Creating Successful Cultural Brokers: The Pros and Cons of a Community of Practice Approach in Arts Management Education

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Arts and Cultural Management, Cultural Brokering, Arts Management Education, Community of Practice

Abstract  
Arts managers play a critical role in creating a strong, sustainable arts and cultural sector. They operate as brokers, creating programs, and, more critically, coordinating the relationships between artists, audiences, communities, governments and sponsors required to make these programs a success. Based on study of model developed for a subject in the Master of Creative Industries (Creative Production & Arts Management) at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), this paper examines the pros and cons of a “community of practice” approach in training arts management students to act as cultural brokers. It provides data on the effectiveness of a range of activities – including Position Papers, Case Studies, Masterclasses, and offline and online conversations – that can be used facilitate the peer-to-peer engagement by which students work together to build their cultural brokering skills in a community of practice. The data demonstrates that, whilst students appreciate this approach, educators must provide enough access to voices of authority – that is, to arts professionals – to establish a well-functioning community of practice, and ensure that more expert students do not become frustrated when they are unwittingly and unwillingly thrust into this role by less expert classmates. This is especially important in arts management, where classes are always diverse, due to the fact that most dedicated programs in Australia, as in the US, UK and Europe, are taught via small-scale programs at graduate level which accept applicants from a wide variety of arts and non-arts backgrounds.

Biography  
Dr Bree Hadley is Senior Lecturer in Drama, and Study Area Advisor for the Master of Creative Industries (Creative Production & Arts Management) at Queensland University of Technology. Her research investigates management, production and production platforms in the performing arts, and, in particular, the pedagogical approaches that are most effective in training emerging producers. Hadley’s work has appeared in Performance Research, About Performance, M/C Journal, Australasian Drama Studies, Brolga: An Australian Journal About Dance, and the collection International Faust Studies: Adaptation, Translation, Reception, and more than thirty conference papers in Australia and internationally. She is currently Vice-President of the Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies (ADSA), and a nationally recognised commentator on all forms of drama, theatre and performance in her role as a critic for The Australian.
Introduction

Arts managers play a critical role in creating a strong and sustainable arts and cultural sector. They operate as brokers, integrating the managerial, cultural and creative arms of arts organisations. They create arts programs, and, more crucially, coordinate the relationships between artists, audiences, communities, government and sponsors required to make these programs a success and generate value for stakeholders. As Bilton and Leary put it, effective arts managers “are the brokers who add value to the creative process by directing the traffic of ideas and resources, and ‘matching’ ideas, individuals and organisational tasks” (2002:62). Teaching arts management students to engineer creative new connections between ideas, people, institutions and resources can be a complex, challenging prospect. Whilst there is agreement amongst arts management educators about the need to teach these skills (Brkic, 2009; Dewey and Wysomirski, 2007; Sikes, 2000) – that is, endow students with entrepreneurial skills as well as entry-level skills in administration, management and marketing – pedagogical models are still emerging.

This paper investigates the potential of a “community of practice” model (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in teaching students cultural brokering skills. A community of practice is a group of practitioners who come together to learn, working collectively to improve their performance in a profession, or in relation to a particular process or problem in that profession (Wenger, 2006). To date, the term has most frequently been used in a Higher Education context to describe staff participation in more or less formalised professional development programs (see, for example, Blanton and Stylianou, 2009). This article investigates the potential of a community of practice model for graduate students, and in particular, graduate arts management students in Higher Education. Based on a case study of model developed for a subject in the Master of Creative Industries (Creative Production & Arts Management) at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), the article examines whether participation in a primarily student-driven community of practice, in which peer-to-peer conversations about cultural brokering strategies lead into an individual arts programming, producing or partnership-building project, does assist students in addressing the professional problem of improving their brokering skills. It provides empirical data on the effectiveness of the activities used encourage students to work together, transfer knowledge, skills and resources across sectors, and envisage transformations in the arts and cultural landscape. In doing so, the article identifies a specific challenge in designing a community of practice to support the diverse cohort of students that populates the typical arts management classroom to develop their creativity, confidence and career-ready professional skills. This challenge lies in the way in which the “old-timer” voices (Blanton and Stylianou, 2009) of established arts professionals are represented in a community of practice composed primarily of students with differing levels of expertise and experience in the field. The paper concludes by arguing that educators in arts management – and, indeed in other Higher Education sectors that deal with diverse cohorts – should adapt the community of practice model and place more emphasis on the presence of arts professionals as voices of authority in the community, because it is this that will best support both “expert” and “non-expert” learners (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993) to participate in a community of practice as part of their arts management training.

