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Community learning: Members' stories about their academic community of practice

Dr Jacquelin McDonald

Learning and Teaching Support Unit, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
mcdonalj@usq.edu.au

Pauline Collins

Faculty of Business, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
collins@usq.edu.au

Ray Hingst

Faculty of Business, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
hingst@usq.edu.au

Lindy Kimmins

Learning and Teaching Support Unit, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
kimmins@usq.edu.au

Bernadette Lynch

Faculty of Business, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
lynch@usq.edu.au

Dr Cassandra Star

Faculty of Business and Centre for Sustainable Catchments, USQ, Toowoomba, Australia
star@usq.edu.au

Communities of practice (CoPs) are generally endorsed in higher education, but there are few examples of successful communities within the Australian higher education context. This paper articulates the experiences of members of a Faculty community of practice as they share their stories about collegial support, fellowship, inspiration, problem-solving, essential administrative backing and cheese! The stories reflect the response of a group of academics to the development of a community of practice around learning and teaching within the business faculty of a small, regional Australian university with a diverse student cohort of domestic and international on-campus and external students. We argue that CoPs provide a number of key professional supports for academic staff: real communication and ongoing dialogue across institutional barriers; a sense of trust required to open up a safe place to share common challenges and enable social learning; support and professional development for course leaders; and a model of strategic thinking and strategic action in a changing institutional environment.

Keywords: community of practice model, higher education, story telling.

Introduction

This paper outlines the story of an existing, successful, community of practice (CoP) established within the Faculty of Business at an Australian regional university. Despite the embrace of CoPs as something that could work in higher education (e.g. Cox 2006; Lea 2005), something that serves as vehicle or methodology for establishing other goals in higher education (e.g. Dunn and Wallace 2005; Price 2005; Henderson 2007), or as a theoretical framework that explains some professional activities around learning and teaching in higher education (e.g. Brooks and Fyffe 2004; Viskovic 2006), CoPs remain under-utilised and under-explored in higher education in Australia. This paper draws upon the experiences of a group of Australian academics teaching first year core courses in a dual-mode university. Their CoP – focussed on teaching and learning in the first year student experience – has been running successfully for over two years.

The experience of CoP members is explored using storytelling to portray their journey. We argue, based on the experiences of the CoP members, that CoPs are valuable additions to the professional life and professional spaces of academics. These spaces provide a number of key supports for academic staff: real communication and ongoing dialogue across institutional barriers; a sense of trust required to open up a safe place to share common challenges and enable social learning; support and professional development; and a model of strategic thinking and strategic action.

What is a community of practice?

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).

CoPs take a variety of forms depending on their context; however, they all share a basic structure. Wenger (1998) says that a CoP 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. In this case study the *domain* of knowledge and *practice* is learning and teaching first year business courses, and the community consists of core course leaders and the two convenors: a core course leader and a learning and teaching designer.

The Faculty of Business Community of Practice

CoPs specifically grow, or are fostered, to provide a shared space around shared concerns – in this case, the teaching and learning of first year core course leaders in a Faculty of Business. Individual members of CoPs face shared challenges provided by their student cohorts (Sharrock, 2000; Biggs 2003), their institutional context, and the challenges facing the wider higher education sector (Harman 2004; Schapper & Mayson 2004; Marginson & Considine 2000). These shared challenges provide the basis for a common understanding between members, which in our case has been further strengthened by the collaborative identification of priority issues to be addressed by the group. Establishing and nurturing a shared sense of identity provides the missing element in maintaining institutional memory and sharing of teaching and learning practices. It also provides a safe place for reflection and experimentation on teaching and learning for individual staff members. A CoP approach to teaching and learning in higher education provides a space for staff to collaboratively reflect, review and regenerate their current teaching and learning practices.

The first year student experience is widely acknowledged (Krause et al, 2005; McInnis & James 1995; Pitkethley & Prosser 2001) as critical to student progression and retention. This CoP emerged as a deliberate attempt by two of the authors (McDonald and Star), to improve the quality of teaching life and student learning by first-year, undergraduate lecturers through a process of sharing experiences, teaching practice and concomitant lessons learned.

