UTAS Community of Practice Initiative: Readings and Resources

These readings and resources have been included to stimulate conversations and to guide the potential ways in which you might consider or develop a community of practice at UTAS. It is by no means an exhaustive collection, however it does contain a variety of documents pertaining to: what a community of practice is and some common ways in which one might work (Blue Section - Toolkit Readings); and, how communities of practice have been applied in particular contexts within the Australian higher education landscape (Green Section - Case Study Readings).

The following lists some additional recommended texts that might assist you in considering a community of practice. They are:


**Blue Section: Toolkit Readings**


**Green Section:**

**Case Study Readings**


The term "community of practice" is of relatively recent coinage, even though the phenomenon it refers to is age-old. The concept has turned out to provide a useful perspective on knowing and learning. A growing number of people and organizations in various sectors are now focusing on communities of practice as a key to improving their performance.

This brief and general introduction examines what communities of practice are and why researchers and practitioners in so many different contexts find them useful as an approach to knowing and learning.

What are communities of practice?
Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell:

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.

Note that this definition allows for, but does not assume, intentionality: learning can be the reason the community comes together or an incidental outcome of member's interactions. Not everything called a community is a community of practice. Not everything called a community is a community of practice. A neighborhood for instance, is often called a community, but is usually not a community of practice. Three characteristics are crucial:

1. **The domain:** A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. (You could belong to the same network as someone and never know it.) The domain is not necessarily something recognized as “expertise” outside the community. A youth gang may have developed all sorts of ways of dealing with their domain: surviving on the street and maintaining
some kind of identity they can live with. They value their collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may value or even recognize their expertise.

2. **The community:** In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. A website in itself is not a community of practice. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together. The claims processors in a large insurance company or students in American high schools may have much in common, yet unless they interact and learn together, they do not form a community of practice. But members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis. The Impressionists, for instance, used to meet in cafes and studios to discuss the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they often painted alone.

3. **The practice:** A community of practice is not merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. A good conversation with a stranger on an airplane may give you all sorts of interesting insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice. The development of a shared practice may be more or less self-conscious. The “windshield wipers” engineers at an auto manufacturer make a concerted effort to collect and document the tricks and lessons they have learned into a knowledge base. By contrast, nurses who meet regularly for lunch in a hospital cafeteria may not realize that their lunch discussions are one of their main sources of knowledge about how to care for patients. Still, in the course of all these conversations, they have developed a set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice.

It is the combination of these three elements that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community.

**What do communities of practice look like?**

Communities develop their practice through a variety of activities. The following table provides a few typical examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem solving</th>
<th>“Can we work on this design and brainstorm some ideas; I’m stuck.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requests for information</td>
<td>“Where can I find the code to connect to the server?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking experience</td>
<td>“Has anyone dealt with a customer in this...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communities of practice are not called that in all organizations. They are known under various names, such as learning networks, thematic groups, or tech clubs.

While they all have the three elements of a domain, a community, and a practice, they come in a variety of forms. Some are quite small; some are very large, often with a core group and many peripheral members. Some are local and some cover the globe. Some meet mainly face-to-face, some mostly online. Some are within an organization and some include members from various organizations. Some are formally recognized, often supported with a budget; and some are completely informal and even invisible.

Communities of practice have been around for as long as human beings have learned together. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies, we all belong to communities of practice, a number of them usually. In some we are core members. In many we are merely peripheral. And we travel through numerous communities over the course of our lives.

In fact, communities of practice are everywhere. They are a familiar experience, so familiar perhaps that it often escapes our attention. Yet when it is given a name and brought into focus, it becomes a perspective that can help us understand our world better. In particular, it allows us to see past more obvious formal structures such as organizations, classrooms, or nations, and perceive the structures defined by engagement in practice and the informal learning that comes with it.

Where does the concept come from?
Social scientists have used versions of the concept of community of practice for a variety of analytical purposes, but the origin and primary use of the concept has been in learning theory. Anthropologist Jean Lave and I coined the term while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. People usually think of apprenticeship as a relationship between a student and a master, but studies of apprenticeship reveal a more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reusing assets</td>
<td>“I have a proposal for a local area network I wrote for a client last year. I can send it to you and you can easily tweak it for this new client.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination and synergy</td>
<td>“Can we combine our purchases of solvent to achieve bulk discounts?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing developments</td>
<td>“What do you think of the new CAD system? Does it really help?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation projects</td>
<td>“We have faced this problem five times now. Let us write it down once and for all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits</td>
<td>“Can we come and see your after-school program? We need to establish one in our city.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps</td>
<td>“Who knows what, and what are we missing? What other groups should we connect with?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place mostly with journeymen and more advanced apprentices. The term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Once the concept was articulated, we started to see these communities everywhere, even when no formal apprenticeship system existed. And of course, learning in a community of practice is not limited to novices. The practice of a community is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone.

Where is the concept being applied?

The concept of community of practice has found a number of practical applications in business, organizational design, government, education, professional associations, development projects, and civic life.

**Organizations.** The concept has been adopted most readily by people in business because of the recognition that knowledge is a critical asset that needs to be managed strategically. Initial efforts at managing knowledge had focused on information systems with disappointing results. Communities of practice provided a new approach, which focused on people and on the social structures that enable them to learn with and from each other. Today, there is hardly any organization of a reasonable size that does not have some form communities-of-practice initiative. A number of characteristics explain this rush of interest in communities of practice as a vehicle for developing strategic capabilities in organizations:

- Communities of practice enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, recognizing that, given the proper structure, they are in the best position to do this.
- Communities among practitioners create a direct link between learning and performance, because the same people participate in communities of practice and in teams and business units.
- Practitioners can address the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and sharing, as well as the more explicit aspects.
- Communities are not limited by formal structures: they create connections among people across organizational and geographic boundaries.

From this perspective, the knowledge of an organization lives in a constellation of communities of practice each taking care of a specific aspect of the competence that the organization needs. However, the very characteristics that make communities of practice a good fit for stewarding knowledge—autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, crossing boundaries—are also characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organizations. How this challenge is going to affect these organizations remains to be seen.

**Government.** Like businesses, government organizations face knowledge challenges of increasing complexity and scale. They have adopted communities of practice for much the same reasons, though the formality of the bureaucracy can come in the way of open knowledge sharing. Beyond internal communities, there are typical government
problems such as education, health, and security that require coordination and knowledge sharing across levels of government. There also, communities of practice hold the promise of enabling connections among people across formal structures. And there also, there are substantial organizational issues to overcome.

**Education.** Schools and districts are organizations in their own right, and they too face increasing knowledge challenges. The first applications of communities of practice have been in teacher training and in providing isolated administrators with access to colleagues. There is a wave of interest in these peer-to-peer professional-development activities. But in the education sector, learning is not only a means to an end: it the end product. The perspective of communities of practice is therefore also relevant at this level. In business, focusing on communities of practice adds a layer of complexity to the organization, but it does not fundamentally change what the business is about. In schools, changing the learning theory is a much deeper transformation. This will inevitably take longer. The perspective of communities of practice affects educational practices along three dimensions:

- **Internally:** How to organize educational experiences that ground school learning in practice through participation in communities around subject matters?
- **Externally:** How to connect the experience of students to actual practice through peripheral forms of participation in broader communities beyond the walls of the school?
- **Over the lifetime of students:** How to serve the lifelong learning needs of students by organizing communities of practice focused on topics of continuing interest to students beyond the initial schooling period?

From this perspective, the school is not the privileged locus of learning. It is not a self-contained, closed world in which students acquire knowledge to be applied outside, but a part of a broader learning system. The class is not the primary learning event. It is life itself that is the main learning event. Schools, classrooms, and training sessions still have a role to play in this vision, but they have to be in the service of the learning that happens in the world.

**Associations.** A growing number of associations, professional and otherwise, are seeking ways to focus on learning through reflection on practice. Their members are restless and their allegiance is fragile. They need to offer high-value learning activities. The peer-to-peer learning activities typical of communities of practice offer a complementary alternative to more traditional course offerings and publications.

**Social sector.** In the civic domain, there is an emergent interest in building communities among practitioners. In the non-profit world, for instance, foundations are recognizing that philanthropy needs focus on learning systems in order to fully leverage funded projects. But practitioners are seeking peer-to-peer connections and learning opportunities with or without the support of institutions. This includes regional economic development, with intra-regional communities on
various domains, as well as inter-regional learning with communities gathering practitioners from various regions.

*International development.* There is increasing recognition that the challenge of developing nations is as much a knowledge as a financial challenge. A number of people believe that a communities-of-practice approach can provide a new paradigm for development work. It emphasizes knowledge building among practitioners. Some development agencies now see their role as conveners of such communities, rather than as providers of knowledge.

*The web.* New technologies such as the Internet have extended the reach of our interactions beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities, but the increase in flow of information does not obviate the need for community. In fact, it expands the possibilities for community and calls for new kinds of communities based on shared practice.

The concept of community of practice is influencing theory and practice in many domains. From humble beginnings in apprenticeship studies, the concept was grabbed by businesses interested in knowledge management and has progressively found its way into other sectors. It has now become the foundation of a perspective on knowing and learning that informs efforts to create learning systems in various sectors and at various levels of scale, from local communities, to single organizations, partnerships, cities, regions, and the entire world.

**Further reading**

For the application of a community-based approach to knowledge in organizations:


For technology issues:


For in-depth coverage of the learning theory:


For a vision of where the learning theory is going:
**What are 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.

- **Why focus on communities of practice?**
  - **short-term value**
    - help with challenges
    - access to expertise
    - confidence
    - fun with colleagues
    - meaningful work
  - **long-term value**
    - personal development
    - reputation
    - professional identity
    - network
    - marketability
- **Why focus on communities of practice?**
  - problem solving
  - time saving
  - knowledge sharing
  - synergies across units
  - reuse of resources
  - strategic capabilities
  - keeping abreast
  - innovation
  - retention of talents
  - new strategies

**What are some critical success factors?**
- **community**
  - Domain that energizes a core group
  - Skillful and reputable coordinator
  - Involvement of experts
  - Address details of practice
  - Right rhythm and mix of activities
- **organization**
  - Strategic relevance of domain
  - Visible management sponsorship, but without micro-management
  - Dance of formal and informal structures
  - Adequate resources
  - Consistent attitude

**What elements to develop?**
- **Domain**
  - the definition of the area of shared inquiry and of the key issues
- **Community**
  - the relationships among members and the sense of belonging
- **Practice**
  - the body of knowledge, methods, stories, cases, tools, documents

**Where to start?**
- **educate**
  - Communities of practice are a familiar experience, but people need to understand how they fit in their work.
  - Conduct workshops to educate management and potential members about the approach
  - Help people appreciate how communities of practice are inherently self-defined and self-managed
  - Establish a language to legitimize communities and establish their place in the organization
- **support**
  - Communities of practice can use some light-handed guidance and technology infrastructure.
  - Provide some process support, coaching, and logistic assistance
  - Identify needs and define adequate infrastructure without undue emphasis on fancy technology
- **encourage**
  - Practitioners usually see the value of working as a community but may feel the organization is not aligned with their understanding.
  - Find sponsors to encourage participation
  - Value the work of communities
  - Publicize successes

**set strategic context**
A strategic context lets communities find a legitimate place in the organization.
- Articulate a strategic value proposition
- Identify critical business problems
- Articulate need to leverage knowledge

**get going**
Starting to cultivate communities of practice as early as possible creates early examples that allow people to learn by doing.
- Have a few pilot communities going as soon as possible
- Find communities to start with by identifying areas where there is potential and readiness
- Interview some prospective members to understand issues, start discussing a community, and identify potential leaders
- Gather a core group to prepare and initiate a launch process
- Help members organize an initial series of value-adding activities
- Encourage them to take increasing responsibility for stewarding their knowledge

**integrate**
The formal organization must have processes and structure to include these communities while honoring their root in personal passion and engagement.
- Integrate communities in the way the organization works
- Identify and remove obvious barriers
- Align key structural and cultural elements

**A quick start-up guide**
*by Etienne Wenger*
Community of Practice (CoP) – from own to shared knowledge

SDC aims to enhance learning across organisational units and empower people in their work. A Community of Practice is a convincing way of doing this.

Does your CoP pass the fitness test?

Experience shows that a successful CoP fulfills the criteria of the fitness test. Check your own CoP and tick ✔ what applies to it!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Concrete check questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Are the selected topics of interest to all members?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is the domain strategically relevant to the involved organisations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do all members have their own practice in the domain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of CoP</td>
<td>Is the relevant experience on board?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is the heterogeneity of the members assured?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is the CoP open to new members?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms and rules</td>
<td>Are roles and accountability defined in a common agreement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are both distant contacts and face-to-face meetings possible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the balance between giving and taking among members?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure and process</td>
<td>Is the chosen structure clear and flexible enough?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are key roles in the core group defined, such as owner, manager, facilitator, and expert?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is the step-by-step planning process open and transparent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flow of “energy”</td>
<td>Do members care about common interests, commitment and trust?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there regular face-to-face events, celebrated (social) key moments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is the history of the CoP alive and told to new members?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Is there a common concern as a basis for producing tangible results?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do members get direct and practical benefits?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are results officially recognised by the CoP members’ organisations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Do the members have a sufficient time budget for the CoP?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are the member organisations willing to provide time and money?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is the facilitation attractive and stimulating?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values in a CoP</td>
<td>Is listening to others a living virtue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are members willing to give without immediate return?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is diversity in thinking and practice validated?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Result? How many ✔ did you mark?
0 … 8 Your CoP is still in its infancy
9 … 15 Your CoP may be in need of serious coaching.
16 … 19 Your CoP is running well. Some aspects may require improvements.
20 … 22 Please tell us about your CoP! It must be a fine experience!
23 … 24 You probably have a too optimistic picture of your CoP! Please check again!

How to start a CoP?

Every CoP has its own history, milestones, highlights and pitfalls. Knowing this history is a key to understanding the nature and the development potential of a CoP. Like every organisational form, a CoP has a life cycle and goes through different stages – from its creation to its phasing out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Associated metaphors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Express your need to interact with peers:</td>
<td>Germination Creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know – you know – we together might know better!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Start a discussion of a domain in a core group and discover a common interest in this interaction. Dare introducing new forms of sharing experience. Encourage others!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budding stage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Contact potentially interested people by phone, by mail, and in informal talks during workshops and gatherings. Attract their attention and awaken their interest. Involve them in a first small and useful interaction. Let them feel the possible benefits.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Design the interaction in terms of time and place: Contributions in journals, discussions in electronic platforms, and meetings. Pay attention to early, intermediate results, summaries and conclusions of discussions. Ensure the flow of the process, assure added value for all participants. Motivate individuals through backchannel contacts. Organise the core group (owner, convenor, facilitator, experts) and take care of the inner and the outer circle.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting an expedition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Organize workshops and face to face meetings on core topics. Strive for concrete products. Live and learn within the CoP – this important phase of a CoP can last up to several years or even decades.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoP in full swing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Phase out when the domain of the CoP is becoming less relevant. Determine whether a reorientation might open a new vision. Organize a closing event. Celebrate the farewell with results achieved! Use the empty space and time for new initiatives or contributions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission accomplished</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy ending</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of Year Party</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support and Coaching

SDC is offering a service entitled, Knowledge Management – Getting Started.

