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What If Grassroots Don't Take Root?: Reflections on Cultivating Communities of Practice

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Abstract:

Traditionally, communities of practice (CoPs) have been characterized as self-directed, self-governing entities. In our experience, however, we have found that CoPs focused on teaching and learning in post-secondary institutions rarely lead themselves. In this piece, we reflect on our experiences leading CoPs as organizers and facilitators. We then draw on literature about CoP governance to consider the implications of having educational developers – and post-secondary institutions more broadly – take on influential roles in managing CoPs. To conclude, we pose questions to guide future research on how to cultivate healthy CoPs and healthy roles for the educational developers who support them.

Key Words:

Communities of practice, self-governance, leadership, educational developers.

Introduction: Communities of Practice In Practice

Traditionally, communities of practice (CoPs) have been characterized as self-directed, self-governing entities (Wenger 2010). In our experience, however, we have found that CoPs focused on teaching and learning in post-secondary institutions rarely lead themselves. Even when instructors have expressed interest in creating a CoP, we have had challenges getting the communities started and encouraging members to adopt leadership roles. As a result, the CoPs have taken on a hybrid form in which an educational developer acts as a driving force, often playing an active role in both supporting and sustaining the community.

Our experiences lead us to ask, what does it mean if CoPs focused on teaching and learning in post-secondary institutions are not self-organizing? What are the deeper implications of having educational developers play an active role in supporting these CoPs (Cassidy 2011, Teeter et al. 2012)? In this piece we reflect on our experiences leading CoPs and suggest that it may be useful to examine educational developers' roles in these communities more closely.

Stephanie's Experience: Western Active Learning Space CoP

As Program Assistant for Western Active Learning Space (WALS) from 2014-2016, I worked with the Teaching Support Centre (TSC) to provide pedagogical support for Western University's newest active learning classroom. When an instructor approached me about starting a WALS CoP, Gavan and I discussed how the TSC could assist with creating one. In preparation, I reviewed resources from a number of Canadian universities outlining how to support CoPs. Many of the resources cited Wenger's (2015) influential definition of communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). They also either explicitly or implicitly suggested that communities of practice were self-directed and self-governing. While educational developers might facilitate an initial organizational meeting, their stated role was to provide ongoing logistical support by, for example, booking rooms; otherwise, it was the responsibility of the group to elect chairs to facilitate meetings and guide the CoP (see, for example, Guelph OpenEd n.d., MIETL 2008, UBC CTLT n.d.).

Drawing on these resources, I planned to use the first CoP meeting to provide a platform for members to outline a vision for the group, set a timeline for meetings, and elect co-chairs. While attendees were eager to develop a vision and timeline, encouraging them to take on leadership roles proved more difficult than expected. They resisted electing chairs not only due to low end-of-term turnout, but also because they wanted me to facilitate the CoP, at least until they "got the ball rolling" and "figured out what they wanted to do." One instructor noted that it would also be useful for the TSC to stay informed about how instructors use the space and any issues they encounter. While these were all valuable points, I wanted to nurture the CoP as a grassroots movement and avoid creating a group run from the top down. However, when attendees at a follow-up meeting reiterated the desire that I lead the CoP, I agreed to not only provide logistical support, but also organize and facilitate meetings for the time being, with a plan to re-assess my role at the end of the year.

Although the WALS CoP was not self-governing, its activities were largely self-directed and it embodied Wenger's (2015) model in that participants demonstrated 1) a shared commitment to a particular "domain of interest"; 2) a sense of community based on engaging in activities, supporting each other, and sharing information; and 3) a "shared practice" based on shared resources, including "experiences, stories, tools, [and] ways of addressing recurring problems" (p. 1). As our numbers grew, some members began developing their own side projects (e.g., proposing conference presentations based on their WALS experiences), while others expressed interest in taking on new responsibilities (e.g., training new WALS instructors). In an effort to capitalize on the grassroots leadership emerging in the group, I returned to the question of self-governance at the end of the year. However, members expressed their desire for me to continue in my role, noting that they valued having a TSC representative as a "neutral" voice who could address questions, focus discussions, and share concerns with appropriate parties.

Despite my efforts to support instructors in establishing a CoP that was both self-directed and self-governing, my attempts to cultivate internal leadership did not take root in the ways I had expected. When I shared my experiences with Gavan, I learned that I was not the only one who had encountered these challenges.

Gavan's Experience: Education for Sustainability CoP

As an Educational Developer at the University of Guelph, I had been working with the Director for Sustainability throughout 2013 to support the embedding of sustainability in the University of Guelph curriculum. My own disciplinary background before entering educational development was in environmental education and education for sustainability. As such, I know that sustainability is a complex, broad, and multi-dimensional concept. Given this complexity, I believed that a CoP offered a meaningful opportunity to bring together instructors interested in discussing how to integrate concepts of sustainability into diverse course and program curricula.

When contacting instructors to solicit participation in the CoP, I communicated that the role of the educational development unit was to provide initial and ongoing logistical support for the CoP. My stated role as the educational developer was to assist and organize, but my experience, much like Stephanie's, was not so decided; CoP participants learned of my own disciplinary background and not only wanted me to provide facilitative and logistical support, but also encouraged me to join as an active CoP member.

