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Establishing a Learning Community to Support Research and Scholarly Training: A Case Study

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Introduction

This paper examines the concept of learning communities as defined in the literature. An existing case study is described, and the issues that facilitated and constrained the development of this learning community are considered and discussed. Strategies to address threats to the ongoing viability and usefulness of a learning community to support research training are offered. The influence of leadership styles and their interaction with the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of learning communities is used to support the argument.

Case Description

A School of Nursing and Midwifery in an Australian university has invested a lot of energy and resources into developing a research profile. The appointment of a Professor of Rural Nursing has energized many of the staff members to be more research active and has attracted a large number

of PhD candidates. Prior to the Professor's appointment, the School did not have a Professor of Nursing, only one staff member had a Doctorate (PhD), there were no higher degree research candidates amongst staff members and the Master of Nursing Program did not usually include a research project.

The Professor obtained her PhD under the supervision of Australia's first Professor of Nursing who was appointed from the United Kingdom. The Professor's background influenced her different style of supervision that includes development of a learning community focused on research and scholarly activity. Week-long Research Schools are convened twice yearly to support this learning community. Both PhD candidates and faculty and staff are invited and encouraged to attend the Research Schools. This provides PhD candidates with the opportunity to present their ongoing research and receive critique from their peers, and provides staff members with the opportunity to contribute to the development of the learning community and to present their own research outputs.

Many of the School of Nursing and Midwifery PhD candidates are international students who travel to Australia specifically to attend the Research Schools. The candidates' diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds results in a group of sophisticated individuals who are willing and able to engage in critical discussions about their research work.

During the Research School there is an expectation that all PhD candidates and their faculty supervisors attend each session to provide support and feedback. Sometimes feedback takes the form of constructive criticism, but in the learning community there is an understanding that this is provided in the spirit of generosity and goodwill. For example, feedback may include comments on the incongruence of research questions with a chosen methodology or comments pertaining to a lack of clarity in reporting research findings. Individual supervisory sessions are scheduled for each afternoon during the Research School. This enables supervisors to provide further feedback that they might not have wanted to share with the wider group, such as a candidate's lack of progress. These sessions also provide an opportunity for candidates to debrief about their group session. Confirmations of candidature sessions are also scheduled during Research School, which allows for peer support to be provided at this stressful time. Multiple social functions are held in conjunction with the Research School to increase interactions and provide relaxed venues for discussion that range from the scholarly to the personal.

Not everyone in the workplace attends Research School and over time a thread of discontent and resentment has developed between staff that attend and those that do not. Even though all staff in the School of Nursing and Midwifery are invited and encouraged to attend the Research Schools, some of the staff, who are not enrolled in the PhD program, elect not to participate. The Research School is held during the University's semester break. Some staff members use this as an excuse for attending, believing that their continual staff presence in the School of Nursing and Midwifery is necessary during the semester break. Other staff members ignore the Research School and either take leave, or work from home during this time.

Learning Communities

A learning community can be defined as student engagement in “educationally purposeful activities inside and outside of the classroom” (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 115). There is strong evidence to support learning communities as an effective way of strengthening intellectual interaction between students and teachers, individual’s identities as scholars, professional resilience, and critical thinking skills (Butler & Dawkins, 2007; Hafferty & Watson, 2007; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The processes used in the Research School activity focus on developing each of these areas in individual participants.

Lenning and Ebbers (1999, p.5) identify four main types of learning communities: curricular learning community, classroom learning community, residential learning community, and student type learning community. When students are enrolled in one or more subjects together, they form a curricular learning community. This differs from classroom learning communities, which are small student cohort groups that undertake individual teaching and learning activities together over a period of time (Gibb, Anderson, & Forsyth, 2004; Hafferty & Watson, 2007). Residential learning communities are structured around students living and studying together and student-type communities are designed for specific groups of participants. In the case study described, the Research School would be classified as a student-type learning community because it is specifically designed for PhD candidates in the School.

