

Final Report "Transforming the teaching climate: a study of the dynamics and potential of group reflective practice at Charles Sturt University"

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The aims of this project were as follows:

- To carry out a rigorous qualitative investigation of the benefits of participation in the Chemistry Teaching Team Project (CTTP);
- To explain the value of the CTTP process in terms of the common experience of work by academics at Charles Sturt University;
- To gather information on academic's perception of their work situation and factors hindering the formation of staff teaching communities in their school;
- To improve understanding (for both academic and management groups) of the factors that need to be cultivated to create communities of practice that will enhance learning and teaching environment;
- To promote the benefits which flow on from the formation of staff teaching communities of practice, and hence contribute to transforming the teaching climate at CSU.

The Chemistry Teaching Team Project (CTTP) is a group of chemists and other interested educators who have developed a successful and rewarding collegial relationship. This project investigation was divided into two principle stages:

- Stage one – investigation of member's experiences within the CTTP with respect to the literature on Communities of Practice (COP), in particular the ideas of Wenger;
- Stage two - examination of the work experience of volunteer participants with relation to work communities, and implications on work satisfaction.

Stage 1 was completed by November 2004. Over three months CTTP members discussed Wenger's ideas relating to Communities of Practice, and how these ideas related to member's experiences within the group. Members were interviewed as to their perceptions of the value and benefits of participation in the CTTP. Group discussions and individual interviews were transcribed and analyzed. The results of this work were presented and published in a peer-reviewed paper at the Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) conference in December, 2004 (please see attached). Participants found exposure to Wenger's ideas regarding COP interesting, most particularly in that it helped provide a language participants could use to more clearly express their experiences. However, participants were uniform in their view that knowledge of Wenger's descriptions of COP had little effect on their understanding of the functioning of the CTTP, or on their understanding of how they should conduct the group. Having developed an operational system and practical and intuitive understanding that worked well for the Team members and provided benefits, Team members reported that exposure to fundamental groundings in the theory of how communities of practice develop and work led to no realizations or deeper meanings. However: group members did report that the discussions that arose around the introduction of ideas of 'communities of practice' seemed worthwhile, i.e. the process of consideration and reflection was an extension of the their understanding and practice within the group even though the CoP language itself was not judged as valuable. Also, members did begin to use some of the CoP language, such as 'trajectory', 'levels of participation', 'peripheral participation' and the use of such language did seem to bring about discussions of aspects of their group and practice that they had not discussed previously. So, as we pointed out in the PCET it may be that some influence or benefit will emerge later from working with the CoP language and conceptual framework.

It is in the second stage that the project ran into difficulties. We had great problems in three areas. First, the members available to work on the project dropped significantly. One member went on study leave and a core member for this project began acting as Head of School and was thus tied up with other duties. The second problem was finding a research assistant, and the third was finding volunteers interested in participating. In the absence of a research assistant, two of the investigators (Bedgood and Adlong) tried for three months to drum up interested participants, finally making some progress with two schools on the Wagga campus. With no research assistant, Bedgood conducted interviews with participants from one of the schools. At the end of 2005 Adlong and Bedgood were finally able to conduct individual and focus group interviews with participants from the other school.

School Team One

Several faculty in School #1 initiated their own Teaching group in 2003 after hearing about the CTTT (CTTP members in fact presented a seminar on the project). This group had regular meetings, and interviews in general revealed participants felt they produced some worthwhile results; however, the project had had a hiatus for about six months, and several interviewees expressed concern that momentum had been lost. Initial impressions from the interviews indicate that all participants found their meetings worthwhile, and would without question recommend that others meet and form comparable groups. Differences arose, however, in the perceived value of the time investment the group demanded. Participants who had been at CSU the longest were most positive about the payoff for time input, and also indicated they had found benefits that percolated into their teaching; however, participants newer to CSU – still on probation – while confirming their belief that the team project was worthwhile, were less convinced of the value of the demand on their time – UNLESS there was a payoff in a publication from the work of the team. Since the CTTT had some success in generating refereed publications, the newer Wine Science faculty felt a pressing need to produce, and were disappointed in the apparent lack of publication by their group.

