

## Cultivation & Propagation

This section, for the benefit of academic development units or other areas considering using communities of practice as a means of supporting professional learning, briefly overviews how CEDAM has cultivated and propagated communities of practice. The *Promoting Teaching and Learning Communities Project* has identified the following issues as important considerations:

- the key role academic development units can play in supporting CoPs;
- providing an adaptive model of support; and
- using the community of practice structure to foster leadership in teaching and learning.

Finally there is an overview of the project team's own journey, a cautionary tale for the unwary who are eager for any funding!

### **A key role for academic development units**

For academic development units the community of practice approach can be a strategic and complementary extension of its development activities within the university. As these unit are usually well placed to negotiate systemic and local issues they can play an instrumental role in seeding and nourishing communities of practice, Further as noted earlier in this report, in the time poor overburdened world of academia in which staff are not necessarily motivated to assume yet another responsibility for which they will not be rewarded or valued, ADUs can play the trusted broker. Whether the resourcing body is an ADU or another agency the support role requires an authentic commitment to mutual engagement.

The communities of practice resourced by this project have been seeded by the project team. Self-generation does not seem to be a natural occurrence within academic environments in which staff feel time poor. However with support from CEDAM teaching and learning staff (without specific forums, or avenues to address or pursue the issues they face in their practice) did participate in communities of practice. To undertake this role successfully the ADU must be respected and trusted by its stakeholders. CEDAM in this project relied heavily on its alumni—the project was premised on the assumption that they would aspire to be involved with the project and to participate in communities of practice. ADU alumni bring a set of experiences, skills and practice tools that partly predispose them to the community of practice model—an orientation to developing their capabilities in teaching and learning, to reflective practice and to group-based activities.

### **How communities of practice can complement existing work undertaken by ADUs**

Through the project it is evident that teaching and learning staff seek opportunities to engage in sustained and deepening conversations about their professional practice and the issues facing them within these contexts. The community of practice model has been a useful 'space' and 'container' for working through unstable teaching and learning contexts at ANU, and proved a strategic form of intervention. As a bridge between formal, accredited learning and informal, situated and peer based problem solving communities of practice enable staff to engage with practice in an ongoing manner in their real world professional context.

Communities of practice do implicate participants in a web of relationships both within and outside of that community. For the academic development unit this implies a sustained commitment, but the pay-off is building long-term relationships that maintain university staff's association with the unit. If this complements the developmental and strategic work of the unit and actively assists the effective transition of its graduating alumni to becoming skilled academic practitioners, it is worthwhile and politically astute investment of its time and staff resources.

## **An adaptive model of support**

Through project roll-out, CEDAM identified that this wasn't going to be a hands off, or walk away project, instead it would require more investment by CEDAM than start-up support or needs analysis and result in a learning partnership.

The project's support options were flexibly adapted to the identified needs or enterprise foci of the communities as they developed. The range of support has included:

*At a pragmatic level providing:*

- a home base for community of practice activities;
- a venue and facility resources;
- administrative support for communities of practice;
- refreshments (morning/afternoon teas, lunches, evening nibbles etc);
- on line communication tools; and
- some support for associated costs e.g lunches, book vouchers, etc.

*At a staff level:*

- participation by CEDAM staff in communities of practice;
- role modelling by project staff as participant observers;
- process facilitation of communities of practice;
- a range of specific interventions as identified by the communities;
- between meeting follow-up and contact with community members; and
- mentoring for key community of practice drivers.

Subsequently the project team through a planning and review exercise identified further issues concerning propagating communities of practice in light of its experience including:

- How can an ADU facilitate forming of communities of practice?
- What is role of ADUs in relation to communities of practice?
- How can ADU staff resource communities of practice?

## **ADUs facilitating communities of practice to form**

Through the process of attempting to foster the formation of fledging communities of practice, the project has found for a group to make it beyond the initial meeting there needs to be:

- key people (motivators) ... or drivers (imperatives) who generate enough critical energy for the group to invest;
- an authentic commitment and energy from group itself, not from the ADU;
- appropriate intervention and encouragement by ADU to identify and explore what their issues might be;
- a pleasant, safe and neutral place; and
- a sense of staff time being valued and their participation being worthwhile.

The project has also identified a range of conditions or circumstances that enable communities of practice to form and for leadership to emerge. These include:

- a supportive boss, unit, faculty, college or institutional environment;
- issues or goals that are cross disciplinary;
- people sharing a common set of challenges with imperatives for resolution;
- organizational change or threat;
- staff who have previous professional development in teaching & learning or leadership; and
- passion.

