



# Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education

Final Report 2012

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- Stakeholder network members who provided evaluative input on draft resources.

## Project team



*Figure 1: Project team members*

From left: Professor Milton Cox, Associate Professor Jacquelin McDonald (Project Co-leader), Mr Tony Burch, Dr Cassandra Star (Project Co-leader), Associate Professor Judy Nagy, Mrs Fiona Margetts (Project Manager)  
Absent: Ms Emily Collins (Project Officer)

## List of acronyms used

ABDC	Australian Business Deans Council
ALTC	Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd
CADAD	Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development
CoP	Community of practice
CoPs	Communities of practice
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DIISRTE	Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
FLC	Faculty Learning Communities
HERDSA	Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia
ISSOTL	International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
M-CoPs	Modified CoPs
OLT	Office for Learning and Teaching
OTALN	Occupational Therapy Academic Learning Network
POD	Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education
SRHE	Society for Research into Higher Education
STLHE	Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
USQ	University of Southern Queensland
V-CoPs	Virtual CoPs
W-CoPs	Wenger CoPs

## Executive summary

The Leadership project LE10-1734, 'Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education', used an iterative, reflective, action learning approach to identify and address the leadership needs and challenges for those facilitating learning and teaching communities of practice (CoPs).

CoPs are increasingly established in higher education to provide opportunities for staff to form a peer learning community and to allocate dedicated time to build knowledge of learning and teaching and to share their practice, ultimately leading to improvement and innovation. An analysis of the academic literature identified confusion around the understanding of CoPs, a dearth of literature specifically on higher education, and a gap regarding the leadership role within CoPs.

The leadership role within CoPs can be challenging as the CoP may have an uneasy fit within the context of higher education institutions. Often CoPs are not aligned with formal structures, and the leadership role/s within CoPs can differ significantly from those of the familiar 'corporate' roles of committee chair, department head or unit/course leader. Often CoP members will be from different disciplines and may include both professional and academic staff. The dynamics of collaboration within such diversity will require significant leadership skill to manage personalities and power dynamics, cultivate a supportive receptive context and provide outcomes useful for both members and institutions. Thus, for this project, the 'leadership' role in the CoP is designated the 'facilitator.'

The project team's action research methodology is detailed in Chapter 2 of this report. Data to inform a leadership needs analysis were obtained through a literature review, a broad quantitative survey of the higher education sector, as well as from in-depth qualitative investigation with key informants. The triangulation of these sources, plus input from the reference group and evaluator, provided a deep understanding of the leadership needs and challenges for those facilitating learning and teaching CoPs in higher education. Data identified most CoPs are situated within university faculties among practitioners and are, therefore, close to where student learning takes place.

In evaluating how best to support and develop capability for facilitators of CoPs in the Australian context, the project team concluded that "[r]esearch ... indicates that there is no one definitive set of 'traits' or 'behaviours' that characterises leaders" and there are many diverse types of successful leader with a range of qualities, skills and attributes (Jameson 2008, p. 9). Therefore, the project's methodology highlighted a need to engage strongly with the target end users to identify their needs; this featured throughout the project. To facilitate this approach, early, continuous engagement with a stakeholder network of individuals in Australia and overseas known to facilitate or be interested in facilitating CoPs, ensured strong involvement in the project by stakeholders. Additionally, the project team developed linkages with a number of groups working in the same area overseas and with other OLT projects in Australia. Through the stakeholder network, and other interested groups, a targeted survey and in-depth interviews informed a needs analysis for CoP facilitators in the sector, which led into development of resources from the project. These resources were derived after a comprehensive literature review, survey and interviews, as depicted in Figure 2 below, as well as engagement with the stakeholder network.

A rich set of Australian, higher education-specific resources designed explicitly for those who facilitate higher education communities of practice is the key outcome of the project. Based on feedback from the project survey, interviews and the stakeholder network, the resources were developed as a 'just in time, just for me' integrated online package aimed at disciplinary academics who were found to be the key facilitators of CoPs in the Australian setting. The resources are framed and constructed around the development phases through which CoPs typically move, as shown in Figure 3 below.



Figure 2: Identifying CoP leadership needs for development and capacity building: A triangulated/iterative approach

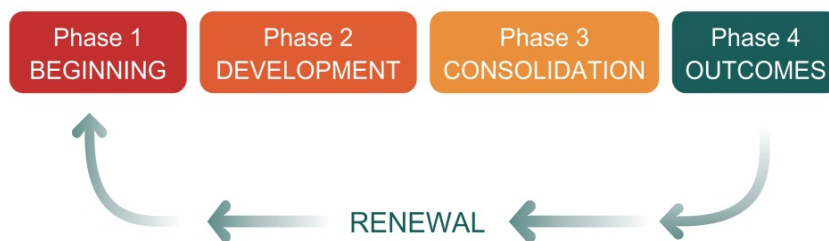


Figure 3: Phases of Communities of Practice

The introductory explanations to the resources note that the need for particular skills may be more pronounced in some phases of the CoP than others and, also, that each facilitator has a separate development journey, and, thus, completes a self-audit to assess their development needs. For each phase of CoP development, there are key leadership skills, capabilities or competencies that are needed to contribute to successful leadership by the facilitator. The resources, therefore, cover a range of skills, capabilities and competencies, in each phase of CoP development. Each individual resource is constructed to be short and sharp and to stand alone, but sits within the overall framework outlined above. These resources have been tested and reviewed with target academics at Australian-based conferences and workshops and are available for free distribution via the project website <[www.cops.org.au](http://www.cops.org.au)>.

The independent evaluation of the project highlighted that the project team displayed significant strengths including a tight project design, joint leadership, a strong approach to working together that worked with the team's strengths and the continuous engagement model through the stakeholder network. The evaluator concludes that these strengths ensured the project stayed on time and on budget to produce excellent outcomes. In particular, the project demonstrated clear value through the identification of and engagement with end users, its articulation of the strengths and use of the CoP approach in higher education, and ultimately, through its contribution to the development of CoP facilitators.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction

## Project background

This project focused on clarifying and building the leadership capacity of facilitators of learning and teaching communities of practice and was funded, under a leadership capacity-developing program, by the then Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). In January 2012 the ALTC was replaced by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) and the project continued under its auspices. As a result, reference is made to both organisations throughout the report, dependent upon the environment in which the project was operating at the time.

The project proceeded in parallel with the ALTC-funded Teaching Fellowship of Associate Professor McDonald, one of the project leaders, focussed at the institutional level: 'Community, domain, practice: Facilitator's catch-cry for revitalising learning and teaching through communities of practice'. Significant synergies and effective mobilisation of in-kind resources were achieved by undertaking the projects concurrently as they both addressed the building of leadership capacity: the Fellowship at an institutional level and this project at a national/sectoral level (refer Chapter 4 – Project linkages).

Communities of practice (CoPs) provide one mechanism through which academics can engage in sustained learning and teaching inquiry within supportive communities situated in their learning and teaching practice (McDonald & Star 2008; Star & McDonald, under review (a)). However, CoPs operate differently from institutionalised work groups or project teams. Wenger et al. (2002) describe communities of practice as:

*Groups of people who share a concern ... 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 ... [t]hey become a community of practice. (pp. 4–5).*

The leadership role within CoPs, therefore, differs from that of the familiar chairperson, course leader or lecturer. Furthermore, those who are involved in CoPs are led voluntarily and contribute to the leadership of the group. CoPs encourage active participation and collaborative decision-making by individuals, as opposed to separated decision-making that is present in traditional organisations (Johnson 2001). It was the leadership needs of individuals performing these roles in the Australian higher education context which were explored and resources to meet these needs were developed as this project's deliverables.

## Project rationale

A review by Southwell and Morgan (2009) did not identify a strong link between academic leadership development programs and student learning outcomes. The authors did, however, conclude that "[w]ell developed professional learning communities have positive impact on both teaching practice and student achievement" (p. 82). A multi-university study of Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) in the USA also found that they had an above average impact on student learning that was consistent across the six universities (Beach & Cox 2009). This finding aligned with previous research by the project team (McDonald & Star 2006, 2007, 2008; Nagy & Burch 2009; Star & McDonald, under review (a and b)) and others into the preferences of academics to learn collegially in their context, with directly relevant practical outcomes and the positive impact of this approach on student outcomes. Southwell and Morgan (2009) recommended that further research be undertaken. That agenda was addressed through this project.

Significant discussion of professional learning communities or CoPs in higher education has revealed confusion about the meaning and potential role of such groups. Part of this confusion was due to the newness of the application of the concept within higher education (McDonald & Star 2006). It was also due, in part, to definitional rigidity among some scholars, and debates about the different types of CoPs and how they are used in higher education (Star & McDonald, under review (a)). However, collegiate structures, including CoPs, seem ideally suited to the style of leadership espoused by Kotter (1990 cited in Anderson and Johnson 2006, p. 3) who suggests that “leadership is about influencing and engaging others to effect change”.

CoPs have emerged as a non-hierarchical structure within higher education that attempts to re-engage academics in learning and collegiality. However, little (if any) research about leadership and role definition within such structures has been conducted. When this project commenced in October 2010, literature was developing on the use of CoPs in higher education which could be categorised into three strands:

- a strand acknowledging significant potential for CoPs in higher education
- a second strand reflecting on previous activity undertaken and believing a CoP had formed
- a third strand relating to those who had started or created a CoP within higher education and reporting their experiences.

