

Daisies in the university meadow: Communities of practice and action research

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Abstract: *This paper explores the processes and success of an ongoing Communities of Practice involving colleagues in action research at Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) in Cambridge and Essex, UK. In so doing, it builds loosely on Mary Melrose's (2000) daisy model of action research and action learning, set in a complex organisation.*

Many colleagues are interested in research evidence-based enhancement of the learning of their students, relationships between learning and their own teaching, curriculum, the learning environment and change. This frequently involves a continuing cycle of introducing innovation, solving problems in practice and managing the developmental aspect of curriculum or other changes so students gain an improved learning experience. Much of this work is a mixture of the intuitive, based on experience, and some is more rigorous, involving action research strategies in a genuinely collaborative action research cycle.

This paper explores support for colleagues in ongoing Communities of Practice through action research based learning facilitated from the University Centre for Learning and Teaching. The example explored is research into postgraduates' learning and supervisory practice.

Keywords: *action research, postgraduates, supervisors, communities of practice.*

'Although I am nearing the end of my teaching career, I feel I am actually only just beginning. In the last five years, through the stimulus and support that the University Centre for Learning and Teaching has provided me with, I have been able to develop my own potential in helping our international postgraduates to achieve what they deserve and to share my ideas and concerns with colleagues and the wider academic community. I no longer feel I work in isolation.' Colleague involved in action research Communities of Practice

Action research Communities of Practice in APU are informed by theories and practices of Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1999) and practitioner-based action research, (Zuber Skerritt, 1992), (Kemmis, 1989), among a variety of colleagues engaged in a variety of action research projects (Mary Melrose, 2000). Supported by University Centre for Learning and Teaching and Learning and teaching

advisors, fellowships and small groups on campus, cross campus, and more broadly afield, undertake practitioner-based action research on a range of issues including:

- Postgraduate learning, supervisory practice and the enhancement of research development programmes (RDPs).
- Discipline-specific learning, and the introduction of diagnostic use of learning inventories building into profiling and portfolio development.
- International student learning, international postgraduate student learning, including the development of subject-specific tertiary literacy support for students undertaking postgraduate taught courses, and research into Chinese learners.
- Student retention.
- Identifying barriers to learning and taking disadvantaged women returners (with mental health issues) over those barriers.

APU has a history of working with staff undertaking small action research projects, led by individuals interested in developing their own practice and working collaboratively with colleagues and students. Historically, in this respect, the work of Richard Winter and Maire Maisch (1996) testifies to the enhancement of practice-based action research, while the establishment and maintenance of the MA in Learning and Teaching (MALT) enables action research in a more rigorous and systematic way. Historically, this research took place locally, for an award, to try out an innovation, or to address a specific problem. It was relatively short-lived, often dying with the end of that problem or innovation, and rarely led to dissemination. Following the establishment of the University Centre for Learning and Teaching, the building of a supportive communities of practice, underpinned by occasional funding and directly related to the university's learning and teaching strategy, has firmed up these developments. Projects have been disseminated in the wider arena of the university and beyond; all have benefited from the development of communities of practice using action research with a range of staff groups, nurtured by university centre for learning and teaching and faculty based learning and teaching advisors.

Context and core

UK universities have more explicitly developed learning and teaching strategies since HEFCE's funding initiative in 1999 following the Dearing Report. Educational developers work to identify, nurture, recognise and embed good practice in learning and teaching throughout universities, supported by Teaching Quality Enhancement Funding (TQEF). At APU, we encourage sharing of issues and practices involved in initiating, nurturing and embedding good practice through, among other activities, support for effective action research, undertaken in the *context* of other activities of learning and teaching development.

There is no doubt that national funding initiatives and the call for explicit learning and teaching strategies are a great spur to institutional embracing of educational development, of which action research-oriented groups and individual projects are a productive example. As Graham Gibbs notes (2001), 'the improvement of teaching has become more strategic in nature.' Development funds are more clearly targeted at institutional goals, institutions are committed to rewarding excellence in teaching, HEA membership is supported, and developers often work closely with schools/ faculties, although perhaps some 'developers appear to have traded autonomy for influence, and those who have not done this deal have been by-passed' (Gibbs, 2001).

Staff and educational development as a profession is being re-conceptualised and repositioned institutionally, considering organisational and management theories and practices exploring and defining changing roles and locations within higher education (Brew, 1995 in Australia; Angelo and Cross, 1993,

in the US, Gibbs 2001, Gosling, 1997, Brew and Boud, 1996, Martin 1999). Historically, we have often nurtured individual developments and innovations with teaching staff, carried out consultancies and projects, and run workshops related to change. Staff development practice now requires underpinning from a broader trans-disciplinary theoretical base incorporating management and organizational theory, existing and emerging pedagogies in the context of understanding changes in the nature of knowledge and educational institutions (Martin 1999, Boud and Solomon 2001, Brew 2001). HEFCE TQEF places us more centrally within universities in terms of strategies, policies, management, market models and influences, while involvement before and during Quality Assurance Agency visits has increased our profile and management identity (Duke, 1992, Kogan *et al.* 1994), contributing to professional status and identity with the development of a 'higher education' discipline. But it also produces tensions (Brew, 1995, Webb, 1996, Martin, 1999, Barnett, 1997, 2000). Staff and educational developers have historically worked through a model of dialogue with academic communities and individuals (Ramsden, *et al* 1995, 1998, Hannan & Silver, 2000). Our work at APU with action research groups revives such a nurturing, dialogue focus, while similarly, explicitly addressing the university's commitment to visibility, research evidence-led enhancement, quality practices and sharing success across the sector through conference dissemination and publication. To this end, colleagues need both the support and recognition for their work, which a nurturing developmental communities of practice offers and which strategic management behaviours enable.

Knight and Wilcox argue 'higher education needs to think more in terms of teams and, for example, to shift the focus of incentives, education and rewards from individual faculty members to departments or other academic units' (Wergin, 1994).

Our changing roles are associated with the increased identification of universities themselves as learning organisations (Barnett, 2000). Staff and educational developers working with schools/faculties, central units and individual colleagues are doing so by encouraging and supporting related activities between groups and individuals to engage with current and future developments and needs, of which, for example, e-learning, widening participation, enhancing the student experience and quality enhancement are a few.

Good teaching is underpinned by awareness of how students learn and how we might empower and facilitate learning by planning, consolidation and innovation of good practice. Much of what we do as staff and educational developers supports colleagues in engagement with the scholarship of learning and teaching, often involving appropriate learning and teaching research: 'Educational development may thus be described as all the work that is done systematically to help faculty members do their best to foster student learning' (Knight & Wilcox, 1998).

Support and development for fellows and action research groups – daisies

The large shifting fellowship team and action research groups intermix and are exciting and dynamic to work with. They have their own innovative ideas, experience and projects, share these with other fellows and group members in organised sessions, and encourage other colleagues to become involved (some of whom then later bid for fellowships).

Mary Melrose's daisy model (2000) of an action research team related to a core is a more formalised, managed version of our own looser model. For us, fellowships, and action research groups form petals with the University Centre for Learning and Teaching, its researchers and the learning and teaching advisors acting as a supportive core, nurturing projects, established and newer colleague members, ensuring both that the practicalities of the research are supported with researcher input, and the results disseminated and embedded.

Involvement in such research brings staff together, motivates them, and sustains learning conversations about evaluating ways in which teaching and curriculum practices do or do not facilitate learning in our diverse student body. Research is cascaded among staff groups in specific subjects, such as social work and languages, which developed from core action research groups. A small research budget is augmented by external funding to support a research team (three part-timers) handling data, running focus groups, and contributing to research meetings conference presentations, publications and dissemination. The research is centred around several core groups using action research formats.

Action research and the Mary Melrose daisy model

We chose action research because it is collaborative, reflective and empowering. Mary Melrose's 'daisy' model (2000) has emerged as the basis of our working from a core from the University Centre for Learning and Teaching with colleagues' projects. Action research (Kurt Lewin, 1946), began as a process of improving a perceived social problem, and is conceptualised and practised as a 'continuous and participative learning process...to create sustainable learning capacities and give participants the option of increasing control over their own situation' (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). It has become a widespread process for investigating and changing social and political conditions for communities, and within educational contexts, the identification of needs, innovations, developments and changes to enhance student learning and the facilitation of that learning, learning environments and curriculum implications.

Melrose identifies its sources in:

The progressive educational philosophy and pragmatism of Dewey (1938), the promotion of democratic decision making, and the idea that social research can be directly connected to social reconstruction stimulated teachers to carry out educational Action Research (Zeichner and Noffke, 1998).

It is used in organizations to improve processes. Results include interactions between teachers/facilitators/managers, learners/staff, and groups of practitioners who use its processes of action underpinned by research to improve individual practice in common areas of group concern. It is a collaborative, emancipatory, ethically sound, empowering, collective enquiry, using cycles to enable colleagues working together collaboratively to identify issues, plan interventions, take action, reflect on action and evaluate, re-plan and alter the action, reflect and evaluate, and so on. In a sense, it need never stop. Continuous improvement is an aim, but it can stop when, for example, an innovation is successfully embedded, or a problem solved. One of its major benefits is encouraging metalearning (Flavell, 1977; Biggs, 1991) among the participants, both the researchers and their collaborative subjects. With the model of a network or 'daisy pattern' of action research groups (Melrose, 2000) joint dissemination and joint development, the learning and sharing grows amongst a wider group in the university informing improvement for change while encouraging metalearning and the development of working communities of practice, which raises morale among those involved and enables institutional improvement.

The daisy model (Figure 1 – after Melrose 2000) conceptualises ways in which a core group of experienced and novice action researchers work on a range of related mini-projects (petals) contributing to organisational improvement. This model enables support, feedback, critique and the spread of action research from one or two enthusiasts to others in an organisation, allowing for changes in individual commitment and organisational context as the research progresses.

Petals can grow or wither at different times without the whole project folding. An experienced action researcher (Director University Centre for Learning and Teaching) acts as facilitator for the core group

and other members contribute specialised knowledge of the area of practice to be improved. Members of the organisation learn the process of action research, with support from the core group, as they plan, practise and reflect with their own petal group. Results include organisational change, learning, teaching and achievement, and the building of communities of practice.

Melrose's daisy model researchers, our own research and work leading to this essay, are guided by APU's Richard Winter's (1996) ethical advice:

- Relevant persons in the organisation are consulted in advance.
- Aims and principles are accepted in advance by stakeholders.
- Ethical approval is obtained if interviews/human subjects are involved.
- Permission is obtained before observations made or documents produced for other purposes are examined.
- Descriptions of others' work and points of view are negotiated with those others before they are published.
- All participants influence the work.
- Those who do not participate are not coerced.
- Research in process is visible, transparent.
- Researchers must accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality.

Communities of practice theory

Communities of practices build upon the characteristics of a working team or group but develop concern for an ongoing sense of community that all members invest in and contribute to, with shared values and shared projects. Lave and Wenger (1999) refer to groups involved in joint activities themselves reproduce the community concerned, over time, by the gradual introduction of new members initially considered 'novices', functioning on the periphery, incrementally entering the community until fully functioning participants. In this model, learning is always situated within the specific communities of practice. Burkitt, Husband, McKenzie, Torn and Crew (2001) argue that to learn in a communities of practice is more than being made aware of concepts, facts and structures. Learning is an embedded contextualised 'performance', including immersion in the practice world. Joint action and collaboration in professional work, enterprise or assignment are all features of teams as of communities of practices, but the latter are conceptualised and organised around engagement in learning, the development and sharing this involves. They derive from:

'A theory of learning that starts with the assumption that engagement in social practice is the fundamental principle by which we learn and so become who we are' (Lave, 1999).

Key communities of practice principles are:

- (1) Enterprise; shared goals, mutual accountability, fluent communication.
- (2) Mutual engagement; individual and/or group connection.
- (3) Shared repertoire; pooling of resources, material and emotional.

Communities of practices further a knowledge management strategy embracing the overriding goal of sharing knowledge and best practices, building on intellectual assets and using knowledge as a mode of innovation, identifying experts, capturing and re-using past experience. Individuals can recognise their own places within several communities of practices, some of which link to others or form sub-sets of larger communities. In some, an individual might be in the centre, highly active, in others slightly more marginal or on the periphery. Positions change as members move from being in a loose network to developing a shared learning agenda and actioning it.

Our action research – petals and communities

In each of our learning and teaching research activities, the action research is shared with students as full collaborators. Research informs staff understanding of how students learn and how various strategies pursued can better enable students in their learning.

In the discipline-related work we look at students' expectations and preconceptions of learning in a subject, their learning strategies, learning experiences and their achievement of learning outcomes. This involves first-year and third-year students and has led to findings feeding into direct change in curriculum, learning and teaching practices. For example, one law teacher, faced with students defining law as regurgitation of facts, and knowing her subject demanded problem-solving skills, developed 'mooting' in the first year, first semester. It is not an expert activity, but students love it, learning to solve problems and articulate arguments from sources.

Outcomes and outputs

Each action research project has been disseminated at internal yearly large conference, two small campus-based conferences, and thrice-yearly symposia. COPE and EMPOWER are also disseminated with large regional conferences (part of their funding brief). Colleagues and students involved in each project have delivered together, written together and published initially in the in-house *Networks* magazine, in SEDA's *Educational Developments* and subject-related or Higher Education publications, including *Studies in Higher Education*, *Teaching in Higher Education*, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *SEDA Occasional Papers*, and *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*. Projects have led to several conference presentations, e.g. at EARLI (European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction) and the ISL (Improving Student Learning Symposium), and fed into publications: *Good Practice Supervising Postgraduate Students* (1999), *Good Practice Working with International Students* (2000), *The Postgraduate Student Handbook* (2001) and most recently *The Good Supervisor* (2005). Our collaborative work has also been used as a case study of TQEF funded good practice in all three of the TQEF coordination team's publications to date (and was selected for the fourth, on evaluation).

What did the action research participants say?

Colleagues involved in action research in the various petals and the core 'daisy' group were asked about experiences of working together with action research in a communities of practice, through emailed questions. One wrote at length, and others commented in extract, excerpted below. This feeds onto our ongoing development work.

How useful have you found working in a small group to support reflective practice and action research towards publication? If it has been useful, how has it been useful?

- *Very encouraging in assisting getting published – X generous in sharing authorship initially, access to researcher to assist with gathering data helpful. Y also supportive. Have had article on RoLI use with social work students accepted for publication in Social Work Education, awaiting publication.*
- *Useful to share ideas, focus areas of research, develop questionnaires.*
- *Useful to discuss issues for taking back into teaching.*

Have there been any benefits of discussing your learning, teaching and assessment work with other colleagues around the university and in University Centre for Learning and Teaching through groups, or as a spin-off outside them? What kinds of benefits?

- Yes, RoLI now used across BA Social Work, including Supported Open Learning and now using in foundation degree. Staff initially sceptical, now using it.
- The focus group uncovered problems in a new collaboratively taught year one module. We were able to do some emergency work (elastoplast) and undertook more fundamental work before the module ran again.

What could we do to strengthen the sense of a Communities of Practice supporting or working with students in learning and teaching?

- Encourage writing about learning and teaching by setting targets in appraisal and getting duos etc working together – already happening to a small extent.

Communities of practices: the benefits of group membership

Being part of a research or writing group provides a welcome support network in re-examining aspects of teaching and learning within a group of colleagues. It has allowed me to re-examine several areas of classroom practice in depth, to try out and get feedback from colleagues on changes in methodology and teaching styles. I have been able to work on aspects such as devising more effective assessment practices, which enhance motivation and simultaneously reward the acquisition of transferable learning skills increasing student employability. Sharing experiences with colleagues from other disciplines has proved to give a different perspective and expand horizons.

..... I have been given the opportunity and encouragement to try to link everyday classroom practice with reflective and academic research and commentary in the form of giving papers at external conferences and APU mini-conferences and writing up my research findings for publication. I had not done this before and it has increased my academic confidence.

Conclusion

Involvement of colleagues and students as collaborators in action research has led to development of research evidence-based enhancement of good practice. It uses the differing skills of University Centre for Learning and Teaching staff and research assistants, teaching and learning facilitators and students as collaborators in action research projects, developing not only innovations and solving problems in learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum change, but skills in reflective action research into our own practice. The use of a 'daisy' model or network of action research groups overlapping, supporting each other, disseminating and writing together has helped build Communities of Practices across the university, and so, we hope, can lead to improvement and cultural change.

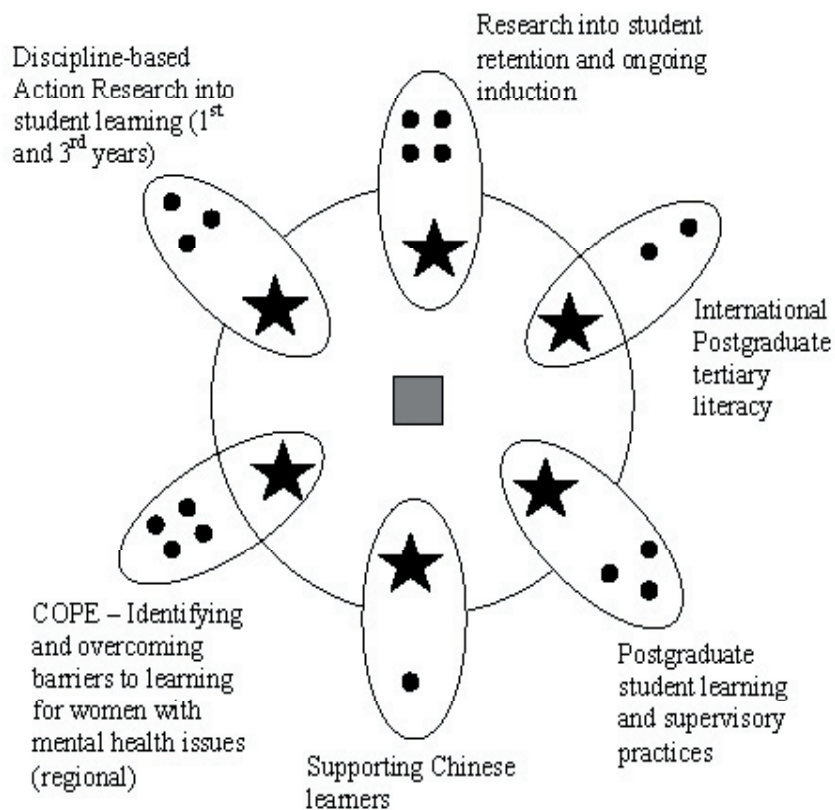
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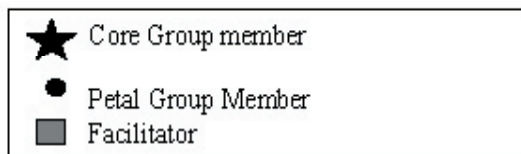
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Representation of Ideal Daisy Model

Modified to indicate Anglia University Action Research groups



Key



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