
I'M NOT ALONE: FIRST YEAR COURSE LEADERS HELPED THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Michael Sankey & Jill Lawrence
University of Southern Queensland

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a two year pilot project facilitating the professional development of teachers of first year courses through a community of practice. Community members reflect and co-construct initiatives to enhance the learning experiences of their students. They also develop strategies to meet individual, institutional and societal demands impacting on their teaching.

KEYWORDS

Keywords: Communities of practice – professional development – first year students

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a two year pilot project aimed at facilitating the professional development of teachers of first year courses in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), as an initiative of the Learning and Teaching Support Unit (LTSU). The project involved establishing a community of practice (CoP) to improve the quality of first year teaching in the Faculty and, consequently, students' learning outcomes. The pilot study found that the community has significantly contributed to the professional development of participating staff, fostering a transformative learning approach for these teachers, an approach consistent with the universities commitment to promote lifelong learning at all levels (USQ, 2007). By participating in the community members were able to reflect on their existing practices and co-construct initiatives to enhance the learning experiences of their students. It also assisted staff to address and develop strategies to meet the individual, institutional and societal demands currently impacting on their teaching. Using an action research approach, the project evaluated the impact of this form of professional development as well as coordinating a range of innovative curriculum strategies. The dynamic nature of this project conforms to the university's charter to establish innovative ways of supporting the learning and teaching (L&T) program. By researching this transformative process this project has demonstrated new ways of understanding the complex issues faced by teachers. This understanding will, potentially, have a significant impact on the ways the University supports both its staff and students in the future.

Defining communities of practice

CoPs have emerged in both education and industry as a means of facilitating the growth and

implementation of new knowledge and to foster organisational and individual learning. Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002), describe CoPs as,

“groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches.” (p. 4)

They suggest that mutual engagement around joint enterprise is an ideal context for leading-edge learning and usually incorporate three fundamental elements; *domain of knowledge* (common knowledge about interest area), *community* (shared sense of belonging), and *practice* (a set of common approaches to problems) (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). From the organisations perspective (in this case a university) CoPs may also be seen as a means of creating opportunities for mutual learning which accords well with learning organisation theory, as members of the CoPs reflect not only their own perspectives of practice but also those of the organisation (Cox, 2006). In the context of lifelong learning, this CoPs also addresses the personal and social dimensions of professional development that are becoming increasingly important at a corporate and organisational level (Chalmers & Keown, 2006, p.144).

CoPs have gradually been emerging in education, over the last decade, as a means of facilitating the growth and implementation of new knowledge and have become reasonably well established in the Australian Vocational Educational and Training (VET) sector and in industry (McDonald & Star, 2006). However, they remain a relatively unexplored phenomenon in Australian higher education (HE). McDonald and Star suggest that the slow uptake of CoPs in Australian HE may be influenced by its emerging corporate and competitive nature. At the university level this is seen in the traditional

concept of a private and individual approach to academic teaching, rather than a collaborative, community based approach. Whereas, Chalmers and Keown (2006) believe that CoPs are exactly the type of professional development that is required for teachers; who need to develop in three distinct ways, “professionally, personally and socially” (p.144), and that if any one of these dimensions are underemphasised then the effectiveness of the lifelong learning experience is compromised.

The driver for establishing CoPs at USQ

At USQ, the idea for CoPs for teachers of first year courses emerged from collaboration between the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Business and the Learning and Teaching Resource Unit (LTSU). The development of the CoPs concept was based on the recognition that the first year experience (FYE) can be difficult for many students, and particularly for those accessing university for the first time.

Increasingly, diverse student cohorts are making new demands on universities, requiring a greater flexibility in access to programs and services (Laurillard, 2002). The profile of the ‘traditional’ undergraduate student, one that came to university straight from school, is also changing as international and mature age learner’s increasing access further study. Consequently, the FYE may vary dramatically for those unfamiliar with mainstream university culture and its many languages, i.e. information and communication literacies, research methodologies and core academic knowledge.

As well as this changed student cohort, the CoP’s initiative is driven by the need for academics to also manage burgeoning pedagogical initiatives emerging from the research literature on transition, retention and the FYE. This literature shows that both FYE and transition are complex phenomena (Krause, 2005): that students experience social, personal as well as academic transitions (Scott, 2005); that interactions between students and other in the university community and students’ interpretations of these contacts affect their transition (Tinto, 2005). Furthermore, transition is influenced by students’ perceptions of how well their cultural attributes are valued and accommodated and how well any differences between these and the university culture are bridged (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003).