The interviews with School #1, however, seemed to motivate team members; several participants in their interviews lamented the previous lapse of group activity, and indicated the individual interview discussions would drive them to reinvigorate their group and motivate them to finish and publish the project upon which they were working. There was, in fact, a renaissance of activity after the interviews, though not clearly because of the interviews. The group submitted an abstract for a Uniserve conference, completed an ethics application, arranged several focus groups with their students, discussed the transcripts and spoke to a social science professor about analysis of qualitative data and submitted an application for a CSU Scholarship in Teaching grant. Presently group members still have not submitted a paper for publication. This may be due to the difficulty group members have in visualizing the way forward towards publication; interviews indicated several participants struggled with completion of work that is so far removed from their world of training and study.

The Restructure has now moved some of the members of the CTT into the same school as participants from School #1, and discussions are already underway to organize more interaction between the two groups. Bedgood has recently had conversations with members of the School #1 group regarding joint meetings, and supporting the School #1 group in bringing their work to publication

School Team Two

Participants from School #2 provided a different group to talk with, in that they have no established 'Team', and so interviews allowed us to gather something of a 'before and after' perception of experiences as we try to foster the development of a 'Team'.

This School scored poorly on the CSU work environment survey conducted in 2003. Several (eventually six) members of the school contacted us individually (through a couple attempts at recruiting with the help of the School ED) expressing an interest in trying to improve the collegiality among colleagues in their school. Each of the six were interviewed individually to explore their perceptions of their work environment. All but one expressed disappointment and frustration with the lack of interactions with their colleagues; this single individual was part of a vibrant, active discipline group and while personally and professionally fulfilled through the interactions of that group, communicated sentiments similar to colleagues regarding collegiality *within* the school.

Several of the participants communicated a relief and satisfaction with the opportunity provided through the interviews to be heard; in an interview and in a focus group, the process was described as 'therapeutic'.

Following individual interviews, Adlong and Bedgood identified important issues noted in the interviews, and used those as talking points to prompt discussions in a focus group in December 2005. The group came to a consensus on several areas they felt inhibited the growth of collegiality within the School:

- Diverse disciplines
- Lack of a meeting space

- Lack of opportunities to meet as a school and 'be collegial'

During discussion of these issues the participants expressed a sense of reification by the process – sharing frustrations with others and working together to identify possible solutions. Despite communicated burdensome work loads, several individuals volunteered to take actions to address identified problems – for example, clearing bookcases and rearranging furniture in the extant meeting room to try to improve the feel of the room.

The participants agreed that Bedgood and Adlong should approach the Head of School and present the identified problems, and proposed solutions. This meeting occurred in February, 2006. The HOS indicated his concern with the lack of collegiality within School, and suggested several issues raised by the participants had already been identified by him as issues to address. He did indicate, however, that with the impending restructure and division of the disciplines within the School he felt hamstrung to make meaningful immediate changes.

Adlong and Bedgood met informally with the participants in their offices the end of May, to see what sorts of changes may have occurred in the six months since the focus group interview. One participant indicated they experienced a marked improvement in the professional interactions among colleagues. The remaining four focus group participants, however, felt there had been really no change. The observations of Bedgood and Adlong were equally mixed. There had been no changes in the meeting space – the bookshelves had been cleared off, but had almost immediately been refilled by someone else within the School; no furniture had been rearranged. Intentions to make changes in the layout of the kitchen area and the meeting space had apparently moved nowhere – likely partly due, at least, to impending changes due to the restructure. However, some of the suggestions arising from the interviews had been implemented (though not evidently because of the research intervention): there was now a monthly research discussion group, providing informal opportunities to share ideas and problems; the Learning and Teaching Committee had a new leader (and new name – Learning and Tertiary Teaching and Education, or LATTE), actively initiating sharing of ideas through a monthly informal LATTE lunch, as well as a full day LATTE Workshop jointly held with a related School.

