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Learning and Teaching Professional Development: An Australian Community of Practice Case Study

Jacque McDonald
University of Southern Queensland

Cassandra Star
Flinders University

Teaching can be an isolated and private experience; however, communities of practice (CoPs) provide faculty academics teaching on-campus or distance students with a safe community to share and grow their practice. The authors present a case study of a CoP established for first-year course leaders at an Australian regional, online and distance education university. The article includes an exploration of three categories of higher education CoPs and the challenges of engaging academics in learning and teaching quality initiatives. They argue that the creator CoP approach outlined in this case study to support learning and teaching professional development can provide an embedded approach that meets both the needs of academics and institutional goals.

Introduction

Communities of practice (CoPs) provide a context where academics can engage in sustained learning and teaching inquiry within supportive communities situated in their learning and teaching practice (McDonald & Star, 2008). However, CoPs operate differently from institutionalised work groups or project teams. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) describe CoPs 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)

A multi-university study of faculty learning communities in the USA also found that CoPs had an above-average impact on student learning, and this was consistent across the six universities examined (Beach & Cox, 2009). Similar findings have been reported from Australian research (McDonald & Star, 2006, 2007, 2008; Nagy & Burch, 2009). In higher education, many CoPs provide a non-hierarchical structure where academics engage in learning and collegiality. There is now a developing literature on the use of CoPs in Australian higher education that can be categorised into three strands: one strand that sees significant potential for CoPs in higher education; a second strand that reflects on previous activity undertaken and believes a CoP was formed; and, finally, a strand whose proponents have started or created a CoP within higher education and report their experiences.

The Current Context of Australian Higher Education

While the continuing impact of the global financial crisis has provided new challenges and financial stresses in the US and UK higher education systems, including new charges for students, the Australian higher education system has been under significant financial pressure for the last four decades. While the US and UK systems have recourse to user-pays fees and, in some cases, donations from alumni and the private sector (Orkodashvili, 2007), neither of these approaches is significant in the Australian system. Australian universities, especially the elite universities (referred to as the Group of Eight), *are* increasingly seeking (or attempting to seek) funds from the private sector, a practice that is argued to be related to the corporatisation agenda of universities (see Sharrock, 2012). Despite this change, Australian university income from endowments and donations was only 5.2% of total income across the period 2009-2011 (Moodie, 2012).

The decrease in government funding for higher education over the last three decades, in particular, has been marked, with limited options available to universities to offset this loss (Kemp & Norton, 2014). The Australian government has only recently been able to vary student fees or increase domestic student enrolment numbers without governmental assent. The key recourse for the majority of institutions has been to expand

international student enrolments—a source of student numbers that is under their control—accompanied by charging substantial upfront fees that are set by the universities themselves (Guthrie & Neumann, 2007; Norton, 2013). This resulted in a steady growth in international student numbers from 1986 until around 2010 (Department of Education, Training, and Youth Affairs, 2001; Norton, 2013), with a 39.8% increase between 2003 and 2008 (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations, 2008) and a 293% increase overall in international enrolments between 1991 and 2000 (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003a, cited in Guthrie & Neumann, 2007). By 2009, international students made up 21% of enrolments in the Australian tertiary sector, compared with an average of 6% in other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2011). While international student numbers declined slightly across 2011-12 due to changes in migration policy, the high Australian dollar, and negative publicity about student safety (Norton, 2013), these students still comprise in excess of 20% of the total student body. Domestic student numbers also have been rising since the 1950s, most notably increasing by 51% between 1996 and 2005 (Parker, 2011). In 2011, domestic students totalled 890,000—an increase of 100,000 from 2008 (Norton, 2013).

The high number of international student enrolments has brought twin challenges for teaching academics in the Australian sector, intensifying their work and expanding work expectations (especially around teaching workload) to service a large number of students, but also to accommodate a more challenging cohort of students needing greater support (Freudenberg & Samarkovski, 2014). At the same time, the government has introduced incentives and policy changes to ensure universities raise their teaching standards and foster teaching quality, in an effort to protect and enhance the export market in higher education (Freudenberg & Samarkovski, 2014; Lodewijks, 2011; Universities Australia, 2013). These pressures on academic work practices have led to a significant focus on professional development for quality learning and teaching.

