Engaging Communities

Proceedings of the

31st HERDSA Annual Conference

1-4 July 2008

Rotorua, New Zealand

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DEEWR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence, expertise and experience and received the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Where substantial differences existed between the two reviewers, a third reviewer was appointed. Papers were evaluated on the basis of originality, quality of academic merit, relevance to the conference theme and the standard of writing/presentation. Following review, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

The challenges of building an academic community of practice: An Australian case study

Dr Jacquelin McDonald

Learning and Teaching Support Unit, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
mcdonalj@usq.edu.au

Dr Cassandra Star

Faculty of Business and Centre for Sustainable Catchments, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
star@usq.edu.au

While the concept of learning communities is now widely known and generally endorsed in higher education, there are significant challenges in relation to their implementation within the current Australian higher education context. We argue that a community of practice model proposed by Wenger (1998) can provide a framework for the building of successful academic communities of practice. The model contains three fundamental elements - a *domain* of knowledge that creates a common ground and sense of common identity, a *community* of people who care about the domain and create the social fabric of learning, and a shared *practice* that the community develops to be effective in its domain. In this case study the community provides a location for individual academics to focus on teaching and learning against a background of tensions in the current Australian higher education environment. In addition, communities of practice create a space for safe reflection on practice, as the challenges of mass education, such as increasing diversity in student cohorts, are best met by collaborative effort. Communities of practice provide a context for sustained professional conversations around identified domain and practice issues. This paper presents a discussion of the application of Wenger's model in an academic community, and the challenges and successes of that process to inform the implementation of communities of practice in the Australian tertiary context.

Keywords: community of practice model, higher education, academic professional development

Introduction

This paper explores the process of applying Wenger's (1998) model as a framework for the building of successful academic communities of practice (CoPs) and the challenges of building such a community in the current Australian tertiary education context. The paper is based on the case study of the creation of a CoP for first year core course leaders in the Faculty of Business at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia. The community of practice on which this paper is based emerged from collaboration between the two authors to redesign a first year core course within the Faculty of Business. After the course redesign, the authors wondered how best to share what they learnt with other members of the Faculty, particularly other first year course leaders. As a way of

communicating these innovations, and to support Faculty members in their own teaching and learning journeys, we established a community of practice. Based on doctoral research into online learning communities (McDonald 2007) and CoP literature, the authors applied the community of practice model proposed by Wenger (1998) and developed further for business contexts by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). The paper presents a brief overview of communities of practice in the Australian tertiary context, followed by a discussion of Wenger's (1998) CoP model and how it was applied in the case study. This will provide the background for the discussion of the conceptualisation, establishment, and issues addressed in a community of practice for teachers of first year courses at an Australian university.

Communities of practice in the Australian higher education context

The implementation of communities of practice is still an emerging approach to support learning and teaching in higher education, despite being well established in the Australian Vocational Educational and Training sector (Mitchell 2003; Mitchell 2006). CoPs are also well established in business as a means of facilitating the growth and implementation of new knowledge (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). In business contexts there has been recognition of the importance of more subtle, tacit types of knowledge that needs to be shared, and CoPs have been identified as being a framework or approach where such types of knowledge are nurtured, shared and sustained (Hildreth & Kimble 2004). Tacit knowledge is highly personal, and is understood without being articulated. It is hard to formalise and therefore difficult to communicate to others as it is unvoiced or unspoken. Lave and Wenger (1991) and Vygotsky (1978) have identified the acquisition of knowledge as a social process, and communities of practice provide the opportunity to share and articulate tacit knowledge.

An online search to identify CoPs in Australian higher education institutions found limited evidence of reported CoPs on institutional web sites, although literature searches and personal contacts identified the existence of informal or planned implementation of CoPs. The Australian National University has a Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education grant to investigate leadership in teaching and learning using a CoP approach, Griffith University's School of Business has a CoP centred around learning and teaching issues and Deakin University has established two teaching fellowships through their Institute for Teaching and Learning to implement CoPs across the University. Other examples are references to resources provided for communities of practice in learning and teaching by the flexible support and development network at the University of New South Wales and the call for CoPs to support transnational educators at Southern Cross University (Dunn & Wallace 2005). Does the lack of a sector wide application of CoPs in Australian higher education mean that communities of practice are more suited to industry and training organisations? Historically that may be the case, but we argue that CoPs are an innovative means of regenerating current learning and teaching practice, and that they are a particularly appropriate way of building a dynamic academic community striving to address the range of issues facing first year educators. Cox (2006) suggests that CoPs create opportunities for mutual learning, align with learning organisation theory and practice, can meet the demands of rapid change, and are well

suited to higher education. The following section is a brief overview of the nature of communities of practice to provide a framework for the following discussion of the case study on the implementation of Wenger's CoP model in an Australian tertiary context.

