

## Communities of Practice : Creating Spaces for Resistance and Activism

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### Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### Abstract

The term Community of Practice (CoP) refers to groups of people who regularly discuss topics of shared concern, passion, and interest, to develop knowledge and expertise (Wenger, 2002). Previous research shows relationship building and interaction is key to sustainable CoP development (Hildreth and Kimble, 2008). In an increasingly challenging and alienating academic landscape (Hall, 2018), it is important to facilitate community building and networking within a Higher Education institution. As centralised departments, educational development units, are well placed to facilitate this. However, increased pressures in the UK, such as those arising from the NSS and the TEF, means that the work is 'complex' (Ling, 2009), with tension between community building and a need to focus on implementation of institutional strategy and policy. In this paper the authors reflect on activities that have been part of a research project, funded by Advance HE, to interrogate CoPs as creating spaces for activism.

### Full paper

In an increasingly challenging and alienating academic landscape (Hall, 2018), it is important to create opportunities to facilitate community building and networking for colleagues within a Higher Education institution. As centralised departments, educational development units are well placed to facilitate this. However, increased pressures on T&L in the UK, such as those arising from the NSS and the TEF, means that the work of educational developers is 'complex' (Ling, 2009), with a tension between the community building aspects of L&T development and a need to focus on implementation of institutional strategy and policy. The Australian Universities Accord interim report (2023) attempts to define a vision for the future of Higher Education, in which communities of practice (CoPs) are cited as playing a key part. This is because they offer a unique opportunity to bring together otherwise often disparate and siloed colleagues into discussions on shared educational challenges and successes. However, how can we ensure that communities of practice created by educational developers are rhizomatic rather than being used as a mechanism for surveillance and a way to enforce institutional drivers?

This paper uses the experiences of a group of educational developers who are involved in a collaborative research project that explores how to build and sustain learning and teaching focused CoPs in the current HEI landscape. The project is funded by Advance HE and includes six universities (from the UK and Australia). As part of the research, it is necessary to address the tension between the role of the educational developer facilitator and enforcer of change. This is imagined through building a community

of practice for educational developers, with a focus on members' interests and needs and a shared space to create conditions for challenge and resistance.

We start our thinking by considering what collective critical praxis may feel like through varying lenses including structuralism, social and cognitive processes, and critical pedagogues. From a structuralist perspective, praxis can be interpreted as the practical application of knowledge and skills in a given social field. On theorising the ways in which we encounter the social world (familial, work, study etc.,) Bourdieu (1977) posits that we consciously, and subconsciously, internalise what we take to be our 'natural' place within the social order. Reflective practice is understood to be heavily influenced by lived experiences. In understanding the implications for participation, community members will be using cultural resources and social networks to influence social positioning, judging positional gains and losses, and internally weighing up the worth of continued participation (Brown, 2008).

Collective praxis could look like CoP members critically discussing how positioning (both internal monologue and by other members) provides insight into who gets to speak, who gets to listen and who is silenced. By paying attention to how CoP members learn the social rules and navigate the discursive landscape, the power dynamics that shape and constrain action becomes unmasked thereby illuminating potential spaces for resistance and change.

Originally conceived as situated learning by Lave and Wenger (1991), 'praxis' was later reworked by Wenger (2002) as 'knowing in practice' (p.141) and 'experience in knowing' (p.142). This approach sees ways of knowing as a social practice, which cannot be performed in isolation. Through this social cognition lens, collective praxis could provide insight into how members participate in a community, develop shared understandings and negotiate meanings. Outcomes for evaluation would likely encourage experimentation to overcome challenges and/or to foster a culture of continuous development through sharing knowledge, ideas, practices and artefacts,

For critical pedagogues (Friere, 1996; hooks, 2014; Giroux, 1985), the collective critical praxis of the CoP would likely involve ways to dismantle and transform existing structures through a critical dialogue, which encourages individuals to question dominant narratives, confront injustices and to achieve social transformation. For CoP members developing collective praxis would most likely include collegiate discomfort, interrogating relations of power and culminating with activism and the intent to bring about social change.

The authors of this paper believe that it is possible to create CoPs, within the context of higher education, which facilitate the development of collective critical praxis, challenge dominant narratives, resist injustice and actively create alternative ways of being and knowing for the development of T&L.

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