

Bernadette Mary Mercieca
Jacquelin McDonald

Sustaining Communities of Practice with Early Career Teachers

Supporting Early Career Teachers in
Australian and International Primary
and Secondary Schools, and Educational
Social Learning Spaces

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ISBN 978-981-33-6353-3 ISBN 978-981-33-6354-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-6354-0>

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The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

Foreword

It is a pleasure and a reward to write the Foreword to Mercieca & McDonald's fresh and powerful book on *Sustaining Early Career Teacher Communities of Practice*. Much has been written about Communities of Practice (CoPs) and Collaborative Professionalism over the years, but rarely do we see such a comprehensive treatment. The fact that the book focuses on "early career teachers" gives it focus but enables the authors to range far and wide while providing valuable insights to both the concept of CoPs, and the professional lives of early career teachers.

Chapter 1 contains a comprehensive and novel way of establishing the framework for the book, but also characterising the nature of CoPs. The framework—which the authors call the *Value Creation Framework (VCF)*—is simple while providing a roadmap for going deeply in the topics in subsequent chapters. The framework has four sides: "Strategic Value" and "Enabling Value," "Network Activities," and "Transformational Values." The rest of the book pursues various kinds of social networks in terms of how they generate minimal to maximal *individual* learning on the one hand, to deep organisational change that they call *Emancipatory Collaborative Team Learning*. The authors say that the VCF can be "used to envision what activities or learning [that] members would like to see happen at each phase, and what conditions will enable these aspirations to be achieved."

Life cycles of CoPs are then framed and used to examine various specific learning cycles and their impact through phases of development, action and impact such as: initiation, creation, infancy, maturing/sustaining and recreating. The authors then review the research on CoPs fleshing out the findings on evolving social learning theory. In sum, Chapter One sets the stage for envisioning and evaluating CoPs.

Chapter 2 dives into the case of "early career teachers," especially those working in rural areas. Normally a neglected topic (which in effect means that such teachers typically operate in isolation with little support and a sense of being left on their own). Then the authors change this image by studying over a three year period two groups of early career teachers in rural Victoria, Australia. The authors show how supportive CoPs help teachers locate themselves with in a "vast landscape of practice" countering what they describe as "the tyranny of distance." We find in these cases of support by mentors and interaction with other teachers in a community of learning, that these early career teachers alter stereotypes of rural living, gain a stronger sense of

self, greater knowledge and agency. We also find that these teachers, partly because of leadership needs, and rapid early growth are more likely to take on leadership positions late in their second year, or third year of teaching thereby accelerating their growth, and career progression. We find in these two cases of deliberate support for early career teachers in rural communities that CoPs provide the opportunity for young teachers to thrive in a supportive environment.

Chapter 3 is devoted to leadership: How school principals support and sustain CoPs as proactive leaders; how to actively foster and support leaders at other levels of the school (sometimes called distributed leadership, or middle-level leadership); and how leaders can forge unity of purpose with communities. It is here that we see the vital role of school leaders, and teachers (especially as they operate in collaboration) to gain a deep “contextual knowledge” of the community—something that I found to be the hallmark of “nuanced leaders” (Fullan, 2019). As the authors note “honouring people’s histories and contexts” is critical to establishing knowledge and trust, which is essential for success.

Chapter 4 is a novelty and a surprise. It takes us into Twitter where we meet certain leaders who have deliberately set up learning groups using Twitter as the communal centre. Several examples are portrayed along with names of the leaders, and the focus and activities they are engaged in. We meet several of the Twitter leaders—handles, and pictures, as well as portrayals of what how they set up and run the communities of learners. We learn how worldwide as well as regional groups get started and maintain a commitment to learning. The crucial roles of facilitators and mentors are taken up in relation to starting up, maintaining and assessing impact. Individual learners are helped, as well as groups, and even how to set up debates.

In chap. 5 Mercieca & McDonald’s Belgian colleagues discuss collegial networks of early career teachers, where they provide comprehensive treatment of infrastructure, and membership. Included here are examples of worldwide networks which operate as focused but geographically large scale learning enterprises.

Chapter 6 is based on a case study in Northern Ireland. Here the authors’ colleague examines the CoPs in action involving pre- and in-service teachers, and action research where we see how networks can be organised for “individual learning” or can delve deeply into “collaborative learning.” Case examples of reflective learning are featured as well as examples from both pre-service and in-service. A valuable typology is presented which focuses on three typed of CoPs: Emancipatory individual learning, emancipatory mutual learning and emancipatory collaborative learning. Participatory action research underpins all three of these modes of learning. The authors use this framework to critique existing models of professional learning.

