School-university CPD partnerships: Fertile ground for cultivating teacher communities of practice

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Abstract
Continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers is a neglected area of teacher development in South Africa. The introduction of a new national curriculum in the post-apartheid era presents enormous challenges for teachers. CPD initiatives in South Africa thus far have been fragmented, diluted and have had little direct influence on teachers’ practice. This article draws on a community of practice framework and applies the work of Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2004) in analysing the development of CPD communities of practice. It argues that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through their community outreach initiatives can play a powerful role in advancing teacher continuing professional development by developing and strengthening teacher communities of practice.

INTRODUCTION
As researchers, we need to recognise that we are inevitably a part of the contexts in which we seek to understand teachers’ knowing and learning. This issue is important when we take on multiple roles of researchers and teachers of teachers. Putman and Borko note that recent professional development programmes illustrate:

… the bringing together of teachers and university-based researchers or staff developers into new forms of discourse communities focused on teaching and learning. University participants can bring to these communities the critical and reflective stance and modes of discourse that are important norms within the academic community. In addition, they bring research-based knowledge … that can contribute to the improvement of teaching. Teachers, in turn, can bring to such discourse communities craft knowledge about pedagogical practices, their own students, and the cultural and instructional contexts of their classrooms (Putman and Borko 2000, 9).
Day and Sachs contend that internationally, there still is a substantial dearth of understanding with respect to the outcomes of teacher professional development as it occurs in its various forms, and that continuing professional development ‘is alive, but not thriving’ (Day and Sachs 2004, 29). The issues, tensions and problems of teacher professional development in South Africa are multi-faceted and become amplified in a context of unprecedented curriculum reform. The stark absence of substantive teacher development programmes to address teachers’ needs has manifested itself in alternative mechanisms for teacher professional development, namely communities of practice.

In this article I draw mainly on my experiences of working on the Teaching Economic and Management Sciences (TEMS) teacher development project. I also reflect on two other HEI-DoE collaborative teacher development projects in KwaZulu-Natal, namely, the KwaZulu-Natal Council for Economic Education (KZNCEE) Economics Teacher Development Project and the KZNCEE Economic and Financial Literacy Project for GET Economic and Management Sciences teachers. I present a description and analysis of how teacher communities of practice can be cultivated (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2004) and nurtured through both teachers and HEIs exercising agency in response to a need for CPD in the fields of Economics and Economic and Management Sciences.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND TEACHER EDUCATION

Teacher development through participation in teacher communities of practice is a relatively new phenomenon in South African teacher education. Locating teacher professional development activities within a community of practice that is supported by access to quality resources and expert input from HEIs have much potential for advancing the teacher professional development agenda in South Africa (Maistry 2006; Graven 2002). Graven (2002) reminds us though that literature analysing teacher learning in communities of practice is relatively new and needs further development. International research into teacher learning communities, particularly in the United States, has highlighted the potential that teacher communities of practice have for teacher development. Wesley and Buysse (2001, 120) contend that we have much to learn about how we ‘… might transform traditional views of teaching and learning (in which practitioners are viewed as recipients of knowledge) into learning communities (in which practitioners are viewed as co-producers of knowledge)’. They suggest that designers of professional development programmes should take the lead in developing communities of practice ‘from the ground’ and should ideally incorporate diverse expertise to bring together research, policy, and practices in a way that is most meaningful to all participants.

Teachers often find formal professional development disappointing because they are positioned as clients needing ‘fixing’ rather than as owners and managers of programmes that supposedly aim to support their learning (Clark 2001; Sayed 2004). Clark argues that many teacher professional development initiatives are
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often superficial, short-term and insufficiently sensitive to complex local conditions. Communities of practice offer a useful alternative mechanism for teacher professional development. Communities of practice originated in response to several barriers to professional development that exist in the culture of schooling, such as the isolated nature of teaching and the lack of agreement as to what constitutes acceptable practices. Wideman and Owston (2003) suggest that communities of practice are crucial to sustaining and expanding the momentum for change. There exists a ‘natural’ interconnectedness of teacher learning and professional communities (McLaughlin and Talbert 2001). Long (2004) identified several barriers that teachers confront in their attempts at sustaining development and suggests that teacher educators take an honest look at how they might work with teachers and administrators to effect significant change. In a study of how novice teachers described and assessed their experience in a community of practice, Myer (2002) concluded that such communities have much benefit for novice teachers as they allow teachers to develop a form of collegiality that enables members to provide each other with ‘critique and support they identified as being missing in other venues for professional development’ (ibid.39).

