

How did I get here? Reflections on Learning from Multidisciplinary Communities of Practice

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Abstract:

This scholarly reflection on my journey from engineering educator to educational developer to Director of an Institute for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning describes three very different multidisciplinary communities of practice (CoPs) which have been instrumental in my gaining the knowledge and confidence to try new research methodologies and work across traditional disciplinary boundaries. I share how they have been both generative and challenging, and encourage others to do the same, as a way to develop our collective understanding and valuing of multidisciplinary CoPs in higher education.

Key Words:

scholarship of teaching and learning, faculty learning, multidisciplinary, communities of practice

Introduction

Recently I have not been able to get the song “Once in a Lifetime” (Byrne, 1981) out of my head. It’s a catchy tune. Another reason is because, as an engineer who has been Director of the Institute for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) at Mount Royal University (MRU) for three years, I sometimes ask myself “*Well, how did I get here?*” I almost did not apply for this position because I did not feel expert enough. But perhaps that was a positive thing. Feeling like a novice is one of the barriers to faculty engaging in SoTL (Simmons et al., 2013, Webb, 2015), so if nothing else I could empathize with others and be a role model for stepping out of one’s comfort zone. In this position, one of my priorities has been to support others in this transition and in particular, expand involvement in SoTL by supporting collaborative and multidisciplinary projects. In this essay, I suggest that multidisciplinary communities of practice (CoPs)

are one way to build our collective capacity to collaborate across disciplines, and I use my own experiences to illustrate how they can be generative as well as challenging.

In my institution, engaging in disciplinary SoTL is becoming more common in many programs and departments, yet many colleagues are still reluctant to jump into a multidisciplinary space. We know from literature in both the academic and business worlds that innovation and creativity rely upon diversity of ideas, upon crossing and dissolving the borders of classic disciplines, and upon group effort, but also that this is challenging (see Hill et al., 2014, Lattuca & Creamer, 2005). Further, for faculty members, our disciplines are dominant forces and sources of our identities (Becher, 1989). Considering the resistance to and difficulty of multidisciplinary work, I sometimes ask myself “*am I right?...am I wrong?*” to expect this of others. I believe the answer is, not everyone but at least some. We need more boundary crossers - those who straddle multiple communities and can facilitate exchange between them. In reflecting back on my own experiences I’ve realized that three very different multidisciplinary CoPs have been valuable to my own learning to cross boundaries, yet each had different advantages and challenges.

SoTL Scholars CoP:

Multiple disciplines and perspectives, multiple topics

First, I had the good fortune to participate in a multidisciplinary CoP about SoTL. I had been interested in researching my teaching, but had no idea how to start. The Nexen Scholars Program at MRU brought together an annual cohort of scholars to develop individual SoTL research projects in their classes. My cohort included colleagues ranging in disciplines from social work, to policy studies, to business, to English. This was my first real exposure to the epistemologies of other disciplines, but I was open to learning about qualitative research primarily because it was already being used in engineering education (I thought, “If other engineers are doing it, it must be okay!”) I do, however, remember feeling quite uncomfortable when an experienced qualitative researcher told me to “let the data take you on a journey”. (I laugh about it now because that’s exactly what happened - after a period of despair upon reading my qualitative data and initially thinking it was useless, I suddenly had an a-ha moment when I realized it was interesting to ask *why* the data was showing something I hadn’t expected. And so I embarked on my journey.) Through others’ projects, I was exposed to a variety of methods and approaches that were useful in SoTL, but at the time I was primarily focused on learning things which were useful for my own project. When the year was up, I felt there was still a huge range of theories and methodologies relevant in SoTL to learn more about. I went on to seek more opportunities to learn about the perspectives and methods of other disciplines such as facilitating subsequent cohorts of the scholars program and engaging in other multidisciplinary CoPs.

Decoding CoP: Multiple disciplines and perspectives, single topic

My first SoTL project piqued my interest in the notion of expert-novice differences. I soon became involved with a group of colleagues who were interested in learning about Decoding the Disciplines (Pace & Middendorf, 2004) and exploring how the model might be used in our MRU context. The premise of Decoding is that teachers, as experts in

their disciplines, often hold knowledge in tacit ways which are not easily accessible to their students. Decoding provides a process for uncovering the expert's thinking so that it can be made explicit and so that it can inform teachers' modeling, practice, and assessment initiatives. As a first step, we began practicing Decoding interviews with one another and discussing what seemed to be effective strategies. Our work expanded over time to include offering professional development opportunities for colleagues, and support for those using the Decoding process for purposes such as course and curriculum revision as well as SoTL research. We became extremely interested in the common themes that were arising out of interviews from very diverse disciplines and bottlenecks, and several of us were interested in analyzing the interview from different theoretical lenses. Through new applications and continued discussions we eventually realized our collective work had implications for teaching, research, and community development in higher education and decided to conduct formal analyses and publish (Miller-Young & Boman, accepted). The key strength of this group was that we were all interested in the same topic, the Decoding interview, but from many different perspectives. Those of us less experienced in SoTL benefited from having an experienced qualitative educational researcher in the group as well as an entire group of colleagues intimately familiar with the data so that we could get feedback on our analyses. Committing to writing was another important ingredient for taking the group to a deeper level of engagement because we continued to engage with each other and the existing literature as we each wrote and peer reviewed each other's chapters. As a result of this experience, I now look for opportunities to bring together diverse groups of faculty in terms of discipline and SoTL experience, so that multiple opportunities for mentoring and learning are built into a project.

