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Behind closed doors: The effects of change practices on the members of an allied health community of practice

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A community of practice is a group of “people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for joint enterprise” (Wenger 2000, p.139). They differ from other organisational functional units or teams as it is the shared meaning and interests of its members that keep it together rather than merely set tasks (Wenger 1998a). Communities of practice can emerge around new events, changes or organisational shifts, such as the implementation of new teaching methods, but institutional change can also create situations in which communities lose their relevance, rendering their practice extraneous and leading to disestablishment. This paper presents the results of a research project investigating a curriculum development team of an allied health school at an Australian university. The team emerged as a community of practice through the instigation of new teaching methods and subsequently came to an end in response to directives to change their teaching practice. The data were collected through informal, semi-structured interviews that provide insights into the ways in which the members constructed their practices within the community and the ways this was integral to their workplace identities. The paper describes the collaborative, collegial environment in which the community of practice emerged. It reports on the ways in which the membership of this community provided members with a recognised and rewarded organisational identity. The authors contrast the members’ responses to a subsequent organisational shift in teaching practices and the resultant devaluing and disestablishment of the community. The authors conclude that the ways in which change is implemented in tertiary institutions influence the ways in which academic staff engage with their work.

Keywords: communities of practice, universities, academic work

Introduction

Universities are traditionally seen as sites of communal and collegial learning, rendering them particularly relevant to the emergence of communities of practice. Communities of practice are groups of people who informally share, develop and diffuse learning, knowledge and practice. Within these communities which are defined by their practice, “explicit and implicit knowledges are negotiated, that is, meaning is constructed through what the community actually does” (Merriam, Courtenay & Baumgartner 2003, p.172). Communities of practice are defined as “groups of people who share a concern, set of

problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002 p. 4). They differ from other organisational functional units or teams as it is the shared meaning and interests of its members that keep it together rather than merely set tasks (Wenger 1998a). Members of these communities find value in engaging with each other as they take charge of their practice and grow (Wenger 1999). This value is not limited to members alone as organisations, in turn, can benefit from the synergies developed within the community.

Communities of practice can emerge around new events, changes or organisational shifts, such as the implementation of new teaching methods, but institutional change can also create situations in which communities lose their relevance, rendering their practice extraneous and leading to disestablishment. This paper presents the results of a research project investigating how one community of practice, the curriculum development team of an allied health school at an Australian university, emerged through the instigation of new teaching methods and their subsequent demise in response to directives to change their teaching practice. This community of practice emerged from the implementation of a fully integrated problem-based learning (PBL) curriculum. Members collaborated on the PBL teaching methodology for a period of ten years with considerable success - recognised within the profession, and by students, and as recipients of a national teaching excellence award. The members were committed to the PBL teaching and learning philosophy and valued the recognition and its contribution to their pedagogical identity (King 2007). A subsequent review of the program led to a management decision to abandon the commitment to the small group process integral to PBL. In doing so, the members’ past recognition and reward, as well as the commitment of time and intellectual energy, were devalued. This paper describes the responses of members of this community of practice who, in light of the organisational changes, perceived that their knowledge was no longer being valued by the organisation.

The authors first provide a brief overview of current academic practice, and then present the background of the study, including the methods employed to gather data and some history of the community of practice and broader context. They provide some insights into the ways in which the members constructed their practices within the community and the ways this was integral to their workplace identities. The following discussion focusses on their responses to an organisational shift in teaching practices and the resultant devaluing and disestablishment of the community. Included in this discussion is a comparison of the change processes evident in both the emergence and demise of the community. The paper then draws some conclusions on ways in which change is implemented in higher education institutions.

Shifting academic practice

Within the community of practice theory, Wenger (1998b) posits that there is a profound connection between our identity and practice. “Developing a practice requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another and thus acknowledge each other as participants. As a consequence, practice entails the negotiation of ways of being a person in that context” (1998a, p.149). Changes to the academic context are marked. Researchers studying universities are “struck by the extent

of the change occurring in Australian universities” (Marginson 2000, p.6). These changes have resulted in situations in which academic staff have endured the devaluing of aspects of their work and undermining of their conditions for some time and it is no surprise that occupational stress among academics is “alarmingly widespread and increasing” (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua & Stough 2001, p.53).