The concept of ‘cultivating’ communities of practice uses the analogy of a plant that does its own growing irrespective of how its germination had occurred (Wenger et al. 2002). Just as it is not possible to pull the components (stem and leaves) of a plant to make it grow faster, it is also not possible to force a community of practice to grow. However, much can be done to encourage the healthy growth of a community of practice. While some communities of practice grow spontaneously, others require careful seeding. It is important to value the learning that takes place in communities of practice, by making time and resources available for their work, encouraging participation and removing barriers (Wenger et al. 2002).

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study adopted the tenets of qualitative research. Critical elements of case study research and ethnography were employed in the data collection process. The role of the researcher was central to this study, acting as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The choice of methods and instruments was informed by symbolic interactionist theory. Data collection methods included a researcher’s reflective journal, teacher interviews, classroom observations and field-notes over a sixteen-month period. Initial interviews were used to capture baseline information, including reasons for participation in the study, while the second interview entailed a mid-term review. The final interview would provide a summative view of teachers’ experiences. The empirical field for this research study was the TEMS teacher development project, a teacher learning community. The TEMS grouping comprised approximately twenty teachers some of whom drilled in and out of the project. A core group of seven teachers were active participants in the research project. Of the
original group of ten committed participants, three had dropped out of the research project for various reasons such as work pressures and personal commitments.

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEMS COMMUNITY**

The TEMS teacher development project was set up in 2002 to assist novice Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) teachers address the curricular expectations of a new learning area in the school curriculum. The participants in the study comprised *novice* EMS teachers, that is, teachers who were teaching EMS for the very first time, had no formal qualification in the field of commerce education and had very limited subject content knowledge. In the Shallcross-Mariannhill area of KwaZulu-Natal, a group of EMS teachers had banded together to form a support group to address the curriculum development challenge they faced. As a university academic involved in the training of teachers of commercial subjects, I viewed the challenge of addressing the professional development needs of this group of teachers as a useful and meaningful outreach initiative. Together with a core group of teachers, a CPD programme for EMS was developed. This was an informal sixteen-month programme that was informed by the principles of a community of practice (Wenger 1998, Wenger et al. 2002). My role as researcher entailed a study of how teacher learning occurred in this community of practice (Maistry 2006).

The TEMS community was a dynamic and constantly changing grouping of EMS teachers. Cindy, an astute and esteemed member of the community, played the role of coordinator and administrative leader. Wenger et al. (2002) assert that the community co-ordinator is crucial to the community as she is a well-respected member who helps the community to focus on its enterprise and helps maintain relationships between members. A core group of research participants actively participated in discussions and debates and helped shape the curriculum for the TEMS teacher development programme. They identified topics for the community to address and moved the community along its learning agenda. This group was the heart of the community. ‘As the community matures, this core group takes on much of the community’s leadership … (and) … become auxiliaries to the community coordinator (Wenger et al. 2002, 56). This phenomenon was particularly evident in the developing and strengthening relationship and bond that began to develop between Cindy and the core group. As the programme progressed, members of the core group began to assume greater responsibility for the coordination and functioning of the TEMS community.

Four other teachers were regular attendees but elected not to be part of the research project. Wenger et al. (2002) referred to this next level of membership (outside the core) as the ‘active’ group. ‘These members attend meetings regularly and participate occasionally … but without the regularity or intensity of the core group’ (ibid. 56). These teachers were invited to participate in workshop presentations and feedback sessions. They were also involved in ‘community maintenance’ activities. As the programme progressed, some of these members engaged in more active participation as a result of the opportunities created for them. This phenomenon of inviting
participation is important as ‘successful communities build a fire in the centre of the community that will draw people to its heat’ (ibid. 58).

Six teachers attended alternate sessions. The non-appearance of previous attendees was also a phenomenon of the TEMS community. Three teachers made a regular habit of arriving for a session, signing in the register, waiting for fifteen minutes, then quietly exiting the venue. This is characteristic of ‘peripheral participation’ (Wenger et al. 2002), a phenomenon where members rarely participate, but prefer to observe the interactions of the core and active members from the sidelines. ‘In a traditional meeting or team we would discourage such half-hearted involvement, but these peripheral activities are an essential dimension of communities of practice … people on the sidelines often are not as passive as they seem’ (ibid. 56). In interactions with such members before and after TEMS workshop sessions, they often described the insights that they had gained from attending TEMS workshops and their attempts at applying this new knowledge to their classrooms. ‘Rather than force participation, successful communities “build benches” for those on the sidelines’ (ibid. 57). A community of practice allows for free movement of members between the core and the periphery. The TEMS coordinator and core members warmly embraced new members. Some of these teachers were to become regular attendees, who later began to exhibit characteristics of active members.

