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Good CoP or Bad CoP? What makes a Community of Practice successful; Learning from experience at Flinders University,

Abstract

This paper details the current state of play of an institutional learning and teaching community of practice initiative at Flinders University. The majority of Flinders University CoPs are cross-institutional and focussed on key learning and teaching challenges. Flinders University CoPs are voluntarily facilitated by staff and each CoP's knowledge creation and outcomes are driven by members, with the University providing a framework and support for their activities without institutional expectations.

In this paper, through four firsthand case studies, the authors reflect on the CoPs that they facilitate and consider how the CoPs are progressing by exploring lessons learnt, success factors and potential for future success. The paper commences with a brief review of relevant literature. Four case studies are then introduced and explored. The paper argues that considerable social learning and collective identity formation has been achieved, but that obstacles remain to future success.

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Introduction

This paper details the current state of play of an institutional learning and teaching community of practice initiative at Flinders University. The majority of Flinders University CoPs are cross-institutional and focussed on key learning and teaching challenges.

Flinders University CoPs are voluntarily facilitated by staff and each CoP's knowledge creation and outcomes are driven by members, with the University providing a framework and support for their activities without institutional expectations.

In this paper, through four firsthand case studies, the authors reflect on the CoPs that they facilitate and consider how the CoPs are progressing by exploring lessons learnt, success factors and potential for future success. The paper commences with a brief review of relevant literature. Four case studies are then introduced and explored. The paper argues that considerable social learning and collective identity formation has been achieved, but that obstacles remain to future success.

Literature review

In recent years, CoPs have proliferated across multiple sectors. While CoPs have been theorised as arising organically within craft and task based learning communities (Wenger 1998a, 2002), the desire to harness the promise of this model for learning and knowing (Amin and Roberts 2008); innovation (Dube et al 2006) and change management (Garavan 2007) has seen efforts to nurture or intentionally create (Garavan 2007) CoPs within business and the corporate world, professional and creative contexts (Amin and Roberts 2008). They are now gaining popularity within academia, especially within learning and teaching circles.

This paper accepts the original CoP definition of Wenger et al (2002) notwithstanding debate about the applicability of this definition in academic contexts:

> Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. . . . Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal

relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice (pp. 4-5).

Debate around CoPs relevant to the University's CoP initiative centres on three issues: the tendency to label everything a CoP (see Amin and Roberts 2008 for a good overview of this issue), whether the CoP model outlined by Wenger applies to higher education (Nagy and Burch 2009) and whether a CoP in this context may only be organic or can be intentionally created (Garavan et al 2007).

The authors agree that the original CoP model and its subsequent application in the corporate world is at odds with the nature of higher education. However, the collegial tradition of management and work practices in academia provides the model with applicability in higher education contexts (Nagy and Burch 2009). The current policy environment in higher education and the intensification of academic work have placed more organic forms of community in which previous generations of higher education workers found opportunities for tacit learning and collective problem solving in jeopardy, if they have not already fallen away (Bathmaker and Avis 2006; Viskovic and Robson 2006; Gill 2009). If we accept Wenger's premise that learning is profoundly social and situated, intentional CoPs may be more vital in higher education now than in the past. Some of the participants and facilitators in Flinders University's CoPs described in this paper have chosen participation in CoPs in an effort to engage in conversations and contexts which collegial forms of organisation might have made possible in the past.

We also agree with Amin and Roberts (2008) about the unhelpfulness of the indiscriminate application of the CoP framework. However, their extensive review highlights a category where the CoP framework is applied appropriately and where we situate the CoPs described in this paper – "craft or task knowing",

in which tacit knowledge and ways of doing (in this case teaching and learning in higher education) are shared, developed and generated (Amin and Roberts, 2008, pp. 358-359). The stories outlined below by the facilitators of the University's CoPs demonstrate that they are places of significant sharing of teaching practice and places where novices may benefit from the experience of others.

