

# CHAPTER 1

## A community of practice for teacher education academics

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the formation and early development of the Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP) group. Throughout 2012 six teacher education academics participating in the development of STEP each gave a 60-minute presentation about the learning and teaching activities in their units and how they assessed students. Then at the start of 2013 each academic wrote a 500 word personal reflection and these were used to reflect on the impact of the presentations and consider possible future directions for the program. A research assistant, who was not a STEP member, interviewed each participating academic individually for about 20 minutes. The research assistant then analysed the reflections and interview responses in terms of Wenger's (1998) three defining features of a community of practice; namely, mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Results indicate that the STEP group enhanced collegiality by enabling a better understanding of the challenges faced by others, strengthened common purpose and inclusion, and provided a rich opportunity to reflect on pedagogy and improve practice. The paper offers positive insight into a collaborative pedagogical culture for academics.

**KEYWORDS** community of practice, teacher education, self-study, higher education

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### INTRODUCTION

Higher education is in a state of change. Government policies designed to make tertiary study more accessible to a range of students have been accompanied by funding cuts (Lea, 2005). These changes can impact on the work of academics so there is a need for a more scholarly approach to teacher development in higher education (James, 2007). In particular, secondary teachers face a variety of challenges in transitioning to university teaching. The shift typically involves moving from a shared staffroom to a private office working alone in a discipline so opportunities for collegial discussion are less frequent. Yet a more collegial approach provides "appropriate opportunities for academic staff to develop their approaches to the scholarship of learning and teaching, through action, reflection and evaluation of their current practice" (Stefani, 2006, p. 121).

In 2012, six teacher education academics considered how to address some of these challenges. A key focus for the group was to develop greater curriculum alignment in the secondary teacher education program and share best practice from across the methodology units of study. After preliminary discussions about the need to create a forum for dialogue and reflection focused on pedagogical knowledge, practice and experiences, the Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP) group was formed. The underpinning approach for the group was the notion of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how the STEP model enhanced collegiality among members and highlight how this was achieved.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) define communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and experience in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). Wenger (1998) identifies three key features of communities of practice: *mutual engagement* when people share a common interest and are sufficiently knowledgeable about it so that they can learn with and from each other; a *joint enterprise* which includes interactions among members that help to build relationships centred on the common interest; and a *shared repertoire* of resources that are used to develop and negotiate meaning among the members of the group. In the case of the STEP group, these shared resources took the form of participants’ reflections on the STEP activities.

Communities of practice emphasise co-participation in shared activities and practices, since individuals learn through social relations to other members (Fuller, 2007) and it is through interacting that members build relationships with each other to form a community around the domain (Gray, 2004). Such an approach can inform the scholarship of learning and teaching as academics “use increasingly diverse and sophisticated techniques to examine the effectiveness of their educational strategies, making their work more compelling to more colleagues” (Nelson & Robinson, 2006, p. 80). This paper reports how the STEP group was formed (mutual engagement), negotiated (joint enterprise) and sustained (shared repertoire) as a collaborative pedagogical forum for a group of teacher education academics. This community of practice approach informs current research by examining how the collective work of a group of teacher education academics might influence the capacity to reflect critically and meaningfully with peers, and to contribute to an agenda of capacity building and professional growth.

## METHOD

Throughout 2012, each of the academics in the STEP group gave a 60-minute presentation about the learning, teaching and assessment used in the methodology unit. The presentations were informal with much discussion about the ideas. In 2013 common issues from the presentations were examined, especially the need to align student assessment practices.

At the start of 2013 the idea of sharing experiences about teaching in the methodology unit was discussed. Ethics approval to conduct the study was obtained and each STEP member wrote a 500 word personal reflection about the impact of the group activities. An interview schedule was created by the group to investigate how the 2012 presentations had shaped thinking and practice, how the STEP group might evolve, and how the STEP model might be broadened to other contexts. A research assistant who was not a STEP member conducted a 20-minute interview with each person. She audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews and analysed the data by a close reading of the personal reflections and transcripts to identify examples related to Wenger’s (1998) three key features of communities of practice. These written and interview responses not only provided the data for our study but have also served as a means of analysing our experiences as members of the STEP group.

