

The Super Community of Practice

Going into the second year of the project CEDAM determined to trial a new approach to capacity development. It targeted instrumental members of existing communities of practice or learning communities within the university to form a meta community of practice. Our explicit intention was to pilot a model for fast-tracking capacity development¹ around communities of practice and distributed leadership.

The project team agreed that we would facilitate and resource this community as a ‘train the trainer’ style intervention. This initiative was labelled the Super Community of Practice (Super CoP) and was to:

- map theory against the reality of the project’s model of CoP formation and development;
- harvest and distribute the learning, insights and processes gleaned in the Super CoP back to members’ originating communities of practice; and
- offer needs based skills development with a particular focus on leadership.

Aspirations for this super community shifted into committed resourcing and conceptualisation for project members after a planning day in January 2007. The project team came to key agreements to resurrect Super CoP (we had one earlier meeting in November 2006) and to instigate a fortnightly meeting schedule to run as a tight lunch time session with duration of an hour and a half.

Ideally in terms of process the aim was to rotate responsibilities for chairing/facilitating the community (skills enhancement for all) and to trial this arrangement for three months. The following table outlines the Project Team’s blueprint for Super CoP.

Function	Goals
<i>1. Action research group</i>	<p>To test out project models and checklists about CoP formation and evolution.</p> <p>To identify what is needed and validate pre-conditions for CoP emergence.</p> <p>To identify the necessary steps, the contextual features and the reflective processes.</p> <p>To clarify the different points/stages in development of CoPs.</p> <p>To clarify the role that CEDAM project person can play in such a community.</p>
<i>2. Mutual coaching/capacity development forum</i>	<p>To provide effective modelling of facilitation, distributed leadership and reflection on practice.</p> <p>To provide mentoring and coaching for members.</p> <p>To solicit contribution and input from Super CoP members on necessary skills, knowledge and capabilities.</p>

¹ Capacity building over the course of project has become more than activities which strengthen the knowledge, abilities, skills and behaviour of individuals around leadership, group interaction, self management and teaching and learning practice. The focus shifted to creating, supporting and sustaining an enabling environment in which individuals and communities can collaboratively identify and address issues, and develop insights, knowledge and the necessary experience to solve problems and implement change.

<p>3. <i>Evaluation arm of project</i></p>	<p>To gather data and harvest individual and group reflections from this forum. To validate community of practice models and checklists for project evaluation. To link learning processes to project evaluation instruments to a community of practice reflecting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on teaching and learning; • on leadership capability; • on its development as a community of practice.
--------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Table: Project Team Blueprint for a Super Community of Practice

Establishment and development of the Super Community of Practice

The Super CoP has met 18 times over the course of the project. Membership of the Super Community of Practice has stabilised to encompass around 15 people. On average approximately 70 to 75% of the membership has attended each session. Membership of the Super CoP was drawn from a diverse range of areas across the university including Physics, Computer Science, Biology, Medicine, Graduate Teaching Program, Epidemiology & Public Health, Human Resources, Music, Economics, Arts, Education, Environment, Sustainability and Academic Development. The project team itself has been at the heart of this core membership, and has pursued a learning-capacity development partnership with the membership. There are approximately ten people who are regulars, and for the others, participation is more sporadic. CEDAM has facilitated nine of the community's meetings, and resourced Super CoP members to plan process facilitation for the balance of the sessions.

In terms of formative and summative evaluation of this project initiative, the following commentary draws on:

- Two focus groups held with Super CoP members (May and November 2007), both undertaken by a staff member from the Evaluations Unit. Unfortunately the last focus group yielded less data, as the quality of the recording was poor.
- Two sessions during July–August in which the members of the Super CoP reconsidered their activities and goals going forward into 2007-08.
- Notes from each of the Super CoP sessions.

The first Super CoP meeting was held in November 2006—a premature beginning, as the project team had not clearly thought through their approach, roles or the nature of support they were offering. Thirteen people attended this initial meeting (including four project staff). Of the people who came to this session in 2006—five never returned to subsequent sessions, (several had no community of practice operating and another person had parenting commitments arise).

