

Getting it together – enhancing outcomes for students, staff and institution through a FYE community of practice

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Abstract:

The Griffith Health Group’s response to its brief to support the orientation and transition of its 2,000 or so commencing undergraduates in its nine schools across four widely dispersed campuses has resulted in a vibrant and productive community of practice (COP) that has had positive outcomes for first year students, for staff involved in the COP, and, ultimately, for the institution. This Nuts & Bolts session will discuss the formation, function and outcomes of this COP.

Paper

“A community of practice ... defines itself in the doing, as members develop among themselves their own understanding of what their practice is about. This living process results in a much richer definition than a mere institutional charter... Even when a community's actions conform to an external mandate, it is the community – not the mandate – that produces the practice” (Wenger, 1998).

As one of Griffith University’s four broad disciplinary groupings, the Griffith Health Group is charged with supporting the orientation and transition of its 2,000 or so commencing undergraduates in its nine schools across four widely dispersed campuses. Though not formally recognised as such, the ‘living process’ in which the Group engages to meet the University’s strategic goals in this area has resulted in a vibrant and productive community of practice (COP) that has had positive outcomes for first year students, for staff involved in the COP, and, ultimately, for the institution. In this session I will discuss the formation, function and outcomes of this COP.

Formation of the COP

Generally referred to as the First Year Advisor Forum, the COP was developed in 2006 under the visionary leadership of the Health Group’s Dean of Learning & Teaching, who in turn drew on the work of senior Health Group colleagues to develop a Group based approach to planning for first year orientation and engagement that nevertheless leaves room for ‘localised’ School based interpretation and initiatives.

The Forum draws together members from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds but with the common goal of enhancing the first year experience. Membership of the group, whose internal leadership is both “diverse and distributed” (Wenger, 1998), is as follows:

- The Dean (L&T) who provides “*institutional* leadership” (Wenger, 1998), allocates Group resources to Schools to support their orientation and engagement strategies, and negotiates with senior management for institutional recognition and support of First Year Advisors (see below);
- The Health Group Learning Development Officer (LDO), whose broad role is to support academic staff in matters related to learning and teaching, and who provides “*day to day* leadership” (Wenger, 1998) within the forum;
- Twelve School based First Year Advisors (FYAs), whose broad role is to assist and support commencing students in their transition to university and who, depending on their level of expertise, play a range of leadership roles within the forum; and, at times,
- School Administration Officers (SAOs) who, where their role involves working closely with their School’s FYA in planning orientation and engagement strategies, play a supporting role.

Function of the COP

Communities of practice perform a number of functions. A primary function of the FYA Forum group is that of a node “for the *exchange and interpretation of information...*” (Wenger, 1998):

- The group comes together in a quarterly forum each year to discuss, develop and provide feedback on annual School based Orientation and Engagement Plans (that is, individual plans built on Schools’ local knowledge of their first year cohorts); to share good practice around first year issues and reflect on the success of strategies implemented; and to develop group wide approaches to common areas of interest that nevertheless allow for local interpretation (e.g. processes for identifying and supporting ‘at risk’ students; group wide peer mentor training that can be applied to School based mentoring schemes).

The group also serves to “*retain knowledge* in ‘living’ ways, unlike a database or a manual” and “*steward[s] competencies* to keep the organization at the cutting edge” (Wegner, 1998).

- While over the past two years the membership of the Forum has changed as FYA’s have moved on to other roles, ‘newcomers’ are initiated into the group’s practices in a seamless way, quickly learning from more senior members who, in turn, have much to gain from the fresh approach of newcomers. Members both bring with them, and further develop, a range of competencies, experience and expertise in the area of the FYE, including direct engagement in the scholarship of teaching. In this way the group is both kept up to date with, and engaged in the production of, knowledge in the field and is open to working together to find innovative ways of addressing problems/issues.

Another important function of COP’s is that because they are “organized around what matters to their members...[t]hey provide *homes for identities*”. As Wenger (1998) points out, “[h]aving a sense of identity is a crucial aspect of learning in organizations”.

- As the FYA Forum has developed over the past two years, so has the FYA's sense of identity. As FYA's learn from each other, and as they engage in the sharing and production of knowledge, so too has their status within the University increased. Negotiation by the Dean (L&T), with input from FYA's, has resulted in greater status attached to the role and FYA's have, this year, received funded assistance (e.g. relief from other duties) in recognition of the work involved in the role.

Outcomes of the COP

For students:

- Evidence from last year's Orientation & Engagement plans demonstrated improvements to the orientation and transition of first year students in a number of Schools. While the evidence at this point in 2008 is still only anecdotal, feedback from many Schools indicates more marked improvements will be recorded this year. In addition, those former first year students who undertook the Health Group's comprehensive peer mentor training are already reporting enhanced skills development and connection with the University community.

For staff:

- Membership of the FYA Forum has resulted in more sophisticated understandings of the FYE and hence increased competencies and confidence in the area. Various FYA Forum group members are currently the recipients of three learning and teaching grants directly related to supporting the transition of first year students. Several First Year Advisors have presented papers on their practice as FYA's to this and other national and international FYE conferences while others are moving their research interests to, and hence basing career promotion on, scholarship in the area of the first year experience. SAO's have reported greater understanding of, and thus support for, the role of FYA's and what they are attempting to achieve.

For the institution:

- The enhanced knowledge of, and thus greater sophistication in, strategies for dealing with first year issues is beneficial not only for students and staff but also the institution. While performance indicators (e.g. retention rates) for 2008 are not yet available, we are confident of enhanced outcomes. The Health Group is now considered by the University community to be a leader in the area of the FYE and the planning processes utilised by the Group's FYA Forum have, in turn, been shared among, and taken up by, others engaged in the first year experience, not only at Griffith but further afield as well.

Reference:

Wenger, Etienne (1998) 'Communities of Practice. Learning as a Social System', retrieved 6 March, 2008 from http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm, first published in the "Systems Thinker", June