Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education

November 2011 Briefing Report: Interviews
Communities of Practice
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1. Introduction

The project Identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for communities of practice in higher education 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 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 topic, course or unit leader. In many ways the CoP facilitator operates at the leadership crossroads of the contemporary higher education institution. The CoP facilitator wears different hats and mobilises different resources and strategies as the contextual factors require – their leadership approach and skills are contingent, and thus requires specifically developed leadership training and approaches that reflect the complexity of the role.

We suggest that a leadership approach that is capable of bridging all university interests and foci without self-interest or the interest of department, faculty or other grouping is that style of leadership provided by CoP facilitators. Therefore, the need to be conversant with underpinning literature, to have the requisite soft skills to work with existing university hierarchies, manage the institutional constraints and opportunities to ensure CoPs are provided with the space and resources to achieve desired objectives are important.

This project will identify and create resources to support the facilitator leadership role. Critical to the success of CoPs is the need to persuade academics that CoPs do not function as a committee with a need for a fixed and predetermined agenda to achieve particular outcomes. There is a lack of understanding about how CoPs operate and what they can achieve for academics, hence the need for the project team to investigate CoP facilitators in Australian higher education. Data on the leadership needs, challenges and strategies of CoPs in higher education, informed by distributed and contingency theories of leadership will inform subsequent resource design and development to support this form of leadership.
2. The Project

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.

Resources will be developed, trialled, evaluated and made available to the sector via a stakeholder network, a project website and key dissemination targets. The key outcomes will include:

- a leadership needs analysis for CoP facilitators in higher education;
- an understanding and articulation of the key leadership challenges for CoP facilitators; and
- the development of Australian higher education specific support and resources for the enhancement of facilitators’ leadership capacity.

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.

3. 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 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 from the pool of participants who had responded to the online survey in Phase 1. There were a number of survey respondents who expressed interest in an interview after completing this 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, although they may not necessarily have completed the online survey (the survey was anonymous). Those responding to the email invitation and who expressed interest in an interview were followed up by the research Project Officer, who developed the interview schedule.
3. Methodology (continued)

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 reference group at a face-to-face meeting in June 2011, with all providing input. The final tool was tested by Dr Star prior to implementation at interviews. The tool contained a context statement and a list of questions, as follows:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

CONTEXT STATEMENT: We are interested in exploring your experiences as a community of practice facilitator in a context of learning and teaching; particularly from the perspective of your role. Based on the data collected, the project team will develop resources to support community of practice facilitators.

QUESTIONS:

1. Tell me a little about a particular learning and teaching community of practice you have a significant role in at your university, and how you perceive your role within that community.
2. What makes your community of practice work, and how do you as a facilitator make this happen?
3. How does your institutional context shape the opportunities for your community of practice?
4. In your role as a facilitator how have you managed the institutional context for your community of practice?
5. What have been the biggest challenges in carrying out your role?
6. What have been the biggest enabling forces/influences allowing you to carry out your role?
7. If you wanted to mentor a colleague starting a community of practice, how would you focus on helping them - what sort of resources would you like to provide?
8. Do you view your role in your community of practice as one of leadership? Why or why not? (If no, how do you view your role?)

The tool also included a number of permitted probes. An interview protocol was developed by the Project Officer for all interviewing members of the research team to follow, to ensure consistency in the conduct of interviews using the tool.

Interview process: As per the protocol, all key informants were provided with an information sheet outlining that only researchers and the transcriber would have access to the audio recording of the interview; that the interview transcript and any data generated from it would be kept confidential where requested; and that participants and their institutions will not be identifiable in any publications arising from the project if they so chose, with reference to such data. Prior to being interviewed, all participants signed a form indicating their free and informed consent to be interviewed by one of the researchers, the project officer or project manager, acknowledging that they understood that their confidentiality and anonymity would be assured if they chose not to be identified. They also completed a demographic sheet that requested information on their staff type, gender, age, CoP type, CoP facilitation status (previous or current) and role (sole facilitator or co-facilitator), and total CoP facilitation experience (in months or years).
3. Methodology (continued)

Interview data collection: Dr Star, Dr McDonald, the Project Officer and the Project Manager conducted a total of 28 interviews of up to 1 hour with key informants from metropolitan universities in QLD, NSW, VIC, WA, ACT, SA and TAS and also regional universities from some states. There were no key informants from NT as the online survey from the previous data collection phase did not capture any participants from that region. Many of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and a number were carried out via telephone or video conference where logistics prevented meeting in person.