The initial meeting was formally conducted as semi project briefing and as an overview of communities of practice (our tools and checklists for establishment) and process facilitation. In hindsight, we misjudged the pitch of this session as we started from how the project team (with all our own insecurities) saw the situation and not from the level ANU staff were at. Attendees were not interested in theoretical approaches; they needed information based in their own contexts, on their own challenges and issues. At that session people made the following specific points in relation to communities of practice at ANU:

- the lack of collaborative culture at ANU (does not support or reward people for collaboration) was an impediment to communities of practice;
- seeing a need for champions/drivers to get groups going (this changed later);
- the sense of staff feeling time poor and stretched;
- difficulties getting people to invest in participating in communities of practice, what incentives/motivators to involve people;
- the challenge in working across divides within university (academic/general, teaching/research etc.); and
- ANU culture vis-à-vis teaching versus research and individualism.

Super CoP did not restart until *February 2007*, and experienced a slow development over the first two months. Its core participation until April was largely the project team, with three to four additional participants. It was not until April that it started to attract a more consistent group beyond the project team. In part this also could have been attributed to the very disrupted beginning of semester at ANU arising from massive storm damage (changes to timetabling, venues, teaching activities) sustained by campus facilities.

At the February Super CoP an outline of the project team's vision was circulated as a discussion starter. The intention was to inform, share and evolve what Super CoP could be with participants. The major challenge that participants felt they faced regarding communities of practice was forging a common vision and goals in their communities. A component of the session was a skills needs analysis, and the group identified a range of skills for capacity development including dialogue, catalysing, facilitation, leadership, and project management and resource identification.

At this point the group's preference was towards skill sharing and learning from each other ... rather than on seeking outside expertise. A corollary of this was that a member volunteered to run the next session on facilitation. This suggested a preference for an informal peer-to-peer learning environment.

In the Super CoP's establishment phase the group's focus was on the context and difficulties associated with the set-up and resourcing of communities. What people wanted from their involvement in Super CoP is gleaned tangentially from responses to a 'dummy' run conducted for the *Practice in Leadership Workshop*.

- To create links between academic staff working in different disciplines.
- To improve communication and work practices in departments.
- To use communities of practice as vehicles for achieving change.
- To support teaching, mentoring and induction.
- To act as alternative structures for interaction between peers.
- To improve teaching and learning outcomes, through working with students in communities of practice.

People needed practical information on setting-up, managing and sustaining communities of practice and at personal level this translated to having the necessary capabilities to do it. They wanted to explore and be exposed to different processes and approaches to managing and facilitating groups and their interactions.

Super CoP operated in an open and adaptive manner. Members ran flexible sessions that were underpinned by thoughtful process facilitation. Sessions were based on topics that interested the community and facilitation was rotated. The community problem solved issues that participants brought from their own communities of practice and used case studies as a form of action learning. In using this approach, it was important to be responsive to emerging themes or ideas raised during these sessions. In this way the community's work was clearly focussed on real practice issues and on building group process.

Appendix 3.1 gives a comprehensive overview of the content, process, capacity development and outcomes covered through the Super CoP's journey. This matrix of experiences and activities covered during the last twelve months is diverse but it falls into two phases pre and post *Practice in Leadership Workshop*. Prior to the workshop activity can be clustered around:

- understanding context of the academy (e.g Academic practice as craft);
- personal and group skills development (e.g Facilitation);
- knowledge and values dimensions to effective practice (e.g. Power);

After the workshop, the community shifted over time from an inward community focus back to the larger university setting. Much of the activity towards the end of 2007 has focussed on hot-housing and problem solving for other people who are running or seeking to establish communities of practice around the university.

For the first half of 2007 the agenda setting for this community was influenced by the project's own imperatives. Over time this changed, and the first inkling of this was through the Focus Group Report in June 2007 (See Appendix 2.3). In the Super CoP establishment phase people were uncertain, they felt vulnerable, and were wondering was their participation a good use of their precious time. Their perceptions of the processes used in Super CoP were of a:

- lack of structure;
- lack of purpose for group initially;
- discussions at some times seem like navel gazing;
- not knowing what the group was supposed to be doing;
- not knowing whether they were doing it well (performance anxiety);
- being concerned about the involvement of Super CoP in developing the *Practice in Leadership Workshop*; and
- feeling that they were not deriving benefit from the workshop trial sessions.

There was a perception of the Super CoP being redirected to develop the *Practice in Leadership Workshop* (PILW), and members were unclear of the connection between their participation in Super CoP and the workshop. Some comments illustrate shifts in sensibility such as the observation that 'lack of structure' could be a factor in members discovering their own goals and purpose or that sense of purposeless shifting as members realised Super CoP was more about interaction than achieving a goal.

