Designing the future of learning through a community of practice of teachers of first year courses at an Australian university

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This paper argues that the future of learning, and the facilitation of quality teaching within that future, face significant challenge within the current Australian higher education context. A Community of Practice (CoP) approach to meeting the individual, institutional and societal demands on university teaching and learning provides the opportunity to meet these challenges, while supporting teachers and recognising their existing knowledge and expertise in designing the future of learning. CoPs provide a context for sustained professional conversations around identified domain and practice issues. They provide valuable professional support for academics who are increasingly overwhelmed by continuous change, excessive workloads and research output demands. The practice of CoPs generates a range of artefacts that embody jointly constructed knowledge objects, which can then be integrated into the Learning Activity Management System (LAMS). Ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of a CoP within higher education requires the recognition and alleviation of academic time poverty, the provision of appropriate institutional and financial support, and the ability to provide valuable and measurable outcomes from the community.

Keywords: community of practice, professional development, first year course teachers, higher education, LAMS

Introduction

This paper outlines the conceptualisation and establishment of a community of practice for teachers of first year core courses at an Australian university. There are two main reasons why this project is relevant to the conference theme. Firstly, university teachers face many challenges as they design learning environments and experiences for first year students. The community of practice described in the paper is one way of supporting teachers as they design the future of learning. Indeed, communities of practice are an effective design for the future of learning. Secondly, the community will generate a range of learning and teaching strategies and objects that can be effectively integrated into the Learning Activity Management System

(Phillip and Dalziel, 2004). The paper presents a brief overview of communities of practice and outlines opportunities and challenges facing such communities in tertiary education. This will provide the background for the discussion of the conceptualisation and establishment of a community of practice for teachers of first year courses at an Australian university. The opportunities and challenges facing the community will be articulated, along with practical examples of community of practice start-up actions.

Overview of communities of practice

The term "communities of practice" emerged from Lave and Wenger's (1991) study that explored learning in the apprenticeship model, where practice in the community enabled the apprentice to move from peripheral to full participation in the community activities. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) describe communities of practice 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. . . . (As they) accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice (pp. 4-5).

Communities of practice (CoPs) take a variety of forms depending on their context, however they all share a basic structure. Wenger (1998) says that a community of practice is a unique combination of three fundamental elements. These elements are a *domain* of knowledge that creates a common ground and sense of common identity, a *community* of people who care about the domain and create the social fabric of learning, and a shared *practice* that the community develops to be effective in its domain.

Communities of practice in tertiary education: opportunities and challenges

While formal communities of practice are a relatively new in higher education, they are well established in the Australian Vocational Educational and Training (VET) sector (Mitchell, 2003; Mitchell, 2006) and also in industry as a means of facilitating the growth and implementation of new knowledge. In industry knowledge management emerged in the mid-1990s as a way to deal with the explosion of information and climate of continuous change (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004). However, many knowledge management strategies have proved ineffective, for example, complex databases became digital graveyards of unused information. Hildreth and Kimble (2004) argue that there has been recognition of the importance of more subtle, tacit types of knowledge that needs to be shared, and CoPs have been identified as being a group where such types of knowledge are nurtured, shared and sustained. Tacit knowledge is highly personal, and is understood without being articulated. It is hard to formalise and therefore difficult to communicate to others as it is unvoiced or unspoken. Lave and Wenger (1991) and Vygotsky (1978) have identified the acquisition of knowledge as a social process, and communities of practice, as outlined in this study, provide the opportunity to share and articulate tacit knowledge, and subsequently capture that knowledge in an environment such as the Learning Activity Management System (LAMS).

