Creating and Facilitating Communities of Practice in Higher Education: Theory to Practice in a Regional Australian University

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Chapter 6
Creating and Facilitating Communities of Practice in Higher Education: Theory to Practice in a Regional Australian University

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Abstract Communities of Practice (CoPs) have been operating successfully at Central Queensland University Australia (CQU) since 2009. The major purpose of this chapter is to use a scholarly reflection approach to share what we have learnt are the keys to creating, sustaining and facilitating CoPs within an Australian regional university. A second purpose of the chapter is to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of creating, sustaining and facilitating CoPs within a higher education setting. We highlight the importance of meeting the CoP members' needs, of keeping the focus on the domain of the CoP, of engendering trust within the CoP, and when in the role of facilitator, sharing your passion for the domain through regular engagement with CoP members between CoP meetings. Critically within the higher education sector, we also highlight the importance of 'managing up' and engaging the senior leadership/management of the university to ensure the sustainability of CoPs. Finally, and based on our extensive experience as drivers of CoPs within regional universities, we share our *Top 10 Tips* to creating and facilitating CoPs within a higher education setting.

Keywords communities of practice • higher education • facilitating • creating • regional university

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6.1 Introduction

Communities of Practice (CoPs) were initiated at Central Queensland University, Australia (CQU) in 2009. The lead author (PR) was the instigator of the CoP 'movement' at CQU and remains the key driver of CoPs at CQU. The second author (JM) has acted as a mentor, advisor and critical friend to the lead author. She is widely regarded as the lead academic researcher of CoPs within Australian higher education.

While they vary in focus, membership and activities, the common denominator of CoPs at CQUniversity is that they are meeting the needs of their members and are facilitated well by experienced 'champions' (leaders of their respective CoP). Importantly, we have also learnt that the CoPs that have aligned their activities with the strategic and organisational plans of the university have been sustained since their inception.

The major purpose of this chapter is to bridge the gap between the theory and limited empirical research related to the role of CoPs within the higher education sector and relating this theory to the practice of creating, sustaining and facilitating CoPs at CQU. The chapter is not based on empirical research examining the outcomes of CoPs at CQU. The chapter is framed upon the scholarly reflections and seven years' experience as the driver and leader of CoPs at CQU under the mentorship of a critical friend, the second author of this chapter.

6.2. The Context of CoPs within CQU

CQU is a relatively 'young' Australian University. It achieved full University status in 1992 after being an Institute of Advanced Education from 1967. Now more than 20 years on, and following a merger with the Central Queensland Institute of Technical and Further Education (CQITAFE) on 1 July 2014 to become Queensland's first dual sector university. CQU is responsible for providing a diverse range of training and education programs (degrees) and courses to more than 30,000 students studying qualifications from certificate to post-doctorate level. Compared to other Australian universities, CQU has the highest ratio of students from mature age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, first-in-family, and low socio-economic backgrounds.

CQU is a complex organisation with multiple campuses and study locations, a large and diverse student population, internal and external modes of delivering learning and teaching, a complex and ever-changing corporate structure, and increasing demands for academic staff to become more research productive. Along with 12 locations in regional Queensland, CQU has expanded its presence throughout Australia with campuses in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Noosa and Sydney; Study Centres in Biloela and Yeppoon within Central Queensland; a Cairns Distance Education Study Centre; a delivery site in Edithvale, Victoria; and Partner Study Hubs in Cannonvale, Queensland and Geraldton, Western Australia.

Adding to the complexity of the organization, CQU has nine corporate directorates including the Higher Education Directorate that has six academic schools and two schools related to the TAFE Directorate. Further complexity is added by the fact that, apart from the Vice-Chancellor and a Provost, there are five Deputy Vice-Chancellors and four Pro-Vice Chancellors with various corporate responsibilities, and 10 Associate Vice-Chancellors managing the large number of campuses and study locations. The university has approximately 1500 academic staff across a wide range of disciplines and schools and 800 professional staff across the many schools and directorates.

At CQU we began to initiate the creation of CoPs in 2009 for reasons that will be examined in section 6.4 later in this chapter. Using the experience, guidance and advice of the second author (JM), the first author (PR) used the CQU general e-mail list to call an open meeting of potential CoP 'champions' (at CQU we call CoP facilitators/convenors 'champions'). These 'champions' were identified as well-respected leaders in their field who also had a demonstrated commitment within a domain of knowledge and a passion to share that knowledge.

6.3 Operational Definitions of CoPs at CQU

At CQU, we define CoPs 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 (Wenger et al. 2002). With effective leadership and facilitation, CoPs encourage active participation and collaborative decision-making, problem solving or simply sharing of practice by all individual CoP members. They are thus different to the more traditional organisational structures within universities such as committees, project teams and working groups. At CQU we strongly support the position taken by McDonald, Star, Burch, Cox, Nagy and Margetts (2012), in their project report on identifying, building and sustaining leadership capacity for CoPs in (Australian) higher education when they suggest CoPs provide one mechanism through which academics can engage in sustained learning and teaching inquiry within supportive communities situated in their learning and teaching practice. At CQU we not only encourage and assist individuals with a 'passion for something' to share their knowledge of learning and teaching, we also encourage and assist 'champions' to initiate their own CoPs that can be focused on any aspect of University practice. The major criteria we use for the creation of CoPs at CQU is that the 'champion' is passionate about their topic/domain and has the capacity and energy to bring other people together to share practice and learn from each other.

6.4 Why CoPs in Higher Education and CQU?

We began encouraging the creation of CoPs at CQU for four reasons. Firstly, in the years leading up to 2009, CQU was an unhappy place to work. Staff morale was very low and staff were working behind closed doors and not engaging with each other in a collegial or collaborative way. Interestingly, evidence of the low staff morale at CQU was being observed across the sector at the time (Churchman 2005; Winefield et al. 2008). Thus the major driver to initiate CoPs at CQU was to bring like-minded individuals together during a period of rapid change as our University became increasingly bureaucratized and individual staff more isolated as the sense of collegiality and consensual decision-making was becoming lost with the increase in bureaucracy. We saw CoPs as a way to have staff open doors and engage in collegial and collaborative dialogue. Indeed, once we looked at the research literature related to CoPs, it became obvious that CoPs were *the* way to engage staff in collegial dialogue.

Through a professional colleague at CQU, the lead author became aware of the work of the widely-acknowledged 'founder' of the term and concept of CoPs, Wenger (1998). The work of Wenger highlighted that a CoP is a combination of three elements:

1. A *domain of knowledge* that creates a common ground and sense of common identity,
2. A *shared practice* that that community of people develops to be more effective in that domain, and
3. A *community of people* who care about that domain and want to learn more about it.

Two of these core elements of CoPs, 'community of people' and 'shared practice' struck a chord with the lead author of this chapter. In contrast to formal higher education groups such as committees, project teams, schools or faculties, a CoP allows for both personal and professional development of the participants that is grounded in their current practice and driven by their individual needs, rather than the organisations' needs. Furthermore, and as identified in a review of CoPs in academe in Australia (Nagy and Burch 2009), CoPs are different from traditionally formal university meetings in a number of ways including:

- Non-hierarchical
- Informal
- No formal leader
- Membership is voluntary
- Agendas are not imposed or intentionally prescribed
- Tacit knowledge becomes articulated
- Participants may just listen/observe and choose not to contribute
- Involves social time to build sense of community and trust.

