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# Creativity and cross-institutional collaboration in the DigiDex Community of Practice

## Abstract

Responding to industry need, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) sector-wide approach to developing digital dexterity established a unique practitioner-led network and Community of Practice (CoP). This paper focuses on how a core-group (Digital Dexterity Champions) within the cross-institutional CoP has self-formed a flourishing learning culture that fosters creativity. We explore aspects underpinning the creative collaboration evident within the Champions culture. In sharing stories of creative library practice, we highlight the generative power of initiatives that nurture a sharing culture. We argue for the value of supporting cross-boundary spaces that enable individuals to work creatively together.

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## **Creativity and cross-institutional collaboration in the DigiDex Community of Practice**

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### **Abstract:**

*Responding to industry need, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) sector-wide approach to developing digital dexterity established a unique practitioner-led network and Community of Practice (CoP). This paper focuses on how a core-group (Digital Dexterity Champions) within the cross-institutional CoP has self-formed a flourishing learning culture that fosters creativity. We explore aspects underpinning the creative collaboration evident within the Champions culture. In sharing stories of creative library practice, we highlight the generative power of initiatives that nurture a sharing culture. We argue for the value of supporting cross-boundary spaces that enable individuals to work creatively together.*



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## Introduction

Digital dexterity is a contextual mindset and evolving set of skills that sustain agentic<sup>i</sup>, successful participation in modern digital environments (Gartner, 2015; CAUL 2019b). The capacity to leverage appropriate digital tools and strategies to problem solve, communicate, and create new knowledge has become critical to work and educational practices. The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) took a sector-wide approach to develop digital dexterity by establishing a unique network and community of practice (CAUL 2019a; O’Sullivan et al. 2019) in 2019. University Librarians from every CAUL member institution put forward a candidate to participate, resulting in a diverse cohort. While practical distinctions between the Digital Dexterity Champions Network (DigiDex Network) and the Community of Practice (CoP) exist, for the purposes of this paper, the terms DigiDex Network and CoP are used interchangeably. This recognises the blended nature of these spaces and the interactions of the Network members, which often reflect the collaborative behaviour common to communities of practice rather than the more structured ‘official’ participation in the DigiDex Network.

Libraries have long been champions of open practice, embracing the ethos of sharing, generosity, and reciprocity (Straw 2004) and supporting the development of Open Education Resources (OER). Furthermore, there is an established culture of open borders both within the academic library, and between and across institutions, which is beneficial and adds value rather than diluting the proposition of the original groupings (Miller 2000; Shivalingaiah 2003). The DigiDex Network was established to support open borders, connecting academic libraries together around the area of digital dexterity. The community design of this initiative was deliberate and clearly shaped to be practitioner-led in order to sustain continued development (Salisbury et al. 2020).

The liminal nature of the DigiDex Network has been an important factor in shaping creative activities within the group. Liminality describes “the psychological process of transitioning across boundaries and borders” and is “the threshold separating one space from another”. (Larson 2014 p. 20) In the threshold state, creativity can flourish and transformation can take place as “the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction” (Thomassen 2014, p. 1). Liminal space, as expressed through the CoP, sits between existing structures where there is a suspension of the normal constraints of organisational life and the usual routines, rules, boundaries and expectations don’t necessarily apply. Furthermore, liminality is implicitly woven into the professional ethos of the library sector as our work typically involves working with a diverse cross section of the academic and public community. Librarians frequently position themselves as a “disciplinary border crosser” (Fister 2017), informing a liminal dispositional identity.

The tangible outputs of this creative collaboration within the DigiDex Network have ranged from numerous blog posts, conference papers, presentations, workshops, governance documents and more recently, a “living book of digital skills” using the GitBook<sup>ii</sup> platform. However, rather than focus on the multiplicity of creative endeavours, innovative practices and problem-solving behaviours demonstrated by the Champions, this paper explores the generative activity behind individual and

group creativity. This process is demonstrably organic in the way creativity is expressed within the CoP, and we explore the nature of the fertile environment and the essential elements that have given rise to creativity.