Communities of practice are different from traditional organisations and learning situations, such as task forces or project teams. While a team starts with an assigned task, usually instigated and directed by an "authority" figure, a CoP does not have a formal structure or assigned task, so the focus may emerge from negotiation, and there is continual potential for new direction. Communities of practice encourage active participation and collaborative decision-making by individuals, as opposed to separated decision-making that is present in traditional organisations (Johnson, 2001). Members can assume different roles and hierarchical, authoritarian management is replaced by self-management and ownership of work (Collier & Esteban, 1999). Members usually have different levels of expertise and there is a fluid movement from the

peripheral to the core of the community that symbolises the progression from being a novice to an expert; what Wenger terms a "learning trajectory". The learning that evolves from these communities is shared, in that the collaborative knowledge of the community is greater than any individual knowledge. The community focuses on completely authentic tasks and activities that include aspects of constructivism, such as addressing ill-structured problems, facilitation, collaborative learning, and negotiated goals (Johnson, 2001).

Communities of practice are an important strategy for the implementation of the VET national training system and substantial resources were committed to funding 16 pilot communities in 2001, then 48 communities involving over 2,323 participants from around Australia in 2003 (Mitchell, 2003; Mitchell, 2006). A total of over one hundred communities of practice have been seed-funded since 2001. Evaluation showed that in the VET sector CoPs were embraced by VET providers as they provided a means to increase social capital and they also enabled practitioners to extend and cultivate their relationships with peers, industry and other stakeholders in VET (Mitchell, 2003). The success of CoPs in the VET has not led to widespread adoption of CoPs in Australian institutions of higher education. There are some examples mentioned, such as a reference to resources provided for communities of practice in learning and teaching by the flexible support and development network at the University of New South Wales, and the call for CoPs to support transnational educators (Dunn & Wallace, 2005). There is considerable research into online learning communities (Barab, Kling & Gray, 2004), however an online search into CoPs in Australian higher education found little evidence of reported CoPs. The reasons for slow take up of CoPs in higher education are an area for research that is outside the scope of this paper; however it may be influenced by the emerging corporate and competitive nature of higher education. Another possible reason is the traditional concept of "academic freedom" and the competitive promotion system that pervades higher education, and fosters a private and individual approach to academic teaching, rather than a collaborative, community approach.

Opportunities for communities of practice in higher education

Higher education is facing many challenges, including a changing student cohort, e-education and continuous change with the application of technology. CoPs provide an environment that fosters collaborative learning and an opportunity for mutual support for university educators who are facing a range of similar professional challenges. CoPs consist of three structural elements; domain of knowledge, community and practice. They are described by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), who say:

- a *domain of knowledge* creates common ground and a sense of common knowledge in the community. A well-defined domain legitimizes the community by affirming its purposes and value to members and other stakeholders. The domain inspires members to contribute and participate, guides their learning and gives meaning to their actions. Knowing the boundaries and the leading edge of the domain enables members to decide exactly what is worth sharing, how to present their ideas, and which activities to pursue.
- a *community* creates the social fabric of learning. A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It encourages a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions and listen carefully. Community is an important element because learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process, involving the heart as well as the head.
- the *practice* is a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories and documents that community members share. Whereas the domain denotes the topic the community focuses on, the practice is the specific knowledge the community develops, shares and maintains. When a community has been established for some time, members expect each other to have mastered the basic knowledge of the community. This body of shared knowledge and resources enables the community to proceed efficiently in dealing with its domain (Wenger et al, 2002, pp.27-29).

Higher education already has very successful models of communities of practice in the research. Laurillard (2006) suggests these research communities foster an excellent model for innovation and progression through a cybernetic/adaptive model of change. The academic research community has a process that

supports the creation and development of knowledge, and that is so effective that its basic characteristics are common to all disciplines. This research model provides an excellent model for creating communities of practice for the design of learning.

Wenger et al. (2002) suggest that the element of community is crucial to developing a social learning system and an effective knowledge structure within the community. Wenger et al. (2002) define a community as "a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" (p.34). CoPs provide a context for sustained professional conversations around identified domain and practice issues. Creating such an opportunity provides valuable professional support for academics who are increasingly overwhelmed by workload and research output demands. The lack of time academics have to devote to community activities is one of the issues raised in the following discussion of challenges for CoPs.

