

Authentic learning within the community of practice: The Advancing Teaching and Learning Program



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***Abstract:** New conceptions of teaching and learning as well as new practices and policies have been introduced to higher education in recent decades (e.g., Student Centred Learning, Problem-Based Learning, Outcomes Based Education). Advanced staff development addresses some of the professional needs of staff in times of rapid change. However, it is only when attempting to implement new approaches to teaching and learning that the more specific concerns and doubts of staff arise. Some of the outcomes of the paradigm shift introduced by the new conceptions and practices include a shift to authentic learning by academics in communities of practice and a more cooperative academic culture (Angelo, 1997). Communities of practice are valuable assets for universities. Passion for a common goal brings members together and drives them to share and advance their collective knowledge with each other. This paper considers communities of practice and their implications for staff development. The connection between communities of practice and the staff development context is then explored using the Advancing Teaching and Learning Program at the University of Western Australia (UWA) as a case study example. The authors suggest that academic staff developers can foster the development of communities of practice and provide a bridge between advanced staff development and authentic learning by teachers in the university classroom*

***Keywords:** authentic learning, communities of practice, staff development*

Introduction

Wenger and Snyder (2000b) state that “to be a successful high-performance organisation in the new economy ... you will want to create and grow learning communities” (p. 1). They suggest that community-based organisational learning is being driven by the recognition that the most valuable knowledge in any organisation is ‘tacit’ and that people need to share their knowledge and collectively bring their intelligence to bear to solve important problems.

The purpose of this paper is to consider communities of practice and their implications for staff development in higher education. The connection between communities of practice and the staff development context is then examined using the Advancing Teaching and Learning Program at the University of Western Australia (UWA) as a case study example.

“Communities of practice” and authentic learning

In recent decades, educational researchers and reformers have introduced new conceptions of teaching and learning as well as new practices, policies and organisational settings (for example, Student Centred Learning, Problem Based Learning, Outcomes Based Education). Staff development is a central component of such educational changes. Staff need to learn new ways of thinking and new skills, knowledge and attitudes to support their teaching. Bureaucratic organisations are efficient in processing large numbers of people through such changes, yet tend to create ‘one size fits all’ solutions that are unrelated to classroom contexts and teaching practice. Studies seeking to understand the different contexts and adaptations to change within educational improvement settings have found that supportive professional communities within the institution provided an organisational context for teachers that made continuous learning possible (Lieberman, 2000). Such studies point to a need for collaborative structures to reduce the isolation felt by teachers in contexts of rapid change and to provide a major channel for involving teachers in improving their practice.

Terms used to describe groups of individuals learning together include educational reform networks, learning communities and communities of practice. Such communities are described by Lieberman (2000) as loose, borderless and flexible organisations well suited to adapting to rapid change and inventing new structures and activities that are responsive to their members. Wenger and Snyder (2000a) define communities of practice as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (p. 139). They organise themselves, determine their own agendas and establish their own leadership. Members have a personal commitment to the work of the community. Brown and Duguid (2000) differentiate between communities of practice and networks of practice. The former are defined as “relatively tight-knit groups of people who know each other and work together directly” while networks of practice are defined as “social systems [that] can share information relating to the members’ common practices quite efficiently” (pp. 142-3).

Turner, Brown and Duguid (2000, p. 127, cited in Hung and Chen, 2001) state that “practice is an effective teacher and community of practice [is] an ideal learning environment” (p. 4). Members “solve problems, discuss insights and share information ... They mentor and coach each other” (Wenger and Snyder, 2000b, p. 3). Communities of practice are effective sites for authentic learning (Hansman, 2001). In authentic learning environments, substantial conversation between learners occurs allowing learners to construct their own meanings and to produce knowledge that they truly own (Derryberry, 1998). Such learning is a social process in which the conversation and tasks enable learners to encounter real life situations from a variety of perspectives as they are exposed to the range of opinions and attitudes of others (Radloff, 1999). Tasks have real-world relevance and produce a variety of outcomes (Herrington, 1997). Synthesising situated cognition, Vygotskian thought and communities of practice, Hung and Chen (2001) proposed four dimensions of learning that contribute to a vibrant and sustaining community of practice: situatedness, commonality, interdependency and infrastructure (Hung and Chen, 2001, p. 7). Does embedding these principles of authentic learning into a staff development program encourage vibrant and sustaining communities of practice that positively impact on the classroom teaching of its members?

Authentic learning by academics in communities of practice and a more cooperative academic culture are some of the outcomes of the paradigm shift introduced by the new conceptions of teaching and learning (Angelo, 1997). Despite advanced staff development, it is only “when people actually try to implement new approaches and reforms that they have the most specific

concerns and doubts” (Fullan, 1991, p. 85). This paper suggests that communities of practice may provide a bridge between advanced staff development and the authentic learning that goes on in the environment of the university classroom.

Wenger and Snyder (2000b) observe that:

Although communities of practice are fundamentally informal and self-organising, they benefit from cultivation. Like gardens they respond to attention that respects their nature. You can’t tug on a cornstalk to make it grow faster or taller, and you shouldn’t yank a marigold out of the ground to see if it has roots. You can, however, till the soil, pull out weeds, add water during dry spells, and ensure that your plants have the proper nutrients.