Engaging the group to define accountability and determine how to distribute leadership was particularly challenging. After our first meeting, the CoP was successful in selecting leadership, but my experience following that meeting was that the CoP was not so self-directed: I had to follow-up with the co-chairs to ensure that the planned meeting schedule was followed. My observation was that the CoP was not driven internally: while members were interested and engaged in the community, had I not continued to organize meetings, the CoP would have fallen apart.

My interpretation of the CoP literature and its application to the higher education setting gave me the impression that if interested members were brought together, with

the facilitative support of an educational developer, a self-sustaining, self-governing CoP would easily follow. This seems to suggest a certain neutrality to the role that an educational developer should play: assist with the convening, but then get out of the way of the meaningful work of the group. Yet, as Holmes, Manathunga, & Wuetherick (2012) write, that notion of neutrality in educational development is largely false. And in our experience, the communities suggested that it was not enough to facilitate the establishment of the structural elements—we were asked to take an active role in nurturing the communities themselves.

Cultivating Healthy Communities of Practice

In his recently updated introduction to communities of practice, Wenger (2015) notes that one of the most common myths about CoPs is that they are “always self-organizing” (p. 6).¹ He writes: “Some communities do self-organize and are very effective. But most communities need some cultivation to be sure that members get high value for their time” (p. 6). In the context of post-secondary institutions, instructors are busy balancing teaching, research, and service commitments, and may not feel prepared to take on a CoP leadership role. It is understandable, then, that these CoPs may take on hybrid forms in which educational developers not only provide logistical support, but also adopt more active roles as organizers and facilitators.

Consequently, CoPs focused on teaching and learning in post-secondary institutions may not look like traditional “organic” CoPs – that is, CoPs that emerge through “collegial collaborations” and operate independently of “external influences” (McDonald et al., 2012, p. 4). Instead, they may look more like “nurtured/supported” CoPs, which are often initiated by one or two colleagues who build a community for the purpose of sharing knowledge and practice, and may be encouraged by institutions to continue or share their resources more widely (p. 4). CoPs may also be “created/intentional,” meaning that they are formed with particular outcomes in mind and are linked to broader institutional goals (p. 4). Indeed, as McDonald et al. (2012) argue in their study of CoPs in Australian higher education, the conventional notion of organic CoPs as unstructured, self-managing entities is being displaced by studies that suggest “leadership, support, and organisation have a significant impact on the success of CoPs” (p. 11-12).

In many ways, educational developers are ideally positioned to “cultivate” successful CoPs in post-secondary institutions. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) suggest that “cultivating” CoPs means “creat[ing] an environment in which [these communities] can prosper: valuing the learning they do, making time and other resources available for their work, encouraging participation, and removing barriers” (p. 13). In addition to providing CoPs with institutionalized support, educational developers often have the

1 According to Wenger, the notion that communities of practice are self-organizing is a misconception partially due to interpretations of earlier work on the topic (p. 6). Yet Wenger often explicitly frames communities of practice as self-organizing in his writing. For example, in his 2010 article “Communities of practice and social learning systems: the career of a concept,” he states that communities of practice exhibit “many characteristics of systems more generally,” including an “emergent structure” and “self-organization” (p. 1). It is thus understandable that many have interpreted his model of communities of practice as self-directed and self-governing.

knowledge, skills, and experience to organize productive meetings, facilitate generative discussions, and assist instructors in achieving their goals. And if, as Wenger (2002) argues, the “health” of a CoP “depends primarily on the voluntary engagement of their members and on the emergence of internal leadership” (p. 12), educational developers can encourage members to take on greater responsibilities and leadership roles by, for example, encouraging participants to run meetings and “identify[ing] future facilitators with specialized skills” (Cassidy 2011, p. 6).

If educational developers, however, are not neutral facilitators, then it is worth examining what it means for them – and for post-secondary institutions more broadly – to take on more influential roles in managing CoPs. For example, if a CoP is created from the top-down, membership is encouraged, and outcomes are shaped institutionally (McDonald et al. 2012, p. 5), how do educational developers ensure that engagement is voluntary and nurture internal leadership? Moreover, Wenger (2002) suggests that even in a cultivated CoP, members’ “ability to steward knowledge as a living process depends on some measure of informality and autonomy. Once designated as the keepers of expertise, communities should not be second-guessed or overmanaged” (p. 12). For CoPs that are supported institutionally, it is important to ask, how do educational developers create an environment of informality and autonomy in which the group can effectively steward knowledge? How do educational developers ensure they are not second-guessing or over-managing the group? These questions are also important to consider given that educational developers will not necessarily be content experts in each CoP’s domain of interest. While an educational developer’s lack of content knowledge may encourage internal leadership to emerge in some CoPs, it may limit the developer’s ability to support certain groups requiring more in-depth guidance.

A number of questions remain about educational developers’ roles in cultivating healthy CoPs. How do CoPs focused on teaching and learning work in practice within post-secondary institutions? How often are these CoPs self-directed and self-governing? What may be gained or lost by having educational developers play more active roles in managing such CoPs? In other words, what forms of CoPs exist in Canadian post-secondary institutions, how do they work, and what might they add to conversations surrounding CoPs and higher education? Further research in these areas will help us better understand how to cultivate healthy communities of practice and healthy roles for the educational developers who support them.

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