



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Engaging Communities

Proceedings of the

31st HERDSA Annual Conference

1-4 July 2008

Rotorua, New Zealand

Campbell, M. (2008) Teaching, communities of practice and the police, in *Engaging Communities, Proceedings of the 31st HERDSA Annual Conference, Rotorua, 1-4 July 2008: pp 106-116.*

Published 2008 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 1441 001X
ISBN: 0 908557 73 6

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Teaching, communities of practice and the police

Matthew Campbell

Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, Australia
matthew.campbell@acu.edu.au

Communities of practice are generally accepted as locales of engagement, learning and development. This paper reflects on a case study of the evolution of a community of practice amongst staff in a university School of Policing Studies. The case study reveals the requirement for space, in a physical, temporal and timely sense, for open discussion and the formation of shared understanding and trust as key stepping stones to the formation of community. Within this case study there is evidence of success in the development of staff that is directly attributable to the evolution of the community. The process of evolution in this case study may present as a model for the evolution of communities of practice that is transferrable to other contexts.

Keywords: communities of practice, academic development, partnerships

Introduction

Communities of practice are generally accepted as locales of engagement, learning and development. They present a framework from which we can come to better understand human interaction and the construction of identity as aspects of broader notions of learning. However, communities of practice present as difficult beasts to develop and form, often being identifiable only after they come to exist. This paper explores the experience of an emerging community of practice amongst staff within a university School of Policing Studies. The character of the police education environment provides a case study that presents frustrations that can be translated to other emerging professional environments. The purpose of the emerging community of practice was to provide a space for collaborative development of staff into their role as an academic. By reflecting on this case study it is intended to consider the process as a model that may be transferable to other contexts, problems and issues that arose in the emergence of the community, and whether such an effort was of benefit to the development of staff.

Methodological approach

This research is shaped by a strategy of case study where case studies are viewed “as a form of research ... defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used” (Stake 2000, p.435). Within this case study there was an evolution of thinking most akin to the notions of participatory action research, with a spiral reflective cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, but moreso as a “social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who join together in changing practices through which they interact in a shared social world” (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005, p.563). This paper presents reflection on the process of change that was

undertaken within the School of Policing Studies. It draws on personal observations and reflections supplemented by, and triangulated against, those of my colleagues, who were instrumental in the endeavour of creating sessions in which the sharing of information and ideas could occur. In this case study I was a driver of change and often viewed by others, including management, as the coordinator of the community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002), though I would present the reality of leadership as far more collaborative and distributed.

A criticism of qualitative research, especially that which is conducted by a participant in the process, is the level of bias brought to the inquiry (Alvermann 2000). Such bias is unavoidable in any human interaction or intervention with data sources. At best it is possible to make known a researcher's biases so as to allow the reader the opportunity to negotiate the research in a valid way making allowances for any influence these may have had on the presentation of the story that is told. Within this research I was a participant observer (Punch 2005), acting through my role as a leader of teaching and learning development. Not having come from a policing background I would situate myself very much as a 'non-practitioner academic', often working in a world of practitioners. Policing has not been traditionally an academically rich field of enterprise with most knowledge in policing being generated through lived experience and passed on by story-telling. So to present in such an environment as a non-police academic very much located one on the outside of the conversation. The development of a community in which there was engagement between academics, practitioners and practitioner-academics (these are recently retired police who are working with the university) allowed for a breaking down of some of these barriers and allowed me to bridge some of the gap of practice, gaining recognition amongst my peers and enhancing my knowledge of policing in turn.

Describing the context

This case study presents the experience within the School of Policing Studies, Charles Sturt University. This School works in partnership with the New South Wales Police Force to deliver the primary recruit training. Within the school staff there is a range of expertise across the fields of sociology, criminology, law and philosophy / ethics as well as policing practice; presenting a truly interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning. The partnership between Charles Sturt University and the New South Wales Police came as a result of moves in the late 1990's to professionalise police in response to the findings, primarily, of the Wood Royal Commission (1997) that asserted a need for police to be provided with external influences to improve their decision making and to break-down the walls of silence that permeated the police culture and aided corruption. Thus the university was, and still is, viewed as a tool for anti-corruption and regulation rather than education and advancement and a perception of the partnership as something that was imposed.