For details please refer to:
Knowledge and Research Office, Phone ++41 31 323 38 17

Community of Practice (CoP) – from own to shared knowledge

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of committed people, active in a common domain, with a genuine interest in each others’ expertise based on their own practice. Members combine their own interests with an open mandate from their organisation and work together in a rather informal structure.
The six essentials of a CoP

(1) There is a **Community**. A Community has active members with a lively interest in sharing their knowledge. Being a community means something special to the members, and the community has a certain priority. It is not just “what I do after six in the evening”. Members are keen to meet each other because they benefit from the community.

(2) There is a **Domain**. A CoP has a clear domain, a thematic orientation that is neither too narrow nor too large. This domain is relevant and meaningful to the members; they are interested in specific topics and expect to improve their own practice by sharing experience related to what they do.

(3) There is a **Practice**. Each and every member has his/her own practice within the domain of the CoP, and members know about each others’ practice. One’s own practice serves as a kind of reality check when sharing experience, concepts and strategies. Reflecting on one’s own practice against the background of other practices is one of the essentials of a CoP.

(4) There is **Motivation**. A CoP exists only through the motivation of its members. This motivation is recognizable by their personal interest and the priority they assign to the CoP in their daily work. Adhering to a CoP often means developing a passion for it.

(5) There is a **Mandate**. By means of a mandate, the management of the organisation shows its interest in and commitment to the CoP. It defines, on one hand, the thematic focus and the expected concrete results. On the other hand, the mandate provides an open space for self-commitment to its members, in terms of time and financial resources.

(6) There is a balance of formal and informal **Structure**. A CoP is a structure beyond organisational boxes and lines. Hierarchy is not an important element. Most CoPs crosslink organisational units and organisations.

The basic structure of a CoP

Most communities of practice have a threefold concentric structure: a core group, an inner circle, and an outer circle.

The core group acts as a managing group based on an agreed co-ordination mandate. It co-ordinates the activities of the CoP and ensures secretarial support if necessary.

The inner circle functions as a steering committee with an informal structure, meeting once or twice a year. Individual members of the inner circle may be in contact with the core group on demand.

The outer circle consists of interested people, contributors, and readers, forming a loose network.

A CoP exists in a concrete context and depends on it

An organisation is ready to host a CoP or to allocate time and resources for a CoP if:
- The domain has a strategic importance for the organisation.
- The CoP and the organisation share common values.
- The organization recognises learning and knowledge management as an important asset.
- The results are relevant and beneficial for the organisation and its members (i.e. there is an added value).

A successful CoP is able to cope with the values, the culture and the pragmatism of all supporting organisations.

CoP ... or ... task force ... or ... interest group ... or ...???

A CoP is a kind of a network. But what is the difference between a CoP and other groups of cooperating people? The most striking differences are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of the cooperating group</th>
<th>Tentative main differences with a CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest Group: Group of persons interested in a topic that invites experts and shares experience. Open for new members, and supported by facilitation.</td>
<td>Loose form, passive role of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Force: A group of specialists working on a specific task given by the management, often under time pressure.</td>
<td>Guided by management, result-oriented, limited time frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Help Group: Individuals with similar problems gather for mutual support. Frequent focus on topics related to health and addiction.</td>
<td>Focus on individual problem-solving, coping with a difficult life situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their business unit, collaborators shape the organisation; in their teams, collaborators take care of projects; through networks, collaborators form relationships; in their CoPs, collaborators develop the knowledge that lets them perform these other tasks.
Communities of Practice (CoP) – from own to shared knowledge

A co-production of Ernst Bolliger (AGRIDEA), Urs Egger (SKAT), Manuel Flury (DEZA), Ueli Scheuermeier, Tonino Zellweger (both AGRIDEA), Arthur Zimmermann (odcp consult)

Communities of Practice (CoP) – a new term in development and co-operation? Is it just another trendy expression or is there something new behind it?
In this paper we reflect the idea and the background of the term "Communities of Practice". A few selected concrete examples illustrate the reflections.

A Community of Practice (COP) is a Group of Committed People

A Community of Practice is a group of committed people with the concern of sharing their expertise and knowledge in a common domain of their professional activities in order to perform their tasks on a high quality level. Knowledge sharing and learning is stimulated by problems and challenges of the professional practice, and thus is action oriented.
Communities of Practice exist without formal hierarchy; their structure is function oriented. Members participate mainly based on their own interest and motivation, less based on a clearly defined task of their organisation.
In brief, this is what we understand to be a Community of Practice – a CoP. But let's start with a metaphor that may help to explain the spirit behind a CoP.

COPs and Vikings – a metaphor to understand the nature of a Community of Practice

Vikings roamed the rough northern seas in their very well made ships. Each man had an oar and rowed. One or two guys took care of the steering.

The rowers were free men, having opted to join the group on their own free will in order to go "viking" together. The group was initiated by an enterprising (and sometimes rich) leader, who took care that a ship was built. Then he looked for fellow crew members, who would join him on the ship. They were not paid. Each crew-member took his seaman's chest along to sit on while rowing. It held his own personal belongings. Usually the initiator took care of steering, but the crew could always insist that another took the steering oar, if it turned out that he knew the coast better. And off they went into the sea, to explore, to settle.

And often women were on board too, particularly when the idea was to settle on a faraway coast. The women knew about that better than men. They had a high standing because they managed the economy.

A Community of Practice is similar to a boat of Vikings:
• There is no strict hierarchy on board. The steering was more or less mandated on the Viking's ship, as is the facilitation of a COP.
• There is a mandate for the whole expedition between the community back home and the crew on board (trade, new territories, etc.).
• A COP can only achieve something if the members engage to get things moving, as with the ship that doesn't move unless the rowers agree to row in a coordinated manner.
• Each member must bring along his/her expertise and resources, as with the rowers who each sit on their own seaman's chest and bring along an oar.
• A COP needs some kind of a structure to be effective; Vikings need a boat for discovering new territories.
• COPs are most often initiated by a small group of committed people, as with the Vikings where an enterprising leader looks for a couple of likeminded people who plan the trip, then they look for crew members who may join.
• COPs cannot be ordered to happen, as with the Vikings, where the setting up of a crew was a matter of free will. The crews were "gangs" in their own right.
• Members of a COP do a lot of other things, too. The Viking crew as well switched from "viking" to settling, if they wished. However here, there is a limitation in the analogy: Today, a COP member can be simultaneously in a job and in various COPs, whereas a member of a Viking crew had to stay on board as long as they were at sea.
• Learning happens all the time among members of a COP, as with the Vikings, where the younger ones learned from more experienced crew members who had been travelling along a coast on earlier forays.
• There is no objective or mission that could be accomplished, as with the Vikings, who learn about "viking". There might be single objectives like getting to a place and doing something there. But the real skill of the Vikings was, that they could repeatedly and reliably cross the rough seas and arrive fit for settling or fighting. That was "viking". This seamanship was the "art" that made the Vikings so successful (and their skills at statesmanship. I wonder how the two arts/skills interacted). This art of seamanship needed to be cultivated. It was cultivated on the ships during voyages. It was their "practice". As with a COP: It cultivates an art, a skill, a practice - it's not a one-shot affair.

The six Essentials of a Community of Practice

According to our experience, three essentials are obvious; another three are hidden.

The three obvious aspects help to differentiate a community of practice from other forms of information sharing or working together: **Community - Domain - Practice**.

(1) **There is a Community.** A Community has active members (more and less active ones). Being a community represents something special for the members. There is a lively interest for the community and its topics. And the community has a certain priority. It is not just "the thing I am doing after six in the evening". Members like to meet and to share.

(2) **There is a Domain.** A CoP has a clear domain, a thematic orientation, neither too narrow nor too large. This domain is relevant and meaningful for the members; they are interested in this specific domain.

(3) **There is a Practice.** Each and every member has his/her own practice within the domain of the CoP and members know about each others' practice. The own practice serves as a kind of check-reality, when sharing experience, concepts and strategies. Verifying in the own practice what is shared and discussed in theory is one of the essentials of a CoP.

Three essentials are hidden: **Motivation, Mandate and Structure**.

(4) **There is a Motivation.** A CoP exists only through the motivation of its members, visible in their personal interest and in the priority they attribute to the CoP in their daily activities.

(5) **There is a Mandate.** The mandate of the concerned organisation(s) defines on one side the thematic focus with the declared interest of the organisation in a concrete outcome; on the other side, the mandate gives open space for self commitment to its members (working time and financial resources).

(6) **There is an informal structure.** Finally, a CoP is a structure beyond organisational boxes and lines. Most CoPs make a link between organisational units and between organisations. Horizontal and diagonal links are very typical for a CoP.
Benefit of a Community of Practice for its Members and its Organisations

The most prominent benefits of a community of practice for its members are:
- Ensuring access to relevant knowledge – explicit knowledge available in institutions and with individuals and tacit knowledge living with individuals;
- Ensuring the quality of knowledge and knowledge management for the concerned organisations;
- Getting access to experienced persons in the respective domain;
- Quickly finding common ground for jointly implemented projects.

According to our observation, CoPs contribute to improving quality and sustainability of projects and programmes, increasing the potential for innovation, reducing risk factors and finally influencing organisational change.

The basic Structure of a Community of Practice

Most communities of practice have a kind of a threefold circle structure. A core group, an inner circle and an outer circle.

The core group acts as a kind of managing group. It coordinates the activities and assures the work of a secretariat.

The inner circle is a kind of a steering committee, meeting once or twice a year. Individual members of the inner circle may be in contact with the core group on demand.

The outer circle consists of interested members. They are contributors and clients of the CoP.

A Community of Practice is a Group of Peers

Communities of Practice aim at sharing knowledge among the members. Knowledge sharing combines two things: Communicating knowledge and valorising the gained knowledge.

If I want to share knowledge I need to find an appropriate form for doing so. It does not mean transferring data or pumping information into one another's brains. It is a question of reducing the own vast and rich experience into a meaningful form of presentation. A frequent form is a mix of theory and models combined with anecdotes and stories.

The knowledge gained from others needs to be applied and verified in my own reality. Does the theory hold true in my conditions? How do partner-organisations react? The theory gets
an enrichment in my own situation; there is a new process of implementation and experimen-
tation. The following graph shows the sequence of steps.

**Flow & Crystal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flow: experimenting, implementing, enriching</th>
<th>Crystal: reducing, theory &amp; model; story &amp; anecdote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flow:</strong> experimenting, implementing, enriching</td>
<td><strong>Crystal:</strong> reducing, theory &amp; model; story &amp; anecdote</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Differences between a CoP and other Forms of Cooperating Groups**

Let us start this discussion with an anecdote: A couple of years ago, in a workshop on farm-
ing systems research, a researcher resumed one of his key lessons: "What we discussed
during this workshop, principles, procedures, roles, rules, communication patterns, ... is just
what we did for the last ten years in our collaborative research projects. I am happy to know
at least, how you officially call what we are doing."

This anecdote brings to the point what can happen to you when you start talking of CoP to
someone. You might get the answer: "That's exactly, what we are doing ever since."
Nevertheless, let's try to characterise some current forms of cooperating groups and identify
their main differences to a CoP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of the cooperating group</th>
<th>Tentative main differences to a CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group for experience sharing:</strong> Frequent among (young) professionals who want to share their experience. Often guided by a facilitator / animator and limited in time to e.g. two years. Also reflection of professional practice → supervision groups.</td>
<td>participants with similar working situation. (a loose form of a CoP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Circle (in German: &quot;Arbeitskreis&quot;):</strong> A closed interest group aiming at improving economical fitness of the enterprises of its members. Members act as experts with external facilitation.</td>
<td>closed circle; fixed working cycles (a closed form of a CoP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interest Group:</strong> Group of persons interested in a topic. Inviting experts and sharing experience. Open groups, with facilitation.</td>
<td>relatively passive role of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Info-Network:</strong> Common topic or area of activities. Normally a loose net with the possibility to interact on demand (exchange of information, question – answer)</td>
<td>loose form, low commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Group:</strong> mainly created within institutions to work on defined issues, tasks. Result oriented. Often very limited in time.</td>
<td>nominated and task given by superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task Force:</strong> A group of specialists working on a task given by the management, often under time pressure.</td>
<td>short term problem / result oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality Circle:</strong> A formally installed group within an institution aiming at improving the quality of a process / product.</td>
<td>nominated by the management; quality oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self Help Group:</strong> Persons with similar problems gather for mutual help (support, information, experience). Frequent for topics of health and addiction.</td>
<td>personal stress situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In practice, a set of questions might help to understand whether we are speaking of a CoP or another form of interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key question</th>
<th>Typical answer when speaking of a CoP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the size of the group?</td>
<td>Open, between 10 and 100, or even more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is participating? What is the commitment?</td>
<td>Interested professionals, committed by personal professional interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the inner structure of the group? What roles can be differen-</td>
<td>Informal structure, no hierarchy. Core group with owners, experts and facilitator; inner circle with active participants; open for interested people (outer circle).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tiated?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the domain of concern (theme, topic)? Who defines it?</td>
<td>A clearly defined domain (= thematic field), defined by owners and active participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the aim of the interaction?</td>
<td>Increase the quality standard of the professional work through access to relevant information, knowledge and experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent motivation and interest are personal and to what extent mandated by the institution?</td>
<td>Personal interest is predominant. The institutions declare their interest in general terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of results are expected? Who defines them?</td>
<td>No strict planning of activities and results. Often concrete results are the outcome of a process, not planned, but happening by chance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the planned duration of the interaction?</td>
<td>Open, depending on funding. Reviews prove the value (outcome and concrete results) of a CoP. A CoP exists as long as it serves the members and member organisations. Without concrete results, a CoP is to be closed down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is the working mood of the group?</td>
<td>A high commitment by the members is very typical for a CoP.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where does the information / knowledge / experience come from?</td>
<td>Mainly by the active participants (inner circle and core group); external experts may be consulted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the working tools of the group?</td>
<td>Networking, workshops, peer exchange, peer review, joint projects, joint evaluations, joint planning, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is the group financed? Who has an interest in its financing?</td>
<td>Financing through interested organisations (funds and working time).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of CoPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Short characteristics with regard to CoP-features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGUASAN</td>
<td>A group of water supply specialists started in 1983 with a knowledge sharing event that was highly appreciated. In the following years a stable core group went on keeping the AGUASAN group alive. The main purpose was experience sharing and knowledge generating in the domain of water and sanitation. Every year, up to 4 meetings of the core group and a one week workshop with some 30 participants and changing resource persons are the key activities. ➔ A „Community of Practice“, that is facing the handing over to a next generation. <a href="http://www.skat-foundation.org">www.skat-foundation.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Thematic Groups World Bank

Roughly 80 working groups within the World Bank System deal with different topics, partly as internal groups, partly with external participation. They have a general mandate and certain means (secretarial support) of the Bank; they all are accountable to the Bank for results / outcome. These working groups are reported to be a success story of the World Bank and serve as examples for CoPs in the field of International Cooperation.

