

Establishing a Community of Practice: from Outsiders to Insiders

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Abstract

A shared interest in scholarship of teaching and learning between three academics/ researchers stimulated the establishment of a community of practice. The spontaneous formation of the group developed into a formal and functioning CoP. The aim of this article is to explore the transformation of a group of nursing academics who started as outsiders in a support group to becoming insiders in a community of practice. A single intrinsic longitudinal case study design within a theory of action was used to illuminate and explicate the experiences of participants during the development (analytical frame) of a community of practice (object). Four themes were identified from the four construct bins, namely shared domain of interest, informal network, formal work group and community of practice. A true sense of belonging with concrete academic and research-related outcomes and a shared vision statement and values and beliefs clarification for sustainability characterizes the flourishing group.

Key concepts: *Community of practice, informal network, formal work group, collaboration*

Introduction

Higher education has re-focused their attention on research and scholarly activities which in turn increased the expectation for all academics. Universities are currently driven to become research intensive institutions, which lead to an increase in their expectations of individual academics to increase their contribution to

research and the scientific body of knowledge. The nursing profession globally and in South Africa has been regarded as a practice-driven vocation and the majority of academic nursing departments emphasised teaching, administration and clinical practice (O'Connor & Yanni, 2013:78). Academics in universities, including those in nursing departments are now

compelled to shift the focus to research as one of the core activities in academic institutions. Nursing academic career pathways and promotions have been affected by the shift which now reflects research outputs considerably more than teaching and administrative activities (Stockhausen & Turale, 2011).

Recognising the shift towards research activities as one of the main roles of nursing academics, the Forum of University Nursing Deans of South Africa (FUNDISA), on behalf of the South African nursing profession and with financial support of the National Research Foundation, developed a strategic plan for the development of nursing research in the country. FUNIDSA initiated a structured support programme referred to as the PLUME programme for the development of a minimum of one research programme per university nursing department. The programme had three main goals, namely to build a research culture in nursing, build nursing research capacity and build research programmes. The rationale was that by promoting research programmes in academic nursing departments, academics and departments would have an opportunity to focus the research conducted in the department, promote academics' own research within a specific field of research and supervise scholars to obtain masters and doctoral degrees within this field. Academic nursing departments were requested to each identify a lead researcher who is in possession of a doctoral degree. A total of 15 lead researchers from different universities throughout South Africa were supported over a period of 18 months to create a research programme for individual nursing departments.

During the PLUME programme lead researchers were faced with challenges such as planning and initiating research programmes in their respective academic nursing departments,

writing a research proposal in application for a research grant and increasing their publications. In nursing not all academics are encouraged to follow a career in research as they are often recruited for clinical expertise and not their academic profile resulting in limited research experience (Andrew, Lopes, Pereira & Lima, 2014:75; Andrew, 2012:846). Therefore some of the lead researchers were exposed to a new way of thinking about their careers. This change contributed to feelings of isolation, insecurity and a lack in confidence for the task provided. Participants were unsure where to start and on the spur of the moment three lead researchers decided to form a "support group" which developed into a community of practice.

Background

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people that evolves because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or it could be created with a specific goal of sharing information and experiences with the group members. Through these processes the members of the group learn from each other, creating an opportunity to develop and grow personally and professionally. Prost and Borzillo (2008) define a CoP as a specific form of intra-organisational network, and regards it as an important structure within any organisation. In view of McDermott (1999) these network structures have progressed into platforms for individuals to develop and share best practices across organisations. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) is of the opinion that a CoP can be defined as a group of individuals who shares interests, challenges related to a specific topic, and gains a greater degree of understanding, knowledge and expertise of a specific topic through regular interaction. Furthermore Wenger *et al.* (2002) believe that a CoP must be established voluntarily, and that the success of a CoP is determined by the ability to generate excitement,

relevance and value to attract and engage members. In addition Hearn and White (2009) maintain that a CoP creates an environment where participants can reflect, interpret and give feedback, which enriches the relationship between members and lead to knowledge generation as well as linking knowledge, policy and practice. It is this function that makes a CoP such a powerful tool for evidence-informed decisions/practice.

