

Continuing the story: A case for socially sustainable academic communities

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The Australian academic profession is being transformed by profound long term changes. Governance of the higher education sector is increasingly prioritising quality assurance, numerically based accountability measures and results orientation as a way of ensuring a more globally competitive and finely tuned institution. Such initiatives have impacted the work of academics. For some it has meant a fragmentation of academic activity and in order to meet organisational benchmarks, a greater emphasis on individualised achievement. With community, in an historical context, considered a cornerstone of academic work (Churchman & Stehlík 2007) consideration of their value in a contemporary context is important. This study investigates the practices that sustain academic life in one higher education workplace community and utilises the communities of practice model (Lave & Wenger 1991) as a theoretical framework for analysing the findings. The case study is part of a larger ethnographic study situated in an education school, exploring ways in which academic staff are re-thinking and re-shaping their work through the application of socially sustainable principles. Social sustainability is increasingly playing a more significant role in the broader contemporary sustainability discourse, requiring the consideration of values, culture, decision-making and democratic processes of the social systems of which we are a part. Barron and Gauntlett (2002) propose five principles of social sustainability: equity, democracy and governance, diversity, wellbeing and interconnectedness. These principles, among others, are evident in members' descriptions of social sustainability. The findings place agency at the heart of socially sustainable practices, underpinning the principles of equity, democracy, diversity and wellbeing. It is within the construct of a community and members' interconnectedness that agency is experienced and the principles enacted. Connections between community members provided the space for creativity to flourish. Creativity and agency increased the productivity of this community, enabling the community to achieve its agreed enterprise and be recognised in the broader university environment. This study recognises and reinforces the importance of social sustainability in contemporary discourses of higher education and reaffirms the importance of the community as a site for innovative and socially significant academic work. It contributes to the debates on both social sustainability and the sustenance of academic life.

Introduction

Embodied in academic work is the development and communication of knowledge. Such work holds the promise of contributing to and building on a body of knowledge that can transform current understandings and practices in the broader community. For many academics this work is socially significant and deeply meaningful. The core activities of research, teaching and public discussion are the means through which academics engage in the development and communication of knowledge. Since the late 1980's government intervention has shifted the functionality of universities. Changing policies and governance structures underpinned by quality

assurance, accountability measures and results orientation have resulted in work environments that foster individualism and competition (Murray & Dollery 2005, Blackmore & Sachs 2003, Churchman & Stehlík 2007). The nature of academic work has changed and for some academics the pursuit of new targets and accountability measures have negatively impacted what they see as being the core business of knowledge development and communication.

'Academic communities are sited in long and well-known historical contexts with plurality, autonomy and community as their cornerstones' (Churchman & Stehlík 2007). Academic communities are social structures that enable the sharing of knowledge and provide a forum for challenging existing meanings through collective action (Cook & Yanow 1993). This paper argues that the corner-stone of 'community' and collective structures are under threat in an increasingly individualistic and competitive academic environment. The author contends that academic communities are the site for socially sustainable work practices; sites where knowledge is shared, transformed and disseminated; sites where connections and synergies impact agency and provide the space for creativity to flourish. The emergent field of social sustainability seeks to identify what makes a community healthy and liveable, both now and in the future (Barron & Gauntlett 2002). While sustainability has had a long history in higher education discourse through environmental and 'greening' initiatives, social sustainability brings new and more pervasive considerations, namely the extension of sustainability programmes to incorporate social systems. Tilbury, Keogh, Leighton and Kent (2005), in a national review of the status of further and higher education in regard to sustainability practices, explicitly draw attention to an institution's ability to sustain their social systems and support the social capital of staff and students.

'Community' is theorised in this case study through the communities of practice model (Lave & Wenger 1991). This socially constructed theory provides a lens through which to investigate socially sustainable academic work practices that facilitate knowledge communication and the transformation of knowledge-in-practice (Contu & Willmott 2003). This paper tells the story of one community of practice and their understandings of social sustainability in a changing academic landscape. Their story sheds light on what practices bring health and integrity to their work both now and into the future; what threatens their health and integrity and what practices strengthen their health and integrity over time.