- Inter-linked Communities of Practice within one big organisation.  

### SDRA: Skills Development in Rural Areas

A group of experts and practitioners in vocational training and rural development are leading an internet discussion on SDRA. The objective is to elaborate working guidelines for SDRA. The internet discussion is a first step, followed by a face-to-face workshop and an option for a future CoP.

- Mandate and financial resources by SDC’s section Employment and Income.
  - A Community of Practice in its first stage; the facilitator is speaking of a “Proto-CoP”, that might become a CoP after the face-to-face workshop.  
  [www.skilldevrural.net](http://www.skilldevrural.net)

### SDC-finance

Specialists of the finance administration of SDC headquarters and COOFs started an electronic discussion platform, administrated and facilitated by staff of the headquarters. In the centre of the activities are Questions & Answers. A lively participation, quick answers to raised questions, no facilitated or structured discussion of conceptual issues so far.

- Functions as a virtual self help group; offers the possibility to evolve in specialised Communities of Practice (as „off-springs“).

### SDC-finance-Asia

After a regional workshop in spring 2004, a group of finance administrators from two sections of SDC started a common electronic platform (<sdc-finance-asia>), with an administrator.

The intention is to discuss conceptual issues of regional importance in addition to the Q&A practice within <sdc-finance>.

- The group is about to form a Community of Practice.

### SDC-aids

Initiated in a workshop in 2002, South and East Africa section staff formed a closed discussion group about HIV-AIDS.

The group maintains an electronic platform (<sdc-aids>).

It started with the exchange of interesting documents; in 2003 facilitated discussions about selected conceptual issues followed.

- Presents many elements of a Community of Practice.  
  [http://www.aidsnet.ch](http://www.aidsnet.ch)

### Network of Ethnologists-

Interested group of ethnologists working at SDC headquarters. Initiated and coordinated by a key person.

The network acts according to self set rules and topics; members are meeting regularly.

- Community of Interest with the potential to evolve in a Community of Practice.

### SDC-knowledge

Electronic platform initiated by the thematic service “Knowledge and Research” for the exchange about conceptual issues regarding knowledge management within Swiss International Cooperation and the SDC knowledge management.

- Started as a Community of Interest; without noticeable activities as yet. Will be closed down soon.

## Typical Development Stages of a CoP

Every CoP has its own story, its own history. Knowing this (hi-)story is a key to the correct understanding of the nature and the development potential of a CoP. As every organisational form, a CoP develops through different stages of "live" – from creation to extinction.
CoPs take off based on a felt and expressed strong need. CoPs position themselves in a broader organisational setting. CoPs die, whenever the need is satisfied, the potential exhausted, the job done. CoPs tend to exist the longer, the more they manage to produce useful and recognised results. The more results are produced, the more new topics emerge, giving additional life-energy to a CoP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Associated pictures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I know – you know – we together might know better Someone feels the need to interact with peers</td>
<td>Germination, creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 A core group starts a discussion in a domain and discovers a lively interest in this interaction. Encouraging experience → eager for more</td>
<td>&quot;The holy swear&quot; = the meeting of at least three core members as founding group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Lobbying by phone, mail, meetings, informal talks during workshops and congresses. The attention and the interest of relevant people is increasing.</td>
<td>Growing of a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Structuring the interaction (phases and places of discussion): Contributions in journals, discussion on platforms and in e-mails – intermediate results – conclusions of discussions. The core group and the outer group get structured: owner – worker – facilitator – expert.</td>
<td>Adventure group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Workshops (face to face meetings) around core topics → striving for concrete results. Most prominent phase for concrete products.</td>
<td>Living and learning within a CoP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Phasing out: The domain of the CoP is getting less relevant or changes completely. A re-orientation may open a new direction. The end of the activities creates room for new initiatives.</td>
<td>Mission accomplished, happy end, last event</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Important Issues**

Experience shows, that the development of a CoP crosses various critical stages that are prone for mistakes and failures. The following issues need particular attention in building and promoting CoPs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Needs special attention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Composition of members of a CoP</td>
<td>• Bring in the key-stakeholders • The practice must take into account the heterogeneity of the members: some primarily represent their organisations or organisational units, others represent themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication among the members</td>
<td>• The different members have varying needs of being connected. • Balance the important face to face meetings with other forms of staying in contact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules and roles</td>
<td>• CoPs work best in an informal (non-hierarchical) way. • But even informality needs basic rules of communication and collaboration (define responsibility and accountability) and a common agreement • Take care for the key roles in the inner circle (owner, manager, expert, facilitator, ...) especially in handing over phases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Flow of “energy”
- Keep away from routine
- Balance between giving and taking among members
- Care for commitment, affinity and trust
- From time to time a face to face event increases the energy
- Keep the history of the CoP alive repeat it to new members

### Linking different realities (including field realities)
- Each member brings in his/her reality based on their background and competence

### Changes of content and members
- Stay open to changing priorities be it of member organisations or in the wider environment
- Be prepared for changing (core) members

### Applicability of results
- A common concern is more likely to produce tangible results
- Formulate clearly identified issues and go for useful and tangible products
- Make the insights and lessons accessible to others

### Ownership of results and the process
- Useful results make the CoP attractive for the member organisation and at the same time justify the process for reaching these results

### Resources
- Members must be able to reserve enough time for a CoP; evenings and weekends are not sufficient.
- Member organisations must be willing to provide time and money
- A step by step planning keeps members and their organisations in touch with the CoP

### Mode of work
- The core group must keep up a close contact and sometimes put some other members “under pressure”
- Some members are grateful for suggestions be it for a closer collaboration be it for the application of results
- Present results and outcome to a wider public

### Key assumptions in a CoP
- Members look for a direct and practical benefit
- Listening to others is a virtue
- Members are willing to give without expectation of an immediate return
- A reflecting group produces new and useful ideas
- Diversity in thinking and in looking at common issues are allowed and welcome

---

... in short:

- Make sure key stakeholders are members
- Be aware of the specificity of the subject (domain)
- Care for shared internal rules, a code of conduct
- Keep the energy flowing
- Create links between (different) stakeholders and their realities
- Adjust to changes in the environment
- Strive for most practical and tangible outputs/outcomes
- Stay aware of ownership
- Make the resources available
- Select carefully the ways of communication, of "being connected"
- Focus on the value of the CoP for the members
Useful Links to the Internet

Etienne Wenger, author of "Cultivating Communities of Practice":
http://www.ewenger.com/

Here a copy of the "Quick start-up guide for a CoP"

SDC is offering a service "Coaching for CoP". Details you find under:
http://www.agridea-international.ch

Still more? If this is not enough food for thought, please check in the internet under
http://www.google.ch/ ... enter CoP into the search engine ... and you will find another 5 to 6
million entries about CoP, COP, Cop and cop, in all their meanings, from "Community of
Practice" to "Policeman". And every day, there are more!
Good Practice Guide 5: Developing a Community of Practice (COP) to Support Curriculum Reform

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion and deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area from ongoing interaction with others (Wenger, McDermott & Synder, 2002). They can take many forms and may involve members from one organisation or from many organisations however a community of practice has several characteristics which make them unique. These include:

- Community - A self-organising group which agrees on the focus of the group, goals and the form of working and sharing ideas.
- Domain - The group deals with a theme of common interest. Examples of domain specific groups include early career faculty, graduate students, specific teaching topics and specific areas of professional knowledge.
- Practice - Members of a community of practice share their combined resources, including their experiences, stories and tools. Communities of practice bring together a wealth of information where members can share their experience to solve problems.
- Motivation - Members must have a professional interest or passion to be involved in the group and cannot be mandated or instructed to be involved by their organisation.
- Mandate - An organisation however must in their mandate show interest and commitment towards the community or practice
- Structure - Must be a balance between formal and informal structure.

(SDC, 2009)

Communities of practice are comprised of three layers, an inner core who manage and organise the group and participate regularly, an active group who attend regularly but do not contribute as often as those in the core group and then there is a peripheral group who are interested but do not participate as often (Wenger et al., 2002).

Your Curriculum Team is a Community of Practice

Communities of practice provide opportunities for sharing of knowledge and resources. Benefits include:

- Increased networking
- Increased research outputs in learning and teaching scholarship
- Transfer of knowledge between younger and older staff
- Re-energizing and re-engaging staff thus improving staff morale
- Provides opportunities for problem solving and develops new capabilities in members
- Best practice is enacted and standardised practice can develop
- Increase talent
- Produce time savings
• Ensure mistakes are avoided and
• New knowledge is created (Reaburn, 2009).
• Allow organisations to attract and retain the best staff (Wenger et al., 2002)
• Improve student learning (Beach & Cox, 2009)

Developing a Community of Practice?
The Swiss Agency for Development of Cooperation (SDC) (2009) suggested six stages in developing Communities of Practice

1. Creation - express an interest/need to interact with peers
2. Development - start small with discussion with a core group to discover a common interest
3. Growth - contact other potentially interested people, by phone, email or informally at workshops, conferences etc.
4. Focused adventure - design the interaction in terms of time and place. Meetings, discussions on electronic platforms, contributions to journals. Organise the core group (owner, convenor, facilitator, experts) and organise inner and outer groups.
5. Operational - organise workshops and face to face meetings on core topics on interest. Work to create products and outcomes. This phase of living and learning with CoP can last up to several years or decades.
6. Celebration - the community phases out when the domain of the CoP is becoming less relevant. Celebrate what has been achieved.

Wegner et al. (2002) also described seven principles for cultivating communities of practice

1. Communities evolve over time, therefore design for evolution - Start with little structure, for example problem solving meetings or a community coor dinator.
2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives - Insiders have a good understanding of the groups' potential to develop and outsiders have ideas about what groups should achieve and help to see new possibilities.
3. Invite different levels of participation - coordinator, core group, active group, peripheral members, and those who are outsiders to the group (those not involved but have an interest). These levels or participation change over time for members.
4. Public and private community spaces - ensure a range of interactions. Public spaces include face to face meetings and online web groups and private spaces are individual one-on-one networking. A common mistake is to have too many public meetings.
5. Focus on value - create events, activities and relationships that allow the value of the group to emerge.
6. Combine familiarity and excitement - offer a range of familiar activities/ tools, but also provide divergent thinking and activity
7. Create a rhythm for the community - regular meetings, teleconferences, discussion and meetings online. Must find a balance of activities, not too fast to overwhelm members and not too slow where the community is sluggish and little is achieved.

(Wenger et al., 2002)

**Challenges for Communities of Practice**

Communities of practice can experience many challenges and it is unlikely that they can all be avoided. It is therefore important to be mindful and watch for their development, taking a pro-active approach when problems arise (Wenger et al., 2002). A range of challenges have been described by Wenger et al. (2002) these include (but are not limited to):

- Communities can become closed to new ideas and are reluctant to critique each other. This can be a barrier to new comers to the group.
- Communities can develop a sense of ownership over knowledge, this can lead to arrogance where communities feel their perspective on the domain should prevail and that their domain is more important than others.
- Communities who are marginalised, where members have a shared discontent become places to share frustrations and gripes rather than enacting change.
- Some communities can suffer internal wars, where disagreements between members can consume the group.
- Relationships between members can become too strong, where the group becomes exclusive, it is difficult for new members to join and members are likely not to critique each other.
- Too much dependence on the coordinator or on a central leader makes the group vulnerable if this person leaves. This also decreases the diversity of perspectives in the group.
- When leadership is not shared and distinct classes of the group develop, it is difficult for the group to have a shared identity
- A community can be too large or dispersed to actively engage members, people may sign up but not contribute or honour their commitments.
- Barriers to outsiders can develop when communities develop specialised methods, environments and use technical jargon.
- Some communities can focus too heavily on documenting, where the group begins to see its purpose as producing documents.
- Other communities do not document enough. Where ideas are continually re-worked and discussed leading to an unproductive group.
- A reluctance to change hinders groups, where they became set in their ways and are hesitant to accept outside perspectives.
References and Resources:


Engaging Communities

Proceedings of the

31st HERDSA Annual Conference

1-4 July 2008

Rotorua, New Zealand

Community learning: Members’ stories about their academic community of practice,
in Engaging Communities, Proceedings of the 31st HERDSA Annual Conference, Rotorua,
1-4 July 2008: pp 221-229.

Published 2008 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 1441 001X
ISBN: 0 908557 73 6

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets
DEEWR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence,
expertise and experience and received the full paper devoid of the authors’ names and
institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Where substantial differences
existed between the two reviewers, a third reviewer was appointed. Papers were evaluated
on the basis of originality, quality of academic merit, relevance to the conference theme and
the standard of writing/presentation. Following review, this full paper was presented at the
international conference.

Copyright@ 2008 HERDSA and the authors. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, criticism or review,
as permitted under the Copyright, Design and Patent Act, 2005, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any for
or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the
terms and licenses issued by the copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to
the publishers at the address above.
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 disjunction
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, fromagé 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.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge the first year core course leaders’ community of practice members. In addition, the authors acknowledge the support of the Faculty of Business and the Vice Chancellor’s Strategic Grants scheme in supporting the community of practice.
References


Copyright © 2008 McDonald, J., Collins, P., Hingst, R., Kimmins, L., Lynch, B., & Star, C. The authors assign HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive right to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD and in printed form within the HERDSA 2008 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.
Engaging Communities

Proceedings of the

31st HERDSA Annual Conference

1-4 July 2008

Rotorua, New Zealand


Published 2008 by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 1441 001X
ISBN: 0 908557 73 6

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DEEWR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence, expertise and experience and received the full paper devoid of the authors’ names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Where substantial differences existed between the two reviewers, a third reviewer was appointed. Papers were evaluated on the basis of originality, quality of academic merit, relevance to the conference theme and the standard of writing/presentation. Following review, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

Copyright@ 2008 HERDSA and the authors. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Design and Patent Act, 2005, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms and licenses issued by the copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers at the address above.
Developing a vision of sustainable community

Christine Brown  
University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia  
christine_brown@uow.edu.au

Rebecca Albury  
University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia  
rebecca_albury@uow.edu.au

University Strategic Plans provide the institutional context for situating learning and teaching goals alongside research, community engagement, staff, students, an international outlook, and business and enterprise. This paper describes a developing vision and three key implementation strategies to focus on innovation in learning and teaching. The trigger for its development was provided by the Carrick Institute’s Excellence Initiative funding. Formulation of the grant application crystallised an analysis of current gaps in support for staff wishing to engage with Award, Grant and Fellowship opportunities at the institutional and national level.

