

Communities of Practice at UTAS: Following up on the CoP Workshop with Associate Professor Jacquie McDonald (USQ).



This briefing document details key discussion points following the CoP professional learning workshop held at UTAS in June 2012:

Generating Excitement, Relevance and Value: How to make the most out of your Community of Practice.

The workshop was co-hosted by Melody West (Tasmanian Institute of Learning and Teaching, UTAS) and invited guest and experienced CoP practitioner, Associate Professor Jacquie McDonald (University of Southern Queensland). As a way of continuing dialogue with participants engaged in the UTAS CoP Initiative, people were invited to share their key take-home messages from the workshop and to pose questions for further consideration. These messages and responses to your questions form the basis of this document.

It is a priority for us to continue building practice, knowledge and generating discourse with current and future CoP members both within UTAS and cross-institutionally; we encourage you to enhance these processes and the role that CoPs play as a vehicle for innovation and vitality in learning and teaching (and beyond).

Thanks for your participation and active engagement with the UTAS CoP Initiative.

Regards

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Key take home messages from the workshop

The following represent some of the key take home messages as noted by participants at the workshop.

- **Culture change** (CoPs are different than meetings; in terms of outcomes, participants, and expectations);
- **'Lurkers'** (those sitting on the far periphery) are legit (and should be welcomed as potential future members);
- There is a distinct difference between **champions** (good to have) and **sponsors** (not as welcome);
- Early stage CoP leaders have potential issues with **gaining momentum of the group**, particularly where potential members are outside the uni 'sphere' (although their involvement has the potential to change/improve the L&T of students quite markedly);
- CoPs can provide spaces for **intellectually stimulating** and **invigorating conversations**;
- CoPs can provide a forum for **developing and testing innovative communication strategies**.
- There is a **supportive institutional framework** for CoPs at UTAS (other universities don't have funding available).
- CoPs are a vehicle for innovation and change and can **influence learning and teaching practices**;
- CoPs are successful in terms of **engagement and influence** when they **align with the overall strategic priorities of the university**.

Key questions and responses

The responses provided under each of these questions reflect collaborative consideration and development of ideas between Melody and Jacquie. In many cases, there are no right or wrong answers to the questions posed, but we hope that the information provided can at least spark further thinking and/or a course of appropriate action. Be encouraged to pose these questions within your CoPs as well, as a way of developing context specific and relevant responses of your own.

How do you recruit/entice champions?

- I think some of the membership notes that we took on the white board (see 'Notes from the Board' section below) would be helpful to consider in response to this question. For example, finding out how to get an agenda item at a targeted network meeting where you could showcase your resources or make a presentation. Be certain to think strategically about linking the work of your CoP to institutional (or other appropriate context specific) benefits and provide evidence of culture change and/or impact. Also, be specific. Let potential champions know about your CoP and invite them to review information about your CoP proposal (objectives etc.) before they decide they can help.
- You CoP will be located within a particular practice area, so:
 - decide who has institutional leadership or responsibility for the area;
 - arrange to meet to discuss your CoP proposal, noting how CoP will support initiatives in champions leadership area;
 - be prepared to outline your plan + alignment with institutional goals, in particular the champion's goals in the focus area;
 - outline benefits & outcomes for members and institution;
 - present and negotiate your expectations of champion contribution;
 - have a timeline for first activity with high profile role for champion and some publicity, e.g. institutional web site, discipline newsletter.

"... recruiting champions and sponsors is important to promote and protect the CoP. A champion is identified as a senior manager who believes strongly that a CoP should be a primary mechanism for managing knowledge in the organisation. He or she aggressively supports development by providing guidance, funds, visibility and legitimacy. A sponsor is also willing to provide funding and some level of legitimacy or support, but is not as passionate. Sponsors are more likely to request early evidence that communities are worth time, attention, and resources (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 214). In the authors' experience, champions and sponsors play an important role in supporting the initial start-up by using their position and influence for positive promotion of the CoP and providing resources to support practical implementation of the CoP. Actively recruiting and educating them about the needs, benefits and CoP processes is critical."

From: Star, C., & McDonald, J. (in press), CoPping it sweet: the state of play of CoPs in higher education, *Higher Education Quarterly*, Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, United Kingdom.

Given the diverse origins of Communities of Practice what processes exist for reconciling conflict, for example in the instance where two Communities evolve competing action agendas or where the mandate and evolving agenda of a CoP conflicts with the expectations of the Senior Management Team?

- TILT has a pivotal role to play in helping to reconcile potential conflict, or to assist with aligning the priorities and interests of CoPs within broader institutional agendas. This will always be done in collaboration with CoP leaders and facilitators. TILT also has important role in sponsoring and promoting the CoP initiative so there is an institutional wide understanding of how CoPs are different from project teams and work groups. Remember that CoP agendas are generally determined and agreed upon by members.
- Conflict with Senior Management Team may be caused by a perception that CoP activities are not aligned with institutional goals, or when their work or ideas may challenge existing practices. Universities are places

for vigorous debate, and if CoP members are engaging in scholarly discourse which contributes to institutional goals then this process can be articulated at appropriate forums.

