Unlocking the Potential of Learning Communities in Academic and Business Contexts: Australian and Chinese Case Studies

by

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration of Originality .................................................................................. i

Approval to Copy ................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................. iii

Table of Contents ............................................................................................... v

Index of Tables .................................................................................................... xiii

Index of Figures .................................................................................................. xv

Abstract .............................................................................................................. xvi

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.............................................................................. 1

Setting the Stage .................................................................................................. 1

Background of the Research ............................................................................. 1

Key Terms: Learning and Community ............................................................ 1

The meaning of ‘learning’ .................................................................................. 2

The origins of the concept ‘community’ ......................................................... 3

Learning Community Practice ...................................................................... 7

Learning Communities in Different Institutional Contexts ....................... 8

Learning Community Practice in Elementary and Secondary Schools ...... 8

Learning Community Practice in Higher Education .................................. 9

Learning Community Practice in Business or Professional Enterprises ....... 9
Learning community .......................................................................................... 30
Contextualised into a Cross-cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspective ............ 39
Integrative Conceptual Framework .................................................................. 43
Shared Mission, Vision, Values and Goals: Common Value One .................. 44
Commitment to Continuous Improvement: Common Value Two ................. 46
Collaborative Culture and Collective Inquiry: Common Value Three .......... 48
Supportive and Shared Leadership: Common Value Four ......................... 51
Freedom of Group Membership: Common Value Five .............................. 53
Proximity and Mutual Engagement: Common Value Six ............................ 54
Thematic Links to the Research Project .......................................................... 55
Summary of Chapter 2 ...................................................................................... 58

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY ........................................................................... 59
Introduction ....................................................................................................... 59
The Selection of Research Approach ............................................................. 59
Selection of the Research Methodology ....................................................... 61
Justification of the appropriateness of the case study methodology .......... 62
The choice of the type of case study ............................................................. 63
Number of cases ........................................................................................... 64
Selection of the Sample .................................................................................. 64
vii
Data Analysis Related to Research Questions ................................................. 109

Research Question 1: How do stakeholders perceive their work contexts as a learning community? ............................................................................................................. 109

Are there cross-cultural differences in stakeholder perceptions? ............... 109

Are there institutional differences in stakeholder perceptions? ............... 112

Research Question 2: How do stakeholders’ reports of learning community criteria fit with criteria operationalised from the literature? ...................... 116

How do stakeholders perceive each of the developed criteria that define learning community? ............................................................................................................. 116

Are there cross-cultural differences in stakeholder perceptions of learning community towards each of the developed criteria? ....................... 118

To what extent do the operationalised criteria fit stakeholders’ perceptions? ......................................................................................................................... 165

Summary of Chapter 4 ....................................................................................... 174

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .............................................. 176

Introduction ....................................................................................................... 176

Findings Related to Research Questions ......................................................... 176

Stakeholders’ Perceptions – Work Context as a Learning Community ...... 177

Cross-cultural differences in stakeholders’ perceptions ............................ 177

Institutional differences in stakeholders’ perceptions ............................ 179

Stakeholders’ Perceptions – Towards Operationalised Criteria .............. 181
How do stakeholders perceive each of the developed criteria that define learning community? .......................................................... 181

Are there cross-cultural differences in stakeholder perceptions towards each of the developed criteria? ........................................ 183

To what extent do the operationalised criteria fit stakeholders’ perceptions? ................................................................................. 214

Suggestions for Further Research .......................................................................................................................... 217

Suggestions for Methodological Considerations ........................................................................................................... 218

Suggestions to address the Knowledge-gap with Research .......................................................................................... 219

Suggestions for Future Practice .................................................................................................................................. 220

Summary of Chapter 5 ........................................................................................................................................ 221

References .......................................................................................................................................................... 223

Appendices ......................................................................................................................................................... 255

Appendix A Definitions of Communities as proposed by Various Researchers .......................................................... 256

Appendix B Example of Survey-questionnaire Instruments ....................................................................................... 260

Appendix B1 Survey-questionnaire Guideline ........................................................................................................ 261

Appendix B2 Survey-questionnaire for University .................................................................................................. 263

Appendix B3 Survey-questionnaire for Business .................................................................................................... 267

Appendix C Example of Interview Schedules ........................................................................................................ 271