The aim of the Promoting Excellence Initiative (PEI) at the University of Wollongong is to develop a sustainable community with a passion for learning and teaching innovation, and the means to achieve their goals. The three key strategies identified as a starting point for engaging a larger community of practice in progressing the vision are a distributed network of learning and teaching mentors, enhanced systems for recording and sharing practice, and an evolving program of practice celebrations.

The authors have analysed and reflected on the seemingly rapid process of gap analysis and strategy formulation that has, in reality, taken three years; numerous opportunities for collaboration with a large number of university staff; and a significant intellectual and time commitment by a core team in the Excellence, Diversity and Innovation in Teaching Subcommittee (EDITS) of the University Education Committee. The critical tensions between formal and informal opportunities for collaboration are highlighted.

Keywords: innovation, community of practice, leadership

Introduction

The University of Wollongong’s strategic plan for the next triennium is shaped by a vision of excellence and innovation. To realise such a vision of learning and teaching in a period of financial uncertainty and a focus on research excellence, measured by a revised RQF, demands enhanced organisational expertise that spreads responsibility beyond the current relatively small number of people presently designated as leaders in learning and teaching. A sharing community of innovative teaching academics will be built on the foundation of current practice to include a team of innovation mentors, systems for recording and sharing practice, and regular celebrations of learning and
teaching by engaging a larger team that is physically distributed and functionally varied. It will provide opportunity for collaboration, and overlap of roles and responsibilities to ensure systems are continually refined, rather than periodically re-invented.

The activities of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and Teaching and Learning Fund have provided a focus on teaching for Australian universities. In particular, the grants and awards programmes of the Carrick Institute have contributed to the development of a common language of excellence in contributions to learning and the student experience. In addition, the programmes reward outstanding practitioners. Simultaneously, many universities have struggled to provide the support for staff applying for grants or making submissions for awards since there are few equivalents of the research offices that have been developed over the past decade or two. At the University of Wollongong, the Promoting Excellence Initiative (PEI), funded by the Carrick Institute, now the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), provides the opportunity to develop an integrated approach and move from ad hoc to more formal and widely shared processes of support for engagement with activities that support ALTC objectives and the university objective of high quality teaching.

This paper will provide an analytic description of this vision for a sustainable community of practice that supports high quality learning and teaching by explaining the gaps in the existing institutional practices and describing the integration of the three elements of a team of mentors, improved recording and sharing systems, and celebrations that promote sharing good practice as part of developing communities of practice. Other institutions may benefit from a comparative analysis of their key strategies with these three elements, and enhanced awareness of the benefits of detailed process documentation to support reflection and iterative rather than ad hoc refinement of university wide processes for staff engagement with teaching awards and grants.

**Existing institutional practices**

The Excellence, Diversity and Innovation in Teaching Subcommitteee (EDITS) of the University Education Committee is charged with the dual responsibilities of managing learning and teaching awards and grants, and providing strategic advice on ways to foster, enhance and share innovations in learning and teaching. Although a new committee chair was appointed in 2005, continuity and corporate memory of core processes were retained by continued presence of several past committee members including the past committee chair, now a Faculty Dean, and the Dean of Students. Given that at any time there may be one or two committee members on study leave, the core group size averages five plus a committee executive officer.

The new chair instigated an informal approach to many of the committee meetings, to contrast the very formal and lengthy meetings when the committee members constitute the assessment panel for awards or grants. The latter meetings require substantial preparation in the preceding week(s), and panel members arrive with detailed notes or evaluative feedback on applications, the apparent impact of the support process on application quality, and suggestions for process or support improvements. Assessment of awards and grants follow annual cycles that are constantly adjusted to complement the
Timing of national learning and teaching award and grant deadlines; to avoid staff overload with peak teaching activities; to acknowledge traditional holiday periods; and to allow staff to meet key research grant timelines. The available funds for grant distribution are tied to national Learning and Teaching Performance funds and institutional strategic priorities. Hence, given all these competing priorities, there is an ongoing tension to fit all formal committee activities within both the annual timeline and schedule of busy academics on and off the committee.

The strategic discussions in informal meetings allow committee members to reflect on the array of achievements presented formally on paper through award and grant assessment processes, identify and cluster forthcoming issues, share their individual practice concerns across a range of disciplines (arts, health and behavioural science, informatics, commerce, science, engineering and education) and suggest further opportunities for sharing of learning and teaching practice. They also provide an opportunity for staff responsible for supporting awards and grants applicants to update the committee on key support strategies, patterns of staff engagement with awards and grants, and potential limits to existing support processes.

In a report presented to EDITS in March 2007, the Teaching Innovation Coordinator, responsible for oversight of applicant support, presented the statistics on staff engagement with awards (2006-7), the key strategies shared with applicants for the structural aspects of document development, and the intensive interview process required to maintain applicant motivation and develop a deeper conceptual framework for an application. The report also analysed the relationship between internal and national teaching award structures to inform discussion of further refinement of institutional teaching award categories and the associated criteria. Not all applicants who won institutional teaching awards would set their targets on future national awards. Some were keen to gain learning and teaching funds to explore a discipline specific innovation, while others were exploring more generic graduate qualities and could be linked in cross-disciplinary teams. There was a need to balance support and provide diverse pathways for staff pursuing institutional, national and international learning and teaching agendas.

EDITS identified a lack of synergy between predominantly individual teaching awards and team applications for teaching grant funds, high risk of maintaining intensive individual support for applicants, and lost opportunities to foster development and share practice. Mentoring of grant applicants occurred in a fractured, ad hoc, one-to-one and just-in-time manner that made workload planning difficult and the workload itself unsustainable as the demand increased. There was no mirroring of the well-developed Research Services Office monitoring systems. The intensive individual support for reflection, analysis and conceptual development offered by the Teaching Innovation Coordinator was unsustainable and limited to the insights of an individual. Lists of applicants for awards and grants were associated with particular application rounds, and the lists that were publicly available on the institution’s web site were only the successful applicants in a competitive pool. Thus, future champions fell repeatedly under the radar as there was no formal process for collective recording of their potential interest, nor any systematic support for development of ideas and collaborators. Sharing of Good Practice relied on the willingness of recent award winners, grant recipients, and recognised
innovators to present workshops and to informally advise future applicants. Resources to share and record processes and practices were not systematically collected in a centrally accessible repository.

**A snapshot of community member interaction**

The Teaching Innovation Coordinator and the current chair of EDITS (authors), both recent or new recruits to EDITS in 2005, maintained regular contact throughout the period January 2005 to December 2007, with 102 ‘meetings’ registered in the electronic corporate diary. An analysis of these meetings reveals two key patterns. Firstly, their duration (illustrated in figure 1) ranged from half an hour to nine hours, with seventy-three meetings (roughly 70%) of less than three hours’ duration.

![Number and duration of meetings](image)

**Figure 1: Meetings of two community members supporting teaching innovation 2005-2007**

Secondly, the purposes for the meetings varied widely. They ranged across an administrative or personnel focus (awards and grants processes and marketing, policy development, EDITS agendas, Carrick protocols, staff changeovers), an EDITS committee focus (informal EDITS committee meetings and EDITS assessment panel meetings), collaborative facilitation of workshops and information sessions on awards and grants, attendance at national forums and celebration events for teaching awards, International conferences on e-Portfolios and the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching, meetings for collaborative publishing, strategic meetings with the DVC (A&I) around project initiatives such as the PEI, and last but not least, social discussions about life and the universe over a meal or cup of coffee. There was constant variation in group size, composition, the formal or informal nature of the meeting and the scope and sharing of current learning and teaching practice.

Such sustained and varied opportunities for discussion, coupled with regular exposure to institutional awards and grants applications, strategic input from EDITS members, international perspectives at conferences, shared travel and reflection time, and the
constant timeline of formal internal and national award and grant processes permitted the authors to conduct a seemingly ‘rapid’ analysis of the gaps in current practice when provided with the opportunity to apply for PEI grant funding. Gap analysis revealed a significant risk of pressure of workloads on those mentoring award and grant applicants, inadequate information collection regarding staff innovation, participation and engagement in awards and grants processes, and many missed opportunities to share practice both at the institutional level and the individual academic level. There was no systematic formal collection of information regarding learning and teaching to mirror the detailed collection of research practice data.

Three key strategies were conceptualised by the authors, in close consultation with the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic & International), the Director of the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR) and the Manager of Educational Systems Development in CEDIR. These strategies were: individual support by a network of mentors; enhanced systems to record practice and share resources; and, a targeted program of celebrating learning and teaching.

**Unpacking the vision**

The vision of sustainable support for a community of practice of learning and teaching across the campuses includes opportunities for formal and informal linkages and processes. The tension between the richness of informal, personal and context dependent interactions, and the need for formal articulation of practice and reporting of innovation, resonates with Wenger’s (1998) analysis of the relationship between participation and reification in communities of practice. Organisations need formal artefacts (i.e. forms, reports, minuted meetings, transparent award processes) in order to conduct business inclusively and to induct new members.

The context within which that business is done changes rapidly in higher education and the inclusion of new members brings new insights and ideas for reform of processes. The more informal processes of participation in discussion, feedback and daily practice provide the opportunity for continuous refinement of the formal practices and lead to revision of those practices and artefacts. The University of Wollongong Strategic Plan (UOW 2008-2010 Strategic Plan, p13) articulates five key strategies for teaching innovation, career development and recognition of achievement to achieve the objective of “high quality teaching”. The elements of the PEI contribute to the implementation of those strategies in formal and informal ways.

**Sustaining advice and support - a system of mentors**

The pattern of sustained advice and support will contribute to both a developing community of practice and the type of mentoring leadership that Ramsden (1998) suggests that academics prefer. The proposed system of mentors addresses two challenges in meeting institutional objectives: it provides a sustainable model of support for grant, award and fellowship applicants or early career innovators, and it provides career development in academic leadership for the mentors. Both of these are important as the University better articulates the career paths that value contributions to learning and teaching more highly. The mentor network has the potential to expand beyond the
current framework as followers become formal or informal leaders, and mentors adopt positional leadership roles.

Any practice of mentoring that moves beyond a formal introduction to the “folk ways” of a community of practice is necessarily responsive to the effects of participation. The demands for both members of a mentoring relationship change, and the relationship itself provides opportunities for reflection on the process as well as the topic of discussion. Table 1 captures the sense of a widening process of engagement that the mentoring system will develop further. The column “Past Ways” describes practices that began to change at the end of 2004; by early 2007 it was clear that the successful improvements recorded in “Current Practice” were unsustainable. The demand for support by an increasing group of innovators indicated that a structured process should be expanded for award support, and developed to replace the largely informal support mechanisms for grant applicants.

The mentors will be people with recognised achievements in some aspect of learning and teaching ranging from grant and award winners to curriculum innovators and successful team leaders. The other two elements of the PEI will include and support the mentors who will be offered opportunities to reflect on their practice and to extend their portfolio in ways that will contribute to their own career goals within the extended community of practice.

### Table 1: Characteristics of evolving engagement with awards, grants and fellowship applicants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>A: Past ways</th>
<th>B: Current Practice</th>
<th>C: Future vision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of contacts with applicants</td>
<td>None or one</td>
<td>Up to 7</td>
<td>Number determined by needs of current and future applicants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of contact</td>
<td>Web site information leads to phone inquiry</td>
<td>Information session Workshop Multiple individual consultations timetabled around award/grant cycles</td>
<td>Ongoing access to a mentor network and online resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of contact</td>
<td>Specific award or grant process</td>
<td>Possible progression of awards or relationship with grants</td>
<td>All awards, grants, research collaborations driven by staff needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to career development</td>
<td>None or serendipitous (person also going through promotion)</td>
<td>Seen as opportunity to reflect on teaching in relation to whole career</td>
<td>Process supports career discussions as a backdrop to future teaching related activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support team</td>
<td>One academic developer (varied) and/or a discipline colleague</td>
<td>Dedicated small team lead by academic developer</td>
<td>Team of central and disciplinary mentors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using technology to link people and support innovation

Drawing information together is a vital pre-requisite to reflection, analysis, peer review and refinement of existing practices at the individual and institutional level. Three developments will assist with recording, organising and improving access to learning and teaching information for all UOW staff. Firstly, a formal set of learning and teaching data will be specified and collected to assist the institution to make more informed decisions and increase accountability. Secondly, staff will be supported to collect more informal, developmental and personal data in an academic portfolio. Thirdly, the web interface to access the formal data set, learning and teaching case studies and support resources will be re-designed and rationalised around a Focus on Teaching.

Database to collect key learning and teaching data for the institution

The specifications are under development for a ‘database’ to record a range of learning and teaching activities that illustrate staff interest and achievements. This learning and teaching data will complement an existing system for monitoring staff engagement with research grants and research publications. Data to be collected includes participation in formal mentoring roles (with the PEI Project, HERSDA, ASCILITE or Head Tutor positions); fellowship opportunities such as the Faculty Scholars Program; contributions to professional development of colleagues in colloquia, workshops or symposia; good practice cases captured and shared electronically; award applicants who are nominated, those who submit applications and those who are successful; peer reviewers who have been formally trained for peer observation of teaching (POT) or peer review of curriculum development (PRCD); key roles in University Education Committees at faculty and institutional level; and teaching grant applicants who submit an application as well as those who are successful.

Detailed specifications will be progressively refined with broad faculty consultation, and the data mapped to existing gold standard data in a central ‘data warehouse’. What data we are not currently collecting will form the basis of the design of a new database. Those responsible for recording and validating this data will do the data entry as an integral part of their roles and responsibilities.

ePortfolios for individuals and teams to gather and keep evidence

A common issue for teaching/research academics is lack of awareness of what evidence they need to keep of teaching, and a language for expressing what they do. Staff are currently advised to collect a broad range of evidence of learning and teaching related activities, listed by the source of evidence (peers, personal reflection, student reaction and student learning outcomes), what the evidence indicates (experience, interest or quality based on student and staff review), and how a ‘mix of evidence’ may relate to level of
appointment (Associate Lecturer to Associate Professor). The source list has been widely disseminated by Denise Chalmers through her past role within the Carrick Institute. The Director of CEDIR has led the development of the latter two lists. Together, the three lists inform staff of what evidence they can target to support applications for teaching awards and probation or promotion, particularly when teaching is ranked highly.

