Communities of practice: A sphere of influence enhancing teaching and learning in higher education

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Abstract: Power is framed within systems of influence and, in higher education, one field of influence potentially lies in the discourses cultivated and disseminated within a Community of Practice (CoP). Communities of practice provide contexts for sustained professional conversations around identified domain and practice issues. These are particularly pertinent in the Australian higher education sector which is facing significant challenges from individual, institutional and societal demands on university teaching and learning with academics increasingly overwhelmed by continuous change, excessive workloads and research output demands. This paper reports on a Community of Practice which was initiated to improve the quality of first year teaching in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Topics covered by the community include course design, embedding academic values, graduate attributes, and student retention strategies. The paper will also report on a research project which complemented the Community of Practice, its purpose to evaluate the community's effectiveness as a sphere of influence in transforming the faculty teaching and learning culture. The project found that the community has significantly contributed to the professional development of participating staff, fostering a transformative learning approach for these teachers. It has also provided a vehicle for disseminating best practice to promote quality teaching and learning across the Faculty. In describing the ways in which the community influences the communication processes within the faculty, the paper demonstrates how a community of practice approach can exercise power: how it can strive to augment an organisation's communication processes to enhance teaching and learning within a higher education context.

Introduction

The ability to facilitate changes in professional teaching practice within higher education (HE) has become particularly important due to increased pressure from stakeholders for universities to deliver better learning and teaching outcomes, and more skilled graduates. Communities of practice (CoPs) are seen as a means of facilitating positive change in relation to the growth of professional expertise of teachers and improved quality of first year core courses, with an anticipated flow-on of improved student experience, retention and progression.

This paper will describe CoP and how a community was established in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). It will also report the findings of a research study conducted on the CoP. Analysis of the interview data shows that staff perceive benefits of participating in the Arts CoP, such as increased collegiality and opportunities for professional development. However, interviews with CoP members also show that perceived benefits are accompanied by changes in teaching practice for the majority of those interviewed.

Defining communities of practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better (Wenger, 1998). McDonald and Star (2006, citing Wenger, McDermott & 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 incorporate three fundamental elements; *domain of knowledge* (common knowledge about interest area), *community* (shared sense of belonging), and *practice* (a set of common approaches to problems) (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Communities of practice are well established in the Australian Vocational Educational and Training (VET) sector and in industry, in particular as a means of facilitating the growth and implementation of new knowledge (McDonald & Star, 2006). However, they remain a relatively unexplored phenomenon in Australian higher education (HE). McDonald and Star suggest that the slow uptake of CoPs in Australian HE may be influenced by its emerging corporate and competitive nature. The traditional concept of "academic freedom" and the competitive promotion system that pervades HE may also foster a private and individual approach to academic teaching, rather than a collaborative, community approach. However, from the organisation's perspective (in this case the university) CoPs may be seen as a means of creating opportunities for mutual learning which accords well with learning organisation theory, as members of the CoPs reflect not only their own perspectives of practice but also those of the organisation (Cox, 2006).

Communities of practice at USQ

At USQ, the idea for communities of practice for teachers of first year courses emerged from collaboration between the Faculty of Business and the Learning and Teaching Resource Unit (LTSU) and was later extended to the Faculty of Arts. The development of the CoPs concept was based on the recognition that the first year experience can be difficult for many students, and particularly for those accessing a university education at USQ, whose student cohort is not only exhibiting increasing diversity but also multiple disadvantages in terms of equity indicators (Lawrence, 2004). Many students are meeting the peculiar characteristics of academic knowledge for the first time when they commence university (McDonald & Star, 2006). These students may also be less familiar with traditional university and discipline discourses and literacies than more traditional students (Lawrence, 2004).

As well as this changed student cohort, the CoP's initiative was driven by the need for university teachers to also manage burgeoning pedagogical initiatives emerging from the research literature on transition, retention and the first year experience (FYE) as well as the theoretical perspectives stemming from educational and critical discourse

literature and constructivism. The literature shows that both FYE and transition are complex phenomena (Krause, 2005): that students experience social and personal as well as academic transitions (Scott, 2005); that interactions between students and other individuals in the university community and students' interpretations of these contacts affect their transition (Tinto, 2005) and that student outcomes can be improved when institutions adapt their cultures to meet their students' needs (Burton & Dowling, 2005). Furthermore, transition is influenced by students' perceptions of how well their cultural attributes are valued and accommodated (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003) and how well any differences between these and the university culture are addressed/bridged (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). At USQ these are issues which affect retention and progression. They are also issues which can be canvassed at CoPs.