The arrival of new teachers was a feature of every session. Wenger (1998) notes that the existence of a community of practice does not depend on fixed membership. Participants may move in and out of the community and that an ‘essential’ aspect of any community of practice is the arrival of new participants. These new participants are integrated into the community. They engage in its practice and then perpetuate the practice. This aspect of practice is understood as ‘learning’. The TEMS community of practice was able to provide peripheral experiences to newcomers who did or did not want to become fully-fledged members. These teachers were offered various forms of casual, but legitimate access to the practice without subjecting them to the demands of full membership.

Communities of practice continually evolve. Wenger et al. suggest five stages of community development: potential; coalescing; maturing; stewardship and transformation (Wenger et al. 2002). They caution that while it is possible to discern different stages, progression from one stage to the next entails an evolutionary transition and not a distinct or sudden shift. While some communities go through one stage quite quickly, others may spend much time in the same stage or may even skip a stage. This phenomenon was evident in the development of the TEMS community. At any point in time, the TEMS community displayed characteristics that were associated with and straddled two or three stages.
The early stages of development: The potential and coalescing stages

The following extract offers a narrative vignette of a workshop held in the early stages of the TEMS programme.

Extract of workshop observation report:

I was extremely grateful to Cindy (the co-ordinator) for setting up the venue … Cindy and her team paid meticulous attention to detail. It was a steaming hot and humid day in Durban. Cindy had set up four oscillating fans at strategic points - definitely needed on a day like this. She had organized cakes, biscuits and soft drinks. This was really appreciated by the teachers who had travelled from their schools to this venue. I was most impressed with the effort that Cindy and her team had put in to make sure that everything was in order … Session one involved a production simulation activity.

… The second session involved reflecting on the entire process and exploring whether such an activity could be used in teachers’ own classes …. Teachers expressed their appreciation for the workshop and the materials. They were grateful to have “some material to work from” but still expressed much uncertainty about planning for EMS teaching …. None of the teachers had any formal background in EMS. Another issue that was raised was how to integrate EMS with other learning areas – said that they found this particularly difficult and needed help in this area.

Wenger et al. describe the characteristics of a community of practice in its ‘potential’ stage in terms of an ‘extant social network’ that is drawn together by a ‘common topic’ (Wenger et al. 2002, 70). Prior to the commencement of the TEMS project, this formation of teachers was an ‘extant social network’ that had organised themselves around the need to share ideas on teaching EMS. ‘… the idea of forming a community is introduced into this loose network … (and people) … start to see their own issues and interests as communal fodder and their relationships in the new light of a potential community’ (ibid. 71). Finding enough ‘common ground’ is the key issue at the beginning of a community as what ‘energises’ a potential community is the revelation that other people face similar difficulties (ibid.). In the above vignette, we see that ‘common ground’ was emerging amongst the group of teachers, namely, that they were ‘forced’ into teaching EMS, a subject that they knew very little about, an issue common to all teachers present. At the end of the session, teachers appeared to see the value of more systematic interactions, citing issues and topics that could be included in future TEMS sessions.

Another characteristic of the potential stage is the role of the coordinator. A good community coordinator may not necessarily be an expert in the field. She needs good interpersonal skills and the ability to identify the development needs of potential members. Her ‘primary role is to link people, not give answers’ (Wenger et al. 2002, 81). The coordinator’s role in the early stages of the community’s development entailed apprising me of the needs of the EMS teachers in the network, providing
systematic coordination of the groups activities and ‘formally’ linking the network’s members via personal invitations to the workshop sessions.

In the next vignette, we see how the community had started to display elements of the second stage of development, namely, the coalescing stage.

Extract from workshop observation report:

Cindy welcomed everyone and started off with a short story about geese flying in formation and the benefits from such “co-operative” flying. I was thoroughly impressed with the aptness of the short reading …. I re-emphasised the value of such co-operation and networking. The teachers also acknowledged this need. … In today’s workshop, I was determined to encourage teachers to begin take ownership of the workshop. Teachers had to use the material that we had discussed to draft a short learning programme. Teachers were divided into groups according to the grades they currently taught. I provided a framework/guide/structure to assist teachers with the task. Some teachers were initially quite nervous about this task. Once they got going in their groups, they began to settle down and have fun with what they were doing. They had to capture their drafts on transparency and present it to the group using the overhead projector …

A community moves from the potential stage to the coalescing stage when it understands what its current resources are and has a vision of where it wants to head. ‘… during this time it is crucial to have activities that allow members to build relationships, trust and an awareness of their common interests and needs’ (Wenger et al. 2002, 82). Issues at play in the coalescing stage entail firstly; establishing the value of sharing knowledge about the community’s enterprise; secondly; developing relationships of trust in order to discover the main issues at hand and; thirdly; discovering specifically what knowledge should be shared and how.