The results of this project are as follows:

- members of the CTPP found no benefit to their functioning as a COP through exposure to literature ideas (Wenger) behind COPs. However, while contact with and discussions of Wenger's ideas were not perceived to provide a basis through which the group's COP could be improved or strengthened, it was uniformly agreed that Wenger's ideas provided CTPP members with a *language* they could use to reflect on their COP, and communicate benefits of the group process to others. *This case suggests that an intellectual exposure to developed ideas of communities of practice may not have an effect in fostering development of new COPs.*
- The gathering of individuals to form a COP requires a commitment *and a perceived payoff*. Members of the group from School #1 demonstrated a commitment for about eight months, but new staff felt pressure to devote time in areas perceived to have a sure payoff towards their careers. The collegial activity among the group was valued, but was not enough in and of itself to warrant the time investment for new faculty.
- The push for new faculty to produce publications can serve as an initial sweetener to join and participate in a group if the work of the group can lead to publications. However, the gap between participant's science discipline and the qualitative work of the group – a gap of experience in very different methods of research, language, and publication – led to a loss of direction in finishing the project. *Lack of familiarity with research outside their discipline* provided a significant barrier to completion of the project and publication.
- Participants from School #2 identified that for a sense of collegiality to develop among individuals, there needs to be some *shared sense of direction*. While all members of the School teach students, and many have practicals and professional placements for their students, these similarities are lost among the perceived large differences in disciplines and in a tendency to isolate themselves and lose the rapport for working through differences. In addition to commonalities with teaching issues, participants identified similarities with respect to research that could contribute toward collegial interactions; however, perceived differences in discipline were again identified as a barrier.
- To develop a collegial group of colleagues, *there must be opportunity for individuals to interact*. The barriers highlighted above might be overcome through activities now occurring in the School –

informal lunch 'chats' where people can share what they are doing, and ask questions to move forward all members of the School.

- An important contributor to the preceding point is that there must be a *comfortable space* in which people can meet. Some of the newer activities within the school have moved into the foyer of the building, bypassing the problems with the current meeting room entirely.

This project attracted some attention from outside CSU; a group of Speech Pathologists with the Greater Southern Area Health Service, based on the Wagga Base Hospital campus, were looking at implementing a peer appraisal system and 'following the success of the CSU Chemistry department's team teaching' project invited Bedgood to speak to them about this project, and issues associated with developing a CoP. The Speech Pathologists felt ideas from the presentation could help them in forming a peer appraisal process of their practice.

Budget

Spending on this project was much smaller than projected in the application for several reasons:

- Inability to identify a research assistant. Lack of a research assistant, and concomitant completion of interviews and such by the investigators meant that the salary funds requested for the research assistant were not spent
- Research economies. Happily, we were able to use data project from a different funded project for this project, allowing us to save money on interview transcriptions.
- Due to the project delays with departure from CSU of a researcher, absence of a research assistant, and difficulty in identifying participants, collection of interview data was delayed (beginning 2006) to the point that analysis of the second aspect of the project only occurred shortly before one of the principal Investigators left the country on SSP. Consequently requested funds for dissemination at other campuses were not expended.

\$ 307.73 temp assistance

15.14 consumables

1090.91 professional development fund for Adlong (approved by M. Tulloch)

\$1413.78 total expenditure

\$6392.98 not expended

Refereed Papers published

'Reaching outside of the discipline: Chemistry teachers or organisational developers?' (2006) Adlong, W, Bedgood, D, Bishop, A, Dillon, K, Prenzler, P, Robards, K, Ryan, R. Proceedings of the 2006 Annual International Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), 9-12 July, Perth, Australia Bunker, A., and Vardi, I. (eds) *Research and Development in Higher Education*, Volume 29: Critical Visions: Thinking Learning and Researching in Higher Education. HERDSA: Milperra. pp 19 – 27.

'The explanatory value of 'communities of practice' to members of an academic critical discourse group'. (2004) Adlong, W, Bedgood, D, Bishop, A, Higgins, S, Dillon, K, Haig, T, Prenzler, P & Robards, K. In *Doing, thinking, activity, learning: Proceedings of the 12th Annual International Conference on Post-compulsory Education and Training, Crowne Plaza Surfers Paradise, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia, 6-8 December, vol. 1*, J Searle, C McKavanagh & R Roebuck (eds), convened by the Centre for Learning Research, Griffith University, Australian Academic Press, Brisbane, pp. 1-8.