

The advantages to students, staff and the university in the strategic development of networks and connections within a first year tutoring team

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Abstract

Collaboration, collegiality and networks are a vital component of the success of students and of universities in general. In an era of increasing casualization, it can be difficult to ensure that sessional staff feel a sense of belonging and are properly resourced to support their students. This paper examines the nature and potential of the relationships of a large, foundational, first year teaching team. In a survey of 22 staff, the study found high levels of social capital, manifested as trust, relatedness and collaborative tendencies. Staff considered their networks to be very important to their success in teaching, providing access to information, resources and support. Much weaker connections were identified within the wider university institution, potentially resulting in an over-reliance on internal networks and a paucity of access to new ideas. This paper discusses the benefits of social capital for tutors, teaching teams, students and the university institution.

Introduction

The first year experience, and indeed successful engagement of students at all levels, relies on many factors and has been recognised as a university-wide responsibility (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). This endeavour requires collaboration and an environment which promotes collegiality. Collegiality has been recognised as a key influence in the university's role of supporting students (Wojcieszek, Theaker, Ratcliff, MacPherson & Boyd, 2014), and encompasses the idea of a collective body who are willing to devote time and energy and to employ democratic procedures to promote a shared purpose (Burnes, Wend & Todnem, 2014). Collegiality and strong networks can have benefits for tutors, students and the institution, with course coordinating teams, including first year experience leaders, in an ideal position to deliberately and strategically promote collegiality within their teaching teams.

Social capital

An extension of the concept of collegiality is that of social capital. Social capital, as with other forms of capital, is conceptualised as a resource: "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998:243). Theorists have recognised that social capital can produce many benefits at the individual, organisational and community level. Networks that consist of strong, bonding ties emanating from shared values, beliefs and norms are characterised by high levels of trust and reciprocity (Coleman, 1988). These networks can provide benefits of trust and belonging (Lee, 2008), improved collaboration, knowledge exchange and intellectual capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Conversely, networks based on weak, or bridging, ties are characterised by connections with diverse and dissimilar people, usually with lower levels of emotional closeness (Lee, 2008), but can provide wider access to

information and influence (Adler & Kwon, 2002) and the development of new practices (Nooteboom & Gisling, 2004). Although both open and closed networks may deliver benefits (Nooteboom & Gisling, 2004), the most effective networks comprise a mixture (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). Within an organisation, social capital can function “as both ‘glue’ and ‘lubricant’ to get things done” (Halpern 2005:59). However, in order for social capital to flourish and for individuals to form connections, the preconditions of opportunity, motivation and ability must exist (Kwon & Adler, 2014). Opportunity relates to the facility to connect, for instance physical spaces or arranged events that encourage face-to-face interaction; motivation is the desire for individuals within a network to share resources; and ability may include social competence or capacity to offer support (Kwon & Adler, 2014).

Social capital within education

Social capital and its application in the context of education has attracted limited research attention, particularly at the tertiary level. The majority of current research has explored student to student or student to teacher level connectivity. The limited research at the teacher-teacher level has recognised outcomes of improved working environments that were more open and innovative (Moolenaar, Slegers & Daly, 2012), trusting (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) and supportive (Frank, Zhao & Borman, 2004). Staff social capital has also been mooted as having positive impacts on student learning (Newmann, King & Youngs, 2000). It has been postulated that collective efficacy may be the missing link between staff social capital and student and organisational outcomes. An empirical study examining the relationship between teacher networks and student achievement in elementary schools found that bonding networks appear to nurture and support teachers’ confidence in the ability and capacity of the teaching team to impact students’ learning (Moolenaar et al., 2012). There is limited coverage of social capital at the staff level specifically in the context of higher education, providing opportunity for further exploration. The current exploratory research aimed to address this gap, seeking to determine the nature of social capital within a university teaching team and the impact of staff networks on teaching decisions, knowledge sharing and development of new ideas.

