

**I AM BECAUSE WE ARE: CREATING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AMONG
MALT LEARNERS AT ROYAL ROADS UNIVERSITY**

By

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We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

“The orbit of any one planet depends on the combined motion of all the planets, not to mention the action of all these on each other” - Isaac Newton (as cited in Lake, Quinn, Richardson, & Stadel, 2004, para. 1).

The increasing complexities of modern life render traditional leadership approaches in our organizations obsolete, necessitating new strategies and ways of leading.

The Master of Arts in Leadership and Training (MALT) program at Royal Roads University cultivates leaders for this complex and interconnected tomorrow. This Action Research project is premised on the belief that learning is a way of being and not a destination to reach. Against the backdrop of ancient and new sciences, it explores the feasibility of creating a sustainable Community of Practice among MALT learners and graduates. Such Community of Practice could become a leadership gathering space, epitomized by the practices of collaboration, support, and lifelong leadership learning.

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Learning about our human interconnectedness has been a fascinating journey, where every path and direction seems to have no end. Everything somehow relates to everything else. The more I explore and experience this web of life, the more I realize that I cannot acknowledge only some people – because it will exclude related others. Therefore, I want you to know that if you are, or have been, a part of my life, you have played a role in me being who I currently am. Thus, you have participated in this research project, and I honour you for what you have contributed to me along the way.

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CHAPTER ONE – FOCUS AND FRAMING

Introduction

“I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Nussbaum, 2003a, p. 3).

The Universe has unforeseen ways of presenting us with guidance and direction, if we only ask and remain open to hearing the answer. In the winter of 2002/2003, I spent nine weeks cycling and backpacking solo through Chile and Argentina. This personal journey served as a catalyst to yet another transition period in my life, initiating a chapter of collaboration, co-creation, and interconnectedness. While traveling and reflecting on what this next period of my life would bring forth, an African word – Ubuntu – crossed my path. This word and what it signifies has subsequently changed my life, illuminating a deep yearning that I have had for a long time, yet was unable to articulate clearly. This research project explores the articulation and expression of this yearning by creating viable applications for Ubuntu - a concept that moves me like no other.

Ubuntu is a social philosophy that originates in South Africa and is premised on the belief that all things and people are interconnected and bound together. For South Africans, it defines the meaning of being human. Ubuntu means honouring the dignity of each person, valuing the good of the community above self-interest, and striving to help the people in the spirit of service while developing mutually affirming and enhancing relationships with everything around us, people and planet alike (Colff, 2002; Lessem & Nussbaum, 1996; Nussbaum, 2003a, 2003b). Ubuntu can be summed up as “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Nussbaum, 2003a, p. 3).

How does one introduce a different cultural perspective, a new set of cultural values, and

a potentially different way of being? Can our Western, and for the most part individualistic, society embrace the humanistic culture of South Africa? Lessem and Nussbaum (1996) describe the Western culture as the world of pragmatism and entrepreneurship, and the Southern as the world where “the power of the interpersonal, the consensus and legitimacy of the group, the networks of communities form the basis of humanity” (p. 18). The more I explored and reflected, the more I wondered, could these two worlds meet? Even the Master of Arts in Leadership and Training (MALT) program, which started with a strong emphasis on creating a learning community and collaborating in learning during its first year, shifted focus onto our individual major projects during the second year, diminishing the sense of community and collaborative learning. This happened despite the fact that the Revised MALT Curricular Framework stresses the importance of the continuing support of learners, without which “the learners may feel somewhat adrift and neglected” (Advisory Board and Instructional Team, 2000, p. 19). In parallel, many learners have been going through a range of transformational changes in their personal and professional lives throughout this program and often needed the support of their learning community.

There is a certain paradox here, whereby on the one hand, the MALT learning community dissipates into isolated and learner-initiated islands of self-managed support and conversations, and on the other, the wide range of theories and practices MALT learners are exposed to during the studies, highlight the perspective of interconnectedness and interdependence of all life. This interconnectedness is eloquently summarized by O’Murchu (1999) in his exploration of science and spirituality, “In a quantum universe, all life is understood to operate within the context of relational interaction. Everything is affected by everything else” (p. 34). How do we embrace this inherent interconnectedness, allow and

welcome it into existence and into our lives, in an intentional, conscious, and tangible manner?