What are communities of practice?

The term "communities of practice" emerged from Lave and Wenger's (1991) study that explored learning in the apprenticeship model, where practice in the community enabled the apprentice to move from peripheral to full participation in community activities. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) describe communities of practice as:

> *Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. . . . (As they) accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice (pp. 4-5).*

CoPs are different from traditional organisations and learning situations, such as task forces or project teams. While a team starts with an assigned task, usually instigated and directed by an "authority" figure, a CoP does not have a formal, institutional structure within the organisation or an assigned task, so the focus may emerge from member negotiation and there is continual potential for new direction. CoPs encourage active participation and collaborative decision-making by individuals, as opposed to separated decision-making that is present in traditional organisations (Johnson 2001). Members can assume different roles and hierarchical, authoritarian management is replaced by self-management and ownership of work (Collier & Esteban 1999). The community focuses on completely authentic tasks and activities that include aspects of constructivism, such as addressing complex problems, facilitation, collaborative learning, and negotiated goals (Johnson 2001). These characteristics provide an ideal environment for tertiary educators to share, debate, and build their learning and teaching expertise, within a "safe" and supportive community of practice environment.

CoPs take a variety of forms depending on their context; however they all share a basic structure. A community of practice is a unique combination of three fundamental elements (Wenger 1998). These elements are a *domain* of knowledge that creates a common ground and sense of common identity, a *community* of people who care about the domain and create the social fabric of learning, and a shared *practice* that the community develops to be effective in its domain. In this case study the *domain* of knowledge and *practice* is learning and teaching first year business courses, and the community consists of core course leaders and the convenors; a Faculty of Business core course leader (Star), and a learning and teaching designer from the Learning and Teaching Support Unit (McDonald).

Tertiary context for applying the community of practice model in Australian higher

A community of practice 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, the organisational structures and culture of individualism (Laurillard 2006), produce a situation where individuals are often isolated and unaware of the practices of others. While initiatives to overcome this individualism within research endeavours, such as research centres and research networks, are well advanced, these are less common in relation to teaching in higher education (Laurillard 2006). The consequences of a lack of formal or informal structures for sharing of learning and teaching practice contributes to a lack of institutional memory regarding teaching and learning 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 teaching and learning practices.

Communities of practice specifically grow, or are fostered, to provide a shared space around shared concerns – in this case, the teaching and learning of first year core course leaders in a Faculty of Business. Individual members of communities of practice face shared challenges provided by their student cohorts (Sharrock 2000; Biggs 2003), their institutional context, and the challenges facing the wider higher education sector (Harman 2004; Schapper & Mayson 2004; Marginson & Considine 2000). These shared challenges provide the basis for a common understanding between members, which in our case was further strengthened by the collaborative identification of priority issues to be addressed by the group. Establishing and nurturing a shared sense of identity provides the missing element in ensuring the institutional memory and sharing of teaching and learning practices. It also provides a safe place for reflection and experimentation on teaching and learning for individual staff members.

The Australian higher education sector is currently characterised as having been through a significant period of commercialisation and marketisation, particularly in regard to the provision of teaching to both domestic and international students (Marginson 2006). These changes have placed considerable pressure on individual staff and led to increases in teaching loads and expectations (Forgasz & Leder 2006; Anderson, Johnson & Saha 2002). At the same time, the sector has experienced real declines in funding and continued increases in student numbers. These two trends taken together have led to economic rationalisation of teaching, assessment and course delivery across the sector (Schapper & Mayson 2004). For tertiary teachers this combines with research, where the maxim of "publish or perish" remains truer than ever, to produce a powerful surge in expectations. Significant funding outcomes are attached to research output, both individually and institutionally. With the widespread use of short-term contracts in the sector (Macnamara 2007), those who publish survive, and those who don't, do not. Thus, individual academics are at the centre of heightened institutional tensions between research priorities and new teaching and learning priorities. This creates an important institutional imperative to support individual academics as they face and negotiate the new challenges associated with these policies and the resultant expectations. In this storm

of competing and increasing expectations, CoPs can provide a safe haven for tertiary teachers.