A community of practice provides an opportunity for members to continually engage in learning about their practice. Discourse about shared practice provides the conceptual foundation for the generation of community artifacts. Examples of such artifacts in higher education could include embedding graduate attributes in assessment strategies, tutorial procedures, or language support activities for international students. If these were captured within the LAMS environment, they could be easily shared with other academics. Community practices are histories of mutual engagement, negotiation of an enterprise and development of a shared repertoire (Wenger 1998). The shared repertoire is of particular interest for the LAMS initiative, as producing and adopting tools and artifacts, and the shared discourse surrounding that process could be captured as re-usable learning activities. For this reason, the LAMS initiative is seen as a valuable addition to the facilitation of the CoP's future activities. The following section will reflect on the challenges of implementing CoPs in Australian higher education.

Challenges for communities of practice in Australian higher education

Australian higher education is operating with an environment of significant change and academics are challenged to cope with, and benefit from, the changes to design for the future of learning. This changing environment is the result of a number of influences: the application of technology, greater emphasis on lifelong learning, the advent of the information age and globalisation. In addition, changing student cohorts make demands on universities for greater flexibility in the way they access programs and services (Laurillard, 2002). More recently Laurillard (2006) suggests that the range and scale of possible applications of new technologies in higher education is almost beyond imagining because, as while we try to cope with what is possible now, a new technological application extends those possibilities even further. A case study of the impact of transnational teaching on staff at an Australian University found that the nature of academic work has changed significantly. These include "tasks, technologies, accountability and regulatory compliance that have changed the nature of academic work (including) the management of courses over multiple sites" (Tickle, Clayton & Hawkins, 2003, p.76). The traditional undergraduate student population that came to university straight from secondary school is now changing as international students are recruited and mature aged learners access further study while they continue to work. Employers expect that students will graduate into a "knowledge society' with more than a bundle of soon to be outdated "discipline specific" information. This has led to an increased focus on generic graduate attributes such as communication and interpersonal skills and critical thinking. In order to prepare students to operate effectively in a knowledge society, the role of the teacher changes from information dispenser to that of a designer and facilitator of a learning environment that enables learners to critically construct knowledge and develop life long learning skills. Designing for the future of learning requires a creative blend of teacher skills, discipline knowledge and knowledge of how to implement graduate attributes. To build and sustain these skills universities must provide substantive, rather than tokenistic, institutional backing for staff tasked with skills-based research, curriculum development and teaching. Elton (1999) suggests that "new ways of learning … require new forms of institutional management" (p. 219) and in his analysis of strategies for innovation and change in higher education he draws a distinction between hierarchical (top-down) and cybernetic (bottom-up) models of governance. It is suggested that a balance between the two models will enable innovation to be embraced within a model of change management.

Laurillard (2006) argues that if universities are to rethink their methods of teaching, they need a management structure that is capable of supporting innovation. Elton (1999) suggests that:

> The process of change must be initiated from both 'bottom up' and 'top down', with the bottom having the knowledge and the top the power… The top must use its power, not overtly and directly, but to facilitate the work from the bottom and to provide conditions under which it can prosper (p. 215).

CoPs could provide the bottom up impetus for effective change management and professional development. Support for a bottom up approach requires a champion and/or sponsor. A champion is a senior manager who strongly believes that CoPs should be a primary mechanism for managing knowledge in the organisation, and aggressively provides guidance, funds, visibility and legitimacy to clear the way for CoPs to thrive and achieve results. A sponsor is less passionate, but willing to provide funding and some level of support and legitimacy for the community. (Wenger, 1998). The Australian government initiative to lift the profile of learning and teaching has provided opportunities to competitively apply for funding to support learning and teaching initiatives (DEST, 2003). These funds are especially targeted at cross-institutional initiatives so it will be interesting to see if professional learning communities are developed and sustained by DEST projects. Universities must also engage in staff development processes that enable university teachers to engage confidently with, and contribute to, skills-based pedagogy in higher education.