Researchers suggest that high level of altruism evident in all professionals is a particular characteristic of academic staff (Moses 1992, 1995; Moses & Ramsden 1992; McInnis 1996; Friedson 1994 in Mitrano 1997). Moreover, academic staff are traditionally seen to be “professionals with a difference”, who are characterised by an “exceptional preoccupation and satisfaction with the intrinsic rewards of the work itself” (Evatt Report 1994, p.29), and by a relatively self-regulated work organisation. Academic staff tend to be satisfied with the work of the academy itself rather than status or money. They like their work and want the security and autonomy that an academic career provides (McInnis 1996). Academic staff have “demonstrated that peripheral erosions to their work conditions can and have been accommodated, if not relished, as long as the intrinsic satisfactions remain” (Adams 1997, p.5).

Members of the community in this study found value and intrinsic satisfaction in sustaining their identities as facilitators of student learning within the paradigm of PBL. Their motivation and reward was to “develop or preserve a sense of themselves they can live with” (Wenger 1999) through their community of practice interactions. The self-actualisation, together with endorsement from their community members, enabled them to sustain energy for their work. However, with the new management directives, there was the real possibility that this support would no longer exist.

Method

This paper is based on one segment of a broader study of the construction of academic identities, particularly in relation to the ways in which academic staff engage with educational change (King 2007). The study followed a community of practice from its emergence through the development and implementation of a PBL curriculum, to its disestablishment ten years later. The members of this community were an allied health teaching team that self-initiated a change to a fully integrated problem based-learning curriculum in its undergraduate program. Membership of this community fluctuated over a ten year period with staffing changes but numbers remained consistent at approximately ten team members throughout all stages of the project. The original team had a strong sense of commitment to PBL as a teaching and learning philosophy and recognised that over time it had become an integral element of their pedagogical identity (King 2006). When newcomers joined the community in later years they were incorporated into the structures, rules, culture and practices of this community.

Thirty interviews were undertaken with members of the community of practice. This paper focuses on five of these interviews conducted with members of the original PBL curriculum development team after university directives rendered the community’s practices redundant. The discussion in this paper draws on the stories from those academic staff. The interviews were informal and semi-structured with non-directive, open-ended questioning to stimulate the participants’ thoughts. During the interview

process, the interviewees discussed their experiences of, and responses to, the directed change which impacted on their pedagogical practices and reflected on the ways in which they made sense of these changes to their teaching.

Collaborative change processes: The emergence of a collegial community of practice

The formation of this community of practice occurred specifically through the development and implementation of the PBL curriculum. During the four year curriculum development and implementation phases members of the community explored their connectedness, defined their joint enterprise and negotiated ways of interacting as a community (Wenger 1998b). In particular, the members found that the mutual engagement of shared enterprise effected through the curriculum implementation process was a constructive element in building their sense of community, especially the collegial nature of this activity:

The good thing about the PBL program that we're working towards is that we all do have a common interest in making it happen, and making it happen well, so even if it doesn't happen as well as we would like it to, at least it's one of those things that we are working on together, and it is a positive thing.
(Respondent 2)

Members of this community found that establishing an innovative teaching and learning methodology such as PBL, profoundly changed their pedagogical identity, values and beliefs. They commented on the altered relationships they experienced as a result of this process. This included improved bonds with students and the ways that their students had improved relationships with each other. The shared practice formed a basis for interactions with existing and new colleagues. One member stated:

The other staff converse more about teaching and there is a feeling of collegiality that may not have developed to the extent it has without the PBL as a common discussion point. In a traditional program you each tend to go off on your own and only converse with those directly involved with your course. With PBL you have a commonality with others even from different discipline areas as you have a method in common. (Respondent 1)

As mentioned previously, this community experienced considerable success with this teaching and learning methodology, and the interviews revealed the degree of commitment and engagement by members. A sense of professional identity and self-esteem was aligned with participants' understanding and beliefs about what constituted effective teaching. Nias (1996) confirms that educators' self-esteem is closely correlated to their acting consistently with the basic beliefs and values that lie at the heart of their personal identity. Hence, the members of this community found that taking on an innovative curriculum like PBL, was not simply a matter of learning new skills and new practice; it also necessitated a redefining of personal and pedagogical identity in practice.