Social sustainability

The idea of sustainability in higher education has a history at an international level dating back to 1978 through the United Nations UNESCO – UNEP International Environmental Education Programme (Wright 2004). In order to meet the challenge of living sustainably, society needs to engage in a process of social learning, enhancing the ability to make appropriate choices about complex issues (UNESCO 2002). In this context sustainable development is concerned with values, perceptions and our relationships with each other and the natural world (UNESCO 2002). Sustainability is necessarily about culture and includes the ways in which social systems influence and are influenced by political, economic and biophysical systems. This view of sustainability requires a consideration of values, culture, decision-making, democratic process and the social system, and the related systems

with which we identify (Hammond & Churchman 2008). Orr (2002) states 'no institutions in modern society are better situated and more obliged to facilitate the transition to a sustainable future than colleges and universities' (p. 96).

Increasingly, social sustainability plays a significant role in the broader contemporary sustainability discourse. Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes, systems, structures and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and livable communities (Barron & Gauntlett, 2002). Socially sustainable communities provide a good quality of life, with a focus on acting in the best interests of present and future members. A definition of the concept needs to be grounded by a set of principles that describe the attributes of the term and enable characteristics of socially sustainable communities to emerge. Barron and Gauntlett (2002) identify equity, diversity, democracy and governance, interconnectedness and quality of life as fundamental to considerations of social sustainability. The five principles suggested by Barron and Gauntlett (2002), should not be considered in isolation as their value as an investigative framework lies in their complex connections. They all reflect the importance of social relationships, difference, values and choice, recognised as integral to social sustainability. This article will consider the social sustainability of Australian academic communities in relation to these principles. The principles and their attributes enable descriptions and interpretations about the ability of social systems, and the communities contained within those systems, to be sustainable. Sustainability does not only refer to contemporary communities, but the ability of communities to operate inter-generationally, providing spaces for future community members and enacting sustainable practices (Hammond & Churchman 2008). In this paper the principles are used to interpret the social sustainability of one academic community, identifying their connections and relationships. The nature of social sustainability complements the social learning theory of communities of practice, used here as a theoretical framework. Both acknowledge the centrality of the social dimension and the ability of relationships and connections to build knowledge and influence practice over time. The communities of practice theory enables a deeper analysis of the socially sustainable practices of the community being investigated.

Communities of practice

Communities of practice, is predicated on the belief that learning is embedded in social practice and the culture of the community in which the learning takes place (Lave & Wenger 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a community of practice as a group of people who choose to relate in order to share understandings, beliefs, values and practices around a common theme, with the aim of contributing to the development of knowledge and practice through shared learning experiences. Those experiences are uniquely situated and contextual. Wenger (1998) defines communities of practice as having three dimensions: 'a community of mutual engagement, a negotiated enterprise and a repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time' (p. 126). Mutual engagement implies relational learning, where meanings are negotiated with members of the community engaged in actions around the joint enterprise. These activities are fundamental to higher education and therefore communities are a core component of academic work (Churchman & Stehlik 2007). This case study describes the process of mutual engagement around

a joint enterprise in one community of practice. Descriptions of this social process of mutual engagement will explore the relational and embedded nature of meaning, learning and enterprise for members within the context of their community. This study, focusing on one community of practice, enables a deeper analysis of meaning and learning around a common enterprise.

While definitions and descriptions of communities of practice are contested and continue to evolve, the shift from voluntary participation of like-minded individuals, as described by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their seminal text (*Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*), to organisation-designed and driven communities of practice, intent on best practice and performance (Wenger 1998), has sharpened the debate of situated learning theory within organisational contexts. Where the emphasis is placed on the *practice* of the community, it needs to be asked, whose interests are the community of practice serving and who is 'driving' the community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) contend that the locus of power is held within the community and managed by its members. Accessing members' motivations for participation in this community of practice and exploring how those motivations work with wider organisational contextual issues will give depth to considerations of social sustainability and contribute to evolving definitions of communities of practice in organisational contexts.

