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Tutors' Forum: engaging distributed communities of practice

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Abstract

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Keywords: learning community, professional development, distributed learning environment, leading teaching teams, multi-location teaching, casual teaching, sessional teaching.

Introduction

As many universities continue to expand networks of satellite campuses and access centres, geographically-dispersed teaching teams are becoming an increasingly common feature of the workplace. Yet the literature has comparatively little to say about teachers working in this type of environment. Nevertheless, multi-location teaching has begun to generate complex challenges for coordinators and team members alike. A 2002 study of part-time teaching staff in the UK revealed some of the fragmentation that can occur between those who design and coordinate subjects and those who deliver them (Tait, 2002). This fragmentation can only be compounded when geographical distance from colleagues and the central campus are thrown into the mix. Our paper identifies a range of conditions specific to multi-location teaching and reports on a study investigating the efficacy of using the 'Tutors' Forum', an

online discussion space, to offset some of the more negative consequences of this type of teaching model.

Attention to the Tutors' Forum as an object of study emerged out of the findings of two inter-related university-wide projects: the Multi-Location Teaching (MLT) Project examined MLT models operating throughout the university; the Sessional Teaching Project focussed on the professional needs of casual academic teaching staff – the dominant profile of multi-location teachers. Quite separately, both studies identified, amid a general level of dissatisfaction, a high level of satisfaction from a particular group of sessional teachers in one subject that used a Tutors' Forum as a means to engage the team, build a community of practice, and foster professional support. While the Tutors' Forum appeared to present a useful solution to the communication problems that had come to the fore as the greatest challenge in multi-location teaching for this particular team, the researchers set out to identify precisely how, why and in what conditions the facility might also contribute to a university-level solution for a complex problem.

Please note the terms 'tutor', 'sessional' and 'casual' will be used interchangeably in this paper to refer to those teaching staff who are employed on a session to session basis and are paid by the hour.

This paper has three sections. *Three studies: Method* describes three research projects which produced the primary data drawn on throughout the following discussion. This section briefly explains how the university-wide projects on multi-location and sessional teaching led to a subsequent case study of the Tutors' Forum. The section, *Multi-location Teaching: An empirical framework*, provides a finer analysis of the findings of the two university-wide projects and the rationale for the Tutors' Forum case study. Finally, *The Tutors' Forum* presents case study findings about the multi-location innovation and examines the critical success factors identified through interviews with the teaching team.

Three studies: Method

In 2006 two separate research projects were undertaken at our university. The first set out to identify some of the conditions specific to multi-location teaching; the second, to explore the professional needs of casual teachers. Both were exploratory qualitative studies that sought consultation from key stakeholders to determine the major issues

pertaining to these areas. The Multi-location Teaching Project was funded through a teaching and learning grant to explore current models of multi-location teaching across the university and identify their strengths and weaknesses. This study involved extensive open-ended interviews with key stakeholders in multi-location teaching at the university. In all, 42 interviews were conducted in the last four months of 2006. The participants included Deans, Assistant Deans, Professors, Associate professors, Senior lecturers, lecturers, tutors, satellite campus heads/coordinators, programme managers, faculty professional officers, as well as the centrally-located IT and Learning and Teaching Development staff. Interviewees were invited to participate because of their diverse roles in the delivery of higher degrees and courses to the university's various campuses within Australia and / or those campuses located overseas. The data was then analysed to outline the various models of delivery used and to identify key areas for improvement. This project was completed by mid 2007.

The Sessional Teaching Project - also funded through a teaching and learning grant - explored the professional needs of casual teaching staff and began in the last 3 months of 2006 with a number of scoping activities. Two of these activities are relevant to this paper: a series of focused but open-ended interviews with 24 casual teachers at the satellite campuses; the trial of an online Tutor Engagement Survey. Both activities were framed around themes of recruitment and employment; training and professional development; evaluation and recognition; and integration and communication. These themes have been identified by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) Report (2003) as crucial to the higher education workplace. Interviews were conducted at the end of 2006 and the data analysed to produce a working paper (Percy, 2006). The Tutor Engagement Survey sought to obtain feedback from all casual teaching staff and was released for three weeks at the end of Semester 1, 2007. In addition to identifying teaching roles, faculty, and general demographic data, casual teachers were asked to rate their satisfaction against approximately 40 items which connected to the main themes identified in the AUTC Report. They were able to respond on a Likert scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree to items such as, 'I feel adequately prepared and supported to mark student assignments and provide feedback', 'I find the frequency of communication [with my subject coordinator] satisfactory' and 'I feel that I am a valued member of the teaching team'. Space for comments was also provided.