The final chapter includes a retrospective examination where the authors identify five key findings from the book as a whole (I’ll leave this to the reader to discover). Beyond the findings, Mercieca & McDonald’s main recommendation is that it can make a big difference if a system of support—informal but focused—is set up, especially for early career teachers. It affects who stays and develops in the profession for decades to come, not to mention how these teachers affect others.

In short, *Sustaining CoPs of Early Career Teachers* contains a goldmine of ideas. It takes a complex problem and zero's on a small piece of it (Early Career) with practical ideas that could make a world of difference.

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Preface

Our Focus

Much has been written in recent decades about the need to support Early Career Teachers (ECTs)—those in their first five years of teaching. Partly this has been due to their alarming attrition rates globally (AITSL, 2016; Gallant & Riley, 2017; Flemish Department of Education & Training, 2013; Ford, Olsen, Khojasteh, Ware & Urick, 2019) but also to the precarious scenarios many graduate teachers find themselves in both in terms of gaining and maintaining regular employment and dealing for the first time with the increasingly high demands of the classroom. Bamberry (2011) highlights the current casualisation of the workforce where ECTs can feel, “as disposable as the next tissue that comes out of the box” (p. 58) when schools come to determining their annual staffing. From a psychological perspective, Ford et al. (2019) drawing on their large study of 1500 teachers from 73 schools in a large, high-poverty, urban US Midwestern school district, refer to the feelings of marginalisation and exclusion that many of the teachers feel and their risk of burnout, when they lack sufficient support from their principal and staff. In addition, Nicholas and Wells (2016) point to the limited professional development that casual teachers are able to access and the consequent problems that arise from this in terms of accreditation and other steps in their career progression. Others such as Veenman (1984) and Dicke, Elling, Schmeek and Leutner (2015) speak more generally of the *praxis* or *reality shock* that beginning teachers experience even if they have an ongoing position when the reality of dealing with day to day lesson preparation, class management and the multitude of other expectations that they have to deal with sets in. These issues and the support that can potentially alleviate them will be addressed in Chap. 2 based on research with rural ECTs in Australia and in Chap. 5 involving ECTs in Belgium, while Chap. 6 explores the importance of coaching and mentoring partnerships within such collaborative settings in Northern Ireland. Further, Chap. 3 considers the views of the leadership of the school in Chap. 2 in terms of how they have sustained the Communities of Practice that their ECTs were involved in at a rural Australian secondary school. From a different perspective, Chap. 4 considers

support for ECTs in social media networks such as Twitter. This is a form of professional learning that all teachers can access no matter what their status—having, as one Twitter Chat Leader states, “professional learning is in the palm of your hand!”

As our title suggests, the importance of supporting and sustaining ECTs through collaborative gatherings of teachers through Communities of Practice or social networks and a supportive school environment is the central theme of this book. In the first chapter, the authors articulate the theoretical foundations of Communities of Practice and the most recent developments in theory. Examples from higher education are used to illustrate the practical application of Communities of Practice. The following chapters take this core theory and view it from a variety of different perspectives as outlined above.

What are Communities of Practice? They are essentially groups of people who come together to share their practice and learn with and from each other. This is an age-old phenomenon, although the term itself is fairly recent (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner describe Communities of Practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion about something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (p. 1).” An understanding of Communities of Practice continues to evolve, and includes the three defining characteristics of the *domain*, the *community*, and the *practice*. A common interest, shared concern or desire to begin a joint enterprise draws people together. As they continue to meet, their knowledge deepens and they become more skilled as they participate in *learning loops*, where shared practice is taken back to the workplace, implemented and then returned to the community for more feedback. The learning loop begins again, thus building community and sharing and developing knowledge within the Community of Practice. Although many schools are beginning to explore this form of collaborative endeavour under a variety of names, such as Personal Learning Teams (PLTs), or Personal Learning Networks (PLNs), or Collegial or Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), growing and sustaining these communities’ efforts can be difficult.

Research into practical experiences and strategies to sustain these groups is the focus of this book. The theoretical underpinnings for the concept of Communities of Practice as developed by the Wenger and the Wenger–Trayner partnership and their colleagues, including the more recent understanding of Landscapes of Practice, Social Learning spaces, online networks and how they support and sustain teachers, in particular Early Career teachers, are articulated in this book. A Value Creation Framework (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2019) for visioning and evaluating the value of CoPs for members and wider stakeholder informed the research in this book and is presented in Chap. 1. Research into the roles of leading Communities of Practice—as a principal or middle-level leader—are shared in Chap. 3, while the importance of the whole school environment in supporting ECTs is explored in Chap. 5.