CoPs have been significantly considered within previous ALTC projects. They were, however, an element only, employed as dissemination or delivery mechanisms, a planned outcome of a project’s completion or part of an approach or methodology. One major project, ‘Promoting teaching and learning communities: institutional leadership project’, did have the construction of CoPs at its centre (LE5-18; see Higgins et al. 2009), but the focus of the project was on building leadership of learning and teaching with CoPs as the delivery mechanism, rather than on the leadership development or capacity needs within CoPs.

From the perspective of the project team, however, what was missing from the literature of the day and previous ALTC project work was a focus on the leadership role within CoPs – the challenges of CoP leadership and how to build the leadership capacity of those who facilitate CoPs. This was identified as important given the challenging but strategic position of CoP leaders between academic teachers at the ‘coalface’ and the formal institutional hierarchy, including senior leaders.

The important negotiation and mediation roles of CoP facilitators require specific skills and knowledge about how to negotiate and work with cross-level leaderships in higher education. This capacity-building agenda was the focus of this project, addressed through the collaboration of five active CoP researchers from three different Australian universities and an international expert, Professor Milton Cox (Miami University, USA).

The team’s initial dissemination approach was to conduct a series of nation-wide, context-specific workshops based on the needs analysis undertaken early in the project’s life. This approach was modified, however, based on early stakeholder feedback and evaluative input. It was identified that a suite of online leadership resources would more closely meet the needs of facilitators of CoPs and would live beyond the life of the project.

These revised outcomes have provided resources to build facilitator leadership capacity. They focus on how the facilitator successfully practises the craft of leadership, scanning the broad institutional context and positioning the CoP to succeed within that context, as well as facilitating the internal CoP processes to achieve members’ learning and teaching goals.

In the course of the project a further review of the literature was undertaken and the results are reported in Chapter 2.

## Value of and need for the project

Ramsden (1998, p. 4) describes academic leadership simply as “... a practical and everyday *process* of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues”. Thus, leadership in learning and teaching is situated, grounded in practice and transformational.

In this project, this leadership was situated between two common levels of analysis or investigation within OLT/ALTC projects: the course or unit leader and the formal institutional leadership. The leadership role and the leadership needs of the course leader had been investigated previously in ALTC projects (for example, Jones et al. 2009; D’Agostino 2010; Vilkinas et al. 2009; Roberts et al. 2011; Nagy et al. 2010). The formal institutional leadership at different levels including heads of school, associate deans and professional development centres had also been the subject of ALTC investigations (for example: Scott et al. 2008; Holt 2010; West and Vilkinas 2011) and one particular project which investigated both (Southwell et al. 2009).

Little attention had been given, however, to the roles, needs and impacts of those learning leaders who operate between the level of academic teachers at the ‘coalface’ and the level of formal leadership. These leaders – in the case of this project, facilitators of learning and teaching CoPs – occupy a significant leadership position between the top-down leadership of the institution and the leadership of teaching teams and the course or unit leader. In many ways, the CoP facilitator operates at the leadership crossroads of the contemporary higher education institution. The CoP facilitator ‘wears different hats’ and mobilises different resources and strategies as the contextual factors require – their leadership approach and skills are contingent and, thus, require specifically developed leadership training and approaches that reflect the complexity of the role.

It was the project team’s position that a leadership approach that is capable of bridging all university interests and foci without the intrusion of self-interest or the interests of department, faculty or other individuals, is the style of leadership provided by CoP facilitators. Therefore, the need to be conversant with underpinning literature, to have the requisite ‘soft’ skills to work with existing university hierarchies, and to manage the institutional constraints and opportunities to ensure CoPs are provided with the space and resources to achieve desired objectives, was deemed important for CoP facilitators to achieve success.

Critical to the success of CoPs is the need to persuade academics that CoPs *do not* function as a committee with the imperative of a fixed and predetermined agenda to achieve particular outcomes. The lack of understanding about how CoPs operate and what they can achieve for academics is clearly illustrated in the literature review (refer to Chapter 2, Literature Review). This lack of understanding further emphasised the need for the project team to investigate CoP facilitators in Australian higher education.

This project identified, designed and developed resources to support the CoP facilitator leadership role through the collection of data on the leadership needs, challenges and strategies of CoPs in higher education, further informed by distributed and contingency theories of leadership.

## Chapter 2 – Outcomes and impacts

### Outcomes

As already stated, this project focused on clarifying and building the leadership capacity of facilitators of learning and teaching communities of practice. It proceeded in parallel with an ALTC Teaching Fellowship focussed at the institutional level conducted by Associate Professor Jacquie McDonald, one of the project leaders: 'Community, domain, practice: facilitator's catch-cry for revitalising learning and teaching through communities of practice'.

The role of the facilitator in community building, orchestrating the sharing of practice, organising the building of knowledge and reading of the context is vital for CoPs to lead change and transform teaching and learning practice. Effective facilitation is essential for creating and sustaining an environment in which CoPs can thrive (Ortquist-Ahrens 2009; Cox 2004, 2006). Six years of experience and research in the Australian context (McDonald & Star 2006, 2007, 2008; Star & McDonald, in press) confirmed this crucial element in the success and sustainability of CoPs.

The aims of the project were, therefore, to:

1. Identify the leadership challenges for CoP facilitators managing down (course leaders), managing across (the department or the school) and managing up (the formal hierarchy)
2. Identify the impact of institutional factors that influence leadership challenges for CoP facilitators
3. Develop support for and increase leadership capacity to foster collegial forms of collaboration for sustainable impact on learning and teaching across the sector
4. Evaluate existing resources and create new resources to facilitate capacity-building for CoP leadership.

Collaboration with national and international CoP scholars increased the national knowledge base and grew expertise in leading and operating CoPs to foster learning and teaching practice. Resources were developed, trialled and evaluated by the sector through a stakeholder network and the project website.

The key outcomes included:

1. A leadership needs analysis for CoP facilitators in higher education
2. Identification of the size and spread of CoPs and who facilitates these CoPs
3. Review of the CoP literature with a focus on CoP leadership
4. Development of an understanding and articulation of the key leadership challenges for CoP facilitators
5. Development of Australian higher education-specific support and resources for the enhancement of facilitators' leadership capacity.

The ultimate goal of the project – identifying resource need and then providing these resources to improve the leadership capacity of facilitators of learning and teaching CoPs to increase their success in engaging academics to transform their teaching practice and, thus, enhance student learning outcomes – was achieved.

## Approach and methodology

The project adopted an iterative, reflective, action learning approach comprised seven stages as depicted in Figure 4 below. Each stage of the project provided important data and lessons for the subsequent stage. Data to inform the key leadership needs analysis were obtained through a broad quantitative survey of the sector, as well as in-depth qualitative investigation with key informants.

The triangulation of these sources with reviewed literature provided a deep understanding of the leadership needs of and challenges for those facilitating learning and teaching CoPs in higher education.



*Figure 4: Project stages*

The phases of initiation, development, implementation and evaluation proceeded through the following ten steps:

1. Survey development
2. Survey testing and validation
3. Survey implementation
4. Data analysis
5. Interviews
6. Interview data analysis
7. Results of needs analysis
8. Outcomes
9. Further dissemination
10. Evaluation.

## Literature Review

The literature review focused on that literature concerning CoPs which provided insights into how leadership is identified, built and sustained for CoPs in higher education. Approximately 200 research papers and texts were identified, either by title or abstract, as having some connection with the subject of this investigation and approximately 25 per cent of these have been directly referenced in the detailed literature review. As the review progressed, it became evident that the concept of CoPs in much of the literature was unclear or muddled, and that the definition of what might be a CoP or organisational workgroup was often confused. A summary of the key themes emerging from the literature review and the full document are available at <[www.cops.org.au/literature\\_review.pdf](http://www.cops.org.au/literature_review.pdf)>.

### Leadership defined and the facilitator role in CoPs

“Research ... indicates that there is no one definitive set of ‘traits’ or ‘behaviours’ that characterises leaders” and there are many diverse types of successful leader with a diverse range of qualities, skills and attributes (Jameson 2008, p. 9). In addition, context will also influence leadership approaches and activities (Jameson 2008, p. 9) (Jameson 2008, p. 9). ALTC/OLT projects reflect an increasing move to considering the social and inclusive dimensions of leadership, such as distributed or collaborative leadership.

Defining leadership is difficult. Literature from a variety of disciplines could be relevant in the investigation and navigating this literature in ways that would satisfy many is a challenge. However, Jameson and the UK Higher Education Academy Education Subject Centre (2008) provide a contextually relevant summary which the project team found particularly relevant. The following quotations from *Leadership: Professional communities of leadership practice in post-compulsory secondary education* represent perspectives that are useful for framing and interpreting the CoP leadership or facilitator role.

While the notion of ‘leadership’ has tended to attract greater provenance than ‘management’ in recent years, the two are often confused. They are, however, complementary and both are needed for successful organisational operations ... Leadership can also be either ‘formal’ or ‘informal’. Formal leaders are those with a specific role in management, while informal leaders may comprise anyone from any level of hierarchy (Jameson 2008, p. 10).

Research in fact indicates that there is no one definitive set of ‘traits’ or ‘behaviours’ that characterises leaders. Charisma, dominance and charm, though often popularly regarded as ‘traits’ of successful leaders, are not at all necessary conditions of leadership: there are many different kinds of effective leaders with a variant range of qualities (Jameson 2008, p. 9).

