

Critical project issues/findings

For CEDAM and the ANU to develop and build on the outcomes of the *Promoting Teaching and Learning Communities Project* the following issues have been identified as critical points for further engagement and follow-up.

Practice

An interest in academic practice spurred the initial grant application to Carrick for CEDAM's leadership project. As the project evolved its focus shifted from the needs of an individual practitioner to the larger extra-individual aspects of academic practice as a situated, historical and cultural reality. As the project moves into closure, it has become more obvious that changing practice is not simply a matter of getting practitioners to change (practice is more than the sum of the actions of individuals), rather it requires the social, discursive and practical conditions that support and structure practice to also change.

Complexity of university context for staff

A common theme threading through much of the project work from participants has been the sense of fragmentation besetting academic staff in their working lives. Perhaps this suggests a rethinking of approaches to capacity development to appropriately resource staff to perform academic work effectively? The *Promoting Teaching and Learning Communities Project* suggests that communities of practice, resourced through academic development units, have potential to offer an integrating context for evolution of practice in higher education. The communities supported by the project have manifested an increasingly sophisticated grasp of strategic planning as core to furthering their mutual endeavour.

Academic development units balance and negotiate sectoral, institutional and local context awareness and share an appreciation of Boyer's (1990) scholarships of application, integration and teaching. Through their input in communities of practice they can expedite members being able to explore and integrate contextual understandings and practice. At this meta-level, through this participation academic development units can also transform institutional epistemologies to value and engage with practice knowledge (Kemmis 2005:395).

There is also an ethical dimension to practice and leadership that communities of practice can strengthen and promote. In part this stems from the mutual nature of endeavour and the mesh of reciprocal obligations and accountabilities that communities engender. Through appreciative inquiry the community and its members 'open' to considering how ideas and positions have evolved, and what underpins their thinking. This reflection on personal and group agency can build and promote ethical and sustainable practice. Kemmis (2005: 418) observed that communities of practice can influence the timbre of debate, the engagement with ideas and situational understandings and are able to generate alternative ways of doing things.

Multi-level, cross communities of practice

An unforeseen outcome and strength of how the project has progressed at ANU has been the accelerated development and influence manifested by people who intersect and straddle a range of communities of practice (in particular the Super Community of Practice plus another). Project indicators suggest that these community participants evolve a complex and richer understanding of university context and increasingly sophisticated means of negotiating it. As claimed earlier in the report, participation in the Super Community of Practice and also *The Practice in Leadership Workshop*, has been, for people active in other communities of practice, transformative. They are manifesting shifts in awareness of self as leader or in actions that indicate leadership. Additionally in some cases the inter-penetration and overlap of issues between various communities of practice has also accelerated endeavour and development within the communities. It is a type of satellite intelligence meshing, overlapping and intersecting interests, skills, opportunities, and strategies for change. This is a higher-order form of organisational interaction and of value-adding, that CEDAM is seeking to further explore, understand and support.

Communities of practice

The project team did discover that communities of practice are frontloaded in terms of resourcing and inputs to seed and nurture them through an establishment phase that can attenuate. Resourcing units and staff need to be active, patient and persistent through this period—it is a discipline to make haste slowly. When a community enters the developmental stage, or when, as in our case, this developmental stage is expedited through an intervention such as the Super Community of Practice, the community begins to assert its autonomy as it moves towards becoming self-directed. At this stage the benefits flowing from the community of practice, and the potential transformation in the membership, gathers momentum. At a basic level some key benefits of communities of practice, that the project has reinforced, are that they:

- support dialogue between people working across business units, disciplines or across institutions in the higher education;
- enable people to construct their experiences together;
- create and sustain more holistic explanations of organizations and systems and the intricate inter-relationships that arise between them; and
- generate social and organizational return on institutional investment that adds to its stock or practice knowledge and social capital.

It is also important for others to be aware of pitfalls involved in this approach, such as:

- underestimating the resourcing or investment requirements communities of practice demand in their incubation and development phases;
- assuming that this approach to engagement will have little impact on the academic development unit;
- of expecting short term gains, wins or outcomes from this model; and
- the attendant responsibilities that seed from a learning partnership premised on mutual engagement.

Super CoP

In CEDAM's experience of the *Promoting Teaching and Learning Communities Project* a key project outcome has been the success of the Super Community of Practice as a fast-track incubator for distributed leadership development and also for resourcing emergent and ongoing communities of practice. In summary the benefits and strengths of the Super Community of Practice have included its capacity to empower members to:

- address the practical problems issues impacting on the work of university staff;
- integrate and synthesize their knowledge, skills and context understanding to effectively perform within their workplaces;
- collaborate in meaning-making and transformation of practices;
- generate and link social capital allowing members to leverage resources, ideas, information and knowledge;
- engage in informal learning (mutual group and individual learning);
- work together for mutually productive gains;
- exert *collaborative* force or influence within the university;
- broaden the base of leadership in the academy; and
- seed and develop further communities of practice.