How can academic staff developers cultivate the development of communities of practice as one means of bridging the gap between advanced staff development and authentic learning by teachers in the university classroom?

Communities of practice and the staff development context: A case study

To be responsive to the expanding role and changing demands on the academic and to emerging issues in higher education, the University of Western Australia (UWA) offers a comprehensive approach to academic staff development through its Organisational and Staff Development Services (OSDS) unit (Goody and Ingram, 2001).

The core teaching and learning program offered by OSDS, *Foundations of University Teaching and Learning*, aims to assist teaching staff at all levels and in all subject areas to develop an effective approach to teaching. While the Foundations program is aimed at new academic staff who are beginning to teach, experienced academic staff who want to refine, test out, validate or develop their present conceptions of good teaching and their current teaching practice also enrol in the program.

For some time, staff at OSDS had been concerned about the professional development needs of senior staff in the University who were responsible for teaching and learning in faculties and schools. The Advancing Teaching and Learning Program was developed in response to the need for professional development for senior staff and excellent teachers beyond the introductory Foundations program. The program provides a unique senior-level professional development opportunity for those who influence the quality of teaching and learning in faculties and schools: deans, school heads and teachers who are recognised as excellent.

The program was designed as a Forum, a full-day workshop with nationally and internationally recognised teachers invited to address critical issues in teaching and learning, followed by Summits, which are half-day workshops addressing a key critical issue in teaching and learning identified by participants in the Forum. The first Forum was held in May 2001 followed by the first Summit in September 2001.

Heads of School and the Faculty Deans were invited by the Deputy Vice Chancellor to participate in *An Invitational Forum for Leaders of Excellence in Teaching and Learning at UWA*. Heads of School were also requested to extend this invitation to one or two experienced teachers from their schools who demonstrate excellence in teaching and learning. Seventy six people attended the first Forum with representatives from each faculty including

all the Faculty Deans. Workshops were limited to twenty participants except Problem Based Learning, which was limited to twelve participants at the request of the facilitator.

The Forum was an opportunity for participants to consider and explore four critical issues in teaching and learning. Authentic learning is embedded in the rich contexts of practice enabling learners to gain both implicit and explicit knowledge. Problems are faced in the context of the classroom and a demand is created for the teacher (as a learner about teaching) to solve the problem. The performance of the teacher is based on finding successful solutions. Based on current themes in the higher education literature and anecdotal feedback gathered by OSDS staff from teachers in the University classrooms, staff involved in developing the Advancing Teaching and Learning Program identified problems faced by teachers in the context of the classroom. Four critical issues were then identified as a focus of the Forum. These were:

- Developing in students the critical ability to learn how to learn;
- Taking a problem-based approach to learning;
- Teaching in large classes; and
- Effective small group teaching.

Leadership of the discussion was taken by four distinguished teachers, including two winners of the 2000 Australian Awards for University Teaching. Speakers were practicing teachers in the university classroom who represented a cross-section of disciplines: commerce, science, medicine and the humanities. They addressed the critical issues in both a plenary session and through workshops. The day was designed so that everyone could participate in two of the four workshops, thereby addressing both cross-disciplinary and discipline-specific issues.

Participants were asked to provide written feedback on a number of items after the Forum. These included the two aspects they found most useful at the Forum, the extent to which their understanding of the issues had changed, how useful the sessions had been to their thinking about their teaching and whether they were likely to change their teaching as a result of what they had learned at the Forum. They were also asked how useful the Forum had been for advancing teaching and learning at UWA and what topics they would like addressed in the Summits. As a result the first Summit addressed *Outcomes-based education in the tertiary sector*. Heads of School and the Faculty Deans were again invited to participate in the Summit and to extend this invitation to one or two experienced teachers from their schools who demonstrate excellence in teaching and learning. Because Outcomes Based Education is new to the tertiary sector in Western Australia, speakers for the first Summit, on the topic Outcomes-Based Education in the Tertiary Sector, were drawn from the West Australian Curriculum Council and the West Australian Department of Education as well as practicing teachers from within the University. Speakers again represented a cross-section of disciplines: education, engineering, science and the humanities. Participants were also asked to provide written feedback regarding the Summit.

The aims of the Advancing Teaching and Learning program are to increase the awareness of senior staff about current critical issues in teaching and learning in higher education and to encourage them to consider the implications for practice within their disciplines and schools. It is also an opportunity for the sharing of ideas and strategies for improving teaching and learning across schools and faculties.

Learning is a social act mediated between social beings through language. It facilitates identity formation and membership of a particular group, those who have shared interests and problems that require them to work together. Through their joint efforts in common areas, participants develop a shared bond or identity.

The opportunity to discuss across the University issues about teaching and to find that others were also keen to make changes to improve their learning was noted by participants as a useful aspect of the Forum. The different viewpoint afforded by exposure to what was happening in other faculties was also appreciated. As one participant wrote, the Forum was *“a good opportunity for informal discussion and networking across the University, particularly with people from other faculties”*. Others appreciated the *“rare chance to exchange Faculty viewpoints”* and *“the views on teaching/learning from the perspective of varied disciplines”*.