Appendix D Ethics Approval .................................................................................................................................. 274
INDEX OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Brief Summary of Definitions of ‘Community’ ......................... 6
Table 2.1 Overview of Research on PLC .................................................. 33
Table 2.2 Criteria of Learning Community Operationalised from the Literature ......................................................................................... 57
Table 3.1 Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals (LCC1) .................... 75
Table 3.2 Commitment to Continuous Improvement (LCC2) ..................... 76
Table 3.3 Collaborative Culture and Collective Inquiry (LCC3) ................. 76
Table 3.4 Supportive and Shared Leadership (LCC4) ............................... 78
Table 3.5 Freedom of Group Membership (LCC5) .................................. 79
Table 3.6 Proximity and Mutual Engagement (LCC6) ............................... 79
Table 3.7 Test of Homogeneity of Variance ............................................. 86
Table 3.8 Test of Normality ...................................................................... 87
Table 3.9 Listing of Criteria for judging Methodological Quality in this Study .............................................................................................. 96
Table 4.1 Demographic Profile of Sample from Four Organisations .......... 107
Table 4.2 Similar Perceptions between University Cohorts across Culture .... 110
Table 4.3 Highly Significant Difference: Business Cohorts across Culture .... 111
Table 4.4 Significant Difference: Chinese Cohorts across Different Institutions .............................................................................................. 113
Table 4.5  Significant Difference: Australian Cohorts across Different Institutions .......................................................... 114

Table 4.6  Summary of Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach alpha for Scores on Each of the Six LCCs .......................................................... 117

Table 4.7  Comparison Responses to LCC1 by Nationality ........................................ 119

Table 4.8  Comparison Responses to LCC2 by Nationality ........................................ 128

Table 4.9  Comparison Responses to LCC3 by Nationality ........................................ 136

Table 4.10 Comparison Responses to LCC4 by Nationality ........................................ 144

Table 4.11 Comparison Responses to LCC5 by Nationality ........................................ 154

Table 4.12 Comparison Responses to LCC6 by Nationality ........................................ 158

Table 4.13  KMO and Bartlett Test ........................................................................ 166

Table 4.14 Total Variance Explained ..................................................................... 168

Table 4.15 Pattern Matrix for PAF with Oblimin Rotation of Three Factor Solution of LCC Items .......................................................... 169
INDEX OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Timetable of research activity ...........................................................68
Figure 2. Methods of data collection .................................................................69
Figure 3. Normal Q-Q plot of scale for China ..................................................88
Figure 4. Normal Q-Q plot of scale for Australia .............................................88
Figure 5. Scree plot .........................................................................................167
ABSTRACT

The term ‘learning community’ is one that has been broadly or narrowly defined depending on its context. It is now widely used in a range of settings, from schools and universities, to business work places, by many researchers (see, for example, Brown & Duguid, 1991; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat, 2011). While the term has slipped into common – often idiosyncratic – usage a review of the literature highlights how the meaning of learning community has evolved over time, reinforcing the need to investigate more rigorously how practitioners in different contexts understand their situation as a learning community. As understood commonly now a ‘learning community’ is more than just a group of people who simply work together in the same space, but what are its essential features and how are these perceived by those involved?

This study addressed the broad question: how do practitioners in Australia and China perceive their work places as ‘learning communities’? It sought to do so by examining six criteria of a successful learning community synthesised and operationalised from the literature. These criteria were

(i) the perceptions of shared mission, vision, values and goals;

(ii) the demonstration of commitment to continuous improvement;

(iii) initiatives that develop and sustain a collaborative culture and collective enquiry;

(iv) feelings of supportive and shared leadership;

(v) perceived freedom of group membership and;

(vi) the descriptions of proximity and mutual engagement.

Data collection methods included a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques consisting of document analysis, a questionnaire and a face-to-face interview with volunteers. A total sample number of 70 participants was recruited
opportunistically and purposefully (Burns, 2000) from two known university academic departments in Australia (AU) and China (CU), and two business organisations in Australia (AB) and China (CB). The sample frame was not intended to represent the whole population of academic or business stakeholders in the two countries. However, for the scope of this study this sample gave valuable insights into the degree of ‘learning community’ perceptions of stakeholders in two universities and two business organisations that are not examined by other learning community studies.

The unique data in this study attempted to fill a significant gap in the literature, where learning community studies have focused primarily on single cases, by exploring learning communities that operate in two universities and two businesses in Australia and China respectively. This allowed a two-by-two comparison of ways in which learning communities operate in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary institutions by addressing how practitioners construct meaning about team work, common tasks, sharing and flexibility of role relationships. A greater understanding of different stakeholders’ perceptions could impact where, why, and how the learning community concept will be utilised within their institutions.

Among the important findings from the study was that the role of national culture, reflecting historic-socio-political influences, was central in understanding respondents’ perceptions of the six constituent elements listed previously. On the other hand, there were cross-cultural and interdisciplinary similarities in the way stakeholders reported their perceptions of their working environment as a learning community, which reflected many interconnected issues inherent in the data. These data suggested that a more nuanced picture of ‘learning community’ needs to be taken into account when looking at particular instances or assertions about the operation of a learning community.

This study will be of interest to researchers, practitioners working at the interface of Education, Management, and Organisational Development, and especially those interested in the work lives of academics or employees, policy development
and implementation. More generally, the study will allow those who have utilised
the term ‘learning community’ to describe and talk about their own workplaces to
consider more critically the essence of what they are seeing.