Applying a Community of Practice model to an Australian tertiary context

The idea to establish a CoP for first year course leaders in the Faculty of Business emerged from collaboration between the two authors, and their plan to share ideas to regenerate one core first year course with other first year teachers. The authors worked collaboratively to redesign an existing undergraduate business course to embed graduate attributes, scaffold constructivist learning activities, and address student retention and progression issues. The authors debated strategies of sharing and evaluating the planned learning design with other first year course teachers. The authors envisaged a learning community where teachers could share positive experiences (domain knowledge and practice), successes and "war stories" about their practice.

Operational aspects of the CoP

Based on the principle that meaningful change is most effectively implemented if grounded in practice (Elton 1999), and an interest in CoPs, the authors submitted a funding application to initiate and support a CoP for teachers of core first year courses. One of the authors had applied this learning community approach previously with both academics and students and the approach was supported with positive feedback from participants in their evaluation of the CoP (McDonald & Mayes 2007; McDonald 2007). This domain of knowledge about CoPs informed the funding application and planning for the establishment of the CoP. Time was spent introducing the CoP idea to senior management and champions, who subsequently provided financial and practical support for the CoP.

The authors have joint convenor roles, and base the operational structure of the CoP on the community of practice model proposed by Wenger (1998) and further developed for business contexts by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). Having identified that first year teachers are time poor (Forgasz & Leder 2006), it follows that the convenors are equally busy, and needed support to establish and sustain the CoP. Successful bids for funding provided resources for administrative and research personnel, meeting resources, and funds to build exemplars of good practice generated by community activities.

The convenors applied Wenger's three fundamental CoP elements: *domain* of knowledge *community* of people, and shared *practice* as the organising structure for the CoP. As previously mentioned, in this case study the *domain* of knowledge and *practice* is learning and teaching first year business, with the core first year course leaders forming the community. This structure was chosen to provide a consistent framework for monthly meetings to ensure that each of the essential elements of a CoP was addressed at meetings and to provide clear direction, outcomes and value adding for members. The structure, community support, and outcomes have assisted in addressing initial skepticism about "just another meeting" and the need to make best use of the time committed, for time poor tertiary educators (McDonald & Star 2006).

Utilising this approach, the CoP has now achieved full membership from the first year core course leaders on a voluntary basis. The CoP is now in a sustainable phase of its operation, with funding in place that ensures the continuation of the CoP and its support for core course leaders. Senior management have ensured that CoPs are integral to the University's response to learning and teaching challenges at all institutional levels, including in the Faculty Learning and Teaching plan, LTSU professional development plans, and a key part of the USQ Program Revitalisation Project (PRP) process. Significantly, the success of the CoP approach in supporting the professional development of academic staff in sharing quality teaching practice and in ensuring a quality student learning journey has been institutionally acknowledged through learning and teaching awards.

However, this acknowledgement has raised an issue for the convenors in balancing the institution's embrace of the CoP and its approach to supporting the student learning journey, and the independence of the CoP to support first year course leaders in meeting their needs. To ensure sustainability of the CoP, a careful path between these two elements must be negotiated. This is a potential issue because members value the independence and trust that characterises the CoP. On the other hand, senior management at the Faculty and the University levels identify the success of the CoP and seek to leverage that success to meet important institutional goals. A key responsibility of the CoP convenors is to ensure that the needs of the CoP members continue to be met and the role of the CoP in meeting institutional goals is highlighted without management involvement in the activities of the CoP. One way to do ensure this is through member-negotiated agendas, based on issues arising from members' practice.

Addressing first year learning and teaching priority issues
In the first CoP meeting members brainstormed on the priority issues facing them as the leaders of first year core courses; the list was collated and circulated as a diagram (Figure 1, below) on the CoP web page. Members then used an online polling system to prioritise the importance of the issues. This process enabled members to shape the CoP agenda and also allowed the identification of the most pressing issues at the ground level, rather than at the University or the Faculty level.

