

# **The evolution of a community of practice at the Queensland University of Technology for lecturers involved in large first year units**

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## **What is a Community of Practice?**

Communities of practice (CoPs) may be defined as groups of people who are mutually bound by what they do together (Wenger, 1998, p. 2), that is, they “form to share what they know, to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work and to provide a social context for that work” (Nickols, 2000, para. 1). They are “emergent” in that the shape and membership emerges in the process of activity (Lees, 2005, p. 7). People in CoPs share their knowledge and experiences freely with the purpose of finding inventive ways to approach new problems (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 2). They can be seen as “shared histories of learning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 86).

Specifically, CoPs are characterised by:

- sustained mutual relationships;
- a shared discourse;
- the quick set up of problems to be discussed;
- shared stories and jargon;
- shared ways of engaging in doing things together;
- knowing what others can and cannot do
- informality with members deciding on their agendas themselves according to their needs
- the rapid flow and propagation of information, and
- common conventions, language, tool usage, values and standards

(Klamma, Rhode & Wulf, n.d.; Viskovic & Robson, 2001, p. 234; Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 3).

## **Why a Community of Practice at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT)?**

For some time, QUT staff have been involved in a number of initiatives aimed at sharing ideas and resources for teaching first year students such as the *Coordinators of Large First Year Units Working Party*. To harness these initiatives and maximise their influence, the leaders of the Transitions In Project (TIP)<sup>1</sup> decided to form a CoP around the design, assessment and management of large first year units.

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<sup>1</sup> TIP is a commissioned Teaching and Learning Grant at QUT with the brief within a limited timeframe of 2007-2009 to enhance the transition into QUT of commencing students by embedding and institutionalising good practice strategies across faculties and divisions. It is part of the Real World Learning Project under the sponsorship of the Office of Deputy Vice Chancellor (Teaching Quality).

## **What were its aims and objectives?**

The aims were

- To facilitate the ongoing transfer of knowledge and experience to improve the quality of first year student learning by identifying, sharing and developing resources, tools and policies that address key issues; and
- To develop processes within the CoP with a view to sustaining the community independent of TIP and beyond its limited time-frame.

Within these broad aims, there are a number of specific objectives:

- To share practice and resources for teaching first year units across and within QUT faculties and schools;
- To share solutions to common teaching, administration and management issues faced by teachers of first year units;
- To campaign for and recommend the development of policy, resources and tools that address key issues;
- To identify and trial new resources developed through TIP;
- To be critical friends to each other;
- To activate spheres of influence to improve the first year experience; and
- To develop protocols and roles for sustaining the CoP beyond the life of TIP.

## **What has happened?**

### *Formation and development of the CoP*

In early 2008, a small number of experienced first year coordinators of large first year units representative of a variety of Faculties were invited to form a CoP. The membership of the CoP gradually increased during 2008 when six meetings were held and that trend has continued on into 2009 where the first and thus far only meeting attracted over 20 participants. A total of 39 participants have been involved since the CoP's inception.

### *With regard to Objectives 1 and 2 (sharing practice, resources and solutions to common issues)*

Guest speakers and large and small group discussions have focussed on areas such as

- Administration: e.g. scheduling tutorials, room allocations, workload management and equitable support;
- Tutors and sessional staff: e.g. sourcing, training, coordinating, resourcing and quality control and retention;
- Assessment: e.g. using electronic management systems, moderating and developing common assessment standards, managing and providing timely feedback to large cohorts;
- Multidisciplinary units: e.g. engaging and managing disparate cohorts;
- Teaching: e.g. embedding and integrating academic and teamwork skills;
- Students: e.g. communication with, managing expectations and engagement, and reducing attrition;
- Curriculum: e.g. academic/integrated literacies, unit design; and
- Unit evaluation: e.g. improving unit evaluation scores

### *With regard to Objective 3 (resourcing and supporting staff)*

In mid-2008, equity in support for and resourcing of unit coordinators emerged as a significant issue impacting on their working life. This has led to the development of a submission "Resourcing and

Support for Coordinators of Large First Year Units” which we plan to use as the voice of the group to raise and discuss with senior management.

*With regard to Objective 4 (identifying and trialling new resources)*

Specific resources discussed included Checklists (see Duncan, Quinn, Nelson, Smith, Creagh & Clarke, 2009) based on First Year Curriculum Principles (Kift, 2008, 2009), the QUT Teaching and Learning Support Services Just-in-time Teamwork site on Blackboard, the results of a trial of an on-line Criterion Referenced Assessment tool, the “Guides to QUT Support Services” for students and staff (QUT, 2009) and Just-in-time emails for first year students (QUT, 2006).

*With regard to Objective 5 (being critical friends)*

A “burning issues” item is on the agenda at each meeting where participants share their “burning issue” and receive feedback from the group about similar experiences and how they dealt with them.

*With regard to Objective 6 (activating spheres of influence)*

An individual’s “sphere of influence” is the people the individual feels that they may be able to influence e.g. a Unit Coordinator has the potential to influence their teaching team or, more broadly, institutional-level policymakers in teaching and learning. The experiences of community members related to this objective was surveyed and is discussed below.

*With regard to Objective 7 (sustainability beyond TIP)*

This is an issue for the community during 2009.

### **What have been the participants’ experiences in the CoP?**

The experiences presented here arise from survey data from four participants who have been involved with the CoP during 2008 and 11 members who were first-time attendees at the first meeting in 2009. The complete data is discussed in detail elsewhere (Quinn, Smith, Duncan, Clarke & Nelson, in process).

Six themes emerged from the data, clustering into professional experiences in the CoP (Themes 1 to 3) and characteristics of the CoP itself (Themes 4 to 6). The themes and illustrative comments are:

Theme 1: Self development and intentions to involve others: *I heard about useful ideas/activities/resources at the meetings; I intend to discuss the outcomes of the meetings with other lecturers in my “sphere of influence.”*

Theme 2: Involving self with others: *I have made contact with other members of the group outside of the meetings to discuss ideas/activities/resources that were discussed at the meetings; I have already discussed outcomes of the meetings with other lecturers in my “sphere of influence.”*

Theme 3: Supporting the community: *I have accessed the Community of Practice Wiki site and found it useful; I have encouraged other lecturers in my “sphere of influence” to attend the meetings.*

Theme 4: The collegial nature of the community: [The CoP provided] *a chance to meet and chat with folk facing similar problems. [And] I feel part of a network with common issues and also which*

*includes relevant experiences.*

Theme 5: The energising influence of the community: [I feel] *motivated again and [do] not ... feel so isolated in my quest to provide optimum learning for first year students; [It is good] being around motivated people who do not see first year as a drag!!*

Theme 6: The format of the meetings: [Participants were] *open, friendly [and] approachable. The meetings were brilliantly planned and conducted [and] provided an excellent opportunity to meet, share and problem solve in a very supportive and positive environment.*

### **What happens next?**

A reasonable interpretation of these outcomes is that, during the first year of its operation, the CoP has been successful in achieving the first aim viz. “To facilitate the ongoing transfer of knowledge and experience to improve the quality of first year student learning by identifying, sharing and developing resources, tools and policies that address key issues.”

From this relatively strong position in its development, the major challenge for the community is to achieve the second aim viz. “To develop processes within the CoP with a view to sustaining the community independent of TIP and beyond its limited time-frame.”

### **Questions for discussion**

Is the CoP really in a “strong position” to achieve sustainability?

What processes need to be put in place to ensure sustainability?

Do we really have a CoP here? Is a “sustainable” CoP outside of Wenger’s construct of a CoP?

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