Connected Communities

Community–university partnerships through communities of practice

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Executive Summary

This study explores the application of the communities of practice approach (CoP) to community–university partnerships (CUPs). A specific focus is whether forming CoPs might help struggling communities cope within an increasingly resource-stretched environment. Might they bring people together to solve common problems, overcoming differences in perspective brought about by specific organisational affiliations and personal backgrounds? Data includes: a literature review, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with CUP members, and Chicago fieldwork. Our study developed the research capacity of a local practitioner who shared the project's learning within his ethnic minority community and beyond.

Data analysis indicated the versatility of the CoP approach for individuals working in partnership across boundaries (for example voluntary, statutory and university sectors). Strikingly, our literature review shows little application of the CoP approach to CUPs, beyond our own limited work. In the literature, CoPs are critiqued for not dealing explicitly with inequalities; while they may offer space to address differences, there is limited analysis of how CoPs work through inter-group conflicts. However our empirical data revealed more potential. Given this promise, future research priorities include (1) empirical studies of CoPs designed to provide effective mechanisms for developing cohesion and learning, and (2) enhancing the role of community partners in co-production and community knowledge exchange.

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Key words

Community–university Partnerships/Community Engagement/Communities of Practice/Co-production/Conflict/Localism

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Introduction

CoP approaches have informed the work of research team members (http://www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp/) in the South East of England since 2004. This Connected Communities Programme (CCP) funded study gave us the opportunity to explore whether the CoP approach resonated with CUPs elsewhere, and to consider the issue of conflict in CoPs and CUPs in a challenging economic and political context. Our research triangulated the following:

- Literature review of 105 articles and books looking at CUPs in relation to CoPs and their ability to address conflict (see Appendix 1).
- Twenty nine semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with practitioners working in CUPCoPs exploring their experiences and their expectations of a university. Empirical data comes from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) practitioners' group. Remaining data comes from a well-established CUPCoP addressing young people's resilience.
- A 'mini CoP' (two day learning symposium) addressing the research questions in relation to our data attended by the research team including two international colleagues; Wenger in person, plus Rosing on Skype. (See Appendix 2).
- Findings from a BME practitioner supported to develop his research capacity and to share the project's learning locally.
- Fieldwork in the US by a community and a university researcher exploring how CoPs and CUPs survived in an already devolved and privatised environment (see Appendix 2).

This paper includes a short introduction to CoPs and CUPs, a discussion of how far we have addressed each of our research questions, and research recommendations.

CoPs and CUPs

In our experience, CoPs are particularly valuable for facilitating connections and learning within and between participants originating from different backgrounds and expertise but sharing a mutual interest. Smith (2003) describes a CoP as 'a community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise'. A CoP focus on learning from each other's practice enables a group to look critically at opportunities for the co-production of knowledge and to take a social view of learning and development, as opposed to one that strictly focused on the learning content only. For us, CUPs are the formation of relationships between a university and the communities within its locality, based on a principle of reciprocity. Such partnerships serve to establish 'a dialogue across the boundary between the university and its community which is open-ended, fluid and experimental' (Watson 2008). The value in taking a CoP approach to a CUP is the focus it provides on joint enterprise, shared passion, different levels of participation and membership and the co-creation of

knowledge. Our own CUPs also have a particular focus on issues of social inequality. This is documented in Hart and Wolff (2006) and the University of Brighton has applied CoPs to CUPs through a range of small grants, and a larger HEFCE-funded regional programme (http://www.coastalcommunities.org.uk/), with Wenger being a critical friend since 2002.

How do communities of practice (CoPs) work as a mechanism for community–university partnerships?

CoPs in the CUP context are subject to the challenge of working across and between organisations and sectors. This contrasts with much of the literature which documents learning and effectiveness within shared, rather than different organisations (Garrow and Tawse 2009); (Hodgkinson-Williams, Slay et al. 2008); (Kimble, Hildreth et al. 2008); (Short, Jackson et al. 2010); (Wesley and Buysse 2001).

An important facet of the CoP approach is whether and how CoPs generate social capital for all partners involved (Lesser, Prusak et al. 2000). Developing new 'joint' practices or shared repertoires (Wenger and McDermott 2002) between quite distinct modes of operation is key. Our empirical data showed that in mature community–university partnerships both of these occur. However, in emergent partnerships, community members were keen for them and university partners to maintain different roles and mostly separate practices. Here, the perception of value in co-working was associated with one another's core practices (e.g. the status a university brings to joint research and the access and practitioner knowledge offered by the community partner).