Storytelling from our community of practice experiences

Bateson (2001, p. 34), a well known anthropologist, argues that, “storytelling is fundamental to the human search for meaning” and is a common activity in our daily lives. Storytelling is increasingly used in business as an effective way of communicating a new idea to a skeptical audience. Denning (2005, p. 2) suggests that, “an appropriately told story had the power to do what rigorous analysis couldn’t – to communicate a strange new idea easily and naturally and quickly get people into enthusiastically positive action”.

The CoP emerged as a deliberate attempt by the authors, (particularly Star and McDonald), to improve the quality of teaching life and student learning by first-year, undergraduate lecturers through a process of sharing experience and concomitant lessons learned. A sense of community assumed a role in the foreground of every gathering: celebrated by “fellowship, fromage and fruit,” and further cultivated by the selection of storytelling as a principle, though by no means exclusive, method of communication in meetings.

The following stories, told by a number of members of the CoP, were originally presented as a university presentation on the CoP, and were subsequently taped, transcribed and edited by the storytellers, the authors. The sense of community of the CoP, an element in the foreground of every gathering, is cultivated by the selection of storytelling as a principle method of communication in meetings. Storytelling is therefore

an appropriate methodology to convey both the ambience and substance of our CoP experiences. Through these stories, members suggest that the CoP structure and processes provide a powerful means of supporting them in their daily academic and professional activities.

Member story: Pauline Collins

CoPs have been a wonderful thing for me. When I was first invited as a fairly cynical, jaded and tired core course leader, the idea of another two hour meeting was not one that I was enamoured with. However, after having attended for over a year now, I'm still attending and that to me is the biggest sign of the value of the group for me. Obviously if it wasn't giving me value I wouldn't still be going.

Habermas's (1987) *lifeworld* is made up of shared meanings in which individuals can freely communicate their experiences and knowledge, creating a meaningful world. It is the place where stories and the sharing of values helps us create a legitimisation of our self and others. The *system* world on the other hand is one academics unfortunately have become far too aware of as the process of risk management, extensive, often derogatory, public commentary, internal self-review, staff reviews, performance appraisal, constant re-evaluating of management structures, and external auditing all outweighing the importance of our socially orientated world of real communication. However, I see the CoP as a bit like Habermas's *lifeworld* where the real communication occurs, the communication that brings about change, makes changes, makes things happen, and supports people. It is a place where real life goes on. The fact that food is provided at the beginning of the meeting, the socialising and then early in the session you're allowed to just share stories or concerns, makes it different from the average meeting, instead, it becomes very much a place of support for hardened, cynical, overworked and overwhelmed academics.

The next advantage is that we are a very large faculty, that has just gone through structural change and been divided into schools, so there is less chance for cross-fertilisation between the schools and there's a risk of a silo mentality developing. So these forums can cross those boundaries and reach out to other academics that aren't in the same discipline area but nevertheless are experiencing some of the same fundamental problems. It's not like other groups or meetings where people may be at very different levels of experience and have different agendas; we have pretty much the same experience and a similar agenda, namely to improve our teaching and to improve the student experience. Another important aspect for me is that over time the community has built up a trust and this is extremely important because it feels like a safe place for you to be able to "bear your soul". This is something you need to be able to do sometimes because I think we are all dedicated teachers who do worry for our students and our institution.

A while ago, I was in a meeting being led by someone who was saying that our core courses are the "face of the university", that therefore we needed to focus on getting them right. The unfortunate thing is that they were focusing on talking to the core course leaders about how they could improve their materials, and how they could just make the university look better in that regard. This person hadn't realised the serious disjuncture

between looking at the materials and looking at the faces; the very jaded and worn out looking faces that were sitting behind those materials. I just looked around the room and thought, “can’t you see that these people need a lot more support, they’re very unhappy overworked people?” The CoP has provided that sorely needed support, to the face of university, the core course leaders.

I have found the CoP encouraging and supportive. I have gained knowledge from the experience that I was able to put into practice. A CoP supports the members so they don’t feel isolated, alone and struggling against a world that is ever changing, and by so doing will help members do their job better. In terms of concrete outcomes, I recently presented in the Learning and Teaching Week about some authentic assessment that I wrote into a new core course for the law degree. Part of the initiative to do a new kind of assessment came from my learning, my support and listening in the CoP.

