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Fit for purpose: Designing a faculty-based community of (teaching) practice.

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Based essentially on a social constructivist understanding of situated learning, the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (CoPs) has been taken up enthusiastically in the corporate sector as a model for managing organisational knowledge. However, the formulaic, top-down approaches associated with this trend are particularly inappropriate in a higher education context, where the complexities of the organisational environment and the inextricable link between disciplinary knowledge and identity call for a more critical approach. We engage here with current thinking about CoPs in higher education in the light of our participation in an embryonic faculty-based community of (teaching) practice. We take the view, with Wenger, that while any learning, including learning to teach (better) cannot be designed, or predicted in advance, it can, and should be designed *for*. Here, we outline four considerations – language/meaning, identity, access/inclusion, and agency – that have both informed the design of our CoP, and proved crucial to its development.

Keywords: Communities of practice, higher education, academic development

Introduction

The concept, ‘community of practice’ (CoP) has been taken up enthusiastically in the corporate sector as a strategic approach to knowledge management, yet it has failed to gain much traction in universities (McDonald & Star 2006). Some attribute CoPs’ patchy history in the higher education sector to the benign conceptualisations of ‘community’ and the formulaic approaches to implementation found in much management literature (e.g., Barton & Tustig 2005; Lea 2005). Certainly, such approaches are particularly inappropriate in the context of higher education, where the complexities of the organisational environment and the inextricable link between knowledge and identity call for a more critical approach. At stake here are issues of power and language: What do we mean by community? Whose needs define the agenda of the CoP? Who benefits from CoP membership? Who has access to it? Who doesn’t?

We engage with these questions here, informed by both the current CoPs literature and our participation in a faculty-based community of teaching practice. We argue, with Wenger (1998) that while learning (to teach) cannot be designed, or predicted in advance,

it does need to be designed *for*. Within the organisational environment of the modern university, this design needs to account for both the complexity of power relationships and the ever-increasing workloads of academics. After briefly defining key CoP concepts, we consider the limitations and possibilities of CoP thinking for the design of workplace learning within the academy generally, and specifically, in our faculty. We outline four considerations – language/meaning, identity, access/inclusion, and agency – that have both informed the design of our CoP, and proved crucial to its development.

What are ‘communities of practice’?

Essentially, ‘communities of practice’ are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better together. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) coined the term after observing the impact social networks had on apprenticeship training in traditional and industrialized societies. They found that these apprentices learned more on the job, from their slightly more advanced peers than from their formal training programs. Based on these observations, Lave and Wenger articulated a conceptualization of learning at odds with the then dominant paradigm; in their view, meaning is shared, contested, negotiated and developed by learners in social contexts. Learning and being are inextricably linked: “learning involves the construction of identities ... identity, knowing and social membership entail one another” (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.53).

Ultimately, Lave and Wenger concluded that CoPs can be found and developed everywhere. Importantly, they argue, CoPs differ from other social groups in three ways. They are based on a shared interest, or ‘domain’, such as teaching; they focus on practice, with members developing a shared repertoire of practices by discussing recurring problems, providing resources, etc.; and they are consciously nurtured by their members, because they are seen to support their learning.

This third factor, regarding relationships, raises a key question for CoP scholars and practitioners: how do communities facilitate the participation of new members? Lave and Wenger’s (1991) idea of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (LPP) refers to the process of integration into a CoP as a graduated re-negotiation of relationships between novices and ‘old timers’. Again drawing on their observations of apprentices, they proposed that ‘newcomers’ move from peripheral, prescribed forms of participation towards full participation at the ‘core’ of the community as competence increases. As Lave and Wenger acknowledge (1991), LPP can be an empowering or disempowering experience, depending on the way power is exercised within the community. Nevertheless, the process of joining workplace communities remains underdeveloped in Lave and Wenger’s 1991 publication, and later, in Wenger’s work (see Fuller et al, 2005). Indeed, attempts to apply the concept, LLP to contemporary workplaces in advanced industrial societies (Fuller et al, 2005) underscore a number of theoretical tensions, which come to the fore when we consider the place of CoPs in higher education.

