through coding, listed with reference frequencies.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Frequency of References
Community of Practice	Practice-focused	11
	Professional development	8
	CoP environment	6
TATAL	Enactment of TATAL	259
	Focus of TATAL	8
	TATAL environment	
Evolution of the Group	COVID-19 as a tipping point	12
	Transformation	5
	Where to from here?	4
	Development of relationships	3
	Beyond TATAL	2
	Time	1
TATAL 2019 (as a CfP)	The TATAL 2019 environment	113
	Nurturing environment	100
	Affect	69
	Tangible aspects and outputs	50
	Community	29
	Individual	15
	Professional development	8
	Teaching and learning practice	4

3.2.1. Main Theme: Community of Practice

Presenting the themes as part of the chronological narrative, the story begins with the main theme: Community of Practice. Within this main theme, manual coding resulted in 26 references across five participants, with three sub-themes and their associated lower-level sub-themes shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Hierarchy of sub-themes under the main theme of Community of Practice.

Main Theme: Community of Practice		
First Level Sub-Theme	Second Level Sub-Themes	Frequency of References
Practice-focused	HE work environment	6
	Growing the practice	2
	Improvement in practice	1
	Just T&L practice	1
Professional development	Learning	5
	Self-improvement	2
	Professional development	1
CoP environment	Shared interests in T&L	6
	Safe environment, not necessarily	3
	Open, non-confidential	1
	Can be recreated	1

Members recognized their early engagement with TATAL as participating in a CoP. While this was not as prevalent as other main themes (Table 3), the group did acknowledge that the focus of collaborative engagement was still underpinned by the original aim—that of focusing on T&L practice, professional development, and nurturing a CoP-type environment. It is from this basis that the evolution of the group builds.

3.2.2. Main Theme: TATAL

The next main theme, TATAL, also had three main sub-themes, across six participants and with 46 references. Table 5 provides the coding and references of the main and lower-level sub-themes that were coded against this theme. Continuing the narrative of the evolution, this theme highlights how the TATAL approach, built on being a CoP, is extended. Table 5 shows ‘how’ the group engages as a TATAL CoP: through the enactment of TATAL, the focus of TATAL, and the environment of TATAL.

Table 5. Hierarchy of sub-themes under the main theme of TATAL.

Main Theme: TATAL		
First Level Sub-Theme	Second Level Sub-Themes	Frequency of References
Enactment of TATAL	Questions of clarification	7
	Sharing insights	7
	Monthly meetings	4
	Replicable	2
	TATAL workshop	2
	Facilitators	1
	Reflective practice	1
	TATAL breakfast	1
Focus of TATAL	Professional development	5
	HERDSA fellowship ¹	3
	Teaching philosophy	1
TATAL environment	Trust	3
	Safe environment	3
	Curated information	1
	Highlight of the month	1

¹ HERDSA fellowships are HE fellowships awarded by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.

Recognizing TATAL as a type of T&L CoP is evident here (Table 5), as the enactment and focus of TATAL encompass the HE fellowship. Each year, there is an annual introduction of members to new TATAL groups through a workshop and breakfast, and a recommended approach for reflective practice through monthly meetings based on questions of clarification and shared insights. These elements of TATAL were evident in the coding. The evolution of our group to a level beyond TATAL ideologies is evident when considering the TATAL environment alongside the CoP environment. Here, the shift in terminology is apparent through the recognition and prominence of safety and trust being of great importance to TATAL to its members, acknowledged as a highlight of the month. However, it is still notable that the TATAL approach underpinned the collaboration the group continued to engage in. As highlighted by one member's comment, we used the TATAL model to ask each other questions of clarification, and our confidence grew that our [individual] practice was worthy.

3.2.3. Main Theme: Evolution of the Group

The final main theme before reaching the CfP was that of Evolution of the Group. Coding continued to support the narrative, and in this case, the theme elaborated on some of the unique features of the group's activities and interactions that were emerging and evolving. While the six sub-themes were coded from seven participants, only the most referenced sub-theme, COVID-19 as a tipping point, had lower-level themes, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Sub-themes under COVID-19 as a tipping point, within the theme of Evolution of the Group.

