

Executive Summary

The *Promoting Teaching & Learning Communities: Institutional Leadership Project*, funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education proved a challenging and transforming initiative for the Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods (CEDAM). The ANU project used communities of practice to build distributed leadership (in this context meaning shared by the group) capacity in staff committed to enhancing learning and teaching at ANU.

The *Promoting Teaching and Learning Communities Project* proposed, over a two-year period, to resource between four to eight communities of practice, based across a range of disciplines. The project approached communities of practice as groups of people who share a passion for something that they 'know how' to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better (Lave and Wenger 1991). Through this staged action research CEDAM sought to test if such communities were a suitable means for developing leadership capacity for staff engaged in teaching and learning within the higher education sector. Initially it was envisaged that leadership capacity building would occur through action learning sets and other specific needs-based interventions. In part this was a response to a new ANU promotion policy that potentially recognised performance achievements in teaching and learning.

During project implementation the project team faced conceptual, cultural and organisational challenges that led to profound shifts in participant focus, organisational context, underpinning ideas of leadership and of how this could be best developed. In embracing the informal learning environment of communities of practice and their capacity to surface tacit knowledge, the project shifted its capacity development strategy away from individual skill development to an inquiry based group learning approach targeting group process, personal agency and distributed leadership. This was a shift to the larger extra-individual aspects of academic practice as a situated, historical and cultural reality. This shift manifested in the second year of the project in:

- piloting a fast track model of capacity development through a meta community of practice (labelled Super Community of Practice); and
- organising an experiential group-learning dissemination event—the *Practice in Leadership Workshop*;

The project has largely operated 'under the radar' of formal university structures and management at ANU. It focussed on working with early to mid-career university staff, who were in the main seeking to effect change in teaching and learning.

Fifty people have been actively involved in communities of practice over the two years of the project from ANU. A further sixty people, (including some ANU staff), drawn from ten research-intensive universities across Australia, participated in the national *Practice in Leadership Workshop* in 2007.

CEDAM piloted a Super Community of Practice (CoP) comprised of ANU staff who were supporting communities of practice across campus, as a means of accelerating leadership capacity building. Twenty project participants who are Super CoP members are overtly manifesting shifts in awareness of self as leader or in actions that indicate leadership. Significantly the project's

communities of practice are exercising distributed leadership and beginning to exert some influence on the quality of and valuing of teaching and learning at the university through forums, policy development and good practice dissemination.



Practice in Leadership Workshop 2007

Through action research, the project has established that the community of practice model can provide:

- a useful 'space' for working through unstable teaching and learning contexts;
- offer an integrating context for evolution of practice in higher education; and
- act as a bridge between formal, accredited learning and informal, situated and peer based problem solving.

The project has also found that communities of practice are an effective means of developing distributed leadership capacity as:

- their leadership boundaries are open—which widens the conventional net of leaders, and fosters contributions from individuals and the group to leadership; and
- they value and use the diversity of expertise spread across it to forge a concertive dynamic beyond than the sum of their individual members.

Through the Super Community of Practice the project has shown that:

- leadership requires a shift in self-perception and valuing of what people bring to their work and what it offers the people and university as a living system; and

- that a community of practice catalyses this shift in perception through members making sense of self as socially embedded beings in the workplace.

For academic development units the community of practice approach can be a strategic and complementary extension of its development activities within the university. However to undertake this role successfully the academic development unit must be respected and trusted by its stakeholders, and prepared to manage a front-loaded establishment phase, and relationships that demand sustained commitment. If this complements the developmental and strategic work of the unit and actively assists the effective transition of its graduating alumni to becoming skilled academic practitioners, it is worthwhile and politically astute investment of its time and staff resources.

The approaches undertaken through the *Teaching and Learning Communities: Institutional Leadership Project* could prove useful in other universities. The project findings are not intended as recipes for establishing and resourcing communities or practice or for fostering leadership capability. Transferability is not a given as communities of practice are contextual, situated and dynamic entities, and cultivating and sustaining them requires high-level process facilitation skills. However the project has evolved approaches, conditions and capabilities that can assist in establishing and sustaining these communities.