Another important aspect of the CoP is that as core course leaders and in our involvement in other committees we are often asked to comment on policy changes, and it’s been a useful forum to discuss those policies, jointly, to present joint comments and to raise issues with management. You can present a more forceful and more well reasoned argument as to why policy should or shouldn’t change in a certain way, and as it comes from the CoP it probably carries more weight, so that’s been really useful as well.

Member story: Ray Hingst

For me, one of the most valuable things to come out of the CoP has been the social value of learning and I reflect upon this as a learner, particularly when I was doing my studying for teaching and learning, I discovered that the social context is quite important and I have appreciated that particularly in the CoP. Also the dimension of the academic as a learner, the teacher as a learner is quite valuable. “Fellowship, fromag  and fruit” I think sums it up because we join together at the start of each session and share what we’ve been doing in an informal sense before the proceedings commence, as well as sharing cheese and fruit, and that’s quite valuable as a feature of the CoP.

The things that the CoP does that I value, includes the breaking down of silos. I don’t like the term silos particularly; I think they’re a little too concrete, pardon the pun. What I do see as important is the occasional joining with other CoPs and we’ve done that with Faculty of Arts on a couple of occasions and learnt from their experiences. It’s like knowing what other people are doing, that I’m not the only idiot doing this particular thing, or struggling with this particular challenge, so as a CoP we’ve learnt that other academics have gone through similar trials and tribulations, so that’s quite valuable.

I’d like to also make an analogy and it’s one that occurred to me during our planning for this particular paper. I recalled an earlier career when I was a leadman working on survey vessels. As a course leader you’re standing proudly on your vessel, say *Business Communication*, in my instance, the shining, gleaming course that sails forth each semester and with you as the crew. You’ve got the course moderator and well, it’s pretty much you two onboard and sometimes we can sail into waters which aren’t clear, that are a bit murky. That’s when swinging the lead, the term that the leadman derives his or her title from, swinging a lead weight on a knotted cord to plumb the depths, so to speak. So

when we're in murky waters, when we're not sure what we're doing as a course team, the CoP helps because others, or idiots like ourselves have gone through similar experiences. We share our experience and that makes clear some things that we otherwise would have struggled with. But it's not all overcoming adversity, *Per Ardua Ad Astra* (through adversity to the stars), we can look to the stars for inspiration and we have many in our small galaxy in the CoP. So with our chart and our compass, that is our course specification or outline and our study package, we know where we're going broadly, but inspiration also comes from others, from above, so we look to the stars in that context.

In terms of inspiration, people give you the courage to try different things and I've done that in my course, not always successfully; I think the idea was virtuous but perhaps the practice was not. I've learnt from that and hopefully will be more successful next time, but I'm encouraged as well by the responses students have given me when I try new things. The CoP has given me the courage to try those things which I probably wouldn't have otherwise, and I value that highly.

Member story: Lindy Kimmins

For me, my experiences in the CoP are something that are very special. The success of the CoP and the most rewarding things for me are:

1. the breakdown of silos
2. the contribution to a continuing conversation on various issues, and
3. an increased comprehension of where other people are coming from.

I work in the Learning and Teaching Support Unit (LTSU) and I also worked in its predecessor OPACS. I work in academic language and learning support. Because I'm in this particular silo which is not a faculty, I think the whole unit or department, including me, is viewed by the university both staff and students as being something that's peripheral, something that's add on, tacked on and generally something that's needed by other people, but never by one's self.

What I found is that the CoP has given me an opportunity to engage with staff in a particular faculty and this has given me an insight into the workings of the faculty from the lecturer or grassroots level, as opposed to the information that we get in the LTSU about faculty issues which is generally official top down statements and documents. Therefore I've really appreciated the opportunity to be sharing dialogue with lecturers about issues that we all face regarding the teaching of our students.

Another observation that I have made in CoP meetings was that not only are there silos with regard to actual faculties but also within the Faculty of Business there are silos, partly as a result of the school system, but partly it's just the way teaching staff seem to work. We're all a little bit insulated; we tend to work with the same group of people – the ones we get on well with, so again I saw the CoP as an opportunity for those within the Faculty of Business to break down these internal silos.