The three main features that are essential in creating a CoP is viewed by Wenger (2006) as the domain, community and the practice. The *domain* indicates that the CoP is not simply a group of friends or colleagues coming together. Membership implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competency that distinguishes members from other people. The *community* implies members pursue their interest in their domain; members participate in joint activities, discussions and projects to share information. During this interaction relationships are built and members learn from each other. The *practice* implies members of the CoP are practitioners. The members share stories, experiences, tools and ways of addressing burning issues in the shared practice, in this case research.

Communities of practice are dynamic social structures that generate opportunities for researchers to engage in inter-organisational collaboration. As suggested by Cambridge, Kaplan and Suter (2005) organisations, workgroups, teams and individuals must work together in new and innovative ways. A CoP provides a new model to connect people in the spirit of learning, sharing knowledge and collaboration with the purpose of personal and organisational development. Cambridge *et al.* (2005) identified certain benefits, namely that a CoP *connects people* who would have otherwise

not had the opportunity to interact with and learn from each other, provides a *shared context* for people to communicate, share stories, information and builds understanding and insight of a specific topic. In addition the *dialogue* between people who come together has mutual beneficial opportunities such as exploring new possibilities and solving challenging problems. Furthermore a CoP introduces *collaborative processes* between groups and organisations that in turn encourage free flow of ideas as well as the exchange of information. In turn *new knowledge* is generated, assisting people to transform their practice to accommodate changed needs and technologies.

According to Jakovljevic (2012) a CoP must be a psychological safe and secure environment, where the greatest fear to creativity namely criticism, ridicule and retrenchment have been removed. In an innovative CoP environment, members should develop a personal innovation plan aimed at achieving a better understanding of their own creativity through self-awareness of future project challenges.

Generally there are a few acknowledged reasons why CoPs generally fail. Firstly a lack of a core group could impede the success of a CoP. Prost and Borzillo (2008) state that it is essential to have an active core group that engage in activities regularly, sharing ideas and participate in problem-solving. Secondly a low level of one-to-one communication between members also has a negative impact on the communication between members of the CoP. Face-to-face communication, e-mails and telephone calls play a very important role in maintaining communication and momentum within the CoP. Thirdly rigidity of competence is another aspect that can cause the CoP to fail, if members only trust their own competencies and are less willing or not willing at all to integrate practices originating from other CoP members.

Consequently, reluctance to learn from each other impedes members' capacity to absorb new information and therefore transfers between members are rare. Fourthly a lack of identification with the CoP, where members do not view the participation in their CoP as meaning full for their everyday work life will have a detrimental effect on the success of the community of practice. Thus they do not view other members as peers who can assist and support them with useful knowledge and practices. Lastly practice intangibility occurs when members' fail to engage with one another in a way that allows them to illustrate the practice to make it concrete enough for other members' to understand, visualise its function and to relate to.

Prost and Borzillo (2008), Wenger (2000), McDermott (2003), Thompson (2005) as well as Breu and Hemingway (2002) suggest the following principles to ensure a successful CoP. *Clear objectives* safeguards that each member will be aware of his/her responsibilities. *Sponsorships* are necessary to ensure the CoP develops to its full potential. *Designated leadership* roles and responsibilities will motivate members to collaborate effectively and work towards shared goals. *Links outside the boundaries* of the CoP should be established to enable members to share knowledge, effective practices and benchmarking. The members must experience the CoP as a *risk free environment* with feelings of safety and intimacy between members. Finally the use of *measurements* to assess the value of the CoP is vital to ensure continuous support from the management and growth of the community of practice.

Statement of the problem

Collaboration, networking and team efforts are important for a successful research career (Mbuagbaw *et al.*, 2013). A shared interest in

scholarship of teaching and learning between three lead researchers stimulated the establishment of a CoP. These lead researchers are academic nursing staff from three different universities. Two of the members were more experienced researchers, whilst the third member was a clinical expert and not an experienced researcher. As group we opted to add a fourth member – also a clinical expert - who was working with one of the lead researchers on the research programme developed during the PLUME programme. The spontaneous formation of the support group developed into a formal and functioning CoP. The processes that would take place within this group were not planned beforehand. However, the mutual goal of research capacity development stimulated active and enthusiastic interactions within the group, resulting in a more formalised process than merely a support group. The question that arose was: What are the processes and experiences involved in the evolving group of nursing academics from outsiders to insiders in a CoP? The aim of this article therefore is to explore the transformation of a group of nursing academics who started as outsiders in a support group to becoming insiders in a community of practice.

