

Making meaning of women's networks: A community of practice framework

(for blind peer review)

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Abstract

Women's lives are multilayered through involvement in education, employment, family, community and everything, thus involving women in a number of community groups, networks or communities of practice. These groups exist in a myriad of contexts and are often a key component of the community and professional life of women. Some of these groups have a formal business structure, while others are more informal, with membership changing as the group focus ebbs and flows. This paper will investigate the factors that distinguish a community of practice from more informal women's groups, and identify how community of practice structures and processes can be used to achieve the aims and objectives of women's groups.

Women's networks are constructed when women interact in informal or organisational settings. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They develop personal relationships, established ways of interacting, and may even develop a common sense of identity.

The conference presentation will provide a brief overview of the distinguishing features of networks and communities of practice and an opportunity for the audience to participate in the exploration of their existence in women's networks, and how community of practice structures and processes can be used to enhance such networks.

Introduction

Women's lives are multilayered through involvement in education, employment, family, community and everything, thus involving women in a number of community groups, networks or communities of practice. This paper provides a brief overview of the processes, structure and differences between women's networks and communities of practice, with a focus on professional settings. Based on a case study of a

community of practice (CoP) located in a higher education setting, it is suggested that CoP structure and processes provide a powerful means of supporting women in achieving their personal and professional goals.

Women's Networks

Networks are an important part of everyone's lives. Salancik (1995, p. 345) says 'networks are constructed when individuals, whether organizations or humans, interact'. These networks include participation in family, friends, personal hobby and professional networks, which we draw on for emotional, practical and inspirational support through both good and bad times. These networks change as we journey through life; prenatal groups are replaced by nursing mothers, school and sport clubs, then professional and hobby groups. The way we interact in each of these situations will depend on our relationships with other members of the network and what we either consciously or unconsciously are trying to achieve through our interactions. For example, think of the different interactions within family and professional groups, or when having lunch and the sharing personal 'secrets' with a girlfriend.

In professional contexts women tend to network differently to men. Women often talk to whoever is physically closest, actively engage with someone who appears 'lost' or stick with someone they already know. Men tend to be far more strategic - they will arrive at an event and try to gauge who they should talk to and who they need to be introduced to build business relations. Jackson (2003, p.1) suggests that women also need to be strategic, build relationships at a range of levels and argues that 'women though often tend to want everyone to be their best friend and don't always understand that business is about strategic positioning and building a network of people around you who provide advice etc on a range of different areas'. This reactive, rather than proactive, networking behaviour and the existing social and business structures mean women often have limited access to, or are excluded

from, dominant organisational networks. Ibarra (1993) argues that the organisational context in which interaction networks are embedded produces unique constraints on women and racial minorities, causing their networks to differ from those of their white male counterparts in composition and characteristics of their relationships with network members. Many women still find themselves in business structures that are not inclusive of women's behaviour and life demands.

At an international level De Jorio (2005, p. 1) suggests that the study of women's informal networks makes the activities of marginal groups more visible, and thereby provides 'a more in-depth and localized understanding of women's diverse interests and structural opportunities for change is needed to promote concrete and durable social changes'. When discussing women's activities in Third World development-oriented initiative, De Jorio (2005) argues that participation in local women's networks have made it possible for women to become driving forces in a number of development initiatives. This avoids the otherwise recurring pattern of elite capture - a process by which local elites become the primary beneficiary of much of the resources allocated for development (De Jorio, 2005). Given that both formal business structures and informal community networks may foster inequitable social structures and access to resources, the following discussion presents an alternative approach for women to organise their community and professional life. The approach recommended is a community of practice approach.

Overview of Communities of Practice (CoP)

The term 'communities of practice' emerged from Lave and Wenger's (1991) study that explored learning in the apprenticeship model, where practice in the community enabled the apprentice to move from peripheral to full participation in the community activities. Communities of practice (CoPs) are 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. They develop a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity' (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 4).

Communities of practice are different from networks in that their basic structure comprises of three fundamental elements. These elements are a *domain* of knowledge that creates a common ground and sense of common identity, a *community* of people who care about the domain and create the social fabric of learning, and a shared *practice* that the community develops to be

effective in its domain (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice are different from traditional organisations and learning situations, such as task forces or project teams. While a team starts with an assigned task, usually instigated and directed by an "authority" figure, a CoP does not have a formal structure or assigned task, so the focus may emerge from negotiation, and there is continual potential for new direction. Communities of practice encourage active participation and collaborative decision-making by individuals, as opposed to separated decision-making that is present in traditional organisations (Johnson, 2001). Members can assume different roles and hierarchical, authoritarian management is replaced by self-management and ownership of work (Collier & Esteban, 1999). The learning that evolves from these communities is shared, in that the collaborative knowledge of the community is greater than any individual knowledge. A community of practice provides an opportunity for members to continually engage in learning about their practice.