Educational literature also provides implications for CoPs. For example there is the increasing importance of a student focused curriculum and a range of socio/constructivist approaches that promote situated learning and learning based on

reflective and shared practice (Cox, 2006). The traditional view that learning is a process of transmitting information from the teacher (expert) to learner (novice) has been supplemented by the idea of the learner playing a more central role in constructing their own knowledge, and the teacher having a facilitating role in that learning (McDonald & Star, 2006). Critical discourse and multiliteracy theory (New London Group, 1996) contributes further implications for CoPs, including the importance of facilitating students’ engagement, mastery and demonstration of, a suite of learning and information literacies required if they are to succeed at university. Embedding these critical literacies and skills, and graduate qualities, has also been added to first year teachers’ repertoires. CoPs offers a space where first year teachers can be empowered to address these needs. Importantly, this approach allows those in the community to experience first hand the benefits of co constructing their knowledge, where, in a real sense the curriculum (or agenda) is shaped by the members, which in turn forms the basis of the learning circle (Cox). This shared approach is carried through into the action research methodology adopted to determine the benefit (or otherwise) of the CoP to its members at USQ.

The Arts CoP

The CoP process for teachers of first year students was initiated in the Faculty of Arts with the Dean acting as its supporter and “champion” in Semester 2, 2006. Learning and Teaching funds were obtained from the Faculty and were further complemented by funds obtained for the action research project to evaluate the effectiveness of the CoPs. These funds are primarily used to purchase refreshments for the group. The Arts CoP meets on the fourth Thursday of each month (February-November) between 2-4pm. The group consists of a faculty based facilitator, a facilitator from the LTSU and between 8-10 regular attendees. Members are, on the whole, faculty academic staff (associate lecturers to senior lecturers) from a range of disciplines. Two thirds of the members would be female, but this varies from meeting to meeting. The faculties’ liaison Librarian also often attends. The common bond among members is that they deal predominantly with first year students. In the weeks leading up to each meeting the facilitators work together to promote forthcoming meetings and to create an initial running schedule. The members teach a range of disciplines, teaching anywhere between one (1) and 1000 students in any one year, including on campus, external, off-shore and a combination of all three modes of delivery.

As the social nature of the CoPs is deemed important by the members and the meetings are kept reasonably informal. No formal minutes are kept, however the facilitators do keep good notes for future reference and action. Finger foods and beverages are made available throughout each meeting. Typically, the agenda is reasonably flexible, although there is an expectation that the designated issues for a given month will be discussed. Participants are given at least a week's notice of a given topic, most of which are generated from within the group itself from the previous month's meeting. For example, some of the issues addressed to date include: 'What do you do to engage students in the first three weeks of semester'; 'Lets talk about creating a marking criteria and a rubric as a way of making assessment requirements more explicit'; 'What is the first assessment item in your course and how do you engage students with this'. All the discussions are kept relaxed with an emphasis on sharing what has worked, or not worked, in a given situation and, as most of the topics are self generated, they resonate within the group. By the end of the meeting a number of ideas will have emerge about how members may address a given issue. These ideas are then written up and disseminated at a later date by one of the facilitators.

Evaluating the success of the CoP

The research project comprised three stages. Stage 1 was a voluntary online survey where questions were designed to provide some baseline data on the core group, including their teaching duties; their perception of key challenges facing them as university teachers; their understanding of current university-wide L&T initiatives; their perception of existing support for staff; and their perception of staff development practices in general. These data will be directly compared to data collected during Stage 3, which will not be collected until the completion of the two year project, in late 2008. Consequently, only Stage 2 findings¹ are reported in this paper.

Stage 2 comprised voluntary semi-structured interviews of core group members using open-ended questions: what is working well in relation to the CoP; what could be improved (any suggestions); have there been any changes to your teaching as a result of CoP activity; and are there any changes you would like to make as a result of your CoP activity. These interviews were conducted by a fellow member of the CoPs in an open and collegial manner, with a view to

strengthen the ownership of this process by the community itself. The Stage 2 data reviewed here is the qualitative analysis of interview data from seven 'core group' members. This sample reflects Community of Practice theory (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002), which suggests that there is usually a core group of members in any Community of Practice who are more engaged than more peripheral members, and who provide the 'driving force' for group activities.