The Challenge of Engaging Academics in Learning and Teaching Quality Initiatives

While scholars of higher education are clear on the what of cultural change in higher education, there is much less clarity and decisiveness on how to change the culture of quality teaching and learning in higher education. Although changes in government policy provide financial in-

centives and key performance indicators for higher education institutions to follow, internal institutional change can be more difficult and elusive. Accounts of institution-wide changes in teaching quality with discussion of concrete implementation are not widely available or evident in the literature, despite the increased discussion around the application of learning analytics (Siemens, Dawson, & Lynch, 2013).

One of the key difficulties facing higher education institutions concerns changes to the traditional autonomy of academic staff and the identity of higher education away from its collegial past (Nagy & Burch, 2009) and toward a more managerial and commercial entity (Christopher, 2012; Probert, 2014). The key site of this difficulty is at the level of faculties and schools within higher education institutions, where the managerialism of higher education senior leadership, expressed through university policies and key performance indicators for deans or heads of faculties to implement, are to be operationalised (Parker, 2011; Sharrock, 2012). Thus, the challenge for universities is how effectively to engage individual academic staff in ways that meet the needs of staff, students, universities, and government policy. In this article, we explore a CoP approach to professional development and institutional change from the perspective of learning and teaching in universities.

CoP Approaches in Higher Education

Because much of the CoP literature (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) is concerned with CoPs in industry or community projects, there are some interesting considerations when applying existing CoP theory to the higher education context. Higher education managers, in responding to government pressure to adopt a managerial approach, could, therefore, view CoPs as one way of implementing top-down processes. However, we advocate a CoP approach that embraces a bottom-up, situated engagement of both academic and professional staff in learning and teaching practices because we believe that this approach creates a space for members to engage in scholarly conversations, encourages reflection on situated practice within the discipline, and provides an opportunity for staff to share their learning and teaching knowledge. As noted by Martin, Benjamin, Prosser, and Trigwell (1999), these areas support scholarly practice and have a positive impact on student learning.

We assess the current literature on the use of CoPs in higher education as currently falling into three categories. First, there are authors who see significant potential for CoPs in higher education, whom we refer to as "idealists." A second group of authors reflect on previous activity un-

dertaken and believe a CoP was formed; we refer to these authors as the “reflectors.” A final group of authors, those who have started or created a CoP within the higher education setting and report their experiences, we refer to as the “creators.”

The first group of authors, the idealists, see a positive potential from using CoPs to re-introduce some structures of collegiality into higher education. These authors point to a breakdown of traditional academic practice and culture resulting from changes in academic work practices, the sector as a whole, and government policy on higher education. Thus, for these writers, CoPs in higher education are advocated as an alternative collegial structure and approach that is more in keeping with traditional academic practice. They argue that the introduction of CoPs in a variety of areas, including learning and teaching, opens up a space for collegiality and sharing of practice and trust that needs to be restored in academic workplaces across higher education. A range of authors provide perspectives on the implementation and rationale for CoPs in higher education, including Nagy and Burch (2009), Churchman (2005), and Cox (2006).

The second category of authors, whom we refer to as the reflectors, are interesting in terms of their *post-facto* reflection on a range of experiences within higher education and their “discovery” of a CoP within those experiences. While these authors reflect on a range of research, leadership, and student experiences, our main interest is in the learning and teaching professional development cases they articulate. A collection of cases specifically investigates and articulates the experiences of the development of academic staff through the lens of CoPs. Of particular note here is the *post-hoc* examination and theorising of the experiences and development of staff, through the eyes of the author(s), as constituting a CoP. Some examples include Viskovic’s (2006) work on the professional development of early-career academics in New Zealand, Price’s (2005) work about module teams on assessment, and the work of King and Churchman (2008) with allied health staff. In all of these cases, when the case study, project, or professional development had ceased, later reflection led to the realisation that a CoP had grown among participants, and that the CoP may (or may not) have continued beyond the initial professional development activity.

The final group of authors, the creators, includes those that have established, or attempted to establish, a CoP around learning and teaching. These authors have generally approached a particular problem or task by applying a CoP methodology, using their knowledge of the existing CoP literature. This group is characterised as having actively decided that a CoP is suitable for a task, intentionally fostered or created the CoP, and implemented it to solve a problem or achieve a set of goals in relation to

learning and teaching in the Australian higher education sector. These authors have drawn upon knowledge from the existing base of CoP literature in the business sector and sought to adapt those approaches to suit the needs of academic work practices, the requirements of learning and teaching, and the Australian higher education sector. This category includes the work of McDonald and Star (2006, 2007, 2008; McDonald et al., 2008) on creating a CoP approach to learning and teaching in an Australian institution, and of Green and Ruutz (2008) on the creation of a cross-disciplinary CoP in an Australian university, among others. The work of Cox (1997, 1999; Blaisdell & Cox, 2004; Richlin & Cox, 2004) on the use of faculty learning communities in the United States also fits within this category, although it is unique to higher education in the United States and its circumstances.