Methodology

Case study methodology has been chosen to investigate the socially sustainable practices of this community of practice. Yin (1989) describes a case study as seeking to:

Investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence is used (p. 23).

Social sustainability (in relation to academic work) is the contemporary phenomenon and the SMART community in a higher education workplace is the real life context of the case study. Corcoran, Walker and Wals (2004) propose case study methodology 'is the ideal research tool to investigate sustainability in higher education. The case study approach allows the researcher to go deep, to learn what works and what does not' (p. 10). The heuristic feature of this case study seeks to enhance the reader's understanding of the phenomenon, social sustainability. The case study is part of a larger ethnographic study focussing on the socially sustainable practices of numerous communities within an education school in the higher education sector.

This case study is a study of practice, of participants' actions and the theories underpinning their actions. The participants in the case study 'engage in theory building about change' (Corcoran, Walker & Wals 2004 p. 11). Interview, observation and documentation were sources for data collection. All four members of the Approaches to Learning community were interviewed and transcriptions of interviews were analysed. Emerging themes were identified and considered within the context of the principles of social sustainability proposed by Barron and Gauntlett (2002). The themes provided a scaffold for the findings and the theoretical

framework Communities of Practice provided a lens for analysis. Pseudonyms have been used in the case study to identify team members.

The SMART community: An historical perspective

SMART is a core educational psychology course in a number of higher degree programs based in an education school. The SMART community dated back to 2000 when courses that preceded SMART were taught at another campus. When that campus closed and the program in which the courses were placed was reviewed, the SMART course was rewritten and based at a newly constructed education campus. In its earlier evolution the community responsible for the design and implementation of the courses had a membership of three, a continuing staff member who assumed the role of course coordinator, a casual staff member who worked with the coordinator in the course design and implementation and a sessionally employed member whose primary role was teaching. The community of practice evolved and expanded with the relocation to the new campus. The purpose of the community was to orchestrate the redesign, implementation and evaluation of the core course. Membership grew from three to five. By this time two members had continuing status, one had a fixed term contract and the remaining two members were employed on a sessional basis. The community met weekly during the teaching periods and remained in email contact in this time and between study periods. The coordination of the course changed when the previous coordinator passed away after battling a chronic illness¹. The passing of this central figure in the community had a profound effect on the community and continues to impact the community today through the initiatives of members who knew her. One member stated, 'even today she's very much a part of the story of the community, she's at the core if you like' (Bruce). In recognition of this member's contribution to the community, it was decided by the community to apply for a teaching excellence award:

It was always about Kay being recognised and I knew that if we could get through this one (the award) it would bond us in a way and no one could ever take that away. Barbara and Liz and Donna and I are still very close today even though two of them have had to go off and follow their own paths. (Bruce)

Changing membership is now a feature of this community however its focus and ethos remains strong. The findings describe in more detail the members, their relationships and practices, and the sustainability of the community through the eyes of its members.

The SMART community self identified as a community. The community has an identity made explicit through their shared domain of practice and competence. One member described the community's identity as 'a masterful practice of teaching' (Interviewee 10). Members' relationships are built around their desire to learn from each other and produce an exemplary package of learning experiences that meet the needs of students in pre-service education. Knowledge within the community is

¹This community member has been identified as 'Kay' for the purposes of this paper, protecting her anonymity.

negotiated and mediated by community norms. The members of the community meet regularly to discuss and share their repertoire of resources, stories, perspectives, skills and capabilities. The community has developed stories and experiences unique to the community that have become mythologised, enriching community identity and rapport. These stories will be elaborated on in the findings. The characteristics of this community satisfy those of a community of practice as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Emerging principles of social sustainability

Community members described their understandings of social sustainability and applied the attributes of their definitions to the practices of their community. They described the practices which enabled their community to work in socially sustainable ways and those which constrained the ability of the community to be sustainable. As well as looking inward on their community, members described the relationship of their community to the broader institutional environment. The findings summarise members' descriptions of socially sustainable academic work practices.