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A deficit in our institution's communication systems made comprehensive circulation of the survey a problem. Consequently, there were only 93 respondents: 48 casual teachers from the central campus out of a potential pool of approximately 500; 45 casual teachers from the satellite campuses out of a potential 100; and 2 unknown. The limited response had obvious implications for the usefulness of quantitative data; however, the written comments were insightful. This qualitative data was combined with the interview data to inform the Steering Committee for Sessional Teaching on the key issues concerning casual teaching staff, with a particular focus on multi-location teaching.

Collating findings from the Multi-location Teaching Project and the Sessional Teaching Project, the researchers identified an urgent need for improved academic management of distributed teaching teams, including clear, consistent and effective communication; cohesive teaching guidelines and marking processes; collegial support and reciprocity; and the need for professional learning opportunities for all casual teachers. These findings are discussed in the section *Multi-location Teaching: An empirical framework.*

Interestingly, during the data collection phase of the projects, the researchers identified one teaching team that appeared to enjoy a high level of engagement and collegiality despite the distance separating team members. Further probing identified the successful use of the Tutors' Forum to alleviate isolation, foster engagement with the entire teaching team, and promote ongoing professional development. A case study approach was utilised to explore how this facility worked and involved observation of online discussion over the Autumn semester of 2007 as well as interviews with the coordinator and team members during the same timeframe. All participants in the Forum were asked about its perceived benefits and after semester concluded, text from the Forum site was analysed and correlated with the interview data. The *Tutors' Forum* section of this paper examines the outcomes of this case study in detail.

Multi-location Teaching: An empirical framework

The Australian university in which these studies are located has, since 2000, developed a network of five regional satellite campuses. The most geographically distant of these campuses is located in a rural community some 400 kilometres from

the central institution, the most urban on the borders of a major city. For the most part, delivery of subjects to the satellite campuses involves multi-media teaching and learning technologies such as videoconferencing, web-based resources, online discussion spaces, pod-cast lectures, and face-to-face tutorials. In this model the subject coordinator is located at the central campus and face-to-face classes across the network are typically the responsibility of teachers employed on a casual basis.

It became apparent as our projects evolved that there were a number of key challenges arising from multi-location teaching. Not least, was the need for a sense of community among geographically-dispersed teaching teams. Brown (2001) argues that forming a community of learners is an important factor in distance learning as it impacts on student satisfaction, retention and learning (p.18). Indeed, the need to engage students studying at a distance in order to reduce isolation, foster a sense of belonging and enhance learning has been well documented (Dawson, Winslett & Burr, 2004; Garber, 2004; Hill, 2001; Hughes, di Corpo & Hewson, 2006; Rovai, 2002). This sort of scrutiny has not been substantially extended to those teaching at a distance. For example, despite a number of insights and recommendations made in the early stages of the move to satellite campuses at our university, institutional recognition of the complex challenges multi-location teaching presents for subject coordinators and team members alike has not kept pace with the expansion of degree programs or increased student numbers.

A significant number of interviewees for our projects identified professional isolation as a key factor of working in a multi-location model. They indicated that distance from other members of the teaching team, the subject coordinator, and the facilities of the central campus had an impact on their confidence, capacity for professional learning, and satisfaction with their engagement with their university employment. Eib and Miller (2006) highlight the sense of isolation, lack of community, and lack of belonging often experienced by university teaching staff even when they are located in the same corridors as their colleagues. The interviews and surveys that comprise our research strongly indicated that, for sessional teachers, working at a geographical distance from colleagues significantly exacerbates these conditions.