In accordance with the protocol, all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a professional transcriber bound by confidentiality. Completed transcripts were returned to interviewees for review, along with a copy of the consent form they signed prior to being interviewed, to re-sign indicating that they had read their transcript and agreed to its use by the researchers. Two participants were not contactable (on leave) to receive and sign off on their transcript, and so their data could not be included in the analysis. The number of interviews analysed thus totalled 26.

Interview data analysis: The research project officer analysed aspects of 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.

4. Interview Findings

MENTORING AND RESOURCES

Interviewees were asked how they would mentor a colleague starting a CoP and what resources they would provide. Three main themes emerged from their responses:

1. Opinions about mentoring or learning to facilitate
2. Approaches to mentoring or learning to facilitate
3. Resources they would recommend or would have liked.

Each of these were divided into subthemes in the analysis, broadly discussed below.

1. Opinions about mentoring or learning to facilitate

A number of the 26 informants believed that the best learning [to facilitate] occurs in-situ—i.e. by doing. One third of informants made some comment that the process was highly variable, and depended on the context, the domain or on the new facilitator’s ability/skills/experience.
4. Interview Findings (continued)

2. Approaches to mentoring or learning to facilitate

The most common approach to mentoring, mentioned or implied by around one-quarter of informants, was to use reflective practice (e.g. guided by the mentor). Around 5 of the 26 informants mentioned inviting the mentee to witness other CoPs in action, i.e. facilitation of a session. An equal number of informants advocated working alongside the mentee (‘walking the walk’ with them), e.g. by co-facilitating, allowing the mentor to model for the mentee. This was described as ‘involving them immediately in the practice’. Informants also commonly mentioned providing information or resources in mentoring, in conjunction with other approaches. The mentor might source suitable resources specific to the mentee’s need as required, suggest relevant literature etc. Some informants advocated the mentor acting as a sounding board or a critical friend for the mentee; someone the mentee could debrief to, and meet for problem-solving. Other informants recommended the mentee meet with other facilitators to hear about their experiences and lessons learned.

3. Resources would recommend or would have liked

Comments about what the informants thought new facilitators should know about or be skilled in, or what mentors should/could give advice on, have been coded as ‘how to’ or tips for facilitators – i.e. information that could go into resources or form the basis of resources. Respondents considered that new facilitators would benefit from information (resources) on HOW TO:

- Manage finances
- Manage people/facilitate sessions—facilitate CoP meetings/foster collaborative processes; manage people and CoP internal dynamics
- Manage upwards
- Establish a CoP—eg identify membership/stakeholders; determine domain of interest; get support from above; assess need or motivation for CoP; diagnose CoP context
- Sustain a CoP—eg promote CoP; maintain CoP momentum; engage members; devise succession plan.

In addition, around 9 informants implied that they would advise new/potential facilitators on the reality of CoPs, and what the role of facilitator actually entails, e.g. ‘tips on self-preservation’.

In other cases, informants gave specific ideas for resources they would have liked, or that they can recommend. Broadly, these specific resources could be categorised as:

- Existing (research) literature—e.g. Wenger, teaching and learning literature, literature on impact of CoPs
- Existing resources/frameworks—e.g. ALTC resources, LeFoe Green Report framework
- Ideas for general resources—e.g. Case studies of CoPs, exemplars of CoP types
- Ideas for tools and applied resources—e.g. Starter kit for new facilitators, ‘life cycle’ of CoP processes, tool for measuring CoP effectiveness
- Ideas for IT applications—e.g. Online leadership network, desktop/iPhone application, email digest
- Workshops—e.g. Workshops with experienced facilitators, meta-CoP of facilitators
4. Interview Findings (continued)

LEADERSHIP

Interviewees were asked if they viewed their role in the CoP as one of leadership (why or why not); and if not, how did they view their role.