Background

Arts management is, as Ebewo and Sirayi have recently argued, “a relatively new field of academic discourse” (2009:282). It emerged as an identifiable field in the latter half of the twentieth century, as politicians, policy makers and practitioners in the US, UK, Europe and Australia started to devote attention to the ways in which arts, cultural and community resources can be harnessed in service of a broad range of social and economic development agendas (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007a:225-26). If arts and cultural practices are, as Australia’s first fully articulated federal cultural policy Creative
Nation and subsequent state-based cultural policies suggest, critical to the social fabric – a means of establishing identity, enhancing it, sharing it with each other, tourists and trading partners, increasing our cultural capital, and creating employment through innovative new events, enterprises and economic clusters (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994) – then a systematic, entrepreneurial approach to the management of cultural resources, and cultural production processes, is required (Ebewo and Sirayi, 2009:282).

Arts management programs in Australia, as in the US, UK and Europe, respond to this need. They train arts managers – skilled professionals able to analyse government, sponsor or supporter agendas, align cultural production practices to these agendas, create sustainable platforms for the public presentation of arts, cultural and creative programs (Ebewo and Sirayi, 2009:290), and, increasingly, create opportunities for diverse communities to access these programs. In a narrow sense, arts management programs may also address concerns about career outcomes for arts graduates, and an oversupply of skilled actors, artists and musicians (Beckerman, 2007:88, 93). They encourage graduates to take advantage of entrepreneurship training that will enable them to compete for and create their own employment. In a broader sense though, arts management programs address more than just the production and promotion of plays, paintings or recordings by creative artists. These programs expand existing definitions of creativity to include the arts manager’s work – in particular, the arts manager’s ability to position arts practices in broader social, cultural, political and economic systems, broker productive new connections within these systems, and increase the viability, capacity and sustainability of the arts and cultural sector as a whole (Bilton and Leary, 2002:57). In this respect, arts management programs address culture in its broadest sense – everyday activities (cultural artefacts, cultural practices, education, entertainment and the media) as well as elite arts activities – and prepare their graduates to operate as brokers in ongoing debates about what constitutes a well-functioning, inclusive and creative culture (Sikes, 2000).

Because arts management is a new field – indeed, there is still debate about whether it is distinct from management generally (Ebewo and Sirayi, 2009:281-82) – pedagogical models are still emerging. There is, Beckerman says, “little consensus on the most effective techniques for educating students to these ends” (2007:88). In some cases, arts management is still taught through traditional classroom models which, as Biggs and Tang (2007:16-17) have argued, typically concentrate on transmission of concepts and principles. As Brkic (2009:271) notes, in arts management these transmission models often start with management theory (the work of Frederick Taylor, Henri Fayol or Abraham Maslow) – indeed, business faculties may make management subjects available to arts students as a minor (Beckerman, 2007:90) – and then add the cultural dimension (the work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer or Pierre Bourdieu). Whilst these models “distribut[e] faculty financial commitments” (Beckerman, 2007:90), commentators criticise the implication that managing art is like managing anything else, arguing that this constitutes a lack of commitment to defining the core of arts management (Brkic, 2009:271). Moreover, though social constructivism, situated learning and authentic learning are not discussed regularly in the arts management literature, most commentators highlight the need for experiential education (Beckerman, 2007:90-92), whether through the enterprise development programs common in business faculties, or the industry placements, internships and extra-curricular programs such as student theatre companies common in arts faculties. As Lapierre argues, arts management, as a field, does not have a “generalised knowledge that is applicable in all situations. Knowledge is, and must be, ‘contextualised’” (2005:6) through case studies, scenarios, problem-solving activities and simulations, and a continual process of reflecting on these activities – precisely the sort of activities a community of practice approach encourages. It is only this way that academic, declarative knowledge will be transformed into the functional knowledge that students need to serve as brokers in the profession (cf. Biggs and Tang, 2007:135-36).
Accordingly, although debate about pedagogical models continues, several points of consensus are clear. Commentators agree that arts management programs cannot rely on content borrowed from business schools. They need to emphasise conversations about the social context of arts, creativity and innovation, which contextualise the content in terms of the social, cultural, political and economic environments in which arts managers will apply their entrepreneurial skills (Brkic, 2009:271, 277, 279; Beckerman, 2007:96-97). Commentators also agree that arts management programs need to create opportunities for students to learn these skill sets, and learn how to leverage these skill sets in a complex professional environment, via situated, authentic or experiential learning (Beckerman 2007:97, 100; Lapiere, 2005). However, programs cannot adopt a purely vocational emphasis on production in the performing or visual arts without broader applicability (Brkic, 2009:274). The need to develop practical skills and a perspective on the field cannot outweigh the need to develop, in tandem with practical skills, the interpretative, analytical and problem-solving skills that will allow graduates to intervene in cultural debates and broker cultural production processes (Brkic 2009:275) – skills that only emerge via considered engagement with the way in which those currently working in the field are succeeding or failing in their cultural brokering activities.