For the past few decades, there has been increasingly less interest in ‘trait’, charismatic and heroic theories of leadership, as newer understandings of the social, democratic and flexible dimensions of leadership such as distributed or collaborative leadership have predominated (Jameson 2008, p. 10).

While these quotations are instructive, the term which best encapsulates the role of a ‘facilitator’ within a teaching and learning context must be considered. The terms ‘leader’, ‘mentor’, ‘manager’ or ‘motivator’ could be used, or a new, hybrid term created. However, just as ‘baggage’ is associated with the term leadership as noted above, research has identified that the role can be interpreted within a more purist, organic sense and in numerous other ways that reflect more structured contexts. To separate leadership from the contexts in which it operates is difficult, and the ‘fit’ between leaders and the culture in which they operate is crucial (Jameson 2008, p. 9). For the purposes of this project the leadership role within higher education CoPs is designated ‘facilitator’ and refers to concepts of ‘leading’ in a general way, thus allowing each user of the project resources to attach a personal meaning for their own context.

## CoPs as defined by seminal authors

Almost all of the literature reviewed referred to at least one or more of what the project team described as the 'seminal authors'. The material of these seminal authors was used as a primary source to understand what CoPs were, how they operated, and their outcomes. The concept of CoPs was first explored in 1991 by Wenger and also by Lave and Wenger, who investigated situated learning environments. The concept was then further developed in a number of papers by Wenger, Wenger with other authors, and, in some cases, by a small number of other authors early this decade. These authors are also considered by the project team to be seminal authors.

Etienne Wenger's (1991) discussion paper, 'Communities of practice: Where learning happens' appears to be one of the earliest publications concerning CoPs and learning and their relationship to the core competencies of an organisation. Wenger (1991) suggested that these competencies were built through informal networks acting like social communities, and that these are naturally occurring in all organisations. Wenger (1991), however, clearly differentiates the concept of CoP from the organisation itself, stating that CoPs do not coincide with the formal organisations in which they exist. He does suggest, however, that successful organisational strategies should also recognise, nurture and capitalise on these competencies. It is this suggestion and its implications for practical application that are central to the confusion in the literature as to the definition of what might be a CoP or organisational workgroup.

Arguably, the earliest *significantly detailed* research into and publication about CoPs is that of Lave and Wenger (1991), who describe CoPs within a *situated learning* context. Their research suggested that learning could be viewed as a special *type* of social practice associated with the relationship between newcomers and existing members of a community of knowledge and practice, with the community being work participants having similar or complementary responsibilities but quite different levels of personal competencies and experiences. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose a theory of learning as a dimension of social practice within the workplace, where membership is not formal, deliberate or even a conscious act, but where learning is, of itself, an evolving form of membership.

From the literature review it seems clear that the concept of CoPs from the perspective of the early work of Wenger (1991) and Lave and Wenger (1991), is one of unstructured learning through unstructured social connections within a shared field of practice. It would seem sensible to assume that participants benefit from such interaction. It would seem probable that the entity within which participants work might also benefit from the underlying collective body of learning that accumulates. There is no suggestion, however, by any of these seminal authors, at least in 1991, that such communities are led, managed or facilitated, or that they could even be led, managed or facilitated. Lave and Wenger (1991) do not claim that communities, as they described them, have any formal or semi-formal structure.

However, more recent literature does introduce concepts of facilitation, leadership, management and organisational involvement, often with CoPs recognised as a *thing* rather than a *process*. This could suggest that the concept of CoPs described by Wenger (1991) and Lave and Wenger (1991) had 'morphed' in some of the later literature into something different from that supported by their original research. Again, this difference has created some confusion.

Wenger's (1998) seminal publication, *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*, provides an in-depth discussion of a broader conceptual framework of situated learning, and strengthens a conceptual perception of a CoP identity. Wenger (1998) argues that CoPs are everywhere, that we all belong to them and that CoPs are an integral part of our daily lives. He further states that CoPs are informal, pervasive and rarely come into explicit focus and yet they are not considered isolated or understood independently from other practices.



One difficulty that arises when thinking about CoPs is demonstrated when Wenger (1998) also describes how sometimes the boundaries of a community are redefined with explicit markers of membership and the nuances and the jargon of a professional group. The question then arises whether CoPs are a natural but informal expression of social identity within an informal learning context, or whether other groups of shared interest such as networks, workgroups, committees, faculty learning groups and others, are also able to be identified under the broader banner of communities of practice. Within a work setting, is a CoP but one particular style of workgroup, or are all forms of workgroups CoPs? This is not resolved in the body of literature examined and might explain some of the confusion concerning what is, and is not, a CoP. However, the project team argues that it has been able to clarify such issues by distinguishing between the CoP structure articulated by the seminal authors and a modified form of this structure, as presented in the conclusion of this literature review.

Wenger (1991), Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1996) and Wenger (1998) make no claims as to how CoPs might evolve, be led, managed or facilitated. These four publications, when read in conjunction, however, lay the foundations for understanding CoPs in that actual work, learning about work, and sharing information about work, are social activities already implicit within work structures, and describe what the state of learning means to individuals and groups. The issue of leadership is not addressed as an important part of the CoPs described by these authors over the seven-year publication period of four important pieces of writing. Was leadership an issue of importance for them? The implication is that the true concept of CoPs as described by these authors is a concept that cannot be led, and CoPs are not a *thing* but a *process*. That process is a situation of unstructured, unintentional, situated learning.

Wenger and Snyder (2000) continue with the same theme, suggesting that CoPs are groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and a passion for joint enterprise, and that CoPs emerge in organisations that thrive on knowledge. The authors suggest that, while CoPs differ from other formal organisation structures, they are also capable of similar tasks. This dichotomy between an informal CoP not controlled by an entity and the more formal management-devised and controlled structures, is obvious from a wide review of other CoP literature, creating tension between the various definitions of 'team', 'leadership', 'facilitation', and 'management'.

Another author, Allee (2000), focuses on knowledge and learning, and knowledge networks, and builds her proposition primarily on her work with large business corporations. One of her community of practice definitions is provided by the Chief Scientist at Xerox, who defines such communities as "peers in the execution of real work" (p. 5), held together by common purpose, but differing from teams in that they are "defined by *knowledge* rather than task" (p. 5). The author strongly differentiates between work and project teams, and CoPs, in that the goals and working nature of the former are predetermined by management, while those of CoPs are negotiated amongst members. What Allee (2000) does not discuss is how CoPs are managed, facilitated or led. Many CoP authors of reviewed papers provide a limited or superficial dialogue about how CoPs are managed, facilitated or coordinated. Allee (2000) does recognise that there are new roles to be defined for community champions, members, experts, mentors, organisers, coordinators, communicators, facilitators, documents and support. The literature review has sought evidence of such definitions but with very limited success, as will be further demonstrated.

The overall theme of the seminal authors is sustained from its beginning in 1991 through to 2011. Wenger (2004) continues to define CoPs as social structures that focus on knowledge. In 2006, he defines CoPs from the perspective of groups of people learning how to do it better and, like Allee (2000), reinforces the domain (area of interest or expertise), community and practice aspects that had been developed in earlier publications. In describing what CoPs look like, however, he fails to discuss leadership, facilitation or management of such communities. Very recently, Wenger et al. (2011) described CoPs *and* networks as integral aspects of the social fabric of learning, indicating that communities and

networks are aspects of social learning rather than separate structures. Again, there is scope for confusion. Networks are defined elsewhere in literature quite differently from CoPs. Networks appear to be part of traditional organisational structures or to evolve for organisational purposes, which is not necessarily why or how CoPs evolve.

Undoubtedly, Wenger has been the driving force behind the development of the concept of CoPs. Any comprehensive literature review would reveal the very extensive influence that Wenger has had and continues to have on CoP literature. Wenger (1998) provides probably the most significant and clear definition of CoPs as follows:

*Communities of practice are about content – about learning as a living experience of negotiated meaning – not about form. In this sense, they cannot be legislated into existence or defined by decree. They can be recognised, supported, encouraged, and nurtured, but they are not reified, designable units (1998, p. 229). ... They are driven by doing and learning rather than by institutional policies (1998, p. 251).*

The conundrum then for the institution exists when Wenger (1998) states that CoPs are organisational assets because they are the social fabric of the learning of organisations. Yet CoPs are also informal, amorphous, shifting groups driven, as Wenger has described, by doing and learning, and doing so in entirely unstructured and almost unconscious ways.

The work of the early seminal authors describes how informal networks of workers both contribute to, and benefit from, a situated learning environment in the workplace having a social community setting of knowledge exchange. This *process* is not only informal; it is unintentional, unstructured and unplanned. It is a special form of participative social practice operating in the organisational background where participants increasingly, though unconsciously, contribute to the knowledge and skills of others, as they themselves benefit from the same reciprocative process. Thus, applying that definition, CoPs in the purest sense of the research of the seminal authors *cannot* be led, managed, facilitated or even influenced. In his later works, Wenger correctly posits that there might be advantage to organisations should they find ways to harness this situated learning process; in effect a structural move from the pure CoP concept of the seminal authors of CoPs being a *process* rather than a *thing*. The introduction of structure in any form, such as organisational intervention or recognised CoP leadership or facilitation, means that a CoP is no longer unintentional and, thus, the CoP concept of the seminal authors is modified. For that reason, this project has labelled the 'pure' CoP concept of the seminal authors as Wenger-CoPs or W-CoPs. CoPs subject to any form of structural change are labelled Modified CoPs or M-CoPs.