Communities of practice in universities: limitations and possibilities

With the development of the 'enterprise university' (Marginson 2000), Australian academics are experiencing increasing occupational stress (Gillespie et al, 2001, p.53). Rapid growth, coupled with a reduction of public funding has prompted significant restructuring, a reduction of permanent positions, increasing casualisation, 'massification' and diversification of student enrolments. Academics are expected to increase their research output while demonstrating teaching expertise in a wide range of areas, requiring skills many feel they don't have: for example, online and blended teaching, inclusive teaching, large scale lecturing, internationalisation and transnational teaching, and embedding graduate attributes.

Worryingly, many programs designed to help academics meet these challenges have had minimal effects. For example, teaching award schemes, which highlight individual excellence have not impacted on the majority of academic staff (Bryant et al, 1999). More concerning still is the marginal impact centrally-provided resources, workshops, or formal teaching programs (Boud & Middleton, 2003; Viskovic, 2006) make on disciplinary 'teaching and learning regimes' (TLRs). This term, coined by Trowler and Cooper (2002) refers to the way disciplinary understandings of learning and teaching are internalised over time and become inextricably linked to academic identity. Trowler and Cooper (2002) distinguish between these 'unique mini cultures' and communities of practice. The former can both secure a level of teaching quality within a discipline, and block new perspectives and marginalize innovators, while CoPs can be designed to counter the noxious effects of TLRs, without detracting from their value (see also Roxa 2005).

In spite of their promise however, successful CoPs are thin on the ground in universities (McDonald & Star 2006). Those successful CoPs reported in the literature tend to consist of small, motivated groups of staff (e.g., Walker 2001; Warhurst 2006). Unlocking the potential for CoPs to support wider shifts in disciplinary pedagogy means grappling with the specificities of the workplace environment in higher education, particularly in relation to the material/industrial constraints. Harnessing the resources necessary to develop and sustain CoPs is a challenge in the 'enterprise university'. CoPs require money for administrative and technical support, particularly if web-enabled communication and resources are involved. They also require time from academics who are already struggling with increasing teaching workloads, within a culture (they feel) devalues this aspect of their role. Face to face (F2F) events also require a place to meet, but traditional meeting places on many campuses have been sacrificed to accommodate increasing student numbers, and in any case, many faculties now operate as multi-campus entities. Gaining the material support necessary to develop CoPs therefore means convincing management of their high value; this challenge can be difficult to surmount, as accounts of funding application knock-backs illustrate (e.g., Mc Donald & Star 2006).

Other challenges arise as a result of academic values and work practices. Academics may well be suspicious of the concept of 'community'. Academic life is a "curious and conflicted thing": the ideal of collegiality develops paradoxically in a culture "infamous for fragmentation, isolation, and individualism" (Palmer in Cox 2006, p.94). For many,

teaching, in particular, means “pedagogical solitude” (Shulman 1993 p.6). Moreover, the “current rules of the ‘academic game’” can function to exclude some groups, such as women, more than others from the collegiality (Churchman 2005, p.15). So can employment conditions, particularly for sessional staff. High rates of casual employment, high staff turnover, and lack of institutional support position sessionals as permanent novices on the ‘tenuous periphery’ of the workforce (Kimber 2003). Without the funding available to attend meetings or staff development programs, sessionals are effectively cut off from legitimate participation in the cultural and organisational life of the faculty. Conversely, collegial teaching practice can also elude senior staff. With the diverse range of skills now demanded of all teaching staff, no one holds the monopoly on expertise. A senior academic may have considerable expertise in teaching large classes but feel under-confident in online environments, whereas a sessional tutor may be more experienced in this area. Yet, the traditional hierarchies within faculties often prevent the development of shared repertoires of knowledge between junior and senior staff.