Findings

The data were analysed using a layered, thick approach (Martin-McDonald, 2000). The layered approach also provides a valuable way of systematically sifting out the participants' perspectives, facilitating its revelatory capacity (p.144). Supporting and assisting these analytical and interpretative processes are the use of 'thick descriptions' – the rich detailed descriptions of specifics – which, Geertz (1979) argues, are able to capture a sense of what is occurring, consequently permitting multiple interpretations whilst also helping to guard against the authorial power of any dual positioning (Martin-McDonald). This approach was used as it facilitates the process of unpacking meaning, proceeding as it does from description through to detailed analysis and finally to general interpretation.

Through this process three key themes emerged from the data:

- 1) the value of meeting others and sharing practice;
- 2) the opportunities to facilitate change, in relation to both students and faculty management; and
- 3) a shared understanding about strategies to manage challenges emanating from individual, institutional and societal demands on university teaching whilst coping with continuous change, excessive workloads and research output demands.

That the CoP meetings provided members with the chance to meet others and share examples of teaching practice was evident to all. Members valued the informal, social tone of the meetings, recognising that the CoPs enhanced their own learning:

First of all it's quite fun. We're getting together with first year lecturers and sharing ideas; I'm learning a lot (Int 4).

It's a productive forum. The thing I like about it is you get to relax quite informally and talk about things you otherwise wouldn't get to in the course of your day-to-day work (Int 3).

¹ The analysis of the data or written text included in this document acknowledges the work of Dr. Sara Hammer.

Members also saw these meetings as valuable as they provided an opportunity for them to see what people from different areas and disciplines were doing, breaking down discipline silos and contributing to a more holistic faculty approach to L&T issues:

The good thing was to meet in an informal setting with staff...It's good to hear other people's ideas; yes, and I also think getting to know what is happening in other disciplines is useful because we're quite isolated in our discipline and quite often we don't know what is going on in other disciplines (Int 2).

One member found meetings affirmed for them a shared professional experience:

It's good to hear that other people have problems because you know you're not the only idiot that has them (Int 5).

CoP meetings appeared to play a particularly positive role for less experienced academic staff, helping them to become more familiar with the universities L&T discourses. This is in line with community of practice theory, which sees the induction of newer staff as a form of 'apprenticeship', which can be facilitated by 'opportunities for engagement with practice, defined by the social contexts of learning' (Bathmaker & Avis 2005, p.50). Two members made particular reference to the value of meetings as a sphere of influence in enhancing the faculty's culture in relation to L&T:

It's also good to surreptitiously air any out-of-the box teaching methods you're using to see if anyone faints or not; if they don't you know you're o.k. It's good for someone like me who's new to academia (Int 3).

As you know, I'm starting out in academe...It's really good to get those ideas and to compare and that sort of thing. Really getting new strategies from people who have been here for quite a while on how they teach and to compare and that sort of thing (Int 7).

For other staff, the opportunity to share ideas with more senior members allowed them to test their own ideas, and to build their teaching repertoire by trying out the ideas of others. One member reported a more fundamental affirmation of her teaching practice:

I have to say it's almost a relief to have an initiative where the University is acknowledging good teaching as an important part of academic work. It always seems like a struggle though to get it recognised – not like the research agenda tends to (Int 7).

All the seven members interviewed saw the CoP meetings in a positive light, particularly in their role as providing an informal, social space for the sharing of ideas about practice. However, while members accepted that the CoP was already disseminating good practice amongst its members, three out of seven interviewees wanted greater influence for the good practices outside of the membership. Two members made particular reference to a potential role for the CoP in lobbying senior management to achieve positive changes. For example:

A site for dispersal for things such as graduate attributes; it would also be nice if a few more senior people came to hear what was going on (Int 1).

I'd like to see us develop an 'agenda for change' – some big pieces we would like to lobby USQ Senior Management about so that it feels like the CoPs have 'real teeth' (Int 7).

Testimony like this confirms Dozier's (2007) view of the importance of teachers' desire to gain further training in affecting change in their spheres of influence. Dozier argues that teachers who wish to become more effective leaders utilise professional relationships. The data demonstrates that, in terms of changes in staff teaching practice:

There are things I've come away thinking about: like diversity of assessment...We're certainly always trying to think about – not just student retention but trying to build students' skills bases very quickly (Interview 1).

Another member was planning but had yet to make changes to their teaching practice.

I haven't [made any changes] as yet but am in the process of planning to do so. One system that came up was assessment via a rubric (criterion-referenced marking and standards sheet) (Int 3).

These comments highlight two of the three areas of change in practice generally targeted by members: teaching students how to learn, and providing greater transparency in assessment practices. One member had made changes in their teaching with the aim of incorporating academic skills and literacies into their curricula. This represented a break from past practice:

[I am] putting a real focus on incorporating study skills into the first year courses; I think in the past its been pretty much sink or swim. So they [students] were expected to know how to reference, and know about ebSCO host and the library and all of this (Int 6).

