Developing a multi-campus STAR Community of Practice

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In a multi-campus university we have developed a Student Transition, Achievement and Retention (STAR) community of practice that involves participants at several campuses. This has been achieved through video-conferencing. A further dimension of the community of practice is the wide range of academic fields represented by the membership. Managing the community of practice meetings is challenging because of reliance on technology to mediate the meetings and the development of appropriate hosting skills and participant behaviours to help the community feel connected.

Introduction

Communities of practice (CoPs) have been adopted in educational institutions as a means of disseminating best practice, sharing knowledge and developing new knowledge that can be applied across the institution (McDonald & Star, 2008). CoPs also play a more subtle role in strengthening the institution through establishing a culture of collegiality, retaining knowledge of the organisation and assisting new staff in improving their practice and better understanding the values and practices of the institution. In Wenger and Trayner's recent definition (2015), CoPs have three elements in common:
- domain – a shared/common area of interest
- community –formed by sharing and learning together
- practice – shared practice, resources, strategies

Perhaps the features of a CoP that distinguish them most from other sorts of groups is that the principal purpose is to develop the capabilities of the members of the community and to develop, exchange and sustain knowledge. These communities are not simply vehicles to promote professional learning. Members certainly learn through participation in a CoP, gaining further 'tools' to be effective in their role but members of the CoP become closer through the shared value that they find in the learning. They have the satisfaction of understanding that their problems are similar to others' problems and that they share a common perspective on those problems.

In this paper, we will describe the emergence and development of the multi-disciplinary STAR Community of Practice across five campuses in the College of Science, Health and Engineering (SHE) at La Trobe University.

Institutional Context

La Trobe University underwent a major organisational restructure in 2014. This resulted in the formation of two colleges out of the five faculties. The College of SHE consists of the Schools of Allied Health; Molecular Sciences; Life Sciences; Nursing & Midwifery; Engineering & Mathematical Sciences; Psychology & Public Health and the Rural Health School. The

disciplines and fields represented within the College are broad and there are different approaches to learning & teaching and modes of teaching in evidence.

The University teaches across seven campuses which are located at Melbourne (Bundoora), City, Bendigo, Mildura, Albury/Wodonga, Shepparton and Sydney. La Trobe University is committed to improving the quality of the student experience, and increasing student retention and success in the context of a diverse student body with regard to academic collateral (preparedness and support). The Student Transition, Achievement and Retention (STAR) team of the College of Science, Health and Engineering (College of SHE) sits within the broader College Education Team and is responsible for the design and implementation, in conjunction with other staff, of college-wide transition and retention programs that foster effective student engagement and improve the student experience.

The STAR Network was first established in 2015, evolving into a community of practice (STAR CoP) providing an opportunity to gather and discuss matters related to student transition, achievement and retention; and share ideas for improving practice across all student-facing activities. Regular meetings provide the forum to share STAR initiatives, facilitate college-wide discussion on best practice and develop critical relationships across disciplines to achieve an improved student experience. The STAR CoP has provided staff in the newly established structure an opportunity to build new learning and teaching networks across the College of SHE and the wider University community. Video-conferencing has been crucial to enable staff from all campuses to participate in the CoP.

Operation of the CoP

Following the first two STAR Network meetings, there was a deliberate re-design, modelling the meetings on the principles of a community of practice, using the experience that both authors previously had of CoPs, albeit in different institutions and contexts (Baker & Beames, 2016; Yucel et al., 2009).

The change to the 'CoP format' was carried out in order to transfer 'ownership' of the group to the members, rather than being management-driven and opened the meetings to all-comers. It has previously been shown that CoPs where the members control the agenda, with relatively informal meetings are likely to be successful and have a long existence (Baker & Beames, 2016). A further feature of successful CoPs is that there is a core group of regular participants who are involved in leading discussion, sharing their passion and knowledge (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Although the STAR CoP is not management-driven, there is institutional support for the CoP, not only moral support but also in terms of providing administrative support and some catering, particularly since the meetings take place over lunchtime.

A challenge for the STAR CoP has been focusing on topics that appeal to staff from the broad range of academic fields. All contributions are welcomed and participants are encouraged to suggest topics, including discussing innovative practice, but also to present their own successful practices in improving student engagement and success. The topics that have been discussed to date have been proposed by the CoP members and are of broad interest, each participant bringing their own perspective. The discussion is enriched by the diversity of views and approaches.

Preparing for the meetings

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To ensure the STAR CoP continues to grow and reach staff across the College of SHE a marketing and communications plan was developed. The CoP meetings are advertised via a number of channels, including Yammer, email invite, School Teaching and Learning meetings, and School Newsletters. Reminders are sent out the week the meeting is held. Advertising through Yammer has resulted in staff from the broader University community joining the CoP, including participants from the Library, La Trobe Learning and Teaching and the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce (ASSC).

