

McDonald, J., Nagy, J., Star, C., Burch, T., Cox, M. D., & Margetts, F. (2012). Identifying and building the leadership capacity of community of practice facilitators. *Learning Communities Journal*, 4, x-x.

Identifying and Building the Leadership Capacity of Community of Practice Facilitators

Jacquelin McDonald
University of Southern Queensland

Judy Nagy
University of South Australia

Cassandra Star
Flinders University

Tony Burch
Higher Education Consultant

Milton D. Cox
Miami University

Fiona Margetts
University of Southern Queensland

The authors report on an Australian project that conducted a sector-wide needs analysis and qualitative interviews to identify community of practice (CoP) leadership roles, challenges, and development needs. Survey and interview data identified that most communities of practice are situated within university faculties among practitioners and are, therefore, close to where student learning takes place. The project findings informed the creation of resources to develop CoP leadership capacity to foster shared social learning and thereby improve learning and teaching across the Australian higher education sector. This article outlines the distributed leadership approach that profiled the

strengths of each member of the project team and enabled the group to become a CoP in action and to work collaboratively over three years.

Introduction

Communities of practice (CoPs) in Australian higher education are gaining momentum and traction as a means of engagement to share and develop learning and teaching practice (Southwell, 2012). The rising profile of CoPs has been given significant impetus as a consequence of the collaborative focus fostered originally by the national Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and, now, the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT). The project funding was located within the OLT Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program. The aim of this program is to “build leadership capacity in ways consistent with the promotion and enhancement of learning and teaching in contemporary higher education” (OLT grants and project, 2012 [**See my question in references.**]). This article focuses on the story of how five academics from different disciplines, universities, and countries conceptualised a project framework, applied for government funding, and used a CoP methodology to achieve project outcomes.

The team of academics worked collaboratively over three years to identify Australian CoP leadership needs and roles and created a rich set of resources to develop the leadership capacity of facilitators of learning and teaching CoPs. While the CoP approach to the project was not planned from the outset, independent formative and summative evaluation highlighted that progress and outcomes clearly benefitted from the CoP approach. Reflection has highlighted that the distributed leadership approach and well established trust relationships subconsciously? [**Stray question mark?**] utilised the strengths of each member to advantage. The article will thus focus on both the journey and the outcomes as an illustration of how this team as a CoP in action played an important part in the project.

The resources generated by the project are situated within a context of academic leadership, with the role of CoP facilitation being advocated as a position that requires diverse skills and capabilities effectively to manage and support CoP activities. The article will first highlight the project aims and outcomes in order to provide a frame in which to situate the subsequent discussion and perspectives about the team’s journey and ultimate publication of the resources.

Project Aims and Outcomes

The aims of the project were as follows:

1. Identify the leadership challenges for CoP facilitators managing down (course leaders), managing across (the department or the school), and managing up (the formal hierarchy).
2. Identify the impact of institutional factors that influence leadership challenges for CoP facilitators.
3. Develop support for and increase leadership capacity to foster collegial forms of collaboration for sustainable impact on learning and teaching across the sector.
4. Evaluate existing resources and create new resources to facilitate capacity building for CoP leadership.

Utilising a mixed-method approach to data collection and a staged cycle of action, outcomes, evaluation, and dissemination, the project benefitted from continuous reflection and development by the project team. The engagement of an evaluator to provide formative and summative assessment, together with the valuable input of an expert reference group at key milestones during the project, provided the team with feedback to reassess and validate action as needed.

Data collection involved the use of an online survey and interviews utilising a strong stakeholder network that had been constructed during the first year of team activities. The stakeholders were provided with periodic updates about progress, dissemination activities, and opportunities to participate in both passive and active ways. Passive participation involved keeping in touch with project developments via the project website and *Twitter*; active participation was encouraged by completing the survey, agreeing to be interviewed, contributing to resource development, and reviewing drafts of resources as they were developed.

