Voices from the Field
A Journey to Build a Community of Practice During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global health threat, Assistive Technology (AT) professionals and educators suddenly found that their work and professional development shifted to virtual spaces. Communities of Practice began to develop or adapt to focus on to aid professionals who suddenly had to change the way they supported users of. Through social media and via online video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, these communities focused on how to provide assistive technology services in the virtual world and have continued to be rich resources as the pandemic has continued to evolve and change how services are delivered.

Keywords: COVID-19, school closures, community of practice, virtual learning, assistive technology

A JOURNEY TO BUILD A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE DURING THE COVID -19 PANDEMIC

A Community of Practice (CoP) has been defined as "a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfill both individual and group goals" (Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, 2016). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) emphasize CoPs as "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." They explain that learning can be the primary reason that a CoP group comes together or can result from the members' collaboration. Professional CoPs consist of individuals who engage in critical inquiry and reflection in a collaborative fashion in order to share best practices and create new knowledge to support their shared area of professional practice. According to Wojick (2015), within a CoP it is through this inquiry and reflection "that members develop, contribute to, and refine the corpus of knowledge for a given practice and, potentially, impact that practice" (p. 205).

As COVID-19 emerged as a global health threat and ultimately a global pandemic in early 2020, the need for human connection became increasingly urgent to many individuals. This held true not just for personal connections but also for professional collaborations. AT professionals quickly found the need to share ideas, troubleshoot unprecedented challenges, and continue to learn and grow without face-to-face professional development. This article examines how the authors created, joined, and expanded virtual CoPs focused on assistive technology.

Personal Statement

The authors of this article each experienced the pandemic through different lenses. Sarah Gregory is a school-based speech-language pathologist and assistive technology provider. She saw the day-to-day impact that school closures and the pandemic were having on the learners that she supported. Beth Poss, the Director of Educational Programs for LessonPix (a tool for creating visual supports), as well as a private consultant and trainer, most often experienced the pandemic through the lens of what could be done to support the adults providing educational and assistive technology services to students, including developing features that supported virtual learning with existing tools already in use. Mike Marotta is the Director of the state Assistive Technology Act of New Jersey, and experienced the pandemic through the lens of providing support to community stakeholders to ensure that assistive technology devices and services are effectively considered for individuals with disabilities. In addition, Mike Marotta is the co-moderator of the weekly #ATchat on Twitter. All the authors, however, sought out ways to connect with other assistive technology professionals and educators, both to give assistance and to learn from what others were doing.

Target Audience and Relevance

While this article is focused primarily on the impact that school closings had on the delivery of assistive technology services to students, the development of CoPs during the pandemic was not restricted to school-based professionals providing assistive technology services. The observations and reflections that follow may be relevant to many AT professionals, who found the sudden need to adapt how they

supported individuals who use assistive technology and looked to their AT colleagues for support on this unknown journey.

AT PROFESSIONALS AND CoP

In the field of assistive technology, the idea of CoPs is not new. The Quality Indicators for Assistive Technology (QIAT) listserv has served as a CoP since its inception in 1998 for its more than 3000 members, fostering collaboration among those providing AT services in a variety of settings (Edyburn 2005; Wojcik 2015). These have also evolved organically through repeated meetups at conferences, via social media such as #ATchat on Twitter, and through ongoing casual and organized collaborations among professionals such as ARPD, the Quality Indicators for Assistive Technology (QIAT) listserv, the Maryland Assistive Technology Network, and Indiana's Promoting Achievement through Technology and Instruction for All Students (PATINS) group. Given the wide range of professionals within the field, including Speech-Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Teachers of the Visually Impaired, Special Educators, Physical Therapists, and Rehabilitation Engineers, those supporting assistive technology benefit from making connections with others with the same goals but differing training and expertise. And whereas some traditional communities of practice may take place within a specific physical space, such as a conference or meeting, virtual communities of practice allow individuals to connect online, reducing the professional isolation experienced by those who might be limited in their contact with others in their field. (Wojcik, 2015). During the pandemic, with schools almost universally moving to a virtual environment in March 2020, virtual CoPs focused on ensuring that the delivery of high-quality virtual assistive technology services could evolve.