The format of the meetings:

The typical format of the meetings includes a brief welcome by the host, followed by two to three presenters. Each presenter has twenty minutes for an interactive presentation, encouraging discussion from the floor. There have been good examples of an 'interactive presentation with presenters building stimulus questions into their presentation and inviting discussion in the course of the presentation. Within the timeframe allocated for the meeting, there is also an opportunity for further general discussion about the theme of the meeting. As these meetings are scheduled during lunchtime a light lunch is provided.

The majority of meetings are hosted on the main campus of La Trobe University, Melbourne (Bundoora), with the regional campuses participating via video-conferencing. More meetings will be hosted on the Bendigo campus in 2017 after the success in 2016. As we get better at facilitating discussion via video-conferencing (VC) it is planned that speakers could be present at any campus, regardless of which campus 'hosts' the meeting. Designating "site-hosts" will help to facilitate discussion across the different campuses and follows a model outlined by Reilly, Vandenhouten, Gallagher-Lepak & Ralston-Berg (2012). Even though the institution is quite experienced in using video-conferencing, sometimes the technology does not perform as expected and some facilities are poorly-designed so that other sites cannot see all the participants in the room.

The Table below presents information on the STAR CoP meetings hosted to date. Please note that the first two meetings were not strictly community of practice meetings. There is a core group of approximately 30 attendees from across the college, and a group that changes depending on the theme and timing.

STAR CoP Themes	Number attended
Workshop: Developing the college strategy for tutor/demonstrator training (Oct, 2015)	28
Workshop: Transition and Retention Charter (Feb, 2016)	16
Communicating with your students – what's working? (2016)	58
Digital learning strategy (2016)	54
Catering for the underprepared (2016)	46
Capstones, WIL & CoPs (2016)	22
Career Ready, Employability & WIL (2017)	49
Engaging Students – What's working? What's not?	46

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Table 1 **The meetings of the STAR Community of Practice, including topics and presenters. Meetings included participants from five campuses.**

Participant Feedback

CoP participants were surveyed after each event and the responses were very encouraging. The majority found the forum to be as they expected or better; they would attend the next forum and would recommend the STAR Network to colleagues. Some participant comments are provided below:

> *…Useful concept and a good idea to share experience…*
> *…Very interesting. I nearly didn't come but I'm glad I did….*
> *… Very informative, engaging speakers….*

Participants suggested inviting "expert guest speakers" to present on targeted topics. Future themes could include: blended learning; online learning & teaching; teaching clinical skills; standardising rubrics for assessment tasks; using simulations to teach practical and clinical skills, and; motivating student attendance and engagement.

Reflection

A CoP that intends to offer a professional development opportunity for academic staff is very different from a team that might be focused on a project or product. In the CoPs the authors experienced previously there were a high degree of 'commonality' in the student cohort. In these CoP participants (Baker & Beames, 2016; Yucel et al., 2009), focused on first-year science teaching. The CoP discussed in this paper has participants who teach in widely different fields of study, as far apart as IT and physiotherapy, as examples. Under these circumstances, identification as a member of the CoP may be relatively weak, with identification as a member of the profession, the discipline, the academic unit likely being stronger forces. The STAR CoP's 'common purpose' that provides its motivation (Wenger and Trayner, 2015) is student transition, achievement and retention. La Trobe University has a strong tradition of welcoming students from low SES backgrounds, particularly at our regional campuses, as well as First-in-Family or first-generation higher education students. La Trobe University has focussed on assisting these students make the transition and successfully in progress in their studies.

Participating in the STAR CoP provides an opportunity to reflect on one's own teaching practices, informed by the practices of others. The STAR CoP enables staff at smaller campuses to join a wider community, reducing isolation and increasing their agency to bring about change. A great strength of a CoP is that it represents an opportunity to talk about innovation in a 'safe environment'. That safe environment is established through the CoP members respecting each other, being prepared to share ideas and reflecting on the ideas of others. One of the specific challenges of this CoP, is the reliance on technology to bring a widely-distributed 'community' together.

The Future

The use of video-conferencing to communicate across all campuses is commonplace at La Trobe University, both for meetings and lectures. Lessons learned from these experiences need to be shared to ensure all participants have the opportunity to join in the discussion. Presenters

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and hosts should be appropriately briefed to ensure that all participants feel part of the community. Presenters and hosts can encourage interactivity by including stimulus questions and inviting discussion from all campuses. The CoP presentations are not intended to be seminars but should act as a stimulus that sparks an engaged discussion amongst the participants.

We hope that the STAR CoP will continue to thrive at La Trobe University. The College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce (College of ASSC) are interested in joining the STAR CoP, expanding the membership across the university. Increasing the breadth of fields in the CoP may be challenging, the compensating effect will be a better understanding of initiatives to improve student success, transition, achievement and retention across the whole University.

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