The casual staff interviewees pointed out that the impact of isolation was often made worse when trying to balance face-to-face teaching responsibilities with poor systemic communication and lack of coherent and inclusive frameworks. In response to the

Tutor Engagement Survey trialled in 2007, one respondent from the satellite campuses stated:

> I have felt increasingly isolated this semester, and have felt that I am expected to run my own ship, yet still be accountable to someone else at the end of the day. This is a very difficult position to navigate without consistent support and/or criteria/boundaries from the coordinator. (Tutor Engagement Survey Respondent 1, 2007)

Another survey respondent reported:

> I am not included…get poor instructions, conflicting feedback…There was one subject some time ago for which I, and others, never understood the assessment criteria. (Tutor Engagement Survey Respondent 2, 2007)

These comments reflect the marginality expressed by a considerable number of the survey respondents: while subject to those codes of practice governing the workplace, they nevertheless felt as though they did not quite belong (Barrett, 2004; Anderson, 2002). A recent report (Percy et al., 2008) on casualisation in higher education funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council found that universities were increasingly reliant on sessional teachers. Although marginalised "as the proletariat of the academic profession", they were nonetheless essential to a university's capacity to meet the ongoing demands of massification in the higher education sector (Castle, 2008).

Despite the multiple systemic problems identified by the interviewees, most expressed an ongoing commitment to their teaching. Again, this finding accords with wider research. Anne Junor (2004) found that 90% of casual university teachers expressed 'pride in their craft' and high levels of intrinsic satisfaction with their work, if not their work conditions. An implication of Junor's findings is that tensions arise from the type of culture generated by casualisation rather than lack of professional commitment from the teachers themselves. This culture, so Abbas and McLean (2001) argue, needs to be subjected to urgent and critical analysis.

For subject coordinators, the main challenge involved developing appropriate strategies to refine and assure the quality of student learning where students and staff are geographically dispersed across distant locations. The MLT Project interviews with subject coordinators indicated that managing their own workloads and the complexities of multi-location teaching / learning requirements generated compelling pressures.

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While professional development and technical support for subject coordinators are not overtly difficult to address where the university's infrastructure allows access and resources, the workload allocation issue is a complex one. Workload allocation for subject coordinators varies between faculties, but coordination loads are most often calculated according to student numbers, not the number of locations a subject is taught or the number of staff involved. Moreover, subjects run at the satellite campuses whether there is one or one hundred students; hence the numbers of students may be low in a subject, but the teaching team disproportionately high. Given these conditions, this sessional teacher's comments are not surprising:

> A lecture failed to record. The lecturer's response was along the lines of 'bad luck, nothing I can do about it'. And when lecture material was not working I was told by the lecturer that he is not paid to do extra work for remote campuses. [The Satellite Campus Coordinator] tells me this is true. It gives you a very clear sense of your own, and the remote campuses, UN-importance to [the University]. That really is a pity for everyone's educational experience. (Tutor Engagement Survey Respondent 3, 2007)

In the context of coordinators' workload pressures, it is, perhaps, also unsurprising that several of the satellite campus teachers reported that subject coordinators were not always reliable in responding to individual emails. One MLT Project interviewee observed that a lack of communication and support on the part of a subject coordinator contributed to problems for many satellite campus teachers. In trying to clarify a teaching-related matter with a subject coordinator, another tutor said: "I received no response, nothing(!), to my email" (Tutor Engagement Survey Respondent 4). A satellite campus manager confirmed the communication problems identified by these tutors with her observation that there were some subjects where there is virtually no communication from the coordinators during a semester.

The problem with workloads, we would argue, is primarily an issue of misrecognition; that is, institutional misrecognition of the additional complexities of leading a large distributed teaching team in a multi-media learning and teaching environment. Despite rhetoric about building communities, and educational research insisting that the added demands on the facilitator and participants in distributed teaching teams be recognised and acknowledged (Rovai, 2002), a review of 16 Australian universities found virtually no evidence of formalised standards of practice or workload recognition for academics leading large casualised teaching teams (Percy et al., 2008). In all cases the leadership role of the subject coordinator was largely

unarticulated. It would appear that consistent standards of practice and clear guidelines for leading teaching teams remain largely unaddressed in most higher education institutions.

We use the term leadership with some care in this paper. While it has become a signifier for all that is corporate and managerial in universities in recent times, we prefer to draw on literature and propose research that stands against received wisdom and notions of leadership (transformational or distributed, for example). From this perspective, we proceeded to engage those who found themselves in the somewhat uncomfortable space of working against the grain by trying to lead in collegial, open-ended and reflective ways as they also struggled to maintain the ethical and social responsibilities of their practice (Bolden and Gosling, 2006, p.159).

