Cultivating Communities of Practice to build organisational capacity: a case study of the Philippines-Australia Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao (BEAM) Project

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Abstract

Building on the seminal work of Lave and Wenger (1991), this paper examines how the latent potential of communities of practice (CoPs) can be harnessed as a strategic resource for building capacity and improving organisational performance. In particular it focuses on a case study of developing communities of practice in the Philippines Department of Education (DepEd) in Regions XI, XII and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) which have been supported under the Philippines- Australia Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao (BEAM) Project.

This paper is a study in progress of community building activities sponsored by BEAM to strengthen local DepEd management capacity to assume greater responsibilities following the passing of the Governance of Basic Education Act 2001. It maps and examines the process of connecting staff who were previously working independently performing the same function to come together to form knowledge sharing networks. Real examples of the changes that emerging CoPs are delivering are also provided. Discussion then turns to the new challenges CoPs face in sustaining the momentum and benefits that these professional networks are yielding.

Background

Learning is a fundamental driver of development (Falk 1997). At a national level, learning is vital to poverty alleviation as well as social development and economic growth (AusAID 1996). This link between learning and development is reflected in the goal of the Philippines- Australia BEAM project which aims 'to improve the quality of and access to basic education in Mindanao thereby contributing to the attainment of peace & development in the Southern Philippines' (AusAID 2004).

Similarly, learning is also important in an organisational context where scholars have proven that higher-order learning and the cultivation of the knowledge of practitioners determine the success of an organisation (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, Cohen & Prusak 2001). To address this issue, the first component of BEAM Stage 1 focused on management capacity building. The objective of management capacity building was 'to assist in enhancing the skills, knowledge and capacity of education managers,

planners and evaluators working in basic education in order to provide the management support framework to facilitate the downstream improvement of the quality and outcomes of student learning in target communities' (AusAID 2001). To address this challenge, a systematic approach to build capacity in DepEd has been used to develop professional networks that connect practitioners who had previously been working on the same activities in isolation. This approach was highly praised in the interim project review and recommended to be documented (Baumgart et al. 2003). This paper therefore attempts to capture the experience of BEAM in building the capacity of DepEd.

Mindanao context

Mindanao, located in the Southern Philippines, is home to 20 percent of the population and approximately one third of the nation's poor (DFAT 2003). Research conducted in 2000 found that, from the 81 provinces in the Philippines, six of the ten poorest provinces were in Mindanao (NSCB 2003). The underlying causes of poverty are heavy dependence on argiculture, lack of adequate social safety nets and poor levels of educational achievement (World Bank 2000).

Within an educational context, Mindanao faces a number of significant issues in service delivery including (AusAID 2004):

- consistently low performance indicators
- consistently low participation rates
- lack of government capacity to support, implement and sustain national change agendas at the local level
- on-going impact of the unstable security situation

Yet, with the exception of the security situation, these problems are not peculiar to the provision of basic education in Mindanao alone – in fact, to varying degrees these issues impact on the quality and delivery of basic education across the entire archipelago. However, their incidence, magnitude and impact is far more pronounced in Mindanao than elsewhere in the Philippines given the overall context of severe poverty among a large percentage of the population, the relative geographic isolation of large numbers of communities, and the "social isolation" perceived by many of these same communities as a result of their cultural and religious diversity in comparison to the mainstream population (AusAID 2004).

Each issue provides BEAM with a challenge to address through a set of targeted interventions to effect change. However, the focus of this paper concentrates on the specific approach taken to build local DepEd capacity to implement and sustain national change agendas. In particular it considers the approach taken to implement the Governance of Basic Education Act 2001 (Republic Act 9155 (RA9155)) which devolves central decision-making to Regional, Divisional and school levels.

What are Communities of Practice?

