Case Study

Innovation
BRIDGE is a registered non-profit organisation that was established in South Africa in 2009 with the aim of linking people and sharing working practice and knowledge in key leverage areas in the education system. From 2013 - 2015, Khulisa Management Services (Khulisa) conducted a developmental evaluation of the Bridge Community of Practice (CoP) model and methodology. As part of this evaluation, Khulisa conducted a series of case studies on three distinct themes that emerged from the evaluation’s research questions. These themes include (1) “innovation”, (2) “policy and practice”, and (3) “knowledge generation and management”.

Innovation in BRIDGE does not simply refer to the creation of something new, but also refers to deepening, recombining and scaling of new approaches and ideas. In the final phase of the evaluation, Khulisa investigated some of the key innovations that have evolved out of BRIDGE over the course of the evaluation, and whether any of these innovations have been deepened, recombined and scaled. The “innovation” case study provides an example of an innovative course of action undertaken by the Ekurhuleni North Principals’ Community of Practice that was both deepened and scaled. This case was selected as a result of participatory engagement with BRIDGE, whereby the particular case was identified as the best example of a critical instance of innovation in BRIDGE that that also demonstrates the program’s effects.
BRIDGE CASE STUDY: INNOVATION

This study investigates one of the key innovations that has evolved out of BRIDGE’s Principals and School Leadership Community of Practice (CoP) and aims to understand how this innovation evolved. The case being studied involves the implementation of a Maths diagnostic test at a number of primary schools in Ekurhuleni North district in Gauteng and an innovative course of action taken by the Ekurhuleni North Principals’ CoP in response to the test results.

The key findings are (i) when CoPs have a common purpose and members begin to trust one another and share resources, innovation can take place; (ii) When a CoP has a “compelling goal or challenge that can be met only through innovation”, innovation is more likely to occur; (iii) although the CoP may come up with the innovative idea together, it is necessary for the CoP to have at least one “champion” to drive the innovation forward and; (iv) good facilitation of the COP could be a key factor for igniting the innovative idea and supporting the CoP in planning to take it forward. These factors drive the process of innovation.

This case study represents two types: (1) program effects and (2) critical instance. It captures an innovation that would not have taken place in the absence of the program, demonstrating program effects. It also examines a unique event, or critical instance, that provides an insight into how innovation has occurred in the BRIDGE context.

Data for this study was collected through a variety of sources including key informant interviews with a member of the COP, two representatives from BRIDGE, and the COP facilitator, and a review of relevant documents and records. Primary and secondary data underwent qualitative analysis to support findings and conclusions through a process of triangulation.
The Ekurhuleni North Principals’ Community of Practice (CoP) was initiated by BRIDGE in 2011, with the support of the Ekurhuleni District Office. Importantly, the district was involved in the selection of schools for the CoP, as explained by a key BRIDGE staff member involved in the project:

“...the schools were originally chosen by [the] district so there has been support from the beginning”

The CoP is comprised of volunteer primary school principals and is facilitated by an experienced BRIDGE facilitator. The CoP sets its own agenda and meets formally once a quarter to discuss different types of issues; some that affect all schools in the area and others that relate to providing support and advice within and between the CoP member schools. The needs of the CoP emerge from the contexts within which the school principals work.

At the point of initiation in 2011, the CoP was not warmly received by the principals in the area. According to a principal in the CoP, who has been a part of the community since its inception;

"Initially there was a bit of scepticism, a bit of fear, because you don’t know who you’re dealing with."

Over the past three years, the CoP developed into an engaging community where principals share their experiences and support one another. In the words of the principal:

“... I think now we’ve developed a form of camaraderie. I think there’s trust. We trust each other. I think also when we go to principal’s forums... we identify with each other, we socialise... So I think the spinoff has been far greater than us just being in that meeting and talking... there’s somehow that pull factor where we just pull together, and I think that is the difference.”

The CoP’s facilitator echoes this sentiment in the following comment:

“... [There is] real trust...they now share stuff. What I have a real problem with is picking up what they do which they see as normal which I think is impact of the CoP.”

The main activities that the CoP engages in include:
1. Sharing resources – both physical and intellectual
2. Solving problems together
3. Providing advice and support to one another (peer support)
4. Modelling behaviour
5. Coaching and mentoring

The CoP has changed over time from a collection of disconnected and isolated school leaders to a group of co-contributors who interact with one another in a symbiotic relationship. In relation to the lifecycle of CoPs, the Ekurhuleni North Principals CoP is in the “maturing” stage. The group is now building on knowledge sharing and co-consulting activities toward consultative collaboration on innovative projects.
The following comment, provided by the school principal interviewed for this study, summarises the evolution of the CoP over the past three years:

“...we’re basically not in competition but rather inter-dependent, and that makes a big difference... Before that we were all independent... our schools [were] in competition with each other... I think once you get to know principals on a different level then that type of superficiality\(^1\) falls away, because then it lies in a community. You’re not selfishly alone in your school. And I think, to me, that’s absolutely important... to develop that view that the community is important and not just the learners in your school.”