Perhaps a clue to the lack of 'community' identified by our research eight years after the satellite campuses were established may be found in an earlier study where researchers suggested that:

> Increased numbers of students on the main campus, an increased workload and a requirement to research and publish has meant that lecturers have other constant and competing demands on their time. They may need frequent reminders and invitations to participate as a member of the community; occasional videoconferencing with the tutors could develop the social relationships and build the trust needed between the groups. (Lefoe, Hedberg and Gunn, 2002, p.732)

The idea that lecturers might need to be 'reminded' or 'invited' into the 'community' of their teaching teams is problematic. And while we do not believe that it was the intention of these researchers, the observation appears to legitimise the 'set and forget' mentality which seems to be the dominant strategy for 'leadership' in the current climate; that is, 'here is the subject outline. Send me the student grades at the end of session'. Jo Tait (2002) has argued that there is a tendency to operate as though teaching and learning are somehow embedded in the curriculum (a practice euphemistically called 'teacher proofing'), thereby downgrading the role of the tutor to mere technician. In this scenario, community and belonging amongst the teaching team is erased as a necessity, along with opportunities to capitalise on the insights of the classroom teachers for the quality enhancement of subject design and delivery.

Geraldine Lefoe et al. (2002) suggest that technology could be used "to strengthen the links between tutors and lecturers through such things as videoconference meetings to encourage the development of trust" (p.732). Our findings indicate that despite

advances in technology since the inception of the multi-location, multi-media model, email remains the main form of communication between coordinators and tutors (approximately 82%). While we would suggest that currently this represents good practice for facilitating a mentoring process, it can also create an extra burden for subject coordinators who are already juggling multifaceted and sometimes overburdening workloads. It also fails to acknowledge and enable the power of peer learning opportunities among the teaching team. In other words, it bypasses those kinds of learning conversations that generate a dynamic sharing of knowledge within a community of practice. This raises concerns for those who see quality enhancement and transformational learning as the product of open, collegial social practice.

During the MLT Project interviews, several coordinators discussed their attempts to work as a team characterised by reciprocity, but were unsure of how this might be achieved. Peter Knight et al. (2006) define professional reciprocity as a valuing of the contribution that casual teaching staff make to the overall quality of subject design and delivery. It is a valuing that is rarely seen in universities outside of some extraordinary cases. In part, this is due to lack of time; in part, due to the intricacies of maintaining a balance between authority and collegiality. From the casual teacher's perspective, working without recognition and acknowledged value erodes a sense of belonging which then effects professional formation and participation (Abbas and Mclean 1999; Kemmis 2005; Kift 2003; Knight et al., 2007). Reciprocity pivots on enabling the contribution and collaboration of casual teachers to subject and program design, delivery and revision. We understand this as an interactive process that has capacity to strengthen professional formation through meaningful inclusion; build the connectivity of teaching teams; and enhance the quality of learning and teaching through grounded scholarship.

Sufficient attention to fostering the experiential interconnectedness of a team enhances the process of meaningful interaction (Akerlind, 1999; Knight et al., 2006), which by its nature is more an organic rather than mechanistic or managerial phenomenon. Some of the multi-location subject coordinators interviewed for our research reflected this in their own practices. One put it this way: "How do you create a teaching environment where the individual tutors can … teach to their strengths; … [develop] a really rich learning environment for students; [and] that makes for a learning community amongst the [teaching] team?" (MLT Interview Respondent 1,

2007). This subject coordinator decided that the 'Tutors' Forum' might be a micro-level practice worth exploring as a way to foster engagement, professional learning and reciprocity for her teaching team.

The Tutors' Forum

The teaching team in this case study teach a first semester, first year Humanities subject that is currently the only core/compulsory subject for a Bachelor of Arts degree designed specifically for a satellite campus network. It is delivered using a range of methods which include face-to-face teaching, online learning/teaching and videoconferencing. Subject design includes embedded sequences of exercises to facilitate the learning of academic and multiple media skills. The content introduces students to multiple – and sometimes conflicting – ideas about nation and national identity. Because the theory is complex, classes demographically diverse, and initial skills levels widely varied, the teaching context poses distinct challenges for sessional teachers. Over and above the actual teaching, they have to manage the student stresses that can sometimes arise from trying to find a way into new and challenging ideas.