Around 12 of the 26 informants indicated a definitive ‘YES’, with some justification (see themes below). 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.

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). These were categorised into around 8 main themes, in approximate order of dominance:

- Distributing leadership and/or collaborating—including working transparently
- Enabling members/building member capacity—including mentoring, facilitating others, enacting service leadership
- Building and/or sustaining the CoP—e.g. facilitating engagement, organising CoP processes/making things happen, initiating the CoP, soliciting funding
- Defining CoP direction/agenda—e.g. identifying issues of relevance, attending to CoP vision/big picture
- Modelling/leading by action and example—e.g. driving or facilitating change/action, ‘walking the talk’, modelling values
- Managing people and dynamics/facilitating and coordinating sessions—including building relationships, managing expectations of members
- Informing or advising members—e.g. providing members with (relevant and timely) information, problem solving for members who come for advice
- Managing up/advocating for the CoP

Three informants also mentioned that the leadership role was dependent on the facilitator’s ability, their own style of leading/facilitating and the domain.

Note that some informants gave a range of interpretations – e.g. they viewed their role as one of facilitator AND mentor AND support etc.
5. Discussion

The insights arising from analysis of the interview data highlights some critical gaps around leadership identification and development for facilitators of communities of practice.

Firstly, the understandings and defining of leadership in this context—communities of practice in higher education—highlights the significant leadership role and capacity building of other staff undertaken by facilitators, but, the lack of understanding and recognition of this role and its importance by most institutions across the sector. This suggests a need to provide resources from the project that enable facilitators to clearly articulate the nature of their role, its importance to the institution and that articulate ways of highlighting the role and its contributions for institutional reward.

Secondly, the analysis clearly demonstrates that quite specific leadership skills and capabilities are needed to effectively lead a community of practice in the higher education sector. Current leadership training across the sector seldom incorporates the approaches and skills articulated as being effective for facilitators identified by our key informants. Thus, the resources eventuating from the project needs to be tailored and specific to the needs identified in the analysis, given the scarcity of resources that meet these needs. In particular, a focus on utilising peer learning and mentoring, with guided reflective practice has been suggested as ideal by our informants, where available.

Finally, a focus on resources that address significant areas of need were identified in the analysis. These included:

- Manage finances
- Manage people/facilitate sessions—facilitate CoP meetings/foster collaborative processes; manage people and CoP internal dynamics
- Manage upwards
- Establish a CoP—eg identify membership/stakeholders; determine domain of interest; get support from above; assess need or motivation for CoP; diagnose CoP context
- Sustain a CoP—eg promote CoP; maintain CoP momentum; engage members; devise succession plan.

While existing general resources exist around management of finances, including grant money and part time staff in the University sector, the CoP specific resources are less available. There are resources available that guide facilitators in establishing a community of practice and sustaining a community of practice, but few of these are higher education specific. In addition, resources that focus on managing people and process within CoPs, that take into account the special challenges evident in higher education are rare. Thus, the focus of resource development within the project will be to fill these particular gaps and make a significant contribution to the development of leadership capability among CoP facilitators within the Australian higher education sector.
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6. Conclusion

The interview process has been extremely valuable for the project in two key ways—uncovering the understandings and reflections on leadership within CoPs, expressed by experienced facilitators of CoPs and identifying the leadership development needs of facilitators of CoPs, based on the practice of those within the leadership role. The production of the project’s resources will be based on these findings.

7. References


8. Feedback

If you have any feedback, questions or comments on this briefing report, please don’t hesitate to get in contact with us via the Project Manager at research@cops.org.au.