Outside of the formal meetings, principals in the CoP are now meeting on an informal level. Some principals get together and discuss issues that face other schools in the area and that also affect them. Principals within the CoP have indicated that it is important that the CoP continue to operate, as it is an important source of support to the schools in the area.

The Innovation

The principals within the Community of Practice came up with an idea to administer a district-wide mathematics (maths) test so that they could gain insight into the gaps within maths learning and teaching both within their own schools and within the community as a whole. As the CoP was primarily made up of primary school principals, the group decided to meet with secondary school principals in the area and gain their buy-in to administer the test within their own schools. BRIDGE facilitated the administration of the maths diagnostic test at the schools within the district covered by the CoP. The primary and secondary school teachers met to mark the tests together which, according to a key BRIDGE staff member, was “the first time that they had really interacted”.

BRIDGE analysed the results and fed the results of this test back to the CoP through the CoP’s facilitator. The principals in the CoP subsequently recognised that there were common challenges across all schools, both primary and high. They saw that there was a problem with Grade 7 maths in their schools and that, specifically, there was a problem with the quality of maths teaching at this level. In response, they decided to engage in a workshop to support the professional development of teachers in their schools. According to the school principal interviewed for this case:

“From the data we picked up [that] while the percentages varied, the problem areas were the same... there was a problem in terms of teaching. So what came up from our meeting ... was that teachers probably knew their work but the presentation, the didactics, was a problem in terms of how to transfer that knowledge to the learners. So, based on that, we then called up a meeting with all the HODs and the teachers teaching Grade 7.

\(^1\) Transcription unclear
And again I think that because of that position of trust, I think probably about 90% of the teachers responded. We called the teachers together and my question to them was ‘where are the problem areas, or what do you find difficult teaching?’, and they opened up.”

A few members of the CoP championed this course of action, and rallied other members to participate. Together, the principals worked with the teachers in their schools to come up with a schedule of topics that would be covered in a series of workshops. The workshops were held just prior to the end of the second school term in 2014. Each week, a different person from a different school covered a workshop topic. The maths series taught teachers how to teach problem topics using the in-class resources available. The teachers engaged in positive criticism, encouraging peer learning and support.

Twelve out of thirteen schools in the CoP were represented in the workshops. Teachers were not forced to attend, but were invited to attend the series twice a week after school hours. No external funding was provided but, rather, each school volunteered to host a session. The schools that participated included a mix of Section 21 and Section 20 schools.

Importantly, while the facilitator of the CoP initiated the discussion, it was the members of the CoP who instigated and carried through with the innovative action in response to the feedback. BRIDGE played an administrative role through this process, not driving it but rather coordinating it. In the words of the CoP facilitator, who was not present during the time that the innovation was being carried out, “…it was me initiating from their debate, which then they took up and which they then did something else with which was informing teaching and learning and which has now established a process which can continue.”

A key BRIDGE staff member involved in the CoP echoes this statement with the following:

“They didn’t want BRIDGE involved in this. They said ‘We’ve got this. We can do this’ so there was a lot of buy-in and ownership.”

According to the CoP facilitator, one principal’s response to this course of action was, “…my teachers cannot believe what you taught us.” Similarly, the school principal who initiated the innovation reported that, “… it opened up a whole new way in terms of teaching... that was the feedback I got”, and, “...there was a lot of self-evaluation by teachers, introspection in terms of the teaching...”. The response of the teachers to the workshop was highly positive. According to the interviewed principal,

“...one of the reasons this was a success, and this is probably just my opinion, is that teachers know there is a problem. They just can’t say it. This was an opportunity. There was a forum for them to come up with the things that were frustrating them. And I think that is why they bought into it”.

The CoP facilitator noted that “…there is action when you have a common factor, like with all school teachers”. Action, in this case, was facilitated through a shared perspective.

In terms of deepening, recombining, and scaling the innovation, the school principal interviewed in this study cited two examples of how the innovative course of action taken on by the CoP went on to affect more than just the Grade 7 teachers and HODs involved in the course, spurring on further innovative action.
In the first example, the teachers across the different schools who were involved in the workshop formed their own group and began to share resources among one another (although the principal is unsure whether this community has continued to present). The innovation had, in this respect, a knock-on effect on a different group of practitioners within the school network and was therefore inadvertently scaled. This instance was confirmed by a key BRIDGE staff member who reported;

“They’ve just been doing... internal professional development things within their own schools... they’re like mini Communities of Practice between maths teachers within the schools.”