The subject averages a sessional enrolment of 150+ students across four campuses and presents a complex administrative task. The teaching team of six is comprised of casually employed tutors; the subject coordinator is a permanent member of the university staff. The subject coordinator's direct contact with students is in fortnightly videoconferences, one or two sessional visits to each campus, and via the formal and informal virtual learning environments of the subject web site. The tutors are effectively the face of the university for the students and their professional interaction and emotional labour central to the students' learning. The teaching experience of the tutors prior to 2007 ranged from 40 years to one semester tutoring, with the mean being around four years of university teaching. All had experience with the online environment; all have postgraduate degrees and three have doctorates. For two of the tutors this was their first time teaching this subject. Two had never met the rest of the team.

The Tutors' Forum originated as an online communication device specific to the subject. It is located on the subject web site and accessible only to the teaching staff. The Forum has been used in this subject for several years so some of the teachers are veterans of the facility and have participated in its evolution. Despite its initial

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inception as a space to merely disseminate information, it quickly became a way to circumvent professional isolation: teachers were able to use the Forum to touch base with each other, vent frustrations, and share experiences. It also became a space where team members could provide feedback for the subject coordinator. The team began to use it to discuss marking criteria for assessment tasks and alert each other about difficulties with the subject web site. The subject coordinator found the Forum to be an efficient means for quality assurance processes such as random double marking of assessment tasks across the network and equity in subject delivery. Rather spontaneously, the Tutors' Forum also evolved into a place for dialogue, collaboration, pedagogic scholarship and professional development. The third component in our research project investigated the evolution and use of this facility with an eye to its role in enabling collegiality and building a learning community despite geographical distance.

Observing the discussion space over the Autumn semerster of 2007, we noted that participation in the Forum ranged from checking in every day through to several times a week, to infrequent involvement. Difficulties with access from home systems were cited as reasons for infrequent use. One participant had never used a Tutors' Forum before; most also taught in other subjects which did not have a Tutors' Forum facility. Some tutors said they tended not to initiate discussion, however, analysis of the discussion site transcript showed that all participants did initiate, sustain and respond to dialogue. Two participants said they still preferred to use email to contact the subject coordinator but that this research had changed and expanded this pattern of communication.

Participants' preferred ways of using the Forum included: dropping in to see what people were saying and thinking (in particular, how the more experienced tutors were handling things); using the discussion space as a sounding board; sharing suggestions on tutorial plans; sharing current and past experiences; reporting in on the state of their class and students' progress and responses to activities; as a source of enrichment and ideas on strategies and resources; as a source of information, particularly if there was a problem; and as a support network. Postings came in waves related to the teaching calendar and to the stimulation of issues raised in the Forum. The way the space was used expanded and deepened through the life of the project. Discussions were both practical and scholarly in a blend of unstructured and

purposeful dialogue. General chat was interspersed with task-oriented discussions and theoretical analyses of learning development. One such example was the identification and discussion of an apparent generational contrast between paper-based and web-based learning tasks.

The Tutors' Forum appeared to operate as a community of practice where shared purpose, a willingness to participate, collegiality, and personal support created a deeper sense of belonging. These are the qualities, Rovai (2002) argues, that characterise communities of practice. He also suggests that such communities are bound through trust, interaction and common expectations. Participants identified multiple benefits from their interaction in the Tutors' Forum; in particular, alleviation of isolation, expanded opportunities for engagement with teaching practice, and professional development.

Alleviation of isolation was acknowledged in the interviews with statements such as: "there is no doubt there is a lot of loneliness among teachers" (Tutor 1); and through the Forum knowing that "we are not alone" (Tutor 3). Some noted that the sense of being alone was difficult in subjects that did not have a Tutors' Forum and suggested that every multi-location teaching subject should have one: "the Tutors' Forum is an absolutely essential component of distributed teaching" (Tutor 6). Feedback from tutors indicates that their workloads increased considerably without the Tutors' Forum (one said it tripled). Additionally, participants said the Forum provided a safety net and protection through collaborative processes addressing difficulties and quality assurance procedures.