Methodology

The research incorporated a case study of a university teaching team delivering a large, institution-wide, compulsory, first year undergraduate course. As the team comprised a significant number of sessional staff, it was important that: 1) these staff shared the ethos of the course and the management team in its commitment to supporting first-year students; 2) the teaching quality and consistency of the course was retained even with large numbers of teaching staff; 3) the staff had access to the support and resources they needed to maintain consistency of teaching quality; and 4) the staff developed a positive experience from working in the course in order to generate commitment to the course and ensure future staffing needs were met (both in terms of quantity and quality). To this end, deliberate strategies were initiated to provide professional development and connections amongst staff. These strategies included:

- Extensive, paid and catered training sessions at the beginning of semesters
- Paid pre-marking workshops
- Weekly tutor meeting, discussing lesson plans and teaching goals (optional and unpaid)
- Assigning each sessional staff member to a mentor from the course management team
- Access to networking opportunities in the HUB, where weekly teaching resources as well course management staff were located
- An open door policy to the course management team

- Introductions to wider university support staff (who were regularly invited to weekly tutor meetings to answer questions and provide specialist advice)
- Social get-togethers at the beginning and end of semesters
- Opportunities to participate in collaborative research endeavours

The leadership team was interested in whether such strategies might have enhanced the development and connectedness of the tutoring team. A non-compulsory survey was delivered to all tutors (total 33, mostly comprising sessional staff). The survey was developed from existing scales, measuring perceptions in three areas. First, the importance of factors which influence teaching decisions and contribute to teaching success. Second, the strength of staff networks within the university and the experiences from these networks including perceptions of belonging, trust and collaborative support. Third, tutor access to teaching information, resources and new ideas. Most of the survey questions followed a 5-point likert scale with responses from 1 = ‘Strongly Disagree’ or ‘Not at All’, up to 5 = ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Extensively’, with some open-ended questions. The survey was anonymous and introduced at a general weekly tutor’s meeting, with an invitation also sent by email. Of the 33 staff members, 22 responded indicating a response rate of 66.7%. The majority of the respondents were female (17), aged between 41 and 60 years old (15), had taught for more than four years (15), and had taught into the course (or previous iterations of the course) before (13).

Results

Respondents identified a number of key factors as being very or extremely important to their teaching success (see Table 1). The responses fell into two categories, one being relationship-based (i.e. relatedness, trust and collaborative support) and the other being resource-based (access to information, teaching resources and new ideas). These results will be explored further in separate sections.

Sense of relatedness amongst team	85%	Access to information and advice	96%
Trusting relationships within team	91%	Access to teaching resources	86%
Being part of a supportive team	96%	Access to new ideas and information	84%

Table 1: Elements important to teaching success (very or extremely important)

Relatedness, trust, and collaborative support within networks

The concepts of relatedness, trust and collaborative support are indicators of bonding social capital. Respondents rated their degree of relatedness (feelings of acceptance) with both fellow tutors and the supervisory team highly, with relatedness to management team higher than to other tutors. Conversely, the level of relatedness to the institution was rated much lower than

<i>In your relationships at this university, indicate how strongly you feel...</i>	Colleagues	Management team	University
.. supported	79%	95%	25%
..understood	53%	74%	13%
..listened to	74%	84%	20%
..valued	68%	79%	13%
..safe	68%	74%	20%

Table 2: Perceptions of Relatedness (agree / strongly agree)

the other two networks, particularly in the areas of being valued and understood (see Table 2 & Fig 1). Confirming this, in a separate question, all respondents (100%) reported a sense of kinship amongst the group.

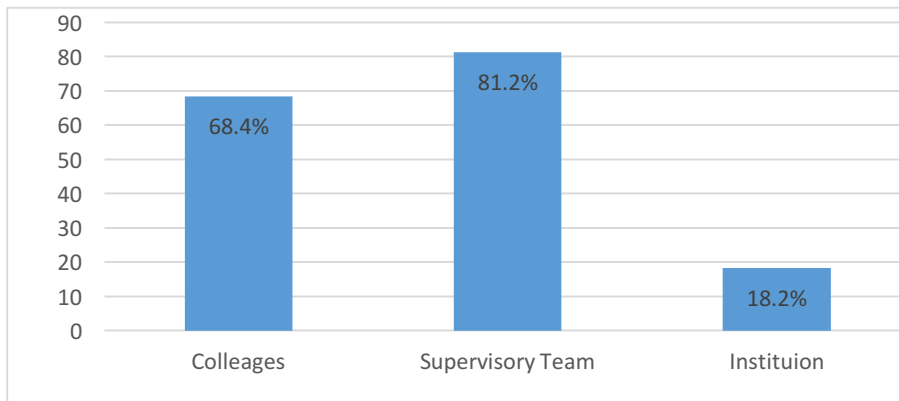


Fig 1: Sense of Relatedness/ Acceptance (agree / strongly agree)

Trust within the group was also seen as important. In fact, participants rated trust in their university networks as higher than their overall disposition to trust people in general (Table 3).

