Communities of practice as partnerships between industry and education

Despite, or perhaps because of changes in culture, the cultural industries and their components currently are defined in many different ways and there is a lack of consensus about what is contained within them. This raises concern about the effectiveness of current data collection processes in accurately informing Australian cultural policies, and the extent to which are understood the requirements for the achievement of sustainable professional practice. The lack of a definition for the cultural industries within Australia and internationally impacts profoundly upon data collections influencing policy, education, training and advocacy, as decision-makers appear to struggle for understanding of the requirements for professional practice within parameters that are unclear.

The Communities of Practice Project (CPP) forms part of a larger research study that has highlighted the diversity of roles currently pursued by practising artists including musicians, and the need to examine those roles within the context of the cultural industries. Data indicated that practitioners, particularly performing artists did often not consider the potential for a diverse range of employment options within the wider cultural industries. The CPP sought to establish the potential for communities of practice across the cultural and education sectors to maximize and highlight the employment potential of graduates and existing practitioners. It examined ways in which partnerships could be structured to form positive, collaborative ventures: facilitating ongoing communication between key groups for the pro-active management of change.

Communities of practice are not new, having existed for centuries in forms such as early European Guilds, professional meeting groups and peer networks. The term Community of Practice (CoP) first was used by Lave and Wenger (1991)[1] when describing situated or active learning, and refers to a group of people who communicate upon a topic of common interest. Shaping a new CoP requires continued discussion about the current needs of the members in order to motivate interest and participation, illustrated by Manto[2] as an algebraic formula for a sustainable online community:

If P = (I x F) then C = (P ∞)
P = Participation   People actively engaging I = Individual   The individual person F = Feelings   Positive feelings C = Community   The online (or offline) place (Manto, 2003, p.1)

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[1]. Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Manto, M. (2003, July, 2003). *On the road to community* Retrieved August 16, 2003, from http://members.ozemail.com.au/~marleman/index.html

Research questions included:

- ♬   In light of recent radical changes to pre-tertiary music education and training in Australia, in what ways could ongoing collaboration between educators, policy makers and the music sector assist with the pro-active management of change?
- ♬   What is the potential role for a CoP in assisting educators to collaborate on the development and delivery of new curricula?
- ♬   How could members of a CoP facilitate a process of continuous curriculum renewal as required to maintain course relevance?
- ♬   Could an online mentoring program assist music practitioners including teachers and performers to achieve sustainable practice?
- ♬   Could a specific mentoring program for women help attract women to, and retain them in non-traditional roles?

The CPP found that the concept of a CoP was welcome, with particular reference to three key issues: mentoring for new music practitioners including teachers; communication between providers of the Industry Training Package, and an information point from which to access resources including existing websites and organisations. Communities of practice can be entirely virtual, however, the majority involve a blend of online and other communication strategies. The music sector is unlikely to respond to an entirely online forum as observed in the lack of activity in existing music-related online forums, thus the use of a blended communication strategy was considered preferable.

Multiple information sources were identified, accordingly a network was proposed to bring together existing initiatives wherever possible, rather than to create new ones that would simply add to the plethora of isolated initiatives. Providing a source of information and support was an obvious goal, and linking together educators and practitioners to share resources, projects and research was found to be necessary due to the lack of a research culture within the music sector.

The music sector is diffuse, and internal communication is particularly poor between genres, and between the government and non-government sectors. A CoP should seek to provide global links without genre barriers and including news and events, organisations, mentors and practitioners. The research found that although an advanced forum is preferable, people were more likely to participate in a community with mediocre infrastructure and stimulating debate than in one with a superb website and little to say!

Time is the reason most commonly given to explain non-participation in activities such as Communities of practice. Collaboration is the key – innovation is everywhere, and yet much of it exists in relative isolation with multiple groups working alone on the same or similar projects.

Further results from the study will be published later in 2004. If you would like to make comments or to receive further information, please contact Dawn Bennett (University of Western Australia) on dawnbennett@iprimus.com.au