

**A Critical Lens on Learning Communities:  
An International Comparative Study of Higher Education Practice**  
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**Abstract**

The term 'learning community' can be defined either broadly or narrowly depending on its context. It is a term now widely used in Education settings as varied as in schools and universities; or, in other institutions, e.g., business work places, by many researchers (see, for example, Brown & Duguid, 1991; Dufour et al., 2006; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Wenger et al., 2002). A review of the Literature has demonstrated a significant change in the meaning of the term 'learning community' and this evolution in its usage has reinforced the need to investigate how participants in different contexts understand their situation if it is described as a learning community. As understood now 'learning community' is more than just a group of people who simply work together in the same space.

This cross-cultural study addressed *inter alia* the question: how do academics in Australia and China perceive their work places as 'learning communities'? It sought to do so by examining the constituent issues of (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 interaction, proximity and mutual engagement.

The unique data presented in this paper attempts to fill a gap that was evident from the literature search where learning community studies have focused primarily on a single case whereas here the study explored learning communities operating in two university academic departments in Australia and China respectively. The study also examined the way academics valued their work contexts as learning communities and their perception of team work, sharing and flexibility of role relationships. 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.

Among the important findings from the study was that the role of national culture, reflecting historic-socio-political influences, was central in understanding respondent's perceptions of the six constituent elements listed above. The paper will present some of these data and locate it within the literature.

This paper will be of interest to researchers in education, particularly in higher education, but also those interested in academics' work lives and policy development and implementation and more generally those who have utilised the term 'learning community' in their own teaching or research.

**Key Words**

Learning Community, Learning Organisation, Professional Learning Community, Community of Practice, Cross-Cultural, Perception, Higher Education

## **Introduction**

Undoubtedly views about teaching and learning in higher education over the recent past have been characterised by tremendous innovation and change. For example, theories of learning have tended to shift from behaviorism as conceptualised by such educational psychologists as Briggs, Gagne, Skinner and Mager, to social constructivism, such as connectivism, navigationism, communal constructivism, activity theory or socio-cultural theory. Constructivism as used here emerged from the cognitive perspective which emphasised learning-by-doing, viewing lecturers as facilitators who scaffold learning environments in which students construct their own knowledge in the context of problem solving process. This shift in focus has come with a concomitant interest in the related concept 'learning communities' and in other contexts, such as Learning Organisation (Argyris, 2002; Atak & Erturgut, 2010; Kline & Saunders, 1998; Senge, 2006; Wenger, 1998), Professional Learning Community (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Hord, 2004; Jones, Jones, Pickus, & Ludwig, 2010; Stoll, 2007), and Community of Practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mitchell, McKenna, & Young, 2008; Nagy & Burch, 2009; Viskovic, 2006; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009).

The term 'learning community' can be defined either broadly or narrowly depending on its context. It is a term now widely used in Education settings as varied as in schools and universities; or, in other institutions, e.g., business work places. A review of the Literature has demonstrated a significant change in the meaning of the term 'learning community' and this evolution in its usage has reinforced the need to investigate how participants in different contexts understand their situation if it is described as a learning community. As understood now 'learning community' is more than just a group of people who simply work together in the same space.

## **Literature Review**

Anecdotal evidence suggested that the prototype of the learning community can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Dewey's (1938) experimental school or Meiklejohn's experimental college, both of which served as a basis for educational reforms. When learning is applied to community as in the term 'learning community', two major definitional categories of learning community surfaced, namely Professional Learning Community (PLC) and Community of Practice (CoP). Both proved to be driving forces for enhancing pedagogy, deepening knowledge and sustaining the growth of educational organisations with strong learning culture. Both treated meaning as socially constructed through collective activity rather than by the individual absorption of knowledge.

The concept of PLC was promoted by Hord (1997) and DuFour and Eaker (1998) and described as “an on-going process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Lave and Wenger (1991) brought the concept of CoP to a wide audience, and the term has been undergoing significant changes; however, the key foci remain as described by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) as “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” (p. 4). A list of attributes of each concept was presumed to be essential; for example, Hord (2004) defined five attributes of PLC that are in accord with a number of other researchers (see, for example, DuFour, 2009; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Youngs & King, 2002) namely: Supportive and shared leadership; Shared values and vision; Collective learning and application of learning; Supportive conditions; and Shared practice (p. 7). Similarly, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) asserted that CoP is comprised of three constituent elements: a shared domain of knowledge; a community of people who engage in joint activities and discussions; and a shared practice. Consequently, the review of the current literature related to PLC, CoP and other related learning community knowledge terms, suggests that while concepts and underlying constructs of learning community vary considerably, when considering the theoretical dimensions much common ground in relation to the concept exists.

