

Formally calling the CoPs for staff working with first year students

Ann Luzeckyj, Centre for University Teaching, Flinders University
Karen Agutter & Regina Sliuzas, Academic and Student Services Division, Student Learning
Centre

Lisa Schmidt, Flinders Medical Science and Technology, Medical Biotechnology
Louise Reynolds, Flinders Prevention, Promotion and Primary Health Care, Social Health
Sciences

Abstract

Drawing on both Community of Practice (CoP) and First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) literature this nuts and bolts session will explore whether the FYHE community may be identified as a CoP. This discussion will be used as a springboard to a presentation on the development of CoPs that support the FYHE teaching community in other Australian universities and the establishment of the CoP for staff who work with first year students at Flinders University. The presentation will outline why a CoP was established to support first year teaching and how the initiative is progressing. Participants will be provided with time to either consider the CoPs at their own institutions or to consider whether investing in one is an appropriate strategy to support staff who work with first year students.

Background on Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice (CoPs) were initially identified as ways of developing knowledge and performance within organisations. Businesses embraced them as they were regarded as opportunities to gain competitive advantage by harnessing the informal networks that staff developed to solve problems (Nickols, 2000; Wenger, 1998, 2006). Similarly in higher education, CoPs have been used throughout the 1990's in Australian universities as a way of developing and implementing change (Hegarty, 2008). However, the effectiveness and value of translating CoPs from business settings to Australian universities has been contested by scholars who argue that academic work practices differ significantly from those of business and industry (Nagy and Burch (2009). In fact Nagy and Burch (2009) contend that the imposition of corporate cultures within universities has resulted in "impediments to wide-spread across institution collegial activity". Despite this, they suggest that CoPs can develop within academic communities provided the "contextual peculiarities of the higher education environment" are explicitly recognized "as the existence of these make CoP-like activities more challenging in academe" (p. 236).

In spite of the challenges outlined above, a number of CoPs have developed both within and across Australian universities. Institutions that have established CoPs include Deakin University; the University of Southern Queensland (USQ); the Australian National University (ANU); RMIT University; the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the Queensland University Technology (QUT) (Lawrence & Sankey, 2008; Nagy & Burch, 2009; Wilson, 2007). National CoPs have also developed around issues of interest to specific groups of staff, for example the

Foundations of University Teaching (FOUT) Community of Practice which meets annually for a colloquia (Flinders University, 2009b). Although it is not formally described as such it may be possible to consider that the Pacific Rim FYHE community which convenes annually, is in fact a CoP as it regularly brings together people who share a passion for first year teaching and learning related issues and who wish to share ideas and learn from each other.

Defining a Community of Practice (CoP)

In their Nuts and Bolts paper presented at the 2009 FYHE conference Quinn, Smith, Duncan, Clarke, & Nelson (2009) provided a formal definition of CoPs based on the literature. While acknowledging the common elements of the definitions outlined by Quinn et al. (2009), and those included within the literature (Nickols, 2000; Smith, 2009; Wenger, 1998, 2006), rather than repeat these definitions, for the purposes of this paper, we will use the definition adopted by Flinders University. At Flinders, a CoP is based on principles of promoting “collegiality and trust” and is described as “a group of people who, through regular meetings share a common area of interest that increases their individual and collective knowledge” (Flinders University, 2009a). Such groups are facilitated by academic staff on a voluntary basis, are open to any interested individual from any area of the university, are not subject to any institutional expectations and all outcomes and knowledge creation is driven by members. Flinders CoPs are supported by the Pro-Vice Chancellor, Academic and a small amount of funding is provided to aid facilitation; meet incidental costs of running the CoPs and for catering at meetings and events. One particular CoP at Flinders is dedicated to first year students. This CoP recognises the diverse needs of the increasing numbers of first year students entering our university with different academic, cultural and social expectations and experiences. It thereby acknowledges the importance of a “wholistic” transition i.e. beyond the focus of “going to university”. As the literature indicates (Kantanis, 2000; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Tinto, 2009) and our own knowledge and understanding affirms, students' experiences in the first year of university can significantly affect academic success, engagement, retention and perseverance across their chosen field of study. These same sources identify the widespread awareness of the need to support students through their first year at university, as they navigate their new and often challenging learning environment which holds unfamiliar academic expectations, and often includes a need to establish new friendships and social networks.

The Flinders University Community of Practice for staff working with first year students

The notion of developing a CoP to support staff teaching first year courses is not new, other CoPs have been instigated at QUT, USQ and UNSW (Lawrence & Sankey, 2008; Quinn, et al., 2009; Wilson, 2007). At Flinders University, the CoP initiative is being utilised as an opportunity to reinvigorate and redefine the work that has previously been conducted independently and through other groups to support first year teaching. While not replacing those other groups, the CoP has been established as a means to support coordination of university wide support through a more informal and voluntary capacity and to meet the needs as identified by staff, rather than bringing staff together to address imposed, institutional requirements.