Evidence on the actual mechanisms of working practice is emergent, both in the literature, and in our empirical findings. The literature offers only three examples of CoPs being used explicitly in CUPs. These range from purely theoretical (Finsel 2008), an explorative piece (Hart and Wolff 2006) to an applied account of multi-agency working, albeit with universities often as peripheral partners (IDEA 2005). Finsel (2008) summarises CoP literature, highlighting various definitions and possible roles played within a CoP; Hart and Wolff (2006) explore ideas of emergence and explicit application of a CoP to CUPs, and IDEA (2005) present a number of partnership and dialogue guides focusing on the mechanics of such work. There is a lack of in-depth empirical work in these studies, and there is scope for further investigation of this particular research question.

What our triangulated data does offer us is the ability to draw a distinciton between CoPs and other forms of collaborative working. This goes some way to being able to better describe CoPs and their potential in relation to CUPs. From research participants, the most common response to the idea of CoPs was around distinguishing it from an action learning set. Unlike an action learning set (Revans 1982) where members share personal experience and direct each other to individual actions, a CoP encourages an analysis of the differences in each other's practice in order to contribute to joint understanding or collaborative activity (Wenger 1998). Typologies that bring together modes of

sharing and types of knowledge activity can be seen in Klein (2005) and Amin and Roberts (2008). Other themes picked up in discussion with Wenger and colleagues in the learning symposium explored the legitimacy of the CoP convenor and the implications their role may have for hierarchies of knowledge and members' ability to participate.

Important issues that emerge from our triangulated data include the importance of sustained, informal and fluid flows of information across different organisational or individual boundaries followed by focused, joint action to really enhance capacity and understanding between people from different backgrounds. This resonates with the model of complexity generated by Durie and Wyatt in their CCP Scoping Study.

Some actors play the role of spanning such boundaries to bring people together across organisational or practice divisions. For example, individuals in one of our focus groups were both 'activists' and 'academics' and act as 'boundary spanners' (an important concept in the CoP approach) between the two, which can be invaluable in brokering early stage relationships. This has also been a significant finding in other CCP projects, including Church and colleagues' Scoping Study on community gardening.

Our empirical data unequivocally shows that introducing a theoretical paradigm (i.e. the notion of CoPs) too early, can exclude community partners who see it as an unnecessary layer of discourse which stands in the way of action. Practical issues with which the CoP convenors in our study grappled included whether or not to introduce the concept explicitly, and if so, when, and how.

Does this approach deal with the competing priorities that can lead to community conflict?

CoPs aspire to different people's knowledge bases being given equal status - the approach suggests that the perspective of an unemployed service user, for example, is given as much value within the CoP as that of a seasoned practitioner or professor. What matters is what individuals bring to bear on the issue and practice with which the specific CoP is concerned, not whether they are part of this or that team or organisation. This is all very well in theory, yet our data indicated a huge potential for structural conflicts in CUPs around use of language, expectations of research, availability of resources, timetables, deadlines and notions of power (Mayer 2000). Wenger's work has been critiqued for not addressing issues of language, power and conflict (Barton and Tusting 2005). This is under revision in his current work. Existing literature on CoPs suggests that they could provide the space to make differences explicit and a mechanism to address them. One study from a CoP researcher suggests that finding a way to work with conflict, either internal or external, could become the practice that a CoP prioritises (Coenders 2011).

A CoP approach involves taking time to understand different practices and priorities, to identify common goals, shared language and, potentially, to focus conflict outwards towards the cause of

reduced resources or whatever else the conflict is concerning. When a CoP is able to identify a learning agenda sufficiently stretching to incorporate all of its members, conflict can be subsumed through working together. Our research suggests that CoPs that fail often try to mobilise around a solution that had already been devised and that may represent individual, rather than shared, priorities. It further highlights the existence of boundary spanners as valuable in mediating difference and promoting shared understanding.

A key question within the literature on CoPs is 'who should be brought to the table' and which voices are needed for the group to have a holistic understanding of issues. Members of one of the CoPs we studied drew attention to the gap between policy makers and practitioners, and the question of representation was a clear area of tension. Practitioners saw their role as working with minority groups but felt reluctant to be seen to be speaking for them. At the same time many felt compelled to speak on behalf of the organisation that employed them and unable to act as individuals in their own right, rather than employees. To properly deal with conflict a CoP needs a personal commitment to learning from each of its members and the symposium suggested reframing the question of representation to one of 'identifying and sharing risks', rather than acting as a voice for the group or organisation with which different members were associated. As such an individual could see themselves as speaking **with** rather than speaking **for**.