Communities of practice provide an opportunity for academics to focus on shared interests and develop practice expertise through the life cycle of the community. Communities evolve through a developmental cycle of creation, growth and decline.
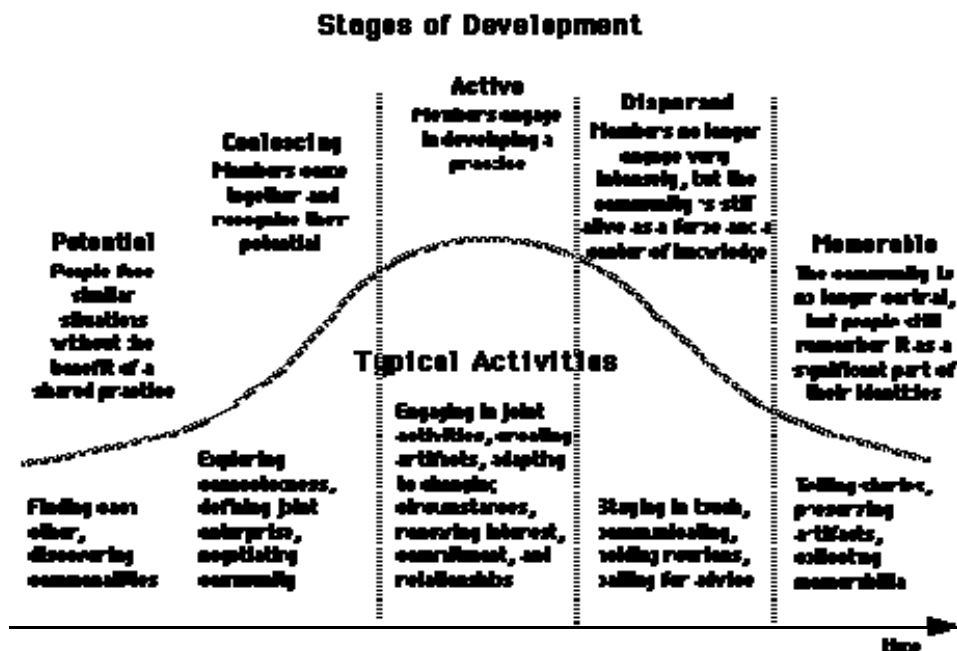

Figure 1: Community of practice stages of development (Adapted from Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice.* Boston Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, p. 69)

Communities may evolve naturally from a network of people dealing with an important topic or concern, and at each stage they are faced with different challenges. Wenger et al. (2002) suggest that community development is rarely smooth, and frequently involves "painful discoveries, difficult transitions, and learning through hard-won experience" (p. 69). Each stage requires members to interact or contribute to the community, and stewardship or convener roles can be complex and demanding. Finding academics who have the knowledge and commitment, and are well placed to foster the CoP is a challenge. The core

members of the community, or community convener, need to be aware of the difference stages a community may exhibit and design elements that provide catalysts for the communities natural evolution. Based on experience Wenger et al. (2002) articulate seven principles to guide CoPs:

1. design for evolution
2. open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives
3. invite different levels of participation
4. develop both public and private community spaces
5. focus on value
6. combine familiarity and excitement
7. create a rhythm for the community (p. 51).