In order to create a learning community Bassi and Polifroni (2005) contend that five key elements need to be present: 1) supportive and shared leadership; 2) collective creativity; 3) shared values and vision; 4) supportive conditions; and 5) shared personal practice. Bolam *et al*. (2005) also identified similar elements in their study into the creation and sustainability of effective professional learning communities. Transformational leadership is also characterized by the five key elements mentioned above. Transformational leaders, such as the School Professor in this case study, aim to create the conditions for people to literally transform themselves (Evans, 2007). The ability of transformational leaders to create a shared vision that inspires others underpins the development of learning communities (Marquis & Huston, 2006). The two most influential factors in the success of the Research School as a learning community are the creation of supportive conditions and shared personal practice.

The way that supervisors and employees managed their time to attend the Research Schools demonstrates their commitment to the exercise. Implicit in this is how much they valued each one of the participant’s research journey, and that they saw the collective relationship that was established amongst the participants as being a collegial and supportive one. In particular, the dynamic of intellectual and social interaction led to high levels of trust and engagement between all participants.

Learning communities can lead to a change in wider organizational culture. Group mentoring results in individual’s professional and intellectual development, which is then carried out into the nursing world by participants who are leaders in their particular context (Bally, 2007). The nursing literature identifies mentoring for scholarly achievement as a useful strategy for cultural change in local workplaces through the development of leadership skills (Gibb *et al*., 2004; Mills, Lennon, & Francis, 2006). In this way, communities of learners become communities of leaders who can spawn other communities of learners resulting in potential positives such as increased staff morale, improved retention of staff, and improved client outcomes (Bassi & Polifroni, 2005).

This case study identifies a group of nurse academics, employed by the School of Nursing and Midwifery, who chose not to participate in Research School. A study by Nielsen, Randall, Yarker and Brenner (2008) concluded that registered nurses who work with transformational leaders require a strong sense of emotional well-being in order to fully participate in workplace activities. If team members have low levels of energy and engagement with the work environment, it is very difficult for leaders to get them involved in activities that require high-level input. Staff members not enrolled in a PhD program locally, and who are finding it difficult to progress through their scholarly activity, would therefore be unlikely to want to participate in a Research School for fear that their lack of progress would be interrogated.

In a study by Sellgren, Ekvall and Tomson (2006), nurse researchers found that subordinates wanted managers to be more "distinct about demands in relation to work" (p. 354). This is reflective of a directive style of leadership, which incorporates instruction and command (Ensley, Hmieleski & Pearce, 2006). Transactional leaders are task focused and are prepared to exchange benefits or bonuses for certain activities (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Yoder-Wise & Kowalski, 2006). As an example of this, the School Professor could have established an expectation that all staff participate in the Research School in exchange for a number of hours of grading relief or other reward options.

Promoting inclusiveness in learning communities so that all members of a workplace are accounted for, not just those identified in a particular group, requires consideration of the variety of communication and leadership styles (Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003; Stoll & Louis, 2007). The collaborative nature of learning communities is not something that fits with all learning styles (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Conclusion

Learning communities are powerful mechanisms for developing both students' and teachers' knowledge and skills. The School of Nursing and Midwifery Research School provides an example of a student-type learning community. The benefits of incorporating intellectual and social activities with a group of PhD candidates over the term of their research studies were articulated. Participants had the opportunity to engage in intellectual interaction between themselves, their colleagues and their supervisors, while developing their identities as scholars. Overall their professional resilience increased as a result of subjecting their work to interrogation by their peers, and their critical thinking skills improved as they contributed to the work of others.

The question as to why staff members chose not to participate in this learning community was explored and reasons postulated that drew upon the literature. Learning communities appear to be interlinked with transformational leadership, which is not always responded to positively. As suggested in the literature (Nielsen *et al*., 2008), those who work with transformational leaders need to have a strong sense of emotional well-being before they are able to participate fully and accrue personal benefit. Developing learning communities in higher degree programs has the potential to create strong and lasting networks between future scholars internationally. Sustaining

intellectual relationships over time has many positive outcomes that can resonate in the clinical workplace.

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