A gap has been identified in the literature of seminal authors concerning the ability to have *leadership* or *facilitation* of the purest forms of CoP, the W-CoP. Whether there is an understanding in the literature concerning *leadership* or *facilitation* of M-CoPs, and how that might complement the traditional W-CoP mode, or work alongside it, needs to be understood.

## CoPs from the perspective of other authors

Much of the CoP literature has focussed on CoPs developed within large business or government entities, and some of the more recent literature suggests that the concept of CoPs within those environments might not easily translate into the higher education environment. More recent publications are overlaid with more sophisticated issues such as organisational behaviour, knowledge management, learning environments and managerial imperatives and structures, and many suggest potentially great benefits to individuals, groups and institutions if this *process* could be channelled in some form. One form of channelling is the introduction of *leadership* or *facilitation* and similar formal or semi-formal processes (facilitation, management, coordination, distributed leadership, and so forth). Given the focus of this project, this review concentrated, understandably, on issues concerning leadership and facilitation of, or within, CoPs.

Various writers discuss from the perspective of Virtual Communities (V-CoPs), and networks which they believe to be CoPs. Design, technology, group support systems, distributed leadership, scaffolding, simulation, code-determined interactions and similar elements are features of these CoPs. Most of these authors build some of their evidence on work by Wenger in particular, but are probably describing organisational formal or semi-formal structures. Many CoP authors are obviously building their material based, at least in part, on CoPs within business organisation entities. Bourhis et al. (2005), when investigating a number of V-CoPs, all in business environments, actually describe management practices. Their evidence suggested the success of V-CoPs was dependent on how the organisation managed V-CoP leadership teams. The seminal authors' material suggests, however, that CoP leadership cannot be managed.

It is difficult to find a body of literature significantly 'faithful' to the foundations that the seminal authors, particularly Wenger, built over a period of 20 years. Whilst many publications refer to one or more of the seminal authors, most usually Wenger, very few base their work on the purer form of the situated learning concepts that have been at the foundation of the original CoP literature – what the project team describes as Wenger-CoPs or W-CoPs. The few authors who refer to situated learning concepts include Cox (2005), Ewing (2005), Churchman (2006), Churchman and Stehlik (2007), and Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan (2008). These and other authors do not describe in detail how CoPs can or should be led or facilitated, apart from Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan (2008) who suggest, quoting Bens (2000), that facilitation is a way of providing leadership without taking the reins. The aforementioned authors also believe that effective facilitation encourages ambiguity in allowing new themes to emerge that might otherwise be lost in more controlled discussion situations, and manages tension as it arises.

An important piece of research concerning CoPs is that of Amin and Roberts (2008). The authors reviewed 300 publications for their work *Knowing in action: Beyond Communities of Practice*. Despite the large body of publications, the limited findings by the authors concerning how CoPs are facilitated, led or managed are surprising. The authors took issue with what they saw as a homogenous and instrumentalist use of the term *communities of practice* throughout the large numbers of papers that they reviewed. This reflects the project team's perception of the CoP literature. The team can clearly note frequent references to the works of the seminal authors, where subsequent authors have used the ideas as inadequate foundations to develop their own views and ideas about CoPs.

Whilst Amin and Roberts (2008) did not purposefully set out to identify issues of CoP leadership, some discussion about styles of facilitation, leadership or management of these quite different groups was expected in such a critical and well-researched identification of groupings of CoPs. This was not so. The word *leadership* is used only once in their paper and *facilitation* or *facilitate* not at all. The single reference to leadership is insignificant. It is likely that material concerning leadership was not present in the 300 publications they reviewed, and this lack is mirrored in the project findings.

## CoPs from the perspective of higher education

The concerns expressed so far about the deficiencies of the body of literature, how leadership and facilitation of CoPs are addressed only in limited form, and the CoP identity confused, could also relate to much of the literature available concerning CoPs and the higher education environment. Incursions into the realm of CoPs in higher education have often been more concerned with CoP concepts, and tying in the work of the seminal authors to then current practices, than to any emphasis on leading or facilitation.

Cox (2005) discusses the works of several of the seminal authors. The words *facilitate*, *facilitation*, *leaders* or *leadership*, however, do not feature in Cox's paper, and rightly so. As the earlier discussion of the publications of the seminal authors indicates, the situated learning processes that those authors researched and described are processes that, by their very nature, cannot be facilitated and led without becoming a modified process beyond the

intention of those same authors at that time. Nor did Cox et al. (2007), McDonald and Star (2008), or Nagy and Burch (2009) discuss leadership or facilitation of CoPs in any detail. Some of those authors are involved in this OLT Leadership Project.

Many other papers have been reviewed where the title or abstract indicate an interest in CoPs, but little emphasis has been placed on leadership or facilitation of CoPs. Typical examples are Debowksi and Blake (2007), Bryman (2007), Wisker et al. (2007), and Buysse et al. (2003). The latter do significantly discuss CoPs in higher education, particularly as models for professional development, but comments regarding leadership or facilitation are very rare and add nothing new about CoPs to the information provided by the seminal authors.

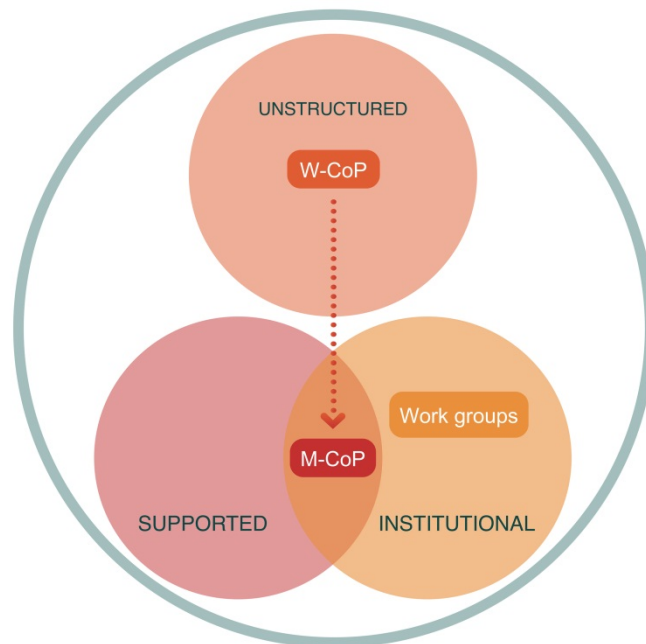
Arguably the most influential piece of research into leadership and education in Australia in recent times has been the Southwell and Morgan (2009) Report to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), *Leadership and the impact of academic staff development and leadership development on student learning outcomes in higher education: A review of the literature*. Whilst not focussed on CoPs, the authors frequently refer to communities of practice, professional learning communities, distributed leadership and similar. They suggest that there is scant research into claims regarding leadership, leadership effectiveness, and academic and leadership development, though they were able to identify some material. Of significance are the recommendations the authors make to the ALTC regarding leadership, including that the ALTC develop a classification of leadership (Recommendation 3), and a recommendation that the ALTC fund projects that specifically focus on quality teaching for learning through the development of leaders (Recommendation 8). Southwell (2012) has since added to the debate, reporting that well-led CoPs can transform teaching and learning practice. She also identifies, as noted in this review of the literature, that little attention is given to the leadership needs of CoPs in a higher education context.

## Literature review – conclusions

While the work of the seminal authors, particularly Wenger, underpins the publications of many other authors writing about CoPs, there seems to be common confusion about whether the various writers are actually writing about situated learning in the manner as described by the seminal authors, or whether they are in fact describing formal and semi-formal organisational workgroups. The focus is frequently on design and technology, semi- and even formal organisational structures, managing down by the organisation including selection/assignment of leaders, and issues of micropolitics and power. In frequent cases, leadership is not an organic or informal process, but formal recognition by the organisation rather than by community members.

It could be assumed that pure, situated-learning based, informal CoPs exist in some form in all organisations, as described by the seminal authors. The CoP of a seminal author (a W-CoP) cannot in any form be confused with workgroups, cannot be formally recognised as existing, cannot be led, managed or otherwise organised. However, its informal existence is powerful and would be of great benefit to both the organisation and individuals as it informs and builds individual and organisational knowledge. As noted previously, the project team has labelled any modification of the 'pure' CoP concept (termed Wenger-CoPs or W-CoPs by the team) as Modified CoPs or M-CoPs. Adding intentional leadership or facilitation is one of the key modifications to the basic W-CoP form that creates an M-CoP. It seems that Wenger's encouragement of the business community to embrace the concept of CoPs to further advantage is an example of this M-CoP genre.

Perhaps the solution to any confusion concerning what is a CoP and what is a workgroup, is to embrace both as legitimate structures in organisations in a progression from simple to complex and from informal to formal. This notion could be represented by Figure 5:



*Figure 5: Progression of CoPs from simple to complex and informal to formal*

Figure 5 shows W-CoPs as unstructured; they may not even be identified as existing or may operate below the 'official' radar. The project team suggests that even the simplest of actions to recognise it or choose a leader or facilitator, converts a W-CoP to an M-CoP and it is thus supported by that action. Further support may eventuate through recognition by the institution that the M-CoP exists, which might lead to support through workload models or institutional resources such as room allocation, technology or funds. Formal institutional M-CoPs might also be created by the institution to pursue institutional objectives. If created along community, collegial lines, these can be differentiated from conventional workgroups.