Almost immediately, an existing, informal CoP, the #ATchat Twitter community, began to focus on the impact of the pandemic on access to the curriculum in virtual learning environments. The topic for #ATchat on 3/18/2020 was COVID-19, School Closures, and AT. One of the first questions asked during this chat was, "What type of plan is your school initiating to address #COVID19 and distance instruction? How has access for all students factored into the conversation?" (Marotta, 2020). The responses varied from, "No - no plans for learning during these three weeks. North of Boston. #ATchat" (Janowski, 2020) to "I feel like there are so many things to try to get ready all at once. Everyone is scrambling to get something up and ready to go. We are hoping to have a solid system up in the next couple of weeks. #ATchat" (Frost, 2020). As we know, school closures went on for much longer than anyone anticipated, and the response to the needs of students and others using assistive technology became an ongoing theme in #ATchat. To the authors, the weekly #ATchats become more meaningful than past conversations that were important but not immediately critical discussions. Participants shared that #ATchat became a lifeline as they were facing ever-evolving challenges in the provision of assistive technology supports and services.

Throughout the next 18 months, topics for #ATchat included *Talking Distance Learning Supports to AT Post COVID: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.* While not all topics were exclusively geared toward the response to the pandemic, many posts and responses ultimately touched on the ways that distance- and hybrid-learning spurred changes to how technology supports diverse learners and the ever-increasing

need to have adaptable, accessible technology available for all learners. The #ATchat community became a place to not only find information but to process the ongoing impact on AT professionals and educators as well. On 6/2/21, on the topic of Reflection to Action, @jschubring responded to the question, "Q1 In our busy lives, how do you find time for reflection? How often do you reflect on ur practice? #ATchat" (Janowski, 2021) with, "A1: My time to reflect is always in the car between appointments. I think that's why I struggled during virtual learning. That time was taken away and I was overscheduled. #ATchat" (Schubring, 2021). At press time, #ATchat continues to address the challenges of those who use and those who support users of assistive technology in the ever-evolving new normal that has followed the initial wave of COVID-19.

At the same time that #ATchat began to focus on the pandemic impact on assistive technology service delivery in education, The Richard West Assistive Technology Advocacy Center organized an AT Town Hall meeting on the topic of COVID-19 School Closures and AT. What was originally intended to be a short-term set of town halls to discuss how to respond to school closures, instead evolved into an ongoing weekly live virtual meeting driven by the participants' needs at the moment. This shift has been captured in the shift of subtitles of the weekly conversations. In the beginning, the subtitle was *COVID 19, School Closures and AT: What do we do?*, highlighting the immediacy of the need to quickly troubleshoot and solve problems. As time progressed, the subtitle shifted to *AT in Education: How do we embrace change and adapt?* to reflect the new normal that professionals are facing with providing assistive technology services in education.

With anywhere from 5 to 30 participants weekly, with many regulars returning week after week, the AT Town Hall became an additional virtual space for those with an interest in assistive technology to meet, vent, and discuss solutions to the barriers that the pandemic was presenting, specifically in educational settings. Not only did the AT Town Hall support individual professionals looking to connect, but school-based teams of professionals used the Town Hall time to gather and learn together while improving their own service delivery models. As the pandemic continues to impact the delivery of assistive technology services within the school setting, the contributors to the AT Town Hall strive to evolve to meet the needs of their community. Where this activity was started by one organization as a direct response to the pandemic, the AT Town Hall belongs to the community now, and community members will mold this into the learning experience they need to be better as professionals.

Following the success of the AT Town Hall, the staff of the Richard West Assistive Technology Advocacy Center has adapted this virtual CoP model for a new endeavor. In order to provide support to professionals providing assistive technology services to individuals with disabilities (both children and adults) in the community, the Makers Roundtable was born through a partnership with Scout Merry from the Missouri Assistive Technology Act project (at.mo.gov). This monthly CoP provides a platform for professionals to highlight unique assistive technology solutions created for individuals, as well as ask questions of the group. In fact, a highlight of the first Makers Roundtable was troubleshooting a solution to enable a young person with physical disabilities to independently bait a hook with a worm in order to go fishing. After lots of discussion in the group and brainstorming, a 3D printed model was created by Kip Lewis from Empower Abilities (empowerabilities.org) and after several iterations, success (see Figure 1)!

