

The Creative Nature of Communities of Practice

Martha McAlister, BSW, Med, PhD
Camosun College

Author's Contact Information

Martha McAlister, BSW, Med, PhD
Instructor and Program Leader
Camosun College
3100 Foul Bay Road, Victoria, BC V8P 5J2
Phone: 250-370-3245
Email: mcalisterm@camosun.ca

Abstract:

Camosun College has been developing a culture of Communities of Practice (CoPs) over the past few years. This article tells the story of how these groups have evolved for us, and why they seem so relevant in higher education today. It also provides a glimpse into the lived experience of what it is like to be part of a CoP, along with some of the benefits and challenges. The collaborative, peer-based, emergent, and iterative nature of these groups is highlighted.

Key Words:

Communities of Practice, creativity, emergent, supportive container, risk, collaboration, peer.

Introduction

I'm still riding on a high from our workshop called "A Glimpse of the Creativity in Education Community of Practice". This is just one of ten Communities of Practice currently running at Camosun College, but it is the third time that one of the groups has decided to put on a workshop. Each time, I have been truly amazed at what a group of colleagues can create through the process of collaboration and shared passion. After this particular workshop, I feel like it is time to share a bit about what we have been doing here at Camosun.

What exactly is a CoP?

Before I tell my story, let me define what I mean by community of practice. First and foremost, it is an emergent and evolving structure and process, and so is inherently hard to define. Although my understanding continues to develop, I have a standard description that I tell people who are interested in joining. I tell people that a CoP is an opportunity to build community and engage at the edge of your teaching and learning potential. A term originally coined by Etienne Wenger (1998), CoPs are groups of

people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and want to interact regularly to learn how to do it better. These professional learning communities have been a popular approach to teacher development, involving educators in collaborative, caring, inclusive, critical reflection on practice (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007). They have been shown to have positive effects on teaching practice and student learning (MacDonald, 2001).

Some of the key principles in effective communities of practice include deep mutual respect, collective responsibility, a culture of openness, an inquiring mindset, trust, and shared purpose (Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007). The premise is that innovation can be nurtured through exposure to multiple perspectives in dialogue, and through putting aside previously held assumptions. A community of practice is a group of colleagues engaged in conversations that have the potential to transform education (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). In their book *The Heart of Higher Education*, Parker and Zajonc call on faculty to engage in dialogue about the deeper meaning and purpose of education as a way to awaken our individual and collective capabilities.

The story begins

Let me tell you the story of how communities of practice (CoPs) have emerged over the last few years here at Camosun. For me, it started when I made a decision to focus my doctoral dissertation on CoPs in higher education. I chose to use an action inquiry approach to my research with a small group of colleagues, exploring novel ways of creating a holding container for transformative dialogue. Titled ‘Dissonance and Resonance in a Community of Practice’, I was curious to explore “what might be possible if we more intentionally create learning environments that support and challenge us at the leading edge of our human potential” (McAlister, 2015, p. ii). As Hart (2009) says, “The question is not whether transformation happens: it does... the question is whether we can help transformation along” (p. 13).

Synchronistically, around the time I finished my research, Camosun had decided to invest in developing CoPs by creating a temporary, part time position through the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. I was eager to take on that role, but also extremely nervous, stepping out into unknown territory. Coincidentally, this is exactly what CoPs are designed to assist with! Drawing from Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of Zone of Proximal Development and Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) concept of Flow, I have become very cognizant of the value in balancing support and challenge. In our ever increasingly complex world, we are coming to understand that creative problem-solving is a necessity, which requires a willingness to be with ambiguity and to take risks (e.g. Scharmer, 2009). We do this best when we create supportive scaffolding to help us step into the vulnerability. Having a sense of being held within the supportive container of my college and colleagues, I decided to step into that unknown territory – a territory where I would be helping to create more supportive containers for my colleagues.