Taken together, CoPs started at CQU as a means of (re)connecting academic staff in collegial and collaborative activities that were different to the increasingly corporatized and bureaucratic activities of their normal university work life.

The second reason for establishing CoPs at CQU was that through a review of the research literature, the lead author became aware that the lack of collegiality observed at CQU also existed across the Australian higher education sector. This lack of collegiality appeared due to the erosion of the traditional self-management practices of academics as a result of changes in government policy forcing universities to corporatize which in turn lead to new managerial-style leadership (Marginson 2006; Sharrock 2012). This corporatization of the Australian higher education sector arose as a result of greater need for government compliance and accountability, greater need for efficiency and value for money, internationalisation and globalisation of higher education, and information and communication technology developments (Huisman and Currie 2004; Kemp and Norton 2014; Universities Australia 2013). Indeed, when describing the present climate of the Australian higher education sector, Sharrock (2012) suggested "it is often claimed that scholarly communities are subject to 'command and control' leadership styles and institutional processes, geared increasingly to 'corporate and commercial profit-seeking purpose" (p.324). Similar to large corporate organizations, it now appears that universities and their leadership must now develop their strategic goals, visions and mission and ensure all individual and organizational efforts are aligned with those strategic educational and economic goals (Sharrock 2012). A number of higher education CoP researchers have suggested that this increased corporatization has led to decreased staff autonomy and increased accountability, both of which decrease the amount of time available and willingness to engage in collegial and collaborative work such as CoPs (Buckley and Du Toit, 2010; Houghton, Ruutz, Green and Hibbins 2015; Nagy and Burch 2009). This decrease in collegiality in decision making works against the desire of 78% of Australian academics previous research has shown to value collegiality as 'very important' in academic life (Anderson et al. 2002). At CQU it became obvious that compliance and corporatization influences at a national level were driving academic and professional staff away from collegial decision making and into an increasingly bureaucratic workplace. Thus, because of their collegial nature in bringing people together who have a similar interest or passion, CoPs were seen as a way of (re)connecting people in an informal way.

Thirdly, through having worked in academia for over 20 years, the lead author was aware that academic life can be a very individualistic activity, particularly in a regional university such as CQU where a critical mass of staff in each discipline was and still remains difficult to achieve. We were motivated by Palmer (2002) who reflected our belief that

Academic culture is a curious and conflicted thing. On the one hand, it holds out the allure and occasionally the reality of being a 'community of scholars'...On the other hand, it is a culture infamous for fragmentation, isolation, and competitive individualism – a culture in which community sometimes feels harder to come by than in any institution on the face of the earth. (p.179)

Again CoPs appeared a way to bring people together as a community of scholars with a common interest to learn from each other in a non-threatening way.

Finally, in 2009 when CoPs were initiated at CQU, the university was preparing for an external audit of its activities including learning and teaching. In 2009 the lead author was seconded into a project team for the five-yearly audit of the university. It was through this process that he became aware of the CoP work in higher education of co-author Associate Professor Jacquie McDonald and others at the University of Southern Queensland. Specifically, this group had established a number CoPs around learning and teaching for a number of purposes including both professional development and leadership development (McDonald and Star 2006, 2007, 2008). With the support of the other members of the CQU audit project team, it was decided to initiate the formation of CoPs at CQU under the mentorship of the second author.

Taken together, the above reasons provide the rationale for the creation and facilitation of CoPs in Australian higher education in general (Churchman 2005; Churchman and Stehlik 2007; Nagy and Burch 2009; McDonald et al. 2012) and CQU specifically. Through reading and ongoing communication with the co-author of this chapter, the lead author became aware that CoPs, as the definition suggests, is a way of bringing together both academic and professional staff across disciplines, schools, faculties and divisions to share practice and learn from each other in a collegial and collaborative way. Thus, we believe that in the modern corporate university where there is increasing alienation of staff from collaborative pursuits and collegial participation in decision making, that CoPs are a means by which universities can reconnect individuals within their own terms of reference.

6.5 Types of CoPs at CQU

Over a number of years of working with CoPs within their own university and then a number of other Australian universities in Australia, including The University of Queensland; University of Tasmania; University of Adelaide; and Griffith and Flinders Universities, McDonald et al. (2012) have identified three types of CoPs operating within Australian higher education:

1. *Intentional* CoPs that are created to satisfy a particular organisational need or strategy;
2. *Nurtured* CoPs that are created and facilitated from grass roots university staff. They maintain a participant-driven agenda and focus, but have university awareness and support from senior leadership; and,
3. *Organic* CoPs that evolve or emerge at universities through participants sharing issues or concerns but not engaging formally with the university or its leadership for support.

Table 6.1 below summarises the key characteristics of these three types of CoPs in higher education. The table also gives examples of both past and currently operating *intentional* and *nurtured* CoPs within CQU.

Table 6.1 Characteristics of three models of communities of practice in higher education (adapted from McDonald et al. 2012)

Characteristic	Organic	Nurtured	Intentional
Initiation	Individual or member initiated	Individual or group initiated	University initiated
Group structure	Informal	Formal but grass roots	Formal and university endorsed
Membership	Participant defined	Optional and cohort or topic focused	Mandatory membership institutionally defined
Leadership	Distributed, informal and shifting	Distributed and lead by a convenor(s)/champion(s)	Formal and hierarchical based on institutionally defined and endorsed
Priorities	Simply evolve or emerges from shared practice, shared concerns or issues	Established to address shared practice, shared concerns or issues	Established to address institutional concerns or priorities
Relationship to University	No formal university awareness, acknowledgement or support	Negotiated university awareness, acknowledgement and support	Formally part of university structure, officially endorsed, funded and supported
Lifecycle	Limited linear lifecycle	Cyclical with potential to recreate lifecycle	Linear but potentially an open lifecycle
CQU example(s)		1. Postgraduate supervisors 2. Work-related learning 3. Education for sustainability 4. Teamwork 5. New staff 6. Internationalisation of the learning experience 7. Technology in learning and teaching	Heads of Program MetacoP (meeting of all CoP champions to share their practice)

8.	First year experience
9.	Interprofessional simulation learning
10.	Open online courses (OOCs)

Lead commentators and researchers on CoPs in universities have strongly suggested that *nurtured* CoPs are preferred within higher education (Buckley and Du Toit 2010; McDonald et al. 2012; Nagy and Burch 2009; Pemberton, Mavin and Stalker 2007). They recommend that CoPs be *nurtured* rather than 'imposed' (*intentional*) otherwise the CoPs may be viewed sceptically by academics as a pretence for a predetermined agenda that may simply be another university committee hierarchical in nature and not driven by the needs of the individual CoP members. However, both the present authors and the commentators above strongly suggest that CoPs in higher education can and do provide the scaffolding for establishing collegial relations in a safe place that is free of hierarchical power and politics typically observed in schools and faculties. Moreover, CoPs offer a collegial environment free of organisational constraints that might negatively influence behaviour and discussion within the CoP.