Trowler and Cooper (2002) propose that academic staff's workplace identity is developed over time through teaching and learning regimes that are based on a "constellation of rules, assumptions, practices and relationships" (p.221). By redefining their role as

educators in the new PBL curriculum, members of the community changed many of these facets of their professional, and specifically, their pedagogical identity. They changed their relationship to the content and process of learning, and changed the rules of engagement with the students, which in turn led to new interactive social practices. As a result, through the development and implementation of the curriculum, new roles were defined and embedded and new discursive repertoires were developed that enabled members of the community to describe, and hence integrate their new experiences.

Community members noted how using this teaching and learning approach had altered their pedagogical practice and beliefs. As some commented, “It [PBL] makes you a better academic, it makes you, makes you think and makes you work better”, “we’re now guiding student learning”, and “I’m not teaching, they’re learning”. Over time members’ practice and identity became more fully integrated as the improved educational and professional outcomes for students, together with recognition from peers, continually reinforced the benefits of their new teaching practice.

Management directed change processes: The fracturing of a community of practice

In 2004, an institutional shift in teaching and learning focus, together with a restructuring of schools and the introduction of administrative and technological processes rendered some of the community’s practices logistically difficult. Whether these were the only reasons or not, a subsequent review of the program by management led to a raft of changes and the disestablishment of the PBL curriculum. The contrast between the satisfaction and success associated with their teaching experience and the management directive to disband the PBL curriculum, resulted in reactions of disbelief, dismay and cynicism from members of this community:

But I can’t see that there is a logical reason within the program itself for virtually disbanding it at this stage. That the reasons are all artificial unfortunately. And that’s really sad. Everybody has put so much effort into it, to making it sustainable. (Respondent 2)

I am not sure where the decision to take the path that was chosen came from but it is unfortunate as for me it has left a very nasty, and to my mind unnecessarily so, taste in my mouth. (Respondent 1)

Participants tried to make sense of the reasons as to why this change in teaching and learning approach had been proposed:

I can’t understand why, I personally can’t understand the reasons behind it. (Respondent 4)

I think there’s been a huge amount of benefit [of using PBL] and I can’t see that any of the arguments that have been put up for changing it actually hold water in reality. The economic reasons don’t hold water because the program was always self sufficient. And before we’ve always returned a surplus. So there is no concrete reason for disbanding it. (Respondent 2)

Interestingly, members' concerns with both the decision itself and the way it had been reached were not coupled with any sense that they could openly contest it and that logical debate was not part of this change process:

Particularly after we won the award. People were just saying like, "well it must be a good program because now it's been axed for something else". So you win the award and then it gets axed. Well that's good. (laughter) Not a very logical sequence of events. But anyway, I guess I'm coming to terms with the fact that that's what's going to happen. It doesn't seem logical to me, but it is going to happen. (Respondent 2)

The members' initial reactions when changes were first mooted did not diminish. Over time they saw the practices, which had previously been integral to their identity, rendered irrelevant. The new organisational structures consigned the PBL chapter to organisational history.

Much of the disappointment with the decision to stop the PBL program was related to the fact that it had been perceived to be an innovative curriculum that helped create a difference, one that set the program apart from its competitors, one that produced graduates that were effective in the profession:

We have moved from a position of uniqueness and difference back into an average and conforming program that is difficult to differentiate from any other program and in fact is a retrograde step to an old program that was removed for lots of good reasons at the time but is now resurfacing as a way forward. It is all very confusing. (Respondent 1)

Some members linked the management directive to the broader changes occurring in universities and the tendency towards homogenisation, discouraging diversity.

I mean we are a learning institution, why wouldn't you develop something new and innovative? Particularly if it is sustainable. Whether the hierarchy tell us it is or not, and go from there. But it's a real shame, you know, that the university hierarchy, and the government in particular, are really very much encouraging, if not enforcing, that everything has to look and be the same. It was nice to have something of a competitive edge. (Respondent 2)

They recognised the potential for this change to promote mediocrity, undermining the unique nature of their teaching practice. As another member commented: "Administration procedures and fitting in with the norm and average seems to be the order of the day at present" (Respondent 1).