Global Service-Learning CoP: Multiple disciplines, single perspective and topic

Finally, having learned firsthand the power of multidisciplinary collaborations, I became intrigued by the potential for using self-study among faculty engaging in SoTL. But I also knew that a self-study must be self-initiated in order to be successful. Thus, when a new CoP on teaching with global service-learning (SL) invited me to help facilitate their self-study, I leaped at the opportunity. The CoP included faculty members from business, science, history, indigenous studies, social work and nursing. With the help of a mentor who knew the SL literature well, we settled on faculty learning about reciprocity in SL as a topic and the specific research question of how a collaborative self-study process generates learning. We interviewed each other using the Decoding interview method and wrote several reflections, and shared and discussed these within the group over the period of a year. While initially our disciplinary diversity created some anxiety for some, in the end we found it to be an important factor in generating "new questioning, new perspectives, and new awareness related to the value of examining the concept of reciprocity and the role of group dialogue in generating learning – although the specific nature of these changes was somewhat different for all of us" (Miller-Young et al., 2015, p. 40). My one regret on this project is that perhaps we tried to go too fast. Energized by the positive experiences we were having through sharing our reflections and perspectives, we committed to writing our first article for a journal which has hard submission deadlines. The group decided to be "efficient" in our writing

by assigning sub-groups to various things: literature review, data analysis, discussion, etc. In retrospect, it's not surprising that this strategy did not turn out to be efficient at all (see Kitchen & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2009 for recommendations about procedures and standards). In the final throes of writing to meet the deadline, two of us had to take the lead, and there was little time left for consultation with the rest of the group. In trying to focus our article on our research question, we had to edit out some of our colleagues' reflections, and in the end some felt that the final article didn't fully reflect their own story. In other words, while the process of the self-study was positive for all involved, the inquiry into a specific research question raised some tensions within the group, and we were unable to maintain our ideals of reciprocity during the final phases of writing.

So what?

Each of these multidisciplinary CoPs has been important for my own learning about SoTL, about the approaches of diverse disciplines, and about effective ways to collaborate across disciplines. But perhaps most importantly, what I've learned is the value of not being an 'expert'. It is much more interesting to take the role of a learner when collaborating with colleagues. Inspired by the concept of reciprocity in service-learning, I've come to see multidisciplinary CoPs as places where all involved are co-educators, co-learners and co-generators of knowledge (Clayton et al., 2013). In other words, such collaborative work is a process in which we each construct new knowledge, skills, and attitudes by building upon previous knowledge and in which all parties learn from and with each other. Social interaction, participation, and trust are key to this kind of learning because it can be uncomfortable at times. To be successful at creating or engaging in an environment where co-learning can occur, it is important that we all model the behaviour we are asking of others – to be willing to continually grow and change ourselves. However, there does have to be enough expertise in a group for the participants to be able to trust that the process will result in some kind of positive outcome.

Now what?

Throughout these experiences, my conception of scholarship has broadened. I find myself *"in another part of the world."* Coming from a positivist paradigm in engineering, I used to value scholarship for its contribution to knowledge. I now see it as a means as well as an end, and multidisciplinary collaboration as a practice that promotes learning. However, it is a practice that requires time, energy, patience, and persistence. Conflict and tension may be unavoidable but have such potential to create new insights. In order for faculty to devote energy to such activities, we must value the effort that goes into such difficult and risky work. Further, since not every multidisciplinary CoP will (or should) result in a traditional scholarship outcome such as a publication, I find myself wondering how else we can document these processes so that others can learn from them as well as assess them? Creamer (2005) offers suggestions such as interactive memoing, external evaluators, and team ethnographers. Some of these are obviously more time and resource-intensive than others. I hope my own reflections help illuminate several ways that multidisciplinary communities of practice can contribute to participants' learning, and I encourage others to share their strategies, stories, and reflections on this topic.

Acknowledgements

While I have learned much from all the CoPs with which I have been involved, several people stand out as being outstanding mentor-collaborators. Much thanks to Michelle Yeo, Karen Manarin, Margy MacMillan, and Patti Clayton for the endless conversations we have had about teaching, learning, and scholarship, and the insights these have generated.

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