To strengthen local capacity in DepEd, assistance provided under BEAM has taken a community building approach. Before describing how this support has been provided, it is useful to firstly define what the term community means and how it applies in an

organisational context to DepEd. In defining community, Kenny (1999, p.35) states that:

> *'descriptively the term refers to groups of people. But it implies more than this. Groups become communities when people feel part of a network; when a sense of solidarity, trust and mutual security is generated'*

This definition alludes to the important role of social capital in being the "glue" that binds people into a community. The networks, trust, and shared values and norms, or social capital, between people promotes effective communication and mobilises individual expertise and skills (Falk 2000). This construction of community can also be applied to organisations where CoPs exist (Cohen and Prusak 2001). CoPs refer to 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger et al. 2002, p.4). This line of inquiry contends that learning in CoPs is very effective as situated knowledge is shared among peers who engage in the same occupational practice (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Organisational benefits of CoPs

Within DepEd there are many CoPs including teachers, school heads, school district supervisors, schools division superintendents and educational administrators among others. However it is difficult to quantify the contribution of CoPs as their assets are largely hidden and cannot be recorded on a balance sheet or organisation chart (Lesser & Stork 2001). Nonetheless, an analysis of several organisations in a range of sectors led Lesser & Stork (2001, p.836) to conclude that the social capital generated by CoPs leads to behaviour change and improved organisational performance by:

1. decreasing the learning curve of new employees

2. responding more rapidly to customer needs and inquiries

3. reducing rework and preventing "reinvention of the wheel"

4. spawning new ideas for products and services

Drawing on the findings of this research, BEAM has purposively supported initiatives to establish and strengthen the social capital within and across DepEd CoPs.

Building Communities of Practice in DepEd

The participation of community members is essential to promoting ownership as '…we more fully value the things we create, and we learn much better the things we do ourselves' (Homan 1999, p.38). Kingsley et al. (1997) also advocate active participation in community development activities in order to avoid dependency and promote self-confidence and responsibility within beneficiary communities. In an organisational context, the community development principle of beneficiary participation implies that change strategies should be consultative and collaborative. Therefore BEAM employed a participatory action research approach to progressively build the capacity of focus system areas in DepEd which can be mapped against the stages of CoP development as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Stages of CoP development in DepEd (Adapted from Wenger 1998, p.2 and Wenger et al. 2002, p.69)
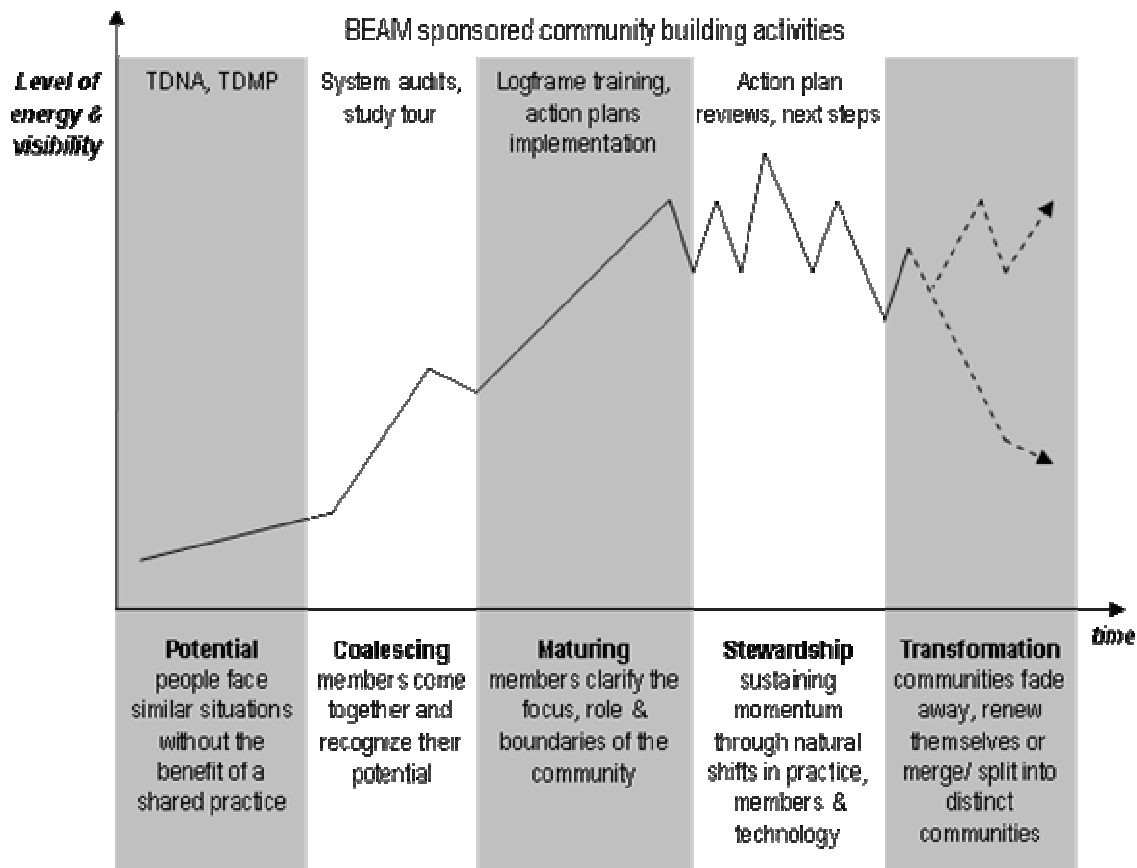
In the potential stage, training and development needs analyses (TDNAs) were undertaken through focus group discussions with Regional and Divisional offices in Regions XI, XII and ARMM. The needs of Regional and Divisional offices were then documented, validated, prioritised and classified into policy, systems and training needs. Priority system areas for improvement identified included planning, human resources, management information systems (MIS) and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The analyses also revealed that many staff were working independently on the same task in the priority system areas so there was a need to connect "islands of knowledge" through networks of professional communities. Drawing on the TDNA, a training and development master plan (TDMP) was developed that articulated the findings of the TDNA into a program of capacity building interventions. The TDMP was then endorsed and incorporated by each DepEd region.