## Grounding creativity

Creativity is a nuanced and complex concept, with varied framings and value judgements. Fundamental to understandings of creativity is the notion of using the imagination to make something new, unusual or inventive. Robert Franken defines creativity as “the ability to create original ideas, connections, alternatives, or possibilities that are effective in solving problems, communicating with others, and inspiring new and useful ideas in others” (Franken 1994, p. 396). An important framing within this paper is that creativity is a capacity every human possesses, rather than a gift they are born with. Moreover, creativity is a transferable skill that can be developed, as it is independent of an individual’s level of artistic ability, education, or experience (Falciani-White 2021). We suggest it is useful to think of creativity as an organic cyclical process, where the new arises out of the old. As Austin Kleon writes, “nothing comes from nowhere. All creative work builds on what came before” (Kleon 2012, p. 66).

Undoubtedly, each creative individual is influenced and shaped by their environment. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (2014, p. 47) acknowledges this in his concept of “networked flow”, arguing that we cannot study creativity “by isolating individuals and their works from the social and historical milieu in which their actions are carried out. This is because what we call creative is never the result of individual action alone”. As Martins, Martins and Terblanche (2004, p. 101) signal, creativity needs to be framed at the level of individual, organisation, industry, profession and beyond, and any evaluation of it is therefore context specific as it can “vary from one group, one organization and one culture to another and can also change over time.” In the DigiDex CoP context we consider creativity to be the generation of any idea, practice or material artefact that is novel to the community and that brings about change (Martins & Terblanche 2003). Thus, “Creativity is theorized as a process through time, rather than a static trait of individuals or of certain creative products” (Sawyer 2012, p. 64).

Essentially, creativity is influenced by the collective, remixing and building upon elements inherent to the context in which it occurs. The importance of social-cultural factors in fostering creativity within work practices cannot be overstated. As numerous researchers have emphasised, creativity is a systematic and context dependent process that emerges from a “we-paradigm”, from networked flow, from distributed creativity, and not from individual action alone (Amabile, 1983; Csikszentmihalyi 2014; Gaggioli et al., 2013; Glaveanu 2010; Sawyer, R & DeZutter, S 2009). Creativity is embedded in, and finds generative power in, social groups, with creative outcomes emerging from collaborative networks. Relational and interpersonal processes are therefore foundational elements in developing a networked creativity. Optimal creative or innovative outcomes originate from what Gaggioli et al. referred to as “the sense of being cognitively, behaviourally, attentively, and emotionally interconnected with other people in the real and virtual world” (Gaggioli et al. p.42). This gives rise to “collaborative emergence”, the flow of

ideas that emerges from the successive individual contributions of participants in free-flowing unstructured conversation (Sawyer & DeZutter 2009).

This has been our experience of creativity in the DigiDex Network. Three elements have contributed to building the environment in which this creativity has flourished. First the identity and culture of the group itself, both the structural and agentic aspects. Second, the culture of openness and sharing that underpins the information services profession which has underwritten our activities and outlook. Lastly, the 'situated practice' itself and the learning culture that has developed within the CoP through experiential learning opportunities as evidenced by examples and quotations from the activities of our members. All of these three elements, we argue, are conducive to creativity.

## **Creativity emerging through identity and culture**

The creation of a DigiDex Network was grounded in the need to improve the digital capacity of the whole CAUL community, with the goal to engage practitioners in a “program of resources and activities that support self-directed learning, collaboration, networking opportunities, resource sharing, and future open educational resource development” (O’Sullivan et al 2019). Notably, the grass-roots model discussed within this paper has moved beyond these stated goals and organically developed into a community that fosters creativity.

The original conceptualisation of the CoP and its Champions core (O’Sullivan et al., 2019) enabled “creative leadership” (Selznick 1984), setting the tone of self-determination and fluidity of the Champions Network formation, scope and projects. This leadership model drives the collective towards the attainment of creative outcomes, where the traditional leader-group model is replaced with a “group of expert professionals who collaborate intensively in the context of a creative project” (Mainemelis, Kark and Epitropaki 2015). As Martins et al. (2004) notes, there are strong linkages between self-directed formation of an organisational culture and the degree of creativity/innovative behaviour.

Emotional connections and relationship building within the core group of Champions has been essential to the success of the community of practice. This requires trust, which takes time and frequent interaction to build. Furthermore, members need to be genuinely interested and engaged, and possess a sense of shared purpose and common identity. A group of committed individuals as the core helps to build trust, establish an emotional connection, maintain engagement and create a sense of community (Salisbury et al. 2020).