A Case of CoP-Focused Professional Development: The Faculty of Business First-Year CoP for Core Course Leaders

The following case study outlines a community of practice approach within an initiative to enhance teaching quality at an Australian regional, online, and distance education university. This is an example of a creator approach, one in which the authors approached a teaching and learning issue, with the specific lens of a CoP in mind, to engage academics in ways that met their needs as well as those of the institution. The authors' collaboration began with the pilot CoP outlined in the case study below, and it was extended to the application and acquisition of funding for first-year CoPs in the faculties of arts and, later, sciences.

The CoP that is the subject of this case study was located in an Australian regional university with a strong focus on distance and online learning and a mix of international students, local students in transition from secondary school, and mature-age students. Academic staff may deliver courses over three semesters to on-campus and distance or online students and work with international education partnerships. Course design and development is often a team effort, with faculty course leaders working with learning and teaching support academics and distance education production staff. The idea for a CoP for teachers of first-year courses emerged from a joint initiative of the authors to redesign a first-year undergraduate course. One author was a core course leader in a business faculty, and the other a learning and teaching designer from a central support unit. We worked collaboratively to redesign an existing undergraduate business course to embed graduate attributes, scaffold

constructivist learning activities, and address student retention and progression issues (see Star and McDonald, 2007). During the process of this collaboration, we debated strategies on how best to share a collaborative design approach and learning and teaching innovations with other members of the faculty, particularly other first-year course leaders.

Our idea was to create a space where teachers could share positive experiences (domain knowledge and practice), successes, and “war stories” about their practice, and build learning resources and professional expertise. Based on our interest in CoPs and a belief that change can be effectively implemented if grounded in practice, we submitted a funding application to support the creation of a CoP for teachers of first-year courses. One author had applied this learning community approach previously with groups of academics and students, and the approach was supported with positive feedback from participants in their evaluation of the CoP (McDonald, 2007; McDonald & Mayes, 2005). The funding application and planning to establish the CoP was informed by the CoP literature, specifically that which placed the learning component as central and situated in practice, that is, Wenger (1998), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Wenger et al. (2002). The funding enabled the procurement of refreshments, administrative support, and also a research assistant to prepare a first-year teachers’ toolkit as a deliverable at the end of the initial project period. We jointly facilitated the CoP, and its members were all teachers of core first-year courses within the business faculty. The faculty dean championed the CoP, providing funding for the administrative support, consumables and workload allocation for members, and also endorsed the CoP and signed off on the invitation to academics to participate in it.

As facilitators, when planning the CoP to suit the educational context and having identified that first-year teachers are time poor (Forgasz & Leder, 2006), we adapted Wenger’s three fundamental CoP elements for the community’s organising structure:

1. *domain* of knowledge,
2. *community* of people, and
3. *shared practice* (Wenger, 1998).

The *domain* of knowledge and *shared practice* was learning and teaching first-year business, with the core first-year course leaders forming the community. We chose this structure to provide a consistent framework to ensure that each of the essential elements of a CoP was covered at monthly meetings, members had clear direction, their priorities were addressed, and practice was shared. Providing the community members

with structure, support, and planned outcomes assisted us as facilitators in addressing their initial scepticism that they were participating in “just another meeting,” and it enabled best use of the time they committed, because the members were all time-poor tertiary educators (McDonald & Star, 2006, 2008). By ensuring a strong and consistent focus on members’ shared practice and a member-led agenda, we created an effective space that carefully met members’ needs.

Effectiveness of CoP Professional Development Approaches

The following is an exploration of how CoP approaches are effective in regenerating teaching and learning practices to engender a culture of learning and teaching quality within the current context of significant change in Australian universities. We argue that CoPs provide an effective way to support the professional development of academic staff and produce practical and tangible outcomes for their members.