It is clear, from the work of the seminal authors, that leadership and facilitation are not possible within the purest form of CoP, what this project refers to as the W-CoP. It is also clear from both this review and some comprehensive literature reviews by other authors, that a gap exists in the literature concerning *leadership* and *facilitation* of all forms of CoPs, with a distinct lack of resource material to support leadership and facilitation. This gap in the literature has been identified by others such as Weaver et al. (2009), Pemberton et al. (2007) and Flessa (2009).

From the perspective of the project team, what is missing from the current literature and previous ALTC project work is a focus on the leadership role within CoPs, the challenges of CoP leadership, and the means to build the leadership capacity of those who facilitate CoPs. This capacity-building agenda is the focus of this CoP Leadership Project.

## Resource development and evaluation

### Stakeholder needs analysis survey and interviews

A major outcome of Stage 1 of the project (refer Figure 4 above) was the compilation of a project stakeholder network comprising community of practice facilitators and co-facilitators across the sector. A needs analysis of this network was undertaken during Stage 2 of the project – the first identification, survey or needs analysis of the communities of practice facilitators in the Australian higher education sector. The results of the survey were reported in a briefing report in October 2011 (refer <[www.cops.org.au/Briefing\\_Final.pdf](http://www.cops.org.au/Briefing_Final.pdf)>).

Key participants were subsequently interviewed to inform resource development and the results of the interview process were reported in a briefing report in November 2011 (refer <[www.cops.org.au/briefing2.pdf](http://www.cops.org.au/briefing2.pdf)>).

### Resource development

The organising structure, content and dissemination process of the resources were conceptualised and development tasks allocated during an intensive two-day team workshop in November 2011. The team, including the project manager and Professor Cox (for some sessions via Skype), reviewed the survey, interview findings and literature, drew on their considerable experience with CoPs, and professionally developed expertise to identify the key competencies and capabilities required by CoP facilitators. The project evaluator and members of the reference group participated in some sessions, and provided input and advice.

The team recognised that CoP leaders would be facing different challenges depending on their experience, context, type of CoP and the particular phase of their CoP's development. The different types of higher education CoPs (refer Table 1), and the CoPs phases (refer Figure 6), that would guide the resource design were identified.

*Table 1: Types of CoP and contextual issues*

Type of CoP	Organic	Nurtured/supported	Created/intentional
<b>Structure</b>	Bottom-up	Modified bottom-up	Top-down
<b>Support level</b>	Minimal	Subsidised	Provided
<b>Membership</b>	Voluntary	Voluntary/suggested	Encouraged
<b>Themes</b>	Discipline-related	Discipline or issue related	Guided issues and cross discipline
<b>Agenda</b>	Self-determined	Self-determined/steered	Guided theme
<b>Timing for outcomes</b>	Self-determined	Self-determined and funding-related	Short-term rather than long-term

Based on this analysis, the facilitator skills required at each phase were identified and a table generated to create required resources. Table 2 below provides an example of the gap analysis that was undertaken for Phase 1 (Beginning) of the leadership resources.

*Table 2: CoP Leadership capacity/cycle capabilities and competencies – Phase 1 gap analysis and resource identification*

Phase	Capabilities	Competencies	Skills required	Gaps/Points of Emphasis
Phase 1 Beginning	Reflect on context  Reflect on skills audit  Planning  Mentor identification	1.1 Skills audit and checklist <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to synthesise</li> <li>• Ability to work in a team</li> <li>• Ability to manage others</li> </ul> 1.2 Emotional intelligence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-awareness</li> </ul> 1.3 Context analysis 1.4 Self-reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Self-management</li> <li>• Social awareness</li> <li>• Relationship management</li> <li>• Perceiving people's preferred mode of learning and working (e.g. visual learner)</li> </ul>	1.2 Emotional intelligence: Examples of group interactions requiring perception/useful to understand to help group management  1.3 Context analysis

Given the different level of skill, context and need each user would bring to the resources, plus the time-poor nature of work life in higher education, a 'dip-in, just for me' and 'just in time' approach was chosen for the resources. This approach is supported by the 2008 study of Australian academic leadership (Scott et al. 2008, p. xvii) where it is noted that academics favour professional development that provides "flexible, responsive, active, problem-based, just-in-time, just-for-me learning methods".

As part of the leadership capacity building, a strong self-management approach was adopted, with a self-audit of skills and provision for self-reflection, review, planning and revisiting of skills and prompts for planning further skills development. In the introduction to the resources, <[www.cops.org.au/resources](http://www.cops.org.au/resources)>, users are advised to identify the development phase of the CoP they are leading, and appraise their own skills through completing a skills audit.

An introduction is provided to the types of CoPs, phases of development and how to use the resources. Table 1 provides a generalised view of the types of CoPs in Australian higher education and the dynamics that may apply in certain circumstances. The three types identified – organic, nurtured/supported and created/intentional – represent the different dynamics of the activities that were the starting point that led to the different types of CoPs noted in Table 1. As the resources were developed, the project team members took into consideration both the types of CoPs and the different phases, as discussed below.

The phases of higher education CoPs were identified and these provided the organising structure for the resources. These phases are Phase 1 – Beginning, Phase 2 – Development, Phase 3 – Consolidation and Phase 4 – Outcomes, with a renewal process included as depicted in Figure 6 below. Feedback from participants at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) 2012 workshop noted that this overview and articulation of CoP phases provided a very useful conceptual framework to reflect on their own CoP context. The development of resources relating to these phases allows the users to quickly identify where their CoP is located within the CoP cycle and to access the resources most relevant to their CoP facilitator role.

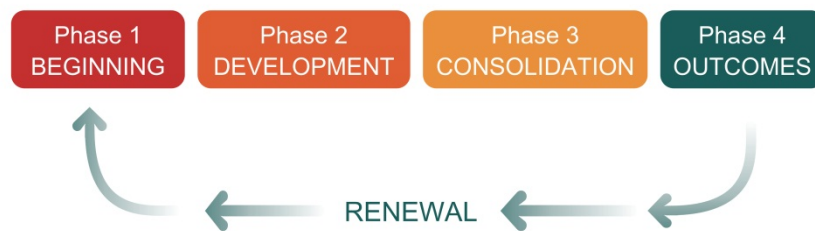


Figure 6: Phases of Communities of Practice

Each individual resource was designed as a short, sharp commentary of no more than a few pages containing distilled knowledge gained during the course of the project and specifically related to CoPs within a higher education teaching and learning context. The project team was acutely aware of the need to provide advice, guidance and development specific to the higher education context, as the majority of development material available for CoPs is not adapted to this context.

A resource template outline was created to provide a consistent organising structure for resource development for each team member as they worked independently on creating their allocated resources. This template was modelled on the templates developed by JISC, the UK's expert on information and digital technologies for education and research. The JISC e-Learning Programme, which provided the template model, has proved effective in all sectors of education in the UK, with many institutions embedding the enhancement of learning and teaching through technology into their strategic missions (JISC 2004). The template was designed to ensure the key items were addressed in each topic and a consistent format maintained for ease of user access. The template includes the following sections:

- Phase – main heading indicating the location of the resource within a CoP phase
- Title – such as “Resource 1.1: Skills audit and checklist”
- The challenge or issue – outlining the facilitator challenge within the topic
- Background – information to provide context for CoP facilitator role and brief overview of any pertinent literature
- Developing the skill or capacity – ideas and activities to develop capacity for successful leadership
- Key points and reflective practice – highlight main ideas and consideration points
- Final word – very brief snapshot of key ideas for facilitator to consider
- Resource links (internal or external) – links to existing resources and project website.

### Resource components

The resources comprise an introduction that provides the context for resources and a brief overview of communities of practice in higher education. Each CoP phase has the resources outlined in Table 3 below.



Table 3: Resources for each of the four CoP phases

Phase 1 Beginning	Phase 2 Development	Phase 3 Consolidation	Phase 4 Outcomes
Introduction	Introduction	Introduction	Introduction
1.1 Skills audit and checklist	2.1 Political astuteness	3.1 Identifying strategies for engagement of members	4.1 Identifying and embedding to maximise impacts outside the CoP
1.2 Emotional intelligence	2.2 Advocacy for space/time/resources/technologies/support	3.2 Alignment of CoP activities with institutional objectives	4.2 How to encourage member confidence and personal growth
1.3 Context analysis	2.3 Who are your members?	3.3 Analytical abilities to find ways to work around challenges/obstacles – under development	4.3 Establishment of group identity
1.4 Mentoring	2.4 Engaging stakeholders	3.4 Identifying and working with or around power relationships	4.4 Visioning and forward planning of new and parallel agendas
1.5 Self-reflection	2.5 Operational processes	3.5 Parallel/sharing leadership assessment	4.5 Effectiveness, sustainability and succession planning
	2.6 Managing team dynamics and conflict resolution	3.6 Evaluation development	4.6 Advocacy for the CoP

A standard format for the introduction to each phase provided a consistent ‘front end’ conceptual framework for that resource phase and included a table to indicate who would benefit from the resource information (refer Table 4 below).