Methods

A single intrinsic longitudinal case study design within a *theory of action* was used to illuminate and explicate the experiences of participants during the development (analytical frame) of a community of practice (object). According to Crowe *et al.*, (2011:2) the purpose of a case study approach is to attain an “in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context.” This design was selected because the authors have insider knowledge as they were active participants, had easy access to the case, and the case could be studied in-depth (Rule & John, 2011). The purpose of the

research was to explore the experiences as outsiders who became insiders during the development of a CoP and the subsequent functioning thereof in order to maintain the health (momentum) of the CoP. Like many other structures, our CoP began as a spontaneous and an informal support group. For sustainability it was necessary to explore the experiences of members during the development of the CoP. Baxter and Jack (2008) confirm that case study methodology allows researchers to deconstruct and reconstruct a phenomenon in order to develop theory, develop interventions and as in this case, to evaluate programmes or processes. The case or unit of analysis this article is reporting on is the experiences of the members from outsiders to insiders in the process of developing and establishing a CoP from conception in 2012 to the completion of the fourth writing workshop.

Paradigm

A constructivist paradigm underpins case study research in the sense that the researchers believe that truth is relative and dependent on one's perspective. One's perspective of reality is constructed through social interaction (Yilmaz, 2008). The participants, who are also the members of the CoP, related their experiences and allowed themselves to better understand the reality and complexity of the phenomenon. Thus an interpretivist epistemological standpoint was applied (Crowe *et al.*, 2011).

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework that guided the researchers was the theory of group dynamics that postulates the progression through forming, storming, norming and performing. Inherent to each phase of group functioning are characteristics, leadership, member behaviour, and shortcomings of the group which formed the

“construct bins” for data analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Data sources

Multiple data sources were used namely group reflections, personal notes, and conversations during and following writing workshops. Each member had a notebook in which personal reflections were jotted down. On concluding a writing workshop the group reflected on the work done and planned the next activities. These reflections and plans were captured in a written summary by one member and sent to all other members. Telephonic and electronic conversations occurred frequently between individuals and between all the group members. Copies of all the electronic discussions were kept for further references.

Data analysis

The CoP members contributed their personal reflective notes, written summaries of meetings, e-mails and correspondence with publishers of the academic journals freely for analysis. The researchers convened and concurred on the distribution of data content to the four construct bins of characteristics, leadership, member behaviour, and shortcomings. Initially the researchers struggled to frame the data according to the group dynamic process of forming, storming, norming and performing. It was then decided to ignore the group dynamic process but to keep the construct bins. Another stumbling block was that the researchers tended to analyse the data according to the CoP meetings/workshops. However, it soon became apparent that the evolutionary process of the CoP could not be clearly linked to the contact sessions. Consequently, data were sorted according to the construct bins of characteristics, leadership, activities and shortcomings and structured over time as revealed by the data. From these four construct bins four themes arose

that described the experiences and processes of moving from outsider to insider in a CoP. These themes were a shared domain of interest, informal network, formal work group and community of practice.

Rigor

The variety of data sources contributes to the rigor and credibility of research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Triangulation of data sources per construct bin further contributed to the rigor of the case study (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). Furthermore, the researchers tried to give a dense description of the circumstances and responses that lead to the initiations and consequent existence of the CoP as well as the experiences of each member. A clear research question was formulated which directed and demarcated the study effectively. The case included all the members of the CoP. Data were systematically collected and analysed according to predetermined construct bins. All the participants actively participated in the data analysis which supported the principles of consensus and member checking (Polit & Beck, 2012). The researchers eliminated the problem of *anecdotalism* by including all data responses in the analysis (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010).

Findings

The findings are presented according to the four themes that were identified from the four construct bins, namely shared domain of interest, informal network, formal work group and community of practice.

Shared domain of interest

Conversations between participants of the research development programme highlighted some links between the different research focus areas. During the preliminary phase all group interactions were based on anxiety and excitement with an element of doubtfulness

about the attainability of the outcomes of the research development programme. The unexpected opportunity of a possible collaboration brought about a positive feeling regarding a potentially difficult situation. The three researchers whose research focus areas were related engaged in informal discussions regarding the potential collaboration as a group. One of these three researchers negotiated the inclusion of a fourth researcher who was part of her research programme.