Given the difficulties of providing this sort of education via a short stream at undergraduate level (Beckerman, 2007), most dedicated arts management programs in Australia, as in the US, UK and Europe, are still taught via small-scale programs at graduate level (Brkic, 2009:278; Ebewo and Sirayi, 2009:286; Beckerman, 2007). These programs accept graduates from any field, including the creative arts, and allied disciplines such as communications, community planning and urban planning, as well as graduates from other disciplines hoping to ‘sea-change’ into a career in the arts. With the effort to define arts management as a field, and advance its scholarly and industrial interests, at the forefront of current debates, commentators are critical of a tendency to allow non-cognate graduates to enter Masters programs in arts management (Brkic, 2009:278; Ebewo and Sirayi, 2009:287). Whilst this is may or may not be justified, in order to ensure constructive alignment in arts management programs, the realities of Higher Education today mean this situation is unlikely to change, and developing pedagogical models to suit and support these diverse cohorts is a priority.

The Study

This study employed an action research approach to evaluate the potential of a ‘community of practice’ model to teach arts management students, cultural brokering skills. The study concentrated on a subject called Advanced Practice in Creative Production & Arts Management developed for the new Master of Creative Industries (Creative Production & Arts Management) in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT in 2009 and 2010. To achieve a MCI (Creative Production & Arts Management), students must complete four foundational subjects in Arts Management in their first Semester, four advanced subjects in entrepreneurship, the creative economy and creative project design in their second Semester, and a Major Project in their final Semester. The Advanced Practice in Creative Production & Arts Management subject is designed to be taken at the mid-point of the degree, amongst the advanced subjects, and addresses the arts manager’s role as a broker of arts and cultural production practices. It is designed to activate knowledge of arts policy, arts management, arts marketing, entrepreneurship and enterprise development, that students have established in the foundational stages of their Masters program, in the context of their own future career ambitions. It challenges graduate students to apply these skills to an active, agenda-driven brokering of arts production practices via peer-to-peer conversations which then cohere around actual or hypothetical programming, producing or partnership-building projects in specific arts sectors. It aims to develop students’ cultural brokering skills,
networks, and confidence in their capacity to implement innovative new relationships, partnerships and programs in their practice.

The study used the observation, data analysis and reflection that characterises action research (Kemmis, 1999:151) to determine whether the collective, collaborative problem-based learning that characterises a community of practice did in fact create an environment in which a diverse cohort of cognate and non-cognate students from the creative arts, allied disciplines, and non-allied disciplines could establish the new knowledge, skills and strategies that will, according to the literature, be critical to their own future professional practice.

The Subject

The Advanced Practice in Creative Production & Arts Management subject is one of the smallest the Creative Industries Faculty offers, offered to a group of around 10-20 students per Semester. It is designed to be taken at the mid-point of the Masters program, as students finish their foundational subjects and start bringing their skills together in the advanced subjects that prepare them for their Major Project. The subject functions as a bridge, as students’ progress from singular units of study to a sizable Major Project in which they demonstrate their arts management skills via an independent project, or via a project, program or internship with an arts organisation.

The subject concentrates on developing students’ cultural brokering skills, and their ability to respond clearly, creatively and decisively to industrial and policy agendas (Brkic, 2009; Dewey and Wy somirski, 2007; Sikes, 2000) impacting on their own sector. As Bilton and Leary (2002:58) argue, brokering is a primary skill for all arts managers. To act as brokers, arts managers need to develop a market orientation, an ability to position their work within wider systems, and engineer productive new connections amongst the people, practices, ideas and institutions that already exist in these systems (Bilton & Leary 2002:57). They need, in Hargadon’s terms, to be able to “construct innovations from pieces of the very landscape those innovations ultimately reshape” (2002: 43), exploiting pre-existing knowledges, skills, relationships and resources to support – that is, to entrepreneur – the emergence of innovative new products and programs. In Australia, where local, state and federal government remain a primary funder of arts, cultural and creative industries programs, the ability to create programs that address the instrumentalist agendas of policy-makers, as well as the social or economic aims of community and corporate partners, is critical. This means the brokering role is complex, challenging and highly politicised, and relies on transformational leadership qualities that allow the arts manager to motivate staff, partners and stakeholders to commit to developing specific ways of doing things (Bilton and Leary, 2002:58). By concentrating on the arts manager’s role as a cultural broker, via conversations within a community of practice, leading to a small project, this subject allows students to see how their skills can be applied in a complex industrial and political landscape. Students develop their ability to advocate on behalf of their organisation, align their organisation with broader agendas, and adapt their aims to take advantage of partnership opportunities (a priority in present sectoral plans in Australia).