There are some key differences between informal networks and communities of practice that lead us to recommend the CoP approach as an appropriate method for support and professional development for women's work. Where networks are informal, CoPs are more formal - they have a particular domain of knowledge or focus, and this a particular membership focus. This increased formality over networks allows the members to elicit and secure outside support (from individual and institutions), as well as attracting resources and/or funding as applicable. Related to this is the CoP approach regarding the structure of activity around *domain* and *practice* that ensures the focus of the CoP work on those areas of immediate interest to involved individuals. This structure ensures a continuous focus on support and professional development. In addition, the formality and structured nature of CoPs ensures a greater permanence to a group and its activities than is in evidence in most informal networks. This permanence allows longevity in the support offered to members, as well as the ability to support more members over time. The final difference between informal networks and communities of practice is that of the presence of a designated facilitator. With a CoP facilitator(s) ensure that the above elements of the CoP structure and approach are maintained to deliver maximum benefit to members in terms of support and professional development. It is the cumulative benefit of these differences that significantly focuses and increases the outcomes for members that lead us to recommend CoP processes as a support structure and mechanism in professional settings.

Using CoPs to support women's work – A case study from higher education

Studies of the work lives of Australian academics have confirmed what many have long suspected – we work long hours, face significant stress, and have a general time poverty perspective on our professional lives (Forgasz & Leder, 2006; Goodyear, 2005; McInnes, 2000). For first year core course leaders, these concerns and the demands upon them are magnified. First year core course leaders are at the frontline of university teaching, along with their teaching teams (for example see: Krause et al., 2005; Pitkethley & Prosser, 2001). At USQ, a core course leader in the Faculty of Business may coordinate more than one transnational course offering of over 1200 students a year, across three semesters, as well as contending with other professional demands and commitments outside the realm of teaching. How to foster collaborative professional structures with individual academics under such circumstances is a dilemma. Informal networks can be neglected as time and stress stretch individual academics and formalised committee structures are often seen as a waste of time. Committees are also much more likely to reflect institutional priorities rather than academic needs.

The Australian higher education sector is currently characterised as having been through a significant period of commercialisation and marketisation, particularly in regard to the provision of teaching to both domestic and international students (Marginson, 2006). These changes have placed considerable pressure on individual staff and led to increases in teaching loads and expectations (Forgasz & Leder, 2006; Anderson et al., 2002; McInnes, 2000). At the same time the sector has experienced real declines in funding and continued increases in student numbers. These two trends taken together have led to economic rationalisation of teaching, assessment and course delivery across the sector (Schapper et al, 2004). For first year teachers this swell combines with the research tide, where the maxim of “publish or perish” remains truer than ever, to produce a powerful tidal surge. Significant funding outcomes are attached to research output, both individually and institutionally. With the widespread use of short-term contracts in the sector (Macnamara, 2007), those who publish survive, and those who don't, do not. In this storm of competing and increasing expectations, CoPs can provide a safe haven for first year teachers, who are more often than not, women; it can provide the support to swim against the tide. This ongoing tension between research and teaching functions is exemplified by two recent developments in the Australian higher education sector – the Research Quality Framework (RQF) and the

Teaching and Learning Performance Fund (TLPF). These two initiatives highlight the tension between teaching and learning quality and research quality expectations in Australian universities.

The RQF, with its first round slated to begin in 2007, is mooted to drive an intensification of research focus within universities (Illing, 2006a; Illing, 2006b) due to the likely funding implications flowing from university performance in the first round. At an institutional level, the priorities to flow from this new research performance measurement scheme will have significant impacts on individual academics and the requirements of them regarding research output. For many academics, the increased quality and quantity expectations placed on their research increases pressure on the quantity and quality of time available for teaching and learning activities. At the same time, the Federal government, via DEST's Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, has also signalled the need for universities across the sector to lift their performance in regard to teaching quality. Given the financial implications, institutional policies are also aligning with these priorities. This is particularly true for first year course leaders – they are the institutional frontline for teaching quality and related issues of retention and progression. Thus, individual academics are at the centre of heightened institutional tensions between research priorities and new teaching and learning priorities. This creates an important institutional imperative to support individual academics as they face and negotiate the new challenges associated with these policies and the resultant expectations.