Super CoP participants expressed many positive things about their participation and commented on how highly valued the sessions were. The most significant issue at this point was member's anxiety that group was only formed for purpose of workshop. They wished post PILW to continue to participate in Super CoP and to reclaim their momentum. What was revelatory

for CEDAM in this was the sense of emergent ownership of Super CoP and participants' assertions of wanting it to serve their needs. There has clearly been some tension between the project team's needs, imperatives and anxieties and those of the other members of Super CoP.

A further project blind spot was that changing participation within Super CoP meant that members did not share a common experience of the group and its development. Through the first half of 2007, the project team were preoccupied with organising the dissemination event and were remiss in not realising some people had not been privy to earlier sessions in which contextual information sharing had occurred.

Super CoP in the second half of the year did regroup after the *Practice in Leadership Workshop*. After a debrief session on the workshop (see Practice in Leadership Workshop Section), the community turned their focus to what they wanted from their community and through a series of sessions identified the following role and tasks as encompassing:

- exploring ideas of communities of practice;
- considering how to propagate communities of practice across the university;
- supporting people who are trying to propagate communities of practice;
- problem solving for existing and emergent communities and similar initiatives; and
- identifying preconditions for communities of practices to emerge.

Appendix 3.1 is a succinct snapshot of the work we engaged in through our Super CoP get-togethers but it does not convey the sensibility and dynamic of these encounters. Members of the Super Community of Practice are aware that it has a qualitatively different aspect to it than the other communities they are involved in. They began reflecting on its value and focussed on understanding its interaction dynamic. Through small group brainstorms people came up with similar qualities that they theorised into a loose schema. Super CoP as an informal lunch-based engagement took place in a friendly atmosphere, which nourished trust, that in turn enabled people to share their issues, even to 'bitch', to navel-gaze and to have fun. Members could problem solve together and explore solutions. They found this form of engagement inspiring, motivating and also conducive to learning.

The Super CoP persisted with this inquiry and nominated the following interaction qualities as necessary or distinctive:

- trust;
- space: a sense of space, of opening, of spaciousness;
- different space: as in a safe place and a haven outside their discipline, business unit, or usual space;
- voluntary participation;
- freedom, autonomy;
- outreach (translation into other contexts beyond Super CoP);
- non competitive (it not being about status, instead the community being about equality);
- people volunteering to lead sessions, this being rotated and shared meant they saw people doing their stuff; and
- sitting with uncertainty, a difficult but generative discipline.

<i>What have you learned through your participation in the Super CoP?</i>	<i>What have you contributed to Super CoP?</i>	<i>What have you received from Super CoP?</i>	<i>What have you valued about the Super CoP?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving techniques (case studies) • Theoretical side of discussions • Developing a sense of common understandings • Different perspectives —different ways of facilitating & experiencing • The value of working within the process for the meetings • Seeing things that work, those that don't, and variations (approaches to process) • Learning to listen to others, e.g. the singing workshop • A sense of contribution, people being themselves, people giving and receiving. • Super CoP sessions opened windows—to see things that couldn't see before—not necessarily on topic of workshop—'reflection' life/work, confidence to do things. • Learning to receive in the group • The need for persistence with process, and the importance of understanding, planning, and reflection. • Insights into academic culture • Giving up control, fullness to emptiness ... accepting the generative space. • Holding onto possibility and power in the group itself, this does not feel 'easy' but as people contribute and grow, the Super CoP becomes stronger and all get more out of it. • An evolving view of Super CoP potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy, zest and ideas. • Humour • Passion • Creativity • Tools and resources • Concrete examples and contributions from own CoP experiences with facilitation. • Providing structure and process • Openness to questioning • Leadership and facilitation • Faith in the group • Offering different perspectives and insights from other arenas • Willingness to disclose (being brave dealing with vulnerability) • Challenging of perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to like minded people • Awareness of similarity of values • Exposure to (and capacity to manifest) other qualities such as 'softness' • Learning through being and doing • Reassurance • Being in a community • Responding with passion and responsibility if invited to do so • Energy from everyone • The satisfaction of seeing people grow • Possibilities for more exciting things to emerge • Seeing people respond and develop over the journey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The space/process for transforming • The people: appreciating what they are doing • The diversity in group, differences in experience—length of time at ANU etc. • Personal development • Respect/trust • Sense of community • Deep listening/getting grist to the reflection mill • Commonalities of interests • Support and project problem solving • Offers of help • Cross disciplinary connections and the windows of insight they offer • The deeper interactions that the Super CoP enabled • Watching and listening to the way other people did things • Feeling more empowered • Being present —feeling part of Super CoP • Interactions with others • Food

Table: A summary of responses for Super CoP members about their experience in this community, October 2007

Super CoP working

Super CoP has been a vehicle for continuous professional learning in an informal setting for its members. In summary the Super CoP did make a journey from being a manufactured group into becoming a community of practice—it evolved vocabularies, knowledge, collective identity, built capacity, and produced resources and skills that members have shared with their own communities of practice.