Main Theme: Evolution of the Group		
First Level Sub-Theme	Second Level Sub-Themes	Frequency of References
COVID-19 as a tipping point	COVID-19	5
	Challenges	3
	Time for change	2
	Change and uncertainty	1
	Reality check	1

Aligned with the coding from the reflections after two years, when we considered the shift in focus of the group after four years, the group still recognized the disorienting dilemma that was COVID-19 being critical to the story of our evolution. As one member noted, the TATAL 2019 community became a place of refuge where we could escape for a short while the disruption and challenges that had fallen upon our personal lives and higher education bubbled around us.

3.2.4. Main Theme: TATAL 2019

Finally, in reaching the current state of the group in the narrative, which is its evolution, the main theme with the most references in Table 3, TATAL 2019 (which the researchers agreed, described a CfP), also provides the most sub-themes. This main theme was recognized across all participants, and the hierarchical coding provides the basis on which we tell the story of the 2019 TATAL as a CfP, with sub-themes expanded upon in the Section 4. To make sense of the TATAL 2019 (as a CfP) theme, we provide the top ten second-level sub-themes (and their frequencies) and the four first-level sub-themes that had 50 or more references (Table 3): the TATAL 2019 environment (113), nurturing environment (100), affect (69), and tangible aspects and outputs (50).

For the TATAL 2019 environment sub-theme, thematic coding resulted in second level sub-themes including Community for Practice (13), celebrating achievements (12), heterogeneity (11), personal development (11), beyond teaching and learning practice (10), collaboration (9), rhythm of meetings (8), reflective practice (7), commitment (6), and belonging (5).

For the nurturing environment sub-theme, thematic coding resulted in second level sub-themes that included building confidence (11), supporting each other (10), empowering people (5), respect (5), sharing (5), care for each other (4), empathy (4), encouragement (4), friendships (4), and genuineness (4). As one member highlighted, ‘TATAL as a CFP (...) is providing nutrition to my identity growth (...) the fact that my peers are from different institutes and disciplines provides perspectives of cultures and practices on the same situation, which has been helpful’.

The narrative analysis for the affect sub-theme was undertaken using the sentiment functionality, as described in the Section 2. During early thematic coding, it was evident that there were positive and negative sentiments in the comments being made. As such, it was decided to explore this aspect of the narratives using the sentiment tool. The results show that all the participants had positive sentiments in their narratives (56 references), and all but one participant had negative sentiments (13 references). The coverage of positive sentiments ranged from 25 to 52% of individual reflections, with an average of 39% coverage. The coverage of negative sentiments, for those who had negative sentiments identified, ranged from 2 to 21%, with an average across all members of 8% coverage. The positive sentiments, combined with the nurturing environment, were evident in member reflections, such as the following: ‘[this group] had become a place where everyone helped each other to work through the problems, frustrations, anxieties, and concerns, and the warm, encouraging and inspiring atmosphere fostered by the TATAL group is infectious.’

While examples of tangible and instrumental aspects that have resulted from engagement with 2019 TATAL are shown in the list below, when coded as part of narrative analysis, the top ten lower-level sub-themes were sharing of work, thoughts, ideas, and practice (9); publications (9); fellowships in progress (4); fellowships achieved (3); joint conference workshops (3); research (3); joint publication (2); monthly meetings (2); peer-reviewed book chapters (2); and scholarship of T&L (SoTL) (2).

When considering how engagement as 2019 TATAL has impacted members’ individual academic identities and growth, several tangible or instrumental and socio-emotional examples were offered. Members have highlighted the following: ‘I appreciate the practical tips of academic integrity, classroom management, LMS development, and the use of tools such as H5P (...) [this is] immensely useful for me as a new HE teacher, and [our group is] a safe place where I can talk about my teaching practice without being judged. I can share my ideas for a new teaching activity or assessment and be encouraged and inspired to build and develop it.’ As one member suggested, the reason for the sharing of information is different; it is about supporting each person in the group so that they have the confidence, tools and people genuinely interested in their success helping them to try new things, develop new skills, or do whatever it is they want to do.