Four questions were posed at the initial meeting of the CoP as a way of initiating discussion and to guide the CoP development. These were:

1. Why are we here?

2. What do we hope to achieve from participation in this CoP?
3. How can we / what can we do to - help each other?
4. What else should be considered?

Participants responded to the questions with enthusiasm, identifying a variety of reasons for wishing to participate in the CoP. Key issues that might benefit from sharing of experience amongst CoP members were identified: how to address non attendance at lectures; working with large classes; identifying ways of supporting students as they develop new study skills and do not realise what they need to learn; raising awareness of current practice in other faculties or at other institutions; as well as considering opportunities for research and publication. A smaller research group was established at the end of the first meeting and this group has met and identified potential areas for further research that may inform practice at Flinders University and that may provide opportunities for dissemination of the findings through publication.

Challenges

Although our initiative is in its infancy, our start has been particularly positive. According to Lawrence and Stankey (2008) broad success within their own CoP at the University of Southern Queensland could be measured in terms of positive staff perceptions and the value of the social, collegial and mentoring aspects of meetings and that has certainly been our experience to date with one participant exclaiming after the first meeting “wow, I have already learned something”. Despite this, a number of challenges to the continuation of the initiative are evident. While some of these challenges are issues of logistics and participation, others are concerned with the ever difficult issue of quantification and the measurement of success, in line with the more corporate culture of the modern university (Alvesson, 2001).

Since our inception in late 2009 the facilitator has only met with twelve of the twenty one staff who initially expressed an interest in participating, due in part to the end of the academic year. Furthermore, the CoP has only met once to date (and the research sub-group have met twice) so it is too early to determine how the group will progress and whether enthusiasm and momentum will be maintained. Participation will be tested at the next meeting in February, and once the academic term begins. However, it is hoped that, despite the difficulties of timetabling which always occur and which are particularly evident across discipline and faculty boundaries, the enthusiasm will be maintained.

Perhaps the greater challenge, as indicated above, will be determining whether the CoP is successful and identifying how success should be measured. As with many other ‘professional development’ activities it will be difficult to determine the value of the CoP to first year students and to the institution. Continued participation from staff and feedback that indicates they are able to develop strategies that support them in their endeavours to inspire success in their first year students is one way of determining whether formally calling the CoP for staff working with first year students was a practical and worthwhile endeavour. It is intended that participants who continue to attend CoP meetings will be surveyed and that the results of the survey and other outcomes of the CoP will be published through the research sub-group.

These future publications will serve two purposes, they will provide an opportunity to formally evaluate the impact of the CoP and they will provide an output, especially if published in a

recognised, high impact journal. Whatever the means, any methodology that is used to measure the success of the CoP will need to ensure that the integrity of the community is maintained and that the institution's unique contextual idiosyncrasies are acknowledged and where relevant upheld. Perhaps, if we can momentarily cast aside the need for more formal measurement, the true values of the Flinders CoP for staff working with first year students are the immeasurable aspects: the regular meetings of a group of people who share a knowledge and a passion for the first year experience and who wish to interact, share and learn from each other. If we can provide a 'community' which exchanges knowledge and experience across disciplines then, at least according to our own measurement, we will have succeeded.

Outcomes of FYHE session

The fact that this will be the third session which discusses CoPs for staff working with first year students at the FYHE conference since 2007 is perhaps an indication of the importance and potential for this form of interaction. In the previous sessions, Wilson (2007) reported on UNSW's use of the concept of CoPs to develop a staff centred approach to supporting first year teaching and learning and in 2009 Quinn et al. gave a nuts and bolts session where the issue of sustainability of CoPs was discussed. While revisiting the idea of CoPs and first year higher education the true intention of this session is to provide participants with an opportunity to discuss the CoPs that exist within their own institutions or to reflect on whether investing in a CoP is a viable strategy for them to pursue as a way of supporting staff involved in working with first year students. The following session outline is designed to provide participants with the opportunity to consider whether 'calling the CoPs' is a valuable and viable strategy.

Session outline

Whole group discussion ice breaker (5 mins): Consider the question: is the Pacific Rim FYHE community a CoP? Does thinking about it in this way change anything?

Facilitators (5 minutes): Outline of CoPs and the initiative at Flinders University.

Paired discussion (10 mins): Ask pairs of participants to consider one or more of the following:

1. the potential value of developing a CoP for staff working with first year students within their own institutions.
2. how existing CoPs for staff working with first year students operate within their home institutions.
3. how the value of a CoP for staff working with first year students may be measured. Specifically consider - value to facilitators; value to participants; value to students; value to institution.

Facilitators + Whole group discussion (10 mins): Draw together ideas from floor – what has come up that has not been part of Flinders' experience? Also discuss whether participants would consider/have considered developing a CoP within their own institutions or nationally.

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