Book Review
McDonald, J. & Cater-Steel, A. (eds.) (2017)
Communities of Practice: Facilitating Social Learning in Higher Education. Singapore: Springer.

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The writing of this review began shortly before the UK 2017 general election when the campaign of the governing party emphasised the role of one individual, the prime minister, as a 'strong and stable' leader. This they contrasted with a 'coalition of chaos' that would result if opposition parties were able to gain control by working together. During the slogans and bald assertions that seem to be characteristic of any election campaign, the arrival of a well-evidenced academic tome of more than 600 pages was a welcome relief. McDonald and Carter-Steel is a collection of 28 chapters involving more than 70 authors who consider aspects of social learning practices within higher education; a topic which has been increasingly recognised as important since the seminal work of Lave and Wenger (1991). With so many authors, might the book itself be a 'coalition of chaos', or might it demonstrate that the social 'chaos' of informal communities of practice represents a valuable component of learning within higher education where the dominant perception often involves individual learning of experts' 'strong and stable' messages? Hence, this book was read with interest.

The initial six chapters set the tone of the book. They concern community of practice theory and advice. The underlying stance of the authors seems to be that both students and academics in higher education are naturally members of multiple communities of practice which support both their academic and professional development. Such communities of practice serve to reconnect individuals who have become isolated due to the increasingly bureaucratic and competitive, rather than collegial, nature of their work. By providing a safe space for participants to learn by sharing practice and solving mutual problems, communities of practice increase retention of both students and staff. Moreover, the participants develop their identities within these communities of practice such that the more experienced become sufficiently secure to undertake innovative activities. Using some interesting examples, it is explained that these experienced participants can, with the help of institutional facilitators, become *champions* generating a *nurtured* community of practice with goals aligned with the institution. To be enduring, however, *nurtured* communities of practice must continue to set their own agendas. The role of institutional community of practice facilitators thus becomes a) to encourage individuals to participate and b) to ensure institutional recognition by making the benefits of community membership relevant and explicit; a process that has been termed 'managing up'. Following examples of how outcomes from communities of practice have been transferred harmoniously across disciplines and campuses, the section ends with some very useful pragmatic advice on creating and facilitating communities of practice within higher education.

The second section of the book has a research focus. It consists of a series of six research case studies concerning communities of practice within a variety of disciplines in higher education. The emphasis is largely on the development of research methodology that could be used for future studies. Here, important considerations are finding ways to: a) encourage a close relationship between the knowledge generated within the community of practice and the participants' own day-to-day activities; b) generate a shared participant identity; and c) foster non-hierarchical relationships between participants. More specifically, a notable outcome from the case studies was that forming a shared participant identity is often dependent on community of practice longevity and on the participants having similar personal goals and tasks. Conversely, despite more time being required for participants to develop common understandings, less homogeneous groupings can capitalise on the rich learning that occurs through negotiation of meaning. Importantly, the section also considers the *quiet leadership* role of community of practice facilitators in working towards placing methodologies in the hands of participants themselves to ensure that initial nurtured collaborations progress towards self-regulated communities of practice in which participants are able to balance their own personal and professional learning goals with the institutional goals.

The third section of the book comprises seven chapters that concern leadership issues in higher education communities of practice. The chapters are mostly reflective pieces of community of practice researchers that illustrate the different types of learning resultant from different leadership styles and settings. In particular, the need for different types of leadership to nurture communities of practice at different stages in their life cycles is stressed, with emphasis being placed on the juxtaposition between the mediating roles of facilitators upholding the institution's specific knowledge goals with the spontaneous evolution of community of practice *champions* having their own favoured knowledge initiatives. It is noted that the ability of web 2.0 technologies to bring participants together from diverse disciplines is particularly conducive to spontaneous learning because such platforms tend to foster volunteer participants who are comfortable with uncertainty and change, and who have an active interest in solving common problems through joint enterprise. Powerful learning also occurs for vocational students undertaking work placements because they become legitimate peripheral participants in both university and workplace communities of practice. The contributors to this section tend to favour shared leadership models since they can cope with changing membership and the emergence of new experts as the community of practice develops. Shared leadership also respects individual strengths and expertise, and develops camaraderie by sharing the tasks. As communities of practice develop, an important role of facilitators thus becomes fostering trust and resolving conflicts between participants. Hence respect for all participants' contributions is assured and learning capacity is increased. The final three chapters of the section contain more detailed examples of leadership within different types of communities of practice.