The key project outcomes included the following:

1. A leadership needs analysis for CoP facilitators in higher education.
2. Identification of the size and spread of CoPs and their facilitators.
3. Review of the CoP literature with a focus on CoP leadership.

4. Development of an understanding and articulation of the key leadership challenges for CoP facilitators.
5. Development of Australian higher education-specific support and resources for the enhancement of CoP facilitators' leadership capacity.

The resources that were developed relate specifically to a higher education teaching and learning context and represent the distilled knowledge gained throughout the project. In particular, gaps identified in the literature together with corroborating data have highlighted that context plays a significant part in understanding and interpreting the challenges that CoPs and facilitators are likely to encounter.

The resource development pathway has produced a number of contextual frames of reference that provide a basis for resource interpretation. The first frame involves identification of the types of CoP in which a facilitator may be involved as shown in Table 1. The frame is general in nature and suggests the types of CoPs—organic, nurtured / supported, and created / intentional—that are likely to be evident in Australian higher education and the dynamics that may apply in certain circumstances. As noted in the introduction to the resources (McDonald et al., 2012 [Which one—*Final report* or *Identifying...* ?]), organic CoPs tend to emerge as a result of collegial collaborations and represent a more “purist” view of CoPs and operate “under the radar” of external influences. They are not created as such, and they usually have a person who acts as a motivational force or leader, although the notion of “leader” is more dispersed. Nurtured / supported CoPs usually are triggered by one or two colleagues having a particular opportunity, interest, or issue to peruse and who gather a community of like-minded colleagues to share knowledge and practice. These CoPs may become “of interest” to institutional managers, so they may be encouraged to continue or to become more visible to enable the sharing of the knowledge created. This may involve new members, more regular meetings, funding for CoP activities, funding for community building, or funding to formalise and disseminate outcomes. Created / intentional CoPs are most likely to operate in anticipation of outcomes and be directly or indirectly linked with certain institutional objectives. Knowledge of internal and external influences and expectations that may exist means that these can be considered in CoP actions.

The second frame of reference aligns resources with the development phases through which a typical CoP progresses (see Figure 1). The skills and competencies that a facilitator may find useful can be different depending on the CoP's stage of development. For example, in early phases

Table 1
Types of CoPs in Australian Higher Education

<i>Type of CoP</i>	<i>Organic</i>	<i>Nurtured/Supported</i>	<i>Created/Intentional</i>
Structure	Bottom-up	Modified bottom-up	Top-down
Support level	Minimal	Subsidised	Provided
Membership	Voluntary	Voluntary / suggested	Encouraged
Themes	Discipline-related	Discipline or issue related	Guided issues and cross discipline
Agenda	Self-determined	Self-determined / -steered	Guided theme
Timing for outcomes	Self-determined	Self-determined and funding-related	Short-term rather than long-term

Figure 1
Phases of CoP Development



(phase 1 or 2), skills associated with embedding impacts and succession planning are not likely to figure highly in capability development needs. Construction of resources around phases of CoP development allows users to selectively engage with resources at a time suited to their own needs without the need for linear progression through phases. This adopts a “just in time” and “just for me” capability that recognises facilitators already may have a certain level of experience and may not wish to peruse and make use of all available resources.

The resources, which are available on the project website at www.cops.org.au/resources, are noted in Table 2 below. They include a detailed introduction statement that discusses leadership in the context of CoPs and the frames of reference noted in Table 1. Each resource provides a short, concentrated perspective of no more than a few pages and then directs users to other, more general resources that may not specifically relate to higher education.