In this context, Lave and Wenger’s commonly evoked development trajectory from the periphery to the core raises several questions. What happens when senior staff are imported from elsewhere (see also Fuller et al, 2005) – a common occurrence in universities, given our highly mobile workforce and increasingly fluid paths to promotion within academe? Do these experienced new comers skip the peripheral stage, and head straight for the core? Moreover, we can’t assume that any experienced staff have the motivation or the time to function as (teaching) mentors, when current reward systems offer no incentive to do so (Viskovic 2006). Neither can we assume that tutors can, or want to view their position as an ‘apprenticeship’ into academia – in many vocationally-oriented faculties, tutors tend to be mature and established professionals. Although Lave and Wenger acknowledge that “everyone’s participation is legitimately peripheral in some respect” (1991, p.117), the linear trajectory implied in much CoP thinking paradoxically “shares one characteristic with the standard paradigm ... they set out to oppose” – the top down teacher-centred model (Fuller et al, 2005, p.52).

Taking these concerns into account, we have begun to develop a teaching community of practice (T-CoP) that is based on notions of participation as reciprocity and exchange. In the following case study, we outline four key concerns that arose during the planning stages of this venture, as we strove to develop a *praxis* in our particular context; these concerns revolved around the meaning of ‘community’ and ‘practice’, identity and boundaries, access and inclusion, and finally, agency.

Case study

Our nascent T-CoP is situated within a business faculty in an Australian university, hereafter named the ‘School’. Like many business schools in Australia, ours has only become one recently through a painful process of re-structuring, which saw disparate and autonomous departments amalgamated into one organisational entity. The T-CoP began as a project in this context. Proposed by the members of the School’s learning and teaching development staff, and supported initially by an internal Grant, the T-CoP aims to provide a safe, authentic learning environment, in which *all* School academics can learn to teach better by sharing and developing their teaching practices. Although

inspired by other CoPs in higher education, ours is to be characterised by the specific challenges of teaching within the School; the proactive inclusion of sessional staff; and by the provision of multiple ‘pathways’ into the community – both face to face and virtual.

In the planning stage, a core group made up of academics from each of the School’s departments and a member of the School’s Learning and Teaching unit gave considerable attention to the design of the T-CoP. As any design decisions were made by consensus within this core group, the ‘we’ in the remainder of this case study refers to this whole group.

1. Language – the meaning of ‘community’ and ‘practice’

The central questions for us here were: What do we mean by a CoP? What do we want it to do? As well as feeling ambivalent about the word ‘community’, many academics in the School were initially alienated by the concept of ‘practice’ – perhaps, not surprisingly, within a culture which values ‘theory’ over ‘practice’. Naming ourselves, our relationships and our work in terminology that had resonance with our colleagues was therefore a crucial first step. Through discussions held over a three month period, School academics identified their core values as ‘self-reflection’, a ‘passion for teaching practice’, and interestingly, ‘social connections’ coupled with ‘academic autonomy’. Although not wedded to any particular terminology, we eventually decided on ‘Teaching Community of Practice (T-CoP)’, because it was seen to encapsulate these values.

2. Identity/ boundaries

The central questions here were: Who can join our T-CoP? Who will benefit from it?

We wanted boundaries that were distinctive *and* permeable, boundaries that would enable us to develop a shared practice *within* the faculty, but also support strong external connections. Specifically, we had to reconcile the desire for strong(er) links with multiple stakeholders, including business and professional bodies, government, student groups, with the desire to create a confidential space for School academics. Developing a virtual space further complicated the issue; the potential to promote a greater sense of identity and belonging (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2004) weighed against the potential loss of confidentiality within the community. Our decision was to trial dual memberships: all School teaching staff (permanent, contract & sessional) can join the T-CoP by logging in the community website and agreeing to a simple ‘confidentiality clause’, while external stakeholders can attend events and gain limited access to the website.

With agreement on external boundaries established, attention turned to the question of internal boundaries. Initially, a division arose between those who wanted a cross-disciplinary T-CoP in the School, and those who struggled to imagine this *in our context*, where strong ‘tribal’ identities are rooted in the once autonomous discipline-based ‘silos’. In a context of differential power relationships between disciplines (Leug 2000), and intense feelings about disciplinary pedagogies, we decided that, contra Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p.58-9), the creation of private spaces within the web site for departmental or other interest groups would be counter-productive.

