



Communities of Practice at Deakin: Co-creating, Co-developing, Co-operating, Co-learning

Key Words

co-learning, co-developing, co-creating, co-operating, collaboration, social learning theory, interconnectedness, relationship-building, expert

Abstract

Inspired by the recent REACT (Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation) investigation of student engagement across fifteen universities in the UK, in 2017 Deakin University established a community of practice for its student mentors to formally support their learning, their voice, the exchange of knowledge and ideas. In the same way that Austen et al. (2017) have sought to better understand the ways in which co-design and peer learning are effective means for building confidence and a sense of belonging, the Deakin Student Mentor Community of Practice seeks to provide an avenue for student mentors to build their social learning skills, sense of belonging and confidence. It aims to provide an appropriate structure for Deakin student mentors to work alongside Deakin's professional peer support program coordinators who have their own, long- established community of practice. This paper presents the development of the Deakin Student Mentor Community of Practice and its evolving relationship with the Students Helping Students Community of Practice for coordinators. Informed by the work of Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, the paper will illustrate how the community of practice approach is an ideal vehicle to support not just student engagement and student peer learning but also coordinator growth, confidence and self- awareness. It will emphasise that both learning and supporting learners is about listening—listening to learn and, perhaps more importantly, to discover what is needed by allowing ideas, issues and concepts to emerge rather than being restrained and confined by pre- existing and fixed notions. To this end, Wenger's (1998) social learning theory and its subsequent reshaping will be highlighted. Learning for both the student mentor and the peer support coordinator communities will be considered as an active, dynamic social construction—a process. With the myths about communities of practice in mind (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), the paper will investigate how the relationship between the student mentor and the peer support coordinator communities is strengthened and nurtured. The emerging interconnectivity between these two Deakin communities will first be demonstrated by presenting the formal training provided to each of these two groups: a development program for the peer support coordinators' community of practice and the initial training and ongoing support for the student mentor community of practice members. The paper will then discuss how formal training can only ever serve as a base for the real learning that happens through practice. It will also explore the dynamic, ever-changing roles that both the student mentors and the peer support coordinators experience—one moment supporting others' learning, then being learners themselves. It is this very interaction, too, that will challenge idea of "the expert". Finally, some defining stories from the deepening relationship between these two communities will be shared, to illustrate this compelling tale of an emerging landscape of practice (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2014) for peer mentoring and the student voice at Deakin.

References

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