Chapter 9

Communities of Practice (CoP) as a Model for Integrating Sustainability into Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The University of Tasmania (UTas), Australia, made the commitment to adopt a plan for incorporating environmental literacy and sustainability into teaching and learning practices for all undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as within research, operational activities, and the community. The systematic goal was Education for Sustainability (EfS). To move towards this goal, a Community of Practice (CoP) in EfS was established in 2011. This chapter describes the establishment process for this CoP along with key milestones from 2011 through 2013. Paramount among these is the impact of the CoP on EfS at UTas and beyond and the phases involved—from initiation to maturation to ongoing regeneration—are explored. The diverse membership of the CoP, which includes students, academics, professional/operational staff, and community members, is elaborated upon in this chapter to ensure each role is understood as well as the challenges that arise from such diverse initiatives (60+ members).

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

In little more than three decades, ideas of sustainability have become indispensable in defining the fundamental problems of our age and in charting pathways towards more responsible futures. These ideas are now embedded globally in multiple disciplines from legislation and policy to advertising and community meetings. Sustainability is also a prominent focus for education at all levels (McMillan & Dyball, 2009). In recent years there has been an increased commitment to integrating sustainability principles into higher education with the United Nations proclaiming 2005 as the beginning of the first Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD).

CoPs have been described by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) and more recently by McDonald and Star (2008) and Star & McDonald (in press) as a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. This concept of community of practice has found a number of practical applications in business, organizational design, government, higher education, professional associations, development projects, and civic life which all use the combination of the three elements that constitute a CoP (McDonald & Star, 2006; Wenger et al., 2002). These elements centre around the domain, the community and the practice. The *domain* implies that a CoP is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people; it has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. C*ommunity* suggests that in pursuing a common interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. The third element, *practice,* situates a CoP as not merely a community of interested people, but as members of a community of practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems - in short, a shared practice.

Our EfS CoP was established in September 2011 as a strategic initiative in the Division of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Student and Education and the Tasmanian Institute of Learning and Teaching, to bring together staff and the wider community with the goal of integrating sustainability as a core focus of the university curriculum, research activities, operations and community engagement. In less than one year, the CoP had grown to over sixty voluntary members, including students and academic and professional/operational staff from most faculties and departments across the many campuses. Members have significant skills and experience in undertaking research, developing curricula, managing multi-stakeholder projects and global and community engagement activities.

This chapter describes the establishment of an institution-wide CoP for integrating EfS across the broader university including curriculum, research, operations and community. It provides a description of the key milestones achieved from 2011 to 2013. It documents the journey of the CoP through the phases from initiation to maturation and ongoing regeneration. The challenges and achievements of the journey are discussed. It looks at the role of the CoP in establishing the current breadth of perspectives on EfS at our university, in documenting existing initiatives, and in promoting a university-wide conversation about the goal of integrating sustainability across the curriculum and into the broader community.

Proposed Objectives and Outcomes of the CoP

Once formed, the objectives for the CoP included building common relationships, identifying focus areas and charting goals, particularly those related to EfS. These included:

- Documenting and disseminating case studies of best practice in EfS in higher education

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