The Super Community of Practice is an environment that is generative of new approaches to practice that can transform individual and group knowledge into strategic action. There is an imperative for the Super CoP and CEDAM to further research the idea of 'group learning' and 'distributed leadership'. Michael Eraut suggested research strategies that track changes in group understanding from evidence of reasons or rationale for actions or decisions taken by the community and group capabilities again tracked from actions taken by the community.

There is also a desire to further explore the synergy between Super CoP as a capacity building structure and the catalysing imperative of an external performance requirement such as the *Practice in Leadership Workshop*. In terms of Super CoP's development the workshop was resented as an external CEDAM imposition, however project staff and Super CoP members are now questioning if there is a co-dependency in terms of capacity development.

Facilitation and resourcing

The project has clearly identified that skilled process facilitation and resourcing are critical to formation and sustainability of communities of practice ... particularly in a complex academic context in which staff feel somewhat alienated.

Effective facilitation is a contextually adaptive and responsive set of skills and behaviors developed over time. This form of facilitation focuses on group dynamics—the way people interact and relate to one another in the course of working together. It highlights the principles, methods, techniques and tools community members choose to use to enhance what they are doing. Over time this approach builds both individual and collective collaboration skills. Process facilitation involves:

- observation and monitoring;

- intervening in appropriate ways;
- using intervention sets such as modeling more effective behaviors, provision of feedback, stimulating open dialogue, suggesting alternative approaches, or mentoring.

It has been used consciously in the Super Community of Practice to foster effective relationships to enable the group to achieve its purpose and objectives.

In community of practice establishment phase this critical resourcing usually does not spring from the group. In our project it rested entirely with project staff, until gradually the community of practice shifted into a developmental phase in which members become increasingly familiar with what process facilitation is, what role it plays in community functioning and the skills needed to undertake it.

For areas interested in replicating this approach it is important to understand that this is core resourcing and that people consistently:

- underestimate the sophistication of these skills;
- the centrality of them to community of practice dynamics; and
- the time taken up by this necessary background work and process preparation.

For the project a ratio of 4:1 is indicative, that is for every hour spent in face-to-face group work there will be at least four hours of process preparation work. The work can include relationship building, process design planning, scoping issues and resources, debriefings, mentoring and coaching others in how to plan process, reflection and analysis of process, and memory and meaning-tracking for the group in its establishment phase.

It is also important that others be aware that there is a high level of **resistance** to this resourcing commitment in the group, and also in the project base (in our case Academic Development Unit) due to:

- assumptions that anyone can facilitate (like anyone can teach!?) it is just setting an agenda and refereeing contributions;
- a prevailing culture that does not value or recognise an investment outside their particular disciplinary domain;
- a focus on content at the expense of process
- challenges in measurability of outcomes or progress; and
- its inherent invisibility being background, rather than foreground activity.

Distributed leadership in teaching & learning

In undertaking this Carrick Institutional leadership project an ongoing challenge has been the wall of ambivalence or rejection of the need for leadership capacity development for academic staff engaged in teaching and learning. This reaction manifests in both academic staff and in academic development units across the sector. In part this may be attributable to the experiential legacy of two models of leadership and their intersection—hierarchical, positional leadership, and collegial

leadership, neither of which have proved satisfactory for meeting the challenges facing the academy.

Communities of practice have proven a useful base for developing distributed leadership capacity at ANU as they

- have open leadership boundaries which can draw on a bigger set of potential leaders than traditional approaches;
- foster leadership contributions from both individuals and the group; and
- value and use the diversity of expertise spread across the community to forge a concertive dynamic beyond the sum of its individual members.

The project has shown through its Super Community of Practice that:

- leadership requires shifts in self perception, that re-values what people bring to their work and what they can offer the university;
- a community of practice catalyses this shift in perception through members making sense of self as socially embedded beings in the workplace; and
- through community engagement there is a generative shift in intention—away from *what can I achieve, to what can we achieve together...*

At a behavioral level reports from *Practice in Leadership Workshop* participants and Super Community of Practice members indicate that participants have both personally and collaboratively been performing as leaders and contributing to organizational development and change. The corporate sector grasps how instrumental informal networks are to the dissemination of information, ideas and practice and their contributions to leadership and change management within organizations. The higher education sector needs to recognise, value and invest in its institutional networkers as leaders. They are a crucial layer in the diffusion of innovative practice and change within their universities. Academic development units often work with these institutional networkers and are therefore able to leverage their potential and build their leadership and practice capabilities.