Educational literature also provides implications for CoPs. For example there is the increasing importance of a student focused curriculum (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) and a range of socio/constructivist approaches that promote situated learning and learning based on reflective and shared practice (Cox, 2006). The traditional view that learning 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 (McDonald & Star, 2006). This approach needs to be made explicit for, communicated to, and scaffolded for, students who may access university with expectations of a traditional, transmission approach to learning and teaching. Critical discourse and multiliteracy theory (New London Group, 1996) contributes further implications for CoPs, including the importance of facilitating students' engagement, mastery and demonstration of, for example, the academic and numeracy, computing, communication, learning and information literacies they need if they are to succeed at university. Embedding these critical literacies and skills, and graduate attributes (or qualities), has also been added to first year teachers' repertoires.

Constructivism has also provided implications for the expected roles of learners and teachers with its focus on the concepts of active, collaborative and learning centred activities, and the situated construction of knowledge that relates to authentic or

practice based situations (McDonald & Star, 2006) also known as 'situated learning' (Wenger, 1998). CoPs offer a space where first year teachers can be empowered to address these needs. Importantly, this approach allows those in the community to experience first hand the benefits of co constructing their knowledge, where, in a real sense the curriculum (or agenda in this case) is shaped by the participants, which in turn forms the basis of the learning circle (Cox, 2006). This shared approach was also carried through into the action research methodology adopted to determine the benefit (or otherwise) of the CoP to its members and the university.

The Arts CoP

The CoP process for teachers of first year students was initiated in the Faculty of Arts with the Dean acting as supporter and 'champion' in Semester 2, 2006. Meetings in the Faculty of Arts are held monthly (February though November). Learning/teaching funds were obtained from the Faculty of Arts Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee (LTEC). These were complemented by research funds obtained for an action research project to evaluate the effectiveness of the CoPs.

The CoP meets on the fourth Thursday of the month between 2pm and 4pm. The group consists of a faculty based facilitator, a facilitator from the Learning and Teaching Support Unit, and between six and nine regular attendees. Members are, on the whole, faculty academic staff (associate lecturers to senior lecturers) from a range of disciplines. Typically, two thirds of the members would be female, one third male, but this varies from meeting to meeting. The faculties' liaison Librarian also quite often attends. The common bond among members is that they deal predominantly with first year students. In the weeks leading up to each meeting the facilitators work together to promote forthcoming meetings and to create an initial running schedule. The average attendance of meetings would be between eight and ten people.

The research project

The research project comprised two stages. The first stage was a voluntary online survey where the questions were designed to provide some baseline data on the core

group members, including their teaching duties; their perception of key challenges facing them as university teachers; their understanding of current university-wide learning and teaching initiatives; their perception of existing support for staff to make these changes; and their perception of staff development practices in general.

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

Stage 2 findings[1] only are reported in this paper (as the basic demographic has already been presented above) and include the qualitative analysis of interview data from seven 'core group' members of the Arts CoP. This sample reflects Community of Practice theory (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002), which suggests that there is usually a core group of members in any Community of Practice who are more engaged than more peripheral members, and who provide the 'driving force' for group activities. The members who participated in the interviews teach a range of disciplines, teaching anywhere between one and 1000 students in any one year, including on campus, external, offshore and a combination of all three modes of delivery.

Findings

The data were analysed using a layered, thick approach (Martin-McDonald, 2000). A layered approach was used as it facilitates the process of unpacking meaning, proceeding as it does from description through to detailed analysis and finally to general interpretation. The layered approach also provides a valuable way of systematically sifting out the participants' perspectives, facilitating its revelatory

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

capacity (p.144). Supporting and assisting these analytical and interpretative processes are the use of 'thick descriptions'—the rich detailed descriptions of specifics—which, Geertz (1979) argues, are able to capture a sense of what is occurring, consequently permitting multiple interpretations whilst also helping to guard against the authorial power of any dual positioning (Martin-McDonald, 2000).

Influencing teaching and learning culture in university contexts is difficult. As Harvey and Kamvounias (2008) maintain, fundamental change in teaching and learning is rare in Australian HE with most universities teaching in much the same ways as they have always done (p.31). Unless a teaching and learning initiative transforms teachers' practice, such as they can transform their students' learning, an initiative can not be successful (Harvey & Kamvounias, 2008). Harvey and Kamvounias advocate a teacher-as-learner approach where change is viewed primarily as a learning process, and where ownership, communication, and support, through the lens of educational theories and approaches to learning, are essential components. The Faculty of Arts CoP takes elements of Harvey and Kamvounias' model to achieve its goal of acting as a sphere of influence in transforming faculty teaching and learning culture. It embarks on this goal with its focus on ownership, communication, and support, facilitated through the lens of Wenger's domains of knowledge, community, and practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Three key themes emerged from the data to support this view: the value of meeting others and sharing practice; the opportunities to facilitate change, in relation to both students and faculty management; and a shared understanding about strategies to manage challenges emanating from individual, institutional, and societal demands on university teaching whilst coping with continuous change, excessive workloads, and research output demands.