The former success of this community of practice rendered its members disinclined to participate in the occupational and rhetorical communities which emerged as a result of the new directives as the proposed changes did not allow them to retain their valued workplace identity. Interview data show that members of the community believed that their work was not perceived as valuable by institutional management, even though it was the optimal teaching method for their discipline and provided them with recognised and valued institutional identities. They remained committed to PBL, even in the face of

criticism by management. This commitment to the curriculum appeared to be driven specifically by the need to reinforce and reproduce their identity.

The impact of PBL on members' sense of pedagogical identity was so profound that they could not see themselves disbanding this form of teaching practice altogether. Indeed, many were advocating its continued use, albeit in a modified form, in the new curriculum:

If I was teaching I'd still teach the technique through a holistic, problem based learning approach. Not necessarily with facilitator groups, the way we're doing now, but in a modified form. (Respondent 3)

I'll be sad if they water PBL right down. I probably will still try and make my lectures interactive though. It's very hard to go right back to traditional system. And I will still probably try and have, you know, interactive tutes and pracs and things like that. (Respondent 5)

We will be able to have elements of problem based learning and be confident about the use of it, even in isolation from one another. So that it won't be in complete context with the rest of the courses within the program but we can still use it [PBL]. So I'm going to retain it as much as possible. (Respondent 2)

The ongoing commitment to PBL, even in an organisationally unsanctioned form limited the acceptance and implementation of the proposed program changes.

Comparing change processes

The contrast between members' responses to the introduction and subsequent removal of PBL was evident in their comments. The change to develop PBL was a consultative, collaborative venture in which the expertise and experience of the lecturers was recognised and valued. They were provided with institutional support and resources, resulting in the emergence of a cohesive community. In comparison, the organisational mandates to abandon PBL devalued both individual staff and the effectiveness of the community of practice. The lack of consultation and collaboration in the second curriculum change process aroused considerable angst:

I guess in a nutshell I would describe the process we went through at the start, implementing the PBL program, it was a process, as a process of bringing staff together and forming ourselves as a core teaching group with common objectives. Whereas the process as I see it now, was so badly managed that it's just a process of disintegration within the staff ranks. (Respondent 2)

Staff described feeling “ostracised, not included and not valued” (Respondent 4) and claimed that they were familiar with change in the institution but that “it’s never been done like the way it’s done this time. Ever.” (Respondent 3). They contrasted the experience of the two change processes, commenting on the lack of ownership of the more recent change as they had been marginalised from the change process:

There is a feeling of exclusion from the process in this change rather than inclusion which was one of the features I feel of the last change.
(Respondent 1)

This contrast of the inclusivity and exclusivity of the two change processes was prevalent in the interviews. The sense of loss related not only to the removal of PBL, but the removal of respect for their expertise in the curriculum area. The community members would now lose the status which they had earned through the successful implementation of the program and their exclusion from the decision making processes rendered them powerless. Members of this community of practice, who had recognised expertise, were relegated to subordinate roles in their own area. As one member commented:

It was almost like the decision had been made behind closed doors. And you were told off as such for doing something differently or not toeing the line, toeing the party line. (Respondent 2)

Other members described their experiences:

It’s so different, different now than it was in the beginning when we created the PBL curriculum. You know, we were very much involved and very much felt a part of it. And equal parts as well. You got that sense that what your opinion was, was as valuable as somebody else’s. It may not have always been agreed with but you could say what you wanted to say. But we’ve lost that process, they’ve basically gone, you know, behind closed doors to format all this. There’s no discussion, that’s it. This sort of, you know, the treatment you get. It’s becoming the norm now for everything. (Respondent 5)

Participants were cognisant of the devaluing of their role and its impact on the collegial community and collaborative culture previously established by the PBL curriculum change process. They felt a sense of loss of status and recognition, a loss of their pedagogical identity as established in their practice. Participants expressed their concerns that this process would have repercussions through the organisations as it reduced their morale, commitment and collegial way of working both with each other and with management.