*Figure 1: 3-D Printed Model for Baiting a Fishhook (created by Kip Lewis)*

By utilizing a variety of communication platforms (#ATchat on Twitter; Maker Roundtable and AT Town Hall on Zoom), these CoPs were able to reach different professionals by tapping into different learning styles. Throughout the pandemic, the independent CoPs of #ATchat and the AT Town Hall have become more intertwined with comments/topics of conversation drifting from one activity to the other. These then became further promoted on varied platforms including Instagram, Facebook, and the QIAT listserv, where individuals in need of a CoP were able to learn how to join.

A common theme that arose among formal and informal CoPs was the generous sharing of ideas. As school buildings suddenly closed in March 2020, professionals who had experience with telepractice and virtual learning began generously sharing strategies, ideas, and resources on social media, such as the "AAC and Telepractice/Tele-Ed" group on Facebook. The resource sharing seemed to encourage even more support, collaboration, and innovation of digital strategies. These groups on social media also allowed educators to connect and learn from people from all over the globe. While this may have been possible before, networks and collaboration grew as evidenced by an increased number of practitioners actively participating in these social networks.

Many educators began navigating virtual learning for the first time, without preparation, in the spring of 2020. We had to learn how to log onto a video conferencing platform, find digital activities, and engage learners through a computer screen. As this sudden transition began, Sarah Gregory heard many of her school district colleagues struggling to get started with these new tools. Unfamiliar with Google Meet, she sat down to teach herself how to create a meeting link for a student and how to engage them in a virtual speech therapy session. Once she learned the basics, she screen-recorded a "how-to" video to send to her colleagues who had asked for help. As fellow educators shared how helpful the video tutorials were, she added them to YouTube and shared them in the Facebook groups where she had already received support in getting started with teletherapy.

Sarah slowly grew her technology and teletherapy skills through trial and error as well as the strong CoP network she had developed through #ATchat and the weekly AT Town Hall meetings. As she learned about technology tools, she created videos to pay forward the support she had been given. She took the support and ideas from her CoP colleagues and mentors, adapted them to be used in AAC teletherapy, and then shared them on social media platforms, as seen in the two tweets in Figure 2 with @possbeth and @wernedat (April 2020).

Figure 2: Screenshot Images of Twitter Posts from Sarah Gregory
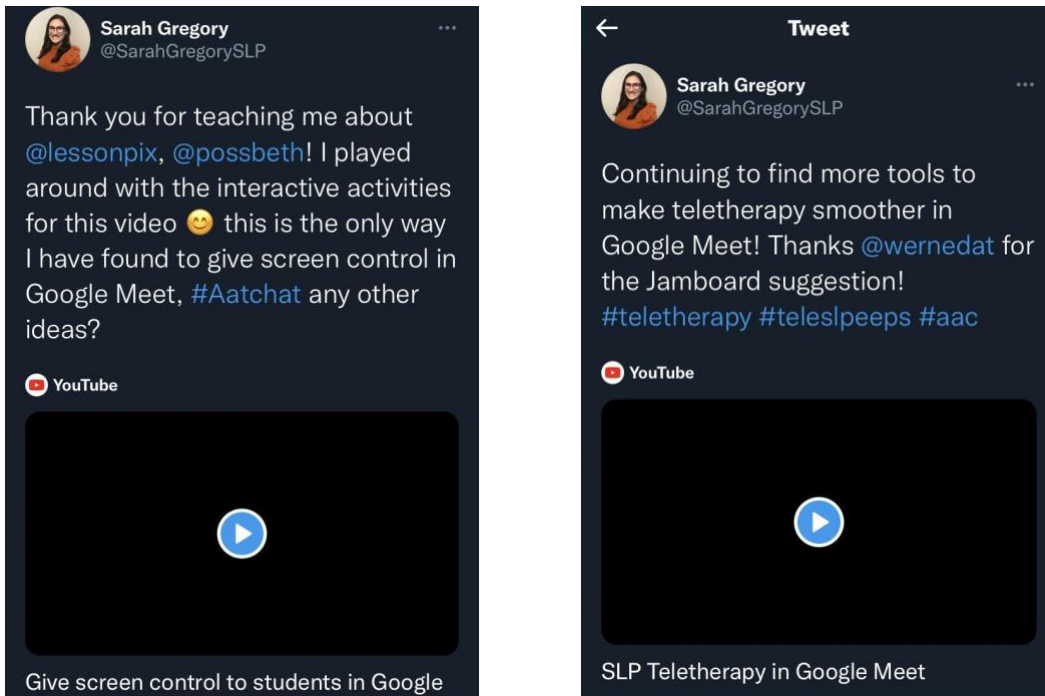
Note: Text reads, "Thank you for teaching me about @lessonpix, @possbeth! I played around with the interactive activities for this video. This is the only way I have found to give screen control in Google Meet, #ATchat any other ideas?" and "Continuing to find more tools to make teletherapy smoother in Google Meet! Thanks @wernedat for the Jamboard suggestion! #teletherapy #teleslpeeps #aac