Agency

At the core of this community's sustainability was agency. It was membership within the community that encouraged personal agency, enabling the journey toward social sustainability. Members described what 'drove' them, what empowered them and what negated their sense of agency and ultimately their sustainability. Human agency is the impulse toward individual action embedded within patterns of relationship (Gergen 1995). Agency was considered by members within patterns of relationship. One member explained:

What drove me was I wanted the course to reflect the input that Kay had had. By that point Kay had died. It was going to have Kay Smith's stamp on it, one that she'd be proud of and that the students can benefit from and I still reckon that we see evidence of that in the evaluations that we do at the end of each study period. (Bruce)

A legacy to a colleague ignited the impulse toward action for this community member. The legacy was embedded in their professional relationship and his respect for her contribution to the development of the course for which the community was responsible. Kay's passing effected members in different ways and for other members grieving her loss created a greater need for interconnectedness and community. This is discussed more fully in the sections on interconnectedness, creativity and community.

Agency for the other members of the community came with permanent employment. They were originally employed on a variety of casual contracts, both sessional and fixed term. One member explained how being employed in this way over a long period of time affected her:

You feel like you are just sort of moving from one thing to the next without being able to plan and set goals that are longer term, just more short term survival...It's not sustainable... It's exhausting, it's tiring and you sort of lose self esteem when you don't feel like you're being valued as much. (Donna)

Members experienced a loss of agency with short term and uncertain employment. Participation in communities held the potential to encourage agency however casual employment also interrupted longer term community membership. Members were not able to realise a long term vision or build toward that vision with any sense of confidence. Social sustainability requires health and integrity over time (Pittman 2004). The absence of health and integrity for this staff member were closely related to her disjointed employment contracts and interrupted participation in communities. Permanent employment was eventually gained by two members and as one explained:

Permanent employment made a huge difference. We actually end up having a stake, an investment, in what we're doing. No longer do you feel on the outside looking in. It's like I have permission, I'm allowed to now. I am confident and have freedom to use my initiative. I have some agency in the whole practice and that in itself is empowering. (Liz)

For this staff member permanent employment meant inclusion, being a full participant, able to exercise choice and initiative. Agency came with the promise of long term unbroken employment which bought a greater sense of ownership in the initiatives of the community.

Members of this community found agency through the passing of a respected colleague and long term employment. Agency provided 'the impulse toward action' (Gergen 1995) within their community of practice. Social sustainability is reliant upon human agency; the harnessing of individual and collective will to create new ways of being based on human dignity, participation and social equity (Littig & Grießler 2005).

Equity, diversity and democracy

Equity, diversity and democracy were principles identified by members as being integral to the social sustainability of the community. The three principles described by Barron and Gauntlett (2002), in their work on socially sustainable communities, recognised 'the provision of diverse opportunities that enable all people to participate and be represented in community decisions and processes an essential part of equity and social sustainability' (Barron & Gauntlett 2002 p. 25). Access, participation and inclusion underpin the three principles and are elaborated on by this community member:

We have built a real rapport over a long period of time. We're all very different, very diverse, but we're all passionate about educational psychology. We all share an interest in that body of knowledge and we enjoy discussing it and having a rigorous debate about the actual content and concepts that we're teaching. We're on an equal footing and even though we all have different levels of academic knowledge, there's no hierarchy, it's an equal playing field. It's very caring, as in looking out for each other's needs. We make sure that no one person is overloaded and try to build in processes so work is equitable across us all. We have continual open communication and if there are

discrepancies we work through it together. When there are issues everyone rallies around and supports in what you're doing. (Donna)

Equity is an acknowledgement of the unequal capacity of people to participate and seeks to actively redress the imbalance (Barron & Gauntlett 2002). The comment above describes the practices of inclusion; the ability to operate with membership diversity but protect the holistic nature of the community through the implementation of explicit practices and processes. Within the community, diversity was experienced through members' multiple views and attributes and they managed the essential components of diversity and unity, recognising their inherent value to the sustainability of their community. Management of these attributes over time built rapport and trust.