Continuity of the community is only ensured if members value the work of the community and the outcomes that it produces. To ensure that this happens, the convenors continually liase with members about their current needs, what outcomes and artefacts would be useful, and secure the involvement of guest speakers who can contribute to building the knowledge and practice of first year teaching. The community also operates a jointly-negotiated, member-directed agenda of critical issues in first year teaching and learning, discussed in more detail below. As a living catalogue of member resources, the convenors have constructed a toolkit for first year course leaders that will be available to all University teaching staff. It is designed to help tertiary educators to improve the student learning journey. It focuses on common challenges for course leaders. Each item highlights an issue and successful approaches in a "quick grab" format, but also provides exemplars and additional external resources. Toolkit topics include: getting started; cross-cultural teaching; first assessment items; peer assessment; evaluating our teaching; graduate qualities and skills, and professional development.
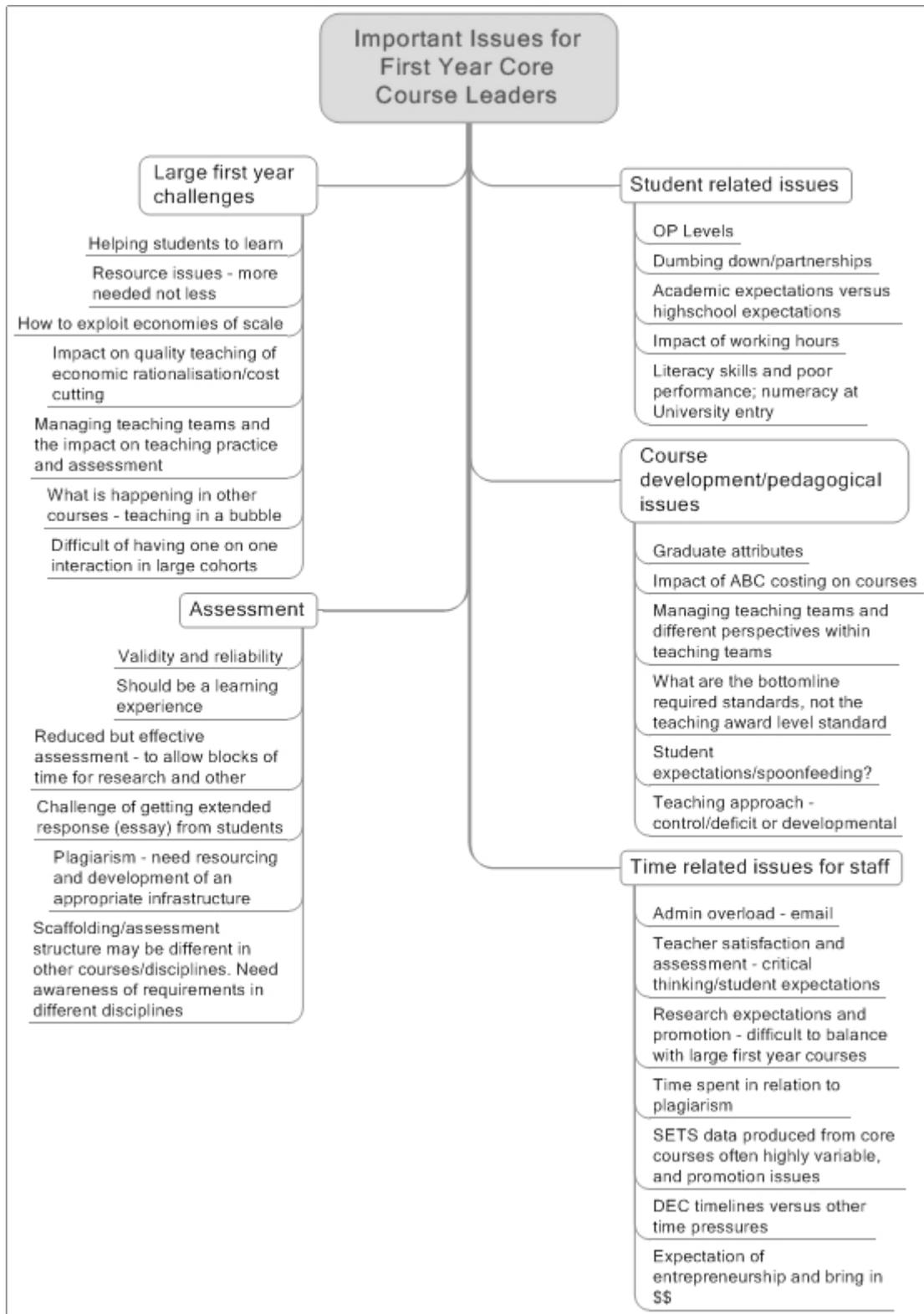
Figure 1: Important Issues for First Year Core Course Leaders

Significant outcomes of the community of practice initiative for first year courses

There are a number of key reasons that outcomes of this initiative is of wider interest in the Australian higher education environment. The four reasons that we will discuss are the provision of practical outcomes for first year core course leaders, the ability to face the challenges of mass education in a shared way, it can build retention and progression and the subsequent student learning outcomes.