3. Access

The central question for us here was: How can we develop and sustain an inclusive CoP in our faculty? Our overriding concern was to construct ‘a learning architecture’ which would invite and support ‘rich forms of learning’ (Cousin & Deepwell 2005, p.63), while accommodating the varied, and varying needs and commitments of academics at any given pressure point in the semester. We imagined, as a central feature, a range of ‘pathways’ – both physical and virtual – which would give academics the opportunity to engage with the community in a way that would meet their needs, their preferred styles of engagement, and their other commitments, at any particular time.

Physical pathways currently include face to face (F2F) connections via periodic discussions, debates and other events, but there are plans to develop publishing syndicates, and other smaller peer support networks. Virtual pathways are provided by the T-CoP website, which the core group designed in collaboration with the university’s technical team to include member personal staff pages, discussions, resource sharing, and feedback.

Following Wenger et al (2002), we also envisaged three ways of engaging along these pathways, via a core group space, an active space, and a peripheral space. Movement between these spaces was a key concern – especially to the core group members who need to know that their commitment would not be interminable! Indeed, one of the key functions of the core group is to recruit their replacements. Hence, in architectural terms, we needed to design and build ‘gateways’ or ‘portals’ to support ‘traffic flow’, and ‘benches’ at the edges of each space to encourage loitering. How these spaces, gateways and bench-seats are designed to operate in our T-CoP is outlined below.

Core group

The first T-CoP facilitator established a core group by inviting the participation of faculty academics with a reputation for commitment, innovation, and leadership – from senior academics to head tutors. The function of the core group during the planning stage was to guide community development, identify the first topics to be addressed by the community, and start to develop the community’s ‘output’, beginning with the design of the website itself. The facilitator spoke with individual staff about the nature of core group participation, the potential workload issues, and the benefits of establishing a T-CoP in the faculty. Finally, she sent a briefing paper to all potential core group members. As a result, sixteen teaching staff, coming from all departments within the School, and ranging in seniority and gender agreed to join the core group.

We’ve found, as others have (e.g., Stuckey & Smith 2004) that the role of the facilitator is crucial to maintaining commitment. For us, this means contacting members of the core group between meetings, via informal, private, “back channels” (Wenger et al, 2002). This is particularly important in an environment where stressed, time-poor academics (Gillespie et al, 2001) are unlikely to feel they have time to develop and sustain communities of practice (McDonald & Star 2006). However, *who* the facilitator is, is just as important as what she does. Perhaps not surprisingly, academic developers tend to assume this role (e.g., Warhurst 2006). The development of a community of practice requires time and some specialized knowledge of the concept - most discipline-based

academics have neither. Yet, the *legitimacy* of one's participation is central to CoP thinking (Carden 2005). Can an academic developer ever escape her 'outsider' status, and if not, what impact this has on a community of practice? In our case, explicit discussion within the core group ended in the decision to instate the in-faculty learning developer in the position during the first, developmental year then rotate annually between other members of the core group. The question of legitimacy has not arisen to the same extent in relation to the second essential role within the core group - the web administrator. As the primary source for content generation, communication facilitation, promotions and basic functional management, this on-going, part-time position was filled by an experienced School sessional member who had already joined the core group.

Active space

This we imagine to be an in-between space, a place to rehearse entry to the core group, provide an exit from/alternative to core group commitment, or simply invite contributions based on expertise. Importantly, this space needs to support distributed forms of leadership.

Peripheral/milling spaces

Knowing that virtual and physical connections are equally important at the community's edges (Dubé, Bourhis & Jacob 2006), we designed the T-CoP website to facilitate traffic to, and from the physical community. For example, each topic explored at an event will be first promoted, and later developed on the T-CoP site, via resources, blogs, feedback, and potentially as an extension activity, at another F2F event.