## RESULTS

The results are reported in terms of Wenger's three key features of communities of practice.

### **Mutual engagement** (*collaborating with colleagues*)

Although the participants' offices are nearby and they see each other regularly, there are few opportunities for professional dialogue. P1 commented on this in the personal reflection,

*Isolation and a feeling of not knowing what you don't know is a challenge! Having a group of colleagues you can discuss common issues with has helped to address this issue.*

At the start, participants wanted to "know we're on the right level with everyone else" so they could see if what they were doing was comparable. As they shared their experiences, it was comforting to discover that each faced similar difficulties, as P2 commented in the interview:

*I've learnt that there are lots of other people in the same boat as me. That makes me feel comfortable about having a work in progress rather than a perfect finished product.*

The presentations were an honest and open exchange of ideas about what participants did well and issues of concern. Peer feedback affirmed the work each person was doing and showed that the group has far more in common than they had previously imagined. All of this helped to establish a sense of mutual engagement in the group.

### **Joint enterprise** (*learning from each other*)

Despite the fact that participants teach across different subject areas, they quickly discovered participants could learn much from each other in terms of (i) immediate practical matters to solve, such as how to use technology more effectively in our teaching; and (ii) the need for broader learning, which P3 characterised as a desire "to make my practice visible against my colleagues' practice, to gain a more complete picture of our shared endeavour" (personal reflection).

Negotiation was a feature of the joint enterprise as they were challenged by the variety of approaches and discourses in each other's presentations. These included the language used to describe practice and how priorities were shaped by syllabus demands. P2 and P3 both noted that this sharpened their sense of difference, even isolation, in their curriculum areas, and P3 was sometimes "struggling to find similarities". At the same time, however, this tension also highlighted what each person valued in his or her own field: "It made me realise how highly I regard accurate and meaningful content and pedagogical content knowledge" (P2). Individual backgrounds and perspectives shaped the perceptions of peers' approaches while also affirming the relationship between each person's area of curriculum content and pedagogy in pre-service teacher education. Yet this potential source of tension enabled participants to learn a great deal from each other and "turned out to be a positive growth outcome, in that these extra discourses expanded my teacher education understanding and repertoire" (P2).

The shared endeavour of teacher education was crucial to the learning which took place in the STEP group. A question which often arose in discussions was articulated by P2, "In what way can my teacher education students be best prepared to take their place within the profession?" P2 also spoke about the way the STEP activities had helped in "becoming more responsive to the needs of my students".

### **Shared repertoire** (*reflecting on our common practice*)

All participants recognised the opportunities in STEP meetings to reflect on individual practice. As P1's personal reflection noted, "One of the key benefits of presenting to colleagues in this forum was the opportunity to reflect on my own practice". P4 spoke in the interview about how the STEP group activities "allowed me to stand back from my daily work and reflect more deeply on my pedagogy; it has provided me

with a space to grow and develop professionally". The STEP group provoked each participant to contemplate his or her own practice in light of colleagues' ideas. As P3 commented in the interview:

*I think it affirmed my practice. It suits my own field, in what I'm doing, so I felt reasonably good about that. But I did think there are some strategies here that I could use.*

Individual reflection also occurred in preparing the written responses and participating in the interviews for this paper. These activities afforded the chance to look back on the activities of the STEP group and think about what was learned. As P2 commented:

*I began to view my endeavours with students as part of a wider mentoring activity – shared with my colleagues at university and also with the classroom teachers supervising my students.*

## CONCLUSION

The results of this chapter demonstrate the encouragement and support that academics can offer each other when they make their practice visible to colleagues. The STEP model was successful because members were willing to share information about their units and respectfully challenge each other to enable a better understanding of the secondary teacher education program. STEP meetings provided rich opportunities to reflect on pedagogy and learn from each other as members developed a common purpose for learning and teaching. This process has allowed for a greater inclusion of ideas across the different methodology units and enhanced a sense of collegiality among the group. The STEP group is now well established and will continue to meet into the future.

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