

The exercise of leadership in communities of practice: The Australian experience

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This paper will provide a clear picture of the leadership expressed within communities of practice in the Australian higher education sector. The paper reports on a two year ALTC-funded project investigating the understanding of, and expression of, leadership by those who facilitate communities of practice. The results show that academics who do facilitate communities of practice do construct their role as one of leadership, expressing well articulated understandings of leadership and several dimensions of leadership in their understandings. The key dimensions of leadership articulated construct their leadership as positional and contextual, expression ideas of leading the group, leading from below (or managing up), and developing their personal leadership capabilities. We argue that these findings form a set of new understandings of the leadership roles performed outside the university's formal hierarchical structures.

Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of the first year of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded project on leadership and communities of practice in the Australian higher education sector. The aims of the project *Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education* are to:

- identify the leadership challenges for CoP facilitators managing down (course leaders), managing across (the department or the School) and managing up (the formal hierarchy);
- identify the impact of institutional factors that influence leadership challenges for CoP facilitators;
- develop support for, and increase, leadership capacity to foster collegial forms of collaboration for sustainable impact on learning and teaching across the sector; and
- evaluate existing resources and create new resources to facilitate capacity building for CoP leadership.

The ultimate goal of improving the leadership capacity of facilitators of learning and teaching CoPs is to increase their success in engaging academics to transform their teaching practice to enhance student learning outcomes.

This paper reports on one aspect of the project, looking at the leadership understandings articulated by those that lead or facilitate communities of practice in higher education.

The Project

The project *Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education* was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in 2010, as a two year, priority 1, sector-wide project. It is focused on clarifying and building the leadership capacity of facilitators of learning and teaching communities of practice. Communities of practice (CoPs) provide one mechanism through which academics can engage in sustained learning and teaching inquiry within supportive communities situated in their learning and teaching practice (McDonald & Star, 2008; Star & McDonald, under review). However, CoPs operate differently from institutionalised work groups or project teams. Wenger *et al.* (2002) describe communities of practice as:

Groups of people who share a concern... 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... [t]hey become a community of practice (pp. 4-5).

The leadership role within CoPs therefore differs from that of the familiar chairperson, course leader or lecturer role. Furthermore, those that are involved in CoPs are led voluntarily and contribute to the leadership of the group. CoPs encourage active participation and collaborative decision-making by individuals, as opposed to separated decision-making that is present in traditional organisations (Johnson, 2001).

Little academic attention has been paid to the roles, needs and impacts of those learning leaders that operate between the level of academic teachers at the coalface and the level of formal leadership. These leaders, in the case of this project, facilitators of learning and teaching CoPs, occupy a significant leadership position between the top-down leadership of the institution and the leadership of teaching teams and the course or unit leader.

Methodology

The data collection approach for the project consisted of two phases: (1) online survey and (2) interviews. Data collection for Phase 1, a needs analysis for CoP facilitators across the Australian sector via an online survey, was completed in May 2011, and the quantitative data analysed. These data informed the protocol for Phase 2: in-depth interviews of facilitators of a teaching and learning CoP at a higher education institution. The methodology for Phase 2 was as follows.

Interview recruitment process: The initial target was to select 25 key informants. There were a number of survey respondents who expressed interest in an interview after completing the survey, and most of these were recruited as key informants. In addition, a smaller number of individuals who were known to have completed the questionnaire but had not volunteered to be interviewed were also contacted via email requesting their participation. To obtain a sufficient cross-section of states, staff types and institutional types, other individuals known to facilitate or be involved in a CoP in the Australian higher education sector were targeted to be key informants.

Interview tool and protocol: A draft interview tool was devised by Dr Star based on the results of the analysis of the online survey in Phase 1, which identified key leadership issues and needs. The draft tool was reviewed by the project team, the Project Evaluator and a member of the project reference group. The final tool was tested by Dr Star prior to implementation at interviews.

Data analysis: The research project officer analysed the interview data using the qualitative analysis software program NVivo to identify key themes for CoP facilitators, initially focusing on participants' responses with regard to mentoring and resources, and leadership. Data from the online survey was analysed using SPSS and NVivo was used to analyse extended responses.

Findings

A number of key findings in stage 1 and stage 2 will inform further work undertaken in the project. Key insights include:

A leadership role?

Interviewees were asked if they viewed their role in the CoP as one of leadership. Around 12 of the 26 informants indicated a definitive 'YES', with some justification. Three of these included in their justification that it was leadership simply in that it was recognised as such (e.g. by their institution), with no further elaboration. An additional number of informants said 'YES' only with some kind of proviso, i.e. only in the sense of a particular definition of leadership. Of these, 8 said 'YES' only in the sense that it was distributed or co-leadership. Five stated 'YES' but the leadership was informal or not hierarchical. One referred to it being some form of service leadership, and one called it leadership/management. A small number of informants said 'NO' they didn't view the role as leadership, with 4 considering it facilitation rather than 'traditional' leadership. Other views were that it was a support role and/or more of a mentoring role.

Leadership in CoPs

In answering this question the informants gave or implied some kind of interpretation of leadership or view regarding their role in facilitating their CoP(s). Answers provided by the respondents demonstrated both a particular understanding of leadership within communities of practice, but also the roles undertaken by leaders.

In respondents articulating their understanding of leadership in this context, a strong theme emerged around shared leadership, distributed leadership and collaboration. The majority of respondents in the online survey indicated that their leadership or facilitation of their community of practice was a shared experience. Just over 55% of facilitators worked with a co-facilitator in their CoP rather than leading alone. This resonated with the wider theme that leadership of CoPs was a shared process that developed over the life of the CoP, with other group members taking on more leadership functions over time, with the initial leader sharing their role and working in parallel with the group. Thus, part of the role of the leader also included modelling or leading by action and example such as driving or facilitating change or action, walking the talk and modelling values. In addition, to ensure successful co-leadership and distribution of leadership eventually, there was an important role articulated in terms of enabling and building member capacity through mentoring, facilitating others and enacting service leadership.

Key roles of CoP leaders

The respondents articulated five key roles in relation to CoP leadership in their interview responses. The first of these roles related to *Building and/or sustaining the CoP*. Understandings articulated here included facilitating member engagement, organising CoP processes, driving action or making things happen, initiating the CoP, and soliciting funding for the CoP as required. The second key role related to *Defining CoP direction/agenda*. *In this vein, respondents saw a crucial part of their leadership role including identifying issues of relevance for the group, attending to CoP vision or big picture*. The third key role articulated was *managing people and dynamics/facilitating and coordinating sessions*. This role covers the internal management of the group including building relationships and managing the expectations of members. The fourth role, also relating to internal group dynamics and needs is *Informing or advising members*. *This role includes providing members with (relevant and timely) information related to CoP domain and practice focus, problem solving for members who come for advice, and ensuring the value or knowledge development for members*. The final role articulated by the interview respondents related to the leaders' role(s) outside the member group: *Managing up/advocating for the CoP*. This articulated role clearly demonstrates a broader leadership dimension than that internal to the group and demonstrates a clear expectation by the majority of respondents that they do or should interact with other leadership structures inside and outside the University as part of their CoP leadership role.

Conclusion

The initial findings from the project indicate that the leadership undertaken in communities of practice within higher education, while different from understandings of hierarchical institutional leadership, is a form of leadership nonetheless. Those who facilitate communities of practice in the higher education sector in Australia also clearly articulate common understandings of this leadership and are able to articulate its elements and the supports needed to effectively enact this leadership in their contexts.

References

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