Generalised trust:		Specific trust (those in teaching network)...	
People usually tell the truth	65%	..would tell me the truth	85%
People can be counted on to do what they say	90%	..would follow through on promised favour	100%
People are basically honest	90%	..would show up to arranged meeting	100%
Experts can be relied upon to tell truth about knowledge limits	45%	I can talk freely and they want to listen	95%
		..would not discuss confidences with others	45%

Table 3: Perceptions of Trust (agree or strongly agree)

Staff reported being fully prepared to trust people in the network in terms of instrumental expectations, such as turning up to arranged meetings or following through on a promised favour. They also trusted the honesty and truth-telling of colleagues, and the more affective expectation of being able to talk freely and be listened to. One exception to the high rating was the perception that the teaching network could be trusted to keep their confidences, where only 45% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (30% disagreed 25% were uncommitted). Yet, in a separate question on their experiences within the teaching network, over 70% reported that they did not believe that colleagues would use confidential information to their advantage.

In terms of support and collaboration, tutors demonstrated their willingness to be generous with their ideas and reported an experience of mutual collaboration (see Table 4). Most of respondents expressed a willingness to share their own ideas with others in the network if they thought it would benefit. They also identified a high level of perceived support amongst tutors and of seeking teaching support from colleagues.

Willingness to share ideas with others in network	86%
Perceived support from tutoring team	95%
Extent of access to teaching support from colleagues	75%

Table 4: Collaboration/Perceptions of Support (agree / strongly agree)

These findings demonstrate a high level of bonding social capital (in terms of relatedness, trust, and collaborative support) amongst tutors in the course. As indicated earlier, these elements were seen by the tutors as key for teaching success. These network resources often increased the motivation to teach within the case study course and seemed to increase job satisfaction. In

fact, almost half (10/22) respondents specifically mentioned the connection to networks and working in a collegial environment as a motivation for teaching into the course, such as in the comments below:

“The team is truly wonderful to work for, I like working for the lovely supportive team”

“I like the collegiate atmosphere in the course”

Influence of internal and external networks on teaching performance

Networks, both bonding and bridging, can affect choices and outcomes for staff. In terms of the types of networks accessed by the tutoring team, all respondents reported having a larger number of people in internal university networks than external networks. Identified key contacts were far more likely to come from within the course, i.e. fellow tutor, team leader or course mentor (9), along with some other contacts within the university (11). Only a few respondents identified someone outside of the university environment as a key contact (7). Respondents also reported being more likely to access information/advice and resources from within internal networks rather than external (see Figure 2).

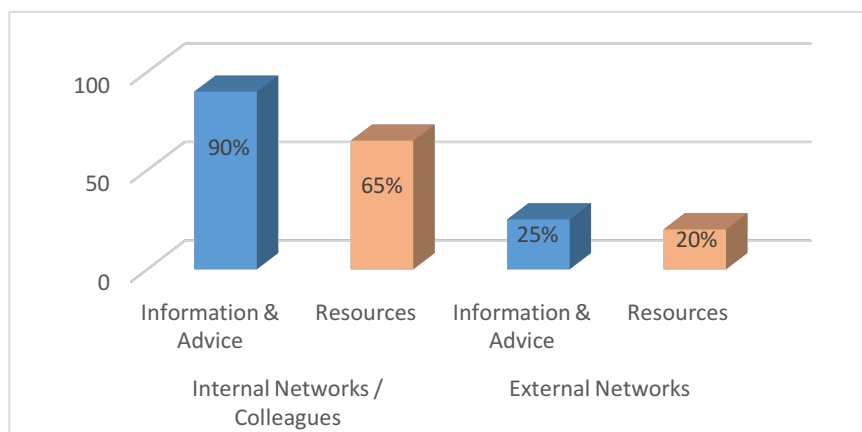


Fig 2: Access to Information/Resources (regularly/extensively)

In terms of new information and ideas, an open-ended question revealed a strong reliance on colleagues as well as professional development/ training sessions. Apart from the inclusion of access to research findings and journal articles by some staff, there was little specific mention of accessing external

sources for new information and ideas. As mentioned earlier, respondents placed great importance on access to information, resources and new ideas for their teaching success, and the results indicate that the internal networks of teaching colleagues feature highly in meeting these needs, with less value placed on new information and ideas from external networks.

Discussion:

The results of this research demonstrate a high level of social capital amongst the tutoring staff in a large, first-year university course. Social capital is an important consideration for leadership at the course, school, faculty or institutional level as it can have significant benefits for staff wellbeing and development, student engagement and institutional operations.