CoPs usually exist within a wider context or larger organisation such as a university. The organisation's attitude towards CoPs can impact on both the development and success of both the individual CoP and the organisation itself (Buckley and Du Toit 2010; McDermott 2002, 2004). As shown in Table 6.1, most of the CoPs at CQU are CoPs that have been created from the bottom-up by passionate individuals who create and facilitate a CoP focused on a domain of interest (e.g. work-related learning) or a cohort of individuals who share a practice (e.g. postgraduate supervisors). Through supporting these 'bottom-up' CoPs, the learning organisation such as a university is allowing staff to take the initiative for activities and projects that will enhance the CoP members learning and personal growth.

6.6 Theory of CoPs to Practice of CoPs

The theory of CoPs is based on social learning theory. In the early 1970s, the work of Bandura (1972) signalled the move of ideas about learning from an individual, objectivist approach to considerations about the context of learning, by theorising that learning was a cognitive process that takes place in a social context. The 'Communities of Practice' concept is informed by further study of the social nature of human learning inspired by anthropology and social theory (Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991; Vygotsky 1978; Wenger 2010).

Indeed, the term 'Communities of Practice' emerged from Lave and Wenger's (1991) study that investigated the apprenticeship model of learning which showed

that, rather than the one-on-one master/apprentice model, it was a complex set of social relationships within the whole practicing community that supported both learning and membership. The idea of 'learning situated in practice' is an essential element of CoPs. Indeed, this early work by Lave and Wenger highlighting the importance of social learning within CoPs has recently been reinforced through Jane Hart's writings and blog that focuses on learning in the social workplace. She notes that social collaboration, as demonstrated in CoPs and social teams, is where we learn implicitly from one another as a consequence of working together (Hart 2015).

Thinking about CoPs as social learning systems enables us to reflect on both individual and group learning, and the relationships, interactions, and learnings that we forge or experience within these CoP social systems. Wenger (2010, p.179) suggests CoPs "exhibit many characteristics of systems more generally: emergent structure, complex relationships, self-organization, dynamic boundaries, ongoing negotiation of identity and cultural meaning, to mention a few." This systems approach is also articulated by Senge (2006) whose work the lead author strongly believes in and supports.

In his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Peter Senge (2006) conceived of learning in any form as a combination of five disciplines:

1. *Personal mastery* implies that personal growth and learning takes place when individuals are in a safe place where inquiry is normal and those same individuals have the capacity and desire to take responsibility for their own professional development. At CQU we have learnt that a CoP that is well facilitated by the 'champion' can create this safe place where CoP members can openly share practice, solve problems, and address issues that are of personal or professional interest and focused on a domain of mutual interest.

2. *Mental models* include the testing and improving of our own interpretation of how the world around us works. For example, within the Postgraduate Supervisor CoP at CQU that the lead author 'champions' an award-winning supervisor of international research higher degree students presented on why his practice is so successful. CoP members who are younger or more inexperienced supervisors of international postgraduate students can then test their methods and practices through interacting with the 'expert' and other members of the CoP.

3. *Shared vision* around which a group can rally and focus. In a CoP this shared vision may be their shared passion or practice (e.g. Education for Sustainability CoP at CQU), the topic on which the CoP focuses (e.g. Work-Related Learning CoP at CQU), or the CoP cohort (e.g. New Staff CoP at CQU).

4. *Discussion and dialogue* is Senge's fourth discipline. This implies that the group develops the capacity to carry out their vision through discussion and dialogue. At CQU we base our CoPs on open discussion of topics, issues and problems directly related to the domain of the CoP and the interests of the CoP members. For example, our Education for Sustaina-

bility CoP identified that the university did not have a policy related to sustainability. Through open dialogue and discussion, the CoP worked with their strategically chosen senior CQU leader, in this case the PVC (Learning and Teaching) to develop a policy. At CQU we encourage every CoP to choose a 'mentor' who is directly approached by the 'champion' to engage with the CoP based on their position and sphere of influence related the domain of the CoP. Working with their 'mentor', the Education for Sustainability CoP members collaborated together to develop a CQU policy on education for sustainability that has since been approved by CQU's Academic Board as a university policy.

5. *Systems thinking* is the way the CoP members integrate, develop and engage in the other four disciplines. Senge (2006) suggests that systems thinking affects the degree to which any organization becomes a learning organization as well as the degree of success an individual CoP can have.

While theories about learning organizations such as universities suggest systems thinking and change need to be synergistic, this change often takes place at the group level. This suggests that CoPs might become an ideal component of any learning organization involved in change. Indeed, Hackman and Edmondson (2007) noted that group learning is far more successful than individual learning whenever issues or topics involve more than one person. Thus, groups such as CoPs that are groups of individuals passionate about a topic or issue should thus become an 'indispensible part of a learning organization' (Henrich and Attebury 2010). The individual CoP members as a collective bring a diverse range of experiences and skills that they can share and learn from to implement and change practice that may be more sustainable at the grass-roots level than change imposed from the top-down.

Importantly, the late Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Harvard University, Richard Hackman has identified a number of characteristics of successful groups within learning organizations (Hackman and Edmondson 2007). These characteristics include: accomplishing their tasks, continually learning and adapting, be a real team and not just a group with a name, have a clear direction and purpose, have competent coaching to facilitate work, not be over-or under-bounded, have adequate autonomy, and have a balance between performing and learning. As suggested by Henrich and Attebury (2010), the success of a number of these above characteristics rests within the group and specifically with the individual CoP 'champion' to create the climate within the CoP group. However, other characteristics involve the leadership and management of the larger organization, suggesting the need to engage with senior leadership if leading CoPs within a university setting. At CQU we have learnt over the years to strategically engage a senior leader ('mentor') of the university. The 'champion' of each CQU CoP has handpicked their own 'mentor' who is invited to every CoP meeting, invited to speak at the CoP at least once per year, and kept informed of CoP activities through notes of meetings being sent to them and being a part of a CoP e-mail list for interaction between CoP meetings. Both of the current authors have learnt the need to 'educate' the senior leadership of our respective organisations as to the benefits of supporting CoPs within the university.

6.7 Benefits of CoPs in Higher Education

Over the last few decades there has been a significant increase in the number of journal articles, books, book chapters, conference papers and online documents mentioning CoPs or using the term 'communities of practice' in the title of the documents (Tight 2015). Moreover, the same paper highlights that there is increasing application of the theory of CoPs within empirical higher education research, suggesting that the higher education sector sees benefits in the application of CoP theory to many aspects of practice within a university setting.

CoP theory has been used to empirically examine the positive impact of CoPs in a number of areas of university practice. These include the professional development of academic staff (Blanton and Stylianou 2009; Buckley and Du Toit 2010; Drouin, Vartanian and Birk 2014; Nixon and Brown 2013), development of new academic staff (Cox 2013; Gourlay 2011; Morgan 2014), mentorship and development of university library staff (Henrich and Attebury 2010; Sanchez-Cardona, Sanchez-Lugo and Velez-Gonzalez 2012; Van Wyk 2005), development of research higher degree student learning (Kriner, Coffman, Adkisson, Putman, and Monaghan 2015; Sense 2015; Wisker, Robinson and Shacham 2007), learning and teaching (Baker-Eveleth, Chung, Eveleth and O'Neill 2011; Lawrence and Sankey, 2008; McDonald and Star 2014; Morton 2012; Pharo Davison, McGregor, Warr and Brown 2014; Richards 2012), online learning and teaching using virtual communities (Bourhis, Dube and Jacob 2005; Johnson 2001; Palloff and Pratt 2007), development of the scholarship of learning and teaching (Bishop-Clark et al. 2014; Buysse et al. 2003), improving the quality and effectiveness of medical education Mazel and Ewen (2015), research development (Kozlowski et al. 2014; Ng and Pemberton 2013), and university leadership development (Debowski and Blake 2007; Flavell et al. 2008; Higgins 2009; McDonald et al. 2013).

