From Isolation to Connection: How to create a community of practice

By Peter Fraenkel

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At the college where I teach, I often walk past groups of students hanging out together around tables cluttered with laptops, smartphones, and iPads. Somehow, they manage to carry on conversations while tweeting, Facebooking, Linked-Ining, pinging, chatting, and e-mailing others in far-flung places around the world. These days, we’re always hearing about how the Internet isolates people—everybody attached to their own little devices, oblivious to the “real” life going on around them. It’s been observed that as we collect thousands of online “friends,” we tend to communicate less with friends face-to-face, or even on the phone. But these students seem to have resolved this dilemma: they take full advantage of their individual devices, while maintaining their face-to-face connection with their buddies, seamlessly merging these two worlds in a way that enriches both.

This kind of social connectivity is something that therapists might well envy. It’s an odd paradox that psychotherapy—which famously succeeds or fails on the quality of the human connection between therapist and client—can be a deeply lonely profession. We spend all day “connecting” with clients, but these are predominantly one-way relationships; we’re there to support and listen to them, but they aren’t there to support and listen to us. Once the last client has left our offices, often we leap immediately through the online portals of our computers to scan our overstuffed inboxes, answer a few e-mails, catch the latest on CNN—hungry for a different kind of stimulation and contact. After a day spent operating somewhat like priests in a confessional, a lot of us long for connection with other therapists—fellow travelers in this profession, who can understand, advise, tutor, commiserate with us, and help us celebrate our occasional victories in the consulting room.

Of course, many of us manage to convene with our tribe from time to time at conferences, where we learn new stuff, ask questions, engage in shoptalk with each other, exchange tips, and trade war stories about battles with insurance companies. We may come home from a good conference experience feeling more intellectually awake and emotionally alive, more enthusiastic about our work, more determined to give our clients the best we’ve got. But all too often, the inspiration and renewed energy fades as the days pass. It’s hard to reproduce on our own the excitement and back-and-forth stimulation of the conversations at the meeting that inspired us and made us envision new possibilities for ourselves and our work. And even though we may have exchanged business cards, jotted down e-mail addresses, and promised to keep in touch, once we return to our regular lives, generally, we don’t.

The fact of the matter is that even in this Internet Age of instant communication, the most satisfying human contact still requires what it always has: the physical presence of other people. Even corporate bigwigs know this. When I ask my high-flying corporate clients why they travel so much—after all, they’ve got all the latest communication technologies at their disposal—they all say roughly the same thing: the real business gets done over dinner, on the golf course or tennis court, while shopping, in a shared cab.

Therapists, of course, don’t do much of their business with golf club or tennis racket in hand. And given that the fundamentally private nature of our work inescapably isolates us from our colleagues, is there anything we can do to maintain throughout the year the professional sociability and learning opportunities we find so enlivening at conferences?

Most of us think of our ongoing efforts at professional development—and our pursuit of our annual CE requirements—as an individual journey. Whether in person at a workshop or when we take an online course, we choose from offerings based on a mix of clinical interest and personal convenience. In doing so, we ignore something that educators and learning theorists have long known: we don’t learn very well by ourselves. As the great Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky discovered in the early 20th century, learning is a social act. It is, he wrote, through challenging and supportive conversations that we provide the “scaffolding” for one another that enables us to take in more information, efficiently and enjoyably.

So, the challenge is: how can we acknowledge both our ongoing need for connection with our colleagues and the irreducibly social nature of learning in a way that can make continuing education something that has more excitement and intellectual challenge than a trip to the DMV? It was as I was pondering this dilemma that the idea for the Networker Excel Clubs was born. The idea is simple. I organized an evening in which colleagues and students at City College, where I teach, could use an offering from the Networker series of Plugged-In webinars as an opportunity not only to watch a provocative streaming-video discussion of “Bad Couples Therapy” with Bill Doherty and Rich Simon, but to gather for dinner, talk about our experiences as therapists, and trade practice resources.

The result of that gathering and others since have been so energizing and well-received that the Networker has agreed to set up an ongoing monthly program for Networker Excel Clubs, featuring a streaming-video interview with a prominent clinician on a topic of compelling therapeutic interest available for free viewing on the Networker website (www.psychotherapynetworker.org). There’s no cost, unless you’re also interested in receiving CE credits. Individuals may, of course, view these materials by themselves, but those interested in expanding their regular contacts with colleagues and finding a way to introduce fresh insights and perspectives can form ongoing groups to watch the sessions together or look at them individually, and then gather for a group discussion of what they’ve seen, the questions it raised for them, and any applications it may have for their own work.

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So the idea is simple: a regularly scheduled club in which you and a group of colleagues meet, maybe share something to eat (food always increases conviviality and possibly your ability to absorb information), watch a webinar, and talk about it. As basic as that sounds, a little bit of preparatory work can enhance the experience. Here are some of the things our group has learned about the best way to set up a club and maximize the opportunity for fruitful discussion and group engagement:

**Tips for Forming a Networker Excel Club**

This is all new, so you and your group will contribute to developing this exciting new way to connect and learn.

Identify a group of colleagues and/or students from an agency you work with, a private practice group, a college or university who can convene in person once a month for dinner, viewing, and discussion. Think of people who share your interests and passion for therapy, and invite them!

Go to the Networker website to access the free webinar being offered for viewing that month. If possible, distribute the webinar link ahead of time, so everyone can watch the session before the club meeting. That’ll leave more time for discussion.

Reserve the first half-hour for dinner and general conversation.

Watch the webinar, and pause it as many times as you desire to discuss interesting points as they arise.

Have someone take notes, or record your discussion.

Possible Discussion Questions

What was most important, relevant, and thought-provoking for you?

Did the ideas and examples remind you of any cases you’ve treated?

In what ways do your therapy practices differ from what was described or suggested in the webinar? What do you think necessitates those differences?

What would you like to see offered in future webinars? What are the most pressing issues and challenges for you as a therapist?

On a scale from 1 to 5, how useful was this webinar to your practice?

No matter where you live, the Networker Excel Clubs will not only make the most accomplished and respected thinkers and practitioners in our field immediately accessible, but will also provide a regular structure—and excuse—for getting together with colleagues and enlivening your professional network. The Networker also plans to set up special Comment Boards that will enable clubs from around the planet to share their observations with each other and start a conversation about the craft of our field at a level that was inconceivable to most of us until quite recently.

So we invite you to start your own club with friends or colleagues from where you work, or with therapists whom you wish to get to know better. The whole point is to provide an opportunity to get us out of our professional cubbyholes, widen the quality and range of conversation in our field, and generate different perspectives on innovative ideas and a new experience of professional community.

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