One level of benefit of increased social capital is for the individual staff member. The perception by tutors of acceptance from both colleagues and the supervisory/management team was found to be particularly high. While it was hoped and expected that the tutors would feel supported, listened to and valued by the management team (given the open-door policy, access to staff mentors, and provision of high quality resources and training), the high rating of perception of acceptance from other tutors was also gratifying. Our respondents

overwhelmingly commented on the kinship and support they experienced within the team. Alienation and isolation can be common amongst staff who support the first-year cohort, particularly as many of these staff may have sessional appointments (Coombe & Clancy, 2002; Wojcieszek et al., 2014). For these staff a sense of collegiality and belonging can be very important and yet difficult to achieve. There is evidence from our research that social capital has served to reduce isolation amongst sessional staff, and the specific strategies of group training and social functions seems to have provided staff with the opportunity to connect with their peers. Other benefits of social capital for individuals can include increased personal wellbeing (Lee 2008), both psychological and physical (Lin & Erickson, 2008) and job satisfaction (Bye, 2012). For staff, social capital can provide a level of faith and confidence in one another and the institution as a whole to operate in their best interests (Ghosh, Whipple & Bryan, 2001). The case study findings suggest that respondents experienced a desirable and appreciative working environment.

“I love ... the interaction with my colleagues”

“I feel valued”

As well as affective benefits, there can be instrumental benefits for individual staff from social networks. Sessional staff often struggle to access sufficient information and support (Coombe & Clancy, 2002) which can be important, not only for teaching success, but also for career success. Concern has been raised about the lack of access to professional development opportunities for sessional staff (Anderson, 2007). One of the most noted benefits of social capital is in the area of occupational attainment, whereby increased access to information and knowledge from social networks can lead to improvements in both general functioning and career advancement (Cohen & Prusak, 2001). As well as providing a high level of information and resources to assist with teaching, the management team employed deliberate strategies to provide sessional staff with professional information and advice, as well as opportunities to engage in research collaborations, with the specific aim of enhancing their professional status and future employability. For sessional staff such a boost in their professional status can be important in achieving future secure employment.

“It is an opportunity to further develop my knowledge/skills”

“I want to create a new and varied career for myself”

The benefits of social capital are not only available to tutors, but also to students. There are indications that strong professional teacher communities produce increased student learning (Newmann et al., 2000), which in more recent years has resulted in educational policy and practice reforms moving to embrace teacher collaboration (Gable & Manning, 1997). Although limited, recent studies also indicate that, as well as learning, student achievement may be enhanced through strong teacher networks (Moolenaar et al., 2012). Pil and Leana (2009) found that strong ties between teachers were very important for better improving student performance. Goddard, Goddard and Tschannen-Moran (2007) suggest the relationship between teacher collaboration and student achievement is likely ‘indirect’. Therefore, student achievement may be boosted through the benefits to teachers from enhanced collaboration, with scholars referring to feelings of raised sense of efficacy, equally shared responsibility and increased feelings of effectiveness (Brookhart & Loadman, 1990). For universities, improving staff social capital could improve student engagement, achievement and satisfaction.

Social capital benefits can also be realised at the institutional level, constituting a worthwhile investment from an institutional perspective. Various theorists have suggested that social

capital can lead to competitive organisational advantage through improving productivity and efficiency (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), reducing transaction costs (Lee, 2008; Coleman 1988) and with the development of new practices (Nooteboom & Gisling 2004). Social capital can also generate citizenship behaviour within an organisation, where employees act over and above allocated duties. Frank et al., (2004) reported that teachers were more likely to assist colleagues in which they had a close relationship, and furthermore, in a collective environment, were more likely to assist others even without a close relationship. The current research results indicate examples of citizenship behaviour with voluntary sharing of ideas amongst tutors. Increased commitment to workplace teams and the organisation and retention of staff are other benefits of social capital (Bye, 2012). Research in English and Canadian universities found that universities with low levels of collegiality and of staff socialisation were often perceived to care less about staff well-being (Burnes et al., 2014), and dissatisfaction with collegial relations can be the primary reason staff leave an institution (Manger & Eikeland, 1990). While there may be a perception that a stream of sessional staff will always be available, replacing, rather than retaining, skilled staff can result in a loss of efficiency and additional costs (Alexander, Bloom & Nuchols 1994). Academic staff place high value on social interactions with their colleagues and one of the aims of the course management team was a recognised need to retain high quality staff, who are crucial to the success of this course.