Knowing what they should keep and maintaining a focus on why and where it belongs in support of a case is a substantial workload that is often sidelined by busy academics in favour of more immediate and pressing teaching and research activities. A number of e-Portfolio tools with optional templates are being used to determine whether they assist evidence collection or cloud the development of a coherent case for an award or probation/promotion application. Although the emphasis is on the whole academic career, most template development for individual use has been in the teaching rather than governance, research or community engagement aspects of a career.

Early use of one e-Portfolio tool (iWebFolio) has identified its value as a collaborative support tool for courses, projects and learning and teaching research. This may be the most appropriate way to gather evidence of development work, staff reflection, student feedback and subsequent re-development or refinement of teaching activities and resources. Bernstein, Burnett, Goodburn and Savory (2006) detail the benefits of course portfolios to make teaching and learning visible, and “offer a model that shows how you can draw upon a process of peer review to document, assess, reflect on, and improve your teaching and your students’ learning through the use of a course portfolio” (p4). This may well be a long-term goal. In the short-term, such collaborative course, project and research data collection sites can support information sharing, document process and potentially enhance staff engagement in team applications for awards and grants.

**A web portal to information, people and good practice**

A Focus on Teaching site will be developed to celebrate teaching, streamline access to existing resources and support for awards, grants and fellowships, and inform staff of professional development opportunities related to learning and teaching. It will draw on information collected through the ‘new’ learning and teaching database (as described above) as well as other relevant existing data identified in the central data warehouse. It will also access resources from a central content management repository (Equella).

Focus on Teaching will forecast events, provide regular features on teaching related activities and provide a venue for feedback and requests for advice. One aim is to help staff to identify internal experts with whom they may network informally. Another is to provide the resources they need to engage with award, grant and fellowship processes in a manner that is ongoing and timely for them.

**Celebrations and practice sharing**

Online access to information, resources and good practice examples of what others are doing in learning and teaching is only one way to celebrate and share learning and teaching practice. Whether the Focus on Teaching site is public or located on the intranet, it represents a formal collection of information and artefacts, with limited asynchronous opportunities for staff interaction.
Less formal, face-to-face opportunities for staff interaction are vital. Tschannen-Moran and Nestor-Baker (2004) uncovered a rich reservoir of tacit knowledge in their interviews with prolific educational scholars. They identified the following tacit knowledge categories, sequenced in diminishing ‘text units’: collaboration and social support; coping with competing demands; navigating institutional context; political skills to gain access to resources and power; setting a research agenda; research to practice connections; connecting with your passions; persevering in overcoming obstacles; the writing process; publishing and coping with peer review; setting goals or maintaining focus; and lastly, standards of rigor. As these authors can attest, this personal tacit knowledge was uncovered and shared through our numerous opportunities for face-to-face interaction, many of which were informal, highly collegial and in social settings.

To complement an existing programme of learning and teaching workshops run through CEDIR, another series of practice sharing events will focus on celebrating highlights (including achievement of awards and grants recipients), and supporting identified learning and teaching needs as a basis for further innovation. This programme will emerge in a grounded fashion, facilitated by the Teaching Innovation Mentor network, who will assist with their planning, identify key resources for development and sharing, and encourage staff use of the Focus on Teaching site as a point of access to information. Artefacts from these celebration and practice sharing events, such as posters, case snapshots, interviews, and resulting print publications will be stored and accessed via Focus on Teaching.

The increased public profile of learning and teaching through celebrations, and access to a growing collection of practice artefacts will support a culture of valuing and sharing learning and teaching practice that provides peer-reviewed evidence for awards, grants and promotion.

**Conclusion**

This paper has described the need for, and visioning of, a complex initiative to support and promote innovative teaching and learning within a regional university. The PEI will achieve this by extending existing skills, information systems and patterns of resource sharing. The integration of the diverse elements in the practice by participating academics, general, and academic support staff, will contribute to a range of innovation and an improved student experience. The varied levels of engagement will also contribute informal feedback to the formal award, grant and fellowship processes, the many institutional changes foreshadowed by current discussions of the mix of evidence needed to support promotion applications, and the externally driven changes to higher education.

Most academics contribute to the core activity of teaching as a part of their practice. Success will be gauged by staff ownership of practice sharing, adoption of positional and informal leadership roles and contributions to the development of the teaching awards and grants programme. Framed by the PEI project a vast array of data will be collected through enhancement of existing systems, detailed notes of PEI participants and project evaluation. Analysis of the emerging data set will lead to further sector-wide sharing of practice (a project requirement), and provide a detailed case to advance our
understanding of communities of practice as a theoretical concept in relation to a whole-of-institution perspective. The Promoting Excellence Initiative will be most successful if it maintains a shifting balance between the formal and informal elements of the vision.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the considerable input of Professor Rob Castle, DVC (Academic and International), Professor Sandra Wills, Director of CEDIR, Mr Ray Stace, currently Acting Director of CEDIR, and all members of EDITS.

References


Teaching, communities of practice and the police

Matthew Campbell
Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, Australia
matthew.campbell@acu.edu.au

Communities of practice are generally accepted as locales of engagement, learning and development. This paper reflects on a case study of the evolution of a community of practice amongst staff in a university School of Policing Studies. The case study reveals the requirement for space, in a physical, temporal and timely sense, for open discussion and the formation of shared understanding and trust as key stepping stones to the formation of community. Within this case study there is evidence of success in the development of staff that is directly attributable to the evolution of the community. The process of evolution in this case study may present as a model for the evolution of communities of practice that is transferrable to other contexts.

Keywords: communities of practice, academic development, partnerships

Introduction

Communities of practice are generally accepted as locales of engagement, learning and development. They present a framework from which we can come to better understand human interaction and the construction of identity as aspects of broader notions of learning. However, communities of practice present as difficult beasts to develop and form, often being identifiable only after they come to exist. This paper explores the experience of an emerging community of practice amongst staff within a university School of Policing Studies. The character of the police education environment provides a case study that presents frustrations that can be translated to other emerging professional environments. The purpose of the emerging community of practice was to provide a space for collaborative development of staff into their role as an academic. By reflecting on this case study it is intended to consider the process as a model that may be transferable to other contexts, problems and issues that arose in the emergence of the community, and whether such an effort was of benefit to the development of staff.

Methodological approach

This research is shaped by a strategy of case study where case studies are viewed “as a form of research … defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used” (Stake 2000, p.435). Within this case study there was an evolution of thinking most akin to the notions of participatory action research, with a spiral reflective cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, but moreso as a “social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who join together in changing practices through which they interact in a shared social world” (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005, p.563). This paper presents reflection on the process of change that was
undertaken within the School of Policing Studies. It draws on personal observations and reflections supplemented by, and triangulated against, those of my colleagues, who were instrumental in the endeavour of creating sessions in which the sharing of information and ideas could occur. In this case study I was a driver of change and often viewed by others, including management, as the coordinator of the community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002), though I would present the reality of leadership as far more collaborative and distributed.

A criticism of qualitative research, especially that which is conducted by a participant in the process, is the level of bias brought to the inquiry (Alvermann 2000). Such bias is unavoidable in any human interaction or intervention with data sources. At best it is possible to make known a researcher’s biases so as to allow the reader the opportunity to negotiate the research in a valid way making allowances for any influence these may have had on the presentation of the story that is told. Within this research I was a participant observer (Punch 2005), acting through my role as a leader of teaching and learning development. Not having come from a policing background I would situate myself very much as a ‘non-practitioner academic’, often working in a world of practitioners. Policing has not been traditionally an academically rich field of enterprise with most knowledge in policing being generated through lived experience and passed on by story-telling. So to present in such an environment as a non-police academic very much located one on the outside of the conversation. The development of a community in which there was engagement between academics, practitioners and practitioner-academics (these are recently retired police who are working with the university) allowed for a breaking down of some of these barriers and allowed me to bridge some of the gap of practice, gaining recognition amongst my peers and enhancing my knowledge of policing in turn.

**Describing the context**

This case study presents the experience within the School of Policing Studies, Charles Sturt University. This School works in partnership with the New South Wales Police Force to deliver the primary recruit training. Within the school staff there is a range of expertise across the fields of sociology, criminology, law and philosophy / ethics as well as policing practice; presenting a truly interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning. The partnership between Charles Sturt University and the New South Wales Police came as a result of moves in the late 1990’s to professionalise police in response to the findings, primarily, of the Wood Royal Commission (1997) that asserted a need for police to be provided with external influences to improve their decision making and to break-down the walls of silence that permeated the police culture and aided corruption. Thus the university was, and still is, viewed as a tool for anti-corruption and regulation rather than education and advancement and a perception of the partnership as something that was imposed.

As the program and the School are located at the NSW Police College, there is a significant influence of the police culture in tension with a sense of university education, as opposed to workplace training. As identified by Reiner (2000), Skolnick (1986), and Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) and others, the typical police culture includes cynicism; a
them’ and ‘us’ culture, where ‘them’ includes researchers and ‘do-gooders’; conservatism; machismo and racial prejudice; and a “very pragmatic, concrete, down to earth, anti-theoretical perspective”, where the major concern is “to get from here to tomorrow (or the next hour) safely and with the least fuss and paperwork” (Reiner 2000, pp. 85-107). This attitude can manifest itself in, for example, police (im)patience with meetings in which discussion is prolonged and complex and does not arrive at a specific, actionable conclusion or where there are opportunities for and expectations of collegiality (Layton, Corbo Crehan, & Campbell, In Press). The pressure thus created can be a source of tension, especially as staff new to academia try to understand their new identity and the pressures of their role whilst constantly being drawn back to the culture of the organisation that they left. Furthermore, staff who have retired from the police organisation and come to the university seem to have difficulty moving from cultural norms and an identity that they have experienced for significant periods of time.

Given the competing cultures of police and academia there exists strong debate about the appropriate focus of police recruit education. The competing views of abstract academic knowledge, or ‘academic expertise’, stand opposed to views that predominantly see police training as practice and technically-oriented. There is a sense that a serving, or recently served, police officer is capable of teaching across any subject, thus staff move regularly between subjects. This practice undervalues academic specialist knowledge compared to policing practical experience. Tension is particularly evident in the field of ethics education, where there are ongoing debates about the place of such a defined field of study in police training and the proper balance between providing information about organisational policy (that is training police to just do) and developing autonomous decision making capacities (that is training police to question) (Corbo Crehan & Campbell 2007). Non-practitioner academics tend to teach in subjects such as communication, law and ethics, and can have difficulty having their expertise recognised as relevant by both students at the College, who aspire to imitate the police they observe, and some police staff ‘colleagues’. Conversely, former police may rely solely on their policing experience (and not on any specific subject-related expertise they have developed), with the potential drawback of teaching through ‘war stories’ that serve to merely reinforce cultural stereotypes (Berg 1990).

**Considering communities of practice**

The term ‘community’ is a difficult concept to explain in one accepted, quantifiable definition (Brook & Oliver 2005). Within the literature there are a range of terms that incorporate the notion of community and its relationship to learning and development, for example learning communities (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones 2003), community of scholars (Goodman 1962), communities of practice (Wenger 1998a), just to identify a few. The challenge is that communities do not exist as a system that has definable boundaries from other human interactions. The reality of communities is that they are complex and often involve the interaction of several groups. A community of practice is not an isolated body, but is often composed of members, who themselves are members of many other communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998a). Communities have been demonstrated to have at their core, values of trust, a spirit of
unity, mutual benefit to actors and artefacts of interactions (Brook 2004; Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman 1986; Chavis & McMillan 1986; Chipuer & Pretty 1999). A distinction can be drawn between a community and a work-group or team, though, for the scope of this paper, it will suffice to assert that a community is less formally structured than a team. In contrast to a team, a community has a fluidity of purpose with constant redefining of why it exists and what it is achieving and more distributed leadership. (Cox 2005; Lave & Wenger 1991; Mansour-Cole 2001; Wenger 1998a; Zarraga-Oberty & De Saa-Perez 2006). This definition was applied to the experience of community in this setting.

There should exist mechanisms by which one can evolve communities. McMillan (1996) argues that for a community to succeed the members of the community must share a security to speak the truth where truth is defined as the personal realities that shape who we are, including our failings. The truths of a community evolve and change over time as the members of the group become more comfortable and, through risk taking, begin to develop trust, which grows to an understanding of the shared benefits of contributing to the group and shared values. However, McMillan (1996) urges that this can lead to “a spark and a flame” in the development of a sense of community, and that this flame will never become a fire unless there exists in the community an authority structure that can sustain the fire; an argument also supported by Wenger, et al. (2002). Wenger (1998b) identifies that a community will evolve through a series of five stages, see Figure 1. Such phases were evident in the evolution and growth of the community discussed in this paper.

The concept of a community of practice builds on a pedagogical tradition of viewing learning as a socially mediated activity (H. Daniels 2001; Vygotsky 1978). Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98) assert that a community of practice is “a set of relations among
persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.” This definition emphasises a community of practice being a source of meaning making, both individually and socially, and having a pivotal role in the social structure defining possibilities for learning (Lave & Wenger 1991). Brown and Duguid (1991) suggest that learning within a community of practice should be viewed as the bridge over the gap between working and innovating, and that “through their constant adapting to changing membership and changing circumstances, evolving communities-of-practice are significant sites of innovating” (p.2). Lave and Wenger (1991) recognised learning as contextually dependent, social and embedded in particular practice, that, therefore, learning should be viewed as an “integral aspect of social practice” (Huzzard 2004, p.351) and that learning is, in and of itself, a social process. Such a view must account for the power dynamics of any social situation which comes to bear on the learning and formation of identity amongst the actors in the community (Ares 2007; Contu & Willmott 2003; H. Daniels 2001).

There is value in the model of communities of practice as points of development. Knowledge resides within each organisation, both explicitly and implicitly. The community of practice model allows for the exploration of the implicit knowledge. Communities of practice provide a framework for the socialisation of knowledge sharing and therefore improved organisational outcomes (C. Daniels, Grove, & Mundt 2006). A community of practice leads participants towards the greater attainment of social capital (Bourdieu 1977), connections, relationships and the expression of a common understanding and context of problems (Wenger et al., 2002), as evident in Figure 2.