Underlying members' discussion of social sustainability was the process of making choices (decision making) and their levels of participation in that process. The community of practice was a forum for members to have their voice heard and to hear the voices of other members so that decisions could be made that sought agreement across the community. A member explained:

Within the learning community there's the idea that everyone can have a say and everyone's being listened to, and there's some sort of agreement that these are the ways that we make decisions and this is how you access it. (Liz)

Access, participation and inclusion underpinned democratic processes within this community. They created connections between members and ways of being that enabled the community to function sustainably as an entity in itself. The focus of sustainability became the community rather than the individuals that comprise the community. It is the agreed and trusted processes that govern the community that enable social sustainability rather than the practice of any one member. The interconnections become the focus in a socially sustainable community.

A product of a socially sustainable community is rapport and trust. A community member explained:

There's a lot of trust and there needs to be because without that people break down and that's when the whole sustainability breaks down, because the social threads get broken, once trust is gone it's very hard to maintain your energy and engagement because you become isolated and shut down. (Liz)

The 'social threads' or interconnections between the community members again reinforces the holistic nature of a sustainable community. The depth of social interaction and the level of trust within relationships in communities are seen as essential to social prosperity (Cocklin & Alston 2003).

Wellbeing and Interconnectedness

Connections, patterns and inter-relationships are a fundamental part of definitions of sustainability. Social sustainability focuses on the quantity and quality of social

processes in a community that promote connectedness (Barron & Gauntlett 2002). Wellbeing and interconnectedness create the unit for social sustainability. Members in this community of practice identified wellbeing and interconnectedness as fundamental components of social sustainability and identified practices that promoted their realisation. A staff member explained:

Our wellbeing and how we support each other is about the scaffolds that we put in place to make sure that we're all okay; because we felt that unless we're all okay with each other, that has an effect on our students. The students are at the centre and peripheral to that is our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of each other, a sense of support for each other, and people who don't sense that, they don't cut it. (Bruce)

The scaffolds put in place by community members included celebratory social events at the end of teaching periods, regular weekly meetings that had a sense of informality and provided opportunities for discussion, debate and decision making. Community members were in constant email contact and email provided an avenue for further discussion between meetings. Barron and Gauntlett (2002) identified quality of life, or wellbeing as it is interpreted in this study, as being a principle of social sustainability which included, among other characteristics, a sense of belonging, self-worth, health and a sense of place. The scaffolds contributed to the community's quality of life.

The 'social threads' that connected community members were strengthened when a member of their community passed away. The process for reconciling her death was different for each community member, and compassion for each other created an environment of acceptance and unconditional support. The 'social threads' created a 'very strong bond'. A member explained:

I think Kay's passing brought around a lot of opportunities for us to interact at different levels over time. Interact in ways that brought out perhaps what we don't usually see in colleagues, like compassion and caring that comes from the fact that someone has been really touched deeply by the death of a colleague. It is a very strong bond. (Bruce)

This community had fostered a connected consciousness. Connectivity in feminist theory is concerned with experiencing the self in relation to others (Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1986). Distinction is made between connectedness and separateness or connectedness and individuality. Kincheloe (2001) proposes the idea of connected knowing and using this idea to facilitate connection with other people around visions of community. This view is consistent with core features of sustainability, including the need to work across social systems, 'seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts' (Capra 1996 p. 6).

Wellbeing and interconnectedness impacted member's participation and practices in their community. Participation and practice contributed toward the productivity of the community. The community measured their productivity through student response to constructed courses; course design, implementation and learning outcomes. A particular benchmark of accomplishment for this community was the successful application for a Teaching Excellence Award. The autonomy of the community and

the creativity of members were attributes the community identified as contributing to its productivity.

