Learning Brief

Inkanyezi Project

What makes a functional, sustainable community of practice/sharing network & what are the benefits of getting involved in this?

Background

A significant area of the Inkanyezi Project's work over the last 8 years has been the development of communities of practice both within the schools and between the schools.

The theoretical concept of communities of practice (CoP) is one which grew out of the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 1999, 2011). Their work was focussed mostly around practical vocational training and health interventions but, as the popularity of the approach grew, it has spread to include many other forms of social development including education. CoPs are effectively networks of like-minded individuals working cooperatively together towards a common goal. The benefit of creating these productive networks were seen as a way of humanising work and reducing conflict and stress in situations where development should be taking place.

Simply stated, Communities of Practice (CoP) can be described as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

In the case of the project schools, we have been involved with direct engagement with Heads, deputies, teachers (educators), students (learners) and other stakeholders involved in the care and education of students from the project's inception. In order to ensure the most effective CoP, dialogues are necessary and empowerment of stakeholders is also desirable. CoPs not only exist to empower stakeholders, they also ultimately involve transfer of expertise from 'experts' or 'masters' to 'novices' or 'apprentices'. In a school environment it is easy to see this as a linear transmission, but in the case of our intervention it is possible to see that there has been sharing and transfer of ideas and expertise on a number of different levels.

"Learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people engaged in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world." (Lave, 1991, p. 67)

Formally, the elements of CoP are described as:

- The domain – or shared domain of interest in which members are committed to activities and share, or pursue common competences.
- The community – where members meet and share information and help each other progress.

- The practice – the activity in which the group are practitioners who share a common interest, share resources, ideas, experiences and ways of addressing recurring problems.

If one uses the above elements to look at education generally, it describes an ideal world of commitment, sharing and working towards a common goal.

The project activities that have brought the best results could be seen as CoP working effectively. The cases where things have not gone to plan may be a sign that there was a lack of communication between stakeholders or a lack of 'buy in' at some point.

What we did

Given the current challenges that teachers face, it is critical for them to have ongoing support and regular opportunities to learn from peers, refocus their attention in the classroom on learning and specifically on the importance of teacher professional development in changing classroom behaviour in ways that lead to improvement in learner performance.

Maintaining their enthusiasm for teaching and keeping the fire in the belly is as important. As a teacher, the opportunity to connect with a community of one's peers is one way to fuel that fire.

The primary driver for fostering the professional teacher network has been through the **Educator Development Seminars (EDS)**, but were ultimately reinforced through a package of programmes (inter-school competitions, workshops and school visits) across the project that relied heavily on continuous engagement by teachers.

Through the EDS, the Inkanyezi Project provided opportunities for teachers to hear from over 20 speakers who shared new research on how learners learn, emerging technology tools for the classroom, new curriculum resources, presentations on critical thinking, neuroscience, 'mindsets', discipline and more.

The focus was on sharing – and developing networks. The sessions were aimed at being experiential, collaborative, educational, motivational, inspiring and encouraging for teachers across all subjects. The format of the seminars was intended to promote collegiality and engagement with space and time for building relationships.

The seminars tried to create opportunities for teachers themselves to share their knowledge, resources, practices and experiences. Teachers collaborated in setting assessments, sharing assessments, moderation of examination scripts, PowerPoint presentations used in classes.

Specific activities included:

- Three Educator Seminars each year over the 8 years of the project. A total of 21 seminars running on the first or second Saturday of each Term
- Tuition Support Workshops to build specific skills focusing on an out-of-school-time tuition programme with a particular focus on implementing a differentiated teaching methodology, self-directed learning and metacognitive strategies
- School based support visits to reinforce and support the implementation of ideas shared at the seminars and workshops
- Staging of inter-school activities such as an annual club competition, excursions to festivals, fun days and academic camps

What did we learn?

Through developing the communities of practice within the Inkanyezi Project we tried to ensure a few things for teachers and mentors:

1. Empowered individuals and groups to influence issues that affect them and their school community
2. Participation through engagement with issues and each other
3. Inclusivity with support, recognising that some people may need additional support to overcome barriers
4. Build confidence and provide motivation

Blurring the boundaries…

We saw that partnerships between teachers and schools were formed, some more tightly than others. These alliances initially formed, to some extent, based on mutual interest, but over the years have grown beyond this initial intention, and are likely to persist beyond the life of the project.

> *"Through this programme we have been quite lucky that we don't see each other as individual schools any more, we've actually become a family…"*

Real World Wins…

Early on, and several times over the life of project we tried to utilise a number of electronic platforms to promote the CoP outside of the face to face sessions. These have included web-based forums, specialist teacher networking tools (such as Edmodo, FaceBook Groups) and group messaging applications such as WhatsApp. None of these gained significant traction such that they might be considered essential to the success of the CoP. What we learned is that, for our purposes, the real world interactions were still the most effective.

Practice Pays…

Each session was followed by a feedback survey. Consistently, teachers identified practical skills that could be applied in their classes as a most sought after request. Many of the most successful sessions for participating teachers were those which responded to this need.

> *"I have been able to take back a lot of information and techniques that I have been able to apply in my classroom, for me that was key…"*

…and Novelty is Needed

When attendance was seen to lag the introduction of a novel, innovative topic or speaker would see interest and attendance spike. The success came from finding a balance between the practical and the path-breaking.

> *"You are able to meet a lot of very interesting people, very intellectual people, and they give you a lot of ideas of how to teach, especially with new technologies. It was really worth it to come to every single EDS."*

Consistency…

The benefits accrued to those teachers who attended consistently, who were able to connect and re-connect with their peers regularly. The fact that seminars were held at set intervals (the first Saturday of each new term), at the same time and generally at the same venue may have contributed to the establishment of a sense of being part of something that had become more than a one-off event.

Teachers were also involved in other project activities which created opportunities for connecting in different contexts, which further cemented the community bonds, and enabled cross-fertilisation and sharing of ideas.

In many ways the most successful CoP outcomes were not contrived through a series of perfectly crafted activities, but arose organically through the structured provision of time, space and topic catalysts. This mirrors the theoretical background to effective CoP where outcomes reflect a natural process of human development based on learning from peers and sharing good practice.

References

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