These principles assume a high degree of knowledge about implementing and nurturing CoPs, which is unlikely to exist in most institutions of higher education. Finding institutional commitment and resources to build or import this expertise is a challenge facing academics keen to start communities of practice. Unless there is a top-down commitment to supporting the establishment of CoPs, the reality is that "time-poor" academics will be unable to commit the time required to sustain CoPs. Goodyear (2005) noted that academics had a strong sense of being "time-poor". This is supported by a recent study by Forgasz and Leder (2006) who reported that Australian academics were clocking up to 55-hour working weeks. The study monitored the working lives of 22 university academics from two multi campus universities in Australia and found that academics worked with intolerably high teaching loads, more stress and less time for research, as they struggled to adjust to life in the new corporate university. Time pressure is a constant issue in Australian higher education, so communities need to demonstrate how they will add value or inform the practice of members. Identifying key domain issues that members feel passionate about, and that align with key organisational issues is another challenge. Wenger et al. (2002) suggest that a common mistake in community design is the focus on public activities. The community coordinator needs to maintain community cohesion by privately contacting non participating members, checking on unexpected technical problems and providing a private as well as public presence. These informal "back channel" discussions (Wenger et al, 2002, p. 58) help orchestrate the public activities and build a strong sense of belonging to a community. Institutional support for time to facilitate CoP activities is one of the challenges articulated in more detail in the discussion of the challenges facing the CoP for first year core course teachers.

The traditional culture of "academic freedom" and the private, individual nature of teaching that happens behind the closed doors of lecture theatre, tutorial room and assessment process, challenge the cultivation of CoPs in higher education. Promotion and academic recognition is traditionally based on research, not teaching, and where teaching is an element of promotion, it is based on individual teaching activities. While the Australian Government has recognised that the rhetoric about the importance of learning and teaching should be supported by policy and funding, (DEST, 2003), recognition and reward of community activities are yet to be factored into the promotion process. The problems facing academics implementing, assessing and rewarding student group learning activities are mirrored in the lack of processes to formally recognise and reward academic community contributions. The majority of CoP literature to date substantially draws on industry practice, so further research is required to investigate the application of existing principles (Wenger et al., 2002) in higher education.

Within the community there is a challenge to establish an environment of trust, where members feel safe to experiment and take risks as a natural part of the learning process. Johnson (2001) cites a case study by Edmondson (1999) with 51 work teams at a manufacturing company, with which detailed statistical analyses were performed. Edmondson found that in a trusting environment, learning took place through corrective, rather than negative, judgemental action. This resulted in members' willingness to take more risks, for example, outside consulting to non-team members or soliciting outside help. In an environment of trust, there was continual change and experimentation. However, creating a climate of openness and trust is another challenge to be met in order to build a community that can share both the triumphs and challenges of teaching in higher education. CoPs are promoted in the literature as a means of growing both individual and community knowledge, and promise to be effective in support academics as they deal with the challenge of designing learning for the 21st century (Wenger et al, 2002; Dunn & Wallace, 2005). The

following section will present the discussion of the conceptualisation and establishment stages of a community of practice for teachers of first year courses at an Australian university.

An Australian University community of practice for teachers of first year courses

The idea for a community of practice for teachers of first year courses emerged from a joint initiative by the two authors to redesign a first year undergraduate course. The course redesign was based on the recognition that the first year experience can be difficult for many first year students as they are meeting the peculiar characteristic of academic knowledge for the first time when they commence university, therefore the design of specific learning activities were required to support learners. Evaluation of past course offers showed that students are also struggling to come to terms with academic expectations in their first year of university study. For example, the influence of constructivism has seen a radical transformation of the expected roles of learners and teachers. The constructivist approach is based on the concepts of active, collaborative and learning centred activities, and the situated construction of knowledge that relates to authentic or practice based situations (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005). The traditional view that learning was a process of transmitting information from the teacher (expert) to learner (novice) has been replaced 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. This approach needs to be communicated to, and scaffolded for, students, who often arrive at university with expectations of a traditional, transmission approach to learning and teaching.

The authors worked collaboratively to redesign an existing undergraduate business course to embed graduate attributes, scaffold constructivist learning activities and address student retention and progression issues. The authors debated strategies of sharing and evaluating the planned learning design with other first year course teacher. LAMs was identified as a practical solution to sharing learning objects, and futher investigation of the process and academic acceptance of "yet another technology" is under way. The authors envisaged a CoP where teachers could share positive experiences (domain knowledge and practice)and "war stories" about their practice and build generic learning resources using LAMs . Based on the belief that change can effectively implemented if grounded in practice, and an interest in communities of practice, they submitted a funding application to support a community of practice for teachers of first year courses.