As the program and the School are located at the NSW Police College, there is a significant influence of the police culture in tension with a sense of university education, as opposed to workplace training. As identified by Reiner (2000), Skolnick (1986), and Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) and others, the typical police culture includes cynicism; a

‘them’ and ‘us’ culture, where ‘them’ includes researchers and ‘do-gooders’; conservatism; machismo and racial prejudice; and a “very pragmatic, concrete, down to earth, anti-theoretical perspective”, where the major concern is “to get from here to tomorrow (or the next hour) safely and with the least fuss and paperwork” (Reiner 2000, pp. 85-107). This attitude can manifest itself in, for example, police (im)patience with meetings in which discussion is prolonged and complex and does not arrive at a specific, actionable conclusion or where there are opportunities for and expectations of collegiality (Layton, Corbo Crehan, & Campbell, In Press). The pressure thus created can be a source of tension, especially as staff new to academia try to understand their new identity and the pressures of their role whilst constantly being drawn back to the culture of the organisation that they left. Furthermore, staff who have retired from the police organisation and come to the university seem to have difficulty of moving from cultural norms and an identity that they have experienced for significant periods of time.

Given the competing cultures of police and academia there exists strong debate about the appropriate focus of police recruit education. The competing views of abstract academic knowledge, or ‘academic expertise’, stand opposed to views that predominantly see police training as practice and technically-oriented. There is a sense that a serving, or recently served, police officer is capable of teaching across any subject, thus staff move regularly between subjects. This practice undervalues academic specialist knowledge compared to policing practical experience. Tension is particularly evident in the field of ethics education, where there are ongoing debates about the place of such a defined field of study in police training and the proper balance between providing information about organisational policy (that is training police to just do) and developing autonomous decision making capacities (that is training police to question) (Corbo Crehan & Campbell 2007). Non-practitioner academics tend to teach in subjects such as communication, law and ethics, and can have difficulty having their expertise recognised as relevant by both students at the College, who aspire to imitate the police they observe, and some police staff ‘colleagues’. Conversely, former police may rely solely on their policing experience (and not on any specific subject-related expertise they have developed), with the potential drawback of teaching through ‘war stories’ that serve to merely reinforce cultural stereotypes (Berg 1990).

Considering communities of practice

The term ‘community’ is a difficult concept to explain in one accepted, quantifiable definition (Brook & Oliver 2005). Within the literature there are a range of terms that incorporate the notion of community and its relationship to learning and development, for example learning communities (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones 2003), community of scholars (Goodman 1962), communities of practice (Wenger 1998a), just to identify a few. The challenge is that communities do not exist as a system that has definable boundaries from other human interactions. The reality of communities is that they are complex and often involve the interaction of several groups. A community of practice is not an isolated body, but is often composed of members, who themselves are members of many other communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998a). Communities have been demonstrated to have at their core, values of trust, a spirit of

unity, mutual benefit to actors and artefacts of interactions (Brook 2004; Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman 1986; Chavis & McMillan 1986; Chipuer & Pretty 1999). A distinction can be drawn between a community and a work-group or team, though, for the scope of this paper, it will suffice to assert that a community is less formally structured than a team. In contrast to a team, a community has a fluidity of purpose with constant redefining of why it exists and what it is achieving and more distributed leadership. (Cox 2005; Lave & Wenger 1991; Mansour-Cole 2001; Wenger 1998a; Zarraga-Oberty & De Saa-Perez 2006). This definition was applied to the experience of community in this setting.

There should exist mechanisms by which one can evolve communities. McMillan (1996) argues that for a community to succeed the members of the community must share a security to speak the truth where truth is defined as the personal realities that shape who we are, including our failings. The truths of a community evolve and change over time as the members of the group become more comfortable and, through risk taking, begin to develop trust, which grows to an understanding of the shared benefits of contributing to the group and shared values. However, McMillan (1996) urges that this can lead to “a spark and a flame” in the development of a sense of community, and that this flame will never become a fire unless there exists in the community an authority structure that can sustain the fire; an argument also supported by Wenger, et al. (2002). Wenger (1998b) identifies that a community will evolve through a series of five stages, see Figure 1. Such phases were evident in the evolution and growth of the community discussed in this paper.