This paper provides a brief overview of the meanings of learning communities and also presents key findings from an international study which addressed inter alia the question: how do academics in Australia and China perceive their work places as ‘learning communities’? It sought to do so by examining the constituent issues of (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 equality of group membership and (vi) the descriptions of interaction, proximity and mutual engagement.

### **Research Methods and Instruments**

As the researcher investigated participants’ perceptions and mapped their understanding of particular phenomena this was seen broadly as a Qualitative study (Burns, 2000). This study is also a case study as it explored in depth ‘bounded’ systems (Burns, 2000). For this current research, two cases were examined and involved participants in two countries (Australia and China) and in two universities.

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach to data gathering (Burns, 2000), which included questionnaires, document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The data collected by these multiple methods were designed to capture the different stakeholders' perceptions about 'learning community'. This approach allowed for the triangulation of different points of view and contributes to the credibility, trustworthiness, and believability of the research.

The survey instruments were designed in three sections; the first sought biographical information, concerned with gender, age, qualification, position, employment status, and years of work experiences. The second section of the survey instruments were developed on the basis of the six constituent elements of a learning community which were operationalised from the literature. 40 question items were designed to capture participants' perceptions to address these six criteria. These items employed a five-point Likert-type scales and respondents were asked to score their perceptions on a 1-to-5 scale where 5 = 'Strongly agree', 4 = 'agree', 3 = 'Neutral', 2 = 'Disagree' and 1 = 'Strongly disagree'. Open-ended questions also were incorporated in the instrument in order to obtain responses which reflect participants' true feelings, and allow them to give their evidence in their own words and to express their views fully. The survey instruments were developed in both English and Chinese languages to ensure that linguistic and cultural consistencies for Chinese respondents. The development of the interview questions also was designed in the same manner as the second section in the questionnaire instruments to address the six dimensions identified from the Literature and considered essential for development of a learning community.

As a cross-culture study, the research instruments were subject to the translations from English to Chinese. Both versions of the instruments were sent to an individual reviewer, in Australia and China, to ensure wording suitability, content validity, readability and appropriateness to their respective contexts.

### **Sampling**

For ease of access an 'Opportunity' (Burns, 2000, pp. 92-93) and 'Purposeful' sampling strategy (Burns, 2000, p. 465) were employed to recruit a total sample number of 37 participants who were from two known university academic departments in Australia (AU) and China (CU). 17 were Australian lecturers and accounted for 46% of the total participants. 20 were Chinese lecturers representing 54% of the total participants. The sample frame was not intended to represent the whole population of academics stakeholders in the two countries (Burns, 2000). However, for the scope of this study this sample gave valuable insights into a range of users' perceptions relating to learning community.

The majority of the respondents from AU and CU were male. The percentages of males from these two university groups were 64.7% in AU, 65% in CU, respectively. Two groups of university participants were different in age. More than half of the participants from CU were in age group 30-39 (55%), whereas most AU participants were aged from 50 years up (41.2%). Two academic cohorts also had different level of qualification. In the AU, 52.9% of participants held the doctoral degree, 41.2% held the Master degree and another 5.9% held Bachelor degree as highest education qualification. In the CU, 70% obtained Doctorate degree, 10% obtained Master degree and 20% obtained Bachelor degree. All AU participants were academic staff. The majority of Chinese academic staff (15, 75%) were employed in the Chinese university. There were 59 (84.3%) participants who were working full-time. Of those, there were 14 (82.4%) in the AU, 19 (95%) in the CU. The majority of the AU respondents had 5-15 years work experiences (9, 52.9%). Of the remaining 8 there were equal proportions of AU participants having less than 5 years work experience to those having 16 or more years work experience (23.5%, respectively). In CU, 8 (40%) respondents had less than 5 years work experience, 7 (35%) had 5-15 years work experience, and another 5 (25%) had 16 or more years work experience.

## **Results and Discussion**

Data from the 40 items on the questionnaire from the two groups of Australian and Chinese university participants were entered into SPSS for analysis. The focus was concerned with how much difference these two culturally different cohorts perceived in terms of each constituent element of a learning community. In all, of the 40 items in the survey the Chinese lecturers rated 28 of these items statistically significant higher than the lecturers located in Australia. Interestingly, there was no item to which the Australian lecturers rated the question higher compared to the Chinese lecturers. The Chinese university lecturers on average gave more scores at the level 4 (agree) range on the 1 to 5 point Likert scale. On the other hand, the Australian lecturers were more likely to give responses to the questions in the middle range, i.e., around the 3 level on the five point Likert scale.