A further benefit identified by the participants in the Forum was a reinvigorated engagement with teaching practices where the sharing of ideas, insights and helpful resources was said to sharpen motivation. Forum discussions were valued because they "had substance" which the participants said was enhanced by the plurality of perspectives and experience. This encouraged sustained participation and was seen as significantly beneficial for professional development.

In addition to the affective benefits of a greater sense of collegiality and belonging, of particular interest was the potential this dialogic space and interpersonal climate provided for professional learning opportunities. The research participants stated that formally organised professional development such as generic, centrally organised

workshops probably did not provide more learning about teaching than they got from the collegial interaction in the Tutors' Forum.

> The Tutors' Forum has become that sort of place because you have such a range of teaching experience and multiple dialogues about teaching practices you are actually learning from – that is the ideal learning community. (Tutor 5, 2007)

At times the discussions went from the very practical to the theory of teaching, exploring the presuppositions, challenges and evolution of scholastic literacies.

> The teaching team is a learning community … a knowledge sharing and building community where we are learning from each other. As a team we bring a richer repertoire to the subject than if we were operating as individuals. (Tutor 2, 2007)

For these tutors, professional sharing and learning was an ecological process evolving with trust and openness where "you take it in by osmosis and … [by being] validated by the group" (Tutor 4). There was clear recognition of the value and efficacy of engaged professional dialogue situated around what was meaningful in the actual practice of this learning community.

This finding in our research is consistent with a shift in professional learning and development literature in the past ten years away from privileging generic training workshops towards facilitating increased social interaction within communities of practice where peer learning, reflective practice and the appropriate forms of educational scholarship can be fostered (Benjamin, 2000; Billett, 2001; Boud, 1999; Brew & Boud, 1996; Eib & Miller, 2006; Lave, 1996; Macdonald, 1999; Mittendorf et al., 2006; Osborn, 1999; Pearson, 2002; Viskovic, 2006).

Critical Success Factors

Forum participants identified critical success factors as the generation of a community through regular contact, trust and care, and a respectful style of participation and leadership. They agreed that a sense of community derived from regular contact and having a specific space for dialogue and reflection with "the opportunity to express … views and be supported through that process" (Tutor 4). While it is important not to imply that this is some sort of idealised community, as Alison Viskovic (2006) argues, these conditions are a pre-requisite in developing a learning community.

We observed that the style of interaction created in the Tutors' Forum allowed 'a sense of the person' to emerge and highlighted individual social presence. The Forum

was described by the subject tutors as 'welcoming'; the interaction as friendly, personal, professional, where dialogue was supportive, honest, open and safe. One participant described the Forum as though everyone was sitting around a table talking, yet with the added need for *netiquette* to indicate that you have read a comment by responding to let people know you are there. All participants stated that they felt included and able to contribute to discussions and that they felt personally validated. This was indicated by expressed warmth, thanks, feedback, comments, and quick responses, even if short.

We found that elements of 'trust' and 'care' were central to the Tutors' Forum community where people were not afraid to say if they were having difficulties or to ask for help (for example, discuss solutions / strategies in relation to problematic student behaviour). Importantly, it was requests for help which elicited the most substantial and quickest responses in a ready flow of suggestions, support and encouragement. One tutor noted: "when I needed help everyone responded and I got amazing feedback" (Tutor 6). Trust acted as social glue and care was the catalyst to move an agglomeration of individuals into the cohesive bonds of a community as a self-organising entity.

The trusting environment characterising this Forum was said to evolve from the leadership and the kind of group participating. As one tutor commented, "I have a certain amount of freedom as a tutor and that freedom is supported by [the coordinator] and by the people I work with – so it's a very trusting environment" (Tutor 4). Other statements emphasised the quality of leadership: "the trust stems from [the coordinator] because of the type of person she is and that she is good to work with" (Tutor 2); she is a "good leader who shows respect and gives the impression that she has time" (Tutor 3). It was noted that with a different subject coordinator there may be a very different outcome.