Table 4: Resource user benefits for Phase 4 – Outcomes

Phase 4 – Outcomes		Members	Collective	External	Self
1	Identifying and embedding to maximise impacts outside the CoP				X
2	Encouraging member confidence and personal growth	X			X
3	Establishment of group identity	X	X	X	X
4	Visioning and forward planning				X
5	Effectiveness, sustainability and succession planning	X	X		
6	Advocacy for the CoP			X	X

Legend

Members: the individuals within the CoP  
 Collective: the CoP itself  
 External: those outside the CoP  
 Self: the facilitator’s development journey

Each project team member developed their resource which was then circulated to the team for feedback. After revisions, the project manager edited and prepared the resources for web posting and formative evaluation. Each team member agreed to identify gaps that emerged in the resource development that could be addressed by video clips. These clips would draw on the experience of the team and interviewees, thus providing examples embedded in the Australian higher education context.

The resources are available at <[www.cops.org.au/resources](http://www.cops.org.au/resources)>.

### Resource evaluation

In addition to the action-learning approach taken throughout the project, draft resources were formatively evaluated to ensure they met the evolving needs of the stakeholder network and were informed by the input of key project contributors.

### Formative evaluation

A timeline for formative evaluation of the resources was created to provide an opportunity for various groups to provide feedback at the draft phase, to inform the review and finalisation of resources. A survey was created to collect feedback on the draft resources and data were collected using *SurveyMonkey*. A casual administrative appointment was made to meet data collation needs and provide an initial analysis of feedback. A sample of Australian higher education academics, including those involved in CoPs or indicating their interest by joining the stakeholder network were invited to review the draft web resources, evaluate the resources and complete a formative evaluation feedback survey. These included:

- Project evaluator and reference group members who were sent an email invitation with links to the resources and survey
- Stakeholder network members who were sent an email invitation with links to the resources and survey
- OLT Network Coordinators who were sent an email invitation with links to the resources and survey and invited to distribute it amongst their networks
- Attendees at the project's HERDSA 2012 workshop
- Members of University of Southern Queensland – Facilitator CoP
- Attendees at the 13th Annual Faculty Learning Community Developers' and Facilitators' Summer Institute in Los Angeles.

### Workshops

Project resources were also evaluated by input received through the following fora.

#### ***The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) 2012 Conference workshop***

The project leaders, Associate Professor Jacquie McDonald and Dr Cassandra Star, presented a half-day workshop at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference, July 2012 <[conference.herdsa.org.au/2012/](http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2012/)>. The conference theme was *Connections in Higher Education*. The workshop, *Communities of Practice leadership roles and activities that create and sustain peer connections*, enabled participants to self-audit their CoP leadership skills and access the draft resources. Based on their self-audit, participants selected three leadership areas, reviewed relevant resources and then discussed their plans with other attendees. They also completed the evaluation survey for their reviewed resources. Participants were provided with a hard copy of the resources and survey, and also sent the web link and invitation to provide further evaluation.

### *University of Southern Queensland – Facilitator CoP members*

A two-hour CoP session was conducted in mid-July 2012 with members of the Facilitator CoP (USQ). These facilitators lead the 22 University of Southern Queensland (USQ) CoPs and meet regularly to share their practice and build CoP leadership capacity. Facilitators identified the phase of their CoP's development and discussed their experience and the skills required at different phases. Attendees completed a paper-based CoP leadership skills audit and viewed the web resources. Their feedback on the audit process and resources provided valuable insights for polishing of resources. All USQ CoP facilitators were invited to access the draft resources and provide feedback via the electronic survey.

### *13th Annual Faculty Learning Community Developers' and Facilitators' Summer Institute, Los Angeles, California*

A three-and-a-half-day Institute, the *13th Annual Faculty Learning Community Developers' and Facilitators' Summer Institute* was presented in Los Angeles, California by co-directors Drs Milton Cox and Laurie Richlin and co-facilitator Ms Amy Essington. Dr Richlin is Director of Faculty Development at Charles Drew College of Medicine and Science, and Ms Essington is a PhD candidate at Claremont Graduate University. Both have had extensive experience facilitating Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), a US-type of community of practice in higher education. Thirty-nine participants from 21 institutions in the US, Canada, and Hong Kong attended the Institute. The participants were in various stages of developing FLC programs, preparing to facilitate FLCs, or currently facilitating FLCs. Attendees completed preliminary planning inventories for designing, implementing and facilitating FLCs using a decision point approach. Each institution's team or individual prepared and showed a brief PowerPoint slide presentation to the Institute participants, indicating the planned design and implementation approaches for FLCs at their home institution. All Institute participants were invited to explore the Leadership project's CoP web resources and provide feedback via the web survey.

## Factors influencing project outcomes

### Enabling factors

The following factors contributed to the success of the project and ensured its timely completion within budget:

- A well developed project proposal ensured successful project implementation and evaluation
- Allocation of roles early in the project's life ensured a contribution by all team members
- Joint leadership of the project was structured to maximise the value of the two leaders' interests and expertise. The different skill sets and styles of operation of each project leader were taken into account when negotiating the allocation of responsibilities. The joint leadership roles proved to be an effective operational and risk management strategy
- Appointment of a project officer for the initial project stages ensured that data were gathered and analysed in a timely way
- Appointment of a project manager for the life of the project ensured application of project management principles and project cohesion
- Obtaining ethics approvals early in the project's life ensured that project progress was not delayed pending this process
- Articulation of a publication protocol ensured that author attribution was agreed early in the project's life
- Significant contribution of effort into the development of a stakeholder network ensured ease of communication with the network throughout the project

- Maximised use of team member networks ensured comprehensive dissemination of the project
- Monthly team teleconferences and weekly team updates by email ensured that the team remained fully engaged with the project
- Formative evaluative input by the project's evaluator ensured constant review and development
- Reference group input ensured that the project remained relevantly focussed
- A change from the originally proposed dissemination approach to a fully web-based approach enabled stakeholder network feedback and evaluation
- Appointment of additional personnel ensured that resources were available to the project when required
- Constant review and update of timelines and deliverables ensured that the project outcomes were delivered in the originally proposed timeframes.

### Inhibiting factors

The project team experienced the following inhibiting factors which contributed to the complex environment in which the project operated:

- The disbanding of the ALTC and establishment of the OLT mid-way through the project resulted in some distraction and loss of momentum. Delayed funding as a result of the transition did delay project deliverables
- The movement of a team member to another institution required additional paperwork and amendment of contractual arrangements which took significant time to manage and administer
- A geographic change for a team member and move from an institution to a consultancy role created a period of instability for the team member involved
- The early arrival of a baby for one of the project co-leaders impacted on the timing of some project deliverables
- An organisational restructure at the lead university caused instability
- Demands of academic workload and acting senior administrative roles prevented team members from undertaking work by set deadlines.

## Chapter 3 – Project dissemination

### Dissemination approach

Project activities and outcomes were disseminated via a continuous engagement model. As mentioned earlier, the survey conducted during Stage 1 also enabled the identification and construction of a stakeholder network. This network was expanded to include learning and teaching units and interested groups both nationally and internationally, including the University of Birmingham's CoP project in the UK, professional networks in the USA through Professor Milton Cox, and CPsquare, the international network on CoPs.

Key findings and deliverables were distributed throughout the project using this network and the following mechanisms:

- *Campus Review*
- HERDSA conferences – a showcase in 2011 and a workshop in 2012
- Two international conferences
- Dissemination of the project resources via the stakeholder network and learning and teaching units
- Workshops provided by the project team.

This approach allowed the project findings to be disseminated widely using existing professional networks, including networks internal to universities, but also by building a new network based on existing experience and expertise with CoPs in higher education across the country and internationally.

### Sector engagement and dissemination

#### Dissemination activities

A project website was created early in the project's life and this was the predominant dissemination portal (refer <[www.cops.org.au](http://www.cops.org.au)>). Project details and aims and intended outcomes were published, as were significant project publications.

Further dissemination mechanisms were project newsletters, conference presentations and workshops, and other project profiling activities as detailed below. Academic publications will be submitted to refereed journals as a post-project outcome.

Targeted dissemination was also undertaken through the following networks:

- Partner institution learning and teaching networks
- National Teaching Fellows Network
- HERDSA networks
- CADAD networks
- OLT national networks
- OLT discipline-based networks
- OLT state-based networks
- USQ CoP Facilitators' network.

## Project newsletters

Four project newsletters were published and distributed through the stakeholder network with the following foci:

- Newsletter 1 – Update on results of survey
- Newsletter 2 – Update on results of interviews
- Newsletter 3 – Update on resource development and invitation to evaluate resources
- Newsletter 4 – Launch of resources (pending OLT endorsement of resources).

## Conference presentations/workshops

Key dissemination activities during the life of the project are outlined at <[www.cops.org.au/publications](http://www.cops.org.au/publications)> with the following key activities.

### National conferences

- Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) 2011 Showcase
- Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) 2012 Workshop

### International conferences

- Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) 2011 paper
- Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) 2012 paper

## Project profiling

### *Campus Review*

The project was profiled twice in the *Campus Review* in March 2011 and November 2011 (refer <[www.cops.org.au/publications](http://www.cops.org.au/publications)>).

### Project-focussed roundtable

A project-focussed roundtable presentation was given at USQ on 24 May 2012. This was held in conjunction with a scheduled team meeting and the collaborative approach to the project was presented and discussed. The Roundtable abstract and summary are available at <[www.cops.org.au/publications](http://www.cops.org.au/publications)>.

### Meetings in the United Kingdom, December 2011

Visits to the University of Edinburgh, Northumbria University, the University of Birmingham and the University of Chester were arranged to maximise opportunities to inform others about the project and progress to date, while two team members travelled to the UK for a conference presentation in Wales. It was intended that the visits act as another form of dissemination with the possibility of generating shared research agendas.