Social Learning Spaces (SLSs) or social networks are the focus of the forthcoming book by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020), *Learning to Make a Difference: Volume I Value creation in social learning spaces*. As described in this book, SLSs and social networks include some of the features of a Community of Practice, but without the expectations of continuity and ongoing commitment. The

SLS features articulated are that they have a focus on people and their participation and that members drive the agenda. Learning is rooted in mutual engagement which pushes the participants' edge of learning, while meaning and identity remain central in terms of "caring to make a difference" rather than striving for competence in a social practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). Social learning spaces are not confined to shared geographical spaces, as they include globally distributed networks and online CoPs, such as those presented in Chap. 4 and the networks described in Chaps. 5 and 6. The ubiquity of technology has meant that many forms of social media networks have flourished including Twitter and Facebook. Recent research shows that teachers in the complex and demanding world in which they operate are increasingly turning to social media to fulfil their professional learning needs (Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Lantz-Andersson, 2018; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). As Chap. 4 will show, these networks are readily available at no cost for participants and are tailored to the needs of the teachers who access them.

As practitioners in education over many years, we are well aware of the good intentions that schools and higher education institutions might have in setting up Communities of Practice for their staff. But we are also aware of how some of these groups end up failing over time or operating in less than ideal ways, due to a range of factors. Our concern was to distil the key factors that are needed to both set up and sustain Communities of Practice within a culture of growth (Fullan, 2019), with a particular focus on supporting ECTs. As will become apparent as you read through our book, we see the way forward primarily in terms of implementing and sustaining Communities of Practice, fostered by inspired leadership models of distributed leadership including with middle-level leaders (Gronn, 2010; Jones, & Harvey, 2017).

Ultimately we believe our research points towards the importance of developing a shared understanding and mutual commitment with Initial Educational Teaching Institutions (ITEs) about the way they prepare their pre-service teachers for the professional world they will enter and the strategies they need to thrive in this environment. This includes the distinct possibility that they will have a casual rather than ongoing position on graduation or have to move to rural or remote location, and the value they might gain in regard to their professional learning in terms of accessing social media, in particular, Twitter chats. Pre-service teachers need scaffolded experiences during their courses where they can experience what Twitter chats are available and what they have to offer as a professional learning resource (Spencer, Greenhalgh, K., Willet et al., 2020). Chapter 6 highlights the importance of reflectivity as well as the demand on learning leaders and educators to work more collaboratively. As part of a teacher's professional journey, ITEs need to also embed reflective inquiry into their programmes, where there is an inclusive perspective of norms and worlds, during preparational studies for teaching. Chapter 6 also advocates for in-service professional development, as a career long journey. This inevitably calls for a teacher-education approach, whereby the merging of informal and formal professional learning may in fact be even more realised utilising new models and methods of inquiry.

Further, as both Chaps. 5 and 6 point out, pre-service teachers and early career teachers need to learn to be proactive in seeking help, whether that be from other teachers within their school or beyond. These teachers need support and mentoring in order to build social capital through networking or put differently, by actively forming relationships with others (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Tonna, Bjerkholt, & Holland, 2017, Fox & Wilson, 2015).

Book Development Process

Chapters were sent to researchers and practitioners recognised as leaders in the chapter focus field for peer review. Authors of selected chapters were invited to act on the reviewer's comments and resubmit their chapters to the book authors. Chapters were checked and final revisions applied based on Springer Publishing Guidelines.

Disclaimers

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Bernadette Mary Mercieca and Jacquie McDonald

Acknowledgements

The authors who contributed to this book acknowledge the contribution of the inspiring educators and school leaders who were the research participants; school staff for facilitating interviews; the online Twitter leaders—who are featured in Chap. 4—and the University of Southern Queensland professional staff who supported the research process including Ethics and Library staff.

The reviewers also played an essential role, and we know the authors were very appreciative of the valuable comments provided by the reviewers. We sincerely thank the reviewers for taking the time to read and comment on the original submissions. These contributions were an essential ingredient necessary to improving the content and presentation of the chapters.

Thank you also to Michael Fullan for providing the thought provoking Foreword for the book. His leadership and contribution to Communities of Practice and Social Learning is widely acclaimed.

Thank you to the staff at Springer SBM Singapore and Australia who provided the necessary process, templates, reminders and project management of the entire process from our first proposal to this final publication. In particular we wish to

express our thanks to Lay Peng Ang, Editorial Assistant and Nick Melchior, Senior Editor Education, Australia & New Zealand.

Finally, we dedicate this book to our families and to Jacquie's CoP mentors, Etienne and Bev Wenger-Trayner and Milt Cox, CoP fellow travellers and all social learning leaders.

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