The coalescing stage involves activities that 'allow members to build relationships, trust, and an awareness of their common interests and needs' (Wenger et al. 2002, p.82). Activities sponsored by BEAM to nurture CoPs included workshops where identified members from each focus system area undertook an audit of the system's strengths and existing capacity. The ability of these systems to meet new responsibilities under RA9155 was also critically reviewed to identify performance gaps. During this stage, BEAM also sponsored a customised study tour to Australia to examine how the four focus systems operate in a decentralised environment. This

activity stimulated ideas among participants of how performance shortfalls may be addressed by considering different aspects of Australian systems that could be modified to the Philippines context. Another significant outcome of the study tour was the improved social networks that developed between practitioners as a result of living and working together.

DepEd communities then entered the maturation stage of development. Upon returning to the Philippines, participants had a range of loosely structured plans for improvement. To focus these ideas, and to establish a means to monitor and evaluate improvement initiatives, training was provided on the development of logical frameworks (LogFrames). The LogFrame approach enabled system area teams to articulate a shared goal and purpose to guide their action plans. Gantt charts and cost schedules were also developed. During this time, there was a change in formal leadership of the four focus systems from School Division Superintendents to regional managers of functional areas. This shift in leadership was significant as it gave practitioners the responsibility for action plan implementation. These team leaders worked closely with BEAM staff who provided any necessary assistance including technical advice and guidance, training and procurement of equipment to support action plan implementation.

In supporting the implementation of action plans, BEAM assisted DepEd CoPs address geographic boundaries which have limited interaction and learning particularly in rural and remote areas such as the island divisions of ARMM. This support included sponsoring face-to-face workshops to address specific training and system needs as well as the establishment of local area networks and internet connectivity in every division of each region. In doing so, CoPs have been strengthened as social interaction has increased through virtual as well as through face-to-face means.

Monitoring of action plan implementation was guided by the indicators and means of verification defined in the relevant system area LogFrame. Monitoring reports detailed completed outputs, outstanding milestones, critical tasks for the following period and any issues or constraints affecting performance. Initially considerable support was provided by BEAM staff in preparing monthly monitoring reports however team leaders quickly assumed primary responsibility for this task as their capacity and confidence grew.