You know, if you’re dissatisfied as an academic that’s going to rub off on your students and that’s, you know, as I said, it is the spiral down that and the GCEQ’s [Graduate Course Experience Questionnaire] will be affected and all the rest of it. Then you go through another major review, another major change. (Respondent 5)

The big thing I notice is a lack of trust between staff members and with the administration and on lots of levels. Lots of closed doors that have never been

there before. Lack of communication and cheer that was present before. A loss of collegiality and less tolerance. (Respondent 1)

Members described their colleagues as being “scared and divided” (Respondent 5). They considered themselves as “poor cousins on lots of different levels” and being “demotivated” because “the change is being forced on us” (Respondent 1). The repercussions for the institution are yet to be fully realised. The manifestation of the staff dissatisfaction is likely to occur in many areas including the student experience, the ability to attract and retain staff and, importantly, staff commitment to the institution. There is, at this stage, no evidence of members’ regeneration through “embracing a new world view” (Deal 1990, p. 11).

Within each of our particular communities of practice we learn certain ways of interacting and working with our colleagues, and as a result develop certain ‘world views’. As such, identities become defined by the mutual engagement and social norms of behaviour set up by practices within a community (Wenger 1998b). As well as this, our accountability to the joint enterprise of the community of practice makes us look at the world from a particular perspective. Wenger argues that by virtue of participating in certain enterprises we develop a perspective that “manifests itself as a tendency to come up with certain interpretations, to engage in certain actions, to make certain choices, to value certain experiences” (Wenger 1998b, p. 153). Within communities of practice, members can share interpretive support and develop shared meanings and responses to the institutional anomalies. This support can be invaluable in negotiating organisational change. In this case, however, the ways in which the change was managed led to an undermining of the expertise and collegiality of the community members.

For this community of practice, changing the foundational elements of practice, such as replacing a teaching and learning philosophy like PBL, changed much of what was familiar, negotiated and understandable within practice, and hence, rendered the community of practice unsustainable. The cognitive and emotional dissonance and depth of mourning for the familiar and valued practices of the community were too significant for members to overcome and make sense of their new roles and reconstructed identities.

Implications for the academy

A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.98). This support is increasingly important to academic staff as the historical notions of universities and academic work lose meaning. The interviewees described contradictions between the ‘word experience’, or rhetoric of the organisation, and the ‘world experience’, ambiguities and inconsistencies in their work, and the ways in which they reconciled them. Without the support of the community, members had varied and disparate responses to the proposed changes. Some talked about looking for an “escape route” (Respondent 5). Others commented that, in the new environment in which they were not included in key decisions they “do not see myself as an academic and don’t intend to be here” (Respondent 2). Some members of the community did leave, with others stating that the recent challenges to their personal integrity and lack of respect made it difficult to remain. None of the members were

committed to furthering the institution's agenda in this case, resulting in withdrawal of intellectual energy and expertise from the program.

Conclusions

In this case study the change to a PBL curriculum was self-initiated by the teaching team due largely to a desire to improve student learning outcomes and the educators themselves had a large degree of control and ownership over the change process. As a consequence, there was a sense of commitment from the outset of the project. The other significant factor influencing the level of ownership of this curriculum reform was the fact that the teaching team took control of the overall curriculum development and implementation process. Because of this, they were instrumental in both the decision-making and planning processes and were able to use their knowledge and expertise to situate the reform to their discipline-specific context. For the most part, team members felt valued and included in this reform process and recognised that their input was integral to the success of the change process.

However, with the more recent educational reforms taking place within this particular institution and the higher education sector more broadly, this 'valuing' and 'inclusion' of teaching staff in the planning and decision-making processes is not always deemed to be essential. In this case study, the educators' experience of these differently configured change contexts was not positive. Major educational change often creates confusion, conflict and feelings of fragmentation and disruption for members of teaching communities as it disrupts routines, procedures and daily events to such a degree that educators oftentimes lose confidence in their ability to cope. It also fragments the established frames of reference that normally guide their teaching practice and, as a consequence, their identity as constructed through that practice. Hence, educators undergo a prolonged period of cognitive and emotional dissonance until their practice becomes codified and imbued with new meaning.

Effective communities of practice should be recognised as a way forward in organisations' quest for improved performance. Wenger (2004) argues that communities of practice are important to the social fabric of knowledge as they are social structures which enable knowledge to be managed by the practitioners. When members of communities are not given control and ownership of the change process they can't use their expertise to situate the reform to their specific context. In situations such as the one in this study in which the complexity and multidimensionality of the members' practice, together with the ways in which they value their role in the community, is unrecognised, the success of the change is questionable. Thus, it can be argued that using collaborative change management practices leads to more refined and situated reform outcomes that benefit both the institution and the members.

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