### Perceptions of shared mission, vision, values and goals

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) argued that shared mission, vision, values and goals must be clearly defined taking into consideration what must be known and able to be completed successfully. They proposed that institutions can be seen as a professional learning community where a collective sense of efficacy can be built throughout the organization by establishing a clear purpose which is widely shared (DuFour et al., 2010, pp. 29-30).

The data in this study showed that the two case universities have developed explicit mission/vision statements and a set of values that embody their commitments. These statements can be found easily either from their websites or publications of annual reports. It was interesting to investigate how Australian and Chinese participants -- in their employees' role -- perceived their institutions' missions, visions, values and goals and, in particular, the 'rhetoric' of their organisations. Four question items were designed to examine these as well as provide an opportunity for the two groups to decide, for example, the degree to which they would agree that their organisational mission and vision statement were clearly communicated and to what extent they had developed into a learning community with shared values and goals.

The data showed that there were considerable differences between the Australian and Chinese lecturers' perceptions of their understanding of mission, vision, values and goals of their organisations. For example, item 1 "I understand the vision and mission of the university",  $F(1, 36) = 0.013, p < .91$ , the means of the Australian lecturers ( $M = 2.24$ ) were significantly low but similar to that of the Chinese cohorts ( $M = 2.20$ ). This was also the case when it came to interview questions such as, 'What is fundamental purpose of [organisation name] and can you describe the mission?' Some interviewees from CU commented that the staple role of the mission was not known, making statements such as: "I don't know... I may have seen in a document, but I don't think I've ever taken much notice of it". Australian lecturers also indicated their unfamiliarity with the mission statement by reporting that: 'I have never read it. Yes, that's why I said it is not clear' (M1, UNI, AU, 1, 14/10). It is quite clear that the public statements from the two universities in this regard were clearly documented but they seem to be too far from the academics' personal objectives to have any impact. Simply proclaiming their institutional mission and vision provided no basis for achieving a shared agreement and clarity of direction among the university members. This finding is highlighted in the literature by Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) who pointed out that successful learning communities "thrive where the goals and needs of an organization intersect with the passions and aspirations of participants" (p. 32), whereas lack of interests in the stated strategic development among university employees "fails to inspire its members, the community will flounder" (p. 32).

The demonstration of commitment to continuous improvement

In addition, the increasing focus on building and sustaining a learning community in educational contexts suggests that to ensure a shared mission, vision, values, and goals, all stakeholders have to understand that a commitment to continuous improvement is vital. As asserted by DuFour and his colleagues, "no organisation can continue to improve unless the people within it engage in ongoing learning" (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 194). Five items on the questionnaire contributed to

investigating the two cohorts' perceptions of commitment to continuous improvement. The statistical findings revealed significant differences for each item within the two national cohorts.

Australian lecturers had less positive mean scores than their Chinese counterparts. For example, item 8, "My university is engaged in an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement",  $F(1, 36) = 38.775, p < .001$ , the means of the Australian lecturers ( $M = 3.29$ ) were statistically significant lower than that of Chinese cohort ( $M = 4.85$ ), and item 9, "I agree that commitment is part of our university identity as a community",  $F(1, 36) = 26.642, p < .001$ , Chinese lecturers reported higher positive mean scores ( $M = 4.75$ ) than Australian lecturers ( $M = 3.53$ ). Interview data also supported this finding. Most of the positive views came from the Chinese lecturers who commented, for example, "I think the university does, yes; as a learning institute, you're always trying to improve (M3, UNI, CN, 3, 18/9). The interview data also revealed that there were notable differences between individuals and the institutional message regarding vision in the Australian university; for example, one lecturer reported, "I am most probably a bit of a critic, because my philosophy on education [more freedom]... [result in/] are maybe a little mismatched sometimes." (M1, UNI, AU, 1, 14/10). Another lecturer also expressed his uncertainty and concluded that, "it is never going to come to anything" when referring to the intention of their university to implement its stated commitment to continuous improvement (M2, UNI, AU, 2, 14/10). The working environment reported here diverges from the literature where it is suggested that learning community members must be taken in the "never-ending process of continuous improvement" and are committed to, and continuously reach toward, the organization's ideal mission, vision, values and goals (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 2009; Hord, 1997; Reichstetter, 2006). Wenger et al., (2002) also argued that, "without commitment to a domain, a learning community or a community of practice is just a group of friends" (p. 30). Communities of Practices continually define themselves by the needs of the community members, and are constantly changing to promote the community's development (Mitchell et al., 2008). The data reported above, however, revealed that if Australian academics were not convinced of the outcomes being met in their organisational mission and vision, they would not commit to an ongoing expansion of their competencies to achieve their institution's desired outcomes (Bierema, 1999) and the capacity to develop learning community was largely limited as their employees were not sufficiently committed to reach the ideal target.