Community opportunities for designing for the future of learning

Discussions with Faculty of Business first year course leaders identified concerns about establishing the expectations of how both teachers and students are to behave when undertaking academic study at USQ. Some of these concerns relate to cultural issues with international students and some with changing student cohorts, as university study is increasingly available to a diverse range of students, not just the academic and/or economic elite. These issues are addressed by Biggs (1999) who argues that academics need to address the needs of all students, not just the traditional "academic elite" who would probably succeed at university with little academic support. Communities of practice enable academics to develop knowledge and skills to meet the increasing demands placed on them by a climate of continuous change. They support professional development and provide a vehicle for sharing and implementing innovative teaching practice.

The CoP for teachers of core first year courses is an innovative and exploratory initiative and provides an opportunity to apply the existing model of academic research communities identified by Laurillard (2006) to add value to the domain and practice of the community. Community member collaboration will foster the sharing of multiple perspectives and contextualisation of knowledge within the practice of first year teaching. The dissemination of learning activities could be through the LAMS environment and joint publications would value add for members. This process would lead to a blurring the traditional and undesirable separation of teaching and research. CoPs provide an opportunity for academics to focus on shared interests and through the life of the community build their domain of knowledge and support the

professional development of members. Dunn and Wallace (2005) found that while universities are beginning to introduce formal induction and development programs, their research showed that most respondents were not aware of anything offered by their institution and had learnt about transnational teaching from their own experience and from their colleagues. While the research showed that some academics had formed networks based around their own school, faculty or institution, Dunn and Wallace (2005) argue that "concerns about the quality of transnational programs could be alleviated by the development and support of broader, more inclusive professional communities of practice than the narrow networks that currently exist" (p. 3).

One of the authors had used a community of practice with academics to inform the learning design for the use of technology in hybrid course design and the approach was supported by positive feedback from participants in their evaluation of the CoP (McDonald & Mayes, in press). The author had a keen interest in CoPs, having attended a VET CoP workshop and participated in the "Foundations of Communities of Practice" workshop (http://www.cpsquare.org/edu/foundations) and is a member of CPSquare (http://www.cpsquare.org/) an international group of people involved in communities of practice across a range of professionals. This domain of knowledge about CoPs informed the funding application and planning for the establishment of the CoP. Time was spent introducing the CoP idea to senior management and champions, who subsequently provided financial and practical support for the CoP. For example the Dean's role as CoP supporter and champion included initial funding, workload allocation for participants and endorsement and sign off on the invitation to participate in the CoP. Established contacts with CPSquare members meant that an experienced CoP facilitator was contracted to facilitate the initial CoP workshop.

In order to deal with the "time poor" issues raised in the literature and by participants, the CoP will address concerns that are identified by members, and therefore of value and relevance, rather than being an external imposition, on members time. Historically academics have tended to focus their research and scholarship within their discipline domain, (accounting, economics, engineering, education etc), however the CoP will provide a common domain focused on first year courses and build expertise and sense of common identity. The CoP has the potential to support a context for learning that will serve the needs of both the members and the broader institutional learning goals. However building CoPs in the service of learning is a major accomplishment about which we have much to learn (Barab, Kling & Gray, 2004).

Challenges facing the community

There are five key challenges in the formation and sustainability of a CoP for core first year teachers in an Australian higher education setting. The ones discussed here include the need for financial support to provide infrastructure and administrative support, overcoming academic time poverty and the institutional demands on these academics, the need for a well placed institution champion(s), the difficulty of identifying and quantifying outcomes from the CoP, and the question of sustainability and ongoing support.