Learning is socially distributed. Novices need to interact with more capable peers. Both the Forum and Summit addressed this need and this was confirmed by the participants. The experiences of those in other schools and universities was greatly valued as indicated by responses to a question about the two most useful things learned at the Forum and at the Summit. Summit participants commented on the models of another university’s *“experience in 1st year Biology”*, *“Engineering’s experience”* and the *“model of how a school implemented change”*.

Participants’ interactions with others are based on their “varying needs, expertise (knowledge and skills), perspectives and opinions” (Hung and Chen, 2001, p. 7). Individuals learn from their own activities as well as from other participants. Learning is also demand driven. It needs to be embedded in a meaningful activity context. Participants considered the workshops to be a valuable opportunity for exposure to different ways of thinking and to practical ideas. As one participant commented *“this [workshop] had the possibility of application in my area, and the opportunity to work through a problem with time out spots for discussion was helpful in ways to move forward”*. Another wrote *“I had planned changes but the Forum has given me practical information about how to do this”*.

Learning is facilitated by meaningful activity. Meaningful activity is fostered by appropriate structures, such as administration and information, and accountability mechanisms such as the credibility of contributors. The credibility of the contributors to the Advancing Teaching and Learning Program was a significant factor in facilitating the learning that took place. As Hung and Chen (2001) observe, “Learning is about dialoguing in matters that we need to understand or that trouble us; not just dialoguing with anyone, but with those that can challenge us, those who can provide us with a difference” (p. 10).

Overall the Forum was considered to be useful in helping to advance teaching and learning at UWA. One participant commented that it provided *“reinforcement of [the University’s] commitment to good teaching”* while another commented that *“pitching this workshop at a high level, ie to heads of schools and deans, has been helpful at awakening them to the nature of teaching issues on the ground level for lecturers”*. The Summit was also considered *“very useful”*, *“a good start on the topic”* and *“thoroughly worthwhile”*.

Authentic learning in the community of practice

UWA is a highly devolved research intensive university. While the Deputy Vice Chancellor accepts ultimate responsibility for the teaching and learning in the University, the Faculties and Schools are responsible for the overall coordination and direction of teaching in their units. The Advancing Teaching and Learning program sought to increase the awareness of senior staff about current critical issues in teaching and learning in higher education. It also encouraged them to consider the implications for practice within their disciplines and schools. Participants took the opportunity to share ideas and strategies from across schools and faculties for improving teaching and learning. However, there was no informal but continuous way to interact with each other or to share ideas. This was left to individuals to pursue with those they met on the day and with their own networks within their faculties and schools.

During October and November OSDS received several requests for OSDS participation in school and faculty retreats in the area of outcomes based education. Given the demands on OSDS staff at the time, participation was limited. OSDS staff were however able to attend part of a workshop arranged by Faculty of Agriculture staff to address the needs of staff involved in the unit Ecosystems Processes 100 (EP100). This unit is a first year unit taken by all students in Agriculture. The unit was problematic, suffering a variety of factors including poor student perception of the unit. The current course coordinator thought that shifting to a more clearly defined outcome based approach might alleviate some of the existing problems. The Faculty Dean was enthusiastic about implementing Problem Based Learning in the Faculty. For the workshop, speakers from both the Forum and the Summit had been asked to return to the University and to address the Faculty of Agriculture staff on how their area of expertise could meet the needs of staff, specifically those wanting to improve the EP100 unit.

The workshop was held in early December and followed a similar pattern to the Forum and Summit with presentations followed by workshops. Enthusiasm for incorporating change into the unit rose as the speakers worked through their material. By the end of the first workshop, plans were put into place to have weekly follow up sessions to begin work on revamping the unit for first semester 2002.

Subsequent to this workshop, OSDS staff have presented a workshop on student learning teams to the EP100 teaching team. The aim of this workshop was to help the teaching group further develop the course by embedding team skills into the learning outcomes of the course. OSDS staff have continued this involvement through working with the team and the EP100 students. Observation of the process of discussion and debate about teaching and learning outcomes initiated and facilitated by the EP100 teaching team suggest the development of a community of practice.

Conclusion

The EP100 teaching team is an example of a “community of practice” as described by Lieberman (2000) and Wenger and Snyder (2000a). The team has come together in response to the need for change through new structures and the needs of their students. They bring their shared expertise to the unit and through this process of restructuring the unit the teaching team has considered, discussed and debated broader issues of teaching and learning.

The Advancing Teaching and Learning Program has been an effective means to bridge the gap in professional development between novice teachers seeking a foundation on which to build their teaching practice and experienced teachers and leaders who seek a foundation on which to initiate change in the higher education context. The development of communities of practice has been cultivated through the creation of a program by OSDS that served as an impetus for conversations about teaching and learning within faculties, schools and unit teaching teams. This has provided the means to bridge the gap between advanced staff development and authentic learning by teachers in the university classroom.

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