In the second example, the principal cited a critical instance from his own school, where the teachers at the school decided not to only look at and support Grade 7 maths teaching, but rather to investigate and support the build-up of maths teaching practices from Grade 4 to 6. They realised that teachers of Grade 4 maths had to understand what was expected of students in the higher grades and that the higher grades needed to, in turn, understand how (and what) their students had been taught previously. In this sense, the innovation was deepened from simply strengthening Grade 7 maths teaching to changing the way teachers teach from earlier grades all the way up. In the words of the principal,

“In our school, we ran workshops on these topics. A teacher had to choose a topic and look at it from so that the Grade 7 teachers knew what was happening at the bottom, and the teachers at the bottom knew what was expected up top.”

Upon query around whether the innovation would likely have taken place in the absence of the CoP, the school principal reported, “It wouldn’t have happened on its own.” The principal went on to state,

“...you’ll find that if people don’t understand how a community of practice works, there’s a lot of mistrust. They think things are judgemental. It’s only after 6 months or so that you realise... you’re all sitting with the same problems here... and that’s when people start trusting each other and start opening up and start talking. And that all of a sudden the problem at your school isn’t just with you. You are able to talk about it. People are able to give their input”

Discussion

The case presented above provides a number of interesting insights into the concept of innovation in BRIDGE. Firstly, all of the informants interviewed for the case study note the fact that significant trust has been built among the CoP members, as portrayed the principal’s comment, “…I think now we’ve developed a form of camaraderie. I think there’s trust. We trust each other”, and in the facilitator’s comment, “…[There is] real trust...they now share stuff...resources.”
According to Community Intelligence Ltd\(^2\),
one of the key enablers of innovation within CoPs is a *knowledge strategy that recognises the importance of trustful relationships* among CoP members and builds on these relationships to facilitate collaborative learning. This, in turn, facilitates innovation. BRIDGE’s style of facilitating the Ekurhuleni North Principals CoP is consistent with this type of strategy. The fact that trust has been built among members of the community could be a key driver of the innovative course of action undertaken by the CoP in this case.

Another point raised during the interviews is the fact that members of the CoP identified an important challenge that affected the CoP as a whole. Not only was the challenge identified within the CoP, but it was understood as a challenge among the teachers involved in the innovation, as represented in the following comment: “...one of the reasons this was a success, and this is probably just my opinion, is that teachers know there is a problem. They just can’t say it.”

Community Intelligence Ltd\(^3\) argues that a “*compelling goal or challenge that can be met only through innovation*” is another key driver of innovation within CoPs. The fact that the CoP identified a common challenge that required radical action is likely one of the main factors that drove the innovation in this context. This is reflected in the CoP facilitator’s comment, "...there is action when you have a common factor, like with all school teachers”.

Coakes and Smith (2007) contend that “innovation is facilitated and supported by innovation champions, who have most influence outside traditional organisational structures when they are members of a close-knit community”\(^4\) The fact that the innovation was taken up and driven by a few members of the CoP is consistent with the concept that change champions can spur on innovation in CoPs. The following comment captures how a few individuals within the CoP decided to take the innovation forward on their own; “They didn’t want BRIDGE involved in this. They said ‘We’ve got this. We can do this’ so there was a lot of buy-in and ownership.” Not only did the champions drive the innovation within the CoP, but they engaged other schools from outside of the CoP to participate in the innovative exercise, thereby scaling and deepening the intervention.

There is evidence to support the fact that facilitation was an important part of initiating, but not carrying forward, the innovation, as demonstrated in the comment of the CoP’s facilitator; “...it was me initiating from their debate, which then they took up and which then they then did something else with.”

The role of the facilitator is interesting in the context of CoPs that are in the process of innovating. These individuals hold a unique place in the CoP structure. They are “part” of the CoP yet they stand at a distance, and they often play a role in multiple CoPs at the same time. These individuals have a “birds’ eye view” of the CoP. Community of Practice members with this kind of perspective are cross-functional individuals that can potentially play an important role in identifying opportunities for innovation:

“Cross-functional individuals belong to multiple communities of practice, and it is the multi-membership that gives them the

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boundary-spanning multi-perspective, from which they can see radical innovation opportunities where others may see an opportunity only for gradual improvement or nothing.”

In this case, the CoP’s facilitator supported the community in identifying the opportunity for innovation. Although she was not involved in carrying it out, the fact that she helped the CoP to come to the point of decision to take it forward is likely one of the factors that spurred on the innovation in this context.

**Findings**

The key findings of this case study are summarised as follows:

1. When CoPs have a common purpose and members begin to trust one another, innovation can take place;
2. When a CoP has a “compelling goal or challenge that can be met only through innovation”, innovation is more likely to occur;
3. Although the CoP may come up with the innovative idea together, it is necessary for the CoP to have at least one “champion” to drive the innovation forward and;
4. Good facilitation of the CoP could be a key factor for igniting the innovative idea and supporting the CoP in planning to take it forward.

The findings of this case study suggest factors such as synergy and trust among members, a common challenge, the presence of supportive “champions” and good facilitation, are important in supporting an enabling environment for innovation to take place.

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5 Community Intelligence Ltd (2003), p. 11.