The project team in working with new communities of practice adopted and evolved a loose set of processes to assist groups in their establishment phase. These included:

- identifying their needs and then purpose as a community;
- working through the group's principles and/or values;
- adopting a question/inquiry/problem-solving based model of interaction;
- dealing with diversity inherent in a group and being inclusive as a community;
- building an underlying architecture for process design; and
- understanding and building some skills in process facilitation (how they work together).

## **The role of ADUs in relation to communities of practice**

At the Australian National University CEDAM, in undertaking a role to cultivate communities of practice, has worked specifically to:

- facilitate group processes, operation and interaction;
- facilitate learning and practice issues in relation to the community's of practice intention and purpose;
- offer capacity development interventions that focus on reflective practice, teaching and learning and also leadership;

- support professional development of seed people within community's of practice (including mentoring and coaching);
- provide enabling resources;
- monitor community of practice evolution; and
- plan for community of practice development.

### **ADU staff resourcing communities of practice**

During the course of the project team members were uncertain what they were meant to do in these communities of practice—lead communities of practice, facilitate skills enhancements, or just be just participant observers? For a time the team laboured under the assumption that it needed to know more about, and to have better leadership skill base to deliver what the communities needed ... until its experience enabled staff to trust that the knowledge, skills and capability would emerge from within the group.

Through this project the team determined that the ADU project person's role in community of practice it one of participation and custodianship. They are fostering the emergence of an autonomous community of practice. This involves ADU staff developing the necessary confidence and knowing in terms of level and intention of interventions re: group dynamics, facilitation, skills and development/capacity. In part this is reflected in the Community of Practice Development Diagram refer to Appendix 1.

The ADU person's role will vary, depending on context, purpose, needs and competencies of the community they are working with. It will also be contingent on their evolutionary dynamic. Having said that the role and skills requirement of ADU staff in relation to the communities of practice could include:

- Identifying individuals who might play critical roles in a community of practice.
- Scoping situation, context and issues.
- Playing out scenarios/developing repertoires.
- Identifying/finding seed funding or resourcing.
- Strategising with key people.
- Getting people together.
- Getting down to doing, being hands on and delivering on something for the community.

The ADU's staff role is dynamic and adaptive to fulfil their transitional responsibility to influence the community towards the achievement of autonomy. This self-guided facilitated leadership period can range in duration, and in the project's experience varied from three to six months. It requires some sensitivity to group dynamics and processes in the group to be aware of shifts towards self-direction. A further learning was that this person does not have to be an ADU staff member, it could be anyone who was prepared to engage in the role with the necessary skills, in our experience ADU alumni if supported can also undertake this responsibility. ADU staff need to participate with honest intention, be open to learning and to contribute in the community.

## Fostering leadership through communities of practice

*One of the most useful things for me was seeing the growth in others attending the workshop, particularly those who had never been exposed to these kinds of concepts [leadership] before. Reflecting on these participants' 'epiphanies' during the workshop was helpful for me, as I would like to achieve similar outcomes when I develop my own CoPs across campus.'*

*PILW Survey Response, 2007*

This comment goes to the heart of what our project has been wrestling with how to facilitate shifts in perception for staff around leadership. The intent of the project although resisted, argued and contested has been on fostering distributed leadership capability development through communities of practice. There is a critical reflection for CEDAM and other academic development units why has there been so much ambivalence exhibited by both academics and also academic development units about leadership in teaching and learning and potential approaches to fostering it. In part from this project perspective this arose from:

- ADU staff thinking they did not have the expertise to teach or facilitate this area of leadership capability development.
- Little exposure to conceptual framing of leadership and understanding about its practice among participants in the project's communities of practice, and some cynicism surrounding positional leadership.
- The ADU being unsure of its footing in the territory of social capital development and distributed leadership and in knowing how to resource this approach to leadership development.

As already noted there is a tension between positional leadership and the distributed model underpinning the community of practice approach. Positional leadership is, after all, institutionalised, rewarded, supported and recognised. Distributed or shared leadership requires the emergence of different processes for inclusion, recognition and in part decision-making within the university community. In some ways this challenges ADUs to broker new avenues for recognising, valuing and integrating this contribution within existing university structures.

To be able to effectively cultivate leadership development an ADU needs to undergo some soul searching concerning what it can offer. Through the project we have been questioning how CEDAM can:

- contribute to and practice leadership in teaching and learning;
- promote or foster the conditions or preconditions that enable leadership to emerge within the sector;
- resource and support communities of practice as effective contexts for leadership capacity building;
- track and evaluate the impact of distributed, collegial leadership on excellence in teaching & learning and on the organization as a whole;
- synergise the energies from informal communities of practice and distributed leadership in relation to established organizational structures and decision-making processes.

