

The Use of Teaching and Learning Communities of Practice in Australian Higher Education (0280)

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Outline

Introduction

Communities of practice (CoPs) represent an emerging concept in higher education. While significantly studied and theorised in the knowledge management literature, especially within corporate contexts, there is a dearth of literature on their application in higher education. The use and reporting of case studies of their *practice* in higher education is overwhelmingly on their application in learning and teaching. The paper provides a clear understanding of the theory and practice of CoPs as relevant to contemporary higher education and presents an agenda for future research.

Community of practice approaches in higher education

CoPs encourage active participation and collaborative decision-making by individuals, as opposed to separated decision-making that is present in traditional organisations (Johnson 2001). This is consistent with academics' preferred way of learning and traditional self-management practices. CoPs provide an ideal environment for tertiary educators to share, dialogue, debate and build their learning and teaching expertise, within a "safe" and supportive environment. The community of practice approach ensures that the professional development is grounded in the participants' practice, embedded in their context, and more importantly, driven by the participants and their needs. From this perspective, a learning and teaching CoP is inextricably embedded in participants' joint domain, in their teaching context, thus, the focus is on collaborative, context-specific, ongoing learning about teaching and learning practice.

In the current literature on the use of communities of practice in higher education, there are three quite distinct categories: those authors who see significant potential for CoPs in higher education; a second group of authors who reflect on previous activity undertaken and believe a CoP was formed; and finally, those that have started or created a CoP within the higher education setting and report their experiences.

The first section of literature includes writing on CoPs in higher education by authors that see a positive potential from using CoPs to re-introduce some structures of previous collegiality into higher education. Collegiality and traditional self-management practices have been, in this argument, continually and relentlessly eroded by changes in government policy. These policy approaches have introduced significant changes to higher education sectors across the Western world, and with them, changes in the ways universities are governed and managed. In turn, these changes have seen the birth of the "new" university, a more corporate and business-like enterprise (for example, see Marginson 2006). Thus, for writers from this perspective, CoPs in higher education are advocated as an alternative collegial structure and approach, more in keeping with traditional academic practice. Authors in this vein include Nagy and Burch (2009), Churchman (2005), Cox (2006) on their role as change agents in higher education, and Mitchell (2002; 2003) on their role in the vocational training sector.

The second category of authors is interesting in terms of their post-facto reflection on a range of teaching and learning experiences within higher education, and their "discovery" of a community of practice within those experiences. The cases examine a range of contexts and activities with academics which are, after the fact, recognised or interpreted to exhibit the characteristics of a CoP. For example,

Viskovic's (2006) work on the professional development of early career academics in their journey to being tertiary educators argues that a CoP formed around these academics focussed on their teaching. This category of literature also includes Price's work (2006) about module teams on assessment and assessment standards (2006), the work of King and Churchman with allied health staff (2008) and Sylvia Currie's work with GEN, the pre-cursor to SCoPE (2007).

The final group of authors includes those working within higher education that have established, or attempted to establish, a CoP around learning and teaching. These authors have generally approached a particular problem or task as one where a CoP methodology would be appropriate, given a knowledge of the existing CoP literature. This category includes the work of McDonald and Star (2006; 2007; 2008; McDonald et al 2008) on creating a CoP approach to learning and teaching in an Australian institution, the work of Milton Cox on the use of faculty learning communities in the United States (1997; 1999; Richlin and Cox 2004; Blaisdell and Cox 2004), Green and Ruutz (2008) on the creation of a cross-disciplinary CoP in an Australian university and others (Herrington et al. 2006; Yucel et al. 2009; CEDAM 2008; Lawrence and Sankey 2008; Sankey and Lawrence 2008).

However, there is also significant debate in the literature on communities of practice about what constitutes a community of practice. Part of this debate is centred on apparent gaps between the *theory* and the *practice* of CoPs in higher education and elsewhere. In particular, there is confusion about when a group of people are a CoP and when they are not – can they be facilitated, or created, or must they “come into being”? Much centres on whether a group self-forms, is facilitated, is directed to form, and under what circumstances this group may be a CoP. Earlier *theoretical* work by Lave and Wenger (1991) seems to suggest that communities of practice are spontaneous or organic. However, later works by Wenger et al. (2002), especially those focussing on the *practice* of CoPs, puts forth a more nuanced view that we “cannot cultivate communities of practice” in the *same way* as spontaneous ones. The author argues that definitional rigidity is not useful in understanding the creation, the processes, and the conduct of CoPs and their impact in higher education.

Moving forward: a research agenda on CoPs in higher education

Current published literature suggests four key challenges for the use of communities of practice within higher education: articulation and exploration of a distinctive CoP model (or models) for higher education; a detailed empirical investigation of the challenges and rewards of utilising CoPs in higher education; a focus on the role of facilitators in initiating, building and sustaining CoPs in the higher education context; and, an exploration of the challenges presented by the existence of CoPs within the formal hierarchies of higher education.

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