

**Framing futures through notions of a particular ‘community of practice’:
What TAFE teachers said.**

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ABSTRACT

This paper was initialised by a request from a group of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers for support in the development of what they called “a community of practice”. In an effort to explore this localised encounter with the concept of learning as a social phenomenon, this paper explores the question, “If a group of TAFE teachers described a community of practice, how might it look?”

KEYWORDS

TAFE teachers – communities of practice – group interviewing – teacher voice

INTRODUCTION

Some would suggest that learning is less about the individual and more about the social relationships and conversations in which individuals are immersed. It is from this notion of learning as being a social process in everyday experience that the constructs of learning and community coalesce to produce such enactments as learning communities and communities of practice, as well as ideas around situated learning, social capital and distributed cognition. How a group of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers constructed their version of a shared space where learning may occur through partnership and collaboration is of keen interest and offers a counter to managerial notions of ‘how’ TAFE teachers should ‘do’.

This paper reports the particular teacher voice that emerged from a group of TAFE teachers as they reflected on and grappled with their concept of “community of practice”. These voices have important implications for how this group of teachers choose to frame their futures through a synergistic association that might contribute to the enhancement of their capabilities as TAFE teachers and lifelong learners, and the shared social rewards this could bring, for example, staking a greater claim over their identities as curriculum innovators, and in offering alternative perceptions to those notions of teacher put forth by accreditation bodies. The teachers in this study are fulltime teachers at a regional institute of TAFE in South Eastern Queensland; their voices were gathered and interpreted through an interpretative paradigm.

The role that teacher voice plays in the shaping of teacher work environments has been emphasised by Brady (2003) in her statement that teacher voices “provide a composite account from the teachers themselves of what they actually do...therefore it is a particularly valuable resource for... understand[ing] teaching practice context” (p. vii). Teacher voice also appears as inculcated within the concepts of teacher empowerment and teacher efficacy in that its articulation and subsequent enaction may well produce “a subjective state of mind where an employee perceives that he or she is exercising efficacious control over meaningful work” (Potterfield, 1999, p. 51).

What is of interest in this research is how a particular group of TAFE teachers might use their social connectedness to enhance their autonomy, build knowledge, articulate what’s important to them and share information on different ways of knowing and doing. Kilpatrick, Barrett and Jones (2003) tell us that learning communities and communities of practice are two examples of social structures in which people can

learn though an emphasis of social connectedness. Learning communities, on one hand, are situations where people of common purpose share space, physically or virtually, and actively promote learning through synergistic environments that create potential for all (Kilpatrick, Barrett & Jones, 2003). Kilpatrick et al. take the position that “[l]earning communities can be deliberately fostered” (p.9) and that leaders play a key role in the emerging collective learning process. Communities of practice (CsoP), on the other hand appear a little more enigmatic. For instance, Wenger (nd) emphasises that CsoP too can form for the purpose of collective learning, but he does not assume that they form just for the purpose of collective learning. “[L]earning can be the reason the community comes together or an incidental outcome of member’s [sic] interactions” (Wenger, nd, p. 1).

This paper chooses CsoP as its central lens for two reasons. Firstly, the paper’s beginnings were prompted by a group of TAFE teachers who named their group a community of practice (CoP) and second, in initial conversations with their spokesperson, the social support aspect of the group was emphasised hence, learning per se was not reported as a central factor in group formation.

TAFE TEACHERS

The TAFE teachers in this study work in the vocational education and training (VET) sector within Australia. This sector has been undergoing unprecedented change as a result of new vocationalism (Grubb, 1996), an economic rationalist and managerialist doctrine (Chappell, 1999; Seddon & Marginson, 2001) that calls for teaching output to be defined in quantifiable terms that are intended to offer instrumental value to the Australian economy (Seddon, 1998). Some suggest that new vocationalism has pressured TAFE teachers to become different teachers (for example, Chappel, 1999; AUTHOR, 2006b) in that notions and identities of the TAFE teacher as a liberalist educator have been replaced by perspectives of the TAFE teacher as an educator for the market economy (Kronemann, 2001). Seddon, (2000) claims that the notion of teacher has expanded to one of “sophisticated producers, recorders, organizers, appliers, disseminators and brokers of knowledge” (p. 8). Yet with a new vocational lens emphasis is on particular knowledge that is seen as having instrumental value. This is exemplified with the implementation of competency based training (CBT) curriculum where particular training outcomes are dictated through industry training packages. These dictate to the TAFE teacher what teaching outcomes must be reached.

