

Learning through Communities of Practice: a strategic and collaborative approach

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As Wenger (2002, 2003) highlights, researchers and practitioners in many different contexts find communities of practice (CoP) a useful approach to knowing and learning. This showcase explores the development of such a CoP for Library staff involved in learning and teaching at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

The CoP was a response to several challenges within the University and Library Services:

- Librarians are being redefined as facilitators to a world of information, enabling and supporting learning and research and helping to develop skills for academic success. It is crucial that libraries plan strategically for these challenges and opportunities, and that their staff are confident in this new educational space. Current literature emphasises this imperative (Levy and Roberts, 2005).
- The importance of the whole student experience is central to Victoria University's *Investment Plan* (2007) which emphasises 'highly effective student support' and an aim to prepare students 'for citizenship and leadership in an increasingly diverse, technologically sophisticated and complex global society.' Victoria's *Pathways to Success* framework highlights the importance of skills development embedded within student learning. Excellence in learning and teaching, and the development of graduate attributes, are therefore key strategic drivers. The imperative to create engaging learning experiences has significant ramifications for the Library.
- Library Services at Victoria are already involved in a range of learning and teaching activities, from formal information literacy classes, presentations to groups (staff and students), lectures in a range of programmes, and 1-1 support. The importance of developing the Library's role in learning and teaching is highlighted in the Library's Strategic Plan.
- VUW Library Services' staff are dispersed across 6 locations (5 libraries and a Language Learning Centre) and can therefore feel disconnected from each other.

Considering all of the above developments and strategic drivers, we recognised a gap existed in terms of supporting and developing staff involved in learning and teaching. The University Teaching Development Centre (UTDC) provide programmes and support for academic staff but had not previously worked collaboratively with Library Services.

The establishment of a CoP to address these strategic challenges was viewed as an opportunity and was championed at the highest level in Library Services.

The research looks at the establishment of the CoP and reports on the meaningfulness of this approach to the community involved. Data has been collected through focus groups, interviews and questionnaires. Whilst this showcase shares

research drawn from a specific context and group of professionals, the issues explored and the approaches would be of interest to professionals in other contexts.

Levy, P. and Roberts, S. (2005) *Developing the New Learning Environment: the changing role of the academic librarian*. London: Facet.

Snyder, W. M., Wenger, E., & de Sousa Briggs, X. (2003). Communities of practice in government: Leveraging knowledge for performance. *Public Manager*, 32(4), 17.

Wenger, E. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice : a guide to managing knowledge*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School.