While not an exhaustive list, the following shows a sample of growth in practice and personal development through tangible or instrumental and socio-emotional outcomes:

- Shared practical tips and solutions for dealing with curriculum, assessment, learning management systems (LMS), and classroom management;
- Support for implementing new technologies in courses or trialing new ideas;
- Ability to gauge issues across the sector through shared stories and access to various international teaching and research approaches;
- Support for individual reflection and through community reflection on areas for improvement in personal teaching practice;
- Improved confidence and capabilities for HE teaching and SoTL research, including enhanced collaborative research capabilities;
- Enhanced ability to engage in critical reflective practice through practicing offering and receiving constructive and considerate feedback;
- Four co-authored, double-blind peer-reviewed book chapters published;
- Co-authored journal article under review, plus this article;
- Four HE fellowships completed and three in progress for group members, with ongoing support at individual institutions for colleagues preparing fellowship portfolios;

- Collaborating to deliver a conference roundtable session, facilitate ongoing CoP groups, and leading a curriculum development project;
- Individual conference presentations and roundtables delivered;
- Various teaching and leadership in teaching awards achieved.

The above sub-themes, lower-level sub-themes, and examples of various outcomes as a result of engagement with 2019 TATAL evidence the support members have experienced in nurturing their individual and varied aspirations. The range of these outcomes, and the personal and professional development of 2019 TATAL members beyond enhancing their teaching philosophies or working toward HE fellowships, further endorses the evolution of our group as a CfP. This support for various aspirations, and the evolution over four years, was summarized by one member as follows:

I think the community has been built over time because we've leveraged our ability to ask questions and genuinely listen (rather than being ready with an answer or response); we've all been given the space and all uphold trust and respect for others, so we truly care for the challenges and their aspirations, which are more often than not, much different to our own.

4. Discussion

Returning to the purpose of this paper, which is telling the story of the evolution of a CfP where collegial development supports individual and varied ambitions of HE scholars without a common practice as a focal point, we leverage the themes presented in the results to guide our narrative. While the analysis of these reflections after four years provides the substantive narrative, we acknowledge the recognition of the evolution of the group that was apparent upon the analysis after two years. The story begins with a group of HE scholars who came together in 2019 to focus on T&L and HE fellowships. This first round of narrative analysis highlighted the impact of COVID-19 as a recognized tipping point, highlighting a shift or catalyst of our group's evolution [66]. After two years of engagement, the themes were coded evidence of the shift in focus from TATAL itself to a much broader focus that includes wellbeing, caring, and a focus on our varied T&L practice. As shown in Table 2, COVID-19 was mentioned as a main theme, which supports the recognition of its importance at this time of change. When the group was reflecting and sharing concerns, challenges, and aspirations, the focus was much broader than the original core focus of teaching philosophies and fellowships. We take this early acknowledgement and extend it in the remainder of the discussion, focusing on the written reflections after four years of engagement.

This discussion is not just about eight individual narratives, but rather the collective narrative, and how the themes themselves tell the story of what it means for the 2019 TATAL group to be a CfP. Through the narrative analysis, the act of determining the main and sub-themes allowed the data to evidence the evolution of the group. That is, the iterative, inductive, and rhetorical narrative analysis approach itself is what led to the development of the bigger story: the evolution of this group and how ongoing engagement as a CfP supports individual and collective professional development in HE.

Diversity is a key feature of our group: we are from different institutions and disciplines, hold different roles with varying levels of experience working in HE, and come from different social-cultural environments. Yet, despite studies having shown that HE scholars with such disparity approach T&L differently or draw focus toward similarities for collegial professional development [41,42,80], we have nurtured our community for development that embraces these differences. Rather than trying to force a common theme that might not suit the differences in our membership, we welcome the different aspirations of members and work to support these (whether they continue on the path of initial focus on HE fellowships or whether their current goals differ from others).

These salient themes of T&L show what constitutes the support for the unique and varied learning needs and priorities of HE scholars. As shown in the sub-themes in Table 3, all of those features describe who we are. Taking any of the themes and sub-themes away

would not do justice to the CfP that we are. The research here has shown that each of those themes are pieces of a puzzle that come together to create the CfP.