My last observation comes from my experiences with the Peer Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS) program, which again deals of course with students. Students build up a dialogue with other students through the actual PALS sessions but then they take the

conversations and social relationships that develop over and beyond those sessions into the wider realm of their lives. I find that the CoP is doing the same thing for staff. There's not only conversation and dialogue and that sense of community in the actual CoP gatherings, but this then extends beyond into the work they do – they continue to share dialogue and ideas with each other. I believe that this is of great value to all the members.

Member story: Bernadette Lynch

The first thing about the CoP that's been great for me is that it's got an administrative infrastructure that's not based around goodwill. (The CoP has a funded administrator position to ensure the smooth day to day operation of the CoP, regardless of whatever may happen to participating academics' workloads). This means the CoP has a real prospect of continuity. So, for me, I give higher priority to the CoP because it has that prospect of continuity.

The second thing that's been great for me about the CoP is that apart from what we formally set out to achieve in the CoP, the CoP has added value to my work in many additional unexpected ways. The CoP means participants form relationships with each other that operate outside the meetings and outside the immediate agenda items of the CoP. Those one-to-one informal conversations have proven invaluable to me in my practice. Similarly, the culture of the CoP meetings is that we accomplish what we need to but also deal with whatever emerges unexpectedly in the meetings. Actually in the meeting we had to prepare for this particular paper, we were on track in discussing the paper but in addition we started talking about how course leaders could make better use of the LTSU representative who has been attending the meetings. That wasn't on our list of things to do, but it was incredibly useful and I guess that's one of the big things about the CoP: you know good things will come out of it, but you don't always know what they will be.

The third thing that is really important about the CoP for me personally is it's assisted me to think more strategically about how I operate within University systems. This year I was part of a group of people who were given mentoring from the CoP to apply for a teaching award. We knew we were doing sound things in our teaching, but would no more have applied for that award than flown to the moon without that mentorship. The mentorship certainly included emotional encouragement to make the application, but probably more importantly the mentorship was actually very grounded and included concrete tips on how to make the application. For example they said, "Now you need to re-phrase that and you need to re-configure that and, this is the language that you need to embed" and that sort of practical advice.

Strategic thinking at this level involves working out the rules for getting things done within the system. It involves working out how to influence things, how to create win-win outcomes. It is easy to be well intentioned but impotent in the university system, because it's a system and if you can't navigate the systems you really remain a little irrelevant bug. Cracking those systems is the way to, for example, get the funding required to further research or to progress innovations in teaching. I feel it really is an essential skill for me to master if I want to keep creating good personal professional outcomes in my work. Interestingly enough one of the key ways that strategic mindset

was opened up for me, was in watching the way the CoP works itself. This is a particularly turbulent time for our University. It is particularly tight climate financially, there are enormous changes in the direction of the university. But, despite this, this little CoP has prospered. The key leaders of the group said, “We’ll get funding, we’ll get institutional support, we will create real outcomes for the institution and participants and we’ll get institutional visibility and acclaim”. And that is what they have done. All of that work has been done behind the scenes work and is not immediately obvious to participants. But again, those leader members of the CoP have been very generous in explaining how they’ve gone about launching and maintaining this group.

Those are the three big things I have got out of the CoP and that third one, thinking strategically, is probably the really big one for me.

Conclusion

Story telling about the experiences of participation in a CoP has provided rich testimonials about the merits of this approach to professional sharing and networking. Consistent with Denning’s view, each participant’s story has provided a personalised and therefore engaging view of the CoP as a lived experience. This space has provided a number of key professional supports for academic staff: real communication and ongoing dialogue across institutional barriers; a sense of trust required to open up a safe place to share common challenges and enable social learning; support and professional development for course leaders; and a model of strategic thinking and strategic action in a changing institutional environment. The CoP provides a vital social and collegial domain, as well as the academic support for members, which combine to foster the growth and development of the members as academics and teachers.

The participants’ stories have breathed life into the drier academic definition of a CoP that opened this paper. It was depicted as a place of relationship and *community* in each story, while the current university setting was depicted as place more usually prone to fragmented and less satisfying social arrangements. The sharing of *knowledge and practice* through the group that each member highlighted was unique to each participant and yet grounded in a common domain - their common role as first year core course teachers. Positive stories about the life of the academic in higher education, such as these, are not always easy to find. They can do much to assist academics re-invent their part of the academy to make it a more satisfying and effective arena for professional practice.

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