The formation of shared understandings and identities (Salisbury et al. 2020; Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 74) provides further grounding for creativity within the CoP. The development of a DigiDex culture has manifested through a number of cultural markers (Martins, Martins & Terblanche 2004) including material symbols such as email badging and the use of common hashtags; rites and rituals such as annual events, online meetings and gatherings; policy and guideline development; and language, expressed through communications including blog posts.

Group identity formation is strengthened through the creation of legends and stories (Martins, Martins & Terblanche 2004). Within a CoP's shared learning and collaborative experience, storytelling performs a significant and supportive function, by helping to build a work culture and foster innovation (Salisbury et al. 2020). In the DigiDex Network, the practice of shared storytelling is evident through participatory activities such as co-authoring conference papers, and sharing experiences and ideas through regular 'show and tells' at meetings, blog posts, workshops and informal exchanges.

Shared values, beliefs and principles, filtered down from industry partners like CAUL and CAVAL<sup>iii</sup>, have also been important in creating the identity of the DigiDex Network. The CAUL Digital Dexterity Framework<sup>iv</sup>, itself focussed in part on "digital creation, problem solving and innovation", as well as "collaboration, communication and participation" has grounded the CoP (Salisbury et al. 2020) and shaped cultural norms (Martin, Martin & Terblanche 2004). Norms around growth mindsets, learning zones, design thinking, trusted communication, and agentic involvement have developed and are accepted by the group. These shared norms have directly impacted creative or innovative behaviours and subsequent creative outcomes.

## **A Library ethos: collaboration, openness and sharing**

Libraries have long been ethically aligned with the principles of openness, sharing, and collaborative use of resources. Open culture, which encourages "creative and artistic works to be made freely be available to the public for legal use, sharing, remixing, repurposing, and reposting" (Creative Commons USA, n.d.) is a natural fit for libraries that are traditionally centred around open and equitable access to information and resources. This ethical standpoint is also a natural fit for open scholarship, and the practices of participatory culture. Nicholson (2019, p. 335) states that "Libraries recognise and share many guiding principles with the open data movement, such as freedom of information, transparency, equality and accessibility."

Matching to this ethos is the alignment of academic libraries with open educational resources. As Mitchell and Chu (2014) identify, many academic libraries have created programs or repositories to support open educational resources. However, this has focused on discipline or course outcomes rather than Library teaching and learning areas. Often Librarians are viewed as guides or mediators for faculty or research generated content (Mitchell & Chu 2014), overlooking the content creator aspect found in many academic librarian roles. Strategies and approaches to collecting, curating and sharing online instructional materials or learning artefacts has been complicated in the Australia academic library sector.

Given this ideological predisposition toward open scholarship, it is unsurprising that professional networks such as the DigiDex Network embrace the opportunity to share and collaborate beyond the boundaries of their immediate institutions. The creative activity that emerges can be understood through the lens of remix culture. Remixing can be defined as "the phenomenon of repurposing existing materials to create something new" (Flath et al. 2017, p. 307). A broader interpretation explored by Flath et al. (2017) is that this process extends beyond the combination of physical

materials to encompass the combination of human ideas. Yu and Nickerson (2011, in Flath et al. 2017) experimented with the idea of a human based genetic algorithm which functioned to combine human ideas. They found that later iterations of the ideas that had been developed through this collaborative, creative remixing process, scored “significantly higher in terms of originality and practicality” (Flath et. al, 2017, p. 309), illustrating the generative benefits of group creativity. It is significant that these studies are not focused on the traditional concept of creativity as something which is developed from scratch (often by an individual), but rather the possibilities of starting from a place in which ideas and elements already exist and are able to be modified, transformed, and extended through group creative process.

In the example of the DigiDex Network, the initial activities of the group focused on the dissemination and promotion of the CAUL Digital Dexterity Framework. To enable this, the network members regularly shared their experiences from their own institutional perspectives during network meetings and were able to benefit from a larger pool of expertise and find solutions and workarounds to the barriers experienced in their home institutions.