![Figure 2: Communities of Practice and organisational success (Daniels, et al. 2006)](image)

**The School of Policing Studies**

In late 2006 a range of tensions, including, but not exclusive to, changed working conditions, increased demands on research output and massive increases in student numbers. During a Teaching Development Committee questions were raised about how we could improve student satisfaction ratings. What ensued was an impassioned debate
about the role, function and identity of us as members of the broad concept of a university and how we related to the policing world that we worked in. What occurred was consistent with Schein’s (2004) notion of unfreezing, where a motivation to change forms when there is enough disconcerting data to cause serious discomfort; anxiety about one’s capacity to attain important goals or adhere to important values; and enough psychological safety to see a possibility of solving the problem and learning something new. The issue centred upon the question of how we identified ourselves as academics.

Within the School of Policing Studies, individuals are pulled between their distinctive identity in the profession of policing, or the academic field from which they come (e.g. criminology, education, sociology, philosophy and law), and their emerging professional identity as academics embedded in an environment where issues of academic identity are still being worked out (Kogan 2000). It was the need to address this question of identities that conceptualised here as an emergent community of practice. Wenger (1998, p.145) argues that “issues of identity are an integral aspect of a social theory of learning and are thus inseparable from the issues of practice, community, and meaning.” As a person comes to membership of a community they negotiate their position and identity within the community as well as shaping the community’s identity through their interactions. As Hogg (2003) argues the communities we belong to influence how others see us, “they are the lens through which people view us” (p.462) but also they influence how we view ourselves.

Emerging from the discussion was the desire to move forward and create a space – physical, temporal and timely – for conversation and sharing of ideas and information, ultimately with the goal of allowing staff of the university to develop a shared identity within the world of policing to consider how this relates to their practices in teaching, learning and research. It was decided to host a session each week with support from the Head of School to create a 2 hour window within the timetable in which all staff were able to come together free of other work pressures. In developing the sessions we needed to draw on a model which would allow for everybody’s input and begin to explore the myriad of personal perceptions and difficulties in an unthreatening way. Table 1 captures three organisational structures, focused on teaching and learning, which could be explored to achieve these goals. Highlighted is our focus, asserting our belief in a collegial perspective of development, with an ongoing design and implementation process. Through such a focus we were able to ensure that the sessions were not just places of free-form discussion, but a clear purpose for improvement was at the forefront of thinking.
Table 1: Approaches to improving the quality of learning and teaching in relation to three organisational ideals (Layton et al., In Press)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Bureaucratic</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Entrepreneurial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of quality</td>
<td>Management; administration; regulatory requirements; national policies</td>
<td>Academic freedom and disciplinary standards</td>
<td>Market change &amp; more dynamic environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation processes</td>
<td>Through organisational hierarchy</td>
<td>Different knowledge/expertise structures</td>
<td>Customers &amp; stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation processes</td>
<td>Technocratic, rule/task oriented</td>
<td>Peer review and self-as-expert</td>
<td>Review relevance to customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional effects</td>
<td>Administrative systems, routines, reports, documentation and rules</td>
<td>New teaching &amp; learning initiatives</td>
<td>Student satisfaction surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum change (pedagogies and/or content)</td>
<td>Benchmarking, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in pedagogies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To ensure the early success of the community it was imperative to maintain a core of motivated and interested people with support from management for the work of the community. During the initial stages of evolution the leadership was vested in those who already had leading roles in the areas of research and teaching development. Space was created in the timetable to permit staff to attend. There was, though, an early push to hold staff who failed to attend to account for their use of time. Such a push emerged from management who felt a need to justify changes to timetables by accounting for hours in development. There, therefore, existed a need to educate decision makers and leaders in the School about the underlying principles of communities of practice and to move their thinking away from the ‘traditional’, formalised view of development. The sessions were eventually viewed as the seeding of relationships which would evolve to a broader community amongst all members of the School.

The first of the sessions involved a discussion about a question we hoped epitomised the problems we faced: ‘What is the identity and role of an academic?’ The focus of such a session was to gather ideas and establish common ground. An interesting view expressed during this first session was that many of the practitioner academics saw themselves as occupying some sort of middle-ground between those that they saw as ‘real academics’ and the police personnel who teach on the recruit course. This added an additional layer of complexity to our previous understanding of our situation, and raised the conceptual puzzle of being an academic staff member in a university school, but not seeing oneself as a ‘real academic’. More than any other issue discussed, this one symbolised the degree of difficulty that would be involved in developing the sessions as ones in which we all were members.
After the first session, we moved onto discussions about the directions of scholarship and research we might pursue as products of our academic identity. Such a discussion aligns with the assertions of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p.71) that “a community is driven by the value members get from it, so people need to see how their passion will translate into something useful”. In fact, some members found this process particularly frustrating, with comments often made about introducing more structure, direction and focus to the sessions. There was frustration with the cyclical nature of discussions that often came back to exploring fundamental questions of purpose for the group. The desire for more formal development programs was most often expressed from practitioner academics, from which it could be argued that their experience of training and development in practice had previously only occurred in highly structured settings.

Nonetheless, what emerged from these discussions was increased understanding of what it means for each of us to be an academic, greater acknowledgement of the similarities and differences in these understandings, and more appreciation of what each of us might be able to offer the others – in other words, our directions were aligning, and leadership in various areas was emerging. Subsequent sessions saw various members begin to take leadership roles through the presentation of areas of interest for their and others’ development. For example, one member presented on their exploration of mentoring and how this could be developed within the school, whilst another presented on their research into the history of police education shaping discussion about where we were heading. Presentations were supplemented with discussions and workshops with no definite procedure for the weekly meetings being put in place.

From the discussions of the community, though, grew a heightened awareness of our academic identity and the need to capture this and share it with our policing partners. As the community grew in confidence artefacts began to emerge. Most notably the sessions led directly to a monthly newsletter that drew on the relationship between teaching and research, promoting achievement in each. This provided a forum for the sharing of individual expertise through biographies of staff, a much desired outcome of the initial meetings where discussion highlighted the lack of sharing amongst staff. The community members also contributed through the sharing of their experiences in both formal and informal ways with the regular meeting usually prompted by a formal presentation of a staff member of their recent research and/or teaching experiences and then discussion of how that can reflect the learning needs of the community members. This format came as a response to the earlier expressed desires of members for more formal training and development and the complexity of the areas discussed. It was agreed that it was very difficult for a person to develop in research skills merely through attending a workshop and that the more productive outcome was to establish networks of people that could provide ongoing support and development. The community also sought to gain contributions from outside experts so as to enhance the collective knowledge of the community and provide fresh ideas and points of discussion.

The potential for a divided School, caused by a lack of understanding of each others’ backgrounds, concerns, strengths and limitations, is being broken down. It will be interesting whether the community continues to exist now that two of the pivotal drivers of the community, and the sessions, have left. The community is moving into a dispersed stage (Wenger 1998b) where the strength of relationships and interests becomes tested.
Although there has not yet been a formal, comprehensive review of the impact of the sessions there are noticeable changes within the school that are coming directly from these engagements. These include an increase in research activity, the recognition and support of innovative and cutting-edge approaches to teaching, and a greater ability amongst staff to communicate about their academic, as well as their policing, ‘war-stories’. The energy of the community is starting to spread and engage with policing partners enhancing the overall delivery of the program. Smaller communities are emerging amongst groups of staff, for example those with a focus on distance education or investigations, that are building on similar structures to encourage development in staff research profiles and learning material development.

**Conclusion**

Whilst navigating the complexities of university partnerships with industry can prove problematic, the experience of this case suggests that they present an inherent disequilibrium opening up spaces for action and creating fires for development. The sessions have provided a platform for communication and risk taking, both of which are identified as being fundamental to the successful development of a community focused on developing professionals (Campbell & Uys 2007). Emerging shared meanings, as well as an enhanced level of trust amongst staff support the wider network of collegiality across the School. The changes that took place in the sessions extended beyond the sessions themselves with changes in, and discussions around, teaching and learning practice and research across the School. The sessions provided the spawn for the evolution of a broader community in which participants in the School actively engaged in discussions of teaching and research. The creation of a safe space for unhindered discussion and the devolution of leadership were imperative to the evolution of the community and the building of networks. The community needed to have a space in time (the 2 hours per week), thinking (free from other academic requirements) and physically (removed from normal meeting areas) that saw the community form its own identity and purpose. Creation of space and ensuring the fire burns brightly are imperatives to the successful evolution of a community of practice.

**Acknowledgments**

This paper draws on work I undertook with two former colleagues, Dr Anna Corbo Crehan and Dr Catherine Layton. I am grateful for their contributions both to the ideas that this paper is built upon, but also for their support and fellowship during the emergence of this community.

**References**


Copyright © 2008 Matthew Campbell. The author assigns to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD and in printed form within the HERDSA 2008 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.
Fit for purpose: Designing a faculty-based community of (teaching) practice.

Wendy Green  
University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia  
w.green@uq.edu.au

Aaron Ruutz  
QIBT/Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia  
aaron@qibt.qld.edu.au

Based essentially on a social constructivist understanding of situated learning, the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (CoPs) has been taken up enthusiastically in the corporate sector as a model for managing organisational knowledge. However, the formulaic, top-down approaches associated with this trend are particularly inappropriate in a higher education context, where the complexities of the organisational environment and the inextricable link between disciplinary knowledge and identity call for a more critical approach. We engage here with current thinking about CoPs in higher education in the light of our participation in an embryonic faculty-based community of (teaching) practice. We take the view, with Wenger, that while any learning, including learning to teach (better) cannot be designed, or predicted in advance, it can, and should be designed for. Here, we outline four considerations – language/meaning, identity, access/inclusion, and agency – that have both informed the design of our CoP, and proved crucial to its development.

Keywords: Communities of practice, higher education, academic development

Introduction

The concept, ‘community of practice’ (CoP) has been taken up enthusiastically in the corporate sector as a strategic approach to knowledge management, yet it has failed to gain much traction in universities (McDonald & Star 2006). Some attribute CoPs’ patchy history in the higher education sector to the benign conceptualisations of ‘community’ and the formulaic approaches to implementation found in much management literature (e.g., Barton & Tustig 2005; Lea 2005). Certainly, such approaches are particularly inappropriate in the context of higher education, where the complexities of the organisational environment and the inextricable link between knowledge and identity call for a more critical approach. At stake here are issues of power and language: What do we mean by community? Whose needs define the agenda of the CoP? Who benefits from CoP membership? Who has access to it? Who doesn’t?

We engage with these questions here, informed by both the current CoPs literature and our participation in a faculty-based community of teaching practice. We argue, with Wenger (1998) that while learning (to teach) cannot be designed, or predicted in advance,
it does need to be designed for. Within the organisational environment of the modern university, this design needs to account for both the complexity of power relationships and the ever-increasing workloads of academics. After briefly defining key CoP concepts, we consider the limitations and possibilities of CoP thinking for the design of workplace learning within the academy generally, and specifically, in our faculty. We outline four considerations – language/meaning, identity, access/inclusion, and agency – that have both informed the design of our CoP, and proved crucial to its development.

**What are ‘communities of practice’?**

Essentially, ‘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 together. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) coined the term after observing the impact social networks had on apprenticeship training in traditional and industrialized societies. They found that these apprentices learned more on the job, from their slightly more advanced peers than from their formal training programs. Based on these observations, Lave and Wenger articulated a conceptualization of learning at odds with the then dominant paradigm; in their view, meaning is shared, contested, negotiated and developed by learners in social contexts. Learning and being are inextricably linked: “learning involves the construction of identities … identity, knowing and social membership entail one another” (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.53).

Ultimately, Lave and Wenger concluded that CoPs can be found and developed everywhere. Importantly, they argue, CoPs differ from other social groups in three ways. They are based on a shared interest, or ‘domain’, such as teaching; they focus on practice, with members developing a shared repertoire of practices by discussing recurring problems, providing resources, etc.; and they are consciously nurtured by their members, because they are seen to support their learning.

This third factor, regarding relationships, raises a key question for CoP scholars and practitioners: how do communities facilitate the participation of new members? Lave and Wenger’s (1991) idea of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (LPP) refers to the process of integration into a CoP as a graduated re-negotiation of relationships between novices and ‘old timers’. Again drawing on their observations of apprentices, they proposed that ‘newcomers’ move from peripheral, prescribed forms of participation towards full participation at the ‘core’ of the community as competence increases. As Lave and Wenger acknowledge (1991), LPP can be an empowering or disempowering experience, depending on the way power is exercised within the community. Nevertheless, the process of joining workplace communities remains underdeveloped in Lave and Wenger’s 1991 publication, and later, in Wenger’s work (see Fuller et al, 2005). Indeed, attempts to apply the concept, LLP to contemporary workplaces in advanced industrial societies (Fuller et al, 2005) underscore a number of theoretical tensions, which come to the fore when we consider the place of CoPs in higher education.
Communities of practice in universities: limitations and possibilities

With the development of the ‘enterprise university’ (Marginson 2000), Australian academics are experiencing increasing occupational stress (Gillespie et al, 2001, p.53). Rapid growth, coupled with a reduction of public funding has prompted significant re-structuring, a reduction of permanent positions, increasing casualisation, ‘massification’ and diversification of student enrolments. Academics are expected to increase their research output while demonstrating teaching expertise in a wide range of areas, requiring skills many feel they don’t have: for example, online and blended teaching, inclusive teaching, large scale lecturing, internationalisation and transnational teaching, and embedding graduate attributes.

Worryingly, many programs designed to help academics meet these challenges have had minimal effects. For example, teaching award schemes, which highlight individual excellence have not impacted on the majority of academic staff (Bryant et al, 1999). More concerning still is the marginal impact centrally-provided resources, workshops, or formal teaching programs (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Viskovic, 2006) make on disciplinary ‘teaching and learning regimes’ (TLRs). This term, coined by Trowler and Cooper (2002) refers to the way disciplinary understandings of learning and teaching are internalised over time and become inextricably linked to academic identity. Trowler and Cooper (2002) distinguish between these ‘unique mini cultures’ and communities of practice. The former can both secure a level of teaching quality within a discipline, and block new perspectives and marginalize innovators, while CoPs can be designed to counter the noxious effects of TLRs, without detracting from their value (see also Roxa 2005).

In spite of their promise however, successful CoPs are thin on the ground in universities (McDonald & Star 2006). Those successful CoPs reported in the literature tend to consist of small, motivated groups of staff (e.g., Walker 2001; Warhurst 2006). Unlocking the potential for CoPs to support wider shifts in disciplinary pedagogy means grappling with the specificities of the workplace environment in higher education, particularly in relation to the material/industrial constraints. Harnessing the resources necessary to develop and sustain CoPs is a challenge in the ‘enterprise university’. CoPs require money for administrative and technical support, particularly if web-enabled communication and resources are involved. They also require time from academics who are already struggling with increasing teaching workloads, within a culture (they feel) devalues this aspect of their role. Face to face (F2F) events also require a place to meet, but traditional meeting places on many campuses have been sacrificed to accommodate increasing student numbers, and in any case, many faculties now operate as multi-campus entities. Gaining the material support necessary to develop CoPs therefore means convincing management of their high value; this challenge can be difficult to surmount, as accounts of funding application knock-backs illustrate (e.g., Mc Donald & Star 2006).