At one university the feedback from over 20 attendees validated the importance of ensuring a CoP leader/facilitator possessed the skills necessary to manage both the external and internal environments. The attendees were very keen to receive the resources at the completion of the project and were generally very positive about the aims and objectives.

In contrast, at another university presentation with six attendees, tensions associated with a 'purist' view of CoPs arose, with the attendees interpreting that there was no real leader. This group was also very critical about whether the facilitator (in any sense) acted as a leader or whether they really were 'just managers'. The viewpoints expressed prompted the team to have in-depth discussions about how to frame and define leadership, management and facilitation in ways that would not become mired in detail or informed by literature that was inherently complex. The reflection proved to be very valuable, providing clearer delineation between various phases of community of practice development, used as the organising framework in the resource development.

At the remaining two universities visited there was more interest in understanding how the ALTC and the team collaborated. Some interest was expressed in developing collaborative research relationships with the project team, however, that did not eventuate.

## Lilly Conferences (Miami University, USA) and further international dissemination

The project was presented and discussed in the US through sessions presented at the Lilly Conferences on College and University Teaching, at international professional meetings and at institutional workshops. Seven national Lilly Conferences are held annually in the following locations: Alaska, California, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, North Carolina, and Washington DC. An international Lilly Conference is held in Beirut, Lebanon. At each conference, project team member Professor Milton Cox presented information about leadership in CoPs, focusing on the models used in his research and applications, namely faculty and professional learning communities (FLCs). Professor Cox drew on some of the literature reviews and developing outcomes of the project. Presentation times varied from 60 to 90 minutes to half-day workshops and focused on CoPs and their facilitation. Professor Cox also included the project in sessions he presented at national and international conferences: The Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (POD) and the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL). Professor Cox also offered insights about leading CoPs at invited presentations at over a dozen institutions in the US.

## Resource dissemination

The CoP facilitator leadership resources which are the major outcome of this project will be published at <[www.cops.org.au/resources](http://www.cops.org.au/resources)>. The resources will be launched early in 2013 through the stakeholder network, project partner universities and the OLT networks. Publications which are submitted after project sign-off will also draw readers to the published resources, as will this report which will be published by the OLT through its website.

## Ongoing dissemination and project sustainability

### Embedding project outcomes

Consistent with the requirements of the OLT, the project website will be hosted for three years from formal close of the project. Resources will continue to be available from this location and links will be distributed throughout networks in the higher education sector in Australia and internationally.

Publications which are submitted as a result of the project will also ensure that users or potential users of the project's leadership resources are directed to this site. This will ensure continued dissemination of project results and further embedding of CoPs in the higher education sector. Project team member contact details are available on the project website for further contact.

## Chapter 4 – Project linkages

### Project linkages

As noted earlier, this project proceeded in parallel to the Teaching Fellowship of Associate Professor McDonald. Conducting the project with the Fellowship enabled the project team to leverage off the fellowship activities to deliver greater outcomes across the two projects. The synergies between the two projects also allowed a more efficient use of resources by extending the *institutional* focus of the Teaching Fellowship to a *national* level of leadership capacity building.

This project has also formed links with the work of 2011 ALTC National Teaching Fellow, Professor Wageeh Boles, 'Navigating a pathway between the academic standards and a framework for authentic, collaborative, outcomes-focused thinking in engineering education'. Professor Wageeh Boles visited Professor Milton Cox (Miami University, USA) as a result of a meeting conducted in association with Associate Professor McDonald's Fellowship. Other ALTC project leaders have linked with project activities to continue conversations around CoP leadership and embedding CoP activities into their OLT projects.

These linkages include:

- Professor Sandra Jones, 2011 project 'Evidence-based benchmarking framework for a distributed leadership approach to capacity-building in learning and teaching' (LE11-2000), which includes a CoP, with Associate Professor McDonald contributing as a reference group member
- Professor Sylvia Rodger, 2011 Discipline Network: Occupational Therapy Academic Leaders Network (OTALN) (SI11-2116), which includes a CoP, with Associate Professor McDonald presenting the first national workshop in June 2012
- Dr Susan Rowland, 2012 project 'Developing and resourcing academics to help students conduct and communicate undergraduate research on a large scale' (LE12-2279), which will include a CoP, with Associate Professor McDonald contributing as a reference group member.

### Disciplinary and interdisciplinary linkages

As a result of project activity, traditional learning and teaching boundaries have been crossed and linkages formed with the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) and the Occupational Therapy Academic Learning Network (OTALN).



# Chapter 5 – Project evaluation

## Evaluation framework

The evaluation approach was based on the Learning and Teaching project evaluation framework in the *ALTC Dissemination Framework* documentation (Chesterton & Cummings, 2007) and results of 2009 ALTC-funded project, 'A Review of the dissemination strategies use by projects funded by the ALTC Grants Scheme' (Gannaway et al. 2011). Evaluation commenced with project plan evaluation and involved continuous evaluation of process and dissemination at each project stage with a final evaluation report provided at the completion of the project (refer below and Appendix A).

Activities consisted of a cycle of action, outcomes, evaluation and dissemination managed through project team meetings. The evaluator and reference group monitored activities and provided formative evaluation on project activities, thus informing continuous reflection and development.

## Independent evaluation

An independent evaluation of the project is provided at Appendix A. A summary and excerpts from this evaluation are included below to provide the key findings of the evaluation.

The evaluator, Dr Elizabeth McDonald, indicated that the comprehensive and careful planning undertaken during the project proposal stage before the project was funded contributed to the project's success. The team also undertook ongoing evaluation, not only of what they were doing, but also of changes in context, continuously assessing whether the initial proposals were the best way to proceed as the project moved through the planned stages and deliverables.

The evaluator noted that a further contribution to project success was the operating style of the team. The team brought to the project different skills along with a very strong interest and belief in the value of CoPs. There was joint leadership of the project. The project was structured to maximise the value of the two leaders' interests and expertise. The different skill sets and styles of operation of the leaders were taken into account in the project design and allocation of responsibilities. The project itself functioned in a manner very similar to that of a CoP. A great deal of the success and the smooth operation of the project team, whose members were separated physically by vast distances, was due to the project being tightly managed by a competent, sensitive and articulate project manager who was there for the duration of the project.

It was observed that the project created a rich set of Australian, higher education CoP facilitator resources. The resources (described in Chapter 2) met a need addressed nowhere else as communities of practice are a relatively recent area of interest in universities. Further, the role of the facilitator or leader has not been a focus of the literature addressing communities of practice. The project contributed to the literature in the field. The literature review not only captured the literature but undertook an analysis of the understanding of CoPs. This analysis has contributed a new level of sophistication to this understanding, one of particular importance to the application of CoPs in higher education.

Finally, the evaluator noted that through the surveys and interviews the team identified that most of the CoPs are actually situated within university faculties among practitioners. CoPs are, therefore, close to where student learning and teaching takes place. The facilitator role and CoP activities offer a powerful way to support the development of teaching in universities.

The evaluator noted that:

the project has produced a comprehensive set of resources to support those who lead/facilitate communities of practice, particularly in universities. The resources are based on new understandings of the importance of the facilitator role and satisfy a need not previously addressed. Since CoPs are most often found within university faculties, they are a means of rebuilding collegiality as academics support each other in developing learning and teaching.

(See the external evaluation report at Appendix A).

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# Appendix A

## Evaluation report on the project: 'Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education'

Dr Elizabeth McDonald

The contract for the evaluation of the project, 'Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education' began on 2 August 2011 and is due for completion by 1 November 2012. I began work with the project at the meeting held in June 2011 in Adelaide, prior to the signing of the contract. The project was well underway when I assumed the role of project evaluator.

### Evaluation brief

Evaluations can take many forms. In this case I was asked to provide both formative evaluation as well as a summative evaluation in the form of a final report.

According to the terms of reference for the external evaluator, the key functions and specifications were to:

- ascertain the strengths and challenges of the project management process
- identify and advise on the level of correlation between the project objectives and the realisation of specific outcomes
- assess the likely success of the project's dissemination strategies
- determine the utility and sustainability of the project deliverables
- provide to the Project Team by 24 August 2012 an independent evaluation report outlining key findings and recommendations for inclusion with the final project report to be submitted to the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) by 26 September 2012.

Participation in a project team meeting will be to:

- observe project team interactions
- understand and review project deliverables
- provide the opportunity to ask questions about individual team member perspectives and personal outcomes from the project
- liaise with members of the reference group, as necessary.

During negotiations about the evaluation, the project leaders asked for a formative evaluation to add value during the course of the project as well the production of the final evaluative report required by the OLT. The final report was to address the issues listed above. Though the contract only required attendance at one meeting, it was agreed that I attend two project meetings and provide advice as appropriate. All formative evaluation components were completed prior to writing this report.

In addition to the two face-to-face meetings there were emails providing me with updates about issues throughout the time of my engagement with the project. I also prepared some evaluation questions, which I provided to team members and the project manager prior to a conversation with each of them by phone/Skype. Many of the insights in this report are those of the individual project team members and I thank them for their careful and thoughtful preparation for the interview.