As the network matured, however, these discussions became more exploratory and members began to take a more generative approach. Working groups were formed, leading to face-to-face and virtual events, a governance model for the group, guidelines and repository infrastructure (through the OER Commons platform) for sharing resources, and a DigiDex blog to disseminate and share information. The Resource Sharing working group brought together existing resources from their own institutions to create a broader open-source repository of content, shareable via Creative Commons. The discussions around sharing of resources within the network extended towards ideas for creating new content, and additional subgroups formed to create a Digital Dexterity blog and a GitBook of Digital Dexterity Skills as a substantial OER, with principles of sharing and re-use fundamental to its design.

Originally, the Network was formed with the intention of being relatively time-limited, and institutions were asked to support the members' participation for a single year. After the completion of that initial year, however, the original Champions Network began to evolve into a broader community of practice, with greater benefits than had originally been anticipated. There have been numerous collaborations resulting from participation that take place outside of the Network activities mentioned already. These include the delivery of design thinking workshops, training in Jupyter Notebooks<sup>v</sup>, consultation on broader professional development frameworks and ways of working, resource development between institutions, and several cross-institutional presentations, workshops and conference papers.

## **Collaborative learning culture and creativity in practice**

Creative outputs from the Network are strongly underpinned by the formation of a collaborative learning culture. Collaborative learning is commonly seen as group learning where individuals work together, rather than on discrete individual tasks, towards a shared goal (Nerantzi, 2017). Nerantzi (2017, p. 35) suggests collaborative learning is “a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to

learn something together” to solve problems. These ideas, Nerantzi suggests, “signal a departure from the view of collaboration as the production of a shared output, and refocus attention more on the process of collaboration. Learning from collaboration, she argues, is learning through which individuals and the group can achieve process goals.” (Nerantzi, 2017, p.35)

Creativity emerging from experiential learning (as articulated by Vygotsky’s social constructivism), with its emphasis on problem based real world applications, is also conducive to the development of a collaborative learning culture. The related idea of situated practice, the “social practice theory of learning”, was further developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), forming the basis of their ideas about communities of practice as spaces in which learning occurs through social interactions in an authentic context. This can be seen in practice in the DigiDex Network, through the development of collaborative outputs which have provided an anchor for the working groups, enabling them to build the shared identity, bonds and trust that fostered the creative process underpinning the shared work. However, the resulting outputs, while valuable, only tell part of the story of the value of such collaborations. The experience of the DigiDex Network has been similar to that of an online community described by Fister (2017) which functioned as a “living community that learned together” and is a “fascinating model for conducting original and highly individual research as a community”. Like the DigiDex Network, the group maintained a common online space which allowed participants to engage in a range of modes, including sharing documents, raising questions, stimulating discussions, and bringing in perspectives from experts. It also allowed that group a space for vulnerability where they could share “ideas, concerns, reservations, half-finished drafts, and moments of existential angst” (Fister, 2017, p. xi).

Exposure to diverse viewpoints and ideas, which challenge and stimulate further ideas, is essential to creativity. The cross-boundary nature of the CoP brings exposure to diversity in perspectives and experiences, inspiring individuals to engage in creative collaboration. Diversity also increased curiosity, giving rise to opportunities to share a “diverse range of experiences and practices to support and teach other.” (Nerantzi 2017, p. 215) As a DigiDex Champion noted, “Networking through the CoP meant that I knew who to approach about OERs and Open Access when our library was asked to provide information on how we might start up OERs at the university.” Another noted that, “Working together on projects helps identify the skill set of the group. This then gives us our own CoP of different capabilities which we can connect with to maximise projects both within the group and our home institutions”. Collaborating with others can supply new perspectives or criteria by which to judge your ideas or work, or point out areas for modification that you might not have thought of yourself. For example, one DigiDex Champion noted that a creative solution to a particular problem was found and added: “I would have never thought of it on my own. Working together from problem to solution can be so amazing with the different points of view we have in the group.”

The flexible structure and emphasis on self-directed learning that has underpinned the learning culture in the DigiDex Network is a pivotal factor in developing relationships. One Champion noted that: “We are writing papers for conferences because we enjoy what we do. Friendships have formed, connections - and creativity is a big part of that.” Another noted: “It is amazing what has been achieved so far

through creativity [...] we have created a community of practice through the 3 Cs: Collaboration, Collegiality and Comradeship!"

