

## From Disparity to Community: Reflections on our journey

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This paper recounts how a small diverse group of academics working across multiple campuses of Central Queensland University met to discuss some issues relating to assessment practices within teaching. As the group structure evolved, some participants were motivated to form a smaller group to tackle a teaching and learning grant to research the affective nature of the discussions on their practices. This paper focuses on the journey by the smaller group, to form a community of practice and in so doing, as a way of identifying its existence, draws on Wenger's indicators of a community of practice.

**Keywords:** community of practice, teaching and learning, group learning

### Background

“On the surface communities of practice look considerably like what associations always have offered members: affiliation, access to best practices, and forums for discussing policy changes and other important trends” (Kahan, n.d. p.27), but many organisations as Kahan points out are still “to fully comprehend and successfully integrate into their business models” (p.27) the concept community of practice. Universities, as organisations, exhibit both the vision for academics, as practitioners, to be active in their teaching engagement, learning and knowledge sharing. At the same time they are required to adopt processes of centralised know-how and expect adherence to divorced sets of policy guidelines for dealing with streamlining the teaching and learning activities within the organisation. Perceptions of disparity between university policy and good practice prompt academics to seek an interpretation of policy using exemplars, frequently coming together to learn from each other in collaborative environments.

Our journey to a shared recognition of the existence of a community of practice (COP) is the focus of this paper and is discussed in the context of Wenger's indicators of a community of practice (1998, cited in Campbell, 2007, p.136; see also Toft, Trott and Keleher, 2006, p.10). Tying our reflections of the journey to the indicators of a community of practice allows us the opportunity to pinpoint and discuss key characteristics for our community of practice (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Indicators of a community of practice**

- 1 Sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual
- 2 Shared ways of engaging in doing things together
- 3 The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
- 4 Absence of introductory preambles... conversations are an ongoing process
- 5 Very quick set up of a problem to be discussed
- 6 Substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs
- 7 Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise
- 8 Mutually defining identities
- 9 The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products
- 10 Specific tools, representations, and other artefacts
- 11 Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter
- 12 Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the case of producing new ones
- 13 Certain styles recognised as displaying membership
- 14 A shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective of the world.

*Note.* From "Communities of Practice – Learning, meaning and identity," by E. Wenger cited in M. Campbell, "Applying communities of practice to the learnings of police," 2007, p. 136.

Campbell (2007, p.136) uses the indicators, set out above, as a way of introducing Wenger's key characteristics for communities of practice (1998, p.73). He notes Wenger's emphasis on *mutual engagement* "in actions whose meaning they negotiate with each other" and a sense of sharing through "*joint enterprise...and a shared repertoire*". These characteristics will be further discussed in the context of our journey.

The journey that we describe in this paper reflects both mutual engagement and a sense of sharing. We would like to acknowledge the significant and valuable work completed by all group members, without which there would be no journey and definitely no story. It should also be stated that the paper recounts the authors' interpretation of the journey to become a self-affirmed community of practice. Some of our COP colleagues may not share our perspective and had other members of the COP been part of the small writing team for this paper then certainly their input would have caused a different emphasis to be placed upon aspects of the journey – this is how we saw it.

## **Our journey**

When our small group of academics from diverse disciplines within the faculty and across several campuses of our regional university met under the name of a community of practice, we were collectively unaware of the potential potency of this title. The workshop series, designed to be delivered over six weeks, was established primarily to discuss and share personal experiences and points of view on issues of importance about the improvement of assessment practices within our teaching, as part of the bigger picture of teaching and learning within the university.

While general meetings such as these are primarily designed to inform practice and are regularly attended with admirable intention and a strong resolve to take onboard new practices the sad reality is that they rarely transform individual practice. All too often, anecdotal evidence indicates that the reality and demands of the teaching week overtake the desire to commit to long term changes in practice. Further, participation in the group meetings are not recognised by heads of schools as part of any staff member's workload consideration. This is not the case with formally organised university committees since this is categorised as community or administration workload. Therefore, any non-attendance at this informally constituted professional development activity could easily be explained away by the interested academic on the basis of busyness, without any consideration for the group cohesiveness as a whole. Attendance varied from one week to the next. A small emerging group of regulars continued through the six week sessions and without realising, we had indeed commenced a powerful journey – one of transformation in our practice and our levels of group engagement.