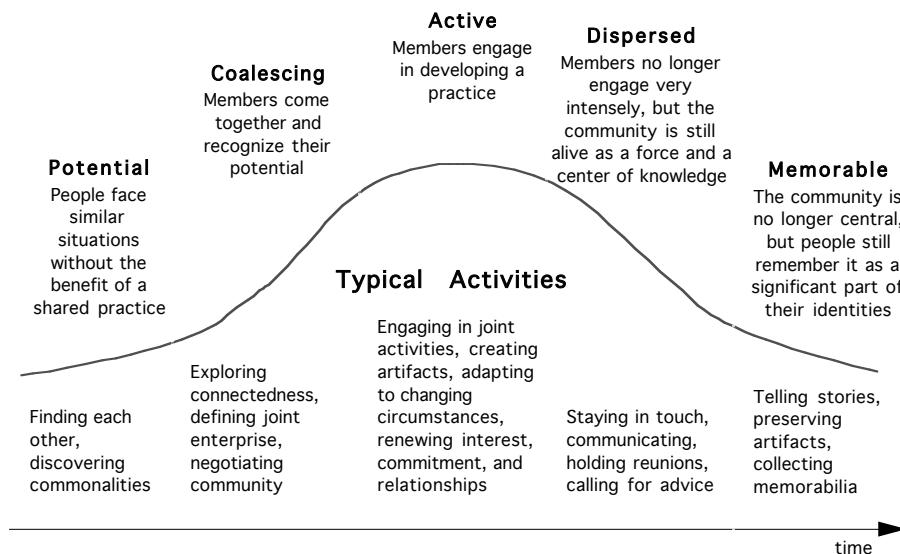


Figure 1: Stages of Development (Wenger, 1998b)

The concept of a community of practice builds on a pedagogical tradition of viewing learning as a socially mediated activity (H. Daniels 2001; Vygotsky 1978). Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98) assert that a community of practice is “a set of relations among

persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.” This definition emphasises a community of practice being a source of meaning making, both individually and socially, and having a pivotal role in the social structure defining possibilities for learning (Lave & Wenger 1991). Brown and Duguid (1991) suggest that learning within a community of practice should be viewed as the bridge over the gap between working and innovating, and that “through their constant adapting to changing membership and changing circumstances, evolving communities-of-practice are significant sites of innovating” (p.2). Lave and Wenger (1991) recognised learning as contextually dependent, social and embedded in particular practice, that, therefore, learning should be viewed as an “integral aspect of social practice” (Huzzard 2004, p.351) and that learning is, in and of itself, a social process. Such a view must account for the power dynamics of any social situation which comes to bear on the learning and formation of identity amongst the actors in the community (Ares 2007; Contu & Willmott 2003; H. Daniels 2001).

There is value in the model of communities of practice as points of development. Knowledge resides within each organisation, both explicitly and implicitly. The community of practice model allows for the exploration of the implicit knowledge. Communities of practice provide a framework for the socialisation of knowledge sharing and therefore improved organisational outcomes (C. Daniels, Grove, & Mundt 2006). A community of practice leads participants towards the greater attainment of social capital (Bourdieu 1977), connections, relationships and the expression of a common understanding and context of problems (Wenger et al., 2002), as evident in Figure 2.

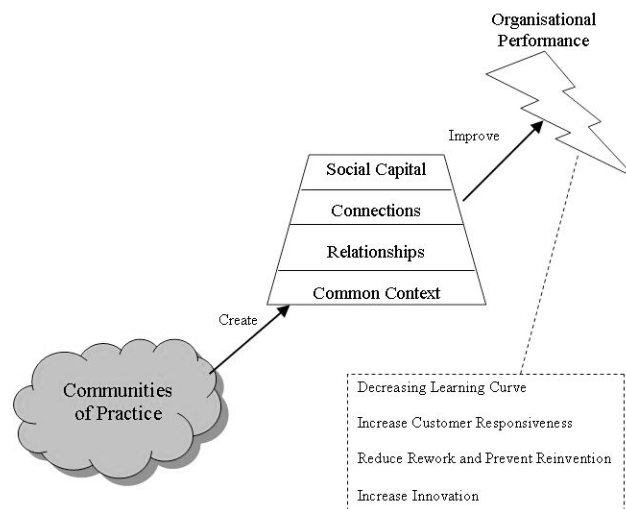


Figure 2: Communities of Practice and organisational success (Daniels, et al. 2006)

