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Establishing an education community of practice

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Traditionally, universities base their reputation on their ability to attract funding and carry out discipline-based research, often precluding education research. In recent times, there has been an increased emphasis on education, particularly in Australian universities, with additional funding becoming available to encourage efforts to improve learning and teaching, including education research. In this paper we describe the genesis of the Education Research Group of Adelaide (ERGA), an emergent “community of practice” that provides opportunities and support for cross-discipline collaboration and communication on education research issues. ERGA’s activities have an emphasis on evidence-based, practical approaches to education, and are designed to encourage the development and dissemination of grass-roots innovation and research. We describe the factors that led to development of ERGA, and discuss the progress made to becoming a viable community of practice.

Keywords: education leadership, communities of practice, dissemination

Introduction

As governments and consumers seek increased quality in learning and teaching, universities are placing a greater emphasis on education and on education research, areas which have traditionally received less attention than discipline-specific research. In Australia, the introduction of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, which ties funding to the results of a national exit survey, the Course Experience Questionnaire, has had a significant impact on how teaching is perceived at the university level. While research into learning and teaching does not yet attract the external revenues available to discipline-based research through the ARC, the fact that the Australian Learning and Teaching Centre (ALTC, formerly known as the Carrick Institute) now provides substantial grants to support education research is also stimulating universities to pay

attention to supporting those interested in research into learning and teaching. This is beginning to have an impact on how research into learning and teaching is perceived, as indicated by the proliferation of courses designed to train academics in tertiary teaching, and to orient them systematically to the literature of education research. One example of this type of course is the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education at the University of Adelaide, which was established in 2004 (University of Adelaide 2008).

Many of these positive changes have been driven by Government policy, but there is one change where education researchers need to take the initiative themselves: overcoming isolation. Academics need critical input from their colleagues in research, and education research is no different. Often, excellent teachers and education researchers operate in disciplinary 'silos' which cut them off from one another. This can make it difficult for education researchers to develop the requisite critical mass to develop successful research collaborations, viable research projects, or successful grant applications. Education researchers require education-specific pathways, sometimes outside of their discipline-specific research, to obtain the support and encouragement they need to pursue their work. And this is not just a matter of finding like-minded people: there is a pragmatic basis to the need for education researchers to extend themselves beyond disciplinary and institutional boundaries. The ALTC funding priorities specifically favour inter-mural collaborations, and support initiatives that have the potential for sector-wide application. Given that set of priorities, education researchers who remain cloistered in their own disciplinary or institutional environments are unlikely to attract significant funding. Where support mechanisms for inter-disciplinary collaborations do not exist, it is necessary to build them. At the University of Adelaide, we have done just that by the creation of the Education Research Group of Adelaide (ERGA).

ERGA (Education Research Group of Adelaide)

ERGA is a cross-disciplinary community of educators promoting high quality University learning through evidence-based, practical approaches to teaching. ERGA's members are united by issues common to education researchers and have formed a new community. ERGA encourages collaborative development of teaching ideas and techniques, and their communication across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. ERGA's extended membership includes staff from all three Universities within South Australia: the University of Adelaide, the University of South Australia and Flinders University. Because ERGA was founded at the University of Adelaide, the strongest representation is from that institution, with members from all of the five Faculties: Professions, Engineering, Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Science and Health Sciences. It also includes representation from the University of Adelaide's Centre for Learning and Professional Development. The aim of the group is to disseminate the outcomes from research and teaching initiatives to all members of the South Australian Higher Education Community.

Origins of ERGA

ERGA was formed by the first cohort of graduates from the University of Adelaide's Graduate Certificate of Higher Education in 2005. During Graduate Certificate classes, highly motivated teachers examined teaching strategies and outcomes of teaching innovations, liaising with equally interested parties, collaborating with other education researchers for the first time in many cases. It became apparent that there existed a group of academics who were interested in teaching, in taking a scholarly approach to their teaching, in implementing challenging and innovative education strategies intended to improve student learning and student outcomes, and in evaluating those innovations rigorously. It was equally apparent that once the course was over, these individuals would return to their own disciplinary areas, where some felt quite isolated. Wanting to maintain the mutually supportive and stimulating relationships they had developed as students in the Graduate Certificate, a group of academics decided to keep meeting after graduation, forming their own organization: ERGA.