The respectful personal style of the subject coordinator and her chosen form of leadership were seen as central elements of success by all team members. Interview with the coordinator revealed that this style of interaction was shaped by experiences of having been a casual university teacher for many years:

> What I have done comes out of nine years practice … [and] what I would have liked to have happened to give me a more professional approach to being a tutor. (Subject coordinator interview, 2007)

The coordinator understood the complexities and vulnerabilities of being a casual employee and having tutored at a satellite campus, she also understood the increased demands of teaching in a distributed learning environment.

From the subject coordinator's perspective, she saw herself not so much as *leading* the team as *being a part* of a team, a team of equals. She argued that "it needs to be a space of equals if it is going to work" (Subject coordinator interview, 2007). The coordinator's respect for the professional knowledge and contributions of the team was evident in her comment that "all of the team bring quite particular and different expertise and by *leading* the team I am potentially going to be shut off from the knowledges that they acquire from working with the students".

Issues of power and authority, Fenwick (2006) suggests, are ever present in this kind of context and should not be side-stepped. This coordinator demonstrated awareness of the differential power conferred by her institutional position in her interactions with team members and the team-as-a-whole-entity but negotiated a balance in the nexus of prescribed authority, structural responsibilities, and the mode of personal participation. She deliberately endeavoured to create a space where the tutors, while being engaged from a position of authority (with the instruction to log onto the Tutors' Forum at least once per week), came online to what is a virtual staffroom. Obviously some directive communication related to the subject and administration must come from the subject coordinator. However, she was well aware that "the team themselves need to invest in that space in some way" if engaged interaction was going to lay the foundations for community building.

> I try to create a space where this type of team interaction can take place –
> not ad hoc – as coordinator I try to create [a] space which can spark that
> kind of interaction. I don't leave that to chance. But what I hope I don't do
> is dominate that space. (Subject coordinator interview, 2007)

In the Tutors' Forum the subject coordinator was part of the conversations. She responded to and also engaged with what was going on with the team. However, she also said that often she did not respond, nor felt she needed to, if others had already done so. Her awareness and behaviour are resonant with Rovai's (2002) recommendations about the value of less control to allow for greater dialogue within a community, and his parallel suggestion that some structure may nevertheless be required and that it is best indicated by a facilitator who is aware of and committed to the role of building and maintaining the community. Hare and Davis (1994 cited in

Rovai 2002) identify two streams of interaction in learning communities: one is task-driven, under control of a facilitator and is made up of responses to instructor-generated discussion; the other is socio-emotional interaction (empathy; self-disclosure; personal) which is largely self-generated.

Wenger (2000) states that communities of practice are hubs of knowledge and knowledge development which, because of their self-organising, organic nature, cannot be mandated. In fact, they are highly resistant to interference but nevertheless respond to attention which respects their ecological nature. He notes that leading a community of practice requires special skills to nurture development and integration into the larger organisation which, in turn, needs to provide the infra-structure in which communities of practice can thrive. We suggest that such infra-structure in this university context entails appropriate technical systems and support and, importantly, awareness of the psycho-social and wider professional benefits of fostering this type of micro-community within the broader institutional environment.

Conclusion

For the casual university teacher, personal decisions are taken about unpaid work time which may not be built into the workload contract. Communication within the teaching team becomes part of these strategic choices. In general, current policy framing recruitment and employment, ongoing training and professional development, evaluation and recognition, continues to fall short of the growing casualisation among higher education teaching cohorts. Moreover, without ways to include input directly from casual teaching staff, new waves of teaching scholarship may remain unrecognized, to the overall cost of quality teaching (Brown 2006; Junor 2004).

In summary, the Tutors' Forum is a micro-practice which supports multi-location tutors and subject coordinators to develop as a team. In the model discussed above, it provides professional support for individual members; enables quality assurance; provides safety mechanisms; and the space where participants have the opportunity to reflect on practice with colleagues. Because the environment of the higher education sector is changing with intensification of workloads and increasing casualisation, models for professional development must adapt to the new realities. Our research indicates clear benefits in re-orienting attention, resources, and casual workload contracts to enable the kind of practice manifested in the Forum where a community

of practice not only facilitated professional development but also facilitated a more ethical and satisfying professional experience. As one of our interview subjects commented: "It is a very small strategy which is so rich. And quite powerful".

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