Our community of practice was born out of discussions between one of the writers, a senior academic, and the head of Academic Staff Development in the division of learning and teaching (L&T) of the university. The former was particularly excited about the prospects for improving practice with assessment, while her colleague had an understanding that using a 'community of practice' would be powerful and affective in its adoption. At this time, Wenger's definition of a community of practice as a "group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, n.d.) did indeed live in the mind of the senior academic who conceptualised the workshops. As well, these two colleagues were to later take on prominent roles as presenters and facilitators within the early group structure and more expert roles as the COP came together in its tighter form.

## **Workshops**

Invitations to attend the set of six weekly hour long sessions were sent throughout the faculty, across all regional campuses, as well as the international campuses, with no pre-requisites on invitees, except a mutual interest in addressing these issues. The email attachment invitation explained

*"The aims of this program are to provide a community of practice to discuss learning and teaching issues related to assessment; more particularly marking rubrics, student feedback and what constitutes authentic assessment".*

It is interesting to note that although the initial invitation did make mention of the words 'community of practice' the term was so alien to some that it was not used by the faculty staff member as she set about canvassing interest in attending the first meeting. Instead she focused on the need to raise awareness of student assessment issues in learning and teaching.

It was planned that we worked together over four sessions on aspects of assessment and these would be framed by two university wide L&T sessions at either end, looking at the general issues of student learning. Setting the scene, the first session was a delivered presentation by Student Services, reporting on feedback from students in terms of their learning environment. The next four sessions were planned within the faculty, the final session again using the university wide forum of the L&T seminar series delivered by an external speaker, with a speciality in first year student issues. Both the university wide forum and the faculty forums were multi-campus delivery to the regional campuses of Mackay, Gladstone, and Bundaberg, Sydney and two sites in Rockhampton.

The first faculty session (session 2), was presented by the head of Academic Staff Development. This session was attended by over twenty staff from within the faculty, across all the sites via video conference, teleconference plus internet access. The presentation was in lecture question and answer style, demonstrating a passive rather than active style of delivery. The presenter urged attendees to "...be proactive about what students raise as key issues" and spoke on assessment practices which involved intrinsic practices and the design of marking rubrics. Staff were given small marking tasks, which required them to mark a piece of work with a range of rubrics within a short time. The idea was to simulate the pressure on markers when marking and to consider the appropriateness of the marking criteria. It became evident that within these constraints, the same piece of assessment could have a range of marks, even with the same marking criteria. Variables that affected this included personal interpretations of marking criteria and the markers' own expectations of the correct answer.

On looking back it is difficult to recall exactly who was there and whether any of the attendees spoke publicly about their practice. We walked from this meeting better informed on best practice, but there was little to engage us beyond the meeting. Some, but not all of the final COP group were there, others joining in on later meetings. In terms of our journey we saw this as an indication that at this stage we had no sense of a developed *shared repertoire* where members share and pool their resources (Toft, Trott and Keleher, 2006, p.10) We were still yet to develop a sense of the group. The third session brought about a facilitated discussion and it was only at this stage that some of the key indicators of a COP began to emerge. As attendees told of their experiences with assessment and the issues that arise from ensuring equity in marking, especially given the cross campus situation at CQU; there began a rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation (Wenger, 1998). Individuals spoke of how they might deal with issues in these situations. Problem areas were very quickly identified and discussed openly with a focus on the disparity between marking of assessments amongst the faculty. The more experienced of the attendees were drawn upon to assess the appropriateness of the actions and procedures surrounding assessment.

The fourth of our sessions, once again a facilitated discussion, saw us breaking off into pairings across the varying video conference sites. Building on the relationships formed in previous sessions, conversations naturally formed around key issues. The beginnings of a group were emerging as relationships grew. Small groups at Bundaberg, Rockhampton city and main campus appeared to be forming. Although this familiarity and a sense of knowing (Wenger 1998) was developing there was still no recognition or verbalisation of a community, as new attendees continued to arrive and others dropped out.

The fifth session focussed around sharing tangible feedback mechanisms used within the respective courses. The collaboration of peers was only possible due to the sense of community and trust that was being established. This safe environment provided a forum in

which members were able to divulge and explore ideas. (Silberman cited in ACU 2000) For example, there was discussion centred around explanations of assessment and feedback procedures by the participants. Relationships continued to develop and new people were still arriving. In speaking informally with one of the attendees she commented that there was still no clear recollection of the specific stories revealed nor could she provide, if necessary, a conclusive list of names of colleagues who attended.

The final session returned to the university wide forum with a L&T seminar on research on student assessment and feedback, presented by an externally sourced expert. This was also presented across several sites through video conferencing. The session was well attended as the speaker was widely known and respected within the higher education community. While being informative, the session afforded no opportunity for engagement as a group. One final COP group member commented “*You interacted with those people who you happened to sit next to, but there was certainly no community feeling in this session.*”

## **Post-workshop**

It was only after the workshop series concluded that the words ‘community of practice’ were given voice and embraced by the group. The group continued to meet once a fortnight.