Furthermore, empirical research has shown that encouragement of university staff engagement in CoPs within higher education leads to many individual and organisational benefits. These benefits include:

- Overcoming institutional isolation and increasing collaboration (Churchman and Stehlik 2007; McDonald 2014; Nagy and Burch 2009; Ng and Pemberton 2013; Pharo et al. 2014; Reaburn, Donovan and McDonald 2012; Sanchez-Cardona et al. 2012; Van Wyk 2005)
- The exchange, acquisition and evaluation of knowledge through social learning (Ng and Pemberton 2013; Pharo et al. 2014; Sanchez-Cardona et al. 2012; Van Wyk 2005)
- Improved learning and teaching (Beach and Cox 2009; McDonald et al. 2008; Morton 2012)
- Increased research outcomes (Ng and Pemberton 2013)
- Improved work performance through sharing of experiences and best practices (Buckley and Du Toit 2010; McDonald and Star 2008; Ng and Pemberton 2013; Sanchez-Cardona et al. 2012)

- Encouraging interdisciplinary practice (Henrich and Attebury 2010; McDonald et al. 2008)
- Establishment of professional networks and alliances (Buckley and Du Toit 2010; Sanchez-Cardona et al. 2012)
- Innovation and promotion of new practices (Henrich and Attebury 2010; Sanchez-Cardona et al. 2012; Van Wyk 2005)
- Leadership development (Debowski and Blake 2007; Flavell et al. 2008; Higgins 2009; McDonald 2014;McDonald et al. 2012)

Taken together, the above benefits and increasing use of CoP theory for maximising both organisational and individual staff outcomes within higher education strongly suggest that application of CoP theory and creation of CoPs is needed and warranted within the higher education sector. At CQU, we used both the above theory and experience of the second author to create a CoP 'movement' at CQU that was driven from the bottom-up.

6.8 Creating CoPs – Theory to Practice

From a theoretical perspective, the creation and development of a CoP is similar to the Tuckman (1965) stages of group development (forming, storming, norming, performing). Similarly, Wenger (1998) identified that CoPs go through stages of creation and development beginning with an initial *potential stage* where individuals who face similar situations but don't share practice find each other and discover commonalities. Wenger suggests CoPs then go through a *coalescing stage* where these same individuals come together, recognise their potential and explore their connectedness to then enter an *active stage* through engaging in joint activities. Finally, CoPs go through a *dispersed stage* where CoP participants no longer engage intensely but stay in touch before entering the *memorable stage* where the participants remember their CoP as a significant part of their identity and tell stories of their involvement.

Based on the original work of Wenger (1998) within actual communities and industry, Star and McDonald (2015) have identified both *nurtured* and *intentional* CoPs are the most commonly observed CoPs within higher education in Australia. Moreover, these same CoP researchers have identified five phases in the evolution of a nurtured CoP within higher education in Australia. Together with key issues for each phase, these five phases are presented in Table 6.2 below.

Table 6.2 Phases and key issues associated with a nurtured CoP within higher education (adapted from McDonald Fellowship resources (2012))

Phase	Key Issues	Examples from CQU
1. Initiation	• Topic or cohort focus	Identify key individuals who exhibit 'best practice' or cohorts of staff iden-
	• Identify the 'spark' or reason to con-	

	nect practitioners or the cohort	tified as benefiting from 'connecting'
	• Scope landscape for CoP alignment with university goals	Familiarise key individuals with university planning documents
	• Identify senior leaders to sponsor/champion the CoP	Identify senior leaders with an interest in the CoP domain
	• Identify resources such as administrative support	Brainstorm potential CoP members
	• Identify potential members	
2.Creation	• Get buy-in from potential members and senior leader(s)	• Make potential CoP members (e-mail or face-to-face) and senior leaders (face-to-face) aware of benefits of membership (see benefits section)
	• Sell the CoP	
	• Get the critical mass	
	• Leverage local knowledge and contacts	• Using the seven design principles, call an initial face-to-face (with video-conferencing if available) meeting
	• Nurture the spark	
	• Seven design principles (see Table 6.3)	• Ensure a credible core group of 'leaders in practice' are engaged
3. Infancy	• Nurture and develop membership	• Create an e-mail list of CoP members
	• Ensure value from membership and attendance at meetings	• Keep them informed of activities/ speakers well in advance
	• Build trust	• Communicate between meetings
	• Build CoP profile	• Create a sense of trust, transparency and openness within meetings
	• Ensure credibility of core members and champions/convenors	
	• Back- channelling (CoP convenor/facilitator(s) regularly check with CoP members that the CoP is meeting their needs and to identify any group dynamic issues or other problems aren't arising)	• Invite senior leaders or experts in practice within or outside the university to share practice at meetings
		• Ensure a credible core group of 'leaders in practice' are engaged and foster development of CoP newcomers
		• Share and celebrate success sto-

		ries through media such as news-letters and reports
4. Maturing/ Sustaining	• Avoid university leveraging or taking over • Membership changes • New member induction • Protect the 'space' • Keep the role of CoP focused	• Educate senior leaders on need for CoPs to remain autonomous to bureaucratic imperatives • Ensure CoP activities are member driven • Welcome new members and encourage their interaction and involvement at every meeting • Ensure the domain of the CoP is the focus
5. Recreating	• Re-assess the critical issues or new trigger • Evolve the membership • Rebuild the critical mass • Renegotiate the relationship with university	• Keep all stakeholders informed and engaged in all aspects of decision making • Involve CoP members in reflective practice and evaluation of CoP activities and outcomes • Keep senior leadership involved and informed of CoP activities

Readers are strongly advised to refer to the CoP facilitator resources described in detail by McDonald et al. (2012). Moreover, the key issues relating to each phase of a nurtured higher education CoP are examined in detail at two excellent websites created and updated by the second author of this chapter:

1. http://www.usq.edu.au/cops/resources/altcfellowship/facilitator-resources
2. http://www.cops.org.au/resources/

These resources are specifically designed for CoP facilitators ('champions') in higher education. They focus on leadership as an enabling influence to achieve desired CoP outcomes. The websites provide resources that are intended as professional development tools for individual facilitators. Critically, each of the resources is designed as a concise commentary of no more than two pages that distil the knowledge and experience gained from a large international team of higher education CoP researchers.

From a practical point of view, higher education CoPs such as those at CQU usually start up around a particular issue or topic (e.g. Work-related learning CoP; Education for sustainability CoP; Internationalisation of the learning experience CoP) or practice (e.g. Heads of Program CoP; Postgraduate supervisors CoP) or are cohort-focused (e.g. New staff CoP, Heads of Program CoP, Postgraduate supervisors CoP). The issue or practice then becomes the domain of the CoP and is the trigger to create the CoP. The person or small group of individuals who identify the *domain* usually takes the role of facilitating the CoP because of their

knowledge of the issue or practice (*nurtured* CoP) or hierarchical position in the university (*intentional* CoP).