As virtual learning continued, Sarah connected with AT colleagues who were similarly struggling with teaching themselves to become teletherapists and tele-educators. When questions came in, she reached out to her network and then created YouTube videos to share strategies more widely. Sarah focused on the fact that we do not have to be experts in order to support our students through a computer screen; we just had to focus on their engagement and slowly add tools to our toolbox.

OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the human need we all have to connect with others, particularly around topics of common interest. In the world of assistive technology, it also created a very real need to find collaborators as problem-solvers for new barriers facing not only individuals who require assistive

technology, but also professionals looking to help them without being able to work face-to-face with these individuals.

CoPs, both brand new, such as the AT Town Hall and the Makers Roundtable, as well as existing communities, such as #ATchat, became critical resources and support for AT professionals. While these CoPs grew during the pandemic, there is clear evidence from the continued participation of both existing and newly added members that these CoPs will have ongoing benefits. Not only do AT professionals face the continuing challenges posed by COVID, but there is a consensus from many in the community that we should not go back to the way we served learners prior to the pandemic.

Virtual learning forced educators to consider how to make instruction and educational resources compatible with technology. There is the hope that lessons learned during online schooling will persist as learners and educators return to brick-and-mortar buildings. @SpedTechMia stated on June 9, 2021, "Reflecting on what worked from this year and what to keep add- like keeping some remote PD because of easier access for some people #Atchat" (Mia, 2021). @hillaryatp responded "We are keeping virtual IEP meetings- the flexibility for parents has been great and it keeps us focused. We can offer both options. #Atchat." (Goldthwaite-Fowles, 2021). @emilydiazslp added, "I learned how to connect more with parents. Definitely need to grow in the area of parent training & buy-in! #Atchat" (Diaz, 2021).

LESSONS LEARNED

The COVID-19 pandemic propelled many in the field of Assistive Technology to become savvy with video conferencing tools, as well as social media tools such as YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. At the same time, both new and well-established CoPs began targeted discussions and professional learning opportunities addressing the needs of both AT users and AT professionals in the context of the pandemic and virtual services. Even as the impact of the pandemic shifted, and schools and therapy practices returned to in-person learning, virtual CoPs continue to flourish, as the need for support and connection has not diminished, as evidenced by continued participation of AT professionals in weekly Town Hall virtual meetings, Twitter chats, and other interactive virtual and hybrid events.

CONCLUSION

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, AT professionals and educators were thrown into virtual learning and services with little to no preparation. As individuals struggled to figure out what best practices should be, AT professionals came together through new and existing CoPs to ask for help, share ideas, and serve as support systems. In an early AT Town Hall meeting, one of the participants, Elisa Wern, paraphrased the movie Frozen II, stating that right now "we just need to do the next right thing." In the case of the sudden shift to virtual learning, "the next right thing" was becoming comfortable with the technology needed to connect with a student/client. Then, it was learning some new digital activities that could engage them, or learning how to incorporate their AAC system into a virtual meeting. We realized that we did not need to know it all, but finding "the next right thing" required us to rely on our network that

continued to grow as we became more comfortable with the digital world. One of the true silver linings of the pandemic are the CoPs who supported their participants through the most difficult of times and generously continued to share resources and knowledge to support each other as well as the learners on the other side of the screen.

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