Providing members are willing, a CoP can offer the space to address deeper conflicts of inequality and power in addition to issue-focussed disagreements. Universities may be in the position to research an argument and provide data to settle a dispute, and there is evidence of this in the literature on science shops (Mulder and De Bok 2006). But a university may not be willing to act as mediator and lack the capacity or the social capital to do this adequately. They may also be implicated in the structural differences that exist between members. A CoP approach expects members to hold joint responsibility as initiators and it is important to make these deeper differences explicit beyond the disagreements that arise through decision making.

Our experience of working with CoPs indicates the value of using creative exercises (for example arts based approaches) to help work through conflicts and disagreements. CUPs in Chicago had used asset based community development tools (http://www.abcdinstitute.org/). Although the data gathered for this study provided no definitive evidence of a CoP approach to addressing conflict and finding resolutions, participants felt that they could be developed to provide the space to do so.

How might the co-production of community–university knowledge serve as a process for mitigating against conflict and building a community's capacity for self reliance?

Our data is thin on this question, and participants in our research did not have much to say on this issue, despite probing. Reasons for this were not always clear, although in the case of one CUP, research participants explicitly said there was no conflict in their group and therefore they could not

really comment on the question. In relation to one CUP, our empirical data showed up the tension between those who expected the university to act as an 'expert' and those who felt their role should be in listening rather than advising. By systematising and ordering the knowledge generated by a community and reflecting it back, a university could help build capacity and a shared understanding among its different members**.** For others, the role of the university members was unproblematically accepted as a contribution to the development of the practice focused on by the CoP, alongside contributions from other members. The literature on CUPs includes discussions on the equal value of different types of knowledge, on participatory research and on co-production. However pertinent issues remain for future empirical research: Can bridging capital be an explicit outcome of CUPs and what are the implications of the CoP approach for co-production of knowledge in CUPs?

What lessons might be drawn from other universities working in increasingly privatised contexts relevant to universities facing reduced public funding in the UK?

CUPs are well-developed in the US. The Steans Center has been established at DePaul University, Chicago for ten years and works with several hundred community partners http://steans.depaul.edu/aboutUs.asp).

Currently in the US, academics are severely constrained in the time they have available for unpaid engagement work. Given the reality of a similar climate for the UK, a university team member and a community researcher, who was a member of an ethnic minority group and convenor of one of the CUPs in this study, visited the Center, drawing on the learning potential from sharing practice and experience across organisational boundaries. The Chicago context offered the opportunity to explore both established mechanisms for CUPs and an emergent context for using CoPs; in particular in relation to issues of conflict. Asset based community development and community planning tools are used by CUPs to deal with internal disagreements by mobilising dissenting voices around a community's assets. Community partners in Chicago identified shared neighbourhood arts activities as a valuable way to consolidate a neighbourhood identity or to recognise the range of identities within a locality. The decentralisation of power to local level encouraged identity groups to work together on area based projects impacting positively on community well being when control could be equitably shared. A number of the CUPs we visited are currently involved in bids to a nation-wide initiative to support children in disadvantaged areas. This programme (The Promise Neighbourhoods) has been specifically built on a CoPs framework (http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/promise-communities-practice).

Research recommendations

Some existing CUPs use the language and practices of CoPs in the UK, in Sweden and in North America. However, there has to date been little research into the CoP process, or even basic auditing of practice. Our scoping study points to the value CoPs could add to building and sustaining relationships between universities and communities, particularly given the increasing role a university may be expected to play as public sector support declines. Potential future research priorities include:

- Empirical studies of CoPs with diverse participants, for example, academics, service users, policy makers and practitioners. Our own interest is specifically related to community–university partnerships, but we found both a lack of empirical data on how **any** CoPs actually work in practice, alongside a belief in the value of the CoP approach and thirst for knowledge about its application.
- Given the wider CCP vision, studies to tease out whether CoPs provide effective mechanisms for developing greater cohesion and learning between diverse groups, would be beneficial. Practice guides, including details of how to apply the promising arts based approaches identified in our study are needed. Alongside researching CoPs that are 'naturally occurring' (whether self-identified as CoPs or not), the programme might consider establishing demonstrator CoPs to explore how useful they might be as mechanisms for cross-boundary working, for example in a neighbourhood area, or in relation to a particularly 'wicked' problem.
- Given CCP's co-production agenda, further studies might seek to enhance the role of community partners, including community partner-led bids, or ones explicitly aimed at community–university capacity building. In terms of our own modest contribution, our study demonstrates the value of including community partners directly in the research team and in supporting them to develop technical skills in data gathering, presentations, literature reviewing and boundary spanning. Our learning symposium and the intricate relationship the research team had with research participants and others demonstrated the value of a CoP approach to executing this scoping study, also laying the foundations for future community–university research collaborations.