Additionally, there has been debate about the approach to the formation of groups. Early literature by Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998a; Wenger 1998b) suggested groups were formed spontaneously. However, later literature has identified a range of practices. Current understandings of CoPs embrace both organic or emergent CoPs, as well as nurtured or intentional CoPs (Garavan et al 2007) as valid approaches. The CoP project discussed in this paper involved the intentional initiation of a number of CoPs within a single University. This paper makes a contribution to a developing literature of case studies of CoPs in higher education, including Viskovic's (2006) work on the professional development of early career academics, Price's work (2006) about module teams on assessment, the work of King and Churchman with allied health staff (2008) and Sylvia Currie's work (2007) on the formation of a multi-University online community of practice for academic staff. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to emergent understandings of what the CoP model may have to offer to higher education

We use a comparative case study approach drawing upon participant observation to inform the paper. In the case studies set out below we explain the formation, core actions and outcomes of each CoP and the challenges that these CoPs have faced. Having explained the features of each CoP, we then move on to draw out and analyse the central themes of our case studies and consider their potential significance for a wider understanding of what the intentional creation of craft or task based CoPs may have to offer in a higher education context.

Case Study 1 – Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Preparation CoP

In 2010, curriculum renewal led to a directive from the University to increase WIL content in courses across the University. Flinders University was concerned to establish consistency of approach and quality of WIL experience for students and thus established a new University-wide WIL policy. The WIL CoPs were established to support professional and academic staff in meeting the challenges represented by the expansion of WIL programmes into non-traditional

areas and the requirements of the new WIL policy.

One of these CoPs focused on preparation for WIL. Its first meeting was held in late 2010. This CoP comprised both academic and general staff members from Law, Business, Chemical and Physical Sciences, Careers and Employee Liaison, Centre for University Teaching and the Health, Counselling and Disability Service. The early meetings involved discussion of the scope and goals of the CoP. Some members wanted clearly targeted outcomes. Others were happy to discuss issues more broadly. There was no set agenda and discussions evolved somewhat haphazardly. Over the course of the year discussions began to recur, becoming a source of frustration for participants.

In 2011 the group decided to introduce a structure where a guest speaker was invited to facilitate discussion. As a result, a University Disability Advisor facilitated a discussion about inherent requirements. In response to her talk the CoP decided to operationalise the ideas generated in this way in a topic in the School of Law. This process brought together the ideas that had been discussed across the year and the outcome will be a set of guidelines made available to other staff running WIL topics and contributions to the wider University policy agenda.

While working across faculties, and with professional and general staff is a strength of the WIL-Preparation CoP, finding common ground in terms of issues and ways of working that accommodate different approaches has been a challenge. Despite these challenges, shared learning has contributed to local and institutional outcomes.

Case Study 2 – Work Integrated Learning Implementation CoP

The WIL Implementation CoP concerns itself with the implementation of the University's WIL Policy and with strategies for the successful management of WIL. Members are drawn from a wide range of perspectives including WIL topic coordination, high level strategy, administrative management and placement supervision.

A first meeting refined the CoP's core principles and set Terms of Reference for the group: operating as a forum for discussion, sharing of information and deepening of members' understanding of WIL. The CoP is not charged with undertaking specific tasks, although task-force activity may arise out of the group. The group sets a broad agenda for meetings, to ensure that any specific discussion needs are met and given time, and the tone of meetings is conversational and informal.

A year's operation of the CoP has seen membership and meeting attendance fluctuate with University and individual priorities. Meetings are held quarterly. Discussion often centres on the 'pain points' of WIL implementation—challenges and obstacles—but has also brought out stories of innovative practice and identified informal benchmarks. The CoP provides an environment of support in which approaches can be workshopped and referenced against others' practice and the group forms a critical mass that identifies common challenges, supports and strategies.

Case Study 3 – First Year Law CoP

This CoP was established to enable constructive responses to challenges facing the first year from 2010/2011. University wide curriculum renewal and intentional redesign of the law degree produced new topics and a new cohort of teachers in first year, placing the coherence of the curriculum and staff capacity to implement transition pedagogies at risk. The co-facilitators sought to enable evidence-based and integrated responses to these challenges, drawing on the extensive literature on the first year experience. This literature emphasises the necessity for intentional design and an integrated first year (for example, Kift 2008a, 2008b). In addition, other goals such as responding effectively to ever more diverse cohorts of students, escalating moves to online fora for teaching and assessment and integrated responses to the well-established data on law student anxiety and depression (Kelk et al, 2009; Field et al 2010) were anticipated. Meeting these needs would require far greater collaboration between first year teachers and far greater capacity for situated professional development. The co-facilitators initiated this CoP believing that a CoP model held promise for achieving these goals in a way that could be supportive and empowering for staff rather than simply asking staff to work faster and harder.