How might the contributions of an individual academic to a Community of Practice be incorporated into Performance Management profiles or given legitimacy within workload formulae? (Especially where many CoPs are not driven by 'deliverables' as expected within the new culture of institutional managerialism).

- CoP members will decide priorities, activities and outcomes. If the CoP decides that recognition of time and performance management indicators are a key focus, members need to make decisions about processes for documenting and disseminating contributions and outcomes, as well as deciding which key groups should be invited to review these outputs.

Are there Australian examples of transdisciplinary Communities of Practice? i.e. which span the University and incorporate individuals within the wider community.

- A few are: the ascilite (Australasian Society for Computer in Learning in Tertiary Education) Collaborative Community Mentoring Program (C²MP); the OLT-funded Science and Mathematics network (SaMnet) of Australian university educators is about to start a CoP (see link for details) <http://samnetaustralia.blogspot.com.au/>
- We are certain there must be several hundred more, but it's worth pointing out that many are potentially 'below the radar'. For example, Jacquie has been invited to present to the Australian Council of Business Deans network, who operate loosely as CoP, but have no web presence to link too or a formalised CoP label.

If a new Community of Practice arises would it be appropriate for this to be profiled on the TILT Community of Practice page? Are there particular approval processes?

- Absolutely! Regardless of whether or not the CoP has been supported with funding under the UTAS CoP Initiative, we would be happy to provide a web presence for any CoPs that are functioning at UTAS. Please email awards.grants@utas.edu.au with a profile statement of the CoP and Emily Marshall will arrange for it to be uploaded.

Sustainability (of CoPs) is a topic that would be useful if another workshop was organised...

- We agree! Given the infancy of the UTAS CoP Initiative, it is paramount that we consider sustainability strategies now so that we've firmed up ways in which we can ensure both the initiative, and the work of the CoPs continues to be supported appropriately. Given the context specific nature of each CoP, it is likely that you will have recommendations to assist the continuation of work and development of knowledge and practice in the areas of interest they inhabit. At a strategic level, it will be TILT's responsibility to assist you in making the right connections to do this, but also to inform you about possible options. I think the development of sustainability strategies will be an ongoing collaborative partnership, particularly in the early days of the initiative.
- Check Jacquie McDonald's Teaching Fellowship resources web site for a range of documents relevant to the different phases of a CoP which are useful in this context. The link to "Maturity and Sustaining your CoP" is at: <http://www.usq.edu.au/cops/resources/altcfellowship/facilitator-resources/maturity>

What are some tips and strategies for engagement?

- I think Jacquie's presentation (and supporting handouts) afforded us some really relevant ideas in terms of engagement and maximising potential membership opportunities. Some of the whiteboard notes might help to clarify this thinking as well, for example:
 - what established networks might you connect with to present your ideas and build membership capacity?
 - How might you think about the phases of development for your CoP (i.e. where are you now – infancy, creation, maturity?) and how might this inform who your members might be, or where to find them?

- Also – the idea of distributing the leadership and expertise might help, so who could you invite to facilitate one of the meetings, and who might they bring along or share these ideas with to engage new members?
- Just remember also, that the amount of members is insignificant in terms of the quality of work that you CoP might engage with. You might decide that certain elements of your work are best achieved with smaller groups – but that conversations about that work is best shared among the many!
- The Office for Learning and Teaching (formerly the Australian Learning and Teaching Council) will launch the CoP Project at the end of September 2012. There will be access to a range of resources on CoP leadership and on 'recruiting members' made available as part of the project deliverables. The Project links is: www.cops.org.au.

Notes from the white board:

These are the notes that we made on the whiteboard during the workshop. They reflect some of the ideas that might prompt us to move in particular directions or provide the starting point for each CoP to determine their own courses of action. The links provided in this document and on the CoP website (see below) might also provide additional resources and ideas to progress your thinking.

- **Thinking about the idea of 'expert'**
 - CoPs are about shared expertise and leadership opportunities
- **Membership**
 - think broadly about how to tap into existing groups of champions in the domain or field of interest.
 - Combining elements of our CoPs that might be in various stages of development/different phases (initiation, infancy etc.)
 - Thinking about intersecting levels of participation and engagement.
 - How can we utilise initiatives at the strategic CoP level to enhance work at the grass-roots CoP level?
- **Sustaining action – how?**
 - Through networks;
 - (tapping into existing groups)
 - What are their roles?
 - Through action (i.e. research);
 - Sharing practice.
- **Making meaning for participants**
 - Focus, refocus
 - How do we manage group evolution
- **Management buy-in**
 - Champions model
 - Using networks and making presentations
 - Showcase your resources
 - Link to institutional benefits
 - Scholarship
 - Evidence of culture/practice change and depth of impact

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<http://www.teaching-learning.utas.edu.au/awards-and-grants/communities-of-practice-cop>