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The potency of interdisciplinary collaboration to empower constructive dissenters

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Highly regulated work environments for academics, where workloads are pre-determined and then enforced through accepted norms of behaviour within departments, can work to suppress organic collaborative partnerships, which may arise out of need or unexpected opportunities. As a result of restrictive work practices where the status quo is often preserved, some academics who wish to engage in more purposeful, innovative teaching and learning practices find themselves as outsiders within their own disciplines. They become, in effect, principled or constructive dissenters. This paper contends that a Community of Practice (CoP) may provide a purposeful environment for constructive dissenters and suggests three broad conditions in which such a community might thrive. These conditions are voluntary membership, a facilitated informal network and interdisciplinary collaboration. We examine the positive impact this CoP has had on our intrinsic motivation, enthusiasm for work, and outcomes for students.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary collaboration, communities of practice, constructive dissent

Background

Academic staff in many universities often find themselves working in silos populated largely by individuals who work in professional isolation, focused in many instances on individual atomised goals and their own success. Universities do not always provide avenues for their staff to practice the skills of teamwork, critical thinking and communication. Nor do they always encourage cross-disciplinary perspectives. This scenario means that we cannot always practise the same skills that we expect our graduates to develop.

This paper reports on the far-reaching and pleasantly unexpected results of an interdisciplinary academic group that reached beyond their individual and discipline-based isolation and came together because of a common goal to improve student language skills embedded in discipline-specific studies. The professional practice of 'embedding language' within a discipline context, especially with support from a language expert, is a proven means by which to enhance student

communication skills (Candlin & Sarangi, 2004; Sin, Jones, & Petocz, 2007). Contextualising the language development, rather than relegating it to stand-alone workshops or a communication unit, is more beneficial for students as the communicating becomes part of the doing (Jones & Sin, 2004; Lyster, 2007; Barratt, Hanlon, & Rankin, 2011). The four authors (three discipline experts and one language expert) were initially brought together as part of a larger selected group of eight discipline experts and three language experts.

Initially, each discipline expert was paired with a language expert in order to explore and develop embedded language activities for their own unit, through facilitated meetings. From this formal, selected group of language experts and discipline experts¹, our informal network evolved. In our subset of the original larger group, the discipline experts found a shared empathy and gained inspiration to collaboratively critique student activities for our individual units. We met individually with the language expert to discuss ways in which assessment tasks and in-class materials could be scaffolded (broken down) and instructions could be more student-focussed. The language expert, in effect critiquing from a student perspective, acted as a conduit continually sharing issues, ideas and process arising from the individual discipline experts who were keen to hear what strategies were being developed by the others. Thus a powerful cross-pollination process began. This was despite the disciplines being totally disparate². Thus our Community of Practice (CoP), characterised by teamwork, critical thinking, and communication, grew organically. This developed an undercurrent of support in our community. Coming from unrelated disciplines freed us from the need to be competitive. We all experienced increased levels of satisfaction, enthusiasm, motivation and empathy for students. This in turn led to greater levels of self-efficacy. In short we all felt better equipped and empowered delivering content to students beyond our embedded language tasks.

In their seminal study of situated learning, Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) defined a CoP as ‘a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.’ They further propound that the locus of power in a CoP is held within that community and managed by its participants. This definition has been refined through time to become a three-dimensional perspective of a CoP consisting of domain (i.e. subject, passions), community (member relationships), and practice (activities; Snyder & Wenger, 2004). Snyder and Wenger (2004) suggest CoPs are social structures that enable knowledge to be managed by practitioners. Members of these groups share a passion for something that they know how to do and regularly interact for the purpose of improving their discipline. CoPs are also characterised by their spontaneous emergence, informal existence, and little, if any, organisational regulation (Brown & Duguid, 1991). For the purpose of this paper, we define a CoP as an informal, non-regulated, organic network that exists to meet the psychosocial needs of practitioners with similar academic goals.

