Facilitation of Learning (FoL) – ENPHE
Good Practice for Physiotherapy Education

1. Title of the Good Practice + Author(s) + e-mail:

Learning across years – vertical communities of practice in physiotherapy education (HAN PACE)

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2. Background & Rationale:

Healthcare is changing rapidly. Physiotherapists are expected to deal with complex cases, uncertain outcomes and fast-moving innovations. No professional can face this alone. The ability to learn with others, share insights, and grow through feedback is becoming just as important as mastering anatomy or manual skills.

To address these challenges, HAN University designed the PACE concept (Physiotherapy Advanced Collaborative Education), a future-oriented curriculum built on flexibility, collaboration and lifelong learning. One of the most distinctive features of PACE is the use of vertical communities of practice (CoPs): groups where first-, second-, third- and fourth-year students learn side by side.

In these CoPs, juniors bring curiosity and fresh questions, while seniors contribute experience and role-modelling. Together they create a small ecosystem of peer support, reflection and experimentation. Students don't just learn from teachers, they learn with and from each other. This mirrors the professional world, where solving complex health problems requires teamwork, dialogue, and the courage to admit 'I don't know yet.'

I categorise my case under the following theme (please tick the appropriate box):

☐ Clinical reasoning skills
☒ Learning between students
☐ Simulation-based learning
☐ Lack of motivation
☒ Tailored learning for student diversity
☐ Facilitation of online physiotherapy
☒ Self-regulation in physiotherapy learning (professional issues)
☐ Blended learning strategies
☐ Other: .....

3. Learning Objectives:

- Grow a professional identity earlier, shaped by real role models
- Develop the habit of giving and receiving feedback, as they will in their careers
- Build confidence and self-efficacy by mentoring and being mentored
- Learn to embrace uncertainty instead of avoiding it
- Experience the power of community and collective responsibility

4. Implementation & Description of the Good Practice:

Each CoP brings together about 150 students and 10 dedicated teachers. Students collaborate both within their own year group and across different years, creating a dynamic mix of perspectives and experiences. Vertical learning activities are an integral part of the program: students help each other practice clinical skills, prepare for assessments, and share study strategies. Senior students contribute by organizing workshops, peer discussions, or offering patient demonstrations.

This collaboration is supported by a digital learning environment, which includes video-cases with real people, allowing students to practice with lifelike patient scenarios. In addition, students are encouraged to bring in their own cases from daily life, such as sports clubs, family or community settings. This blend of digital authenticity and personal contribution makes learning highly relevant and engaging.

Teachers act as learning coaches, experts, facilitators and evaluators. They guide and monitor the process, while giving students room to take ownership of their own learning trajectories. Watch this video for more explanation

What makes it work:

At the heart of vertical learning communities lies the energy invested in building a real community. Students and teachers start with an onboarding week and social activities, creating trust and shared purpose. From there, learning is driven by a strong sense of urgency and social cohesion – everyone feels part of the same collective journey.

Teachers step back into coaching and facilitating roles, giving students space to steer their own learning. They are not positioned above the community, but as equal members of the CoP, modelling non-hierarchical collaboration. Together, teachers feel responsible not only for their own subject but for the entire curriculum and the learning culture of the CoP.

A digital platform supports this process by making feedback and progress transparent, while authentic, real-life problems ensure that learning stays grounded in practice. Both students and teachers embrace flexibility: schedules, roles and content adapt to what the community needs at a given moment.

In this way, the CoP becomes more than a place to acquire knowledge – it is a shared space where people genuinely learn with and from each other.

5. Evaluation & Feedback:

The effectiveness of vertical CoPs has been studied systematically. Surveys, interviews and national progress tests show that the guiding principles were implemented as intended and that students perform strongly compared to peers from other universities.

Students report increased motivation, joy in learning and a stronger sense of 'becoming a physiotherapist.' Teachers observe growing confidence and collaboration, though they note that didactic variety could be expanded.

For a detailed evaluation of the implementation and preliminary effects of PACE and vertical learning communities, see: Stolwijk, Van Bergen, Jetten & Maas (2024). Preparing physiotherapists for the future: evaluation of the PACE curriculum.

6. Challenges & Solutions:

- Senior students are harder to keep engaged once they move into internships. Online peer feedback and meaningful incentives help.
- First-years often feel a 'culture shock.' Peer mentoring and step-by-step scaffolding support them.
- Teachers needed to shift their mindset; professional development programs (like the Feedback Toolbox) helped them grow into coaching roles.

7. Impact & Sustainability

Vertical CoPs create a culture where feedback is normal, collaboration is second nature, and learning is lifelong. Students are better prepared not just for exams, but for the realities of healthcare: uncertainty, complexity, and teamwork.

The model has attracted attention far beyond physiotherapy. In 2024, PACE was rewarded with the *Nederlandse Onderwijspremie HBO*.

8. References & Supporting Materials:

- Cruess, R.L., Cruess, S.R., & Steinert, Y. (2018). Medicine as a community of practice. Academic Medicine.
- Ryan, R.M. & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation. American Psychologist.
- Stolwijk, N., Van Bergen, A., Jetten, E., & Maas, M. (2024). Preparing physiotherapists for the future: evaluation of the PACE curriculum. HAN University of Applied Sciences.
- Van der Vleuten, C.P.M., Schuwirth, L.W.T., Driessen, E.W., Govaerts, M.J.B., & Heeneman, S. (2015). 12 tips for programmatic assessment. Medical Teacher, 37(7), 641–646.

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Thank you in advance for completing the template and for your valuable input.

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