The School of Policing Studies

In late 2006 a range of tensions, including, but not exclusive to, changed working conditions, increased demands on research output and massive increases in student numbers. During a Teaching Development Committee questions were raised about how we could improve student satisfaction ratings. What ensued was an impassioned debate

about the role, function and identity of us as members of the broad concept of a university and how we related to the policing world that we worked in. What occurred was consistent with Schein's (2004) notion of unfreezing, where a motivation to change forms when there is enough disconcerting data to cause serious discomfort; anxiety about one's capacity to attain important goals or adhere to important values; and enough psychological safety to see a possibility of solving the problem and learning something new. The issue centred upon the question of how we identified ourselves as academics.

Within the School of Policing Studies, individuals are pulled between their *distinctive* identity in the profession of policing, or the academic field from which they come (e.g. criminology, education, sociology, philosophy and law), and their emerging *professional* identity as academics *embedded* in an environment where issues of academic identity are still being worked out (Kogan 2000). It was the need to address this question of identities that conceptualised here as an emergent community of practice. Wenger (1998, p.145) argues that "issues of identity are an integral aspect of a social theory of learning and are thus inseparable from the issues of practice, community, and meaning." As a person comes to membership of a community they negotiate their position and identity within the community as well as shaping the community's identity through their interactions. As Hogg (2003) argues the communities we belong to influence how others see us, "they are the lens through which people view us" (p.462) but also they influence how we view ourselves.

Emerging from the discussion was the desire to move forward and create a space – physical, temporal and timely – for conversation and sharing of ideas and information, ultimately with the goal of allowing staff of the university to develop a shared identity within the world of policing to consider how this relates to their practices in teaching, learning and research. It was decided to host a session each week with support from the Head of School to create a 2 hour window within the timetable in which all staff were able to come together free of other work pressures. In developing the sessions we needed to draw on a model which would allow for everybody's input and begin to explore the myriad of personal perceptions and difficulties in an unthreatening way. Table 1 captures three organisational structures, focused on teaching and learning, which could be explored to achieve these goals. Highlighted is our focus, asserting our belief in a collegial perspective of development, with an ongoing design and implementation process. Through such a focus we were able to ensure that the sessions were not just places of free-form discussion, but a clear purpose for improvement was at the forefront of thinking.

Table 1: Approaches to improving the quality of learning and teaching in relation to three organisational ideals (Layton et al., In Press)

Aspect	Bureaucratic	Professional	Entrepreneurial
Interpretation of quality	Management; administration; regulatory requirements; national policies	Academic freedom and disciplinary standards	Market change & more dynamic environments
Implementation processes	Through organisational hierarchy	Different knowledge/expertise structures	Customers & stakeholders
Evaluation processes	Technocratic, rule/task oriented	Peer review and self-as-expert	Review relevance to customers
Institutional effects	Administrative systems, routines, reports, documentation and rules	New teaching & learning initiatives	Student satisfaction surveys
		Curriculum change (pedagogies and/or content)	Benchmarking, etc.
		Changes in pedagogies	

To ensure the early success of the community it was imperative to maintain a core of motivated and interested people with support from management for the work of the community. During the initial stages of evolution the leadership was vested in those who already had leading roles in the areas of research and teaching development. Space was created in the timetable to permit staff to attend. There was, though, an early push to hold staff who failed to attend to account for their use of time. Such a push emerged from management who felt a need to justify changes to timetables by accounting for hours in development. There, therefore, existed a need to educate decision makers and leaders in the School about the underlying principles of communities of practice and to move their thinking away from the ‘traditional’, formalised view of development. The sessions were eventually viewed as the seeding of relationships which would evolve to a broader community amongst all members of the School.

The first of the sessions involved a discussion about a question we hoped epitomised the problems we faced: ‘What is the identity and role of an academic?’ The focus of such a session was to gather ideas and establish common ground. An interesting view expressed during this first session was that many of the practitioner academics saw themselves as occupying some sort of middle-ground between those that they saw as ‘real academics’ and the police personnel who teach on the recruit course. This added an additional layer of complexity to our previous understanding of our situation, and raised the conceptual puzzle of being an academic staff member in a university school, but not seeing oneself as a ‘real academic’. More than any other issue discussed, this one symbolised the degree of difficulty that would be involved in developing the sessions as ones in which we all were members.