Other challenges arise as a result of academic values and work practices. Academics may well be suspicious of the concept of ‘community’. Academic life is a “curious and conflicted thing”: the ideal of collegiality develops paradoxically in a culture “infamous for fragmentation, isolation, and individualism” (Palmer in Cox 2006, p.94). For many,
teaching, in particular, means “pedagogical solitude” (Shulman 1993 p.6). Moreover, the “current rules of the ‘academic game’” can function to exclude some groups, such as women, more than others from the collegiality (Churchman 2005, p.15). So can employment conditions, particularly for sessional staff. High rates of casual employment, high staff turnover, and lack of institutional support position sessionals as permanent novices on the ‘tenuous periphery’ of the workforce (Kimber 2003). Without the funding available to attend meetings or staff development programs, sessionals are effectively cut off from legitimate participation in the cultural and organisational life of the faculty. Conversely, collegial teaching practice can also elude senior staff. With the diverse range of skills now demanded of all teaching staff, no one holds the monopoly on expertise. A senior academic may have considerable expertise in teaching large classes but feel under-confident in online environments, whereas a sessional tutor may be more experienced in this area. Yet, the traditional hierarchies within faculties often prevent the development of shared repertoires of knowledge between junior and senior staff.

In this context, Lave and Wenger’s commonly evoked development trajectory from the periphery to the core raises several questions. What happens when senior staff are imported from elsewhere (see also Fuller et al, 2005) – a common occurrence in universities, given our highly mobile workforce and increasingly fluid paths to promotion within academia? Do these experienced new comers skip the peripheral stage, and head straight for the core? Moreover, we can’t assume that any experienced staff have the motivation or the time to function as (teaching) mentors, when current reward systems offer no incentive to do so (Viskovic 2006). Neither can we assume that tutors can, or want to view their position as an ‘apprenticeship’ into academia – in many vocationally-oriented faculties, tutors tend to be mature and established professionals. Although Lave and Wenger acknowledge that “everyone’s participation is legitimately peripheral in some respect” (1991, p.117), the linear trajectory implied in much CoP thinking paradoxically “shares one characteristic with the standard paradigm ... they set out to oppose” – the top down teacher-centred model (Fuller et al, 2005, p.52).

Taking these concerns into account, we have begun to develop a teaching community of practice (T-CoP) that is based on notions of participation as reciprocity and exchange. In the following case study, we outline four key concerns that arose during the planning stages of this venture, as we strove to develop a praxis in our particular context; these concerns revolved around the meaning of ‘community’ and ‘practice’, identity and boundaries, access and inclusion, and finally, agency.

Case study

Our nascent T-CoP is situated within a business faculty in an Australian university, hereafter named the ‘School’. Like many business schools in Australia, ours has only become one recently through a painful process of re-structuring, which saw disparate and autonomous departments amalgamated into one organisational entity. The T-CoP began as a project in this context. Proposed by the members of the School’s learning and teaching development staff, and supported initially by an internal Grant, the T-CoP aims to provide a safe, authentic learning environment, in which all School academics can learn to teach better by sharing and developing their teaching practices. Although
inspired by other CoPs in higher education, ours is to be characterised by the specific challenges of teaching within the School; the proactive inclusion of sessional staff; and by the provision of multiple ‘pathways’ into the community – both face to face and virtual.

In the planning stage, a core group made up of academics from each of the School’s departments and a member of the School’s Learning and Teaching unit gave considerable attention to the design of the T-CoP. As any design decisions were made by consensus within this core group, the ‘we’ in the remainder of this case study refers to this whole group.

1. Language – the meaning of ‘community’ and ‘practice’

The central questions for us here were: What do we mean by a CoP? What do we want it to do? As well as feeling ambivalent about the word ‘community’, many academics in the School were initially alienated by the concept of ‘practice’ – perhaps, not surprisingly, within a culture which values ‘theory’ over ‘practice’. Naming ourselves, our relationships and our work in terminology that had resonance with our colleagues was therefore a crucial first step. Through discussions held over a three month period, School academics identified their core values as ‘self-reflection’, a ‘passion for teaching practice’, and interestingly, ‘social connections’ coupled with ‘academic autonomy’. Although not wedded to any particular terminology, we eventually decided on ‘Teaching Community of Practice (T-CoP), because it was seen to encapsulate these values.

2. Identity/ boundaries

The central questions here were: Who can join our T-CoP? Who will benefit from it?

We wanted boundaries that were distinctive and permeable, boundaries that would enable us to develop a shared practice within the faculty, but also support strong external connections. Specifically, we had to reconcile the desire for strong(er) links with multiple stakeholders, including business and professional bodies, government, student groups, with the desire to create a confidential space for School academics. Developing a virtual space further complicated the issue; the potential to promote a greater sense of identity and belonging (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2004) weighed against the potential loss of confidentiality within the community. Our decision was to trial dual memberships: all School teaching staff (permanent, contract & sessional) can join the T-CoP by logging in the community website and agreeing to a simple ‘confidentiality clause’, while external stakeholders can attend events and gain limited access to the website.

With agreement on external boundaries established, attention turned to the question of internal boundaries. Initially, a division arose between those who wanted a cross-disciplinary T-CoP in the School, and those who struggled to imagine this in our context, where strong ‘tribal’ identities are rooted in the once autonomous discipline-based ‘silos’. In a context of differential power relationships between disciplines (Leug 2000), and intense feelings about disciplinary pedagogies, we decided that, contra Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p.58-9), the creation of private spaces within the web site for departmental or other interest groups would be counter-productive.
3. Access
The central question for us here was: How can we develop and sustain an inclusive CoP in our faculty? Our overriding concern was to construct ‘a learning architecture’ which would invite and support ‘rich forms of learning’ (Cousin & Deepwell 2005, p.63), while accommodating the varied, and varying needs and commitments of academics at any given pressure point in the semester. We imagined, as a central feature, a range of ‘pathways’ – both physical and virtual – which would give academics the opportunity to engage with the community in a way that would meet their needs, their preferred styles of engagement, and their other commitments, at any particular time.

Physical pathways currently include face to face (F2F) connections via periodic discussions, debates and other events, but there are plans to develop publishing syndicates, and other smaller peer support networks. Virtual pathways are provided by the T-CoP website, which the core group designed in collaboration with the university’s technical team to include member personal staff pages, discussions, resource sharing, and feedback.

Following Wenger et al (2002), we also envisaged three ways of engaging along these pathways, via a core group space, an active space, and a peripheral space. Movement between these spaces was a key concern – especially to the core group members who need to know that their commitment would not be interminable! Indeed, one of the key functions of the core group is to recruit their replacements. Hence, in architectural terms, we needed to design and build ‘gateways’ or ‘portals’ to support ‘traffic flow’, and ‘benches’ at the edges of each space to encourage loitering. How these spaces, gateways and bench-seats are designed to operate in our T-CoP is outlined below.

Core group
The first T-CoP facilitator established a core group by inviting the participation of faculty academics with a reputation for commitment, innovation, and leadership – from senior academics to head tutors. The function of the core group during the planning stage was to guide community development, identify the first topics to be addressed by the community, and start to develop the community’s ‘output’, beginning with the design of the website itself. The facilitator spoke with individual staff about the nature of core group participation, the potential workload issues, and the benefits of establishing a T-CoP in the faculty. Finally, she sent a briefing paper to all potential core group members. As a result, sixteen teaching staff, coming from all departments within the School, and ranging in seniority and gender agreed to join the core group.

We’ve found, as others have (e.g., Stuckey & Smith 2004) that the role of the facilitator is crucial to maintaining commitment. For us, this means contacting members of the core group between meetings, via informal, private, “back channels” (Wenger et al, 2002). This is particularly important in an environment where stressed, time-poor academics (Gillespie et al, 2001) are unlikely to feel they have time to develop and sustain communities of practice (McDonald & Star 2006). However, who the facilitator is, is just as important as what she does. Perhaps not surprisingly, academic developers tend to assume this role (e.g., Warhurst 2006). The development of a community of practice requires time and some specialized knowledge of the concept - most discipline-based
academics have neither. Yet, the legitimacy of one’s participation is central to CoP thinking (Carden 2005). Can an academic developer ever escape her ‘outsider’ status, and if not, what impact this has on a community of practice? In our case, explicit discussion within the core group ended in the decision to instate the in-faculty learning developer in the position during the first, developmental year then rotate annually between other members of the core group. The question of legitimacy has not arisen to the same extent in relation to the second essential role within the core group - the web administrator. As the primary source for content generation, communication facilitation, promotions and basic functional management, this on-going, part-time position was filled by an experienced School sessional member who had already joined the core group.

**Active space**

This we imagine to be an in-between space, a place to rehearse entry to the core group, provide an exit from/alternative to core group commitment, or simply invite contributions based on expertise. Importantly, this space needs to support distributed forms of leadership.

**Peripheral/milling spaces**

Knowing that virtual and physical connections are equally important at the community’s edges (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2006), we designed the T-CoP website to facilitate traffic to, and from the physical community. For example, each topic explored at an event will be first promoted, and later developed on the T-CoP site, via resources, blogs, feedback, and potentially as an extension activity, at another F2F event.

**4. Agency**

The key question here was: What relationship do we want to develop between our CoP and management? Studies based on knowledge workers in non-university contexts (e.g., Dubé, et al. 2004) have found that while active support from management is important, traditional hierarchical structures can be counter-productive (also see Neus 2001). In our case, we wanted to ensure the necessary support from management without forfeiting the capacity of the T-CoP to set our own agenda. Importantly, we hoped the T-CoP would help combat the growing sense of alienation many academics experience in the modern university (Churchman 2005), by strengthening two-way communication channels between School academics, the School T&L Committee, and the School and university Executive. Distinguishing the role of ‘champions’ from the role of ‘sponsors’ (Wenger 1998) helps us to articulate our desired relationship to management; i.e., ‘champions’ being active core faculty academics, while ‘sponsors’ hold executive positions providing funding, support and legitimacy, without setting the agenda. Secure funding beyond the life of the initial Grant has been achieved through the sponsorship of the School Executive, particularly the Dean (Teaching and Learning). Most importantly, this includes ongoing funding for the web administrator and recognition in the form of workload reduction for the rotating T-CoP facilitators.

**Where to from here?**

After eight months of planning, the T-CoP was launched last semester with a well-attended lunch time debate. Now entering its second semester, the T-CoP has established
a presence in the School, via four well-attended, interactive events and the website. The core group as a whole meets twice a semester, with smaller working parties meeting more regularly. Our efforts to develop ‘portals’ to facilitate movement to and from active engagement, and ‘benches’ to encourage loitering appear to be paying off. For example, the core group assumed responsibility for planning the launch of the T-CoP, but it was other academics who took leading roles on the day, and returned to their desks to engage with the T-CoP website. We are also finding that some initially peripheral members are moving towards active engagement, either virtually, by using the site to disseminate their own teaching and learning resources and/or via F2F events. For instance, a lecturer who loitered at the periphery until the launch has since ‘donated’ resources for the site and initiated collaboration with one of the core group members on a workshop for School staff.

Not surprisingly, two of the most contested issues in the planning stage – community boundaries and our relationship to management – continue to be a source of tension. The T-CoP website provides a case in point: in planning the T-CoP launch, the core group identified opportunities to develop flexibility, responsiveness and user-friendliness for T-CoP members and stakeholders, yet University management protocols made implementation difficult. Unfortunately, an unforeseen problem has impacted on our ability to address these issues: the original facilitator, a School-based academic developer, has left the University. Although the intention of the School Executive is to recognize the work of T-CoP facilitation within each facilitator’s workload allocation, the current co-facilitators – as disciplinary academics aligned to departments within the School – have struggled to devote sufficient time to the role. There are a number of possible reasons for this, two of which relate to the wider context: increasingly high teaching loads, and the lack of tangible rewards for CoP activities. Another consideration relates to recent structural changes within the School, namely mixed messages from departmental heads (as workload managers) and the School Executive. The T-CoP recognizes the need to address this issue as a matter of priority.

Continuing Executive sponsorship will depend on the T-CoP establishing and meeting relevant, tangible objectives, which nevertheless evolve with the community. An inflexible approach to goal-setting would be counter-productive; we need to “factor in…the surprises, divergence and conviviality” (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005, p.60) necessary for the development of a shared repertoire of practice. Having met our original goal, to design and launch a community of practice fit for our purpose, we used our first period of reflection, over the summer of 2007-8 to establish new objectives in relation to our most pressing needs. Objectives for 2008 are: to continually improve access points into the community (F2F and Virtual); foster relationships between senior and junior staff and between departments within the School; increase the activity of members in the community; co-host events with other University CoPs; develop the website to better reflect the ‘flow’ of academics daily/semester routine; and enhance the user-friendliness and interactivity of the site. Periodic evaluations each summer, based on qualitative and quantitative data, will enable the core group to measure outcomes against our identified objectives, as well as enable collaborative open-ended, interpretive research.
Conclusion

At this early stage, we can say that the concept, communities of practice, has enabled us to imagine, design and begin to build a viable, inclusive and enriching teaching community in our School. We have found that designing for learning (to teach) in the School means listening and creatively responding to concerns about the meaning of ‘community’ and ‘practice’, identity, access and agency. How the T-CoP evolves from here will depend on how we deal with the ‘uncertainty [that arises] between design and its realization in practice’ (Wenger 1998, p.233).

References


This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DEEWR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence, expertise and experience and received the full paper devoid of the authors’ names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Where substantial differences existed between the two reviewers, a third reviewer was appointed. Papers were evaluated on the basis of originality, quality of academic merit, relevance to the conference theme and the standard of writing/presentation. Following review, this full paper was presented at the international conference.
The challenges of building an academic community of practice: An Australian case study

Dr Jacquelin McDonald  
Learning and Teaching Support Unit, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia  
mcdonaldj@usq.edu.au

Dr Cassandra Star  
Faculty of Business and Centre for Sustainable Catchments, University of Southern Queensland,  
Toowoomba, Australia  
star@usq.edu.au

While the concept of learning communities is now widely known and generally endorsed in higher education, there are significant challenges in relation to their implementation within the current Australian higher education context. We argue that a community of practice model proposed by Wenger (1998) can provide a framework for the building of successful academic communities of practice. The model contains three fundamental elements - 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 community provides a location for individual academics to focus on teaching and learning against a background of tensions in the current Australian higher education environment. In addition, communities of practice create a space for safe reflection on practice, as the challenges of mass education, such as increasing diversity in student cohorts, are best met by collaborative effort. Communities of practice provide a context for sustained professional conversations around identified domain and practice issues. This paper presents a discussion of the application of Wenger’s model in an academic community, and the challenges and successes of that process to inform the implementation of communities of practice in the Australian tertiary context.