Among the individual members of our CoP we discovered we shared an independence in our thinking and a desire to break free from professional isolation arising from the traditional hierarchies which existed in our schools and departments. Further exchanges within our CoP revealed other common threads that bound us together: we shared attitudes, beliefs, and an innovative energy. These attributes centred on wanting the best possible outcomes for students. However, we all confessed to feelings of frustration and doubt as our previous curriculum innovations had not always received appropriate recognition. Essentially we were dissenting, but with a positive intent. We were attempting to pursue what we believed were best practice

¹ The Embedding Language into the Curriculum project comprised three language experts and eight discipline experts. The project was facilitated by the Curtin Business School Communication Skills Centre.

² The three discipline experts lecture in the areas of Financial Planning, Geology, and Law.

principles, and for two of us, clear directives from our respective departments or relevant professional bodies. Without the support and recognition of our departments though, we felt we were fighting an uphill battle and being perceived as rogues within our own schools. It became clear what we were: we came to define ourselves as ‘constructive dissenters’.

The word ‘dissent’ can carry negative connotations (Stanley, 1981). Examples of these connotations include playing the role of devil’s advocate, being a member of a loyal opposition or being a chronic complainer (Shahinpoor & Matt, 2007). These examples are in opposition to the type of dissent that stems from genuine and deeply held principles and values, commitments and emotions (Matt & Shahinpoor, 2011). This is a principled dissent that holds or expresses opinions at odds with those previously, commonly, or officially expressed in practice or policy (Graham, 1986). Given the correct impetus, dissenters can be highly ethically motivated and possess strong desires to contribute to the organization’s wellbeing (Hirschman, 1970; Graham, 1986). Given the correct encouragement and environment to express themselves, dissenters can confer benefits to organisations and inspire change (Sunstein, 2002). We contend that it is this form of dissent that drives academic staff like ourselves to be constructive through pursuing innovation and excellence in teaching.

Research issue

The primary focus of this paper is twofold. Firstly, we seek to define the environment in which constructive dissenters can survive and thrive within the context of higher education. Secondly, we explore how to establish such an environment.

The typical university environment has large schools and departments with personal reward-based rationales driving innovation and application (*e.g.* awards, promotions, etc.). This does not foster strong collaboration and instead results in many becoming constructive dissenters (Bone & McNay, 2006; Churchman & Stehlik, 2007). Further, Churchman and Stehlik (2007) argue that university structures emphasising individual evaluation and reward systems, monitoring, control, and corporate governance fail to recognise the collaborative ways in which knowledge communities work. By failing to positively harness the enthusiasm of individuals, universities may push them to become destructive dissenters. They may not only infrequently interact with their peers for the purpose of improving their discipline, but also become negative influences on their environment.

In order to allow constructive dissenters to thrive, organisations must provide the support, recognition and, more importantly, avenues to nurture enthusiasm. We believe that nurturing the constructive dissenter is essential for maintaining or creating academic communities that lead to sharing. Reihhardt and Sratkus (2002) argue that knowledge communication, interactive creation and dissemination of knowledge, rely on the existence of communities and on the readiness of communities to share. The organisation must, therefore, be supportive of environments and avenues that recognise and appreciate constructive dissenters. In doing so it will be recognising and appreciating that dissent “promotes basic human values such as loyalty, dignity, authenticity, autonomy, integrity, courage, and individual conscience” (Shahinpoor & Matt, 2007). Thus, we recognise the key characteristics of an environment wherein higher education practitioners can avoid slipping into the whirlpool of destructive dissent as supportive, nurturing, and providing appropriate recognition for innovative endeavours.

Why not just rely on collegiality?

Our interdisciplinary CoP provided us with high levels of job satisfaction because it felt liberating in contrast to some of our departmental projects. Free from the constraints of institutionalised preconceptions, we formed supportive relationships with like-minded individuals who were intrinsically interested in their work. We worked critically, but without judgement of each other. These benefits far outstripped the conventional ties of academic collegiality within our own departments.