ERGA initially comprised 13 members from the University of Adelaide and met monthly to discuss research and present research findings in education. The initial focus of these meetings was to establish a shared understanding about the group's nature and mission. The membership was cross-disciplinary, and this was deemed to be its major strength. Thus inter-disciplinarity became a feature of our defining vision statement (ERGA, 2008), along with a focus on evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning. This fits with the research-intensive ethos of the University of Adelaide, allowing ERGA to align itself with strategic institutional priorities.

Developing momentum for the group's activities required a high level of commitment in terms of time and energy, and maintaining it was unrealistic for all of the founding members. Accordingly, the structure of ERGA became two-tiered, with a formal executive and a larger affiliate membership. This enabled ERGA to set achievable goals, focus the group on meaningful activities, and produce outcomes that were both definable and measurable. These included goals relating to the development of funding streams to support education research activities. The executive takes responsibility for making all necessary decisions to run ERGA events, with affiliate members assisting in seminars and other activities. Over the last four years, the number of members in the executive has remained stable at around 10, while the affiliate membership has grown to over 170. While there are senior academics in the membership (which have included Associate Professors and Heads of School), the bulk of the membership consists of junior academics with significant teaching responsibilities. ERGA is, essentially and deliberately, a 'grass roots' organization. Its association with institutional hierarchies is intentionally loose.

An education community of practice

ERGA displays some of the characteristics of a 'community of practice.' Wenger defines a 'community of practice' as a "joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members" (Wenger, 1998). It functions through "mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity" and it has the capability to produce (and

is actually producing) a “shared repertoire of communal resources that members [are developing] over time.”

The premise behind communities of practice is that “learning is mostly social” and “comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life” (Smith 2003). The community of practice model has been widely adopted in education circles, implemented in contexts ranging from teacher training programmes designed for secondary school teaching, through to leadership development training for academics. It functions precisely to address the problems outlined in the beginning of this paper: that teachers tend to be isolated from one another unless concerted action is taken to make provision for their meeting on a systematic basis. Darling-Hammond and Ball (1997) observe that:

[Teachers] have no time to work with or observe other teachers; they experience occasional hit-and-run workshops that are usually unconnected to their work and immediate problems of practice. [Effective professional development cannot] be adequately cultivated without the development of more substantial professional discourse and engagement in communities of practice.

Establishing a community of practice has several benefits for participants. Collaborative inquiry enables participants to share the load of research and problem solving, learning from and with each other (Darling-Hammond 1994). Developing a culture of collaboration and communication can counteract a pre-existing culture of isolation (Talbert & McLaughlin 1994). The opportunity for discussion and reflection outside of participants’ specific disciplines engenders creativity and innovative thought. The trust developed over time within such a community also enables more detailed and honest quality assurance, generating organisational improvement from within.

In addition to the benefits to individuals, establishing an education community of practice also has immediate benefits for the organisations involved. Communities of practice are known to encourage commitment to organisations (Lieberman 1996), and enable “sharing of knowledge outside of the traditional structural boundaries” (Lesser & Storck 2001). This represents an informal model of organisational memory.

ERGA’s aim is to establish itself as an active community of practice, moving from a group of individual researchers, towards a true open community of collaborative education researchers. In some respects, we have begun to achieve this ideal. Our initial focus as a community was to provide opportunities for discussion and dissemination of education research. We decided to achieve this by creating a network of education researchers, driven collectively by its members through their publications and presentation of practical approaches to improving learning.

Building a culture of communication: ERGA Conferences

ERGA’s view was that its most important initial objective was the dissemination of practical methods of improving teaching and learning outcomes. The method chosen to implement this dissemination was to run the first ERGA conference in 2006.