4. Agency

The key question here was: What relationship do we want to develop between our CoP and management? Studies based on knowledge workers in non-university contexts (e.g., Dubé, et al, 2004) have found that while active support from management is important, traditional hierarchical structures can be counter-productive (also see Neus 2001). In our case, we wanted to ensure the necessary support from management without forfeiting the capacity of the T-CoP to set our own agenda. Importantly, we hoped the T-CoP would help combat the growing sense of alienation many academics experience in the modern university (Churchman 2005), by strengthening two-way communication channels between School academics, the School T&L Committee, and the School and university Executive. Distinguishing the role of 'champions' from the role of 'sponsors' (Wenger 1998) helps us to articulate our desired relationship to management; i.e., 'champions' being active core faculty academics, while 'sponsors' hold executive positions providing funding, support and legitimacy, without setting the agenda. Secure funding beyond the life of the initial Grant has been achieved through the sponsorship of the School Executive, particularly the Dean (Teaching and Learning). Most importantly, this includes ongoing funding for the web administrator and recognition in the form of workload reduction for the rotating T-CoP facilitators.

Where to from here?

After eight months of planning, the T-CoP was launched last semester with a well-attended lunch time debate. Now entering its second semester, the T-CoP has established

a presence in the School, via four well-attended, interactive events and the website. The core group as a whole meets twice a semester, with smaller working parties meeting more regularly. Our efforts to develop 'portals' to facilitate movement to and from active engagement, and 'benches' to encourage loitering appear to be paying off. For example, the core group assumed responsibility for planning the launch of the T-CoP, but it was other academics who took leading roles on the day, and returned to their desks to engage with the T-CoP website. We are also finding that some initially peripheral members are moving towards active engagement, either virtually, by using the site to disseminate their own teaching and learning resources and/or via F2F events. For instance, a lecturer who loitered at the periphery until the launch has since 'donated' resources for the site and initiated collaboration with one of the core group members on a workshop for School staff.

Not surprisingly, two of the most contested issues in the planning stage – community boundaries and our relationship to management – continue to be a source of tension. The T-COP website provides a case in point: in planning the T-CoP launch, the core group identified opportunities to develop flexibility, responsiveness and user-friendliness for T-CoP members and stakeholders, yet University management protocols made implementation difficult. Unfortunately, an unforeseen problem has impacted on our ability to address these issues: the original facilitator, a School-based academic developer, has left the University. Although the intention of the School Executive is to recognize the work of T-CoP facilitation within each facilitator's workload allocation, the current co-facilitators – as disciplinary academics aligned to departments within the School – have struggled to devote sufficient time to the role. There are a number of possible reasons for this, two of which relate to the wider context: increasingly high teaching loads, and the lack of tangible rewards for CoP activities. Another consideration relates to recent structural changes within the School, namely mixed messages from departmental heads (as workload managers) and the School Executive. The T-CoP recognizes the need to address this issue as a matter of priority.

Continuing Executive sponsorship will depend on the T-CoP establishing and meeting relevant, tangible objectives, which nevertheless evolve with the community. An inflexible approach to goal-setting would be counter-productive; we need to "factor in ...the surprises, divergence and conviviality" (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005, p.60) necessary for the development of a shared repertoire of practice. Having met our original goal, to design and launch a community of practice fit for our purpose, we used our first period of reflection, over the summer of 2007-8 to establish new objectives in relation to our most pressing needs. Objectives for 2008 are: to continually improve access points into the community (F2F and Virtual); foster relationships between senior and junior staff and between departments within the School; increase the activity of members in the community; co-host events with other University CoPs; develop the website to better reflect the 'flow' of academics daily/semester routine; and enhance the user-friendliness and interactivity of the site. Periodic evaluations each summer, based on qualitative and quantitative data, will enable the core group to measure outcomes against our identified objectives, as well as enable collaborative open-ended, interpretive research.

Conclusion

At this early stage, we can say that the concept, communities of practice, has enabled us to imagine, design and begin to build a viable, inclusive and enriching teaching community in our School. We have found that designing for learning (to teach) in the School means listening and creatively responding to concerns about the meaning of 'community' and 'practice', identity, access and agency. How the T-CoP evolves from here will depend on how we deal with the 'uncertainty [that arises] between design and its realization in practice' (Wenger 1998, p.233).

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