Initiatives that develop and sustain a collaborative culture and collective enquiry

Learning communities are operationalised also through collaboration. Participants in this study were asked eleven questions with regards to the initiatives that a collaborative culture and collective enquiry were developed and sustained in their universities. The mean value from the Chinese responses was greater than that of the Australian responses. For example, item 15, "The

ways in which staff work and learn together are crucial to the development of university”  $F(1, 36) = 23.370, p < .001$ , Chinese lecturers ( $M = 4.65$ ) were much keener than Australian lecturers ( $M = 3.12$ ), and item 16, “ I have been encouraged throughout the work that I have conducted”  $F(1, 36) = 12.300, p < .001$ , the mean score of Chinese lecturers was much higher than the Australian cohort ( $M = 4.60$  and  $M = 3.41$ , respectively).

More positive comments reported by the lecturers in China were, for example, “Whether the project is municipal or governmental, we share some common part of the project to complete” (M1, UNI, CN, 1, 02/9). This finding is supported in the literature where the focus is on “the process of learning and application includes a step of developing a collaborative culture that values sharing information” (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Conversely, Australian lecturers reported, for example, “I have less discussions and conversations with people inside of my faculty. I still have conversations but they tend not to happen inside of my faculty” (M1, UNI, AU, 1, 14/10). Despite many of the underpinning studies of learning community, such as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998); activity theory (Leont’ev, 1978) supporting the view that knowledge is distributed through collaborative efforts toward shared objectives or by dialogues and challenges brought about by difference in persons’ perspectives” (Pea, 1993, p. 48), the negative quotes from the Australian academics suggested the interviewees were less effective at promoting collective learning and demonstrated less member willingness to share their experiences and knowledge with other institutional members.

#### Feelings of supportive and shared leadership

Supportive and shared leadership have been perceived as a key role in driving change by a number of researchers (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Hord, 1997) and support organisations to develop as autonomous learning communities oriented towards shared decision making. Nine question items were designed to evaluate how the participants from the two countries were able to perceive a supportive and shared leadership.

The data showed that Australian lecturers perceived leadership as statistically significant different for 7 items compared to the Chinese counterparts. The items were, for example, item 25, “My university as a learning community has a leader who facilitates the learning of all staff members”  $F(1, 36) = 46.864, p < .001$ , the mean scores for Australian and Chinese responses were 4.75 and 3.00, respectively. Interestingly, the questionnaire findings of Chinese responses did not seem to match the interview data, and in some cases the mismatches were dramatic. Some typical negative Chinese comments were, “it’s by no means easy to establish a sort of learning community where people involved are not seen as equal in this authoritarian organizational culture” (M1, UNI, CN, 1,

02/9). Another lecturer supported this view and described the university as becoming “de facto government attached administration bureaucratic apparatus, which are essentially like government-owned Enterprises” (M2, UNI, CN, 2, 18/9). This finding is significant as the reality described by the academics differs very significantly from the literature which has asserted that a learning community needs to be developed from cases in which power, authority, and decision making are shared, distributed and encouraged between administrators and staff (Hord & Sommers, 2008). DuFour et al., (2010) also advocated that the current emphasis on “shared decision making, dispersed leadership, staff empowerment, collaboration, and collegiality has tended to obscure another harsh reality about substantive change” (p. 253). However, the findings drawn indicated that the suggested change can be a cultural challenge. This finding might be explained by Hofstede’s (1980) conclusions and other cross-cultural research results that there were cultural differences in what was termed ‘power distance’ between individuals in Australia and China. China has been explicitly positioned as a high power distance index (PDI) culture, in which there was a high level of inequality of power within Chinese society, and the unilateral top-down decision making structure reflects a centralized authority and leadership which is unequally distributed.

#### Perceived freedom of group membership

As portrayed in the literature, leadership can be considered as either supportive (Hord, 2008) or shared (Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006), and leadership behaviours tend to be transformational (Bass, 1985), and reflect distributed decision making (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; Schein, 2010; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). If this is the case, then each individual can be empowered equally by giving an amount of freedom for learning from the top and, this in turn, will further provide the ‘bottom up’ impetus for effective achievement. Seven items were developed in the questionnaires to address this issue.