The subject is structured as a community of practice which, although not self-selecting, brings students together on the basis of shared interests and problems (Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland, 2005:13). The community of practice model is based on the assumption that – though students may work in different sectors, such as the performing arts, public art, or community art – they share an interest in advancing their ability to broker new programs and partnerships within their sector. As Wenger argues, simply working in allied sectors is not enough to make people part of a community of practice – they need to “engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and
share information [to] build relationships that enable them to learn from each other" (Wenger 2006, n.pag). Accordingly, the subject uses activities that can be categorised in terms of the four phases Merrill (2002:44) identifies as critical to an authentic, well-aligned learning environment to engage students in peer-to-peer conversations within the community of practice — activation, demonstration, application and integration. In the activation phase, two polemical Position Papers prompt students to think about leadership, policy, policy-aligned programming, developing new networks, developing new partnerships, and developing evidence to demonstrate the impact of arts programs to different partners. This activates students' prior knowledge of arts policy, arts management, arts marketing, entrepreneurship and enterprise development in the context of cultural brokering. In the demonstration phase, Case Studies, followed by Masterclasses with industry professionals during two weekend intensives, demonstrate how people currently working as arts managers have harnessed these knowledges to make politicised decisions, align organisational aims with policy and partner agendas, broker partnerships, and articulate value in the aesthetic, social or economic terms privileged by different partners. In the application phase, face-to-face discussions during the intensives, together with ongoing online discussions, allow students to share ideas, information and relevant resources, identifying the problems most pressing in their own sector of practice via discussion, debate and future-casting scenarios (Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland, 2005:10). In this way, the community of practice becomes a platform for creating, organising and distributing knowledge (Ibid. 9; Wenger, 1998:3). Cross-fertilisation of knowledge across sectors – a central characteristic of brokering skills (Hargadon, 2002:43) – contributes to learning, as well as creating an “authentic” context in which that learning can occur. The community of practice is authentic not just because it involves students in networking, negotiating and advocating on behalf of particular programs in the way they will in the profession, but because it asks students to take responsibility for mapping, managing and re-imagining the field (Wenger, 2006) in precisely the way they will as cultural brokers – agents of cultural change – in their future career. Participation in discussion, debate, and problem-solving activities with peers and industry professionals allows students to build, reflect on and better represent knowledges acquired in prior phases of their degree (Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland, 2005:14), and, ideally, identify innovative ways of brokering activity in their own sector they can pursue in their Major Project or their future professional practice. In the integration phase, assessment via a project in which students design and describe a new program, production platform or production partnership allows them to make meaningful interventions in their own practice by conducting a pilot or precursor to their Major Project. By connecting with the Major Project, mutual enterprise and engagement in the community of practice also creates what Wenger (1998:2) calls a shared repertoire of resources – language, style, sensibility and approaches – that students will eventually be able to share with the broader arts management community as they progress to their independent projects and internships.

The Methodology

The data was gathered in 2009, with a group of 13 students, and the results were analysed to provide information the topics, learning tasks, and learning environments the students found most useful. Whilst the small number of students enrolled in Masters programs in arts management means that educators do not have access to the sample sizes required to generate statistically generalisable data, the use of a suite of qualitative and quantitative information gathering instruments provides detailed information on the variety of views about and approaches to learning cognate and non-cognate Masters students can hold — and, most critically, why they hold these views — which can be useful for educators in evaluating the efficacy of pedagogical approaches.

Three data-gathering methods were used to evaluate the way the community of practice model impacted on the arts management students’ learning. Firstly, students
were invited to participate in an on-campus survey, and online survey, and / or an interview. The anonymous on-campus survey utilised arts-based evaluation methods to draw feedback from students. First, students were presented with a map of the topics and learning tasks throughout the unit and asked to place green, amber and red flags – together with notes giving qualitative comments – on topics or tasks that were entirely clear and useful, partially clear and useful, or confusing. Second, students were presented with an outline of a student and asked to place notes with qualitative comments on any changes in their skills on the outside of the figure and on any changes in their feelings on the inside of the figure. The anonymous online survey used a combination of closed questions to gather basic information on the students’ status, together with Likert scales to allow students to indicate the usefulness of different topics and learning tasks, and open-ended questions to clarify students’ perspectives on their learning. The anonymous interview used open-ended questions to further clarify students’ perspectives on their learning. Secondly, a statistical content analysis of students’ participation in online conversations was conducted. Thirdly, the data gathered via these tools was triangulated with data on student performance in assessment tasks to provide a body of evidence on which to evaluate the impact of the model on student learning. 80% of students enrolled in the subject in its first iteration in 2009 chose to participate in the on-campus survey, 70% chose to participate in the online survey, and 20% chose to participate in the interviews.

