**Learning communities/ Communities of practice of university staff**

**What is a learning community?**

Cox and Richlin (2004) note that many university groups such as committees, teaching teams, classrooms, and virtual learning spaces could be learning communities but often are not. However they are potentially very potent environments in which to enhance learning and practice. Whilst there are no hard and fast rules about establishing learning communities, the following will provide some context to get started.

Cox and Richlin (2004) define a faculty learning community as one in which groups of around 8-12 cross-disciplinary staff spend a period of time (which could be months or years depending on the purpose) working in an active, collaborative way with a common sense of purpose. They will teach and learn from each other, and could be solving problems, sharing knowledge, cultivating good practice and fostering innovation (Griffith University).

These could be (a) cohort based, i.e. they are staff with similar roles such as a group of junior staff, or a group of Deans; or (b) topic based, where a particular curriculum need or opportunity is identified and becomes the purpose of the community.

The purpose of setting up a learning community are various, and could include:

* Solving a particular problem
* Knowledge creation and sharing
* Developing and establishing best practice (through documentation, validation and dissemination)
* Innovation, focusing on new or emerging areas of knowledge (Griffith University).

They could also be established for purposes such as:

* Enabling new academic staff to support each other as they integrate into academic life, develop their teaching practice, undertake research, manage work-life balance and new stress levels
* A programme team with a particular issue within their current curriculum that needs to be addressed, or to develop a new curriculum
* A multi-disciplinary team developing their own practice but around a shared theme such as improved assessment practice, problem based learning, or better classroom engagement. This could involve each member making incremental innovations to their practice, based around purposeful reading and discussion of the scholarly literature, invited guest speakers etc
* Senior managers supporting each other through a purposeful cultural change in the university (Cox & Richlin, 2004).

**Setting up a learning community**

1. Establishing a need or opportunity

As above this could be driven by an issue, or by an opportunity. Whatever the purpose, it needs to be clearly articulated.

1. Determining the membership

This may be self-evident depending on the purpose, or could be determined through open invitation or targeting staff with particular expertise. Considerations for membership include:

* At least some members having sufficient power and reputation to enable change to take place
* Having at least some members with sufficient expertise
* Having varied points of view within the group including diversity of gender, culture etc.

3. Drafting a vision for the learning community

This would identify the desired outcomes and the processes that are envisaged to meet the outcomes. This could be done before the membership is established and/or refined once the group is established. This would include determining frequency and purpose of meetings; resources that might be needed which could include scholarly literature and invited experts; key points where findings may be disseminated and modes for doing so.

1. Communicating the group’s purpose

If an open call is to be used to establish membership, good communication is key to attracting members.

1. Establishing a facilitator

Whilst some learning communities may be collegial and democratic, and the group shares responsibility for the administrative aspects such as scheduling etc, most learning communities would benefit from active facilitation to inspire members particularly where major cultural change is the purpose of the group. The facilitator would also maintain focus and purposefully progress the group by establishing next steps towards the end goal. Key qualities of the facilitator particularly where cultural change is needed include creativity and openness to new ideas, good organisational skills, excellent interpersonal skills to enable all voices within the group to be heard and respected, and an ability to motivate others.

The community may also have a coordinator to organise documentation, readings, invited speakers etc if these are needed as the group progresses, or this role could be shared amongst the group.

1. Engaging in the learning community

Members would be expected to contribute, and to benefit. The purpose of each meeting needs to be established, even with informal groups. Effective communication is necessary, e.g. email distribution list or webpage to facilitate engagement.

A learning community may also be purposefully closed once it has achieved its goal, if it is no longer active, or not achieving its purpose.

1. Evaluating the effectiveness of the learning community

It is useful for learning communities to undertake periodic self evaluation, or if being supported by the university, for the university itself to evaluate the effectiveness of its learning communities to ensure these are fit for purpose and to develop their effectiveness. Evaluation could be based on the predetermined goals of the community and evaluate both the outcomes and the processes for achieving these outcomes. Feedback could be collected from members of the community, their students, associated academic and other staff, depending on the purpose of the community.

**References**

Cox, M. & Richlin, L. (eds) (2004) *Building Faculty Learning Communities.*  San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Griffith University (2006) Guidelines for Establishing Communities of Practice. Southport, Australia: Griffith University.