

Case study - learning communities¹
Rangelands Australia as a learning community
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Creating or enabling learning communities is increasingly seen as one of the most effective ways to promote learning and the acquisition of knowledge and to achieve particular learning outcomes. Creating or developing effective learning communities can be fraught with many difficulties. In some cases however, learning communities, i.e. those communities that 'involve an ongoing tension between the acquisition of knowledge and the creation of knowledge' (Wegner, 1998) can emerge as a result of the implementation of particular processes as a means of achieving identified goals.

Rangelands Australia has an identified goal, highlighted in a national report in 1998 of developing educational programs to build capacity to help ensure the sustainability of Australia's rangelands. While the organisation of Rangelands Australia is a very small group (seven people) it interacts with a very large community – several hundred people, representing a wide range of stakeholders located all over Australia - who provide ongoing formal and informal input and feedback into the development of educational programs for people living and working in Australia's rangelands.

Throughout the last two and a half years Rangelands Australia has built a network of stakeholders around Australia who have an interest in education in the Rangelands. This multi stakeholder group representing pastoralism, government and non-government agencies, mining, business, tourism, indigenous interests and educationalists is made up of many groups and individuals who interact in formal and informal ways to facilitate the sharing and creation of knowledge and wisdom through the processes involved in the development of educational programs for Rangelands courses.

The concept of social learning, a major tenet of Wegner's approach to learning communities underpins the Rangelands Australia approach to course development. Through ongoing communication and interaction, this large informal group, established by Rangelands Australia, has evolved into a learning community that actively works to build a growing and evolving understanding of what is required in educational programs to build capacity in the rangelands. For this purpose, Rangelands Australia acts as a focal point that enables 'both a context for the learning of newcomers as well as a context for new insights to be transferred into knowledge' (Wegner 1998).

In order to facilitate learning for this dual context, Rangelands Australia acts as a conduit for communication, interaction and learning to occur through formal and informal processes. Formal processes include regular print and email newsletters, the 'mates of RA', focus group discussions, course development workshops, pilot workshops, course development teleconferences, email distribution and feedback of course outlines and course materials. Frequent informal interactions occur as part of

¹ Invited presentation at Learning Communities Seminar, University of Queensland Teaching and Learning Week, 15 – 19 November 2004.

these formal activities and also through meetings and exchanges at conferences, business promotions, marketing exercises, email exchanges and phone interactions. The development phase for the short courses and postgraduate program was initiated through invitations to 400 stakeholders to participate in 26 focus group discussions around Australia. This initiative created a climate of safety, trust, openness and collaboration, deemed necessary qualities of learning communities (Muohio, 2004). This atmosphere of trust and collaboration enabled all involved in the focus groups activities to identify and establish the priorities for learning that were considered to be essential to building capacity in the rangelands. Consequent to this initial activity and the utilisation of a participatory approach to course development phase a sense of respect and responsiveness (Muohio, 2004) has emerged as an outcome of the inclusion of numerous stakeholders in all stages of the development process.

Relevance, esprit de corps and empowerment (Muohio, 2004) are other outcomes of the activities facilitated by Rangelands Australia. These emerging qualities have resulted in a vibrant and far flung learning community with a focus on learning for the educational development of the Rangelands. Ongoing learning is occurring within and between individuals, groups and organisations as understanding of the different course components is conceptualised and then developed. This learning is occurring at all points across the community with individuals and groups participating or not participating as appropriate. As new or different learning occurs, adjustments are made to priorities to reflect the changes in the community. This could also be seen as reconfiguring identification and negotiability through new meanings and new relationships (Wegner 1998).

This community has a common purpose, it is occurring over a prolonged length of time and it involves learning in formal and informal ways through numerous organised and “unorganised” activities. It is unique in that it has created a multi stakeholder learning community at a national level united by a common purpose.