Where particular skills and capabilities identified would benefit from a more detailed illustration, resources were augmented by video and audio clips to draw on the experience of project team members and interviewees and provide examples embedded in the Australian higher education context. The resources, thus, provide a mix of distilled explanatory material, links to other more broadly situated resources, and visual and audio examples from experienced CoP facilitators. **[I don't see a Table 3 reference.]**

Figure 2:
**Identifying CoP Leadership Needs
 for Development and Capacity Building:
 A Triangulated/Iterative Approach**



**The Team's Journey:
 From Collegial Interest in CoPs
 to Evolution as a CoP
 Focused on Developing CoP Facilitator Capacity**

Sharing the journey, as an additional dimension to the project, has allowed the project team members more fully to understand and appreciate collegial approaches to knowledge building and the multiplier effects of shared endeavours. This reflects the underlying logic associated with CoPs. Traditional CoP literature, as proposed by Wenger (1998) [**This date not listed in references.**] and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), suggests that CoP members interact in non-hierarchical ways that are collaborative and involve the sharing of domain, practice, and a sense of community. The team members that worked together on this project

individually and as coauthors have been active in the application and development of CoP theory and practice in higher education. Sharing personal knowledge, building an agenda for collaboration, and developing resources from the knowledge gained has been a productive, enjoyable, and satisfying experience.

Utilising a narrative inquiry perspective allowed the project members to consider the journey as a lived and learned experience. Hamilton et al. (2008) suggest that “[i]n narrative inquiry, the professional identity and knowledge of the researcher is revealed in the narratives and explored by those involved in the inquiry” (p. 19). These authors also suggest that

Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, offers researchers a way to think about and share experience. This methodology often appeals to teachers and teacher educators who share and learn from one another through exchanges about knowledge, skills, practices, and evolving understandings. (p. 19)

The following discussion represents a narrative of the journey, followed by independent evidence of collective achievement. It then concludes with perspectives about how this CoP in action has revitalised and affirmed the project members’ identities as academics from their particular backgrounds as part of the project team.

Background and Context

[There must be more than one heading at this second level in this section.]

Australian project team members McDonald and Star started working together in 2006 to establish a CoP for first-year core course leaders in the Faculty of Business at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) (McDonald & Star, 2008). This partnership to develop USQ CoPs continued with application and acquisition for institutional funding and the initiation of CoPs, first to the Faculty of Arts, then the Faculty of Sciences, which also started CoPs with a first-year learning and teaching focus.

In a parallel timeframe, Nagy and Burch were working on an institutional project at Deakin University [where?] to foster development of an across-institution faculty CoP. As part of their environmental scan, they considered the development of CoPs at USQ worthy of investigation. A site visit to USQ resulted in significant knowledge sharing and the development of a number of shared agendas, thus providing the foundation for the building of a collaborative relationship that has continued over the subsequent six years. The significance of personal contact and the

establishment of interpersonal relationships during informal interaction, usually with a lunch or dinner, should not be underestimated. This contact generated the feeling that “here is a kindred spirit who shares a passion for CoPs” (team member). The sharing of professional and personal information and the building of trust and friendship in informal settings, including personal residence and home university visits, provided a strong foundation for subsequent collegial activities.

Interest in expanding CoPs for different member cohorts or topic areas, and an opportunity to explore the implementation of a type of CoP, namely, Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) implemented by Cox (2006), led McDonald to undertake a USQ professional development visit to Miami University, USA, in 2009. This resulted in joint collaboration by McDonald and Cox around the implementation of CoPs and FLCs, which then evolved into the larger project team collaboration.

In 2010 McDonald was successfully in securing an ALTC Teaching Fellowship titled *Community, Domain, Practice: Facilitator’s Catch-Cry for Revitalising Learning and Teaching Through Communities of Practice* (McDonald, 2010 [It says 2010-12 in references.]). This Fellowship was focused on building CoP leadership capacity at the institutional level. As part of McDonald’s Fellowship, she and Cox collaborated to develop workshops in Australia, and Nagy and Star served as reference group members for the Fellowship. This collaboration built on existing collegial CoP activities and research, and the February 2011 Fellowship-funded workshops in Australia led by McDonald and Cox provided an opportunity for the Australian Fellowship reference group members to meet with Cox and establish the personal bond and knowledge of interests and opportunities to collaborate. This enabled the formation of an informal team of Burch, Cox, McDonald, Nagy, and Star that would later become the project team.

