

0170

Learning through communities - the Professional Doctorate experience

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The traditional PhD can be described as a lonely experience and it has been suggested that completion rates may be influenced by the solitary nature of this type of study (Dinham and Scott, 1999). Some Professional Doctorate programmes have sought to redress this issue in part through cohort learning.

Communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) are widely recognised as a means by which people with similar goals and objectives come together for the sharing of ideas, learning and support. The characteristics of communities of practice are used to facilitate the exploration of experiences of being involved in a Professional Doctorate student cohort.

This paper aims to present the experiences of students currently involved in a four year Professional Doctorate programme to examine how cohort based learning and the development of a community of practice has influenced their thoughts, understanding and journey.

Using a model of reflection, the authors provide information about their involvement with the first two years of the Professional Doctorate programme through describing and exploring their encounters and perceptions, challenges and opportunities afforded by their engagement with an interprofessional cohort of students. Formal and informal processes affecting student engagement and support are described to contextualise how a community of practice has evolved. The influence of student led activities is considered and comparisons drawn with the planned activities organised by the programme team to initiate and develop the community. The interprofessional nature of the cohort and the impact upon learning is considered.

Issues relating to collaboration, shared learning, support, the use of technology and face to face contact, are explored and evaluated giving rise to an action plan for future development and progression. The reflections of the authors are not intended to provide definitive guidance regarding the use of communities of practice within Professional Doctorate programmes. These insights will inform the curricular design of one programme and provide other educators with information relating to the lived experiences of engagement with cohort based learning.