The data-gathering tools were designed to ascertain what level of prior learning students brought to the subject, what their career ambitions were, and whether the peer-to-peer conversations within the community of practice did assist cognate and non-cognate students in activating the knowledges from which cultural brokers construct new connections, collaborations and partnerships. The data indicated that more than half the students considered themselves to be non-cognate. More than half (57.0%) said they were in the first Semester of their Masters course. One student had undertaken short-term casual employment in arts management, and this student together with three others had studied some arts management subjects in the past – though, as the data analysis will show, because success was based more on learning style than cognate or non-cognate status these more experienced students did not necessarily automatically become the “old timer” voices in the group. There were four students who had never studied arts management as part of their training in arts aesthetics or education. There were five students who had never practiced or studied arts, arts education, or arts management in any form at all. In theory, the subject was designed to accommodate different backgrounds, aptitudes and career ambitions. It did, however, assume that students came into the community of practice with some knowledge developed via prior study or prior participation in industry on which cultural brokering skills can be built. Moreover, it did assume that students – in theory, in the middle stage of a Masters degree – came to the community of practice with knowledge-building approaches which they could apply to this new area of study (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993:175). The high percentage of non-cognate students in the sample provided an ideal opportunity to test assumptions about the usefulness of a community of practice model for a diverse cohort of arts management students, and about the diverse cohort itself, via the action research (Kemmis, 1999:151, 153; Biggs and Tang, 2007:253). In particular, it provided an opportunity to determine whether changes to the community of practice model would be required (Kemmis, 1999:151) to support students yet to develop the disciplinary knowledges necessary to participate fully and effectively this collective, collaborative, problem-based learning community.

Data Analysis

The data indicated that the students were indeed a diverse cohort – not just in their history, but in their future career ambitions. Asked about their future career ambitions, most indicated that they wanted to work in an artistic, event or exhibition management role in the performing or visual arts, including in the community arts sector. Whilst many
students wanted to work in their own micro-organisation, in a major organisation, or as a consultant to major organisations, few were interested in working for government in a production or policy-making role, and none were interested in working in a marketing role.

Given that most students wanted to create arts programs, events and exhibitions, it is not surprising that most understood the importance (56.2%) or at least the need (29.5%) for cultural brokering skills. Most saw the ability to establish an organisation’s ethos, and explain it to others, as important (28.6%), or very important (57.1%). Moreover, most considered the ability to build trust to be important (42.9%), or very important (42.9%). Only a small percentage of students said they hadn’t considered these skills before (14.3%). Whilst students saw the ability to make politicised decisions as important (85.7%), the ability to align with policy or partner agendas, broker partnerships, and articulate the value of their practice in terms meaningful to multiple partners, was less recognised as skill sets associated with cultural brokering. Whilst most saw these policy and partnership alignments as important, though not very important, nearly a third had not thought about it before (14.3%), or had not thought it important (14.3%). Additionally, some students had not thought the ability to create policy and partnership alignments important to their own role in creating a strong, inclusive, sustainable arts and cultural sector – whilst many saw this as important (42.9%), or very important (28.6%), nearly a third admitted that they hadn’t thought about it before (28.6%). As a result, all students said they needed to do more to understand cultural brokering skills (14.3%), understand how cultural brokering skills are used in their own sector (28.6%), or, most critically, understand how they could apply these skills in their own practice (42.9%). The data indicated that the community of practice activities did help students develop their cultural brokering skills. However, some activities were considered more useful than others. For instance the Position Papers, and the Masterclasses with arts professionals, were considered the most useful learning activities.

In the online survey, all students said the Position Papers – which succinctly summarised issues of leadership, aligning with policy, making politicised decisions and making partnerships – helped them understand the importance of cultural brokering skills (100.0%). In the on-campus survey and the interviews, students characterised the Position Papers as “highly valuable,” and a “good catalyst,” which “set the scene, got me really thinking.” As one student said during the interviews, “the Position Papers … were fantastic, because they … really set it all up for you … distilling all this stuff down into this framed, focused sort of form.”