Appendix 1. Literature review overview

Questions:

- Where are communities of practice explicitly being used to build community capacity?
- Where are universities contributing to community capacity?
- What models are emerging?
- How does university–community engagement work survive in an increasingly privatised context?
- Where are communities of practice explicitly addressing issues of conflict?
- Where are universities contributing to community cohesion

Initial search terms:

- "communities of practice"; "university community"; ("CoP" + "community capacity"), ("CoP" + "social capital") "CoP + capacity"; "CoP + learning"
- "community self reliance"; "communities of practice + conflict"; "CoP and community cohesion"; "universities + community conflict"

Search restrictions:

- Excluding any examples of communities of practice that only exist virtually or are primarily concerned with virtual media as a main method of communication/topic of interest

Theme	Number of papers
CoPs in CUPs and CoPs used 'between' practices	5
Typologies of CoPs + distinction between CoPs and other forms of collaborative work	4
CoPs as a mode of building capacity	6
Defining CoPs (and CoPs as a unit of analysis)	12
What people do in CoPs (i.e. not just a definition of what they are)	5
CoPs in relation to management	12
CoPs within same practice(internal CoPs)	15
Boundaries/multi-vocality and power	6
Social learning/learning communities and situated social practice	12
Membership, participation, identity and practice	10
Community Self Reliance	8
Communities of Practice and Conflict	6
CoP and Community Cohesion	3
Universities and Community Conflict	3

Appendix 2: Empirical data sources

Organisation or group	Numbers	Research approach	Date of data collection
Hastings			
BME members	7	Individual interviews	**April – June 2011**
Councillors	2	Individual interviews	
Local residents	2	Individual interviews	
Former CoP members	5	Focus group discussion	
New CoP members	8	Group observation	
Manager of a CUP	1	Informal interview	
Other CoP convenors	2	Informal interview	
CoP theorist	1	Skyped interview	
Community partner (community planning)	1	Skyped interview	**October 2011**
Chicago			
CU partnership professionals	4	Individual interviews	**July 2011**
Community partners	8 (25 people)	Group interviews	
Academics	3	Individual Interviews	
Learning symposium			
CU partnership professionals	2	Group discussions	**October 2011**
UoB academics	3	Group discussions	
BME group members	4	Group discussions	
CoP's theorist	1	Group discussions	
Researchers	3		
Other visits related to programme			
Glasgow			**July 2011**
Exeter			**October 2011**

Appendix 3: External Links

1. http://www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp/ The Community University Partnership Programme at the University of Brighton, established in 2003 and implementing a CoP approach to many of its partnerships since 2006.

2. http://www.coastalcommunities.org.uk/ South East Coastal Communities Programme, a demonstrator programme funded by HEFCE between 2008 and 2011 using an explicit CoP approach to larger funded project exploring long term community university relationships.

3. http://www.abcdinstitute.org/ Asset Based Community Developent, an approach to working in and with communities initiated by John Jody Kretzmann from North Western University in Chicago.

4. http://steans.depaul.edu/aboutUs.asp/ The Steans Centre based at the De Paul University in Chicago, working with Community Based Service Learning programmes for undergraduate and post graduate students. Also responsible for the Egan Urban Centre at the same university where academics are paid for short term consultancies with third and public sector organisations.

5. http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/promise-communities-practice/ The Promise Neighborhoods, a nation-wide Federal programme currently being launched by Obama's government through which research and community organisations can bid for funds to use a CoP approach to collaborative working in order to address child poverty and disadvantage.

6. http://www.ewenger.com/ Etienne Wenger's home page in which he discusses the basis of his work and his thinking behind 'Communities of Practice'.

7. http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx/ AHRC Connected Communities Programme –Links to our project were made with:
Professor SJ Banks PI, University of Durham, *Community-based participatory research: ethics and outcomes;* Professor GP Crow PI, University of Southampton, *Conceptualisations and meanings of 'community': the theory and operationalisation of a contested concept;* Dr R Durie PI, University of Exeter, *Researching with communities: Towards a leading edge theory and practice for community engagement;* Professor J Pearce PI, University of Bradford, *Power in Community: research and Social Action Scoping Study;* Professor A Church PI*, University of Brighton*, Connecting health, health-behaviours and place through the work of community gardening.*

8. http://www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp/about-cupp/cupp-team/72-angie-hart.html Link to one of PI Angie Hart's university webpages.

List of Abbreviations

AHRC	Arts and humanities research council
BME	Black and minority ethnic
CCP	Connected communities programme
CoP	Communities of practice
CUP	Community–university partnership
CUPCoP	A Community-university partnership using a Communities of practice approach
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council

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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

> "*to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.*"

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx