

CENTRALISED DECENTRALISED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODELS: SUPPORTING THE LONG TERM USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of centralised-decentralised models of professional development. The idea that professional development networks constitute social designs directed at practice is used to investigate the durability and sustainability of two Professional Development (PD) models that seek to draw away from a strongly centralised focus to engage professionals at a local level: the CHED Associates Scheme at Monash University and the Faculty CATLyst Scheme at the University of Western Australia. The specific design of the models as described by the principle participants was interrogated and analysed in order to provide some useful insights into the operation and sustainability of the models. Implications for academic development units interested in using such models to support academic staff in changing their teaching to incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)/flexible teaching and learning are then presented.

Keywords

Professional development models, Higher Education, change management

Introduction

The principal aim of this project is to describe current trends in Professional Development (PD) models in higher education in order to reflect on how academic staff developers can best support academic staff in changing their teaching to incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)/flexible teaching and learning. In this paper, the concept of centralised-decentralised models of professional development is explored. Two alternative PD models that seek to draw away from a strongly centralised focus to engage professionals at a local level are described and analysed using a theoretical framework which draws on the work of social theorists, particularly the work of Wenger (1998) on Communities of Practice. The Scheme coordinators and network members in alternative PD models were interviewed using semi-structured questions about the history, leadership, functioning and funding of the models under consideration. The idea that professional development networks constitute social designs directed at practice (Wenger, 1998) was used to investigate the durability and sustainability of the two models. Wenger's design framework was modified and used to interrogate and analyse the specific design of the models as described by the principle participants. Implications for academic development units interested in using such models to support academic staff in changing their teaching to incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)/flexible teaching and learning are then presented

The changing landscape of professional development in Australian universities

Recent times have witnessed dramatic change in higher education. Academic staff have had to adapt to their role becoming more diverse and complex as it embraces research, teaching, administration and service (Martin, 1999). This situation has provided academic staff development units with an opportunity to embrace a more holistic and coherent approach to enhancing academic work (Goody and Ingram, 2001). Central professional development units in Australian universities encompass a wide variety of learning activities and have varying mandates ranging from a primary focus on teaching and learning to those that also provide for development of research and leadership within the university (Hicks 1999). Fostered by government, knowledge production and learning has been more strongly aligned with the economy. As a consequence, academic development units have found themselves in the position of redefining their relationship with both university administrators and staff. It has long been recognised that professional development must serve two masters: the university and the academic. The role of central units is to provide resources and a favourable climate for the faculties to transform their teaching. Increasingly this transformation has included the use of ICT. Equally, central units are increasingly expected to monitor and audit strategies in order to account for the use of funds to senior management. In devolved universities, professional development programs must also attend to the interests and needs of the faculties and departments.

Universities use professional development as a way of achieving strategic goals. The need to support long term structure and process change within universities means staff development must seek models that support long term change in a climate where increasingly faculties and departments are reluctant to support centrally based services. Professional development programs must also meet the needs of academics. Programs that situate the professional development activities within the academics' teaching are seen as more effective in the long term in transforming teaching within a university.

Decentralisation is a contemporary global trend and an important governance strategy in education (Karlsen, 2000). How centralised or decentralised a system is depends on one's level in the system. In universities, the faculty level is viewed as central in relation to the departments but as periphery in relation to the vice-chancellery and the central administration. The phenomenon of decentralisation is ambiguous and can be interpreted in a number of ways. A number of arguments have been put forward for policies of decentralisation (Karlsen, 2000; Laugo, 1995). The research is weak in the area of whether the arguments for decentralisation are justified and in identifying the unintended consequences of the different forms that decentralisation takes (Karlsen, 2000; Laugo, 1995). While the apparent intention of decentralisation is to transmit power and influence from the central to the local body, in reality, it can be a strategy for strengthening the power and influence of the central body (Karlsen, 2000). True implementation of innovation will only occur if those involved at the grassroots level are in favour of it (Karlsen, 2000; Ryan, Hanrahan and Duncan, 2000).

In a review of the literature, Ryan, Hanrahan and Duncan (2000) found that "professional development that is supported at the local level by staff with the appropriate background in terms of discipline knowledge is likely to be more relevant and productive than a centralised, decontextualised approach" (p. 2). Academic staff development units in Australian universities have trialed a number of alternative models that seek to draw away from a strongly centralised focus to engage professionals at a local level. These models have taken two forms: an informal peer support program or a more formal centralised-decentralised scheme.

Informal peer support programs tend to be cross-disciplinary forums for academics with a common interest in a particular teaching issue. Groups meet regularly to share and discuss some aspect of their teaching. They depend on the voluntary participation of colleagues who are prepared to contribute and reflect upon some aspect of their teaching practice related to the issue of interest. Usually lacking official endorsement, such groups have had varying levels of centralised support, generally limited to a coordination role.

In the early models of more formal centralised-decentralised schemes the emphasis was on professional development in the general area of teaching and learning (see, for example, the ASDU Associates

Scheme, Candy & Borthwick, 1994, and the CHED Associates Scheme, Edwards, 1998). Later models have been developed with professional development and the need to adopt more flexible modes of teaching and learning, particularly online teaching, as a significant driver.

The search for sustainability and durability

In 1999, one of the key priorities of the newly established Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL) at the University of Western Australia was to establish and coordinate a University network for advancing teaching and learning. The network consists of local appointees (CATLysts) within each of the faculties who have a broad responsibility for promoting teaching and learning within their respective faculty and within the broader UWA community. The Faculty CATLyst Scheme was loosely based on the ASDU and CHED Associates Scheme and funded for two years. The Scheme proved highly successful (Ingram & Thompson, 2000). In a further review of the Scheme in 2001-2, it appeared that a solid foundation for the continued promotion of best practice in teaching and learning both within the faculties and in the broader University community had been laid. The questions of why the scheme was proving to be so durable when others seemed to lack such durability and what could be done to sustain the scheme were raised (Hicks, personal communication, 8/11/01). An initial comparison was made with the two schemes that the Faculty CATLyst Scheme was based on.

Candy and Borthwick (1994) identified the key to the success of the ASDU Associates Scheme as “the appointment of academics of high repute who enjoy widespread acceptance by their peers” (p. 193). Four strengths of the model were identified: respect for the wide range of disciplinary differences, increased relevance and immediacy of outcomes, greater ownership over the change process and better use of resources and the expertise of colleagues, especially through networking. Concerns about the long term viability of the scheme indicated by Candy and Borthwick (1994) included the need for Associates to juggle heavy demands from both the immediate local activities against the more distant ones coming from ASDU as well as the need for clear lines of responsibility and accountability. These remained unresolved and the scheme was eventually closed by ASDU in a review of ASDU sometime prior to 1997 (J. Borthwick, personal communication, 4/1/1998).

In 1997, the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), Monash University’s central academic development unit at the time, established the CHED Associates Scheme to support faculties and departments in implementing their strategic plans in the area of teaching and learning. While the CHED Associates met twice a year to report on their activities, by 2001 the scheme was dormant and was closed in 2002.

An initial comparison of the three schemes indicated significant differences in the selection of the Associates/CATLysts, the funding and time allocation, the amount of central support and collegiality developed and the lines of responsibility and lines of communication (Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, 2002). What was not easily identified was how these differences strengthened or weakened the Scheme. Although funding arrangements, for example, were substantially different, money wasn’t identified as necessarily weakening the Scheme. One Scheme coordinator commented “I don’t think money is the answer ... it was interesting that no one would pick up the money that was even there, you know, at every meeting there would be an item ‘there is money there if you just want to ask us’. I didn’t think that would be the case.” (Coordinator 1, 18/2/02). What techniques could assist in comparing the two models? Was there a framework that would provide some useful insights into the operation and sustainability of the models?

Organisations as social designs directed at practice

Wenger (1998) describes a social theory of practice where four dualities operate within an organisation, network and/or community of practice. These dualities unfold “the tension inherent in their interaction” (p. 231) rather than provoke a need to choose between the two extremes. The effectiveness of an organisation, network and/or community of practice depends on how productively elements of these dualities are combined.

Duality 1: Participation and reification

Organisations produce reifications such as public documents that detail policies, curricula, standards, roles, job descriptions, laws, histories, affiliations etc. These represent fixed points around which the organisation aligns its practice. However, it is the practice (participation or lack of participation) that produces the results not the policies and processes. Rather than displacing practice, the challenge is to support and mobilise the practice through the development of enough policies and processes to hold the organisation together but not so many that the organisation stalls under the weight of over-institutionalisation.

Duality 2: The designed and the emergent

Practice is seen as a response to the designed structure (the charter, vision, strategies and network) rather than a direct result of them. This response, while informal, is an emergent structure arising out of the inventiveness and innovation of practice as it seeks to give existence to the designed. The organisation may be made ready for the emergent by negotiating the alignment between the structures, procedures, rules and policies and those that emerge out of the new practices developed.

Duality 3: The local and the global

The knowledgeabilities in an organisation exist in a constellation of practices. No one kind of knowledgeability that subsumes all the others exists, although some perspectives are privileged more than others. Multiple kinds of knowledgeabilities exist in and across the communities in the organisation. Different communities of practice within an organisation connect to each other through various forms of communication. The nature of the communication and the forms of communication can encourage or discourage the appropriation of practices that lead to a sharing of a common vision and/or set of goals.

Duality 4: Fields of identification and negotiability

How people perceive themselves and their practices impacts on what changes they are able to make to those practices. Identification points to where people belong and have a formal membership whereas negotiability points to where people direct their allegiance because they have control and influence. Wenger suggests varying the field of negotiability is a powerful way of developing a learning community.

A comparison of the design framework of the two models

The questions raised by Wenger (1998) in discussing the issues related to the dimensions of the four dualities were explored as a basis for a framework to explore the design operation of the CHED Associates and the Faculty CATLyst schemes. The ASDU Scheme was not included because of the difficulty in finding and interviewing ASDU Associates and because of the length of time since the demise of the Scheme. At the beginning of the study, the CHED Associates Scheme was still formally in existence, although dormant. Wenger's questions have been modified and applied the CHED Associates and the Faculty CATLyst schemes.

Table 1 provides an overview and comparison of the key features of the CHED Associates and the Faculty CATLyst schemes.

Questions based on Wenger's dualities	CHED Associates (Monash)	CATLysts (UWA)
Participation/reification		
What elements of the network were institutionalised (made standard, made policy, made law)?	Policy statements on teaching and learning at Monash that emphasised flexibility and internationalisation. The composition of the network.	The Flexible Programme Delivery Report recommended the setting up of a central unit that would establish a network. The report included the network composition to support flexible program delivery throughout the University.
What voluntary participation within the network was involved?	Participation in the CHED Associates program was voluntary although some	Negotiated fortnightly meeting of participants with a strong expectation of attendance.

Questions based on Wenger's dualities	CHED Associates (Monash)	CATLysts (UWA)
	associates were approached by their Deans to participate.	Expertise and role within the network was voluntarily provided they worked together to promote flexible teaching across the University.
What forms of participation within the network gave meaning to university's strategic plans, policy about flexible learning (compliance or ownership)?	Projects that were obtained under the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) and/or that were developed under the University's flexible learning policy. Regular meetings gave participants a sense of belonging to a group with common interests. Some associates had good relations with the Associate Deans (Teaching) in their Faculty. However, no direct links between grant schemes and associates network.	Participants were unofficially viewed within the network as the principle conduit into the faculty - the person others would go to when wanting information about flexible delivery and teaching and learning in general. UWA does not have Associate Deans (Teaching) for each faculty. Direct link between the grant scheme and consultation with the CATLyst for the faculty. Becoming stronger each year. Contribute to policy.
At what point was the institutionalisation a distraction or a misplaced use of resources in relation to the network?	Funding from different sources to the network imposed different reporting structures on the participants. Only loose alignment between the activities of the network and the SIF grants	Funding arrangement keeps the system fragile by not ensuring faculty CATLyst representation in the network. Restructure of institution led to increase in faculties without an increase in membership.
What were the critical moments, events, or other communities that this network could use as interventions that might support learning practice within the University?	University conferences dealing with Internationalisation and flexible learning. Other networks such as the Higher Education Partnerships in Communications and IT (HEPSIT), an informal network at Monash.	Roadshows of flexible learning projects. University response to the Evaluations and Investigations Program (EIP) provides background information for senior management. Attendance at other professional development events e.g. Advancing Teaching and Learning program. Involvement in University-wide consultation groups and working parties.
Designed/emergent		
How was the design of the network kept minimal yet still ensured continuity and coherence across the University?	Only a small number of people participated - one per faculty. Coherence and continuity stemmed only from the participants' common interest in flexible learning.	Regular reporting; provision of funding; One per faculty. Regular fortnightly meetings. Common activities: Roadshow; online learning report; CATL grant scheme. (Establishing a common language)
What stopped the network from responding to the emergent?	Irregular communication; no coordination of related projects. Associates had little or no advisory role within the strategic directions and initiatives of the University.	Non-alignment with University direction as "policed" by CATL coordinator.

Questions based on Wenger's dualities	CHED Associates (Monash)	CATLysts (UWA)
What were the provisions for renegotiating the design of the network under new circumstances?	Little or no provision for renegotiating the design of the network because the Coordinator determined the activities of the network which focused primarily on the sharing of individual experiences.	Annual reporting and review of CATLyst scheme. CATLyst negotiated role in faculty with Dean. Individual meetings raise concerns about practice that allows for redesign of network.
Local/global		
How did the design of the network support forms of communication that led to the adoption of new practices across the University?	Participants met on a regular basis to share experiences related to their projects. However, communication beyond those meetings with other groups of staff relied on the initiative of the individual Associates rather than arising out of any of the activities of the network.	Very effective dissemination of information to and from both participants and broader University communication.
How did it help the diverse and various forms of knowledgeability involved in the set of practices across the network to see and live with each other?	Discussion of some issues related to flexible learning enabled different viewpoints to be expressed. No other activities of the network made different practices within the faculties transparent and/or required participants to reconcile different practices.	Physically had meetings in each of the different faculties. CATLyst in faculty talked about/demonstrated flexible teaching and learning. Increased knowledgeability of flexible teaching and learning and assisted development of common language. Process of developing reports crystallised essential points of agreement within the network.
How were information flows reciprocal, local to global, global to local, local to local within the network?	Local to local was supported through the regular meetings and informal networks created among the CHED Associates. No activities required information flow from the network to faculty and/or school deans or teaching staff.	Informal CATLyst meetings. Meetings/mentoring with Coordinator. Faculty viewpoints reported. Informal negotiations ongoing. Informal communication with senior management.
Were there forms of multimembership within the network that connect the local to the global?	Only one member from each faculty. It was then up to the Faculty representative to organise an extension of the network and its membership within the faculty.	Rather than only innovative academic, a variety of academic/professional/general backgrounds included in the network. Email relevant to CATLyst also sent to distribution list of other University staff – people with vested interest in teaching and learning – at different levels of the University. Coordinator is member of several networks.
Within the network, which perspectives were privileged and which are marginalised, the local or the global, or is this negotiated each gaining and	Student centred flexible learning. Traditional teaching practices were not actively supported.	Strategic perspective of University as represented by Coordinator is privileged often only after negotiation and discussion.

Questions based on Wenger's dualities	CHED Associates (Monash)	CATLysts (UWA)
losing?		
Identification/negotiability		
What were the sources of identification (practices, perceptions) that keep network together?	Generally known to be an early adopter of technology in the department. Public profile within faculty in the area of teaching and learning.	Perception and practice that reinforces CATLyst as Faculty resource for teaching and learning practice at grassroots and management level; as influencing the development of policy.
What were the obstacles to expanding fields of identification within the network?	Participants had little say in faculties prescriptions for teaching and learning or flexible learning. However, they had considerable say in the conduct of their own projects.	Not easily able to identify CATLysts within the faculty.
What stopped the network from expanding its view of itself and its practices throughout the faculty/university?	Different divergent faculty cultures and practices in flexible learning. Central initiatives such as the WebCT project. Limitations of the network to renegotiate their role within University to support these strategic initiatives.	Restructuring has split faculties so their representation within the network is not as clear. CATLyst skills in developing network limits the capacity of individuals to represent broader areas of interests.
How did the network design promote and distribute ownership of meaning?	Projects devised by associates originated in Faculties.	Faculty recognised and 'owned' CATLyst and their contribution. Meetings and working on common reports created common ownership.
What were the boundaries within and beyond the network?	Being devalued within the faculty. Funds available to support participant. Reporting principally from participants to Centre; seen as intelligence gathering for CHED. Unrepresented on strategic committees that decide important directions/resources for flexible learning (e.g. introduction of LMS)	Faculty ownership – loyal to faculty rather than CATL. Reports and intelligence gathering about flexible teaching and learning viewpoints or practices in faculty necessarily involved CATLysts.
How did the network create and bridge those boundaries?	Boundary creation: membership restricted to small group. Activities not available to other interested staff. Existing members being renewed for another term. Intended to change membership every two years.	Limited membership; collaboration across faculties encouraged. Coordinator in role of translating Flexible Learning policy and Senior Management pronouncements into the common language of the group. Extensive discussion and experimentation to support conceptual change among the participants.
How did it promote multimembership that	No formal strategies employed to engage staff from different	Joint projects

Questions based on Wenger's dualities	CHED Associates (Monash)	CATLysts (UWA)
transcends boundaries?	faculties in joint projects or activities.	
By what processes did the network modify its field of negotiability?	No formal processes because the Associates network had little opportunity to deal with issues, requests, initiatives beyond those arising out of the Associates' projects.	Coordinator kept members informed of relevant developments and encouraged members to see their faculty dean about being involved e.g., consultation groups or working parties.
How did the membership of the network evolve?	Members had a fixed term membership but often the membership was continued.	Each year the faculty is required to nominate (or re-nominate) the faculty CATLyst before funding is sent through. When a CATLyst has left, faculty is asked to provide another CATLyst.

Table 1: Key features of the CHED Associate and the Faculty CATLyst Schemes

Implications for supporting ICT facilitated teaching and learning

Our intention in this paper is not to suggest one scheme is necessarily better than the other. The purpose of this preliminary investigation of the two networks was to use some of the questions arising out of Wenger's social theory of practice to explicate some of the different associations that may have existed within the two networks in order to provide some useful insights into the operation and sustainability of such models.

Both of these schemes emerged as responses to strong policy statements on teaching and learning, particularly flexible teaching and learning with the support of ICT. One had direct funding while the other had limited funding with significant funding often coming from other competitive grant schemes within the University. In addition, the reporting responsibilities differ greatly between the two schemes with the result that different practices were encouraged. Those within the CHED Associates scheme are seen to be more loosely aligned than those within the CATLyst scheme. While practice may not result from these policies, funding mechanisms and the expectations of the coordinators, the CATLyst scheme provides a more consistently assembled set of reifications from which staff will ultimately frame their practices. The CATLyst network is more strongly aligned with the reification of the organization whereas the Associates were more aligned to the participation of the network members. Any network that supports the use of ICT in teaching and learning at a university at this point of time must not only tolerate inventiveness, innovation and change but must put in place mechanisms and communication channels that support the reciprocity between policy and practice. Regular fortnightly meetings, formal reporting structures, direct negotiation with the Deans about the role and the establishment of a common language encouraged the emergence of procedures, rules and policies arising out of the practice of the participants in the network. Balancing this is the potential for the Coordinator to act as policeman thereby restricting and managing the participants' capacity to change existing policy etc. However, the Coordinator's actions do maintain aspects of the original integrity of the network.

The CATLyst and CHED Associate schemes shared mechanisms and forms of communication that supported the emergent but the CATLyst scheme has greater capacity to translate emergent practices into policy and procedures either within the network or university as a whole. The CHED Associates were limited in their capacity to support lines of communication that led different communities in the University to appropriate different practices whereas the regular and frequent meetings of the CATLysts along with participation in and contribution to common projects encouraged the appropriation of practices and development of a shared common vision in relation to flexible teaching and learning and the use of ICT within the organization. The selection processes, the participation in strategic initiatives and the cross-faculty collaboration are powerful in framing the way people perceive themselves and their capacity to negotiate and change their roles and responsibilities within the network and within the organisation.

The selection processes for both schemes were sufficiently inclusive yet there was far more scope for negotiability within the CATLyst scheme. The participation in strategic initiatives encouraged productive redefinition of what people expected of their roles and participation in the university and in so doing allowed for people to more easily perceive themselves and their practices as impacting on what changes they are able to make to those practices. This learning community not only tolerates but strengthens cross-faculty collaboration. The CHED Associates scheme affirmed the identity and the role of the Associate that was established through the framing of the network. This identity tended to be maintained throughout the life of the network, although there was some scope for redefinition. The CATLyst scheme tends to create an identity for members as the network responded to particular challenges arising from within the practices of the network and from the larger community in which the network was located.

Conclusion

Professional development networks that are designed to support the long-term use of Information and Communication Technology within a university are more than professional development opportunities for teaching staff. They constitute learning communities, the identity of which arises out of the negotiated practices that substantively contribute to the universities effective use of ICT in teaching and learning. This is much more than skill and knowledge acquisition – it is about the growth of learning communities within a university and their contribution to the university as a whole. Importantly, for those who are charged with designing effective professional development networks for the use of ICT in teaching and learning, leadership must be reconceptualized to develop sensitivities to the type of dualities and their impacts reported in this paper. It is not a matter of “just providing funding” rather it is thinking about the complex network of structures, associations and practices that are often in reciprocal relationships with each. The durability and effectiveness of such networks requires complex explanations. In this case, leadership is about understanding the balances of these four dualities within whichever network is developed within a university.

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