



Case study of the organic life cycle of a grassroots peer community:

Fertilising the 'hidden' social networks under the surface of student support

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- Thesis focus
- Graduation

Dispersion

Inception

PhD student community

Adversity

Germination

Growth

- Institutional constraints
- PhD progression

- Connected support
- Shared research problem solving
- Professional networking

- Origins
- Filling a need

- Finding shared purpose and goals
- Social and cultural network

Modified from:
Tuckman and Jensen, 1977



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Enablers

- Home away from home support
- Similar PhD stages
- Facebook, emails
- Safe environment to learn and practice
- Socio-cultural exchange

Challenges

- Time commitment
- Everyday life
- Formal recognition
- Undefined roles
- Succession

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Discussing each other's experiences of advanced PhD stages

Proofreading chapters and getting feedback

Practicing oral presentations

Sharing practical tips on research tools

Learning about each other's cultures

Agony 'aunt'



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(PhD Scholars)

Immediate value and potential value

You meet others who understand you, talk shop, think together, have fun, get to know each other, feel inspired. You get value from just participating. We call this immediate value. All going well, this activity gives you confidence, new insights, good ideas, new perspectives, unexpected solutions, a new contact.

(Beverly and Etienne Wenger-Trayner, 2015)

<http://wenger-trayner.com/resources/planning-and-evaluating-social-learning/>

Our Aim:

To form a community of practice comprising domestic and international PhD students to share experiences and ideas.

We discovered:

A common bond in supporting each other in a safe environment, filled with enthusiastic participation without the need to perform for the academic eye.

We experienced:

Difficulties trying to maintain the group's momentum due to institutional restraints and PhD demands.

We would have liked:

Formal acknowledgement and openness e.g. academic guidance to assist the group's strategic development.

What we would done differently:

To overcome the transient nature of our PhD cohort and maintain the essence of the communities of practice idea, while promoting sustainability through the inclusion of new members as older members exit.

TIPS FOR STARTING A GRASSROOTS PEER COMMUNITY

Find a common driver:

Start with the commitment to give purpose to forming a community of practice. Our common purpose was to form a group to practice reading and writing formal academic English. For example, a writing group for journal articles and sharing research methodologies.

Cross-cultural importance:

Forming a group of international and domestic students provides international students with the chance to mingle with the host culture as opposed to naturally congregating only in international student communities.

All work and no play

For a community of practice to function successfully, the 'fun' factor is an important component. We created pleasant experience through organised social activities. For example, we celebrated cultural diversity, such as sharing food from different cultures, and accommodating families during our gatherings. This brought the group together more tightly.

Assign roles:

Although our group was organic, assigning roles were important for two reasons: structure and momentum.

Designating roles facilitates a distributed responsibility amongst group members and ensures accountability for the participation of members. We set out a meeting agenda for individual presentations of members' research work experiences; for instance, data collection and analysis, and research approach.

Assigned roles also assist the functioning of group processes. When the facilitation of the group was left to one or two members, the group's momentum stalled. Delegating responsibilities to other members would enable the momentum to continue. This addresses the transient nature of the PhD cohort and may potentially stave off the inevitable demise of the group.

Further reading

Cotterall, S. (2011). Identity and learner autonomy in doctoral study: International students' experiences in an Australian university. In B. Morrison (Ed.), *Independent language learning: Building on experience, seeking new perspectives* (pp. 57-72). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Hingst, Raymond D. (2006). Tuckman's theory of group development in a call centre context: does it still work? In 5th Global Conference on Business & Economics - Proceedings, Global Conference on Business & Economics. (5th Global Conference on Business & Economics, 6-8 July 2006, Cambridge, UK.)