Autonomy and Creativity

Second generation creativity or small ‘c’ creativity, ‘locates the creative enterprise in the processes and products of collaborative and purposeful activity’ (McWilliam and Dawson 2008 p. 633). Creativity has long been described as ‘the defeat of habit by originality’ (Koestler 1964 p. 96) and more recently as the ability to ‘move an idea from one state to another’ (Jackson 2006 p. 8). Community members identified creativity as being integral to their productivity, acknowledging the ways they worked together with their connections contributing to their creative effort. A member explained:

We have these ideas, for example our report questions, they are I believe very creative. I say that because we made them up. What happens is, one of us will come up with an idea and someone else will work on it, strengthen it, fine tune it and make it into a question that really hits home to our students, so they could see the relevance of the theory. (Bruce)

The connections between members enact the creative process impacting the productivity of the community. McWilliam and Dawson (2008), in their study of second generation creativity in higher education, identify co-invention/co-creation with separation as a principle for sustaining a replicable pedagogical environment for creative learning outcomes. ‘The products of learning are authentic productions of the synergies that exist between the individual member and the team’ (McWilliam & Dawson 2008 p. 640).

Community members described attributes that enabled creativity to emerge within the community. ‘Freedom, autonomy and space’ (Interviewee B) were identified as being important, while another member cited ‘...time, confidence and being familiar with each other’ (Interviewee 3). Autonomy was described by members both in terms of the autonomy of the community within the Program and also autonomy within the community to explore divergent possibilities. The co-existence of autonomy, freedom, space within strong bonds of interconnectedness attests to the complexities of community life and achieving the balance that enables maximum productivity of the community a constant struggle. McWilliam and Dawson (2008) state ‘Co-creative capacity increases exponentially when ‘flockmates’ make a habit of maintaining mental and psychic space unhampered by the team, while habitually aligned with, and responsive to the ‘local neighbourhood’ (p. 640).

Understanding the purposes and thinking behind current practice was fundamental to the creative process for members within the community. A member called this ‘understanding the ‘why’’ (Interviewee 3). She explained that most often it is the ‘what’ that is given most attention, the practice, however for this member creativity was contained in understanding the ‘why’, the thinking behind the practice. Making connections with the thinking behind the practice provided the avenue for creativity. She stated:

It's in understanding the 'why' that you understand the purpose of what you're doing. Then you can be creative and that's the link to sustainability. The 'what' becomes our work contracts, not the 'why', the 'why' is not equated. What's written between the lines of our contract is the necessary part of what we do and that's what actually makes us a great team. (Barbara)

The comment above links creativity with sustainability. The ability of systems to respond and adapt to their changing environments is a feature of sustainability. Social sustainability requires social systems to be responsive, adaptable and resilient. Creativity is necessarily about change and has the capacity to enable social systems, and in this case a community of practice, to be sustainable.

Community of Practice - a site for socially sustainability practice

This community held the promise of socially sustainable practice. Personal agency, realised in this socially constructed environment, grew with the communal valuing of equity, democracy and diversity. Practices built around these principles created a sense of wellbeing and interconnectedness. Strong relationships built trust and confidence in the processes of the community. Participation and practice gave rise to productivity, culminating in a higher education Teaching Excellence Award. A feature of a community of practice is the presence of a 'master' or the recognition of masterful practices prized by the community. This community had an agreed 'master', an inaugural member who had passed away. Her practices and vision for this community became mythologised by its members and permeated all its considerations. The community was clear in its purpose and valued their interconnectedness and all that it held.

Members considered the community to be the site for the realisation of social sustainability. Their references and descriptions of sustainability were located in the context of the community, not in their individualised practice. Participation and practice at the level of community produced effective programs and learning outcomes. Members recognised that sustainability concerned participation and practice over time. Specific individual membership could not be assured over time however the activities of the community of practice and its longevity could be assured. Asked if the community could continue to be socially sustainable, a member explained:

Membership changes and the community can be sustainable under certain conditions: degree of membership changeover, member values and maintaining a membership core to continue the story. That's becoming too hard. (Bruce)

The ability of this community to control its membership was diminishing. Casualisation of staff and demand for indicators of academic performance had impacted academic participation and practice. The opportunity to become a member of a community of practice over the long term, contributing and building expertise was no longer assumed. Policies and practices of the broader institutional environment impacted at the level of community in this study. Members of the community identified threats to their sustainability and attributed them to the impact of the broader University environment.

