

FACILITATING WORKBASED LEARNING GROUPS



This brochure provides ideas and suggestions for facilitators of workbased learning staff development groups.

While other Reframing the Future publications – set out in the References section below – focus on the theory of workbased learning, this brochure highlights useful facilitation strategies for working with groups.

What is workbased learning?

Workbased learning is a popular methodology for staff development projects within the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector. Workbased learning is an umbrella term that refers to structured learning that is organisationally managed and provided in association with paid or unpaid work. The focus of workbased learning is learning through work. Participants are the staff employed by an organisation, including permanent, contract or casual staff or volunteers.

Workbased learning includes a range of different staff development methodologies and techniques, from coaching and mentoring to action learning, networking and communities of practice. As there are many different ways of interpreting or using these methodologies, such as coaching or networking, this brochure only offers broad suggestions.

Specific competencies for coaching and mentoring in VET are set out in *TAADEL403A Facilitate individual learning in the Training and Assessment Training Package* (2004) pp 271–283.

Specific competencies for facilitating action learning in VET are set out in *TAADEL502A Facilitate action learning projects in the Training and Assessment Training Package* (2004) pp 323–334.

Many of the ideas in this brochure are drawn from recent literature about networking and communities of practice.

Key functions for facilitators

New ideas about facilitation have emerged in the past few years from research into communities of practice. For instance, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) report that a number of studies have shown that the most important factor in a community's success is 'the vitality of the leadership'. (p.80) They find that learning community coordinators or facilitators perform a number of key functions:

1. Identifying important issues in their domain
2. Planning and facilitating community events
3. Informally linking community members
4. Fostering the development of community members
5. Managing the boundary between the community and the formal organisation
6. Helping build organisational practice, including identifying the knowledge base, lessons learned, best practices, tools and methods
7. Assessing the health of the community and evaluating its contributions to members and the organisation. (p.80)

Research by Reframing the Future indicates that these facilitator's functions are relevant to a range of different staff development groups, beyond communities of practice.

Organising the different roles within a group

Fontaine (2001) draws attention to the importance of the roles that are needed to 'keep afloat' communities of practice and identifies eleven formal and informal community roles. Sometimes it is the responsibility of the convenor and/or facilitator to ensure these roles are performed by a member of the group:

- subject matter expert
- core team member
- community member
- leader
- sponsor
- facilitator
- content coordinator
- journalist
- mentor
- administrator/events coordinator
- technologist. (p.16)

Experience within Reframing the Future shows that these roles apply to most workbased learning groups.

FACILITATING WORKBASED LEARNING GROUPS

Facilitating different stages

Not only are skills needed to launch new groups, but they are also needed to maintain them. Groups normally move through stages – often following the well-known cycle of forming, storming, norming and performing – requiring different facilitation strategies at each stage. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2003) have described similar stages for communities of practice.

Set out in Table 1 below is a summary of the steps that convenors or facilitators can take at each of the first two stages of development of communities of practice. Research by Reframing the Future shows that other types of staff development groups need similar facilitation.

Table 1: Typical work plans for convenors in each of the first two stages of development of communities of practice (from Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002)

1. Potential Stage	2. Coalescing Stage
Determine the primary intent of the community	Build a case for membership
Define the domain and identify engaging issues	Launch the community
Build a case for action	Initiate community events and spaces
Identify potential coordinators and thought leaders	Legitimise community coordinators
Interview potential members	Build connections between core members
Connect community members	Find the ideas, insights and practices that are worth sharing
Create a preliminary design for the community	Document judiciously
	Identify opportunities to provide value
	Engage managers

Table 2 below provides a summary of the steps that convenors or facilitators can use at each in the third, fourth and fifth stages of development of communities of practice or similar groups.

Table 2: Typical work plans for convenors in the third, fourth, and fifth and sixth stages of development of communities of practice (from Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002)

4. Maturing Stage	5. Stewardship Stage	6. Transformation Stage
Identify gaps in knowledge and develop a learning agenda	Institutionalise the voice of the community	Sometimes ailing communities are rejuvenated, because they still have some value to offer members
Define the community's role in the organisation	Rejuvenate the community	Sometimes communities are allowed to fade away, losing members and energy
Redefine community boundaries	Hold a renewal workshop	Sometimes communities die by becoming social clubs
Routinise entry requirements and processes	Actively recruit new people to the core group	Sometimes communities split into distinct new communities or merge with others
Create a preliminary design for the community	Develop new leadership	Sometimes communities require so many resources they become institutionalised as centres of excellence or new departments
Measure the value of the community	Mentor new members	
Maintain a cutting-edge focus	Seek relationships and benchmarks outside the organisation	
Build and organise a knowledge repository		

Many of the above steps are applicable in other workbased learning groups, not just communities of practice.

FACILITATING WORKBASED LEARNING GROUPS

Assessing the health of the group

Experience of Reframing the Future project teams shows that many of the ideas about networks are applicable to other types of groups. Cohen and Prusak (2001, p.70) note that networks can become like rigid clans – elitist, insular, idiosyncratic, corrupt or destructive. Networks can also develop ‘groupthink’ and ossify. Networks can breed unthinking loyalty and unquestioned shared beliefs. ‘Warm and fuzzy’ networks prevent people from asking tough questions.

Using Cohen & Prusak (2001, p.76), a set of criteria for analysing the health of a network or other type of group, could include:

- Trust: What is the level of trust and mutuality?
- Knowledge: How well is knowledge shared?
- Access: How easy is it for members to access each other?
- Engagement: How well are members listened to and assisted?
- Safety: Will members’ ignorance and needs be used against them?

Evaluation, self-assessment and reflection

Two short publications, available through Reframing the Future, give tips on evaluating workbased learning projects – *Evaluating Projects* and *Self-evaluation Strategies for Project Teams*.

Generic evaluation methods that can be applied to workbased learning project teams include:

- formal methods such as surveys and questionnaires
- informal methods such as observations, individual and group questioning and discussions
- feedback loops. (*Training and Assessment Training Package* 2004, p.328)

Self-assessment and reflection are key components of workbased learning. The *Training and Assessment Training Package* (2004, p.328) describes self-assessment and reflection as follows:

- asking critical questions about personal performance and answering them objectively and honestly
- analysing what worked and what did not work, and why
- thinking about and planning for improvement in the future.

References and further reading

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For more information contact:

Reframing the Future

PO Box 425

Elizabeth SA 5112

Telephone 08 8207 9655

Fax 08 8207 9708

<http://reframingthefuture.net>