Informal Learning

Super CoP in particular has focused on participating in a group, and group and individual learning through problem-solving, asking questions, listening, observing, reflecting, and giving and receiving feedback. The distinctive aspect was to focus on group learning and ideas of practice, personal agency and to then explore ideas of distributed leadership.

Within the project's own model of community of practice development (see Appendix 1) a paradigm shift from a group to a community of practice is indicated by changes in attitudes and mental models and also in skill sets and capabilities. This CEDAM initiated group commenced as a reactive group of people—bemused participants unsure of what the commitment would entail. Through supported facilitation, the group shifted from being responsive, and in part directed by the project team, to becoming self-directed and initiating.

Building and surfacing knowledge

A continuous strand through this project has been the difficulty people have experienced articulating what a community of practice is and what can make them work. In part, this stems from project focussing on the practice rather than the theory of communities of practice, which entails a shift from objectivity to subjectivity. An interesting observation from a Super CoP member is that communities of practice, in practice, are very different from the theory, with an emphasis on the practice being 'messier'.

Mid year 2007, Super CoP members felt they could not 'define' what a community of practice is, however, they did feel that they had a greater understanding of communities of practice and what they could achieve. At this stage, the two other factors they understood to be significant were that some groups that they were involved in could also fit the label community of practice and that communities of practice engage with change. In general as a cohort, they indicated they had learned about:

- group dynamics;
- new ways of looking at things, new ways of thinking;
- ideas and approaches to use in other communities of practice;
- strategic thinking; and
- changes in attitude.

Responses indicated a strong level of enthusiasm and positivism and significant sense of learning. Members were optimistic about Super CoP's potential and about applying their new knowledge and skills to other communities of practice.

Later in the year Super CoP members pondered what they had formally learned about the theory of community of practice through Super CoP. In general they felt that the experience of

working in communities of practice was useful as a learning process. Practically they could also see more application for communities of practice having now experienced them. People felt their knowledge and understanding of communities of practice had deepened and was continually evolving. It is also clear from the evaluation data that people had developed a broader understanding of leadership in general, not just specifically with respect to teaching and learning. What participants would claim at this point was:

- an increased ability to critique communities of practice and leadership;
- a shift in their reflective capabilities;
- personal growth;
- the ability to now consciously plan;
- increased knowledge about what works and what doesn't in communities of practice; and
- having more tools to their tool-kit, particularly in facilitation.

Difficulties in identifying knowledge (and skills as the following highlights) might stem from communities of practice being an informal learning environment. In the Super CoP members surface tacit knowledge rather than receive codified knowledge. The capacity they are developing is not in the domain area they have trained in as academics, instead it concerns self-knowledge and interpersonal skills, it keys are relational and conversational. People learn in the Super CoP by observing themselves and others, listening, modelling, role playing and fish bowling, problem solving and through being exposed to ideas and feedback from people doing similar things.

'It is the first time I have participated in a non-discipline specific group at the ANU, and as such I have really relished contact with people who are not associated with my daily life. It has helped me develop a better sense of what the ANU is (or could be) and how I am situated in it and contribute to it. This has had a big effect on the way I feel about my position here, some positive and some negative. It has released me from the tunnel-vision view of my role at the ANU as someone who would only be appreciated, and could only possibly be successful, through somehow getting a research profile. Participation in Super CoP has really changed the way I look at the ANU and at my job, so that I am now much less worried about my research—I feel like there are other things I can and do that are valuable (even necessary) contributions to the functioning of the University. I feel a lot more confident about the fact that I am potentially useful.'

Super CoP Member, December 2007

Skills

Members valued their experience in Super CoP but found it difficult to pinpoint skills development, although they did nominate development in the following areas:

- facilitation;
- reflective practice;
- collaboration;
- interpersonal; and
- confidence.

Participants were able to unpack these a little further in the focus group and saw increasing interpersonal skills attributes such as tolerance, listening, moderation, empowerment and confidence. Mid year, some people felt they had not had an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills through their professional practice, although they saw them as being of value in the future.