All of these team members were working with CoPs in Australia or FLCs in the U.S. The following factors motivated this team: informal dialogue via e-mail and ALTC Fellowship reference group meetings (Nagy, Star, and McDonald) around CoP leadership, the essential role this leadership played in establishing, maintaining, and sustaining CoPs, and the dearth of research and resources available for the academic CoP leadership role. The personal experience of these informal team members and a review of the literature made it clear that there was a lack of understanding about how higher education CoPs operate and the type of leadership required. Because this ALTC Teaching Fellowship was focused at the institutional level, the informal team members decided they would apply for a national Australian Learning and Teaching Council [You need to write this out the *first* time the abbreviation ALTC is used.] (ALTC)

Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program grant.

Once the informal team members established that they were committed to developing CoP leadership capacity at a national level and agreed to work together to support this initiative by seeking ALTC funding, the already established collegial friendships and knowledge of each other's strengths and interests allowed them to fast track project planning collaboration. Developing a national grant application is a major conceptual and time-consuming task. Team activities to design a CoP leadership program and develop the grant application took place over six months.

ALTC guidelines required the nomination of one lead institution and, traditionally, one project leader from that institution. The application process started with McDonald taking the initial leadership role, e-mailing application development timelines, circulating application drafts, and organising telephone conferences with Australian members. During this development process, Cox contributed from the U. S. via e-mail.

The CoP in Action

What started out as a traditional team project process, with one leader managing the process and delegating tasks, quickly morphed into a CoP approach—without members making a conscious decision to operate as a CoP. The audio recordings of the planning teleconferences reveal McDonald taking the role of organiser of the mechanics of the project management, but then taking a facilitator rather than traditional team leader role, with all participants contributing equally to the discussion and volunteering to take leadership roles in their areas of expertise. McDonald and Nagy already were working together on another national ALTC leadership project (see Nagy et al. [2011], *Coalface Subject Co-ordinators—The Missing Link to Building Leadership Capacities in the Academic Supply Chain*), and they brought to the group their experience with the ALTC leadership and fellowship grant applications and implementations. As noted previously, members had already established strong collegial relationships, and a joint passion for CoPs. This provided the foundation of trust and enthusiasm to work together to seek funding and then successfully complete this CoP leadership project.

The literature that explores community interactions and knowledge transfer (Gertner, Roberts, & Charles, 2011; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) identifies one of the more valuable aspects of CoPs as the interactions between members as they engage in their everyday practice. Brown and Duguid (2001 [1991 in references.]), in their review of organisational learning and CoPs, refer to this everyday practice as the “way work is

done” (p. 200), while this project team considered it a “CoP in action.” The “CoP in action” activities reported in this article are the ALTC grant application-writing process, where the CoP emerged, and then the actual implementation of the CoP leadership project. The CoP in action exhibited a complex range of interactions and activities. Some were structured, such as the project milestones of scheduled meetings, monthly telephone links, and weekly project e-mail updates. Others were more subtle, such as the knowledge generated through team interactions—for example, negotiating what it means to be a CoP facilitator, reflecting on data and literature, designing resources, and sharing tasks. Gertner et al. (2011) suggest that “knowledge exchange can be seen as a form of learning” (p. 626). The activities of this CoP demonstrated the process of knowledge exchange and the continuous learning cycle evident through the meetings, activities, outcomes, member reflections, and the formative and summative evaluations.