The theme of the first conference was “Building Higher Education that Works: Methods and Results,” a broad topic designed to encourage as many people as possible to attend and submit papers for consideration. Keynote speakers included Prof. Geoffrey Crisp from the University of Adelaide, who discussed student expectations, and Prof. Jan Orrell from the Carrick Institute (now ALTC), who discussed national strategic directions with respect to the development of learning and teaching. Funding for the conference was provided by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor & Vice-President (Academic) (DVC&VP(A)) at the University of Adelaide. Registration for the conference was free for attendees from the University of Adelaide. External attendees paid a \$50 fee, which was used to cover catering and conference packs. Free or cheap registration was, once again, a strategy designed to encourage as many attendees as possible.

The 2006 conference was hailed a success. 18 presentations and 2 workshops provided the 86 attendees with ample opportunity for engagement and discussion. The majority found the conference to be a productive use of their time as indicated in the survey results for the conference (Table 1). Of particular note is the fact that many of the attendees felt they were likely to submit a paper for consideration at future conferences.

Table 1: Evaluation survey results from the ERGA 2006 Conference

Question	Broad Agreement (agree or strongly agree) 42 respondents
Overall, I found the ERGA Conference worthwhile.	100%
The presentations at the conference were of a high standard.	100%
I would like to attend a similar conference in 2007.	100%
The research presented at the conference will be useful in my own teaching.	98%
I would contribute research papers to similar events in the future.	86%

The second conference, held in 2007, had the theme “Building Assessment that Works.” This theme was chosen in line with one of the AUQA audit themes selected for the University of Adelaide, but is a topical and relevant area for most universities. The conference was opened by Prof. Royce Sadler from Griffith University, who delivered a thought-provoking address on assessing student ‘achievement.’ We received 50% more presentation submissions in 2006 than 2007, including submissions from international academics. Attendance rose 40%. The funding basis of the conference also grew. In addition to continuing support from the DVC&VP (A), the five Faculties and the Centre for Learning and Professional Development of the University of Adelaide also contributed. This indicated the development of wider support for ERGA and its goals. Additional sponsorship was obtained from external sources including Commander and McGraw-Hill.

Evaluation of the 2007 conference revealed a continued positive response from the attendees. (Table 2). The survey results show that the attendees enjoyed a similar experience to those who attended in 2006, with similar numbers of people interested in contributing to the conference in the future (26 respondents agreeing to this question in 2006 compared with 31 in 2007)

Table 2: Evaluation survey results from the ERGA 2007 Conference

Question	Broad Agreement (agree or strongly agree) 50 respondents
Overall, I found the ERGA Conference worthwhile.	100%
The presentations at the conference were of a high standard.	95%
I would like to attend a similar conference in 2008.	93%
The research presented at the conference will be useful in my own teaching.	96%
I would contribute research papers to similar events in the future.	61%

In 2008, ERGA will host its third conference. The theme for this conference will be “Motivating and Engaging Students”; Prof Kerri-Lee Krause will be the keynote speaker. To support expansion of ERGA, and to encourage greater representation from partner Universities, we have sought, and won, financial support from other tertiary institutions in the State. We have also been successful in attracting funding from the South Australian Government Minister for Employment, Training and Further Education, and continue to develop our relationships with industry sponsors. The State Government’s positive response to ERGA’s activities has been particularly encouraging, as it shows that ERGA has demonstrated the benefits of developing a vigorous culture of education research to those who represent the interests of the wider community. ERGA’s conferences have significantly raised the profile of education research in South Australia.

Building a culture of communication: Education Research

ERGA is developing a large set of education research resources useful to members and other interested parties, including ERGA Conference presentations (Powerpoint slides and presentation recordings are available from the website), reports from research projects and summaries/recordings of workshops and seminars. As this set grows, it must be managed in order for it to remain useful to ERGA members. Our target in this area is to expand our recording of activities, while developing an online search facility to structure this data, and make it more accessible.

Like other academic researchers, education researchers need to collaborate and publish in order to sustain and nurture their careers. To further encourage education research, ERGA has developed an educational journal. The peer-reviewed journal, called *ergo*, is designed to encourage the publication of evidence-based education research including

well-developed “work in progress:” research which may be in its early stages, but backed by evidence and sustained by a scholarly approach. The first issue presented five high quality papers focusing on the themes of assessment and student retention and copies of this issue have been circulated to all areas of the University of Adelaide as well as to other institutions in the country.