Discussions lead by the head of Academic Staff Development revolved around the possibility of preparing an Expression of Interest (EI) for a CQU L&T Grant to analyse the impact of the COP on the teaching practices of the staff involved in the workshop series. We were to become the subject of our own future research. At that meeting, much of the discussion of the group centred on the question of why we would be a community of practice. Some members decided that they did not have the time to participate leaving nine members wishing to work together on this research.

A successful EI led to the need to quickly develop and submit the L&T Grant Application. Subsequent workshops discussed the research direction, formulated how the data would be collected and how all COP members could be involved in the development of the application. Despite general agreement there were still some members of the group who expressed doubt and wanted firmer evidence of our identity. Questions were asked about the legitimacy of using the term, ‘community of practice’ if, in our future research we found that perhaps participants were sceptical and gave a negative voice to this self-perception. Negotiating our way through doubts and questions such as these, is implicit in any path toward *mutual engagement* and a *shared repertoire*. Differing viewpoints on specific issues in the development of the application can now be seen as being integral to the value of the group and the respect for individual viewpoint (Toft, Trott and Keleher, 2006, p.10). Overall our enthusiasm for the research and the future of the group was high. We had achieved as Wenger states, “a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world” (Wenger 1998, cited in Campbell 2007).

Once adopted and discussed the conceptualisation and characteristics of a COP became alive. It seemed that by saying the words we took it on – “seeing is believing” as the saying goes. Our vision had moved beyond the completion of the workshops and the effect they had on our practices. We were now focused on the shared goal of completing the research and the requirements of the grant. Early career academics who had previously remained reserved stepped up and took on key tasks in the project. One member who worked on the budget for the grant proposal found the confidence to play an integral role in the development of the

Ethical Clearance Application and still another member took on the role of facilitator of communications and in so doing created a unique space for all our conversations; giving us a web presence. Email conversations between our group were frequent and detailed. Within our COP it was evident that we were active and engaged. We modelled the behaviours explained by Lave and Wenger 1991 (¶ 1) “So to as the beginner moves from the periphery of this community to its center, they become more active and engaged within the culture and hence assume the role of expert or old-timer”.

## **Adding Value**

It is argued that COP relationships formed over this journey have bridged the gap between staff development and subsequent transformation of practice. The group worked together as an energetic and active COP. Individual members have completed tasks that previously they may not have thought possible within the ambit of their experience and the given time frame. Research consistently shows us that learners that are actively involved in the learning process learn and retain more. Drawing on research conducted by Dale Edgar in the 1960’s we can see that most effective method of learning is from direct and purposeful experiences (ACU 2000). As academics, we can appreciate that active learning strategies such as communities of practice lead to more effective learning for their participants.

Formal recognition of the value of the COP to the university is still to eventuate. However, even though still in its nascent stages, the group is beginning to build strong relationships based on trust and a shared passion for improving learning, for both the students and staff. Through analysing the stories we have shared we are forming “systematic anecdotal evidence” (Wenger cited in Kahan n.d. p.33) which will provide qualitative data to analyse the knowledge gained. By forming these communities we can examine the procedures set out by the university and see the value and best application of them within our own individual contexts. This active engagement generates the opportunity for creating a better nexus between teaching and learning.

## **The future - where to from here**

Our work in the COP will continue with the case study research and its necessary deadlines as well as the continuation of a further series of workshops developed from brainstorming within the COP.

With one of our group leaving the organisation to another academic institution we are faced with a new challenge. Can this COP exist cross-institutionally? Whilst members of the research group are currently based across two CQU campuses; Rockhampton and Bundaberg, the impact of a team member working from another institution within Brisbane is yet to be felt. Will this result in a few ripples for the community, a widening of the community or even its eventual disintegration?

How do we share our experiences beyond our institution? In order to widen our active research, should the COP be opened to other epistemological communities such as students? Student experiences and their voices count in the creation and legitimation of knowledge about education and learning (Walker 2001, p.32).

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of all members of the COP to the underlying events and moments described in this paper. Their work is the interwoven threads of the fabric of our story.

Members of the community of practice are  
Melanie Chin, Tony Dobeles, Kathy Egea, Margaret Flanders, Leone Hinton, Jacqueline Jarvis, Naimatullah Khan, Marilyn Wells, and Samantha Willoughby.

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