Communities of practice in a voluntary youth organisation: reaching for the sky and building social capital

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The study is situated within a national youth organisation called the Australian Air League Inc (Air League). We examine the recent progress of the Air League in South Australia, starting as a loose network of volunteers engaged in a sporadic array of activities, to become a learning community that worked collaboratively and then developed further as a potential community of practice. This process involved sharing across boundaries in a way that was previously construed as undesirable as local achievement was seen as more important than the development of the larger community. In part, this paper takes the form of a personal narrative and draws insights from observations and interpretations during 2009–2010. Highlighting issues arising from the complexity

of developing collaborative models of practice across organisational boundaries and competitive entities, we delve into challenges around maintaining devotion to one's immediate unit while sharing experience and building capacity in the wider community. This includes gaining agreement to action, facing the fear of sharing diverse knowledge with new people, being found wanting, and working across organisational hierarchies in a setting characterised by uniform and a disciplined rank structure.

Introduction

The Air League is a national uniformed organisation for aviation-minded boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 18. Formed in 1934, and entirely self-funded, the organisation has continued successfully for over 75 years and is proud to have the Governor-General of Australia as its patron. The Air League aims to encourage physical and social development, promote aviation and build qualities of citizenship among its members. Meeting for just one night per week, the officers and cadets study a wide range of educational topics, participate in community service events, complete the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme and take part in air activities such as gliding and flying experience. The Air League markets itself as the 'primary school of aviation'. The foundational unit is a squadron, normally named after a local town or suburb where the unit is situated. Squadrons vary in size from ten to fifty members and each is led by a team of volunteer officers. In organisational terms, two or three squadrons are administered as a wing and in each state two or more wings make up a group. Each group is managed by a small team of staff officers. Presently the national organisation has 1200 members, plus 300 associates including parents and supporters. Volunteer officers come from all walks of life, but historically the organisation has attracted adults with prior service in the defence forces, or those people who are familiar with working in a uniformed

environment such as police officers and security guards. However, in recent times, the Air League has attracted volunteers with little or no experience of what it means to serve in a discipline-based organisation, where command and control management techniques still prevail.

The Air League has a chequered history in South Australia and in mid 2009 the Chief Commissioner challenged local leaders to renew their efforts and increase membership through community engagement and collaborative partnerships. The conduit for this change in direction came from a new leadership team who encouraged squadrons to grow and develop by focusing on learning as a major opportunity. A concerted effort to attract more adult volunteers achieved a 90 per cent increase in membership. Part of this growth came from an unexpected alliance with the University of South Australia's Aviation Academy where student pilots aged between 18 and 25 were required to undertake thirty hours of community services as part of their degree program. Air League and UniSA Aviation Academy leaders quickly realised the mutual benefit from engaging these students. Coincidentally, some had prior experience in similar youth organisations overseas and quickly saw an opportunity to continue with their passion for aviation while at the same time becoming involved in a local youth organisation. It is known that overseas students who are displaced from their normal home environments take time to integrate into a new community (Handy & Greenspan, 2009) and the Air League provided a safe and structured place where the students could contribute and belong.

In this paper we review how the adult leaders in South Australia focused on growth and in doing so became part of both formal and informal learning communities, bound together by a keen interest in aviation and a willingness to help young people. Furthermore, we consider organisational development models and learning theories, with a particular focus on the concept of learning communities. We

examine the organisational structure, function and culture of the Air League and take into consideration the literature and theoretical ideas on learning communities to determine how they influence the development of a community of practice.

Embedded within this paper is a personal narrative, written from the perspective of a student/trainee pilot who became involved in the Air League while studying at UniSA. Following seven years of experience in a similar youth organisation in Hong Kong, the student volunteered to share his passion for aviation with local youngsters and help the organisation to grow in South Australia. Drawing from personal observation and self-analysis of the environment over a six-month period, the narrative is presented using the Air League as a case study. Together with the co-author, who was also involved as the leading change agent within the organisation, this report draws insight from the current literature on socially constructed learning, social capital and in particular the texts on communities of practice to compare these findings within those found in the organisation. Finally, we consider how learning gained within the Air League could be transferred to an aviation environment where aircrew and flight teams may engage in communities of practice as a means of professional and personal development.

Method and approach

We have used an interpretive approach in this paper, since the study was primarily concerned with perceptions and experiences. An interpretive approach is based on the view that people socially and symbolically construct their own organisational realities (Berger & Luckman, 1967). It construes knowledge as being gained through social constructions such as language, shared meanings and documents. Thus the individual is cast as 'a central actor in a drama of personal meaning making' (Fenwick, 2001: 9). In this way,

individuals are understood to construct their own knowledge through interaction with environments.

Using the Air League organisation in South Australia as a case study, we report on our personal experience and adopt a qualitative perspective. Drawing on a review of the literature on organisational theory and socially constructed learning, observations through frequent immersion within the organisation and reviewing documents that detail accounts of recent history, we examine and interpret information in form of a scholarly narrative. These techniques are most commonly employed in case studies where the researcher seeks to engage with and report on the complexity of social activity in the area under investigation (Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

In using this approach, we decided to present an account of our shared experiences, taking a diverse perspective because of our different ages, occupations and cultural backgrounds, but finding common ground as professionals working in Australia for a specified period of time and with prior experience of serving in similar youth organisations overseas. This paper differs from other qualitative studies in that those observed were not formally interviewed, nor have any identifiable units of analysis been addressed by name, other than their association with South Australia. In choosing this methodology we have avoided the need for a detailed ethics submission since no individual was identified or singled out for attention. Predominantly, in this paper we present a reflective account of events from the main author who became involved in the organisation to further his career in aviation. The report is based on an analysis between September 2009 and September 2010, taking previous information from organisational documents and artefacts.