That the Arts Cop meetings provided members with the opportunity to meet others and share examples of teaching practice was evident in members' testimony. Members valued the informal, social tone of such meetings, recognising that the CoPs enhanced their own learning:

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

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

Another reason why members saw such meetings as valuable was that they provided an opportunity for them to see what people from different areas and disciplines were doing, breaking down discipline silos and contributing to a more holistic faculty approach to learning and teaching issues:

> Obviously receiving information from people from different types of backgrounds; people from the Learning and Teaching Services Unit (LTSU), and discipline-based teaching (Interview 1).

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

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

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

CoP meetings appeared to play a particularly positive role for newer, less experienced academic staff, helping them to become more familiar with the university and teaching/learning discourses (Lawrence, 2004). This is in line with Community of Practice theory, which sees the induction of newer staff as a form of 'apprenticeship', which can be facilitated by "opportunities for engagement with practice, defined by the social contexts of learning" (Bathmaker & Avis, 2005, p.50). Two early career members made particular reference to the value of meetings as a sphere of influence in enhancing the faculty's culture in relation to learning and teaching:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another member anticipated a wider sphere of influence:

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

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

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

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

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

These comments highlighted two of the three areas of change in practice generally targeted by CoP respondents: teaching students how to learn, and providing greater transparency in assessment practices. One member had made changes in their teaching with the aim of incorporating academic skills and literacies into their curricula. There was also acknowledgement that such changes represented a break from past practice:

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

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

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

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

> [I am] also getting the students to know and interact with each other early on. I've introduced 'speed dating' exercises to they all get to know each other one on one, and we all introduce one other person

> to the group so they've already started to bond...So now we've got
> this community in class and they're not so frightened to speak up
> (Interview 6).

Other members focused more on transition strategies that either explicitly addressed University expectations with students, or provided additional support for students just starting their degree:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of three participants wishing to make changes as a direct result of CoP activity, one member was thinking about negotiated curriculum:

> Another thing I want to look at this semester is negotiating some terms with students for the assessment. That's one thing that didn't occur to me and I didn't really…it came out of a discussion with someone who was already doing…that's something I probably wouldn't have thought of on my own (Interview 3).

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

> What we've been doing in first year in our disciplines actually using flexible delivery; continuing to become more effective at that and improving the application to that (Interview 1)

> I think there needs to be a development of skills as we go along and so hopefully next year that will happen. I want to have it so it's building process so it's skills as well as discipline-based knowledge. So I guess that's the change I really want to make (Interview 6).

Discussion

Based on the interview data, the CoP can demonstrate broad success in terms of positive staff perceptions and as vehicles for change in teaching practice. It is clear from the data that participants value the social, collegial and mentoring aspects of meetings as an end in themselves. Indeed, key terms such as 'social and 'sharing' stand out as characteristics of the CoP meeting valued by all members. The majority of those interviewed acknowledged some existing or planned change to their teaching practice as a direct result of CoP activity. Many of these changes are those identified by HE literature as having a positive impact on student transition, student retention and graduate outcomes (Krause, 2005; Lawrence, 2005). In particular, initiatives aimed at engaging students, developing their academic skills and literacies, developing student independence (peer learning) and providing greater transparency in assessment practices have all been identified as having a positive impact on the student experience (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002; Winter, 1996; Lawrence, 2005; Chanock, 2002).

However, issues such as the need for greater focus and structure raised by some members point to possible avenues for increasing the effectiveness of the CoP as a

vehicle for change. Likewise, as flagged by some of the respondents, another possible means of improving the CoP as a vehicle for facilitating changes in practice might be to think of strategies for wider dissemination of good practice.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on the progress of a Community of Practice since its inception in 2006. Through the analysis of one-on-one interviews, the broad institutional and professional context within which community members operate, and evidence of the efficacy of the communities of themselves to date have been provided. The community has been, thus far, successful in its intended purpose. Sharing of professional knowledge and changes in teaching practice in the areas outlined here will arguably, according to HE research, benefit students through the provision of better processes of first year engagement, a greater emphasis on building skills and attributes and greater transparency in assessment practices. Staff themselves will continue to benefit through the opportunities for critical reflection and professional development offered by their Community of Practice. The community's effectiveness as a sphere of influence in transforming the faculty teaching and learning culture was also investigated. The project found that the community provided a vehicle for disseminating best practice to promote quality teaching and learning across the Faculty. In describing the ways in which the community influences the communication processes within the faculty, the paper demonstrated how a Community of Practice approach can exercise power. How it can strive to augment an organisation's communication processes to enhance the teaching and learning culture within a higher education context.

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