New initiatives in any organisational setting have a number of startup costs that may include time, infrastructure, staffing and other financial support. Communities of practice are no exception to this, and within higher education they require monetary startup, technological support for web-enabled communication and documentation, and the time and commitment of the participants. For the startup of the Faculty of Business CoP at USQ, we applied for teaching and learning funding from a Faculty internal source. This initial funding request was based on our recognition that building and fostering a CoP would require a significant commitment of not only tangible resources, but also of time. While considered an excellent project, our initial application was rejected. The feedback on this application highlighted for us an enduring and difficult tension between projects that are teaching *research* projects, and those that are teaching *outcomes* projects. While outcomes projects based in practice are designed around, and require, a time commitment of the direct participants, teaching research projects can often be carried out removed from the practice of participants by research and/or administrative assistants using standard research tools such as surveys or interviews, and other data. Projects not based directly in practice provide the opportunity to by-pass several of the challenges of CoP processes by being able to purchase or buy in researchers rather than relying on participants. CoPs however, must face a significant challenge in this area, especially given

the time poverty felt by academics, discussed further below. We argue, as have others, that a substantial commitment of funds is necessary to provide support for the project leaders and the first year core course leaders for their effective participation. A similar project in the United Kingdom noted that without a funding grant it was unlikely that the pedagogic research project would be undertaken because of other work pressures (Macmillan & McLean, 2005). Academic/research and administrative support is thus required to guide and evaluate the creation of a CoP, the online communities, and the shared learning materials. This process involves consulting and working with other university staff who have committed their expertise to design and develop learning resources, preparing the activities for LAMS and the Faculty intranet, and building and sustaining a collaborative community of practice. To ground this in the practice of participants, time is a critical but limited resource.

In the feedback on our initial funding application, a number of issues were raised in relation to a standing policy not to buy out the time of the Faculty-based facilitator of the project. Chief among these was the objections that if someone was to be paid to establish and facilitate the CoP initiative, why would this person be a Faculty-based academic rather than an expert in the area? We believe that this gets to the heart of a significant tension for CoPs – there is a widespread lack of recognition of the knowledge and expertise of first year core course leaders within their contexts. This leads to the tendency to direct and govern them from above, and to "expert" them from outside their context, rather than drawing on and supporting their expertise. In this case, the result of a failure to reconcile this tension leads to a shortage of appropriate support for CoPs and their participants in a higher education context where there is a lack of recognition of the importance of basing initiatives in practice.

The second major challenge for CoPs relates to individual academics and the institutional demands placed upon them. Studies of the work lives of Australian academics have confirmed what many have long suspected – we work long hours, face significant stress, and have a general time poverty perspective on our professional lives (Forgasz & Leder, 2006; Anderson et al., 2002; McInnes, 2000). For first year core course leaders, these concerns and the demands upon them are magnified. First year core course leaders are at the frontline of university teaching, along with their teaching teams (for example see: Krause et al., 2005; McInnes & James, 1995; Pitkethley & Prosser, 2001). At USQ, a core course leader in the Faculty of Business may coordinate more than one transnational course offering of over 1200 students a year, across three semesters, as well as contending with other professional demands and commitments outside the realm of teaching. This situation is not outside the norm for other Australian universities. Also, by virtue of being a first year core course leader there are a range of particular challenges that lead to time pressure issues, including facilitating student transition to higher education, attending student orientation events, special information and briefing sessions, and first year courses are frequently the target of new initiatives regarding the student experience. For example, USQ (and many other Australian universities) have current initiatives related to student engagement, retention and progression (USQ, 2005). First year core courses have been identified as a key target in these plans. While this is an appropriate focus of these initiatives, without appropriate additional support for first year core course leaders, these are simply extra demands placed on already over-burdened staff from institutional structures that fail to recognise their teaching knowledge and expertise. The result of this time poverty, the escalation of institutional requirements, and the need to meet other important professional commitments including research and service, is that course leaders are very reluctant to make commitments to other new initiatives or projects, especially where there is limited support available in terms of time buy-out or administrative support for community activities. With competing demands on their time, academics are also most likely to refuse those demands or initiatives that are seen as non-required or negotiable in favour of those mandated or demanded institutionally.