The analysis of the data reported four statistically significant different items. They were, for example, item 34, “I have been able to develop my personal relationships with other colleague”  $F(1, 36) = 9.843, p < .003$ , the mean score for participants in Australia and China were 3.76 and 4.62, respectively, or item 35 “I am able to discuss topics with both experienced and inexperienced people in my work”  $F(1, 36) = 7.673, p < .009$ , the mean score was higher in the Chinese group ( $M = 4.60$ ) than in the Australian group ( $M = 3.82$ ). The interview data were quite mixed, so that negative comments in the Chinese group’s responses concerning a sense of freedom were reflected or coincided with the leadership concerns indicated earlier. As one Chinese lecturer reported the university system tended to be bureaucratic in management practices, and therefore “imposed (on) institutional disciplines” and “It would be very hard to build any form of community where members did not share knowledge and participate freely based on equality” (M3, UNI, CN, 3,

18/9). This finding further demonstrated that there was a high level of inequality of power within Chinese society, and less freedom in decision making resulted in a unilateral top-down managerial structure (Hofstede, 1980).

#### Descriptions of interaction, proximity and mutual engagement

A large body of previous empirical studies indicated that individuals help others like themselves more often than they help those who are dissimilar (see, for example, Baron, 1971; Ehlert, Ehlert, & Merrens, 1973; Karabenick, Lerner, & Beecher, 1973). The relations of proximity in learning community are well documented as being engaging each other mutually. There were two question items that dealt with mutual engagement and one item dealing with relations of proximity.

All items were found to yield statistically significant differences. They were item 37, "The university provides opportunities for mutual interaction and engagement"  $F(1, 36) = 22.077, p < .001$ , with the Chinese mean (4.90) scoring significantly higher than the Australian mean (4.00); item 38 "The university gives me an outlet for sharing similar learning interests and being engaged with others"  $F(1, 36) = 44.401, p < .001$ , with the Australian mean (4.82) scoring significantly higher than the Chinese mean (4.70); and item 39, "I prefer to work with my close colleagues to focus on learning to produce desired outcomes"  $F(1, 36) = 11.257, p < .002$ , with the Chinese mean (4.75) scoring significantly higher than the Australian mean (3.94).

Even if there were statistically significant differences, given the relatively high values in means in both groups, the significance results are likely of little value. The findings of interviews reported that both groups of participants were consistent in their tendency to interpret the interaction in favour of relations of proximity, indicating the fact that they were able to be mutually engaged to develop a sense of learning community. For example, a comment from a Chinese lecturer was, "some of our colleagues in our faculty from the same cities will come together to do something together naturally" (M1, UNI, CN, 1, 02/9). Another Australian academic provided an insight into the mutual engagement by reporting that "certainly we feel we've got collegiality. It assists if we are agreeing the way to make the things move" (M2, UNI, AU, 2, 16/10). This finding concurs with the views of Wenger (1998) that a learning community is dependent not only on relations of proximity, but more on "dense relations of mutual engagement organized around what they are there to do" (p. 74).

#### **Implication, Conclusion and Limitations**

This cross-cultural study addressed the question of how do academics in Australia and China perceive their work places as a 'learning community'. The unique data presented in this paper attempts to fill a gap that was evident from the literature search where learning community studies have focused primarily on a single case whereas here the study explored learning communities

operating in the academic departments of two universities in Australia and China respectively. The study examined the way two culturally different academic groups valued their work contexts as learning communities and their perception of shared mission, vision, values and goals; commitment to continuous improvement; collaborative culture and collective enquiry; supportive and shared leadership; freedom based on equality; and proximity and mutual engagement.

Among the important findings from the study was that the role of national culture, reflecting historic-socio-political influences, was central in understanding respondent's perceptions of the six constituent elements listed above. In this study the data demonstrated that each of these operationalised criteria was perceived differently by the two groups of participants. In other words, this study found that, assessing how stakeholders' perceptions of their workplaces as learning communities fit with operationalised six criteria from existing literature, these often inspired by their particular work conditions underlain by respective national culture.

This study was limited by certain aspects of research methods. First, this study has a limited sample size and, as such, does not lend itself to generalisation to the world at large. Rather, it is sufficient for the aim of this study, representing a range of stakeholders' perceptions from two cultures. Second, the issue of cross-cultural measurement equivalence is real as there may be language subtlety that gives rise to caution when considering the findings. In a subsequent study the use of Rasch or Item Response Theory (IRT) analysis to further test for the attempt of cross-cultural equivalence would be useful.

This paper will be of interest to researchers in education, particularly in higher education, but also those interested in academics' work lives and policy development and implementation and more generally those who have utilised the term 'learning community' in their own workplace or research.

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