This collaborative reflective practice highlights that having a CoP was foundational. Beyond that element, being part of TATAL is a fundamental aspect of the CoP we belong to, and serves as the catalyst of interest in T&L. The TATAL way of doing things enabled the creation of a unique CoP that is able to endure and transcend into a community that embraces professional development and allows for personal nurturing, i.e., a CfP. In addition, there is the collective experiences as evidenced in the theme ‘Evolution of the Group’ and its extant sub-themes that were a critical part of the journey into becoming a CfP. Without that process that accounted for such aspects as ‘time’ and ‘development of relationships’ it is reasonable to say that the metamorphosis into the CfP would not have happened. Then there is the CfP itself and how it is described by the theme of ‘TATAL 2019’ and its sub-themes.

The research here shows that each and every one of the aspects as described by the themes and sub-themes is important to who we are as a CfP, and that a CfP cannot exist on its own without those other elements. Those other elements are foundational to the development of the CfP. They describe what factors are important, such as an interest in T&L and being part of TATAL, and they also capture a process that gives permission for the development of a CfP. It is through the process described, i.e., the design of our monthly meetings, our deliberate written reflections, and our focus on engaging in collaborative reflection, that we have been able to uncover these component parts that we are now seeing as elements required for our CfP. Through these practices, a process has emerged that shows how a CfP can come into being.

As recognized in the themes, the TATAL approach leverages a CoP wherein HE scholars first refine their teaching philosophies, with a recommendation for subsequent monthly meetings to support members to work toward HE fellowships. There was a clear focus for a community seeking to use collaborative reflective practice for enhancing practice [22,46,81]. However, it is the idiosyncrasies of the TATAL approach (Table 5), or the enactment and environment as highlighted sub-themes, that resulted in separate CoP and TATAL themes. In various meetings, members have discussed how their engagement with other CoPs remains different to even early engagement with TATAL. As one member reflected on what signing up to the initial TATAL workshop meant for them, they highlighted the following: ‘that day was to be the beginning of a deeply fulfilling time that continues to this day’.

Indeed, TATAL is a means for collaborative professional development in HE. It is a learning community [82], with a common interest, domain, and shared commitment of collective reflective inquiry for advancing T&L practice, which are underpinning elements of CoPs [81,83,84]. The TATAL approach sets up a collaborative environment in which members engage in community reflective practice to obtain different perspectives on their individual writing and reflections [14,85].

To further understand the collaborative approach to TATAL, we return to the sub-themes in Table 5. While this approach has been implemented annually since 2008 [14], and is indeed, replicable, acknowledging the themes from the group’s reflections affords deeper insights into how this group experiences TATAL. Of note, the process or enactment of TATAL, which begins yearly at the workshop, followed by a breakfast, sets the scene for the purpose of the group. With monthly meetings facilitated by experienced ‘TATALers’ and the use of questions of clarification to explore written reflections, the community provides a space for professional development built on reflective practice. The group also acknowledged, compared to CoPs more generally, that the TATAL environment is safe, and trust is a key element. However, the group still considered that at its core, the TATAL approach has an initial purpose that focuses on the HERDSA fellowship and the development of teaching philosophies. Despite the recognition of our group’s evolution, we acknowledge the origins of the TATAL approach as an extension of a CoP.

To understand how the group evolved from its initial purpose, to the current recognized CfP, we explore the evolution of the group theme. Notably, of the sub-themes that

resulted from narrative analysis for this main theme, the only one with lower-level sub themes was COVID-19 as a tipping point. In reflecting on how and why 2019 TATAL did not simply continue the path of supporting everyone toward HERDSA fellowships, we cannot ignore our shared experience of COVID-19. As suggested earlier, though this was an extended time period, the impact of the pandemic on HE institutions and individuals necessitated transformation. Other communities and groups that are focused on collaborative professional development might not have experienced challenges relating to the pandemic at the same point in their collective development. As such, we explore how this event, and the resulting challenges for the following years, impacted our development. COVID-19 as a theme is apparent because it was a major event during our evolution, but it is also fundamental to building the relationships among the group.