The final section of the book consists of nine, generally briefer, chapters which have an explicit focus on the role of communities of practice within sustainable professional development in higher education. Here, the book's overall focus on newly appointed staff pedagogic communities of practice is most apparent, albeit that some junior academic participants are postgraduate students endeavouring to develop their teaching practice. The case studies comprising this section typically concern online pedagogic communities of

practice with participants drawn from diverse disciplines. In such settings, the participants' state of liminality between their disciplines and pedagogy can be unsettling in terms of identity development, but the need to develop a shared understanding of terminology fosters learning through negotiation. The common starting point of the authors seems to be that formal staff development workshops and conferences have typically limited impact on teaching practices because impetus is rapidly lost when academics return to their routine duties. Conversely, ongoing participation in pedagogic communities of practice often leads to sustained behavioural changes. The case studies supported this premise by emphasising that, in addition to the participants' individual growth, such pedagogic communities of practice produce an enhanced institutional climate due to both mutual participant support and the generation of new knowledge. Concomitant with this is enhanced student learning. Later chapters in this section have a more specific focus on ensuring that *nurtured* communities of practice become sustainable. Factors that were helpful in this respect were: a) maintaining a relaxed, safe environment with shared leadership; b) the invitation of occasional guest speakers on topics of interest to the participants; and c) continuing institutional support and encouragement to engage in broad *knowing why* conversations. However, as the authors note, the applicability of case study scenarios to other situations must be always tentative.

In sum, *Communities of Practice: Facilitating Social Learning in Higher Education* is a very worthwhile, albeit lengthy, read. While the book contains relatively few typographical errors, the absence of an index seems a serious hindrance to navigating the content. The fundamental ideas presented may not be novel, but they form a very useful compendium of exemplars whose diversity shows that communities of practice are situated; there is no 'one size fits all'. This resonates with their voluntary nature and lack of rigid management. Throughout the book it is also emphasised that participants' commitment to, and resources available for online communities of practice need to be at least as great as for those based on face to face meetings. Whatever their format, communities of practice are not sustainable if participants are unable to devote time to mutually overcome any barriers to participation. Perhaps reflecting the editors' own location and research interests, there is some bias in the content because the majority of the chapter authors are from Australian institutions, and almost all studies consider staff communities of practice concerned with professional development rather than those formed by students to support their learning directly. Also, as might be expected from a book involving twenty-eight chapters from more than seventy authors, some key ideas do suffer from over repetition. Nevertheless, this book has much to recommend it.

A review of such a hefty tome must necessarily be a brief overview of the text, but, perhaps, sufficient to whet your appetite. For those committed to the notion, the same editors have produced a similarly weighty sister book concerning the more practical aspects of changing institutional culture through communities of practice (McDonald & Cater-Steel, 2017)*.* The editors are clearly advocates of communities of practice, but readers should make up their own minds. For me, however, a convincing case was made that properly facilitated 'chaos' can have long-term educational benefits. Interestingly, the outcome of the UK general election is now known. The prime minister was retained, but the 'strong and stable' mantra was soon discarded and, following negotiation with others, a functional 'coalition' government was developed. Like the communities of practice notion in higher education, it remains unclear how sustainable this government will be.

References

McDonald, J. & Cater-Steel, A. (eds.) (2017) *Implementing Communities of Practice in Higher Education: Dreamers and Schemers.* Singapore: Springer.

Lave, J. And Wenger, E. (1991), *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.