The particular focus of this member's skills-based teaching was information literacy:

One big thing I've been doing is talking about internet sources...I've now actually got a restriction on the number of internet sources they can use so we can set them on the path of using books and journals primarily, with some additional internet sources (Int 6).

Some members focused changes in their teaching on initiatives that either created a better 'social' environment for students, or focused on transitional initiatives to provide first year students with appropriate guidance and support. Two of these members made changes which were aimed at creating a better environment for their students:

[I am] also getting the students to know and interact with each other early on. I've introduced 'speed dating' exercises to they all get to know each other one on one, and we all introduce one other person to the group so they've already started to bond...So now we've got this community in class and they're not so frightened to speak up (Int 6).

Other members focused more on transition strategies that either explicitly addressed USQ expectations with students, or provided additional support for first year students:

Things like strategies for remembering names, thinking of ways of connecting students who commence in 2nd semester with those who have already been here for a semester, taking the time to connect students with resources that will help them (eg. referencing guides, the Learning Centre) (Int 7).

A final group made changes to their assessment practice, either the assessment itself, or related marking and moderation processes. Two members made substantive changes to their assessment practice as a result of CoP activity. As one interviewee explains:

As a result of something that came up in Cops, I tried a lighter assignment at the end of the semester, which was designed to keep students engaged til the end of semester (Int 4).

An additional two members made changes to marking and moderation processes for their assessment with the aim of increasing grading fairness and transparency for students:

Yes, I hijacked the [marking] rubric; took the existing rubric, which was totally inadequate and threw it in the bin...it's now a lot better. I try and adopt really transparent assessment procedures (Int 3).

When I started here there weren't any clear criteria for assessment so I've gone through and written criteria sheets for each individual assessment so they can clearly see what they're being marked on. And they get that in the course syllabus, so they're aware of that right from the beginning...I go through it with them (Int 6).

All members interviewed wished to make some kind of change, either to their own specific course, or widening their sphere of influence to program and discipline level:

What we've been doing in first year in our disciplines actually using flexible delivery; continuing to become more effective at that and improving the application to that (Int 1)
I think there needs to be a development of skills as we go along and so hopefully next year that will happen. I want to have it so it's building process so it's skills as well as discipline-based knowledge. So I guess that's the change I really want to make (Int 6).

DISCUSSION

Based on the interview data, the Arts CoP can demonstrate broad success in terms of positive staff perceptions and as a vehicle for change in teaching practice. Participants clearly valued the social, collegial and mentoring aspects of meetings as an end in themselves. Indeed, key terms such as 'social' and 'sharing' stand out as features of the CoP meeting valued by all members. This is supported by Chalmers & Keown (2006), who propose that CoPs are increasingly seen as an avenue for social change and a driver of professional development for many teachers; one designed to meet many of their lifelong learning needs.

The majority of those interviewed acknowledged some existing or planned change to their teaching practice as a direct result of CoP activity. In particular, initiatives aimed at engaging students, developing their academic skills and literacies, developing student independence (peer learning) and providing greater transparency in assessment practices were identified as having a positive impact on the student experience. However, issues such as the need for greater focus and structure, raised by some members, point to possible avenues for increasing the effectiveness of the CoP as a vehicle for change. Likewise, as flagged by some of the respondents, another possible means of improving the CoP as a vehicle for changes in practice is to think of strategies for wider dissemination of good practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported on the progress of a two year pilot CoPs project aimed at facilitating the professional development of teachers of first year courses at USQ, since its inception in 2006. Through the analysis of one-on-one interviews the broad institutional and professional context, within which the CoP operates, is more clearly understood by CoPs members. The analysis also reveals evidence of the efficacy of the community to date. The community has been, thus far, successful in its intended purpose. Sharing of professional knowledge and changes in teaching practice in the areas outlined here will arguably benefit students through the provision of better practices and processes of first year engagement, a greater emphasis on scaffolding and embedding skills and literacies and a greater transparency in assessment practices. It is anticipated that staff participating in the CoP will continue to benefit through the opportunities for critical reflection and professional development offered by their community. The project found that the community provided a vehicle for professional development to promote quality L&T across the Faculty and particularly to those involved with teaching first year students. The paper demonstrated how a community of practice approach can augment an organisation's mandate to provide professional development to its staff in such a way that is consistent with its charter to provide lifelong learning opportunities for both its staff and students.

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