Emanating from these reports were stories which were shared within and across communities of practice. For example, in the ARMM MIS action plan, basic computer training was scheduled for all divisional staff that required more computers than what existed in the office. Rather than adopt a deficiency paradigm, or depend wholly on BEAM, the local MIS coordinator delivered the training by arranging access to computers that were donated to a local school. This story was reported and shared with the RXI Planning team which encountered a similar difficulty in delivering training that required the use of computers for instruction. After internalising the ARMM MIS story, the RXI planning team was able to locate and use existing resources from local schools to deliver their training. This story is an excellent example of the sustainable benefits of CoPs. Indeed storytelling is a powerful tool for

sharing knowledge in CoPs and promoting organisational change as it is non-hierarchical, builds trust and mutual understanding and unleashes passion in practitioners (Denning 2000).

The approach taken for evaluating action plans was to document insights, ideas and procedures which are a key element of CoPs (Wenger et al. 2002). Team leaders were responsible for drafting action plan reviews in collaboration with team members who had been actively involved in the implementation of action plans. Guidelines were developed to provide a common structure for documenting ideas and insights stemming from the experience teams gained from action plan development and implementation. In many cases action plan teams conducted post-training evaluations of the knowledge gained from the training and applied to the workplace themselves.

To support DepEd CoPs enter the stewardship stage of development, a conference was held in General Santos City to promote organisational learning. This forum provided an opportunity to share knowledge gained within and across system areas and focus regions about what worked, what did not and why to distill the lessons learned from implementing system action plans.

Concurrent sessions were held by each system area so practitioners could share their resources, achievements and insights with one another and build stronger networks across the three focus regions. For example in the monitoring and evaluation session the ARMM M&E team reported difficulty in sourcing funds from DepEd for the reproduction of teacher and school head performance frameworks for schools. Another M&E specialist from Region XI told of how she experienced the same difficulty which was overcome by approaching the local school board. This insight is now being applied in ARMM.

Following the system area sessions, regional sessions were conducted. These forums provided an opportunity for each system area to report on their achievements to peers from other system areas in their region. These sessions also proved to be very useful in sharing knowledge and lessons learned. For example, in the regional session for ARMM, a senior regional administrator acknowledged his limited knowledge of what had been achieved in other system areas before the conference. The administrator also shared the insights he gained in understanding how the different system areas complement one another citing the web-enabled database supported by MIS and used by HR as an example.

Similarly there were many other instances where stories and resources were exchanged either in formal sessions or informally during breaks, lunch and the conference dinner. To attempt to measure the improved social connectedness of practitioners, a brief survey was conducted. Of the 47 respondents, 63.83% strongly agreed with the remainder agreeing that the community building approach used to strengthen their system area had improved their working relationship with peers from other divisions. Similar results were recorded for the usefulness of the conference in improving networks between practitioners from other regions. Likewise, the most common qualitative feedback (n=22) on the aspect of the conference that most helped people learn was the system area sessions.

DepEd CoPs are now entering the next stage of development and have already started to consider how the momentum gained can be sustained, how the practice can be extended beyond organisational boundaries and how changes in membership can be accommodated. One area of great potential, discussed in the conference plenary, is to better utilise newly installed information and communication technology which offers the prospect of increasing virtual social interaction and dialogue between practitioners and CoPs (Allee 2000).

The success of this community building model has also been adopted for other BEAM sponsored initiatives including the capacity building of school heads in developing and implementing school improvement plans.

Conclusion

This paper considered how the potential of CoPs can be harnessed as a strategic resource to build organisational capacity and improve performance. In particular it examined how the BEAM project has supported DepEd CoPs in Regions XI, XII and ARMM to improve the quality of basic education administration.

Assistance to expand DepEd capacity has taken a community building approach by building on existing capacity and resources in key system areas to promote increased confidence, ownership and responsibility. The model developed provides an effective means for promoting knowledge creation, learning and social capital development to guide future actions. In turn, the improved social connectedness of practitioners and CoPs provide broader knowledge and resources which offers DepEd the promise of sustaining improved organisational performance and Mindanao the promise of greater social and economic development.

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