Voices that contest the above changes are many. For example, Robinson (1993) warned of CBT undermining teacher judgment, whilst Muclachy (2003) and AUTHOR (2006a, 2006b) articulate an erosion of TAFE teacher professional judgment. Reductions of tenure, increasing teaching workloads, and a required involvement in competitive tendering and user choice initiatives have all been noted as areas that have impacted upon what TAFE teachers do (Rimmer, 2002; Kronemann, 2001). The teaching terrain of TAFE teachers has been troubled to the extent that their capabilities and identities are in flux (AUTHOR, in press).

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

To suggest on one hand that the VET sector has been proactive in initiating innovation, or on the other, that the voices of discontent have had impact upon policy is possibly moot, nevertheless, CsoP are considered a useful strategy for benefiting

the individuals and organisations within the sector. Under the 'Reframing the Future' strategy implemented by the contemporaneous peak body responsible for VET in Australia, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), CsoP were highlighted as a means to "accelerate, intensify, enrich and enhance..." the Australian national training system. (Mitchell, Young & McKenna, 2007, ¶ 1).

Mitchell, Wood and Young (2001) pointed to the benefits CsoP provide to individuals and organisations within the VET sector. For individuals the benefits were distinguished as:

enabl[ing] employees to manage change... foster trust and a sense of common purpose...[and] add value to [their] professional lives (p. 12)

The benefits for organisations were highlighted by their ability to, for example: "generate knowledge...disseminate valuable information...decrease the learning curve for new employees...[and, to help] recruit and maintain talent" (p. 13).

Wegner, McDermott and Snyder (2002) tell us that CsoP develop because people find value in spending time together "...sharing information, insight and advice" (p. 4). An informal bond develops through having an understanding that colleagues have a shared perspective and a shared sense of belonging. The authors articulate three ubiquitous characteristics:

1. Members are committed to a particular domain which interests them
2. Members enact their interest in this domain together within a community.
3. Members of a CoP communally share their 'doing' within this specific domain. (p. 45-46)

Wenger (nd) offers a useful nutshell definition:

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. (What are communities of practice? ¶ 1)

One other factor associated with CsoP is of useful note. CsoP are "resistant to supervision and interference" (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p 140). TAFE New South Wales Centre for VET teaching and learning notes this claim by highlighting need to nurture CsoP rather than direct them (ICVET, 2005).

INFORMATS AND INQUIRY

This research was initiated by a request for the author to meet and undertake a conversation with members of a CoP. The informants, self nominated members of this community, were a group of male TAFE teachers working in various delivery teams within a faculty of manufacturing and built environment. This group endeavored to meet monthly. Attendance at the CoP meetings appeared to flex dependent upon the demands placed upon members on any given day. On the day when this conversation took place the group consisted of twelve men, all tradesmen from such trades as electrical, plumbing, painting, bricklaying and metal fabrication. Their period of employment ranged from two months to three years. In relation to education/training qualifications, all men taught their trade from differing educational positions. Some of the men were part way through the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (a necessary requirement to teach at TAFE) others had attained the qualification. In

addition to holding the mentioned Certificate IV, two of the men were part the way through an undergraduate degree in further education and training.

The method of enquiry deployed was that of semi-structured group interview (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Fielding & Thomas, 2001). The discussion was audio recorded and the recording later transcribed for analysis. For purposes of anonymity pseudonyms are used to distinguish between the various identities. In order to prime the discussion the author circulated a list of open-ended questions prior to the meeting, for example, how would you describe your CoP, what do you get personally out of this CoP, and what are the successful elements of your CoP? The author used some of these questions as direct questions, whilst with others their articulation was not strict, but their essence was alluded to over the course of the meeting. Responses to some questions sometimes moved cleanly into responses to other questions. Whilst at times questions were asked directly to invite responses, at other times respondents brought into the conversation topics not prompted by the questions. This interaction could be best described as a guided conversation.