In exploring answers that might work for our ADU considerations have canvassed greater strategic deployment of the ADU's core resources and investing and using the developmental capacity of alumni to more effectively contribute to strategic developments in teaching and learning. An outcome of this project that CEDAM wishes to extend is the potential of communities of practice to offer an informal learning context for integrating knowledge and skills. CEDAM is also looking through the *Promoting Excellence Initiative* grant and the next round of Institutional Leadership grants to transform its historic on demand staff to academic developer model of engagement, to a model based on sets of overlapping communities and capacity development processes that draw on the expertise of CEDAM alumni and teaching award winners and other staff who have participated in this project.

Leadership as a distributed phenomenon also raises further questions for the ADU and for Carrick:

- How can we better understand and nurture leadership communities, people in diverse positions who collectively can assist the university to shape its future?
- Are there core learning capabilities? Generic areas such as:
  - Individual and collective aspiration, visions & values
  - Reflective conversation
  - Understanding complexity

## **How the Project challenged CEDAM**

This section of the report comments and reflects on how projects such as this one undertaken by CEDAM integrate with, and also change the work of an academic development unit.

Past teaching and learning grants, such as those from CAUT or CUTSD, were often conducted as mini 'research projects' with a project officer employed to advance the research. This resulted in outcomes, which at times, could be relatively quarantined from the work of the unit. This may be one of the reasons that findings might not have been embedded in the sector.

The current *Promoting Teaching and Learning Communities Project* was not able to operate in this way, for several reasons. Firstly, the insistence by the Carrick Institute for a comprehensive dissemination plan resulted in greater embedding of the project and its findings in the university and the sector. Secondly the project's focus on leadership is contextual and contingent. People developing leadership capacity start to influence each other and those within their workplace. Changing conceptions of leadership contribute to changing work practices. Use of a community of practice model as its capacity development base committed the academic development unit to responsibilities and relationships it had not envisaged.

An unexpected outcome of the project therefore was the impact that the project had on the staff of CEDAM, the impact that CEDAM had on project staff, and the implications for change within CEDAM and the university the project suggests.

Unlike other projects that could be undertaken individually with the project officer 'reporting' to the team, this project – using the community of practice model – needed the 'community' of the project

team involved. The Project Officer was able to assess very quickly when the project team was changing the nature of the project and firmly, but persuasively engaged the project team again.

The impact of being asked to engage contextually in the project for the project team (which included the four original team members plus the project officer) was unexpected. One team member felt he could not offer the time required, and withdrew. Another staff member had already planned a period of leave, and as such he could not really participate during that leave, and so he largely left the project. The result was a smaller project team, and yet a need for greater time involvement! The psychological impact of this on the two remaining CEDAM staff was considerable, given that they too shouldered their own workloads. A staff member from another College in the university, who had been an involved member of an emerging community of practice was seconded to CEDAM to work on the project, and other CEDAM activities. A further community of practice had also been initiated on Research-led Education that involved a further CEDAM staff member. The change in team dynamics required renegotiation of the project. The resultant group, with some CEDAM staff 'in' the project (or 'in' and then 'out') of the project, and others 'out' of the project resulted in tensions within the Centre. Discussions were occurring, was the project team a community of practice? Was CEDAM a community of practice?

The need to organize the dissemination event, the *Practice in Leadership Workshop* created another shift. With the *Practice in Leadership Workshop* the project team decided to 'do as I do' not just 'do as I say' and run the workshop as facilitated communities of practice. Yet another CEDAM staff member was recruited to take responsibility for organization and administration of the workshop (part-time). It also became apparent that there were insufficient people in the team to facilitate the process design for the workshop. The project team determined to ask the Super CoP members to contribute to workshop planning and preparation and also to consider participating as facilitators. Two members of the Super CoP became involved with the project team to finesse process design in the run-up to the workshop, and collectively became known as the 'the A-Team'. Meetings following-on from the workshop have not been of the project team, but of the 'A-Team'—and hence the project team has changed again, with the inclusion of these additional members. Following the conclusion of the Workshop the Workshop administrator moved onto other jobs, and others in CEDAM refocused on existing and new projects arising again from Carrick funding.

At the conclusion of the project the remaining project team bears only a very slight resemblance to the project team, which put in the application. However during the project rollout and implementation stages it did work as a community of practice—the members were committed to the project, to each other, and to building each member's capacity for leadership in teaching and learning. The experience of the *Promoting Learning and Teaching Communities Project* has changed CEDAM and is having an ongoing impact on CEDAM's work.