The magic of CoPs began happening quite quickly. People were coming to me asking if we could start a group on this or that. There was a feeling of pent-up need for more connection and collaboration among colleagues – “thirsting” to get out of the silos, as someone put it. Within a few short months we had a wide range of groups meeting regularly:

- New Faculty CoP
- Indigenous Education Circle CoP
- Effective Teams: Coach Approach CoP
- Creativity in Education CoP
- Wellbeing in the Learning Environment CoP
- Interdisciplinary Education CoP
- Teaching and Learning Using On-line Technologies CoP
- Research CoP
- Sustainability CoP
- Humane Education CoP

These groups have provided a social container that helps foster mutual development and support our aspiring practice intentions. We recognize that we are all practitioners in relation to a particular topic, and bring our knowledge from the field as well as experiment with new ideas in the field. They are peer based, voluntary, and interdisciplinary.

After the first year, participants were saying things like:

- “The CoPs bring together a diverse group of people from across the college who might not otherwise have a chance to interact and learn together on a topic of common interest”
- “It’s a place to host our questions and uncertainty”
- “I love the emergent nature”
- “The experience of simply sharing stories, anecdotes, ideas, thoughts, resources, and even the act of just being present, feels incredibly supportive”
- “I appreciate how much valuable, real conversation, storytelling, and problem solving we can do together in such a tight time frame”
- “What I have most enjoyed is the cross-school (even cross-department) contact”
- “I feel so energized!”
- “I found my tribe”

Bumps along the way

This is not to say there haven’t been bumps. For example, one group that started strong fell apart. As I reflect on the reasons why, I suspect there were some issues of power imbalance and conflict that the group did not feel quite ready or strong enough to take on. There was not the needed sense of a supportive container to enable participant vulnerability and risk-taking.

I have heard Canadians described as having a rather polite interpersonal communication style, and while the benefits of addressing conflict within a group are well known (e.g. Bonebright, 2010; Cranton, 1994; Mayer, 2009; Mendenhall & Marsh, 2010), we still tend to be conflict avoidant. Scharmer (2009) talks about four fields of conversation he calls downloading, debating, dialoguing and presencing; CoPs are meant to create opportunities to break our habits of downloading and debating, and practice leaning into dialoguing and presencing. This is much easier said than done!

The issue of power imbalance came up in my research as well (McAlister, 2015). Participants may feel less willing to be vulnerable and take risks when there is a real or perceived power differential within the group. I have a hunch that these were factors that contributed to the demise of one group, though it certainly provided a rich learning opportunity for us all.

Other bumps have included scheduling conflicts, lack of time, and therefore, often low attendance at groups. The level of interest in attending is much higher than the actual number of participants that show up. While each group has an interest list of 10 to 70 people, regular attendance ranges from three to 10 people. These groups have not been restricted to just faculty; support staff as well as those in positions of leadership have also shown an interest. Not surprisingly, a number of participants have signed up for more than one group, and simply can't do it all. However, I have discovered that size does not matter, as some of the most powerful conversations have occurred in the smallest gatherings.

It has also been a challenge to encourage more shared leadership and to nurture facilitator competencies. While some of the groups have natural and keen leaders, I have ended up carrying the weight of facilitation for many of the groups, given that I have some release time for the role of coordinator. I had one gathering of some leaders from various groups for a "CoP of CoPs" with some success, and am planning to do that again. I am working on a web-based space that we can all share resources and communicate with each other. I hope that this mutual support for all of the groups will help them become more self-sustaining, though I am concerned that the groups will fizzle out if and when there is no longer someone in my position of coordinator.

As time goes along, I am able to see these bumps as part of the process: while it takes time to develop a culture of dialogue, we can learn as much from what doesn't work as from what works. Some groups show a declining interest; others are just finding their groove. Meanwhile, new ones keep cropping up. For example, I just had a couple of strong leaders approach me to establish a CoP group for department chairs.