We believe that the current trend towards workload management systems combined with methods of workplace evaluation in schools and departments can work against and erode collegiate practices. Collegiality is being splintered by what Nixon et al. (2001) describe as a “plurality of occupational groups divided from one another by task, influence, and seniority.” The current emphasis on the strict allocation of tasks and time hardly encourages collegiality. Academics frequently work in a degree of isolation from one another, focussed on their individual tasks and preoccupied with administration. Collegiality is not encouraged by current evaluation and reward systems. Many are intent on their quest for promotion, which can place primacy on the individual. Bagilhole and Goode (2001) contend that because of this focus on individualism, academic skills are not passed on to new academics. This heroic model is being reinforced at the expense of collegiality.

Discussion

Figure 1 depicts conditions we believe are necessary for the flourishing of a CoP within a university setting. We separate these conditions into three broad areas that contribute to an effective, positive, and safe environment for constructive dissenters. Box A illustrates that participants volunteer to join the CoP, share common goals and interests, and have a willingness to share or create knowledge (Henrich & Attebury, 2010). Box B outlines the informal nature of CoPs. Henrich and Attebury (2010) note that effective CoPs may form organically or deliberately, but emphasise the importance of both top-down and bottom-up collaborative design. Studies show that these non-hierarchical environments exhibit networking characteristics, facilitate learning between participants (Kulkarni, Stough, & Haynes, 2000), create a learning culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mavrincac, 2005) and provide necessary psychosocial support (Kram, 1985). Further, we contend that one member of the CoP can usefully play a facilitator role in order to maximise opportunities for learning. Box C underscores the need for an environment free from departmental constraints, where participants can exercise innovation and creativity.

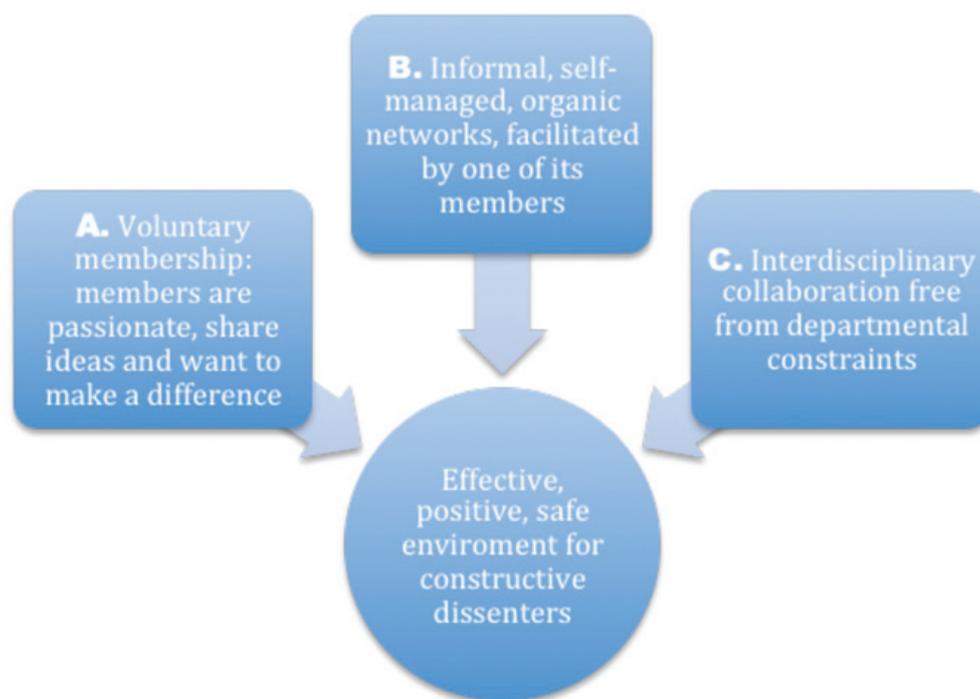


Figure 1: Conditions for the flourishing of a Community of Practice within a university setting

In our CoP, these three broad conditions were present and the benefits were clearly apparent. The CoP environment was liberating and exposed us to innovations and solutions not previously tapped. This clearly added what Churchman and Stehlik (2007) refer to as ‘texture’ and ‘innovation’ to our individual deliberations on our project, resulting in increased creativity. We experienced all four benefits Fontaine and Millen (2004) contend arise out of a successful CoP environment: greater job satisfaction, increased problem solving abilities, access to more knowledgeable colleagues, and (we hope) an enhancement to our professional reputation. In addition, our CoP allowed us to challenge our mental model of research as a nearly insurmountable hurdle that can be successfully overcome only by a few gifted intellectuals (Henrich & Attebury, 2010).