With regard to the first issue, that is, establishing the value of sharing knowledge, Cindy’s opening analogy of ‘geese flying in formation’ and the benefits of such cooperative activity, and teachers’ acknowledgement of this was an indication that community development was moving onto the coalescing stage. The issue of developing trust and discovering issues that were important to the group was a process that had started from the first of the TEMS sessions. Developing trust is a process and as such was expected to occur over a period of time. The group was also beginning to identify issues that were important to them, such as whether to focus on subject content knowledge or on pedagogical content knowledge or on both.

A serious challenge for community at this stage of its development is to strike a balance between developing relationships and trust and the need to demonstrate the value of the community. If the focus is mainly on building relationships, then the community runs the risk of collapsing before it even begins to provide value to its members. On the other hand if it overemphasises the immediate delivery of value, this may be at the expense of developing relationships (Wenger et al. 2002). The period after the launch of a community, which Wenger et al. refer to, as the
‘incubation period’ is a period when communities are most fragile. The reality of community work may cause people’s energy for the community to wane and people may pull away from participating because of other commitments. The role of the community coordinator is crucial at this stage in order to nurture the community to address its challenges.

There was also much movement in and out of the community by teachers. The group of teachers that had become the core had moved from the periphery towards substantial involvement in the community’s activities. Deeper relationships had begun to develop between the members of the core. The coordinator, stuck steadfastly to her tasks, and carried out her responsibilities efficiently and enthusiastically.

The coalescing and maturing stages

The following is a vignette of a TEMS workshop ten months into the TEMS programme. The community was beginning to reflect characteristics of the maturation stage, while still displaying elements of the coalescing stage. Extract of workshop observation report after ten months of the community’s existence:

Extract from workshop observation report (October 2003)

I was quite impressed with the way the previous workshop had gone off. John’s running of that session was excellent. I was satisfied that the group had started to really gel together and that they were prepared to take responsibility for how the workshops would unfold. … I feel that part of my responsibility is to provide opportunities for this group of teachers to take control of the workshops themselves. From my interactions with the group, I could see that members were becoming more familiar with each other and as a result, a more trusting, non-threatening environment was starting to develop. I approached Mary and Cindy to lead the next workshop.

Mary and Cindy had arranged their own planning meetings and had proceeded without requesting my assistance. They had been quite resourceful and went beyond the materials that I had provided and sought materials that they regarded as useful to pupils’/ teachers’ direct experience …. Cindy began the workshop with a thought for the day …

“We are all leaders. This world was created round for a very good reason. It means that wherever you are, no matter in what position you are, you are always ahead of someone, behind someone -- following or being followed -- each of us is in a leadership role someone is watching us, someone is learning from us. – What are we teaching them? Like it or not you are a leader. What then is this thing called leadership” – stopped at that point and said that she would complete the quote at the end of the session.

In the above vignette, we see that the community still exhibited characteristics of the coalescing stage, in terms of building and strengthening relationships amongst
members. The coordinator persisted with her inspirational words about the important ‘leadership’ and ‘follower’ roles that teachers played and the value of cooperative engagement. The value that the community offered had been clearly established over the previous months and became evident in the increasing numbers of new teachers. In the maturing stage, the central issue ‘shifts from establishing value to clarifying the community’s focus, role and boundaries’ (Wenger et al. 2002, 97). Once the community establishes a reputation of being able to effectively share knowledge, it may experience a growth in membership. The community’s work shifts from being more than a vehicle to share experiences and teaching tips to developing a comprehensive body of knowledge that expands its demands on community members especially the core group of members. This phenomenon was beginning to manifest itself in the TEMS community whose activities were starting to become well known. As mentioned above, new teachers became a phenomenon of almost every session. The core group had begun to assume greater responsibility for planning, organising and conducting the TEMS workshop sessions. They had started to devote more time to community matters, such as organising the body of knowledge that was developing, into some coherent form, such as booklets, transparencies, worksheets, notes and other teaching resources.

As the TEMS programme progressed the core group began to take on an increasing role with regard to the professional development aspect of the TEMS programme. They began to hold their own planning meetings in which ideas for TEMS workshops were discussed. These TEMS teachers began to determine the structure and outcomes for each session. Presentation materials and teaching materials were also thoughtfully developed and packaged. Teachers had gradually begun to take ownership of the TEMS programme.