WHAT EMERGED

What was apparent from the start was an impression of a group of articulate men, keen to have their say and passionate about their role as teachers in TAFE. Yet despite their enthusiasm to teach, our conversation revealed a sober side to their role. The topic of interest in this CoP was *survival* particularly within their first three years of employment in TAFE. This section begins with discussion on the beginnings of this CoP and traces the conversation through some of its shadowy elements. In this section quotes from participants will be used to offer the reader an opportunity to consider the visceral reactions these men are experiencing in relation to their work environment.

The conversation can be traced by several themes – *thrown in the deep end, hitting the wall, getting it together, and uncertainty*. These themes are not defined categories of conversation, but blurred focal points within the discussion. At times the conversation was sharply focused on one theme or another. At other times a theme was loosely connected to the conversational threads, for example, the theme of *uncertainty* lurked in the background of most discussion.

The beginning of this CoP can be traced to a conversation, held 18 months ago, between two of the men in relation to one of them *hitting the wall*. Miller recalls:

“... in conversations with George we were saying, gees, were having the same sort of problems at about the same stage of our working career as a TAFE teacher. So we started to gauge from other people’s opinions that we’re all in the same boat, so we started a group to try and help each other a little, that was the main driver.”

Miller tells that within six months of starting work at TAFE he had other employment organised:

“...six months down the track I was at the cross roads. I had another job lined up through various things that happened to me, I thought, that if this is TAFE teaching I don’t want it.”

For those members of the group who were employed for over six months, the prospect of “going back on the tools” at this point of crisis was considered as a reasonable option. Those who were more recently employed acknowledged experiencing these thoughts quite regularly.

Early in the conversation, the group articulated the major factor that was common to all in their reaching the point of *hitting the wall*. In what almost appears ironic, the moving from ‘the tools’ to ‘the classroom’ was not considered a primary stressor. They reported that they had steeled themselves in order to take on the challenge of teaching and indicated a preparedness to do what was necessary to become a competent teacher. The source of their major stressor was identified as the organisation and their interface with it. They described the complexity and volume of TAFE’s bureaucratic demands as a great source of frustration. One member identified this source as the “vagaries” of the bureaucracy. Frank, describes his situation:

“You overcome the hurdles of having to be in front of a class in the first place, and handle that environment, and then you’ve got a situation that arises where your DP, or IAP is due, or your yearly plan is due or whatever it may be. There is no, “this is how you do that and this is the process you go through”. It’s due by next Friday and you’ve got to have it in. So I think that, that whole, probably eighteen months or for some even less, is about the time someone lasts until they go “hang on a minute”. This is, [when] that big wall comes in front of you, too big to get over. And you have moments where you think, as Miller said, “back on the tools’ is the only option cause this is just not going to work.” There is no guidance...mentorship to a certain extent if you’ve got someone on your team, but that’s limited because they’re busy as well. It’s pretty much, “there is the deep end”, be a TAFE teacher.”

Other experiences that were identified as being further sources of frustration were, for example, teachers’ depiction of:

- The organisation as demonstrating apparent shallow treatment of the notion of a beginning teacher and what that possibly might mean from a new teachers perspective—“beginning teachers...that’s not recognised, let’s get that clear”
- Managers who were more focused upon contact hours than on how they were coping as beginning teachers
- Role ambiguity about what their role as teachers entailed— “I have to find my apprentices otherwise my contract in on the line”
- Non-action in relation to promises for teaching resources. One teacher laments, “students walk in with a mobile phone in their hand that has more technology in it than three quarters of the bloody college”, and
- The non-acknowledgment of the pro bono mentoring that has been provided by some more experienced teachers, and in some cases the non-availability of mentoring because of the more experienced teachers’ workloads.

Despite the concerns raised, these men were quick to talk about the usefulness gleaned from this CoP. This is in relation to the sharing of frustrations and the possible relief that their individual disclosures and shared understandings provided. Highlighted specifically was their perception that they were all sharing common ground where everyone within the group experienced contextual constraints and

frustrations. The degree to which these frustrations hindered and produced thoughts of “going back on the tools” appeared dependent upon their length of service. Noted was the view shared by the longer serving members that at about the two to three year mark the knowledges, skills and attitudes associated with negotiating the “TAFE beast” appeared to coalesce into a particular kind of competency that enabled a better fit between the TAFE teacher and (in this case) his organisation. This was spoken about as a point where TAFE teachers appeared to be *getting it together*. In talking about length of service Bruce asked George, “You’ve been here for three years George, do you still find hurdles that you have to overcome?”