In an attempt to meet these challenges within our CoP, we saw the CoP literature's identification of the importance of a champion (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) as vitally important. The identification and recruitment of strategic champions for the project met the need of providing key institutional support for the initiative while still retaining the focus of being grounded in practice. To achieve this, we chose two key institutional figures – the current Dean of the Faculty, and the former Dean who had recently taken up a University level position as Dean of Students. Both champions had discussions with the project team about the initiative, about the substantive support required, and took key roles in launching the CoP activities, including personal letters from the Dean to first year core course leaders inviting them to attend

the initial workshop. Our experience has shown the importance of champions, but also the challenges that exist without having clear champions on board for an initiative that represents a significant change to current practice.

The previous challenges discussed relate to the short-term establishment and facilitation of the CoP, but there are also two important longer term questions that we see as challenges. The first of these questions is in relation to the outcomes and success of the CoP. Initiatives based in the practice of a group of first year core course leaders presents some epistemological and logistical difficulties for identifying, measuring and evaluating outcomes. While the CoP has a specific focus of improving the quality of learning and teaching, and addressing university strategic goals regarding student retention and progression, it will be difficult to establish how changes in individual courses lead to changes in these areas. It is also problematic to assume that any change in an individual course or course leaders' performance on student evaluations might be related to the CoP. There are also well known reservations about linking teaching quality to student evaluations (for example see: Shevlin et al., 2000; Emery et al, 2003; Felton et al, 2004; Anderson & Miller, 1997). This presents a significant challenge for the CoP as ongoing funding and institutional support of any project relies on showing the specific, measurable outcomes that arise from it.

This raises the final significant challenge for the CoP, that of sustainability. The challenge of any new initiative is not just based around emergence, beginning and facilitation, but also about how to ensure an ongoing, meaningful, productive presence. In this case, sustainability will rely heavily on the ability of the CoP and the CoP facilitators in overcoming the first four challenges outlined above – securing and maintaining financial and institutional support, being able to offer participants support and expertise valued enough to ensure a commitment of their time, facilitating the ongoing support of key institutional champions, and providing clear, measurable progress towards strategic university goals. In addition to this, to ensure sustainability, the CoP will also need to prove its value to the participants, and maintain a key awareness of the importance of meeting their needs, while recognising their existing expertise.

Conclusion

As Australia strives toward the knowledge society and we embrace the massification of higher education, there is an urgent need to engage teachers in meaningful professional development and reflective practice to tease out what it means to be a teacher in the new millennium, how a learner is defined and what learning environments support these defined roles. The changed teacher role requires "a consequential shift from the person culture typified by the academic freedom and lecture autonomy, to a role culture" (McDonald & Postle, 1999, p. 10). This imperative is further emphasised as universities respond to the challenges of current higher education policies through a renewed interest in quality teaching and the improvement of the student experience.

A community of practice approach to the challenges that this shift presents for first year core course leaders raises both opportunities and challenges. Basing teaching and learning initiatives in the practice of first year core course leaders offers important recognition of the expertise that lecturers already have, as well as providing valued peer support to address joint challenges. However, there are significant challenges to be faced within an institutional framework that emphasises teaching research projects with clear, measurable, quantifiable outcomes towards clearly delineated goals or measures. Among these challenges, time arises as a significant factor, in particular the time to participate in meaningful ways. If CoPs, and the work they do, is to be valued in higher education, current attitudes to time release for community activities, time buy outs for participants and facilitators, and recognition of time required for peer support are needed. How this is best addressed within the current context of higher education in Australia is still to be identified, but it suggests a role for fellowships and secondments to allow academics and support staff to spent time explicitly focused on quality teaching and learning projects. However, until current reward structures within higher education recognise and celebrate leadership and innovation in teaching and learning, this problem is likely to remain. Defining what a community is, how to design for effective CoPs, investigating what is unique about CoPs in higher education, and systematically researching to inform our understanding of the dynamics of CoPs are all challenges facing academics designing the future of learning through CoPs.

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