**The stewardship and transformation stage**

In the fourth stage (Stewardship stage), a community of practice may face different challenges. The community’s work involves maintaining the relevance of its role and purpose, keeping the ‘intellectual focus’ of the community sufficiently engaging, especially for core members and acquiring and develop new knowledge. The Stewardship phase is characterised by members no longer as intensely engaged, but the community is still strong and members stay in touch and call each other for advice.

In the final stage, namely, the Transformation phase, activity wanes and participants remember it as a significant part of their identities, often attempting to preserve artefacts, collecting memorabilia and telling stories. During this phase, the community could experience a rapid increase in membership (or a decrease in energy levels of the core members), for example, could see the community transforming itself, by returning to an earlier stage, or dissolving completely. The TEMS community had reached the transformation stage when participating members from different districts in the region began to establish similar EMS teacher communities.
in their respective districts. My involvement entailed providing curriculum resources and administrative support. Colleagues from the University of KwaZulu-Natal made regular professional contributions to the work of these newly sprouted communities of practice.

The Commerce Education Department of the University of KwaZulu-Natal in its efforts to expand and strengthen the network of Economics teachers and teacher educators, established a link with the American National Council on Economic Education (NCEE). This kind of networking with an established international organisation was particularly important as it facilitated access to international funding for Economics teacher development in South Africa. The NCEE’s mission in South Africa was to advance economic literacy in the country. It recruited lead teachers, university faculty and curriculum specialists from the department of education and exposed them to an intensive, month-long economic education programme. Alumni of this programme have begun to network locally giving rise to the formation of the South African National Council for Economic Education. Provincial councils for economic education have begun to sprout across the country and networking and sharing of resources and expertise have begun to take place. These councils comprise members from HEIs, curriculum specialists from the provincial department of education and schoolteachers.

In KwaZulu-Natal, under the leadership of the KwaZulu-Natal Council for Economic Education (KZNCEE), two major teacher development projects have begun. These projects are aimed at Economic and Management Sciences teachers teaching in the GET phase and Economics teachers teaching in the FET phase. These projects are jointly funded by the provincial education department and the HEI’s in the province. Lead teachers from each of the 45 districts in the province were recruited to attend week-long development programmes. The curriculum for the programmes is carefully constructed by the KZNCEE. A significant strength of the programme is that it is resource intensive and is able to strike a fine balance between developing subject content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge in Economics and Economic and management Sciences. While the council is aware that week-long programmes have their limitations it does attempt to support the development of individual participants by subjecting them to voluntary pre and post tests. Alumni of the programme are inducted into the community of practice of Economics educators and become members of the council for economic education. These new community members have access to both the expertise and material resources of the KZNCEE and are guided towards establishing similar configurations in their own districts.

**SOME IMPLICATIONS**

In the South African context, financial constraints mean that teacher education providers must be able to make a strong case for the continuing professional development of teachers if they wish to secure state funding for such initiative. Financial constraints therefore necessitate a creative approach to continuing
professional development, one that embraces existing financial and human resources in local communities. Collaboration amongst teachers in communities of practice is beginning to emerge as a strategic response to overcome these challenges.

If teacher educators believe that learning is social in nature, the challenge then is to create contexts in which teachers and other stakeholders interact in ways that help them to overcome barriers to ongoing professional development. Although partnerships between university academics and teachers have been in existence for some time, there is still the perception that academics and their pursuit of theory is distinct from the world of teachers whose main enterprise is in fact practice. There is also the criticism that the work of researchers has had little or no benefit for teachers. Of particular significance is that teacher professional development has failed to acknowledge and develop the knowledge creation capacities of teachers and teacher communities. Teacher educators and teachers ought to assume joint responsibility for knowledge creation, development and dissemination. There is therefore a need to evaluate existing school-university partnerships. Formal teacher education institutions need to begin to embrace less formal teacher development. In planning for teacher development there is a need for teacher education providers to work with schools to envision and implement structures that support ongoing professional development for teachers. If a community of practice framework is to be adopted, then this approach requires a concerted effort from the entire field of teacher development, that is, a fundamental shift in how we conceptualise teacher education and research into teacher development.

CONCLUSION

School-university partnerships that are framed on the principles of a community of practice have much potential for advancing the agenda of continuing professional development. HEIs need to explore the possibility of forming university and ‘community’ partnerships that could provide richer and more meaningful experiences for in-service teachers through relevant teacher education programmes. Communities of practice as a theoretical approach suggest that teacher development initiatives view teachers’ practice as an essential component of teacher learning. The ability to see communities of practice and how they serve to mediate teacher learning and teachers’ response to policy such as C2005 is a first step toward harnessing that energy in the direction that supports positive change in classroom practice.

REFERENCES