Our goal of sharing our experiences and innovations with other course leaders within the faculty prompted us to consider and reflect on the potential methods to do so. Having observed and experienced the frustrations of academic staff with teaching forums, workshops, and information sessions on learning and teaching within the university, and their subsequent disengagement, we sought alternatives to these approaches. There is little evidence for the long-term efficacy of “one-shot” delivery models such as workshops, seminars, and short courses (see Cannon and Hore, 1997; Kember and Mezger, 1990). Henderson (2006) argues that “[i]n order for teachers to transform their practices, they must enter into what is essentially a personal transformative experience that occurs over time” (p. 2). This argument is widely supported in the literature and in the outcomes of a range of case studies on professional development and mentoring in the higher education sector (see, for example, Barnett, 1994; Boud, Keogh, and Walker, 1985; Brockbank and McGill, 1999; Brookfield, 1995; Light and Cox, 2001; Ramsden, 1992; Schön, 1983). Thus, for professional development to be transforming and to transform practice (and contribute to a culture of learning and teaching quality), it must be engaged in over the long term or be ongoing. In addition, professional development must be in a form in which academics, as individuals, see value; it must provide value in terms of their day-to-day, local practices.

In establishing the CoP for first-year course leaders in the faculty of business, we were committed to an approach that emphasised ongoing professional development that the academics would value for their own

practice and that addressed the concerns they identified in their work. We also considered carefully the nature of the approach and how it might relate to that of other institutional structures within the University's complex hierarchy. Elton (1999) suggests that "new ways of learning ... require new forms of institutional management" (p. 219), and in his analysis of strategies for innovation and change in higher education, he draws a distinction between hierarchical (top-down) and cybernetic (bottom-up) models of governance. A CoP approach facilitates "bottom-up" innovation, whereas engaging with the university hierarchy can inform "top-down" change management. We viewed establishing a CoP as an effective way of providing a grounded-in-practice approach that values the individual needs of academics, identifies their common concerns, and enables the provision of feedback into the university hierarchy in relation to such concerns. This approach also has the advantage of being driven by academics' challenges within their teaching and learning practice rather than by the concerns of the university hierarchy about learning and teaching, although there may be some alignment between the two areas.

Once a clear plan was established for the CoP, we secured resources for the project from the faculty and, later, the university. In the funding applications, we aligned the CoP goals with the strategic goals of the university and the faculty. For example, we focused on the faculty members' strategic goals, such as increasing the retention and progression of students, while also addressing the important need to share, support, and grow existing learning and teaching expertise. This strategy was based on a clear belief that within their practice, all academics, even those who are new to teaching, have valuable local knowledge and strategies to share with their colleagues. Within the CoP literature, this is highlighted by the emphasis on the *practice* of the participants; the sharing of *tacit knowledge*; and the role of *apprentices*, who learn the craft of their masters through observation, imitation, and practice (McDermott & Archibald, 2010; Wenger, 1998). The concept of tacit knowledge refers to knowledge that is possessed only by an individual and is difficult to communicate to others via words and symbols. People are not often aware that they possess tacit knowledge or of how it can be valuable to others (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009). Effective transfer of tacit knowledge generally requires extensive personal contact and trust, which is established with an effective CoP.

A CoP approach to teaching and learning in higher education provides a space for staff to collaboratively reflect, review, and regenerate their current teaching and learning practices. Within higher education, organisational structures and the culture of individualism (Newman, 2010) produce a situation where academics are often isolated and unaware of the

practices of others. While well-advanced initiatives exist to overcome this individualism within research endeavours, such as research centres and research networks, such initiatives are less common in relation to teaching in higher education (Laurillard, 2002). The consequences of a lack of formal or informal structures for sharing of learning and teaching practice contribute to a lack of institutional memory regarding innovations; little acknowledgement or recognition of the diversity of good teaching and learning practices outside formal award mechanisms; and little support for individuals in need of mentoring or guidance in reforming, improving, or reflecting on their own practices. Many academics remain isolated within their discipline. This was noted early in the CoP process by our members, who identified that a priority issue for them was to find out what was happening in other first-year courses, rather than “teaching in a bubble” (McDonald & Star, 2008, p. 236). While the members taught in their own individual disciplines (law, politics, economics, organisational behaviour, marketing, management, and so forth), the CoP combined these isolated discipline practices into a powerful shared learning and teaching knowledge. Participation in the CoP enabled these members to share multiple perspectives across different disciplines and build a common practice of what it means to be a first-year teacher in the faculty of business. The resultant sharing of learning and teaching practice provided a more consistent quality experience for first-year students in the faculty of business.