After the first session, we moved onto discussions about the directions of scholarship and research we might pursue as products of our academic identity. Such a discussion aligns with the assertions of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p.71) that “a community is driven by the value members get from it, so people need to see how their passion will translate into something useful”. In fact, some members found this process particularly frustrating, with comments often made about introducing more structure, direction and focus to the sessions. There was frustration with the cyclical nature of discussions that often came back to exploring fundamental questions of purpose for the group. The desire for more formal development programs was most often expressed from practitioner academics, from which it could be argued that their experience of training and development in practice had previously only occurred in highly structured settings. Nonetheless, what emerged from these discussions was increased understanding of what it means for each of us to be an academic, greater acknowledgement of the similarities and differences in these understandings, and more appreciation of what each of us might be able to offer the others – in other words, our directions were aligning, and leadership in various areas was emerging. Subsequent sessions saw various members begin to take leadership roles through the presentation of areas of interest for their and others’ development. For example, one member presented on their exploration of mentoring and how this could be developed within the school, whilst another presented on their research into the history of police education shaping discussion about where we were heading. Presentations were supplemented with discussions and workshops with no definite procedure for the weekly meetings being put in place.

From the discussions of the community, though, grew a heightened awareness of our academic identity and the need to capture this and share it with our policing partners. As the community grew in confidence artefacts began to emerge. Most notably the sessions led directly to a monthly newsletter that drew on the relationship between teaching and research, promoting achievement in each. This provided a forum for the sharing of individual expertise through biographies of staff, a much desired outcome of the initial meetings where discussion highlighted the lack of sharing amongst staff. The community members also contributed through the sharing of their experiences in both formal and informal ways with the regular meeting usually prompted by a formal presentation of a staff member of their recent research and/or teaching experiences and then discussion of how that can reflect the learning needs of the community members. This format came as a response to the earlier expressed desires of members for more formal training and development and the complexity of the areas discussed. It was agreed that it was very difficult for a person to develop in research skills merely through attending a workshop and that the more productive outcome was to establish networks of people that could provide ongoing support and development. The community also sought to gain contributions from outside experts so as to enhance the collective knowledge of the community and provide fresh ideas and points of discussion.

The potential for a divided School, caused by a lack of understanding of each others’ backgrounds, concerns, strengths and limitations, is being broken down. It will be interesting whether the community continues to exist now that two of the pivotal drivers of the community, and the sessions, have left. The community is moving into a dispersed stage (Wenger 1998b) where the strength of relationships and interests becomes tested.

Although there has not yet been a formal, comprehensive review of the impact of the sessions there are noticeable changes within the school that are coming directly from these engagements. These include an increase in research activity, the recognition and support of innovative and cutting-edge approaches to teaching, and a greater ability amongst staff to communicate about their academic, as well as their policing, 'war-stories'. The energy of the community is starting to spread and engage with policing partners enhancing the overall delivery of the program. Smaller communities are emerging amongst groups of staff, for example those with a focus on distance education or investigations, that are building on similar structures to encourage development in staff research profiles and learning material development.

Conclusion

Whilst navigating the complexities of university partnerships with industry can prove problematic, the experience of this case suggests that they present an inherent disequilibrium opening up spaces for action and creating fires for development. The sessions have provided a platform for communication and risk taking, both of which are identified as being fundamental to the successful development of a community focused on developing professionals (Campbell & Uys 2007). Emerging shared meanings, as well as an enhanced level of trust amongst staff support the wider network of collegiality across the School. The changes that took place in the sessions extended beyond the sessions themselves with changes in, and discussions around, teaching and learning practice and research across the School. The sessions provided the spawn for the evolution of a broader community in which participants in the School actively engaged in discussions of teaching and research. The creation of a safe space for unhindered discussion and the devolution of leadership were imperative to the evolution of the community and the building of networks. The community needed to have a space in time (the 2 hours per week), thinking (free from other academic requirements) and physically (removed from normal meeting areas) that saw the community form its own identity and purpose. Creation of space and ensuring the fire burns brightly are imperatives to the successful evolution of a community of practice.

Acknowledgments

This paper draws on work I undertook with two former colleagues, Dr Anna Corbo Crehan and Dr Catherine Layton. I am grateful for their contributions both to the ideas that this paper is built upon, but also for their support and fellowship during the emergence of this community.

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