Firstly, a CoP approach to support and professional development of tertiary core course leaders can provide a focus on practical outcomes for members. Our implementation of the CoP approach has provided a clear focus on staff needs. This creates the CoP as a site for staff support and reflection rather than as a site of growing demands and expectations for staff. Thus CoPs must be able to clearly and tangibly demonstrate practical outcomes for members. Providing such outcomes is an approach that highlights an effective return on the investment of staff time and adds value to the time spent participating in the community. Outcomes have included resource toolkits, assessment and marking templates, and exemplars of good practice. These support sharing of common practice and reflection and revision. In addition, an approach emphasising the professional support of staff can support professional development in teaching and learning practice, but it can also foster scholarship of teaching and learning, and portfolios of teaching and learning for other purposes.

Secondly, the strong focus on practical support provides important scaffolding to meet the challenges raised by the massification of higher education including a diverse student body with different cohorts, demographic changes in the student cohort, and changes in the motivations of university students. The CoP approach provides an effective forum to determine how first year core course leaders can respond effectively. This creates the opportunity to share and evaluate strategies to meet student needs within the University. It also enables a similar understanding and approach to cohorts and their needs. Such an approach enables a level of consistency in teaching and learning across the first year. This means that there is a level of reliability that can shape the common expectations of students across the Faculty. Consistency of the types of resources, support and scaffolding available to students across their first year can also be assured.

The third reason that the CoP approach to supporting core course leaders is significant for the higher education sector is due to the flow on effect in terms of building retention and progression. Retention and progression were the leading institutional goals for USQ in 2007. By aiming attention at commencing students and by supporting first year core course leaders, we pursued the biggest payoffs for effort and provided the most opportunity for change. Involving the first year core course leaders together provides an open communication channel but also to share teaching strategies. Our experience has highlighted that one effective way to do this is by opening, supporting, and resourcing a CoP space within Faculties for academics facing common challenges to share their strategies, concerns, and priorities in relation to teaching and learning.

Finally, CoP activities have contributed to the student learning journey in two key areas: assessment and curriculum change; and the adoption of a scaffolding approach to student learning.

CoP members have instituted assessment and curriculum change as a direct result of CoP activity. Members have articulated a number of changes in their assessment practice – a member identified, and institutionally identified, priority issue. For example, one member developed an oral debate assessment item for on-campus and external students: *I [developed] some authentic assessment ... for the law degree. ... the initiative ... came from my learning, my support and listening in the CoP* (McDonald, Collins, Hingst, Kimmins, Lynch & Star 2008). Other changes in assessment practice resulting from the CoP include the use of online peer assessment in *Business Communication;* the first use of non-exam assessment in *Economics; Government, business and society's* use of assessment to develop core academic skills; the development and use of detailed marking criteria sheets to ensure consistent, quality feedback when there are large marking teams, and for the first time, a coordinated assessment timetable across first year courses.

The CoP members have also developed a scaffolding approach to the student learning journey. For first year students, scaffolding is a successful approach to supporting their transition to University study (Star & McDonald 2007). This approach has been shared within the CoP by academic staff and instructional design staff. Exemplars of this approach have been shared in meetings and in the toolkit for first year core course leaders. For example, as a result of discussion on approaches to academic integrity a flyer, *Why do we reference at university?,* taking a positive approach to building academic skills, rather than a negative punitive approach, was produced. This flyer was made available to all first year academic staff to use with their students, it was also made available to use on electronic forums and in course materials. CoP activities sustain and support both academics and students in their learning journey.

Conclusion

This paper articulated some of the processes of applying Wenger's (1998) model as a framework for the building of a successful academic CoP and the challenges of building such a community in an Australian tertiary institution. Wenger's (1998) community of practice model provides a framework for the convenors when building the successful academic community. Indicators of success are increased domain knowledge, intense discussion, reflection on and in practice of teaching first year students, which have supported changed teaching practice, and a strong sense of community that provides professional support for members.