CoPs have long existed and been recognised for their myriad benefits in the business context but have only recently infiltrated the university culture as a means of encouraging research collaboration (Henrich & Attebury, 2010). Keys to CoP development and success in the university context include: diversity, collaboration across departmental lines, support from senior faculty, and space to safely develop innovative ideas. It is also important that the CoP foster knowledge creation, information management and knowledge dissemination to increase productivity, while focusing on the psychosocial and career functions of each member (Henrich & Attebury, 2010). These characteristics were critical to the creation and favourable outcomes of our CoP.

The informal nature of CoPs may not initially be viewed as acceptable by management, where the reward system is often based on measurable key performance indicators. Working outside the institutional framework of a school, unit or division may not provide management with its traditional measurable outcomes. However, CoPs are not born of management intervention, and rather, thrive without managerial involvement; managers tend to overlook synergies of knowledge that are less obvious and are often more readily recognised by organisational members through informal learning (Brown & Duguid, 1991). Autonomy and independence

are requisite for CoP's innovation and long-term survival (Wegner et al., 2002; Zárraga-Oberty & De Saá-Pérez, 2006; Borzillo & Kaminska-Labbé, 2011). High levels of accountability, particularly that which focuses on individuals, is not conducive to the development of a CoP. Hence, we find that the emphasis needs to shift from managerial accountability to personal responsibility.

Our research indicates that CoPs like ours can be supported by collaborative teaching practice with language experts. Catterall (2003) concludes that a language expert (or 'learning advisor') can give confidence through agreement and enthusiasm to a discipline expert, who may feel anxiety at moving 'out of their territory'. A language expert can also act as a 'sounding board' in partnerships where the discipline expert initiated contact with a language expert and had already formulated some goals and strategies. In this situation, the discipline expert has a strong sense of ownership, innovation, and a sense of driving the projects. This yields a greater chance that the innovation will be sustainable beyond the life of the involvement of the language expert, lead to lasting curriculum change, and ultimately increase student understanding of subject content (Murphy & Stewart, 2002; Catterall, 2003). This type of interdisciplinary teaching partnership can be an effective means of combating academic isolation or 'pedagogical solitude' (Shulman, 1993; Catterall, 2003).

The use of collaborative team may result in changes to teaching and learning practices that are more long lasting and have a greater impact on student learning (Catterall, 2003). Benjamin (2000) finds that collaborative teaching is most effective when the learning is discipline specific and student focused. It creates an environment where untried ideas can be shared and promotes ongoing reflection and evaluation. It is this type of discipline-specific, student-focused collaboration with our language expert that helped break us from our own pedagogical solitude and organically evolve into a CoP.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we contend that one way of generating an effective, positive, safe environment appropriate for constructive dissenters is a CoP. The conditions necessary to establish a CoP are: voluntary membership, willingness to share, a common passion, informal structure, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Especially, we argue that a facilitator from within the ranks of the voluntary members acts as a catalyst for the successful establishment and perpetuation of a CoP.

We acknowledge there are limitations to the 'answers' provided above. In fact, they generate many more questions that require further exploration. CoPs, by their very nature, are informal and as such, may require time outside of contracted work hours to survive and thrive. Is it possible or desirable for CoPs to be accounted for in workload planning? If so, how? Answering these questions fully is beyond the scope of this paper and an avenue for future research. At this moment in time, we answer simply that in order to innovate, we must go beyond what is merely required. Just as we expect our students to push the boundaries in their quest for knowledge, we should aim to do likewise.

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