Discussions amongst the four members were informal with no one taking the lead. It was too early in the process to identify any shortcomings during this spontaneous group formation. However belonging to the group enriched research identity and created a unique positive experience for the members. People's feelings of esteem are closely tied to their social identities and when experiencing positive uniqueness within a group one's social identity is commonly enhanced (Dovidio, 2013).

The outcomes of the initial group activities were relief of anxiety that motivated the group to pursue collaboration. At this stage the more experienced researchers saw the potential that collaboration could contribute to research outputs in the form of publications. Anderson *et al.* (2012) maintains that collaboration serves as opportunities for educational and professional growth of those involved.

Informal network

A first official meeting between the individuals took place in a neutral environment that was conducive for social interaction and building relationships. One member offered financial support for the workshop which placed the member in a natural leading role. During reflection the group reached consensus on rotating the hosting responsibilities in future. Furthermore, a willingness to share draft

manuscripts enabled the group to get started and move towards their envisioned future. The individuals were subdued and uncertain about each other and what was expected of them. Some anxiety existed due to differences in terms of professional levels despite equal academic qualifications. Dovidio (2013) explains that the way people categorise themselves and others are highly context-dependent. The perceptions can change as the functions and activities of the group changes. The nature of the group behaviour then affects the group's standards, shaping group processes such as conformity, perceptions, leadership and intergroup orientations. Social and other comparisons often distinguish behaviour. The environment and informal interactions (socially and academically) contributed to the development of the collegial relationships. Spontaneous reflections evolved and a decision was made to formalise the network and to include reflections as deliberate actions throughout the lifespan of the network.

During the next meeting the three lead researchers experienced high anxiety levels because they had to meet the deadlines of the research development programme. Through the process of sharing information and experiences the individuals supported one another and thus reduced anxiety.

Shortcomings of the informal network included poor planning for the meetings. Although unilateral pre-planning by an individual resulted in uncertainty it also created opportunity for co-authoring of manuscripts. On the one hand the draft manuscripts guided the academic discourse and activities. On the other hand it increased the ambivalence of the relatedness of the research focus areas.

The outcomes of the informal network were the start of the collaborative relationship, participation of all four individuals and a sense

of belonging to a group which in turn raised confidence. Everybody felt safe and respected. The scene was set with the two manuscripts. By having 'something' to start with motivated the individuals to become a group. The group concurs with Anderson *et al.* (2012) statement that incentives are important to sustain partner motivation and maintain involvement.

Formal work group

The shift to a more insider perspective became evident by forming a formal work group. The value of the group participation moved from developing individual research programmes to producing research outputs in the form of academic articles. Publishing is a shared job requirement for all the members of the group.

There was a definite shift in the level of contributions. This brought about a confidence boost that ensured more task-oriented activities. The leadership in the group moved to a more facilitative leadership. During the informal networking one of the members of the group hosted both meetings and provided the draft manuscripts. Consequently she presumed the leadership role. When the group was formalised, the primary author of the manuscript in progress assumed the academic leadership and the responsibility with regard to hosting rotated.

It was also clear that the perceived differentials in professional levels changed to a more balanced view. The ambivalence regarding the shared domain of interest decreased because members were starting to understand each other's point of departure. At the same time members realised that all members are equal and have the responsibility and accountability to perform to the advantage of the group.

The shortcomings evolved around deadlines not met and contributions that were lacking. The

concern was that the vision (or the lack thereof) for the group was unrealistic or overenthusiastic as an action plan was not yet formalised. It was clear that a common goal and realistic expectations were necessary for the CoP to continue and function optimally.

The main outcomes of the formal work group was two published articles, one nationally and one internationally as well as a conference presentation. The publications were joyously celebrated via electronic media. These outcomes brought along mostly positive excitement and feelings of revitalisation because we are doing something positive that have the potential for sustainability. Banks (2012) suggests that collaboration may be a strategy for enhancing the retention of academics.

Furthermore, the first insider activity of this group was the conceptualisation of an article from scratch as a formal work group. As a result of the first insider experience we identified the need for a shared vision statement and values and beliefs clarification for sustainability of the group.