But back to the magic: We have now completed two years of CoPs at Camosun. I realize that even with some low attendance and some fits and starts, there is definite momentum. Positive impacts continue to ripple out. Last year we had a campus wide conference focused specifically on Communities of Practice. This year we just finished an amazing conference focused on Creativity and Innovation, and I am still riding high off the energy from the workshop that one of our CoPs hosted. Let me give you a bit of a glimpse into that workshop and how it evolved.

A glimpse into our process

Scene: A group of colleagues from a wide range of disciplines is gathered in the Camosun pottery studio, playing with mud. It is our monthly Creativity in Education Community of Practice. The conversation is wide and deep. We speak about how it feels to try something new, to feel judged, to take a risk. We make the connection to how students must often feel. Our hands are busy and our hearts are connected. We laugh – a lot. We even sing and yell a bit. We share some challenges being faced in the

classroom, and the ideas and suggestions flow easily. We talk about how we might incorporate more of what we are practicing together into our work.

Then someone suggests we should put on a workshop at an upcoming college-wide conference. On the spot, someone starts taking notes and the vision starts to emerge. Within a matter of minutes we have a rough sketch of what we want to do, and five participants willing to help facilitate!



Figure 1: Graphic poster from Creativity in Education.

A month later at the next CoP meeting, we are making music together this time. Some more meat gets put on the bones of our workshop idea. People start saying “I can bring this; I can do that”. The entire process of developing the workshop is collaborative, emergent, and so much fun. We are now pumped.

The day of the workshop arrives and we all show up early to get organized. We crank up the music, and get busy setting up our four activity stations – kinesthetic (play dough), music and singing (with percussion instruments), painting (nine canvases that will go together to make one mural), and “blackout poetry” (with pages torn out of a National Geographic magazine). This is going to be a very interactive workshop! We are going to give participants a “glimpse” of our Creativity in Education Community of Practice, complete with check-in and check-out. We have lots of great resources to share as well, with a strong rationale for the value of CoPs and the relevance of Creativity in Education.

Before our workshop, the conference keynote speaker provides us with a perfect segue and gets the group in a positive frame of mind. Ben Weinlick of the Think Jar Collective talks about the importance of “mucking around” and developing opportunities for “weird creative collisions” (personal communication, April 27, 2016). He urges us to go outside of our silos and look for innovative ideas in unexpected places; He says that

it is important to support bottom-up innovation; He describes the value of playfulness and how we need to not take ourselves too seriously; He tells us that fostering trust is key; He talks about the importance of divergent thinking and that fear is what kills this. In his creative think tanks, they always start with a check-in and end with a check-out. (And I'm sitting there thinking – YES! We do too!)

By the time participants get to our playful room, they are ready to dive in. We are almost overwhelmed by the number of participants that show up. It doesn't take long for everyone to get past their initial reticence and begin "mucking around". Then, conversation starts to flow; and the strengthening connections are palpable. By the time we get to check-out, people are reporting out about the sense of vulnerability and not being good enough, taking risks, being willing to let go of attachment to the final outcome, and feeling inspired. The five of us are beaming, and energized to keep the momentum going beyond the workshop.

Why I love CoPs

This is just one of many examples of CoP magic. For me personally, involvement with CoPs has been life changing. I have met and worked with colleagues from across the college and from other institutions that I would have never crossed paths with otherwise. I have felt a true sense of belonging in a community. I have seen the direct positive impact on my work with students, and the way I strive to create holding environments within my classroom that nurture transformative learning. I have experienced how a foundational sense of connection, where we don't have to feel defended, is vital in order to be freed up to more productively take risks and engage with the challenges we face. This corroborates with the literature that says empathetic connection helps to bridge understanding and support openness to other perspectives (e.g., Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

In a world of increasing diversity and complexity, encountering difference can cause us to retreat into fight, flight, or freeze positions. The work of creating transformative holding environments such as communities of practice seems vital. Not only that, but it is just so rewarding. I don't know how this initiative will continue to unfold, but I can imagine so many possibilities. The creative potential is limitless. We know that a small group of people can change the world, and we know that collaborating across different perspectives is essential. Communities of practice may be just what is needed.

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