We identified five significant professional development outcomes from the initiative. First, the CoP allowed us to create and facilitate academic professional conversations on learning and teaching. CoP participation provided the impetus for individual academics to expand their engagement with other staff and staff development activities. For example:

I am seeking out colleagues . . . [and] some of the faculty staff development activities . . . I am certainly more engaged outside my immediate teaching team. (CoP member)

This outcome impacts the student experience and academics’ professional development by engaging staff in ongoing teaching improvement and nurturing a culture of continuous innovation in learning and teaching.

Second, the creation and existence of the CoP provided a reference group for individual academics to discuss, plan, and experiment with their teaching and provide inspiration and feedback through observation and analysis of the teaching activities of peers. Teaching can be a very solitary activity; thus, sharing and improving practice using the CoP approach is a powerful and effective way to improve student learning. This outcome

impacts the student experience and staff professional development by inspiring members about teaching, promoting reflection on teaching practice, and encouraging innovation.

Third, the CoP provided a forum for learning and teaching mentoring. The CoP mentored less experienced academic staff through the modelling of good practice and building shared practice among peers. Sharing ideas in a “safe” environment with more experienced members also allowed them to test their own ideas and to build their teaching repertoire by trying out new ideas. For example:

. . . [T]he CoP helps because others . . . have gone through similar experiences. We share our experience and that makes clear some things that we otherwise would have struggled with.
(CoP member)

This outcome impacts the student experience and staff professional development by providing collegial support for new teachers, facilitating a consistent approach to teaching issues across programs, and embracing proven and effective teaching practice.

Fourth, when the group built mutual trust and shared practice, it enabled the CoP to be a vehicle to engage members in a reflective and scholarly approach to their practice. One member stated,

[O]ver that period I’ve been more . . . self-critical in terms of my own teaching practices and challenging some of my own assumptions. . . .

Members also made links between CoP activity and other professional development, such as the Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching and Learning:

. . . [T]he Grad. Cert. gives you the theory and a little bit of practical application. . . . [T]he CoP gives you lots of practical application and a little bit of theory . . . so they complement each other. (CoP member)

This outcome impacts academics’ professional development by engaging academic staff as ongoing students of good practice and increasing their engagement with theory and pedagogy. As academics improve their teaching continuously, students also benefit.

The final outcome from our case was the work of the members of the CoP collectively to design and develop a toolkit for first-year course leaders incorporating practical responses to common issues facing the course leaders. Each section highlights successful solutions in a “quick grab” format supplemented by exemplars and additional resources. Making

resources such as the toolkit available to other educators increased the impact of the CoP's activities. Toolkit topics included getting started, cross-cultural teaching, first assessment items, peer assessment, evaluating teaching, graduate qualities and skills, and professional development. This outcome impacts the student experience and academic professional development by enabling the dissemination of practical solutions to common teaching issues, and spreading awareness of good practice.

Our discussions with faculty course leaders also identified significant concerns about how teachers can respond to the multiplicity of demands facing them. The CoP process we designed to initiate and nurture the group was based on meeting the identified concerns of members in ways that were useful and transferable within their day-to-day teaching practice.

Conclusions

In this article, we have investigated the key current practices in relation to CoPs and their use in the higher education sector in Australia. Three main strands—idealism, reflection and creation—are identifiable in the literature, and each serves a specific purpose in understanding current pressures, practices, and approaches in teaching and learning in higher education. Demonstrating an example of a “creation” approach, the case study we have outlined here highlights the potential role of CoPs in the Australian higher education sector in engendering significant institutional change around learning and teaching quality. Despite the significant financial pressure created by changes in government policy and competition for the declining number of international students, meaningful and ongoing institutional change has, thus far, been elusive for higher education managers. Communities of practice are one mechanism through which Australian universities are undertaking institutional change to improve teaching quality within their academic staff. This particular approach ensures that academic staff members are able to undertake changes in a way that meets their own needs and is grounded in their everyday practice, while still addressing institutional imperatives.

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Jacquie McDonald is a Learning and Teaching Designer at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia. Her leadership of the successful implementation of communities of practice (CoPs) at USQ has been recognised with a 2009 Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) commendation and 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) citation. Her CoP leadership activities include a 2010 ALTC Teaching Fellowship and co-leadership of an ALTC grant for the project *Identifying, Building and Sustaining Leadership Capacity for Communities of Practice in Higher Education*. **Cassandra Star** teaches in the graduate program in Public Administration at Flinders University, South Australia. Her research interests are in higher education policy and management, as well as her disciplinary research focus on environmental politics. Together with McDonald, Cassandra has led a significant number of grants and projects on CoPs. The outcomes of this work were awarded with an ALTC citation in 2009 and an AUQA commendation.