Social sustainability of a profession in a changing context

New accountability and control measures adopted by universities in their contemporary contexts have created significant impediments to the processes of communities of practice (Nagy & Burch 2009). Such impediments hinder the process of knowledge creation and the development of innovative practices in communities. Casualisation, the undervaluing of teaching and meeting academic performative benchmarks were policies and practices identified by members as threatening the sustainability of their community. Hammond and Churchman (2008) described sessional staff as one significant group in the academic profession which is largely positioned outside institutional discourses and stated 'the concept of 'cheap, temporary' workers can only be detrimental to an organisation engaged in the work of a scholarly nature in which the continuity inherent in research networks is central to discovery and the evolution of a discipline' (p. 239). Avis (1999; 2005) identified further education teacher's loss of autonomy and control over their work, higher levels of accountability and the perceived marginalisation of teaching since the corporatisation of further education in the UK. This reality is described by a community member who had been employed on a sessional contract intermittently over a 10 year period:

The University looks more at research, you tend to score more points if you're a research academic with lots of publications and conferences behind you. Teaching and learning is actually very undervalued and is undermanned, there's no continuity in who's teaching what and I don't believe that that contributes to the best courses that we could provide. There aren't many socially sustainable practices promoted by the University that I have seen and I believe that it's progressively got worse and worse over the time that I've been here. It's making me very negative about the work I do and even though I love the work and the bulk of the people that I work with, I can see that my time at the university is probably limited because I'm not able to sink my teeth into anything in a long term capacity and their (University's) values are probably a lot different than the real teaching and learning that I value in the community. (Donna)

The comment above indicates a loss of agency created by an employment contract that does not provide for continuity, predictability or the opportunity to become immersed in a culture of research. For this staff member it is the capacity to contribute over the long term within a community environment that brings the promise of sustainability. There is a perceived discrepancy however between what practices the community values and the practices of the broader institutional environment. University policies and practices that govern employment of staff, define what constitutes academic work and determine measures of academic accountability are inhibiting this community's capacity to be socially sustainable.

Conclusions

The story of this workplace community is unique and has provided the opportunity to describe a contextual application of the emergent concept, social sustainability. Through the identification of socially sustainable practices, definitions and

understandings of the concept can be expanded upon within their contextual usage. Most significantly, participants in this case study identified their community of practice as the site for socially sustainable practices. They did not apply the term to their sustainability as an individual, but to the community that collectively met the educative needs of students. Members found agency within their community, in their social relationships and the enterprise of the community. Agency provided the impetus toward social sustainability.

Members identified equity, diversity and democracy as principles of socially sustainability and described practices that enacted the principles in their community. The implementation of agreed processes maximised membership participation, access and inclusion. Multiple views, skills and abilities were valued and harnessed contributing to the productivity of the community. Strategies that contributed toward the wellbeing of the individual and of the community were practiced and planned for by all members. Trust established over time between members created connections that bought a synergy to the community. The interconnections between members and the complex patterns of relationships established an additional dimension to the community, an acknowledgement and respect for its holistic nature. The connections contained within the community held the space for creativity to emerge. Creativity is fostered through sustainable and replicable pedagogical practice (McWilliam & Dawson 2008).

Members of the community had a history of autonomy in deciding the membership and practices of their community. They recognised however that their autonomy was diminishing as the policies and processes of the broader University environment impacted established community practices. They cited casualisation, the undervaluing of teaching and the increasing demand for demonstrating levels of accountability compromising community capabilities. This finely tuned community with their complex patterns of relationships that had been built over time was struggling to be resilient in the face of requirements and demands that worked against their understandings of socially sustainable practices. In an increasingly individualised university environment (Blackmore & Sachs 2003), community members were seeking to protect space for localised collective 'living'.

Social sustainability 'implies inter-relationships and interdependencies built on communication over time: local and global communities in constant struggle toward living together without exploitation in an ever-changing world' (Murray, Dey & Lenzin 2005 p. 10). The workplace community is a site for inter-relationships and interdependencies built over time and contain the potential to be sites for socially sustainable practices that enable productive outcomes for students and staff. Interdependencies and inter-relationships underpinned by equity, diversity and democracy need to also be realised between broader University policies and practices and the workplace communities that seek to meet the needs of an ever-changing global society.

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