Against the context of competing tensions within the current higher education environment in Australia, the CoP structure and approach provides a forum for staff, to debate strategies to deal with these competing priorities and their impact on teaching and learning at the coalface. Communities of practice specifically grow, or are fostered, to provide a shared space around shared concerns – in this case, the teaching and learning of first year core course leaders in a Faculty of Business. Individual members of communities of practice face shared challenges provided by their student cohorts (Sharrock, 2000; Biggs 2003, p. 3-5), their institutional context, and the challenges facing the wider higher education sector (Harman, 2004; Schapper et al, 2004; Marginson et al, 2000). These shared challenges provide the basis for a common understanding between members, which in our case has been further strengthened by the collaborative identification of priority issues to be addressed by the group. Establishing and nurturing a shared sense of identity provides the missing element in ensuring the

institutional memory and sharing of teaching and learning practices. It also provides a safe place for reflection and experimentation on teaching and learning for individual staff members.

In the first CoP meeting staff brainstormed on the priority issues facing them as the leaders of first year core courses. In subsequent activities, these issues were prioritised to set our agenda for the first 12 months of the CoP. Approaching the CoP's priorities and agenda setting in this way served several important purposes. Identifying issues as a group provided a sense of group ownership of the process and agenda from the beginning. Having the group shape the agenda also allowed the identification of the most pressing issues at the ground level, rather than at the University or the Faculty level. In addition, the process of group brainstorming allowed identification of common issues to all first year core course leaders and a sense of shared challenge that cuts across the disciplinary divide. Monthly meetings are built around the basic CoP structure identified by Wenger (1998), to provide opportunities for members to engage in learning about their practice. For example, guest speakers were invited to a CoP meeting to build the domain of assessment knowledge, members shared their practice with other members, and the community building is factored into all meetings by ensuring that at least thirty minutes of the two hours face to face meeting is dedicated to informal interaction over refreshments. The aim of this meeting structure is to ensure that each area of CoP activity is addressed, and to provide clear direction, outcomes and value adding for members. The structure, community support, and outcomes, have assisted in addressing initial scepticism about "just another meeting" and the need to make best use of time, for time poor first year educators.

A community of practice approach to teaching and learning in higher education provides a space for staff to collaboratively reflect, review and regenerate their current teaching and learning practices. Within higher education, the organisational structures and culture of individualism produce a situation where individuals are often isolated and unaware of the practices of others. While initiatives to overcome this individualism within research endeavours, such as research centres and research networks, are well advanced, these are less common in relation to teaching in higher education (Laurillard, 2002). The consequences of a lack of formal or informal structures for sharing of learning and teaching practice contributes to a lack of institutional memory regarding teaching and learning innovations, little acknowledgement or recognition of the diversity of good teaching and learning practices outside formal award mechanisms, and little support for individuals in

need of mentoring or guidance in reforming, improving, or reflection on their teaching and learning practices.

Of course, CoP membership is not just about "the serious stuff" of first year learning and teaching. It is also about a celebration of the triumphs of educators engaging with first year students as they undertake the big step of starting their learning journey at university. The CoP provides a safe and supportive environment to share these triumphs and test out innovative learning and teaching ideas on like minded professionals, before implementing with the students.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that CoPs provide an effective approach and structure in supporting women's work and aspirations in professional contexts. CoPs are recommended over informal networks due to the benefits offered by having a formal structure, the focus on *domain* and *practice*, the permanence offered by formalising processes and outcomes, and the role of the facilitator(s) in ensuring that benefits accrue to CoP members. In addition, the structure and nature of CoP processes emphasise a focus on shared member concerns and interests, which are often lost or ignored in formalised institutionally-instigated structures, such as committees. In the case study outlined in the paper, we demonstrate the use of a CoP approach and structure to provide support and professional development within a higher education setting. Given the current upheavals in higher education that significantly impact individual academics and first year teachers in particular, a space that enables academics to address a range of common issues through a negotiated group agenda, is a significant support mechanism. This is an especially powerful mechanism with the ability of a facilitator(s) to provide and foster knowledge, the development of professional skills, and both formal and informal mentoring within the CoP structure. The community of practice approach provides significant opportunity for women to receive support for, and help in achieving, their professional aspirations.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the members of the Faculty of Business Core Course Leaders' Community of Practice. We'd also like to acknowledge the funding support for the FoB CoP provided by the Faculty of Business and the Vice Chancellor's strategic funding program, at the University of Southern Queensland.

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