In the online survey, all students said the Masterclasses with arts professionals helped them understand the important of cultural brokering skills (100.0%), and, more importantly, how these skills could be applied in their own specific sector of arts practice (100.0%). Students said the Masterclasses, which took place during two weekend intensives, were more useful than weekly meetings because they enabled an in-depth, integrated approach to the content. In the interviews, one student said, “I think those two intensives gave definition to the readings, and the Case Studies, as well as kind of bringing everything together”. In the online survey, another student suggested that there should be more time to revisit the Masterclass presentations with peers, and perhaps with the industry professionals on return visits. Another student made a similar suggestion in the interviews, saying “having the presentations, and having time to have it gel, and then a week or two weeks later having another conversation with the arts professional” might be helpful.

The Case Studies were considered a less useful learning activity. Certainly, students saw their value. As one student said at interview, “every week, every Case Study, was very good. I mean, even if it wasn’t anything to do with what I’m doing, it just gave an understanding of how people are problem-solving, and how they are approaching their
creative work, their opportunities”. In the on-campus survey, students said they learned something from every Case Study. In the online survey, though, whilst all students said the Case Studies helped them understand the important of cultural brokering skills (100.0%), only half said they helped them understand how these skills were applied in their specific sector of arts management practice (50.0%). The consensus was that, whilst students saw the value of the Case Studies, as they noted in their green, amber and red flags in the on-campus survey, they would have liked them to be “[m]ore practical, less theory, [with] more [emphasis on] objective outcomes,” and this was why they found the Masterclasses with arts professionals present more useful than the Case Studies.

The online and offline conversations with peers were considered the least useful learning activity. Again, students certainly understood that they were being asked to communicate online because communication, articulation and advocacy online – for example, via email, or via industry forums in their field – will be a component of their professional practice as a cultural broker. “I think that, in reality, if we’re talking about the work experience, and people going into the workplace,” one student said in an interview, then “in reality there is a lot of online communication now, so you need to feel comfortable with that.” However, whilst the online survey indicated that some students thought the online conversations helped them understand the importance of cultural brokering skills (50.0%), and a couple thought that they helped them understand how to apply these skills in their sector (16.7%), a significant proportion said they helped them on neither front (33.3%). Clearly, students found the face-to-face conversations with arts professionals following the Masterclasses more helpful in understanding cultural brokering skills (100%), and understanding how to apply these skills in practice (71.4%).

The data showed that issues with the online conversations were due to the fact that this activity most clearly highlighted different learning styles amongst the cohort. Analysis of students’ participation in the online conversations demonstrated that some students were still becoming familiar with the arts and cultural sector, and, as a result, found it challenging to articulate a career ambition, and use conversations with peers to cultivate cultural brokering skills they might call on in that career, in the community of practice model. Thus, whilst students understood why they were being asked to converse online, and were sometimes about to move beyond summarising material with their own practice (21.0% of posts), or make links with other ideas (19.0% of posts), most found it challenging to use this process to debate new program possibilities within the community of practice (only 14.0% of posts). Indeed, whilst the majority of students were able to analyse material, link it to their practice, or link it to other ideas (80.0%), only half participated in the conversations that actually proposed new program possibilities (50.0%), and only a third drove these debates or conversations about new forms of practice (30.0%).

On the surface, the fact that many students found it challenging to display the level of familiarity with the field, and the level of future career ambition, required to drive online conversations about new program possibilities within the community of practice would seem to support Ebewo and Sirai’s (2009:287) that non-cognate students should not be accepted into Masters programs in arts management. And, further, that a community of practice model should not be used in arts management education, or any other Higher Education context, in which both cognate and non-cognate students are represented in the cohort. However, in this study, the data demonstrated that a student’s status as cognate or non-cognate was not actually an indicator of whether they would be able to use online conversations in the community of practice model to propose new approaches, partnerships or production platforms they might implement in their future career. This was, rather, related to learning style and stage. When faced with the demands of this situation – in which they were being asked to cast themselves of brokers of cultural production practices – many students could only replicate, mimic or match approaches they had used or had seen others use in the
past, approaches which seemed to “best fit” (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993:157) the new situation. Only about a third of students were able to extend their existing approaches to meet the demands of the new situation. In this respect, when faced with a task as difficult as brokering arts and cultural programs, two thirds of the students displayed the characteristics of what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) call “non-expert” learners, while one third of the student displayed the characteristics of what they call “expert” learners. And the third that did display the characteristics of “expert” learners – the ability to go beyond mimicry and meet the demands of the new situation – included both cognate and non-cognate students.