While contemplating the above dilemma, seeking for ways to integrate the worlds of West and South, I came across a concept that would convey my passion for Ubuntu in a tangible form that could be apply to MALT. The concept is Communities of Practice. The inquiry became more defined and articulated, and the research direction emerged with the following question:

How can an intentional Community of Practice support MALT learners during the major project phase, and beyond?

The sub-questions are:

1. How do communities of practice originate, evolve, function, and sustain themselves?
2. How do we learn? What is the meaning of lifelong and social learning?
3. How can Royal Roads University (RRU) participate in the creation of a lasting, sustainable community of practice, for MALT learners and graduates? What are the benefits, both for the university and the learners?
4. What are the future trends in the world of learning and leadership, and how do they fit with the idea of a sustainable, evolving community of practice?

Answers to these sub-questions will provide a better understanding of the foundations, feasibility, requirements, and benefits of creating a MALT Community of Practice. These sub-questions will be explored in detail in the literature review section, through the findings of this study, and in the course of the evolving learning and reflection of the researcher of this Action Research project.

Communities of Practice

“We should look for someone to eat and drink with before looking for something to eat and drink, for dining alone is leading the life of a lion or wolf” – Epicurus (as cited in ThinkExist, n.d.-b, para. 2).

Communities of practice are the core concept of this research. To some extent, it already exists within the MALT program, if we look at Wenger’s description: “Communities of practice are 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, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). The intent here is to expand this concept, while shifting the focus towards our learning environment at RRU. How do we self-organize and learn together, while supporting each other on our lifelong learning and leadership journeys? How can we, MALT learners and graduates, incorporate a Community of Practice into our learning environment – both within RRU and afterwards?

Historically, communities of practice are not a new idea. As Etienne Wenger states, “they were our first knowledge-based social structures, back when we lived in caves and gathered around the fire to discuss strategies for cornering prey” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5). This happened a long time ago, and in many ways life was simpler then. Now we live in the era when “a weekday edition of The New York Times contains more information than the average

person was likely to come across in a lifetime during 17th century England” (Pritchett, 1994, p. 21). How is a person to successfully navigate this world of permanent white water? (Vaill, 1996)

Social learning and communities of practice might provide a possible course to navigate through these rough waters. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger started using the term “communities of practice” in the context of social learning, placing it in social relationships and proposing that “learning involved a process of engagement in a ‘community of practice’” (as cited in Smith, 2003, para. 2). Community of practice is a special type of informal network that emerges from a desire of a group of people to collaborate more effectively. These informal networks are usually small groups of people who have worked together over a period of time and through extensive communication have developed a common sense of purpose and a desire to share work-related knowledge and experience. The definition therefore might be as simple as “a community of practice is a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139). Similarly, Lesser and Prusak propose that communities of practice are formed “by individuals who need to associate themselves with others facing similar issues and challenges within the organization” (as cited in Lesser, Fontaine, & Slusher, 2000, p. 123). Wenger proceeds to describe a community of practice as

“not just a website, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Having others who share your overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 34).

Learning is a core element of communities of practice, which is clearly expressed by many. Sharp (1997) writes that “because communities of practice generate extraordinary learning, they are among the most important structures of any organization where thinking matters” (para. 8). Wheatley (2002a) adds that “people learn best in community, when they are engaged with one another, when everyone is both student and teacher, expert and apprentice, in a rich exchange of experiences and learnings” (Sec. 6, para. 8). And Pór (2001c) says that

more than a ‘community of learners,’ a community of practice is also a ‘community that learns.’ Not merely peers exchanging ideas around the water cooler, sharing and benefiting from each other's expertise, but colleagues committed to jointly develop better practices (para. 7).