Super CoP was also a vehicle for participants to explore, test and validate their ideas on leadership. At first there was little interest in even exploring leadership in teaching and learning let alone participating in skill development. Many participants have indicated shifts in self-awareness or attitudes or behaviours and an acknowledgement that they are exercising leadership. This internal shift has also led to reflection on previous work, activities, and insights of exercising leadership in past roles and activities. Many people believe that they can apply the leadership skills that they are surfacing to different areas within their lives ... and some people also see themselves as having the capability to facilitate leadership development.

Towards the end of 2007 members of Super CoP were conscious of applying skills & knowledge they had honed through Super CoP into their practice including:

- using distributed leadership within a learning community;
- showing more leadership in committees;
- running some courses like communities of practice;
- applying Super CoP skills and knowledge to their research; and
- starting communities of practice.

'Both the Grad Cert in Higher Education (GCHE) and Super CoP have been instrumental in changing my attitudes to teaching and learning, to be nice and neat you could say that the GCHE has given me the theory and Super CoP the confidence to try some new things, but it is (of course) messier than that.'

Super CoP Member December 2007

At the end of Year 1 going into Year 2 of the project, the team sketched out a project capability curriculum to encompass communities of practice and implicitly distributed leadership. It was meant to inform possible interventions and skills enhancement activities CEDAM could undertake. Although we did not proceed down the track of a formal curriculum, (not of interest to our membership at that point), in hindsight, reflecting on progress against these objectives has been instructive.

Learning Objectives

Increase understanding about what CoPs are: definition, nature, variability, life cycles

Foster awareness of the conditions (Critical Success Factors) for CoP establishment and sustainment (system factors and parameters, internal and external).

Introduce and achieve facility with proven tools and techniques of CoP process / work management.

Cover and build skills and commitment to collaborative self-direction

Develop sufficient levels of trust for the sharing and collaboration essential to CoP productivity and effectiveness to ensue.

Facilitate understanding and awareness of shared and distributed leadership

and consider the implications.
 Develop collaborative skills in recognising and contending with impediments and challenges CoPs might confront.
 Introduce basics of organisational change and 'getting things done', practice, and build skills in this.
 Build knowledge of the steps involved in setting up and sustaining a CoP, generically applicable to most situations and detailed enough to be practicable in the specific case.
 Develop an Action Plan to set up and /or advance a CoP

Tools

Process facilitation

We have been working with the Super Community of Practice to develop their process facilitation capability. Process facilitation examines how effectively the work is actually done and ensures members learn the most from the process (experience), so that subsequent group work becomes even more rewarding. Acquiring these skills and habits is a matter of awareness, practice, discipline, and observation. In Super Community of Practice specific strategies adopted to build this capacity have included:

- using capable process facilitators as role models;
- members observing others doing process facilitation;
- rotating process facilitation responsibilities amongst community members;
- mentoring and coaching members in specific skills;
- 'lessons learnt' sessions following group work to objectively assess the quality or completion of the task, and importantly how it was progressed; and
- reflection by individuals and the group about process design and management.

Dialogue

Super CoP has sought to promote a participatory interaction based around dialogue. Dialogue is qualitatively different form of engagement from debate, as it is essentially collaborative. David Bohn sees dialogue as a form of interaction that involves joining thinking and feeling to form a shared pool of flowing and evolving meaning that that creates deeper levels of understanding (1996: 6). He sees engagement through dialogue entailing the following internal shifts:

Knower	to	Learner
Competence	to	Vulnerability
Arrogance	to	Humility
Observer	to	Participant

In essence dialogue involves three qualities suspension, inquiry and generative listening. Suspension requires that an individual to let go of attachment to or investment in an idea, feeling, or belief. Instead they allow the community as a whole to consider it and together reflect on what is there from many different perspectives.

Inquiry depends on the community making an open space from which to ask questions about where a particular idea or belief came from. It is surprising how often our conversations are underpinned by assumptions we have never examined. It is a powerful intervention to reconsider the data that led to certain ways of thinking or to the formation of our mental

models. In inquiry mode the community is tracing how ideas and positions have evolved, and what underpins them.