Developing a culture of collaboration: ERGA seminars and networking events

Between conferences, we organize smaller seminars, generally on discipline-specific teaching topics, alerting affiliate members via our email mailing list. For example, in 2008, we hosted a workshop by James Ware, a visiting assessment expert from the University of Kuwait. This workshop was particularly successful and well attended, but this has not been the case with all our seminars. We have had more success attracting attendees to the ERGA Conference than to smaller seminar-style presentations. While ERGA Conferences have featured broad themes of relevance across the disciplinary spectrum, seminars have tended to focus on the concerns of particular disciplines, and we have found that they failed to develop critical mass from interested researchers.

In this respect, ERGA is still emerging as a “community of practice.” We need to develop more robust mechanisms for fostering new collaborative relationships on a continuous basis. One area requiring greater attention is ‘what happens after the event’ or ‘between big events.’ It is common for participants to discuss mutually interesting research and teaching innovations at an event, but then for potential collaborations to slip away once participants return to their regular duties.

Members of the ERGA executive have frequent opportunity to discuss and collaborate as part of their executive duties. They have benefited from collaboration on applications for research grants, teaching prizes and publications, obtaining over \$500,000 in funding for education research since 2006. However, we have found that fostering collaboration among affiliate members is a challenge that cannot be addressed adequately by the annual conference or by workshops. In order to address this, we have hosted the first in a projected series of networking events, such as breakfast meetings, designed to provide affiliate members with opportunities to communicate with potential collaborators between annual conferences. Our plan for the next year is to develop a framework for the continuous fostering of collaborations, including formalizing a process for following up potential collaborations, and developing our website in such a way that it makes it possible for ERGA members to seek out and contact other members with related education research interests.

Developing a culture of collaboration: Decision making within ERGA

At its current stage of development, ERGA is run by its executive group, forming an oligarchic, rather than a democratic community. This is not by design. The pattern emerged from early efforts to be more thoroughly inclusive which did not work effectively. However, having established some useful structures (procedures for

developing funding lines; annual activities including the conferences; a publication with a regular schedule), the executive now sees new opportunities for developing a governmental model that supports both focused, meaningful goal-setting, and greater inclusivity in decision making. This is particularly important as ERGA develops more substantial relationships with partner institutions. In 2008, we plan to tackle this issue in two ways. We will incorporate a plenary session in the ERGA Conference, which will enable attendees to discuss the nature and future directions of ERGA itself. We will also begin working towards promoting the establishments of satellite groups of ERGA within partner institutions. Further, restructuring of the ERGA executive so that members become portfolio leaders, responsible for coordinating a team of ERGA associate members in managing their portfolio, will both help spread the workload, and make the group more representative.

Conclusion

ERGA has some challenges ahead of it. Inter-disciplinary groups, while they are liberating, are, by their very nature, vulnerable. Lacking an institutional ‘home discipline’ in the university, they also lack the stability that such homes bring. ERGA’s inter-disciplinarity means that it does not have an identifiable Head of School or Faculty to provide ongoing financial or administrative support. Funding must be sought, and acquitted, annually. We have not developed a stable line of funding that can be rolled over from year to year. This means that members of the executive are often engaged in time-consuming negotiations with multiple internal and external supporters. Few teacher-based communities of practice have been shown to survive without external, ongoing, funding (Schlager, Fusco & Schank 2002). Other groups like ours have failed because they did not successfully ‘scale up’ beyond the immediate organisation (McLaughlin & Mitra 2001).

An additional challenge is finding robust ways to support ongoing collaborations that can result in successful education research projects, and finding ways of ensuring the ongoing durability of the “community of practice” we have begun to establish in South Australia.

These challenges are not insurmountable. We believe that the success of groups like ERGA is essential for the continued growth of high quality learning and teaching in tertiary education. Providing educators with opportunities to discuss and share education practice and research outside of their disciplines enables growth through scale, and inspires creativity with benefits to members, their institutions and tertiary education sector more broadly.

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