Our group formed in July 2019, so when the pandemic impacted HE institutions in Australia and New Zealand in early 2020, the focus of meetings shifted from sharing and progressing fellowship applications to the practical challenges of T&L in a global pandemic. At this point, we were well-placed for online teaching and meetings, based on our monthly online engagement and the shared experiences of group members with longstanding online teaching practice. The meetings also took on elements of caring for the wellbeing of everyone as we navigated challenges and uncertainties in our personal and professional lives.

Notably, during the meetings at the height of the pandemic, we leveraged our practiced approach of sharing, listening, and asking questions of clarification to explore what others were experiencing in more depth. For example, when members shared about practical challenges of emergency remote teaching and learning [86,87], or what might have seemed superficial personal challenges, members were able to leverage their ability to ask questions of clarification to delve deeper into the issues. This was the beginning of our realization that we could use our established approach and genuine concern for one another to support individual needs alongside the development of fellowship applications. COVID-19 was, indeed, a tipping point. There was a recognized need for change, and the structure of TATAL would be leveraged to advance the group into new territory—that of supporting individual challenges and aspirations—while maintaining the collaborative focus of the group.

Further, with each collaborative monthly session, trust among the group has grown. The community, as a CfP, has been built over time. As a CfP rather than a CoP, the focus shifted to individuals and their unique practice, rather than continuing to support one another toward a common goal [47]. We were no longer just growing together, but collaboratively supporting individual growth as needs emerged across the group. Recognizing the time required for the evolution of the group, we suggest this contributes to some of the subthemes under the TATAL 2019 (as a CfP) theme. That is, the TATAL 2019 environment and the nurturing environment themes both had elements that highlight the commitment of the group to individuals and the group as a collective. These are not characteristics of a community that happen overnight; it has taken four years to reach this point. Nor are they characteristics that are evident in the literature relating to CoP or TATAL; however, we now embrace this environment to support individual and collegial development in what we recognize as a CfP.

This transformation to a CfP is the narrative that describes how the group has evolved from a CoP guided by the TATAL approach to a community where the focus is on the individual as well as the practice. Collegial development is a result of keeping our focus on talking about T&L ('TATALing'), leveraging our community reflection and a collaborative approach to explore how we can advance our practice, while basing specific topics around unique individual needs, or placing the individual at the center [47]. As others have suggested, the collegial nature of communities, engagement in critical reflection, and supportive relationships can foster the evolution of a group that has come together for professional development [9,28,38]. We see this in the results of the TATAL 2019 (as a CfP) theme, in both the sub-themes and specific tangible outputs.

The sub-themes highlight the need for a collaborative approach and emphasis on individual needs. Both heterogeneity of the group and personal development are crucial to the community—we need both diverse members and a focus on each member. Collaboration and celebrating individual achievements contribute to the success of the group, while care, respect, empathy, friendships, support, belonging, and genuineness truly encompass the feelings members have because of their engagement. This is not simply a CoP focused on T&L practice, rather a CfP that has the individual and the community both at the center of its *raison d'être*.

The heterogeneity that comprises all TATALs is amplified as we shift to considering our group as a CfP. No longer are we developing in a collaborative manner with HE scholars at various levels, in different disciplines, and across several institutions, but we are hearing their challenges, exploring their pursuits, and gaining insights into their T&L practices as we support everyone's individual aspirations.

Leveraging the rhythm and structure of the meetings and our practice of asking questions of clarification, while focusing on one piece of writing, reflection, or shared practice, collegial development comes from collectively focusing on supporting one individual at a time. We see the evidence of this in tangible and instrumental outputs as well as socioemotional support. Not only has the group collaborated to deliver joint publications, conference papers, and workshops, but individuals have achieved personal goals and realized improvement in their T&L practice. As a CfP, we collaboratively support each member in overcoming their challenges (e.g., professional frustrations arising from institutional decisions or mandates, or resourcing constraints), chasing their ambitions (such as preparing HE fellowships or award applications), embracing their opportunities (including gaining confidence to publish or experiment with teaching practice and technologies that have proven successful in other contexts), and enhancing their practice (e.g., becoming more familiar with the theoretical underpinnings of SoTL). The common interest is a desire and ability to advance a variety of aspirations to establish individual academic identities and growth.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of the HE environment, whether they revolve around curriculum development and delivery, student engagement and experiences, university models, academic integrity, introducing new technologies, or navigating a new world of artificial intelligence, we face these challenges and opportunities together. As individuals, we might realize and experience our environments differently. Indeed, we represent various disciplines, institutions, and even countries, but our CfP means we have collaborative support to explore challenges together. We conclude our discussion by leveraging the voice of one of our members, who summarized this well in a reflection:

[In] our CfP (. . .) the reason for the sharing of information is different—it is about supporting each person in the group so that they have the confidence, tools and people genuinely interested in their success helping them to try new things, develop new skills, or do whatever it is they want to do.

5. Conclusions

Sharing this story has allowed us to explore our experiences as we came to understand our engagement as a CfP—a place where individual aspirations are embraced and supported. The collaboration is evident as we come together monthly to support whatever goals individual members have at any given time. Collectively, we navigate the complexities of HE. The very essence of this community means we open ourselves up to looking at a variety of challenges, opportunities, and ambitions everyone brings, in a way that leverages community support and collaborative reflection for advancing our practice. We recognize shared issues and opportunities, place them in our own context, and leverage our community to overcome them. It is a space where people can talk about challenges, seek and offer support, and advance both individually and collectively.

The narrative analysis presented here showed that of the main themes, the Community of Practice was foundational. Through our interests in T&L, we joined a CoP that had a

focus on HE fellowships and teaching philosophies. We quickly realized the uniqueness of that CoP, and through our engagement as a TATAL group, we came to understand the value of the TATAL environment and its focus and enactment of key aspects of a CoP. Through the convergence of factors, namely external triggers such as COVID-19 and the responses within the HE environment, we recognized a change in the focus of the meetings and strengthening of relationships. Meeting times were filled with discussions on topical issues and concerns about each other. The TATAL CoP afforded an environment that allowed for just-in-time advice on T&L practices, with practical and actionable advice. Equally, it became a place for frustrations to be voiced, emotional support to be extended, and genuine care devoid of any political or self-focused agenda to be shown. It was an uplifting environment where our concerns were allayed, action plans devised, collegiate support proffered, and a new phase of our existence as a CfP emerged.

Our collective reflective practice and collaborative narrative inquiry have revealed the aspects that are most important to the development of a CfP. The CfP is a result of the unique evolution of those foundational aspects. The sub-themes add clarification to each main theme that allowed us to understand and learn what constitutes the phenomenon of the CfP. We are mindful that we are in our infancy as a CfP, and so we acknowledge uncertainty as to how it will evolve from here. However, it is a unique place we find ourselves in; the data presented tell the story of a unique community centered on the practice of T&L, which we have told through our narrative, to bring value to our understanding of the potential in a CfP.

We have used and suggest the term ‘Community for Practice’. As members of the 2019 TATAL, we consider that the meeting of our group is beyond revolving around a core idea, practice, or knowledge base. The reason for our continued engagement with the community is the people and their individual practice; the central tenet of our community is collectively supporting each individual’s academic growth. Through our narrative analysis and discussion, we have presented and explored the key elements that contribute to the CfP. These include acknowledgement of COVID-19 as a trigger event that was a catalyst for change; the time taken to build relationships, trust, and develop a rhythm and ability to engage in community reflective practice; a structured approach to focusing on specific writing or practice; and care for advancing the emergent needs of everyone. We continue to engage as we have described above, because we genuinely want to support each members’ achievement of their personal aspirations, and we know in return, we will have the full support of the community as we pursue our goals and overcome our challenges. The focus of our ongoing collaboration to embrace and uphold individual goals draws our story to a conclusion, through one final member quote:

TATAL is a community for practice in that we are always moving forward together. Beyond talking and sharing information, we help each individual’s reflective practice by asking questions and sharing insights on individual pieces and collaboratively discussing what this could mean, or how this is approached in other contexts. We debate possible approaches to issues currently being experienced and we create things collectively.

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