As the DigiDex Network spans multiple locations, technology has been a hugely significant mediating factor in relationship building. Nicholson (2019) notes that internet access acts to facilitate participatory culture, and the example of the DigiDex Network illustrates that online collaboration technology such as Zoom, Slack and MS Teams has enabled the creation of professional relationships and opportunities for the collaborative projects mentioned earlier, in ways which would not have been possible otherwise given the geographical spread of the Network members across Australia and New Zealand. DigiDex Champions noted the benefit of: "Connecting authentically online" noting that "Doing things like working in the group together to plan events helped prepare for extended periods of working remotely."

The digital nature of the engagement locations used by the Network may also be a factor in supporting quiet members who do not always thrive in face-to-face networking opportunities. The digital space supports asynchronous communication and contributions, and features such as the chat function in meetings provide alternative means to contribute and ensure voices and perspectives are included in discussions. The technology by itself is not enough however, and the willingness of the participants to enter into rich collaborative relationships has been a pivotal factor in the success of the Network. Nerantzi's (2018) research found that for a learning society (an extension of the aforementioned learning culture) to be possible, the participants need to be motivated and prepared to engage with both the content and other participants in learning opportunities. In the DigiDex Network, members are regularly encouraged to join a working group and are motivated to get involved in particular projects by their personal interest in the subject. While it is possible to engage with the activities of the Network in a passive manner, or limit engagement, we have observed the richness has come from the willingness of the participants to engage dynamically across a range of modes including asynchronous, digital synchronous and face to face forms of communication and collaboration.

Community and relationship building is centrally important to the development of a collaborative learning culture. Nerantzi (2017, p. 218) notes that community building "helped participants overcome barriers associated with the technologies, language and confidence and acted as a motivator for engagement". Furthermore, "[r]egular synchronous communication was found to be beneficial, playing an important role in relationship building and enabling synchronous working practices within the groups" (Nerantzi 2017, pp. 220- 221). Importantly, the strong sense of community and trust provides a safe supportive environment for creativity, which involves stepping out of comfort zones, experimenting, and making mistakes.

Champions also reported finding opportunities for new experiences: "Running a workshop [...] not something we would normally put our hand up for." Another Champion involved in organising a satellite event reported: "creating an identity for ourselves as a facilitator; an easy way to get into hosting events, everyone is behind you. There is a lot of support for us to step up and give it a go". For another, it presented an:

"[o]ppportunity to learn new skills and collaborate in a supportive environment: Working in a CoP like DigiDex has shown me that there is so much

technology out there that I am unfamiliar with [...] this CoP provides a space where others can present this new technology and provide you with a chance to play around with it. I feel this CoP of Digital Dexterity Champions, are not just advocating to their institutes, but are uplifting one another to be more emboldened with our digital skills."

## Conclusion

Libraries and academic institutions are often guided by factors such as return on investment when considering whether to support staff members in participating in voluntary initiatives like the CAUL Digital Dexterity Champions Network. This can be tied to tangible outcomes such as the creation of a product or service which promotes the reputation of the institutions involved, or has some kind of demonstrable benefit to justify staff involvement. The benefits of engaging in group collaborative creative processes that we have outlined in this paper illustrate that when you focus on connections and process rather than outcomes, the intangible outcomes emerge naturally, and can be of even greater benefit to institutions than the original objective outcomes which initiated the involvement. This requires a great deal of trust and transparency, and a willingness to let go of controlling the outcomes. However, for those bold enough to trust in the process, the rich relationships and collaborative opportunities more than justify the investment of staff time and expertise.

The generative power of truly collaborative communities, where different voices and alternate perspectives are given space, is amply demonstrated in the DigiDex Network. Notably, as members of that collective the authors of this paper have followed a collaborative rather than cooperative writing method. Communities of practice are often couched in the language of capacity building, with a focus on achieving specific goals or facilitating professional development outcomes. We propose that an alternative model of communities of practice which enables organic process and free flowing cross sector pollination has the potential to foster new creations, approaches and perspectives as well as the more tangible outcomes associated with traditional communities of practice or interest groups. Valuing the creative outcomes of these relationships justifies institutional investment that both recognises and celebrates the intangible as well as tangible outcomes of such collaborations.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The meaning of agentic in this paper is grounded in concepts of individual agency and having voice and autonomy.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.gitbook.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.caval.edu.au/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.caul.edu.au/digital-dexterity-framework>

<sup>v</sup> <https://jupyter.org/>