The type of activities of the “CoP in Action” are confirmed in the Wenger et al. (2002) description of communities of practice as

Groups of people who share a concern . . . and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. . . . (As they) **[Should these be brackets [] for words added or changed?]** accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. Over time . . . [t]hey become a community of practice. (pp. 4-5)

Evolution of the Team Process to a CoP in Action

Although the group started out like a traditional project team, the members’ inherent allegiance to the CoP and distributed leadership approach meant they were intuitively adopting a CoP approach from the start of the planning process. This process was captured in the audio recordings of the team teleconferences, where the early evolution of the CoP was revealed as members discussed project plans and shared tasks and leadership roles. The cycle of activity was less reflective of a hierarchical team approach and more illustrative of a collegiate learning process, or CoP. In fact, the team interaction and learning activities that evolved over the life of the project became a complex “social learning system,” a term Wenger (2012 **[2010?]**) uses to describe a CoP. Wenger says that a CoP arises out of learning and “exhibits many characteristics of systems more generally: emergent structure, complex relationships, self-organization, dynamic boundaries, and ongoing negotiation of identity” (p. 179). While the traditional notion of organic CoPs was that CoPs are self-managing

and have little or no structure (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger & Snyder, 2000), more recent studies, including this project, show that leadership, support, and organisation have a significant impact on the success of CoPs (Cox, 2006; McDermott & Archibald, 2010; McDonald et al., 2012 [**Which one?**]).

Members of this project team brought a range of expertise and knowledge, both in the theory and implementation of academic CoPs, FLCs, and ALTC grant processes. The evolving CoP involved each member, either self-nominating or being requested by other members who were knowledgeable about each other's strengths, to take leadership in their areas of expertise. For example, McDonald had applied for an ALTC Teaching Fellowship focused on institutional CoP leadership and was a team member of Nagy's ALTC leadership project, so she took a lead role in organising the application process. However, this lead role quickly became a shared role, as the overlapping time frames of multiple projects meant the distributed leadership model was likely to provide a better solution to project needs, and the team decided to work with McDonald and Star as co-project leaders.

During the first year of the project, while McDonald was working on the ALTC Fellowship, Star took the prime leadership role; McDonald took over leadership for the second year. As the project progressed, the leadership model became more flexible in order to accommodate time pressures and circumstance. Although these prime project lead roles had a one-year time-frame, each leader was strongly involved throughout as support leader and contributed as immediate consultant for the other leader, engaged in leadership and project tasks, and shared ongoing interaction with the project manager. Project leadership roles and all project activities were strongly supported by an experienced and extremely competent project manager, Margetts, who joined the team once the funding was awarded.

Reflection about the shared/distributed leadership suggests that the trust established by the team, supported by a foundation of efficient project management throughout the years of collaboration, was a key feature in allowing leadership to be passed around. Each face-to-face team meeting (of which there were five) was for two days and required members to fly to another state and created the opportunity for intense community building with co-located accommodation and mealtimes as a team. This meant that all were removed from their immediate work environment, thereby allowing their immersion and dedication to time on task. Wenger (1998; Wenger et al., 2002) has always emphasized the need for community time to build trust relationships, and that has been a strong feature of this collaboration. The distributed leadership fostered free-flowing

interaction and respect for the knowledge of team members as a feature of CoP activities. Project team interactions have included challenging each other's perspectives, sharing laughter about the need by some for visual diagrams as part of their differing learning/working styles, organising teleconferences and Skype communications around time zone challenges to ensure inclusive team discussions, and, above all, a sense of humour. Each member felt his or her ideas were valued, and there was a strong sense of a CoP in action, sharing knowledge and working toward project goals and outcomes. Jameson (2009) suggests that

humility, humour and "bottom up" practitioner empowerment can be stimulated through "relational intelligence" intentionally fostered by the leaders of such communities; it has also been found that creative willingness to share leadership tasks and responsibilities in a distributed-coordinated team model enables successful teamwork. (p. 226)

Wenger (1998) suggests that working together in social contexts involves a dual process of meaning making. This meaning is developed for members through joint participation, activities, and discussion, and meaning is created through physical and physical and conceptual artefacts, such as ideas, shared stories, and resources. In the CoP narrative told here, members were involved in both processes: engaging and participating in joint activities and creating a repertoire of shared stories, experiences, documents (surveys, reports, a project website), and a comprehensive range of resources. The team planned for and engaged an iterative, reflective, action learning approach, which provided structure for the two years of activities and outcomes at each of the seven project stages. The planned outcomes were achieved after a comprehensive literature review, survey and interviews, as depicted in Figure 2, as well as engagement with national and international members of the project stakeholder network.