Significantly, analysis of online conversations showed that student status as “expert” or “non-expert” learners did not necessarily result in lack of interest, or lack of engagement, with the online peer-to-peer conversations in which students debated new program possibilities. The statistics showed that the high and low performing students made the most use of the online discussion areas (400-800 hits per student over the Semester), whilst the middle performing students made more modest use of this areas (100-300 hits per student over the Semester). The difference was that whilst high and low performing students were on a par in terms of reading posts, high performing students posted more frequently than low performing students. In fact, then, low performing students were watching their peers with a view to discovering new ways to approach the learning challenges based on mimicry of what other people were doing – a prevalent pattern of engagement and interaction for “non-expert” learners (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993:157, 161) – even if there were no visual, written or audio clues to let other know they were engaged in this way. Thus, in the online survey, all students said the combination of online, offline and face-to-face interaction in the community of practice significantly (60.0%), or at least somewhat (40%), improved their ability to articulate their ideas to a board, advocacy body, funding body or partner, even if a proportion of students did not seem to be actively practising this skill in the online conversations.

The final project was considered a worthwhile, if challenging, learning opportunity. In the online survey, 14.3% of students said it helped them understand how they might research their sector, 28.6% of students said it helped them understand cultural brokering skills in their sector, and 42.9% said it helped them understand how they might apply cultural brokering skills in their sector.

Mixed reactions to some of the learning activities notwithstanding, all students said that the community of practice model – in which conversations about the cultural brokering skills led into an individual programming, producing or partnership-building project – was a worthwhile learning experience. All students said this process helped them either to understand their field (28.6%), or to develop skill sets that would be useful in their field (42.9%), or to develop skill sets which were important to them personally (28.6%). Similarly, all students said this process helped them build on skills from their prior study (42.9%), or build skills that would be useful to their professional practice (71.4%). “Overall,” one student said at interview, “I really liked the varied means of communication, the content, and its flow. … [I] felt like a valued member of the community of practice.” “I do think I’ve got a better understanding of the practice of creative industries”, another student said. “I think doing this subject has helped me to look at who I can resource, within the university, and even outside, to clarify [what I’m trying to achieve with my work].” another said. In terms of professional skills, students said the activities in the community of practice clarified their understanding of arts and cultural management, cultural production practices, the impact of cultural policy on production practices, and the ways in which the relationship between arts, culture, community and government works, providing an insight into other people’s values, opinions and ways of working. In terms of personal skills and feelings, students said the activities increased their confidence in their ability to achieve goals, and to operate as both a creative and a creative producer at the same time, whilst expanding their networks, and their respect for a diverse range of opinions and agendas.
Discussion

The data confirms that arts management students do want to develop their cultural brokering skills, and that a community of practice model does assist in creating an environment in which both cognate and non-cognate student engage with these skills in a way that suits their career stage and aspirations. It does, however, have implications for the way in which a community of practice is run with graduate students in a Higher Education context, especially with graduate arts management students, given arts management students do typically come from a diverse range of backgrounds. The data indicates that this cohort did represent what Perry (1988:145) has called “different worlds in the same classroom.” The students were at different stages of the evolution of epistemological assumptions that, according to Perry (1988:148), occurs over the course of their learning and professional life, and enables them to progressively accept more and more responsibility for constructing and applying knowledges across different circumstances (1988:156-59). This difference was not necessarily related to students’ status as cognate or non-cognate, nor was it necessarily related to students’ level of prior learning, participation in the industry, intelligence or talent (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993:154). Rather, it was related to students’ learning style, and, specifically, to students’ ability to apply knowledge-building approaches developed throughout their history as a learner to this challenging task – knowledge-building approaches that, according to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993:175) give “expert” learners a sense not just of what to learn of the best way to go about learning it. This was why “non-expert” students preferred to watch out for and mimic established approaches of peers and professionals, which seemed likely to enable them to complete the task, rather than attempting entirely new approaches immediately and frequently the way “expert” students did (1993:157-59). Most significantly, because the community of practice model did not always allow students to identify a single, discrete, well-defined approach they could learn from a designated teacher (Perry, 1998 148), some “non-expert” students showed a tendency to observe, imitate and implement strategies adopted by their more “expert” peers. This is not a bad thing. Indeed, the purpose of a community of practice is to allow a group of students to share knowledges, skills and strategies, and thus learn from each other. However, it did have an impact on the way this community of practice functioned, which emerged most clearly in the students’ comments about the online conversations. The “non-expert” learners did not feel excluded from these conversations. Rather, the evidence suggests that the “non-expert” learners were watching the “expert” learners debate new approaches, and this became a tool in their own learning. In effect, in the online conversations – the activity in which the voices of the industry professionals were least present – the “expert” learners became the equivalent of what Blanton and Stylianou (2009) call “old-timers” in the community of practice. As Blanton and Stylianou suggest, the presence of old-timers is “an essential dynamic of a community of practice” (2009:85), because “old-timers become the seed for enculturating new participants into the sociocultural practices of the community” (2009: 85). Indeed, students in this study acknowledged this – most said they would like the community of practice to continue after classes finished so they could continue to get peer feedback and support (83.3%), but at least one noted that this wouldn't be as valuable if the industry professionals were not part of the community. However, the data indicated that the “expert” learners were not comfortable with being thrust into the old-timer role. For some, perceived non-participation on the part of their peer group made the online conversations fragmented, and at times frustrating. “I really did like the community of practice,” one student said during an interview. “... I liked the idea of the online thing, and I liked the kind of discipline of having to do something, having to look at things then do them, because they really made you think ... the only thing was, I was kind of disappointed with the group.” The different types of participation in the group were (mistakenly) attributed to laziness, or lack of time management skills, amongst the cohort. Whilst students were reluctant to suggest that the online conversations should be eliminated, they did suggest strategies should be introduced to force all students to take a position in the unfolding debates, if at all possible. This, they felt, would improve
the learning experience for them, in a context where they are paying to participate in a graduate program, and thus perceive themselves to be entitled to take the learner’s position.