> *What life have you, if you have not life together?*
> *There is no life not lived in community (Eliot, 1934).*

Acknowledgements

References

Anderson, D., Johnson R. & Saha, L. (2002). *Changes in academic work: implications for universities of the changing age distribution and work roles of academic staff* (Commissioned report). Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (2nd ed.). Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Cox, M. (2006). Phases in the development of a change model: Communities of practice as change agents in higher education. In L. Hunt, A. Bromange & B. Tomkinson. (Eds.). *The realites of change in higher education: Interventions to promote learning and teaching* (pp. 91-100). London: Routledge.

Dunn, L. & Wallace, M. **(**2005). Promoting communities of practice in transnational higher education. ODLAA (The Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia), *Breaking Down Boundaries Conference*, University of Adelaide, 9-11 November. (Retrieved July 28, 2006) http://www.odlaa.org/events/2005conf/ref/ODLAA2005Dunn-Wallace.pdf.

Collier, J., & Esteban, R. (1999). Governance in the participative organisation: freedom, creativity and ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *21*(2/3), 73–188.

Eliot, T.S. (1934). *Choruses from The Rock.* (Retrieved June 25, 2006) http://www.insidework.net/webfiles/downloads/products/choruses_from_the_rock.pdf

Elton, L. (1999). New ways of learning in higher education: Managing the Change. *Tertiary Education and Management, 5*, 207-225.

Forgasz, H. & Leder, G. (2006). Academic Life: Monitoring Work Patterns and Daily Activities. (Retrieved 8 August, 2006) http://www.aare.edu.au/aer/online/0601b.pdf.

Harman, G. (2005). Australian social scientists and transition to a more commercial university environment. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *24*(1), 79-94.

Hildreth, P.J. & Kimble, C. (2004). *Knowledge networks: Innovation through communities of practice.* London: Ideas Group Inc.

Johnson, C. (2001). A survey of current research on online communities of practice. *Internet and higher education*, *4*, 45–60.

Laurillard, D. (2006). E-Learning in higher education. In P. Ashwin (Ed.), *Changing Higher Education: The Development of Learning and Teaching.* London: Routledge.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Macnamara, L. (2007). Casual staff pick up the slack. *The Australian, Higher Education section*, 28 February, 34.

Marginson, S. (2006). Dynamics of National and Global Competition in Higher Education. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning*, *52*(1), 1-39.

Marginson, S. & Considine, M. (2000). *The enterprise university: Power, governance and reinvention in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McDonald, J., Collins, P., Hingst, R., Kimmins, L., Lynch. B., & Star, C. (accepted for publication). Community learning: member's stories about their academic community of practice, *HERDSA 2008 conference*.

McDonald, J. (2007). *The role of online discussion forums in supporting learning in higher education*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southern Queensland.

McDonald, J & Mayes, T. (2005). Pedagogically challenged: a framework for the support of course designers in an Australian distance learning university. In J. Caldwell (Ed.), *Proceedings of Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning International Conference, What a Difference a Pedagogy Makes:*

Researching Lifelong Learning and Teaching, (pp 397- 404). Stirling Management Centre, University of Stirling, U.K.

McDonald, J. & Star, C. (2006). Designing the future of learning through a community of practice of teachers of first year courses at an Australian university. In R. Philip, A Voerman & J. Dalziel (Eds), *Proceedings of the First International LAMS Conference 2006: Designing the Future of Learning* (pp. 65-76). Sydney, Australia.

Mitchell, J. (2003). *Effectively structuring communities of practice in VET*. Melbourne: Australian National Training Authority. (Retrieved June 25, 2006) http://reframingthefuture.net.

Mitchell, J. (2006). *Ideas for Practitioners*. Melbourne: Australian National Training Authority. (Retrieved June 25, 2006) http://reframingthefuture.net.

Schapper, J. M., & Mayson, S. E. (2004). Internationalisation of curricula: An alternative to the taylorisation of academic work. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *26*(2), 189-205.

Sharrock, G. (2000). Why students are not (just) customers (and other reflections on Life After George), *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *22*(2), 149-164.

Star, C. & McDonald, J. (2007) Embedding successful pedagogical practices: assessment strategies for a large, diverse, first year student cohort, *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, *3*(2), 18-30.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. (M.M. Lopez-Morillas Cole, A.R. Luria & J. Wertsch, J. Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.