Keywords: community of practice model, higher education, academic professional development

Introduction

This paper explores the process of applying Wenger’s (1998) model as a framework for the building of successful academic communities of practice (CoPs) and the challenges of building such a community in the current Australian tertiary education context. The paper is based on the case study of the creation of a CoP for first year core course leaders in the Faculty of Business at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia. The community of practice on which this paper is based emerged from collaboration between the two authors to redesign a first year core course within the Faculty of Business. After the course redesign, the authors wondered how best to share what they learnt with other members of the Faculty, particularly other first year course leaders. As a way of
communicating these innovations, and to support Faculty members in their own teaching and learning journeys, we established a community of practice. Based on doctoral research into online learning communities (McDonald 2007) and CoP literature, the authors applied the community of practice model proposed by Wenger (1998) and developed further for business contexts by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). The paper presents a brief overview of communities of practice in the Australian tertiary context, followed by a discussion of Wenger’s (1998) CoP model and how it was applied in the case study. This will provide the background for the discussion of the conceptualisation, establishment, and issues addressed in a community of practice for teachers of first year courses at an Australian university.

Communities of practice in the Australian higher education context

The implementation of communities of practice is still an emerging approach to support learning and teaching in higher education, despite being well established in the Australian Vocational Educational and Training sector (Mitchell 2003; Mitchell 2006). CoPs are also well established in business as a means of facilitating the growth and implementation of new knowledge (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). In business contexts 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 framework or approach where such types of knowledge are nurtured, shared and sustained (Hildreth & Kimble 2004). 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 provide the opportunity to share and articulate tacit knowledge.

An online search to identify CoPs in Australian higher education institutions found limited evidence of reported CoPs on institutional web sites, although literature searches and personal contacts identified the existence of informal or planned implementation of CoPs. The Australian National University has a Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education grant to investigate leadership in teaching and learning using a CoP approach, Griffith University’s School of Business has a CoP centred around learning and teaching issues and Deakin University has established two teaching fellowships through their Institute for Teaching and Learning to implement CoPs across the University. Other examples are references 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 at Southern Cross University (Dunn & Wallace 2005). Does the lack of a sector wide application of CoPs in Australian higher education mean that communities of practice are more suited to industry and training organisations? Historically that may be the case, but we argue that CoPs are an innovative means of regenerating current learning and teaching practice, and that they are a particularly appropriate way of building a dynamic academic community striving to address the range of issues facing first year educators. Cox (2006) suggests that CoPs create opportunities for mutual learning, align with learning organisation theory and practice, can meet the demands of rapid change, and are well
suited to higher education. The following section is a brief overview of the nature of communities of practice to provide a framework for the following discussion of the case study on the implementation of Wenger’s CoP model in an Australian tertiary context.

**What are 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 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).*

CoPs 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, institutional structure within the organisation or an assigned task, so the focus may emerge from member negotiation and there is continual potential for new direction. CoPs 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). The community focuses on completely authentic tasks and activities that include aspects of constructivism, such as addressing complex problems, facilitation, collaborative learning, and negotiated goals (Johnson 2001). These characteristics provide an ideal environment for tertiary educators to share, debate, and build their learning and teaching expertise, within a “safe” and supportive community of practice environment.

CoPs take a variety of forms depending on their context; however they all share a basic structure. A community of practice is a unique combination of three fundamental elements (Wenger 1998). 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 convenors; a Faculty of Business core course leader (Star), and a learning and teaching designer from the Learning and Teaching Support Unit (McDonald).
Tertiary context for applying the community of practice model in Australian higher education

A community of practice 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. Within higher education, the organisational structures and culture of individualism (Laurillard 2006), produce a situation where individuals are often isolated and unaware of the practices of others. While initiatives to overcome this individualism within research endeavours, such as research centres and research networks, are well advanced, these are less common in relation to teaching in higher education (Laurillard 2006). The consequences of a lack of formal or informal structures for sharing of learning and teaching practice contributes to a lack of institutional memory regarding teaching and learning innovations, little acknowledgement or recognition of the diversity of good teaching and learning practices outside formal award mechanisms, and little support for individuals in need of mentoring or guidance in reforming, improving, or reflecting on their teaching and learning practices.

Communities of practice 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 communities of practice 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 was 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 ensuring the 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.

The Australian higher education sector is currently characterised as having been through a significant period of commercialisation and marketisation, particularly in regard to the provision of teaching to both domestic and international students (Marginson 2006). These changes have placed considerable pressure on individual staff and led to increases in teaching loads and expectations (Forgasz & Leder 2006; Anderson, Johnson & Saha 2002). At the same time, the sector has experienced real declines in funding and continued increases in student numbers. These two trends taken together have led to economic rationalisation of teaching, assessment and course delivery across the sector (Schapper & Mayson 2004). For tertiary teachers this combines with research, where the maxim of “publish or perish” remains truer than ever, to produce a powerful surge in expectations. Significant funding outcomes are attached to research output, both individually and institutionally. With the widespread use of short-term contracts in the sector (Macnamara 2007), those who publish survive, and those who don’t, do not. Thus, individual academics are at the centre of heightened institutional tensions between research priorities and new teaching and learning priorities. This creates an important institutional imperative to support individual academics as they face and negotiate the new challenges associated with these policies and the resultant expectations. In this storm
of competing and increasing expectations, CoPs can provide a safe haven for tertiary teachers.

Applying a Community of Practice model to an Australian tertiary context

The idea to establish a CoP for first year course leaders in the Faculty of Business emerged from collaboration between the two authors, and their plan to share ideas to regenerate one core first year course with other first year teachers. 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 teachers. The authors envisaged a learning community where teachers could share positive experiences (domain knowledge and practice), successes and “war stories” about their practice.

Operational aspects of the CoP

Based on the principle that meaningful change is most effectively implemented if grounded in practice (Elton 1999), and an interest in CoPs, the authors submitted a funding application to initiate and support a CoP for teachers of core first year courses. One of the authors had applied this learning community approach previously with both academics and students and the approach was supported with positive feedback from participants in their evaluation of the CoP (McDonald & Mayes 2007; McDonald 2007). 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.

The authors have joint convenor roles, and base the operational structure of the CoP on the community of practice model proposed by Wenger (1998) and further developed for business contexts by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). Having identified that first year teachers are time poor (Forgasz & Leder 2006), it follows that the convenors are equally busy, and needed support to establish and sustain the CoP. Successful bids for funding provided resources for administrative and research personnel, meeting resources, and funds to build exemplars of good practice generated by community activities.

The convenors applied Wenger’s three fundamental CoP elements: domain of knowledge community of people, and shared practice as the organising structure for the CoP. As previously mentioned, in this case study the domain of knowledge and practice is learning and teaching first year business, with the core first year course leaders forming the community. This structure was chosen to provide a consistent framework for monthly meetings to ensure that each of the essential elements of a CoP was addressed at meetings and to provide clear direction, outcomes and value adding for members. The structure, community support, and outcomes have assisted in addressing initial skepticism about “just another meeting” and the need to make best use of the time committed, for time poor tertiary educators (McDonald & Star 2006).
Utilising this approach, the CoP has now achieved full membership from the first year core course leaders on a voluntary basis. The CoP is now in a sustainable phase of its operation, with funding in place that ensures the continuation of the CoP and its support for core course leaders. Senior management have ensured that CoPs are integral to the University’s response to learning and teaching challenges at all institutional levels, including in the Faculty Learning and Teaching plan, LTSU professional development plans, and a key part of the USQ Program Revitalisation Project (PRP) process. Significantly, the success of the CoP approach in supporting the professional development of academic staff in sharing quality teaching practice and in ensuring a quality student learning journey has been institutionally acknowledged through learning and teaching awards.

However, this acknowledgement has raised an issue for the convenors in balancing the institution’s embrace of the CoP and its approach to supporting the student learning journey, and the independence of the CoP to support first year course leaders in meeting their needs. To ensure sustainability of the CoP, a careful path between these two elements must be negotiated. This is a potential issue because members value the independence and trust that characterises the CoP. On the other hand, senior management at the Faculty and the University levels identify the success of the CoP and seek to leverage that success to meet important institutional goals. A key responsibility of the CoP convenors is to ensure that the needs of the CoP members continue to be met and the role of the CoP in meeting institutional goals is highlighted without management involvement in the activities of the CoP. One way to do ensure this is through member-negotiated agendas, based on issues arising from members’ practice.

**Addressing first year learning and teaching priority issues**

In the first CoP meeting members brainstormed on the priority issues facing them as the leaders of first year core courses; the list was collated and circulated as a diagram (Figure 1, below) on the CoP web page. Members then used an online polling system to prioritise the importance of the issues. This process enabled members to shape the CoP agenda and also allowed the identification of the most pressing issues at the ground level, rather than at the University or the Faculty level.

Continuity of the community is only ensured if members value the work of the community and the outcomes that it produces. To ensure that this happens, the convenors continually liaise with members about their current needs, what outcomes and artefacts would be useful, and secure the involvement of guest speakers who can contribute to building the knowledge and practice of first year teaching. The community also operates a jointly-negotiated, member-directed agenda of critical issues in first year teaching and learning, discussed in more detail below. As a living catalogue of member resources, the convenors have constructed a toolkit for first year course leaders that will be available to all University teaching staff. It is designed to help tertiary educators to improve the student learning journey. It focuses on common challenges for course leaders. Each item highlights an issue and successful approaches in a “quick grab” format, but also provides exemplars and additional external resources. Toolkit topics include: getting started; cross-cultural teaching; first assessment items; peer assessment; evaluating our teaching; graduate qualities and skills, and professional development.
Figure 1: Important Issues for First Year Core Course Leaders
Significant outcomes of the community of practice initiative for first year courses

There are a number of key reasons that outcomes of this initiative is of wider interest in the Australian higher education environment. The four reasons that we will discuss are the provision of practical outcomes for first year core course leaders, the ability to face the challenges of mass education in a shared way, it can build retention and progression and the subsequent student learning outcomes.

Firstly, a CoP approach to support and professional development of tertiary core course leaders can provide a focus on practical outcomes for members. Our implementation of the CoP approach has provided a clear focus on staff needs. This creates the CoP as a site for staff support and reflection rather than as a site of growing demands and expectations for staff. Thus CoPs must be able to clearly and tangibly demonstrate practical outcomes for members. Providing such outcomes is an approach that highlights an effective return on the investment of staff time and adds value to the time spent participating in the community. Outcomes have included resource toolkits, assessment and marking templates, and exemplars of good practice. These support sharing of common practice and reflection and revision. In addition, an approach emphasising the professional support of staff can support professional development in teaching and learning practice, but it can also foster scholarship of teaching and learning, and portfolios of teaching and learning for other purposes.

Secondly, the strong focus on practical support provides important scaffolding to meet the challenges raised by the massification of higher education including a diverse student body with different cohorts, demographic changes in the student cohort, and changes in the motivations of university students. The CoP approach provides an effective forum to determine how first year core course leaders can respond effectively. This creates the opportunity to share and evaluate strategies to meet student needs within the University. It also enables a similar understanding and approach to cohorts and their needs. Such an approach enables a level of consistency in teaching and learning across the first year. This means that there is a level of reliability that can shape the common expectations of students across the Faculty. Consistency of the types of resources, support and scaffolding available to students across their first year can also be assured.

The third reason that the CoP approach to supporting core course leaders is significant for the higher education sector is due to the flow on effect in terms of building retention and progression. Retention and progression were the leading institutional goals for USQ in 2007. By aiming attention at commencing students and by supporting first year core course leaders, we pursued the biggest payoffs for effort and provided the most opportunity for change. Involving the first year core course leaders together provides an open communication channel but also to share teaching strategies. Our experience has highlighted that one effective way to do this is by opening, supporting, and resourcing a CoP space within Faculties for academics facing common challenges to share their strategies, concerns, and priorities in relation to teaching and learning.
Finally, CoP activities have contributed to the student learning journey in two key areas: assessment and curriculum change; and the adoption of a scaffolding approach to student learning.

CoP members have instituted assessment and curriculum change as a direct result of CoP activity. Members have articulated a number of changes in their assessment practice — a member identified, and institutionally identified, priority issue. For example, one member developed an oral debate assessment item for on-campus and external students: I [developed] some authentic assessment ... for the law degree. ... the initiative ... came from my learning, my support and listening in the CoP (McDonald, Collins, Hingst, Kimmins, Lynch & Star 2008). Other changes in assessment practice resulting from the CoP include the use of online peer assessment in Business Communication; the first use of non-exam assessment in Economics; Government, business and society’s use of assessment to develop core academic skills; the development and use of detailed marking criteria sheets to ensure consistent, quality feedback when there are large marking teams, and for the first time, a coordinated assessment timetable across first year courses.

The CoP members have also developed a scaffolding approach to the student learning journey. For first year students, scaffolding is a successful approach to supporting their transition to University study (Star & McDonald 2007). This approach has been shared within the CoP by academic staff and instructional design staff. Exemplars of this approach have been shared in meetings and in the toolkit for first year core course leaders. For example, as a result of discussion on approaches to academic integrity a flyer, Why do we reference at university? , taking a positive approach to building academic skills, rather than a negative punitive approach, was produced. This flyer was made available to all first year academic staff to use with their students, it was also made available to use on electronic forums and in course materials. CoP activities sustain and support both academics and students in their learning journey.

Conclusion

This paper articulated some of the processes of applying Wenger’s (1998) model as a framework for the building of a successful academic CoP and the challenges of building such a community in an Australian tertiary institution. Wenger’s (1998) community of practice model provides a framework for the convenors when building the successful academic community. Indicators of success are increased domain knowledge, intense discussion, reflection on and in practice of teaching first year students, which have supported changed teaching practice, and a strong sense of community that provides professional support for members.

*What life have you, if you have not life together?*

*There is no life not lived in community (Eliot, 1934).*
Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the first year core course leaders’ community of practice members. In addition, the authors acknowledge the support of the Faculty of Business and the Vice Chancellor’s Strategic Grants scheme in supporting the community of practice.

References


Researching Lifelong Learning and Teaching, (pp 397-404). Stirling Management Centre, University of Stirling, U.K.

Copyright © 2008: McDonald, J & Star, C. The authors assign HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive right to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD and in printed form within the HERDSA 2008 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.