The difficulty, of course, is that because the perceived non-participation was due to learning style and stage, not laziness, mandating participation is unlikely to be effective in improving the experience for all members of the community of practice. Indeed, to do so would run somewhat counter to the self-driven style of learning a community of practice is designed to create. Rather, this data indicates that when developing a community of practice amongst arts management students in a Higher Education context, educators need to make an adaptation to the model, and emphasise learning activities that allow for the presence of the voices of arts professionals rather than just the more “expert” students as old-timers – as the Position Papers, Masterclasses and, to a lesser degree, the Case Studies, did in this case – to avoid overburdening students within the group with this role. A community of practice is useful, because it allows students to take control over their own learning, consider the skills, techniques and strategies they can apply in their future professional practice, and come up with new strategies during peer-to-peer conversations about what has proved effective in different contexts at different times. It allows students to build skills – including leadership and self-driven learning skills that will serve them well in their future careers as arts managers. It also graduate students to build confidence, build networks, and build an image of themselves as a valued member of a learning community that will continue to serve them as they launch themselves into their professional lives. However, in a community of practice composed primarily of students, where participants evolve to the stage of being able to take responsibility for their own learning at different rates, not necessarily related to their prior learning or professional life, allowing voices of wisdom and authority to emerge organically simply is not a suitable approach. This data suggests that when working with students – particularly in arts management, where the tendency to offer programs at graduate level means students will always come from diverse arts and non-arts backgrounds – educators need to seriously consider how the activities they propose for a community of practice, introduces the voices of old timers. In addition how to avoid activities that ask students to move too quickly from the position of ‘learner to teacher’ – no matter what their level of prior learning and professional practice. In this study Position Papers, Masterclasses and more practically oriented Case Studies in which arts professionals drive the discussion via a clear focus on practices, processes and outcomes, proved to be the learning activities most likely to be effective in providing this ‘old timer’ voice. Further research could, no doubt, reveal other teaching activities that might be equally or more effective in providing this ‘old timer’ voice, whilst retaining a sense of a learning community based on conversations amongst peers in which all contributions are valued.
Conclusion
This article has investigated the effectiveness of a community of practice model in teaching arts management students, cultural brokering skills. The findings demonstrate that the community of practice model is, on the whole, effective in allowing arts management students to share ideas about brokering cultural production practices, and advance their skills, whilst accommodating diverse career aims. It also enables students to participate in the sort of networking, advocacy and conversations about alignment with stakeholder aims they will need to be part of, as they develop projects in their future careers. In other words, a community of practice does indeed enable graduate students to engage with a specific professional problem – in this case, the problem of how to develop cultural brokering skills. However, the findings demonstrate that, whilst a community of practice approach has advantages, when this approach is used with arts management students in a Higher Education context, educators do need to tailor the activities to suit the different learning styles and stages of the students. In particular, educators need to tailor activities to ensure that students do not find themselves unwittingly or unwillingly positioned as the “old-timer” in the peer-to-peer conversations. Whilst this does not necessarily adversely affect learning outcomes, in a Higher Education context where all students consider themselves to be learners, this can become a source of frustration, and thus impact on the functioning of the learning community. The findings indicate that certain activities – in this case, the Position Papers, Masterclasses, and Case Studies – can assist in introducing the voice of the arts professional old-timer into a community of practice more than others. In a Higher Education context, an extended engagement with these sorts of activities, accompanied by a more gradual move into exclusively peer-to-peer engagement in online or offline contexts, provides the best support for the emergence of a well-functioning community of practice which allows all students to develop their cultural brokering skills.
References