The authors of the present chapter have been both the leaders of the CoP movement and facilitators or co-facilitators of a number of CoPs at their respective universities. From both the authors' experience, the 'champion' needs a high level of passion, commitment and determination to create and then sustain the CoP. Furthermore, for *nurtured* CoPs at CQU we have learnt the importance of both aligning CoP activities with university strategic goals and objectives articulated in strategic and/or operational plans as well as the importance of identifying and forming ongoing relationships and regular quarterly meetings with senior leadership who can act as 'mentors' of the CoPs.

Identifying the CoP 'champion' of each CoP is a critical step in the creation phase of any *nurtured* or *intentional* CoP. Typically this person is self-selected through either of two mechanisms. First, by directly approaching the CoP driver at CQU (PR) with a topic/cohort and reason to connect fellow practitioners or a cohort. Second, and more importantly for the creation of *intentional* CoPs, the 'champion' may be seen by senior leadership or the wider university community as the recognised leader in the proposed CoP practice or cohort. With the mentoring support of the lead author, the 'champion' then starts recruiting potential participants by e-mail and/or verbal invitation to other academic or professional staff they know who may be interested in the issue, topic, cohort or practice. At CQU, we also identify and approach a mentor from senior leadership to work with the 'champion' to promote the initial meeting and ideally speak at that first meeting. We then send out an invitation by e-mail to all university staff or specific e-mail lists (e.g. postgraduate supervisors) inviting them to an initial CoP meeting. The e-mail details the date, time, venue and purpose of the initial CoP meeting.

This *creation* phase is also the appropriate time to address the seven CoP design principles articulated by Wenger and others (2002). In Table 6.3 below we list both these theoretical design principles and examples of how we have applied them at CQU.

Table 6.3 Theoretical design principles of CoPs (Wenger and others, 2002) and examples of how we have applied the principles at CQU.

Design Principle	Examples in Practice at CQU
Design for evolution	CoP convenor/facilitator(s) work with participants to identify a and promote a schedule of activities, sharing experiences for the upcoming year
Open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives	CoP champions work with participants to identify other stakeholders from within the university (senior leaders, postgraduate/undergraduate students, academic or professional staff), other universities, or outside the university (education department, business or public service professionals) and invite their involvement in the CoP

Invite different levels of participation	CoP champions work with participants to brainstorm who else should be encouraged to participate in the CoP
	Senior leaders identified as having an interest or responsibility for the CoP *domain* are invited to actively participate or speak at the CoP
Develop both public and private community spaces	CoP champions work with administration support to arrange regular meeting dates/times/venues
	Individual members share practice and resources via e-mail, video-conference, blogs or informal meetings
	CoP champions work with administration support to arrange an annual CoP Showcase of individual CoP activities
Focus on value	CoP champions work with participants to identify and prioritise issues or topics and individuals to share practice
	Create a 'bottom-up' agenda ensuring CoP members own the CoP and its activities
	Invite relevant senior leadership and community/industry leaders to speak at the CoP meetings
Combine familiarity and excitement	CoP champions work with participants to arrange activities (e.g. guest presenters to share practice, research projects)
	At the first meeting, CoP champions work with participants to establish operating principles (e.g. trust and confidentiality, equality of standing, openness)
Create a rhythm for the community	CoP champions work with participants to arrange convenient dates and times for CoP meetings that are then locked into diaries for the upcoming year

Once created, the combined experience of the current authors suggests the success or failure of a CoP revolves strongly around the commitment and practice of the CoP 'champion'(s).

6.9 Facilitating CoPs – Theory to Practice

Effective facilitation is critical to both creating and sustaining an environment in which CoPs can thrive (Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan 2009). Just as CoPs differ

from groups such as committees and other work groups in universities, the role of CoP 'champion' also differs from that of a chairperson or hierarchical leader.

From a practical point of view, both Table 6.3 and the resources identified at the website http://www.cops.org.au/resources/ identify a number of key roles and responsibilities for the 'champion' creating and facilitating CoPs in a higher education setting. Apart from initiating and creating a CoP through engaging and encouraging potential CoP members and then 'selling' the benefits of participating in a CoP, the facilitation of the CoP during and between meetings is equally important.

Ensuring value for members is critical for maintaining the relevance of the CoP. The experience of both authors is to encourage 'buy-in' and ownership of the CoP activities by the members. One way of achieving this is by providing time for members to identify their priorities at the first meeting of the CoP and then at the first meeting of the CoP held at the beginning of each academic year. This might be done by online survey prior to the initial meeting, or by brainstorming and small group discussion at the first CoP meeting of the year. Ideas are then prioritised by consensus and the activities or topics and associated speakers for future meetings circulated. This initial meeting is also the time and place for the 'champion' to establish the CoP operating principles such as the confidentiality of discussions, the equality of each member's standing in the CoP, and the importance of every member being encouraged to be open and frank in discussion.

The first meeting of the CoP is also the place for members to decide meeting times and lengths and lock them in for the year. At CQU we have found lunchtimes (12-2pm) to be convenient for CoP meetings that usually are 1.0 to 1.5 hours in length. At CQU we have even sought and received university funding for light lunches to be provided to members as an incentive to participate. The structure of each meeting is suggested to be divided into the three equal elements as recommended by Wenger (1998) and used by McDonald and Star (2008) as an organising agenda framework for University of Southern Queensland CoPs:

1. Addressing the *domain of knowledge* where an invited speaker from within or outside of the CoP present for 20-30 minutes on the agreed-to topic related to the domain,
2. Members *sharing practice* by open and frank discussion with the invited speaker while also sharing their own experience or practice,
3. Developing the sense of *community of people* by having time at the start and/or end of the meeting to interact informally to create the social fabric of learning.

Within each meeting, the role of the 'champion' is to engender and develop the building of trust within the members. New members are encouraged to introduce themselves and share their own practice and experiences and core members seen as practice experts are encouraged to share practice in a non-threatening way. Readers are strongly encouraged to read the paper by Ortquist-Ahrens and Toroysan (2009) that explores the nature of facilitation; outlines key facilitative attitudes, skills and tasks; and considers a number of key concepts about adult collaborative learning and group development and dynamics that are important to successful and effective facilitation during CoP meetings. Moreover, readers

wanting to become effective facilitators of CoPs within the higher education sector are strongly advised to consult the concise resources for CoP 'champion'(s) at: http://www.cops.org.au/resources/.

The role of the 'champion' is equally important between meetings. At CQU, we have a 0.4 professional staff appointment to assist the CoP 'champion'(s). This person keeps brief notes (not minutes) from each meeting. These notes simply list attendees and major discussion items and any actions or recommendations that arise during the CoP meeting. These notes are then circulated by the 'champion' via e-mail with warm and friendly dot-pointed list of resources (e.g. websites, papers, links for further reading, shared learnings) relevant to the domain or recent or future meeting. Finally, the e-mail identifies the next CoP meeting date, time, venue, focus item and speaker profile as well as any relevant pre-reading for that meeting. We have learnt this between-meeting interaction greatly encourages the development and sense of community sharing within the CoP.

Critically, during the early *infancy phase* of CoP development where trust is being developed among CoP members, and as identified in Table 6.2 above, back-channelling (Wenger, 1998) by the 'champion' is encouraged on an ongoing basis. This process involves the 'champion' 'checking-in' on the CoP group dynamic as well as the perceptions and concerns of any individual CoP member outside of the regular CoP meeting. This might be done by the 'champion' encouraging feedback from CoP members by e-mail or by spontaneous social interaction in corridors or around campus. During the *infancy phase* the 'champion' needs to also keep senior leadership and in particular their CoP 'mentor' informed of CoP activities and outcomes, especially as they relate to aligned university goals and objectives.

During the *maturing and sustaining phase* of CoP development when the CoP has established its identity and is demonstrating benefits to both individual CoP members and the university, there may be a danger that senior university leadership may see the CoP as a means of implementing university processes or innovations. The role of 'champion' becomes critical in achieving the balance between maintaining the distinction between the institutionalisation of CoPs and the institutional awareness of the CoP's existence (Langelier 2005). This dilemma is a fine line for a 'champion' who must 'protect' the independence of the CoP by educating university leadership about the value and role of CoPs in universities and how CoPs are different to committees, project teams or working groups that are used to implement university policies and projects related to organisational aims and objectives.

Other roles of the 'champion' during the *maturing/sustaining phase* are to be aware that members will leave but that new members will join and need to be introduced and encouraged to actively participate in CoP activities and discussions. Finally, the authors' experience also suggests that the 'champion' must keep focused on the CoP domain and member-agreed topics while also addressing topical issues relevant to CoP members. This currency and focus ensures the CoP remains dynamic and provides value to the members.

Sustaining CoPs has been suggested by lead commentators on industry-based CoPs as a more difficult task than the 'champion' may have expected. Issues that inhibit the CoPs growth and development include loss of momentum, loss of rele-

vance, and a sense the CoP may have become too localised (McDermott 2004). While to our knowledge no empirical research has explored the keys to sustaining CoPs in higher education, an Australian Office of Learning and Teaching project by McDonald et al. (2012) and the project resources at http://www.cops.org.au/resources provide ideas for sustaining CoPs within higher education settings. These include the importance of the 'champion' role in creating a shared sense of context for all CoP members and ensuring equal participation in discussions so that imbalances in experience and power are minimised.

In order to assist facilitators sustain their CoP, McDermott (2004) has identified six characteristics of mature and successful CoPs within both business and community organisations. Both the current chapter authors have seen these characteristics contribute to the longevity and sustaining of CoPs within our respective universities. These success factors are:

1. *Clear purpose.* The CoP sets and evaluates short-term and long-term goals. The CoP might establish annual goal setting and assessment processes or ensure the CoP purpose is clearly articulated. For example, the Postgraduate Supervisor CoP at CQU set out to run a workshop on *Key success factors in postgraduate supervision* and ran a workshop on the topic facilitated by a Dean of Graduate Studies from an internationally-recognised university.

2. *Active leadership.* CoP leadership needs to be passionate and actively promoting the CoP within the university, particularly amongst senior leaders.

3. *Critical mass of engaged members.* CoPs thrive on the work of a committed, stable, and active core group of members who see their CoP membership as part of their job/career. The 'champion' needs to be working with this group at and between meetings.

4. *Sense of accomplishment.* CoP members gain a sense of accomplishment in knowing they are addressing issues relevant to the organisation. By having the CoP members decide the issues, topics and CoP speakers develops this sense of ownership and accomplishment.

5. *High management expectations.* While this factor may be more relevant to business-based CoPs, our experience within higher education strongly suggests the need to 'manage-up' and keep senior university leadership aware of CoP outcomes and achievements, especially those that align with university goals and plans.

6. *Real time.* CoP members see their involvement as core to their role within the university, not secondary to their role.

Finally, the role of the 'champion' may also change during the *recreating phase* of the CoPs development. Annual revisiting of the previously-agreed to priorities and activities needs to be undertaken by the 'champion' to keep the CoP member-focused. Succession planning for leadership of the CoP is also essential and provides members with opportunities to develop their leadership and facilitation skills within and between meetings in a non-threatening environment. Furthermore, *intentional* CoPs may be decommissioned during this phase if the purpose of the CoP has been met. Alternatively, an *intentional* CoP may morph into a *nurtured* CoP if the membership of the original *intentional* CoP desires to keep meeting to share practice, address issues or solve problems. During the *recreating*

phase, *nurtured* CoPs may also decommission or recreate themselves if the members feel it will benefit them. For example, at CQU, one of our more successful CoPs focuses on postgraduate supervisors as a cohort. However, over time the size of the CoP has become too large and interests of the members too diverse. Thus, the 'champion' (PR) is encouraging the creation of a new CoP focused on postgraduate supervision of international students.

A number of previous studies have identified characteristics of 'champion'(s) of successful CoPs in industry, public organisations and higher education. One of the earliest studies was conducted by Bourhis et al. (2005) who identified the key leadership factors within eight virtual and *intentional* CoPs within public and private organisations. They observed that CoPs whose success exceeded expectations had very involved leaders who possessed the ability to build political alliances, to foster trust, and to find innovative ways to encourage CoP participation. Importantly, the researchers identified that the organisations who created the successful *intentional* CoPs allocated time within the CoP leader's workload to facilitate their CoP. More recently, and within the higher education sector, McDonald et al. (2012) reported on an Australian project that conducted a sector-wide needs analysis and quantitative interviews to identify CoP leadership roles, challenges and development needs. Similar to the finding of Bourhis et al. (2005), these researchers identified CoP leaders need to be passionate about their domain, ensure their CoPs become 'of interest' to their institutional managers through aligning their CoP outcomes or activities with institutional objectives, facilitate the establishment of interpersonal relationships through informal interaction, and encourage their CoP members to interact in a trusting and non-hierarchical way that is collaborative.

In summary, the facilitator/'champion' of CoPs within a higher education setting has a critical role in both creating and facilitating the CoP during and between meetings (McDonald et al, 2012). Moreover, the role also demands soft skills to ensure the theoretical underpinnings and suggested activities at every stage of the CoP creation and development are met. Finally, the CoP creator and facilitator/'champion' needs to be aware of what the research suggests are the key CoP success factors in creating and sustaining CoPs.

6.10 Success Factors in Creating and Sustaining CoPs

Over the last 5-10 years, the authors of the present chapter have observed CoPs both succeed and fail within their respective universities. While empirical research on CoPs in higher education has yet to determine these factors, research and experience from industry suggests 10 factors contribute to the success of CoPs (McDermott 2000; Probst and Borzillo 2008) and five factors contribute to the failure of CoPs (Probst and Borzillo 2008).

While presenting the 10 success factors explaining CoP creation and sustainability, there also appear four key challenges in starting and supporting CoPs that

have been able to share knowledge and think together (McDermott 2000). Firstly, the *management challenge* is to communicate that the organisation values sharing knowledge and practices. Secondly, the *community challenge* is to create real value for CoP members and ensure the members share cutting edge thinking rather than copying what is already there. Thirdly, the *technical challenge* is to design both human and information systems that not only make information available but help members think together. Fourthly and finally, the *personal challenge* is for members to be open to the ideas of others and maintain a thirst for developing the CoPs practice. Table 6.4 highlights the ten success factors related to each of these four challenges.

Table 6.4 Critical success factors in building community and how CQU has used these factors to sustain and build CoPs

Success Factor	CQU Implications
Management Challenge	
1. Focus on topics important to the members	Create and facilitate CoPs that are nurtured from the bottom up
	CoP members choose focus items to discuss and speakers to address the item
2. Find a well-respected CoP member to coordinate the CoP	Encourage 'best practice' leaders to create CoPs or encourage the initiator to work with the 'best practice' leader as co-'champion'
3. Ensure people have time and encouragement to participate	Timetable meetings around both non-teaching weeks and lunchtime or low teaching days (e.g. Fridays)
	Provide light lunch at meetings
	'Champion' well-trained in soft skills and facilitation skills
4. Build on the core values of the organisation	Ensure the 'champion' is aware of the university strategic and operational plans as well as the university mission and values
	Educate the CoP on the need to try and align activities with these plans
Community Challenge	
5. Get key thought leaders involved	Invite a senior leader to be the CoP 'mentor' and act as the CoP voice/advocate at senior leadership meetings

	Invite senior leaders and 'best practice' leaders from both within and outside the university to share practice at CoP meetings
	Ensure meeting notes and e-mail updates are circulated to 'mentors' and senior leaders
6. Build personal relationships among members	Timetable social interaction time before and after CoP meetings
	Welcome new members and ask them to introduce themselves
	Encourage different activities and projects (e.g. topic preparation, research projects) within and between meetings and encourage all members to get involved
	Communicate between meetings via creating and using a group e-mail list
7. Develop an active and passionate core group	Deliberately plan for group projects and activities
	Engage with key 'best practice' leaders or enthusiastic new staff between meetings
8. Create forums for thinking together and systems for sharing information	Create a CoP group e-mail list, blog, Wiki or website
	Facilitate meetings well to encourage all CoP members to input and share knowledge and practice

Technical Challenge

9. Make it easy to contribute and access the CoPs knowledge and practices	Create a CoP group e-mail list, blog, Wiki or website
	Create a friendly and non-threatening atmosphere of trust and openness at meetings to encourage all CoP members to input and share knowledge and practice

Personal Challenge

10. Create real dialogue about cutting edge issues	Encourage CoP members to own the focus of each CoP meeting
	Be flexible in the topic of each planned meeting

The chapter authors hope their shared experiences and practices outlined in Table 6.4 above might assist current CoP facilitators to improve their practice. Moreover, it is hoped that future CoP facilitators may benefit from our collective experience. Just as there are factors relating to the success of CoPs, researchers and lead CoP commentators have also examined both challenges that CoPs face, as well as factors leading to the failure of CoPs.

6.11 Challenges and Failure Factors in Creating and Sustaining CoPs

In contrast to the research examining CoP success factors, empirical research consisting of both survey and semi-structured interviews with 12 leaders of unsuccessful corporate CoPs in European and US companies has identified five major reasons for failure common to the 12 CoPs (Probst and Borzillo 2008). These were:

1. *Lack of a core group*. The lack of a core group (regular attendees at meetings, bringing in fresh ideas, supporting other members on problem solving) actively engaged in the CoP activities lead to failure of the CoP. The lesson learnt is that the CoP 'champion' needs to nurture and encourage this core group early in the initiation and creation stages of CoP development.

2. *Low level of one-to-one interaction between members*. The lack of one-to-one interaction between CoP members (face-to-face, telephone, e-mail etc.) in discussing practices or helping one another solve common problems was observed as a major contributor to failure of the CoP. The implication for the 'champion' is to facilitate personal interaction at CoP meetings and encourage member interaction between meetings.

3. *Rigidity in competences*. Reluctance to learn from others was observed to impede CoP member's capacity to absorb and use new practices. Thus, the 'champion' needs to encourage the trialling and use of new ways of doing things to personally and professionally develop CoP members.

4. *Lack of identification with the CoP*. The research focused on corporate CoPs showed that members of failed CoPs did not view participation in the CoP as meaningful to their daily work. Moreover, they did not perceive other CoP members as peers who could assist them with useful knowledge and practices. The 'champion' thus needs to ensure the members needs and priorities are being met when planning CoP meetings and activities. Furthermore, they need to ensure guest speakers are seen as 'experts' in the domain area and/or topic being discussed or activity being undertaken.

5. *Practice intangibility*. This occurs when CoP members fail to engage with one another in a way that allows them illustrate their practice to make it concrete enough to understand and visualise what they do. The 'champion' thus needs to ensure that the speaker and both written and visual resources illus-

trate the practice being discussed in a way that members can understand and incorporate into their practice.

While Probst and Borzillo's (2008) research examining reasons why CoPs succeed or fail might help inform our higher education practice, to our knowledge there are limited empirical studies that has examined barriers to academics not forming and engaging with CoPs within higher education (Buckley and Du Toit 2010; Houghton, Ruutz, Green and Hibbins 2015). Buckley and Du Toit (2010) surveyed academics from a range of academic levels from the Faculty of Management within the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. The survey identified four the reasons preventing academics from engaging with a CoP at the university. The most important factor preventing engagement was lack of time with 75% of respondents agreeing they did not have enough time to participate in CoPs. Their heavy workloads and administration commitments (e.g. meetings, workshops) were identified as the major factors affecting the lack of engagement. The second major barrier was that the academics expected the university leadership/management to should have an incentive to forming and engaging in CoPs. Thirdly, mistrust (e.g. stealing ideas) also played an important role with 41% of respondents agreeing that mistrust as the reason for not engaging with CoPs. Finally, a sense of uncertainty as to whether other CoP members would contribute equally to the CoP was seen as a barrier with 47% of respondents saying this factor prevented their involvement in CoPs. In a more recent Australian study, Houghton and others (2015) used a case study approach to explore reasons why academics did not engage with an online teaching CoP developed by academics within a large multi-campus, multi-disciplinary business school within an Australian metropolitan university. The researchers identified difficulties in finding technologies to fit the CoP purpose, concerns about confidentiality and lack of time as the major reasons for non-engagement of staff.

Despite these barriers to CoP creation and engagement (lack of time, lack of incentive from management, mistrust, concern about confidentiality, and fear of inequity of contribution) in CoPs in a university setting, the Buckley and Du Toit (2010) also identified a number of success factors in CoPs at the University of Johannesburg. These factors included management participation, personal development of CoP members, provision of infrastructure (hardware and software) to share knowledge and practice, desire for knowledge sharing, and relationship building.

Based on seven years of experience with CoPs at CQU and ten years of experience at USQ, a number of the CoP success and failure factors identified within the South African higher education sector research above could be used to explain the success and failure of CoPs at CQU and USQ. In particular, our CQU and USQ experience strongly suggests that engagement of university leadership/management in each CoP is a critical success factor. Moreover, the energy, passion and commitment of the CoP 'champion', meeting CoP members' professional development needs, and informal relationship building are important success factors. Indeed, the very reason the co-author of this chapter undertook her fellowship was to develop resources to enable CoP facilitators to be more effective in leading and driving CoPs in the Australian higher education sector.

6.12 Top 10 (11) tips for creating and facilitating CoPs in higher education

At CQU, our Office of Learning and Teaching has developed a series of *Top 10 Tips* on many aspects of learning and teaching. In 2011, our Metacop (a CoP made up of the 'champion' from each of CQUniversity's individual CoPs) developed a *Top 10 Tips for Creating and Facilitating a Community of Practice* as a Metacop group activity. Each of our individual CoP facilitator/'champion'(s) was asked independently to develop their own list which we then workshopped together in a collaborative way to arrive at the final list. Below are what we at CQU, based on seven years of experience in CoPs, believe are the Top 10 Tips for creating and facilitating a CoP. The lead author, as the 'champion' of Metacop and creator of the CoPs 'movement' at CQU, has taken the liberty of adding one more to the list based on his experience in initiating and supporting CoPs from their inception at CQU.

1. *Select a domain name (title) for your CoP*
   The focus of the CoP must be something people are genuinely interested in and want to focus upon. This will generally be started by one person (the 'champion') who takes the initiative to initiate the formation of a CoP. The 'champion' role is a chance to develop leadership skills and influence practice across the university.

2. *Make contact with the existing CoP network*
   The Office of Learning and Teaching at CQU has provided funding for a professional staff member (cops@cqu.edu.au) to provide administrative support for CoPs. Speak with them about the support they can provide including calling the first meeting, organizing venues, Jabber (video-link from desktops), phone and ISL (video-link from teaching rooms), links, and taking notes. Also speak directly to other existing CoP facilitators ('champions') about how they function. Maybe sit in on another CoP meeting to see how they operate.

3. *Make personal approaches to potential CoP participants*
   Personal invitations either face-to-face, e-mail or videoconference are more effective than a generic e-mail. Invite new people along to the next CoP meeting. At every meeting welcome newcomers and encourage them to share their practice.

4. *Call your first meeting and create a relaxed atmosphere*
   Work with the CoP support staff to arrange the venue, teleconference or videoconference links for you. Make everyone feel welcome and invite them to introduce themselves and have input into every meeting. The CoP belongs to all members.

5. *Lock in the calendar of meeting dates early*
   To help participants with time management, schedule meetings at the beginning of the year for the rest of the year using *Outlook* invitations. Our professional staff support person can do this for you. We are all busy,

so planning well ahead makes life easier for all. We've found before-term, mid-term and end of term breaks are best for meetings with 12-2pm (lunchtimes) the best time of the day to host meetings.

6. *Have a speaker for every meeting*

   The purpose of CoPs is to share practice. Consult CoP members to determine guest speakers for future meetings. Guest speakers can be from within or outside the CoP. They can be bought in for face-to-face, ISL or *Jabber* (video-conferencing software) meetings. A standard agenda has been developed for CoPs and usually takes the following format – welcome and social time (10 minutes), guest speaker (20-30 minutes), sharing of practice (20-30 minutes), social time (5-10 minutes).

7. *Engage every participant in every meeting*

   Everyone in a CoP has a contribution to make. Ideally, the chair of the group engages everyone by encouraging the quieter/newer members and inviting those attending virtually to have input first.

8. *Be patient and flexible and consider working with a fellow co-champion*

   CoPs are built on trust and relationships that take time to develop. Use face-to-face, ISL, Jabber, teleconference, email, Facebook or LinkedIn - all these channels are good ways to communicate but each has a different purpose. Use the collective wisdom of the CoP to decide the direction and activities in which to engage. If you can find an equally-committed person to work with you as a 'champion', it not only shares the load but keeps each of you 'honest' in planning and achieving outcomes.

9. *Have outcomes and share success*

   Choose smaller projects to work on as a group. It may be a research project, a symposium, a research grant, a problem, developing or reviewing a policy, developing a resource or simply discussing practice. Spread the word on what you are doing both within and outside your CoP. Showcase CoP achievements; be they individual or group achievements. Celebrate these and get CQU Communications staff to promote the success or initiative through internal university communications such e-mail updates or newsletters.

10. *Maintain regular contact*

    To keep the momentum going ensure regular contact is maintained with CoP participants. Participants are busy managing their own priorities so keep them in the loop with brief dot-pointed e-mails and regular interaction, face-to-face or online via a *Moodle* site, *LinkedIn* 'members only', *Facebook* page, or other media. Again, let the CoP participants decide what the best way to stay in touch is.

11. *Manage up*

    Previous research on business CoPs highlights the need to engage with senior leadership/managers as a critical success factor in sustaining CoPs (McDermott, 2004; Probst and Borzillo, 2008). Moreover, research from business also suggest that aligning CoP needs and values with those of the organisation the CoP sits in is a critical success factor

(Van Winkelen, 2003). Aware of these needs within a higher education setting, at CQU we communicate with senior leadership about our CoP activities, our alignment with university goals and priorities, and our outcomes related to those goals and priorities. Since we began doing this at CQU we have maintained the funding of a 0.4 professional staff member as a support person for CoPs for the last five years. Based on both the initial suggestion by Wenger (1998) and our own practical experience, we 'manage up' in four ways:

    a.   quarterly face-to-face meetings with both the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) whose office funds the 0.4 professional staff appointment,

    b.   six-monthly written reports of activities and outcomes to the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee that consists of all senior leaders within the University,

    c.   strategically inviting senior leaders to be 'mentors' for individual CoPs and this get invitations to the respective CoP meeting and also receive the meeting notes, and

    d.   invitations to senior leaders/managers to speak and present to at least one CoP meeting per year.

6.13 Conclusions

CoPs are increasingly being recognised as a means of building sustained communities of practitioners to share practice, address issues, solve problems and professionally develop staff in Australian higher education (McDonald et al. 2012). Our extensive experience as the 'drivers' and facilitators of CoPs within our respective universities has taught us that the longevity and success of CoPs within higher education revolves around four critical factors:

1. CoP champions being well read in the theory of CoPs.
2. Regular and open communication with the CoP members at and between meetings and the leadership/decision-makers within the university.
3. Group facilitation skill development for each of the CoP facilitators/'champions'.
4. The drive, energy and commitment of the CoP facilitator/'champion' as possibly the most critical factor in CoP success. Without that commitment to meet the needs of the CoP membership and to effectively communicate with all stakeholders, the theoretical positive outcomes of CoPs may not be met.

We sincerely hope that through our experience in leading CoPs within higher education settings, this chapter brings the theory and practice of CoP facilitation together to enable the reader to effectively lead the development and sustainability of CoPs within their own organisation. We know CoPs are THE way to share practice, learn from each other, and feel a part of a community of adult learners.

Resources

Resources for leaders of Communities of Practice:
http://www.cops.org.au/resources/.

These resources have been designed specifically for those who facilitate CoPs. They focus on leadership as an enabling influence to achieve desired CoP outcomes, and are not intended to address activities around how to form a CoP.

Australian Teaching Fellowship Community of Practice Facilitator Resources:

http://www.usq.edu.au/cops/resources/altcfellowship/facilitator-resources

These resources are prepared as an outcome of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Teaching Fellowship, 'Community, Domain, Practice: Facilitator catch cry for revitalising learning and teaching through communities of practice' to provide CoP facilitators/'champions' with ideas and practical resources at different phases of a CoPs evolution.

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