

## The importance of community in research

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A colleague told me about an experience she had while visiting the University of Cambridge, where her husband had accepted a position in a different discipline. During a visit, she joined his team for afternoon tea in one of Cambridge's austere halls. While enjoying the custom she had the opportunity to tell her newfound colleagues about herself and enquire about research positions in her own discipline. The Cambridge veterans were able to turn to neighbouring tea drinkers from her discipline, which shortly led to a job.

Upon returning, she remarked that there is no way that something like this could ever happen in North America. We concluded that there is something magical about afternoon tea in the colleges of England, where researchers gather to interact and discuss science of various disciplines. Her story reminded me of the importance of community in academic research.

Academic culture places researchers in the role of an 'entrepreneur' who is responsible for their own survival and growth. This culture creates inwardly focused investigators, laboratories and even departments. They spend time protecting turf, both intellectual and physical. Although this culture arose from a single investigator mode of research, more complex research patterns based upon multiple disciplines, institutions and partners are supplanting the stand-alone investigator. What follows is the need to break down traditional, isolationist, research practices and create new ones.

One such new practice is the development of effective learning communities. Learning communities foster groups of professionals gathering within a supportive, self-created community. In principle, a professional learning community provides richer and more stimulating settings than self-learning<sup>[1]</sup>. A social setting allows participants to test ideas, challenge inferences and interpretations, and process new information with each other. This creates a complex and fruitful learning experience.

In order for the community to thrive and prosper, there must be a value proposition, which keeps the membership involved. In the example of “High Tea”, investigators habitually gather together to share their ideas and to interact within and between disciplines. Although they are all very busy people, they see value in learning what others are doing, what new opportunities may be present and envisioning how their respective research programs might converge.

The learning community concept is not foreign to North American researchers. Academic training programs routinely operate learning community activities, including weekly journal clubs. When well orchestrated, this type of learning community can be a powerful professional development approach and a potent strategy for a training program’s improvement. An effective learning community increases faculty commitment to the training program. Faculty members share responsibility for trainee development.

By becoming more informed, supervisors become professionally renewed and better mentors. By enhancing their own learning, mentors expand the resources available to the program, which reduces the load on individual supervisors. Trainees, in turn, learn from participation and receive timely feedback from faculty and colleagues. The “open culture” breaks down barriers between research laboratories and fosters cooperative training and collaborations. Building on this, trainees are more satisfied, which can be quantified by fewer reported conflicts, improved retention, higher productivity and faster degree completion times<sup>[2]</sup>.

Unfortunately such commonplace academic learning communities break down for many reasons. The most common problem occurs when values and visions splinter within the group. As members of the community participate of their own accord, they must net some benefit in exchange. Professors are busy people and their interests can be easily supplanted by the need to write grants, research papers, etc. Once trainees observe decreased participation from PIs, they in turn question the value of participating in the community.

There are many things that can be done to limit these distractions and to keep the community strong and vibrant:

- Keep the community focused. It is important to ensure that the scope of the activities aligns with the community's learning interests. If it is a journal club, perhaps the scope of the papers being discussed should be limited to fit the needs of the group. Additionally, it is important to keep the group small, so as to encourage active participation and interaction.
- Have a mission statement. A mission statement such as "having a high quality research training program" can do a lot to solidify the learning community. Here, a "commitment to training" must be constantly articulated to the membership by the leadership.
- Have a shared leadership structure. Within training programs, trainees must also take part in the leadership structure. Trainees may steer the learning community towards their own areas of interest. This type of structure empowers trainees, while teaching them leadership principles. Combine empowerment with open dialogue and more barriers will fall. Furthermore, trainee-to-trainee discourse solidifies lab-to-lab interaction and encourages and collaboration.
- Socialize. In their book, *The Social Life of Information*[\[3\]](#), Seely Brown and Duguid emphasize the importance of socialization as part of learning. Especially in research, where learning occurs within "communities of practice", the building of social networks is important for breaking down barriers.
- Celebrate and interrogate. In order to be effective, the community must constantly be attuned to its successes and shortcomings. It must be committed to the concept of constant improvement through open and critical self analysis.
- Spice it up! There are many different learning approaches, which tend to get overlooked in typical academic learning communities. Although the journal club typically takes a problem based/peer teaching approach, can we not be thinking of other approaches to get the same message across? For example, could a research paper be presented by a team and could it be turned into a dramatization of the events portrayed in the paper. What about encouraging more open dialogue? Instead of asking the presenter to integrate the paper into the field, why not have an open discussion about how the paper fits into people's own research programs. By encouraging open sharing, including an open and non-judgmental review of performance, a learning community can improve dramatically.

- Get involved. If you lack an effective research community, it may be undermining your morale and limiting your productivity. However, you can take charge and begin to build an effective community around you. Although it may seem like an insurmountable problem, little things that you do can help significantly to change your organization. In his book “The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness<sup>[4]</sup>, leadership guru Stephen Covey, reminds us of the importance of the trim tab, which is the small rudder that steers the large rudder, making the ship change course. In order to help our organizations and institutions become more effective, we must all become “trim tabbers”. You can do your part by establishing a peer group, which you enjoy being part of. Share these ideas and others with your colleagues or even your superiors. The leadership role and network you create will also advance your career.

[1] Hord, S. (1997). Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 18-19.

[2] Davis, G. (2005). Doctors without orders. American Scientist 93 (3, supplement). <http://postdoc.sigmaxi.org/results/>

[3] Seely Brown, J. and Dugid, P. (2002). The social life of information. Harvard Business School Press.

[4] Covey, S.R. (2004). The 8<sup>th</sup> habit: From effectiveness to greatness. Simon and Schuster, New York.