Community of practice

Upon reflecting on the processes the sense of belonging became clearer and stronger. We were able to communicate openly and honestly. The publications and presentation also contributed to the self-esteem in terms of research progress. The CoP became the envy of other colleagues leaving a feeling of satisfaction that we are on the right track. Reflections on membership showed that the insider experience left a feeling of ownership closing the option of expanding the group. According to Dovidio (2013) emotionally, people feel more positively about in-group than out-group members, not allowing out-group members into the group.

The subsequent meetings were characterised by round table sessions with few breaks and little socialisation. Academic debates stimulated a willingness to implement other or new ideas. Communication in various forms outside the workshop was frequent and supportive. We could challenge each other in a constructive manner stimulating new ideas within a psychological safe environment.

A positive shared leadership that is value-driven enables all members to take the lead in a given situation resulting in emerging confidence. Wenger and Snyder (2000) maintain that a CoP organises themselves by forming their own leadership roles. Mentoring occurred subconsciously.

The shortcoming of the CoP was that we could no longer only focus on short term goals of tangible outputs. Objectives set must be adhered to and lead towards a long term goal set out in an action plan. The logistics around meetings had to be formalized and structured.

The outcomes were that individual interests and activities became group activities. The feeling was that it was 'my baby, your baby and now it is our baby'. We moved from outsiders and became insiders of this CoP.

Conclusions

The CoP successfully developed and adapted to changing conditions by working together as a research team. Commitment to the CoP is evident in that the writing workshops take place over weekends.

The outcomes accomplished include the development of vision and mission statements, drawing up a collaborative research plan, developing peer support strategies and successfully publishing in scientific journals. Good working relationships among members

with innovative and creative goal setting are maintained.

The group interactions of the CoP resulted in positive interdependence and productivity where caring and cooperation form the underlying values of the group. Through the group interactions change could take place, set goals are reached, good working relationships are maintained and innovation and creativity are enhanced.

The central philosophy of a CoP is that members learn with and from each other (Hean *et al.*, 2013). Hart *et al.* (2013) refer to authors who explain that people initially join groups and learn at the periphery (as outsiders) even though they have immediate connections with the group. As their competence and confidence grow they become more involved in the main purpose of the CoP. Eventually they function as true members of a group, being insiders.

In all phases of the development and functioning of the CoP support was the golden thread. When functioning in a formal group all members should possess equal decision-making capacities, levels of responsibility and power in the group. There should also be mutual trust and respect and open and effective communication. Each member of the group needs to be aware and accept their roles and responsibilities and acknowledge the knowledge and skills of the other members (Banks, 2012).

As the processes were formalised more and more, the feeling of being a valued member in the CoP increased. Individual members' expertise was being openly acknowledged. An overall feeling of 'something' new developing contributed to the sense of belonging. Wenger and Snyder (2000) state that although CoPs are fundamentally informal and self-organising, they

benefit from enhancement. Members of a CoP respond to involvement in a group where their contributions are respected in a way that promotes that sense of belonging. As a result they move towards becoming an insider.

The authors of this paper never envisaged the success of the spontaneously formed group to become a CoP where individuals all experienced a true sense of belonging with concrete academic and research-related outcomes. Reaching the level of insiders of a CoP was marked with the creative development of a shared vision statement and values and beliefs clarification for sustainability of the group. A common goal with realistic expectations and role definitions ensures that the CoP is currently flourishing.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of the study is that it cannot be generalised because it is contextual and the case refers to a specific CoP. However, the dense description of the background, context and responses may convince others in similar circumstances that the findings and discussion may apply to other contexts. The researchers tried to be honest in their reflections and discussions but due to their intense involvement in the CoP may have unknowingly conveyed a certain bias (Rule & John, 2011).

Recommendations

Recommendations for the sustainability of the CoP were identified to address the following two questions: How do we deal with the ebbs and flows of energy between writing workshop? How do we design this CoP for aliveness?

Group activities such as the writing workshops should be planned in a more structured manner to ensure clear guidelines in terms of preparation

and outcomes. When formalising the CoP and for sustainability all activities will be planned to take place during working hours. The next step in the activities of the CoP is to develop an action plan in the development of a research programme for the CoP. The programme will focus on scholarship of teaching and learning with the ultimate aim of practice development in nursing. Space will be created explicitly where the 'insiders' of the CoP have joint opportunities to engage in knowledge production and mobilisation through research outputs.

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