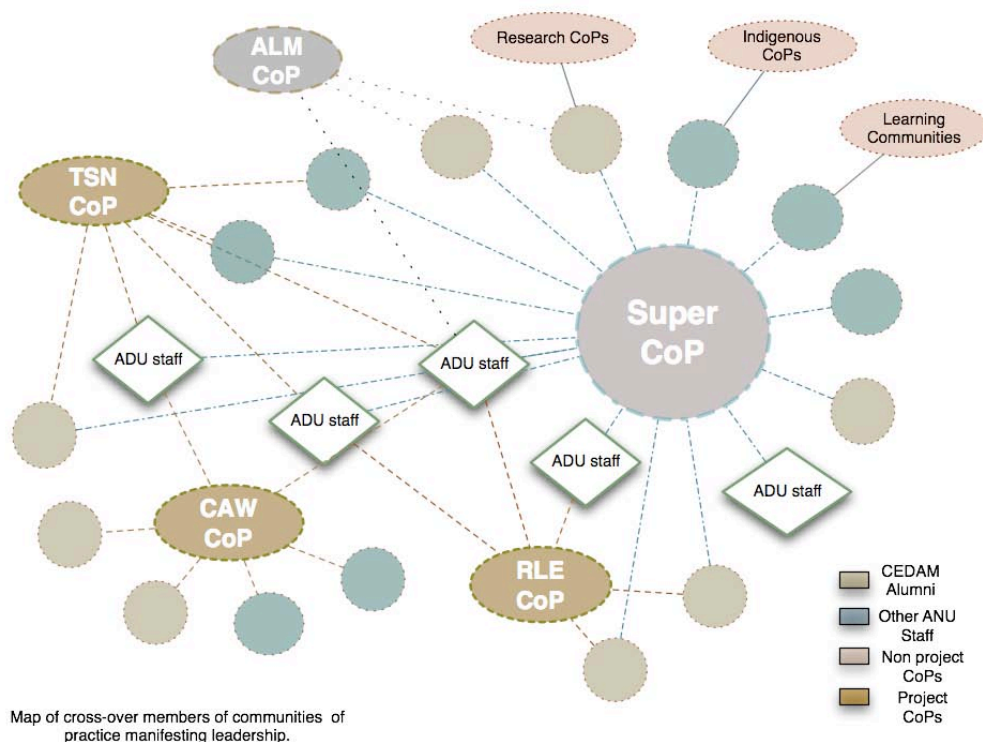
Finally the essential quality of dialogue is generative listening—learning to listen for understanding rather than listening for difference, or for argument. This form of listening requires an opening, rather than closing down of being.

Reflection

Personal and group reflection has been actively seeded and practised in the Super Community of Practice. It is never an easily acquired habit or skill-set as it requires us to slow down and practise self awareness, It is a way of making sense of and advancing practice. Reid (1993: 306) coined a definition of reflection as ‘a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and so inform learning about practice’. Some members of the Super Community of Practice had exposure to this discipline through the GCHE at CEDAM, but many did not.

Reflection in the context of the Super Community of Practice is a collaborative process. It occurs in a supportive social and physical context. It is an interactive interpretation of the university environment and their own professional context. Reflection has proved a vital bridge for Super Community of Practice in assisting people to integrate new knowledge or skills into action.

Ongoing participation Super Community exerts an accretive influence on people that manifests in subtle changes—gradual shifts in personal practice—the trialling of approaches, ideas, practices—from which people determine what they will incorporate into their repertoire. Super Community of Practice offered its participants the space to engage, think and reflect about their work and their shared context of ANU. As situated learning, it built the necessary cultural understanding to translate individual and group knowledge into strategic action. Such an environment is generative of holistic rather than fragmented approaches to practice.



More than fifty people have been actively involved in ongoing communities of practice over the two years of the project. Of these twenty people are overtly manifesting shifts in awareness of self as leader or in actions that indicate leadership. This cohort comprises five people from the ADU, eight ADU Alumni, and seven people with no prior connection with the ADU. Seventy-five percent of this cohort are people who are members of the Super Community of Practice—only two people of this group, were not participating in multiple communities of practice.

If we return to the goals CEDAM expressed for Super Community of Practice they have been well fulfilled. It has been a productive action research group, a very effective capacity development forum and has also been a very useful source and contributor towards project evaluation. A profound insight to emerge from Super Community of Practice is how fundamentally important it has been for the project team's capacity development and for CEDAM's development. The Super Community of Practice was a necessary and mutually enriching initiative that has changed all of its participants. Further reflection on the Super Community of Practice is included in a following section—*Learnings about Communities of Practice*.

The Super Community of Practice is maintaining its fortnightly schedule of meetings with the membership activity involving itself in many initiatives to improve and resource teaching and learning at ANU.