As noted previously, the significance of personal contact and the establishment of interpersonal relationships during informal interaction, usually with food, should not be underestimated. This aspect of CoPs was well recognised by the CoP members, who built in community time for informal discussion and refreshments. These are an important aspect of Wenger's (1998) three elements—community, sharing practice, and building domain knowledge—of USQ's CoPs and Miami University's FLCs. The adaptation of Wenger's (1998) three elements provide an agenda structure for USQ CoP meetings (McDonald & Star, 2008). The three elements have provided a framework that has proved robust over six years across a number of USQ CoPs and is now being adopted by other Australian universities. The framework is available on the USQ CoP

Fellowship resources site (McDonald, 2012 [2010-12?]). Interviews with Miami University FLC facilitators in 2009 and USQ CoP facilitators in 2010 by McDonald revealed that the informal time and sharing of refreshments was an important and valued aspect of community building. For the CoP in action here, this aspect was recognised and factored into the twice yearly, face-to-face project meetings, as time for lunch and dinners. The project external evaluator and reference group members, who formed the wider CoP membership, also attended some of these informal sessions.

Typical of many longer-term projects in academe, academics move between jobs, take on new roles, and have personal factors that can impact team interactions and commitments. During the project, two team members moved to new roles in different states, one stepped back from being a director of a learning centre, and one had a baby. Such events can be destabilising and derail collaborative ventures. However, a measure of resilience and shared commitment generated by this CoP in action meant that these gaps were filled. Though tasks were done a little differently than originally intended or in a different timeframe, outcomes were still achieved smoothly.

External Evaluator Report and Stakeholder Feedback

It was a requirement of the ALTC project funding that an external project evaluator be appointed and, along with the reference and stakeholder group, provide feedback at designated stages of the project. Project updates were provided via e-mail updates and reports posted to the project website (www.cops.org.au). The external evaluator attended two face-to-face meetings, received e-mail updates on project activities and progress, and prepared evaluation questions that formed the basis of a telephone or Skype interview. A formal report was provided by the evaluator and was submitted to OLT as part of the required reporting process.

The evaluator noted that the project created a rich set of resources that met the identified need for Australian higher education CoP facilitators. Through the website, stakeholder network, conference workshops and international visits the team members also met people interested in CoPs, and provided them with a forum to share, gain support, and develop their thinking about CoPs and the role they play when facilitating or leading their CoPs. The draft resources were formatively evaluated at a workshop at a national conference and then by USQ CoP Facilitators. Based on this feedback, a revised version of the resources was made available on a closed site for stakeholder feedback. A survey was created to collect feedback on the draft resources, and data was collected using *SurveyMonkey*. The

feedback enabled a final revision of the resources before posting them to the project website at <www.cops.org.au/resources>. The evaluator's report noted that the project achieved such successful outcomes through the comprehensive and careful planning undertaken during the project proposal stage and the fact that the CoP in action was able to draw on previous CoP, FLC, and ALTC project experience.

The evaluator noted that a contribution to the project's success was the way the team and project leadership operated (McDonald et al., 2012 [Which one?]; see Appendix A in the final report (www.cops.org.au/resources):

The team brought to the project different skills along with a very strong interest and belief in the value of CoPs. There was joint leadership of the project. The project was structured to maximise the value of the two leaders' interests and expertise. In its design and allocation of responsibilities the different skill sets and styles of operation were taken into account. The project itself functioned in a manner very similar to a CoP. The team were open to feedback from each other, respectful of different voices and new findings. All members of the team contributed to elements of the project, taking responsibility for the sections of the work they had agreed to undertake. Despite some challenges all members contributed substantially to the project outcomes, ensuring at the end of the project the entire team were "proud" of the project outcomes.