All first year law teachers were invited to participate in the CoP. Meetings initially discussed research into the first year experience and how it might impact on teaching practices. As the CoP developed, we began to act on this literature by integrating the curriculum and administrative practices faced by students in order to improve transition. We generated common administrative processes and shared language to describe them. Creating shared resources saved staff time as well as improving what was offered to students. As relationships strengthened, staff became more aware of others' teaching practices, allowing a more coherent first year and better articulation with our transitions programme. Members report feeling like a team and students say they perceive us as a team.

The CoP's collaborative approach and the strength of relationships that have emerged have made significant contributions to the members, the students we teach and the School, as well as to debates about first year and transition within the university as a whole. Like several of the other CoPs described here, the FYLaw CoP has also built up capacity for leadership at School and University level.

Case Study 4 – First Year Teaching and Learning CoP

After the call from the Deputy VC (Academic) for expressions of interest in forming CoPs, a group of academics and professional staff interested in the first year experience met in November 2009. The First Year CoP continues to meet regularly with over 30 members drawn from across the University. This includes all four faculties, support services (eg International Student Services Unit, Student Learning Centre, Health, Counselling and Disability Services), Yunggorendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research, Library and professional and general staff.

The format of meetings shifted focus from 2010 to 2011 from a general facilitated discussion around issues of concern to members, to a set agenda and presentations. In 2011, showcase presentations enabled members to share best practice in their team, unit or department. The change in format was designed to highlight, acknowledge and share resources and ideas involved in the first year experience.

In 2011, the DVC(A) was invited to present the draft of the Teaching and Learning Plan, which was seen as an opportunity for CoP members to address those aspects of the plan specific to first year students. This recognised the CoP as an established collective and an opportunity to contribute to policy formation about first year matters at University level.

Discussion

These four case studies from the Flinders University CoP initiative highlight some key themes: developing shared practice to meet a stated challenge, the development of a shared identity over time and ongoing dilemmas around competing demands for staff.

Each of the University's CoPs identify the important outcome of shared practice, a key element of CoPs within the literature. The development of informal benchmarks, the development of shared resources, common administrative processes and a shared language to address shared problems is evident. These outcomes are instances of social learning in meeting members' expressed needs in relation to

their practice. Through the development of shared practice, each of the Flinders University CoPs displays the development of shared identity, in parallel with other CoPs discussed in the literature (McDonald and Star 2006; Amin and Roberts 2008; Bathmaker and Avis 2005). The CoP facilitators observe the recognition and development amongst members of the individuals into a team or collective. This has led to more consistency for students and more cohesion of teaching and learning within programs. Additionally, as collective identities have formed, this has led to the development of a collective voice for members and involvement in policy discussions within the university. We would argue that these outcomes suggest that our CoPs have generated benefits for the institution and for students, as well as for staff.

Despite the positives evident in each of the case studies outlined above, ongoing challenges that are common to other accounts of CoPs within higher education (McDonald and Star 2008; Viscovic 2006) are also clear. A recurring obstacle in this context remains the time poor nature of academic and professional staff within universities (McDonald and Star 2008; Nagy and Burch 2009). This time pressure arises due to significant competing demands on staff time, leading to difficulties in convincing staff to engage in and prioritise new initiatives such as this one. This can manifest both in reluctance to engage, but also in a pragmatic approach to engagement which may compromise the ability to develop shared practice and a collective identity. These ongoing challenges need to be actively managed and mitigated.

Conclusion

We would argue that our case studies show that a CoP model can offer significant benefits to University staff facing teaching and learning challenges and to institutions. Provision of University resources to allow the intentional development of CoPs to address such challenges at Flinders University has resulted in the creation of shared resources and the development and recognition of collaborative teams of staff. It has also enabled the articulation of a shared identity and collective voice in relation to policy and cultural change within the University. Though the success of these CoPs has been placed in jeopardy by competing demands on staff time and resources, Flinders University support and responsive leadership have allowed these CoPs to support staff constructively to respond to continuous and high-paced processes of change faced by many staff across the sector, both nationally and internationally.

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