For an evaluator, there is a great deal of value in this level of engagement with a project. I believe it is helpful to the project to have an 'outsider' testing assumptions, processing, thinking with the team and keeping on the table an overview of the project when the team are caught up in the details of an aspect of the project. However, this degree of engagement with the project does have a risk in that the team can begin to see the evaluator as a member of the project team. Further, there is no longer the same distance and dispassionate summative evaluation of outcomes and deliverables, though there is far greater appreciation of what is possible in the project, compared to the ideal outcomes and deliverables from the project. The reader of this evaluation report should be aware of this challenge and also the background and likely bias of the evaluator.

### About the evaluator

I was appointed in 2006 as one of the initial leadership group at the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), the predecessor body to the OLT. I was also involved the year before in preparation for the Council's establishment. My role encompassed responsibility for the grants programs from the beginning. I drafted the guidelines for all the grants programs including the Leadership Program under which this project was funded.

The Leadership Program was established as one of the early ALTC programs to build capacity in the Australian higher education sector to effect change in learning and teaching. While this is a program that many people found difficult to understand due to a particular view on the meaning of 'leadership', it is a program that I believe has had considerable impact on the thinking of academics about their potential to improve learning and teaching, particularly with those who could influence practice while not holding formal leadership positions in learning and teaching. The Leadership Program guidelines took no particular view on leadership, other than the position that there were many places in universities that would need to engage to effect improvements in learning and teaching in higher education and for such change to occur a broad engagement with leadership would be necessary.

The projects funded through the program cover a range of issues such as researching the roles of formal learning and teaching leaders; working with formal leaders responsible for learning and teaching to build networks and leadership capacity; preparing professional development materials for those with responsibility for activities that can be key change points for improving learning and teaching; working on particular projects with those who through interest or expertise could influence change in learning and teaching. This particular project falls into the last type.

Initially, I struggled with the concept of 'communities of practice' (CoPs) in higher education and the relationship of the project to the Leadership Program's goals. By the end of the project I appreciated the potential value of CoPs and recognised the important work of leadership undertaken by a successful facilitator.

### Project aims and planned outcomes from the proposal

The project aimed to:

1. Identify the leadership challenges for CoP facilitators managing down (course leaders), managing across (the department or the school) and managing up (the formal hierarchy)
2. Identify the impact of institutional factors that influence leadership challenges for CoP facilitators
3. Develop support for, and increase, leadership capacity to foster collegial forms of collaboration for sustainable impact on learning and teaching across the sector
4. Evaluate existing resources and create new resources to facilitate capacity-building for CoP leadership.

Key outcomes will include:

1. A leadership needs analysis for CoP facilitators in higher education
2. An understanding and articulation of the key leadership challenges for CoP facilitators
3. The development of Australian higher education-specific support and resources for the enhancement of facilitators' leadership capacity.

### Actual outcomes from the project

What did the project achieve? The answer to this question is multi-faceted. The project created a rich set of resources. These resources met a need addressed nowhere else as communities of practice are a relatively recent area of interest in universities. Further, the role of the facilitator or leader has not been a focus of the literature addressing communities of practice. During the process of gaining feedback, those engaged in CoPs identified the value and helpfulness of the resources produced to assist them in their roles, even though at the time the resources were in draft form. Though not designed as a 'how to' manual, the resources do provide insight into building and running CoPs as they are based on a needs analysis linked to the stages of development of CoPs.

Secondly, the project contributed to the literature in the field. The literature review not only captured the literature but undertook an analysis of the understanding of CoPs. This analysis has contributed a new level of sophistication to this understanding, one of particular importance to the application of CoPs in education.

The third achievement of the project is that it engaged academic and professional staff interested in CoPs, providing them with a forum to share, gain support and develop their thinking about CoPs and the role they play when facilitating. These opportunities were planned at various conference workshops and during international visits. The project, through these workshops, enabled participants to explore the roles that they undertake in CoPs in such a way that they could test, recognise and articulate the skills and leadership facilitators require in this informal space. While such recognition should assist facilitators to use the resources to become more effective facilitators, the resources also offer them a way to articulate their leadership when applying for formal leadership positions.

Finally the project identified, to the surprise of the project team, that most of the CoPs are actually situated within university faculties among practitioners. CoPs are, therefore, close to where student learning and teaching takes place. This finding means that in Australia, despite a different label, many CoPs form a very similar function to the Faculty Learning Committees that are found in universities throughout the United States. This fact means that CoPs offer a powerful way to support the development of teaching in universities.

### Process and people

How did the project achieve such comprehensive outcomes?

The first indicator this project would be successful was the comprehensive and careful planning undertaken during the project proposal stage, that is, before the project was funded. The team had worked together previously on different projects which meant they could draw on that experience. When they came together to develop the project proposal they spent months in preparation thinking about what they planned to do, how it should be staged and what was manageable. In the project plan each stage builds on the previous one. This systematic approach ensured that the deep understanding developed from the research and literature review underpinned the design of the resources.

Another contribution to the project's success was the way the team and project leadership operated. The team brought to the project different skills along with a very strong interest and belief in the value of CoPs. There was joint leadership of the project. The project was structured to maximise the value of the two leaders' interests and expertise. In its design and allocation of responsibilities the different skill sets and styles of operation were taken into account. The project itself functioned in a manner very similar to a CoP. The team were open to feedback from each other, respectful of different voices and new findings. They sought feedback from others outside the project team through the engagement of the evaluator and reference group and through surveys and workshops. Structured into the project was the careful consideration of feedback. All members of the team contributed to elements of the project, taking responsibility for the sections of the work they had agreed to undertake. Despite some challenges, all members contributed substantially to the project outcomes, ensuring at the end of the project the entire team were "proud" of the project outcomes.

A great deal of the success and the smooth operation of the project, whose members were separated by vast distances, was due to the project being tightly managed by a competent, sensitive and articulate project manager who was there for the duration of the project. The project manager knew the project design well and provided the consistency the project needed as the leadership responsibility moved between the co-leaders. The team themselves recognised the invaluable contribution of the project manager. Her role was separate from that of a research assistant employed in the early part of the project to do the data analysis: another example of matching skills with tasks.

Face-to-face meetings were of three days' duration and linked to planned deliverables. The meetings formed the working hub of the project. The project team touched base at a monthly teleconference as well. Although the project team member from the United States was separated not only by distance but also by time zone, the team did their best to keep in touch via Skype and to use his considerable expertise.

Lastly, the team undertook ongoing evaluation, not only of what they were doing, but also changes in context, continuously assessing whether the initial proposals about process were the best way to go. This iterative process resulted in a couple of changes to the project, one in the method of release of the resources, another in an aspect of the dissemination.

### Challenges during the project

As with most projects run over a couple of years, changes in life and work circumstances impacted on the project. These are documented in the final project report and take the form of the arrival of a baby, change in job and relocating to a different Australian state, and new leadership in one institution with its attendant negotiations around work priorities. It is a credit to the team that they were able to keep the project on track. Changes in jobs and the resulting contractual changes related to involvement in the project add considerably to the workload of a project and delays in project work.

Another challenge was that the Australian Government announced the closure of the ALTC, which was the body that funded the project. It should not be underestimated that the demise of the ALTC caused considerable disruption in the Australian higher education sector, thus impacting on energy levels and created concerns about the viability of projects, next stage funding etc. Although, ultimately, the changes from ALTC to OLT have been fairly seamless, there is always a loss of momentum when such a significant change occurs to the sponsor of a project.

## Dissemination

The project has engaged with and developed an interested group who not only await the resources but also contributed to them through feedback. Through international presentations, workshops in Australia and the project newsletter distributed to stakeholders, knowledge of the resources and the website had spread, even before the resources were finalised.

The team used *Campus Review* and also some of the social networking tools to make their work more widely known. Their biggest challenge for the future will be to promote the resources more widely once they are finalised and to keep them 'visible' over the next couple of years.

## Lessons of value to other projects

- Co-leadership can be a very effective way to manage the work and expertise needed in a complex learning and teaching project. There are though certain conditions that are required for co-leadership to work well. Both leaders must know and appreciate the different approaches and skill sets of each other. These differences should be reflected in the way the project is designed. At the time of transitioning between aspects of the project work controlled by the different leaders, the leaders need to take care to ensure that the rest of the team are aware of what is happening and that team members have an opportunity to gain a sense of how the leader for this new component of the work will operate.
- With the inclusion of different universities in a project, part of the budget will often be allocated to partner universities. Often the transfer of funding between universities takes place. Funds transfer can be both a challenge for the management of the project and an opportunity if one university has simpler systems of financial operation than another. However, the contractual university retains the responsibility to acquit and report on the use of the funding to the funding provider. Very clear understandings and agreements need to be established to ensure reporting and financial management does not become an issue for the project.
- In this project and in my experience with other projects, it is apparent a number of universities have become risk-averse in relation to their contracts with small operators and in managing finances. The resulting university systems mean that enormous amounts of time and frustration can be entailed in contracting an evaluator for a project, or bringing international guests to the university. When planning a proposal it would be useful to check what the processes and constraints of the lead university are in relation to these matters and consider how they will be managed.
- Projects should ensure that in operational matters such as website management, more than one person has the permissions and knowledge to progress work, such as to make changes to a project website. Delays could occur if such tasks depend on a single person.

## Conclusion

This project has produced a rich, comprehensive set of resources to support those who lead/facilitate communities of practice, particularly in universities. The resources are based on new understandings of the importance of the facilitator role. As such, the resources satisfy a need not previously addressed. Since CoPs are most often found within university faculties, they are a means of rebuilding collegiality as academics support each other in developing learning and teaching.