A final report was submitted to the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching at the end of September 2012 and is available on the project website. Through the interviews and ongoing interaction with the CoP members, the evaluator also identified that what started out as a project team actually became a CoP in action.

Conclusions

This narrative is about the journey of a group of academics, passionate about CoPs, who implemented an Australian government-funded project that identified and developed resources for CoP facilitators. The group started out as project team, but it quickly evolved into a CoP in action. While the CoP approach to the project was not planned from the outset, independent formative and summative evaluation highlighted how, over the three years of the project, activities and outcomes clearly have benefitted from the approach. The CoP in action and distributed leadership approach profiled the strengths of each member and enabled

them to work collaboratively over the one-year planning and two-year implementation of the project. While from diverse backgrounds, these CoP members revitalised and affirmed their personal team member identities. They also created a sense of a CoP identity around their contributions to the capacity building of CoP facilitators and the leadership of academic CoPs.

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Acknowledgments

[We wish to thank?] The Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching; Emily Collins (Project Officer); Dr. Elizabeth McDonald (Evaluator); members of the project reference group: Professor Lynne Cohen, Professor Geoffrey Crisp, Emeritus Professor Adrian Lee, and Dr. Deborah Southwell; and stakeholder network members.

Jacquie McDonald (current project leader) leads the successful implementation of communities of practice at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), which was recognised by a 2009 AUQA commendation. Jacquie is a USQ Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, a member of the USQ Teaching Academy, a joint 2009 ALTC Citation winner, a 2010 ALTC Teaching Fellow and is co-project leader of an ALTC Leadership grant *Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education*. Her research areas are academic professional development and communities of practice. **Cassandra Star** (co-project leader) is Senior Lecturer in Public Policy at Flinders University, South Australia. The focus of Cassandra's research is how individuals and organisations work together to mobilise influence, the methods they use to do this and the impacts that they have as change agents. Her current work has focused on two arenas of change—climate change activism and academics in higher education. Associate Professor **Judy Nagy** is a Chartered Accountant and is the Deputy Director and Associate Dean Teaching and Learning for the University of South Australia, Centre for Regional Engagement, located at Mount Gambier. Judy has been project leader for two previous OLT/ALTC grants in the Leadership Program and is a National Teaching Excellence and Citation Award winner. In previous roles she was an educator within a metropolitan Business School specialising in Accounting, Corporate Governance and Ethics, and Financial Reporting, particularly in MBA studies. **Tony Burch** had a successful business career in senior managerial positions and took those experiences into a Graduate Business School at Deakin University as a lecturer and unit chair of a range of business programs. RMIT University also used his background to advantage as a member of a group of academics and industry leaders building a new undergraduate specific-industry-focused degree program. Tony also developed government funded research for that industry group concerning the future of the Australian Book Industry. Tony is now a higher education consultant. In a relatively short academic career he was well published in areas as diverse as the future of the book, teaching and learning in online environments, and communities of practice. **Milton D. Cox** is Director Emeritus of the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA, where he founded and

*directs the Lilly International Conference on College Teaching, now in its 32nd year. He is also founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Journal on Excellence in College Teaching and the Learning Communities Journal. He facilitates the Hesburgh Award-winning Teaching Scholars Faculty Learning Community, now in its 33rd year. Milt has been project director of state and federal grants establishing faculty learning community programs at other institutions. He has worked with over 75 institutions to develop faculty learning communities, including the US Central Intelligence Agency, the California State University System, and American University of Beirut. Milt's research interests include faculty learning communities as communities of practice, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and educational development. He has won several awards for his contributions in these areas and has authored many publications. **Fiona Margetts** is an experienced project manager at the University of Southern Queensland, the lead organization for the project that is the subject of this article. Fiona has extensive experience working in the higher education environment and has contributed to projects across the learning and teaching, research and corporate sectors. Fiona's research interests lie in the challenges of managing higher education projects and the project in question benefitted from the use of it as a case study undertaken in the conduct of her master's degree in Project Management.*