“No, I feel that I’m over that now” George replied.

Another teacher, who recently arrived at this apparent milestone, identified this as the period when “the pressure from the classroom was gone... that used to empty my stomach because I was not naturally a teacher type...I’m fairly comfortable now, when something comes up I can handle it...” This teacher does qualify his present station by acknowledging that he had a mentor who sheltered him from a lot of the bureaucratic pressures.

To the direct question “What do you personally get out of this CoP?” the essences of the replies were around social connection. One vocal, founding member replied “genuine rock solid mateship”. Accompanying these articulations of mateship and camaraderie came a flow of small stories that recited instances of achieving success by choosing to deploy specific overt and covert tactics to the organisational frustrations they were experiencing. The attentive non-verbal signs exemplified the attention paid to these stories by the newer members. These newer members told of their relief when they heard during this segment that older members experienced a sense of impostership, that they “didn’t have all the answers” and “felt inadequate” at times. This disclosure appeared as a further catalyst to a series of questions and answers that may not have eventuated in the general to and fro of daily work, for example, instances of successful relationships with strategic organisational members, and answers as to how best to present one’s weekly timetable, were shared.

Finally, on the question of the co-ordination of this CoP, members expressed a great deal of thanks to one of its founding members who had taken on the task of coordinating the meetings. Members acknowledged that without Miller “...it would probably collapse, because something like this needed someone to organise...”

George said: “it was out of him [Miller] caring enough to say “my mates need this”...there is no money/hours connected to this.”

Kane continued with “If it wasn’t for people like Miller things like this wouldn’t happen, because I know I wouldn’t think of doing this, because I would think that I was the only one having these problems.”

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We now return to the central tenants of a CoP– shared domain of interest, community and practice (Wegner, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). What is explicit in this data is that they provided a clear example of: a domain of interest where members are seeking answers to questions around surviving the initial years as a TAFE teacher, a community interacting together in ways that provide social support and a practice in relation to negotiating a troubling terrain experienced by male teachers and arguably produced by a particular organisational environment.

It is evident that the experienced members of this CoP have access to tacit knowledge in relation to negotiating the organisational terrain that appears to offer much frustration to newly employed teachers, and that they are actively involved in the stewarding and sharing of this knowledge. This is exemplified in the manner in which the success stories were shared during the course of the meeting. McDermott (1999) tells us that not only do members need this non-documented knowledge, but also this knowledge needs to be talked about, *thought* about and shared.

What is also explicit is that the operation of this CoP supports the research by Wegner and Snyder (2000). This CoP organises itself, sets its own agendas and operates its own style of leadership. It is organic and resists organisational control (Casey, 2005). The latter is exemplified by the comment from a founding member around a suggestion made in 2007 that emanated from institute management that the Director could be a regular member: “Miller and I suddenly got the shivers and thought, well hang on a minute, this is not the point of our group.”

Earlier, this paper highlighted the benefits that CsoP can bring to the VET sector (Mitchell, Wood and Young, 2001) enabling employees to manage change, fostering a sense of common purpose and, as points of informal dissemination of information to enhance productivity were some examples. What was not noted was the value that CsoP can play in their role as a provider of space for teacher voice to be articulated and heard. In this instance the volume of these TAFE teachers’ voices in articulating their early experience with their employing organisation is loud. It is one that reports particular frustrations and uncertainties that produces in some members thoughts of leaving the profession, and in others an active choice to do so.

This study prompts many questions, for example, what might a CoP containing female TAFE teachers within the same organisation nominate as their domain of interest, how might their sense of community be described, and how is that different from the CoP within this study? But, for the participants within this CoP, their questions appear to reverberate around the theme of recognition (and possible relief from) the stressors of the beginning TAFE teacher experience.

To close, this paper highlights the voice of one CoP member. It resounds with a vision in which he frames his future as a TAFE teacher and offers insight into his professional identity as a lifelong learner within the TAFE community.

Miller states: “My push now is to carry on in a professional manner so that when my [more experienced colleagues] leave, I can do at least as good a job as they have done...I don’t want to see that disappear...I want to be able to produce the quality teaching they produced before me, I don’t want to let it taper off, that’s my main drive.”

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