Another very important area of advantage, particularly within a university institution, is in knowledge exchange (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Tertiary education institutions serve as valuable knowledge reservoirs. The culture of a workplace can play a crucial role in enhancing knowledge sharing between academic staff (Sohail & Daud, 2009.) Social capital can promote a propensity or willingness of individuals to combine their knowledge and efforts with other members for the common good (Heuser, 2008). However, interaction between staff at the university level has become a complex amalgamation of competition and co-operation. Academic institutions are increasingly becoming entities with a lack of a sense of collective community coupled with an increasingly competitive and isolated environment (Churchman, 2004). Networks are often promoted as an integral part of academia (Hammond & Churchman, 2008), and a strong ethos of individualism can exist amongst academics exacerbated by time pressures, and constantly changing targets, leading to cultures of retreat and atomistic survival (Bone & McNay, 2006). Management support for knowledge sharing as well as institutional policy aimed at developing a positive social interaction culture are significant predictors of positive knowledge sharing and thus positive social capital in tertiary education institutes (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003).

While the noted benefits of social capital are significant, the results of this exploratory research highlighted two concerns. Firstly, in direct contrast to the level of connectedness with the management team and other tutors, respondents indicated that they did not feel understood, valued, safe, listened to or supported by the university institution as a whole. Despite their vital contribution, sessional staff often remain largely unacknowledged in both the university context and the literature (Coombe & Clancy, 2002). They have been referred to as an ‘academic underclass’ or the ‘invisible group’ (Courtney, 2013) and may feel overlooked and undervalued, which could be a cause for concern, particularly in terms of retention of skilled staff. Somewhat counteracting this, research shows that even when commitment to an organisation is low, commitment to a team can influence retention of staff (Bye, 2012). Secondly, respondents seemed to demonstrate a lack of value for bridging ties, with limited utilisation of wider university networks which can provide access to new information and ideas. A disadvantage of bonding, highly cohesive networks is that homogeneity can result in a lack of access to diverse information and lower levels of innovation within a team (Nooteboom & Gisling, 2004). This

occurs due to the tendency of closed networks toward reduced flexibility, ossification, group think and free-loading (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Further study is required to explore the implications of closed networks on the knowledge-seeking habits of tutoring teams.

Implications

In the context of higher education, social capital, as a component of social cohesion, enables students, academics and administrators to focus their ideas, talents and assets to further the community as a whole (Heuser, 2008). It is achieved by providing a conduit allowing human capital to be maximised for the greater good, as well as a regulatory function that ensures social interactions build trust and legitimacy (Heuser, 2008). However, social capital can be influenced by hierarchical and institutional forces (Adler & Kwon 2002). Educational policy can, and has at times, impeded the cultivation of social capital in educational institutions by restricting and controlling behaviour (Frank et al., 2004). Even well intended policies may limit social capital with the formalisation of exchange mediums resulting in inhibition of opportunities to establish trust (Frank et al., 2004).

Conversely, institutions can be instrumental in enabling social capital. A challenge for leadership is to continue to promote a collegial environment in the face of increased managerialism in order to retain a committed workforce (Burnes et al., 2014) and maximise knowledge sharing. Strategies should concentrate on developing and maintaining opportunity, motivation and ability, which sometimes requires a financial investment, but is not necessarily always the case. For instance, research shows that just allowing staff to take breaks at the same time increases both communication and the level of closeness between staff (Kwon & Adler, 2014). The course management team made a specific and concerted effort to provide opportunity for teaching staff to interact with each other in both professional and social situations. Secondly, motivation to share resources requires an environment of trust and support which can be developed through processes of solidarity and clear shared goals and norms (Kwon & Adler, 2014). The course management team fostered an open-door policy and provided a high level of support which was instrumental in developing trust and sense of belonging – vital components for ensuring the motivation for sessional staff to maintain connections and share resources. Finally, a person's ability to provide social capital resources can be improved through developing capacity (Kwon & Adler, 2014) for instance through training and professional development. To this end, the course management team provided continual training and encouraged professional development and collegial collaboration in research endeavours.

Conclusion

The literature surrounding teacher-teacher social capital in the context of higher education is limited, illustrating a need for further research in order to shed light on some of the significant trends occurring in the higher education environment today. This exploratory study addresses this gap and provides useful insight into the advantages networks can have for staff, as well as the indirect benefits to the larger teaching team, students, and even the institution. The early findings of this research support the notion that social capital amongst staff can be achieved through deliberate strategies to encourage connections within a teaching group. The research demonstrates the value that teaching staff place on their connections and the role these networks play in teaching decisions and access to information and resources. As well as maximising the benefits of social capital, it is important to ensure that any limitations are minimised, and this includes strategies to ensure staff have continued access to new information and ideas.

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