This learning is not simply theoretical, for the operative word is “practice,” as explained by Lesser and Prusak, “the word ‘practice’ implies ‘knowledge in action’” (as cited in Lesser et al., 2000, p. 125). Through collaboration among its members, “a community of practice generates a common, shared understanding of events and an action orientation for dealing with such events the next time they arise” (Sharp, 1997, Sec. 2, para. 3). Therefore, a vital ingredient and a *raison d’être* of communities of practice is creating and sharing knowledge among its members, in a way that allows for its immediate application, in real-life situations and events. This is social learning. This is what Wenger (1998b) refers to, writing that

Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact

with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly (p. 45).

This is the idea that learning lives in relationships, among people. Learning is not something that has a beginning and an ending, nor is it measured based on the assumption that individuals possess it inside their heads. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part. Smith (2003) describes learning as a phenomenon that occurs

in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory (Sec. 5, para. 2).

The scope of a community of practice is not limited to one organization. Often communities of practice cross organizational boundaries in their nature and depend more on the interest of the community's members than on their organizational belonging. Pór (2001b) quotes John Seely Brown, VP and Chief Scientist, Xerox Corp. as saying, "Emergent communities [of practice] that span the boundaries of an organization are likely conduits of external and innovative views into the organization" (para. 3). Further, Lesser and Prusak add that even the word itself – community – suggests constraints not "by typical geographic, business unit, or functional boundaries, but rather by common tasks, contexts, and work interests" (as cited in Lesser et al., 2000, p. 125). It is evident even in our MALT learner cohort, during all the online courses, whereby the established connections among the learners span geographical,

professional, and cultural areas.

When looking at a sustainability of a community of practice, the focus shifts from “build it and they will come” to “build it – and will they stay?” Wenger (1998b) talks about the requirement of a community of practice in its temporal dimension being a matter of “sustaining enough mutual engagement in pursuing an enterprise together to share [some] significant learning” (p. 86). How is this mutual engagement sustained over time? Richard McDermott (2001a) talks about the greatest dangers to communities of practice as the following:

- For growing communities - to lose energy and drift into apathy, letting the coordinator carry all the responsibility for community care-taking. When the coordinator moves on to other interests or work, then the community can easily fall apart; and
- For successful communities - that they become too enthralled with their own success and see their work as that of "preserving the practice" from change (Sec. 3, para. 9).

While there is no magic potion to sustain a community of practice indefinitely, various suggestions are mentioned. McDermott (2001a) proposes several possible actions: getting respected leaders involved as soon as possible as a way to build energy in the community, maintaining personal contact among community members, and developing an active, passionate core group. In *Knowledge and Communities* (Lesser et al., 2000), contributor Jeanne Liedtka specifies important community of practice qualities being a sense of commitment and ownership among members, whereby the commitment is to the common purpose and to each other, and the ownership is of outcomes and the means to achieve them (p. 142). According to Hubert Saint-

Onge and Debra Wallace's argument in their book "Leveraging Communities of Practice for Strategic Advantage," organizations will need to provide more than casual support in order to maximize the value produced in communities of practice (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003, p. 2).

Communities of practice are an interesting paradox. They are informal and organic. They grow and thrive as their focus and dynamics engage community members. However, to make them really valuable, inclusive and vibrant, they need to be nurtured, cared for, and legitimated. "They need a very human touch" says McDermott (2001a, Sec. 4, para. 1). Too much support and they lose their freedom to emerge; too little and they wither. On the other hand, organizations have little experience in how to develop this sort of organic element. The challenges communities of practice pose and the factors that help them thrive are a fascinating area of research and future learning.

Learning cannot be designed. Ultimately, it belongs to the realm of experience and practice. It follows the negotiation of meaning; it moves on its own terms. It slips through the cracks; it creates its own cracks. Learning happens, design or no design. ... In fact, the whole human world is itself fast becoming one large organization, which is the object of design and which must support the learning we need in order to ensure there is to be a tomorrow. Those who can understand the informal yet structured, experiential yet social, character of learning - and can translate their insight into designs in the service of learning - will be the architects of our tomorrow. (Wenger, 1998b, p. 225)