About the organisation

Essentially, the Air League organisation is structured on traditional lines with an operating style drawn from classical theories made

popular by Henry Foyol and Max Weber (Robbins & Barnwell, 1994). Several of these ideals are embedded in the organisation and include:Work is divided through an operational structure of specialised appointments in administration, education, physical activities and air activities.

- Authority and responsibility are distributed through a hierarchical rank structure at squadron, wing, group and federal levels.
- Members are expected to follow the rules of the organisation, where good discipline is seen as the result of effective leadership.
- Junior members receive instructions from senior officers.
- The interests of the group take priority over the needs of an individual.
- Decision making is centralised and proportional to rank and/or appointment.
- Communications follow a chain of command.
- The organisational culture values stability, order and control.
- Detailed procedures, rules and policies create a uniform and idealised bureaucracy.
- High turnover of personnel is seen as inefficient and impedes performance.
- Team spirit or *esprit de corps* is promoted to build harmony and morale within the organisation.

Dealing with changing times

Firstly, it is well known that despite the continuing presence of classical management ideologies, especially in larger or public sector organisations, there has been a significant shift in thinking in recent years, not only in the approach to traditional organisational theory, but also about how organisations have become places of education or learning communities (Senge, 1990). Not only do modern organisations adopt ideas from later theories (such as the human relations school of management and contingency approach)

where organisational needs are balanced with those of the individual members (Fulop, 1992); but, more recently, organisations have transformed into places where power is shared, workflow is flexible, people are less focused on position and professional development is seen as an imperative. The significance of these developments can be seen in the education sector. When schools drifted more towards bureaucracy, the hierarchical power-based relationships tended to alienate teachers, parents and students from each other. Conversely, schools that were effective in terms of student achievement and behaviour management exhibited qualities that focused on relationships and values as well as academic achievement. These schools built a 'sense of community' (Merz & Furman, 1997).

Secondly, the Air League is caught up in many tensions between the strong influence of its classical origins and contemporary ideology. In recent years, these changes in how people relate to their organisation have presented several problems and impacted seriously on the Air League's success. In South Australia, current challenges included a failure to attract, motivate and retain new members, particularly younger adult volunteers, commonly referred to as Generations X and Y (MacLeod, 2008). Presently, adult membership is largely polarised into two distinct groups: male officers over the age of 50 (former cadets who remained in the organisation or returned after a period of service in an aviation-related career) and younger male officers under the age of 25 (who have continued as adult members after reaching the upper age limit for cadets). A smaller population of officers between the ages of 25 and 50 are made up from an increasing number of women who are mothers of cadets.

Thirdly, in this 'age-polarised' environment, older members retain many of the classical management behaviours and fall back easily on these traditions when dealing with day-to-day problems. This notion is confirmed by Warr, Miles and Platts (2001) who found that older adults were less outgoing and less change oriented than

younger adults—who were more familiar with contemporary values such as flexibility, multi-tasking and the acceptance of change. In the Air League, this situation resulted in an unsettling environment characterised by:

- **Polarity in values**: In a world of increased egalitarianism and individualism, fewer adult volunteers had either the time or inclination to become bogged down with hierarchical control and bureaucracy. Many existing adult volunteers worked in successful commercial organisations that had made great progress in promoting employee democracy, flatter organisational structures and decentralised decision making. Accordingly, some adults resented being told what to do and found it personally challenging to deal with heavy-handed policy, rules and procedures that, in their minds, defied common sense and did not assist in promoting operational effectiveness at the ground level.

- **Falling interdependence**: In the Air League, each squadron is ultimately responsible for its own performance and survival, yet many day-to-day problems could be resolved through working in partnership with adjoining squadrons. However, this level of cooperation failed when adult volunteers did not build collegial relationships and became polarised. In South Australia, several developments contributed to a breakdown in the interdependence of squadron personnel. First, an acquisition program during 2006 (from another similar youth organisation) created a power division in adult staff between those who were prepared to accept the change and those who were not. South Australian 'air-minded' youth organisations have a history of adult leaders splitting away from their parent organisations to form defector regimes when they cannot agree with organisational policy or cannot work with the senior leadership of the new organisation. Secondly, the organisation in South Australia was affected by the creation of a new unit, where the adult volunteers chose to operate independently of the other two squadrons.

- **High staff turnover** brings a range of challenges to complex
  voluntary organisations such as the Air League including a loss
  of tacit knowledge, perpetual training, uncertainty about being
  able to operate with sufficient numbers of adult staff, failure to
  process paperwork and an inability to raise funds. Furthermore,
  the presence of less predictable work patterns, self-employment,
  working families and the uncertainty of secure employment meant
  that adult volunteers were less able to make a firm commitment
  to attending each week, preferring to keep their options open and
  remain flexible. This situation created a staff shortage and was
  exasperated in late 2008 when the commanding officer of the
  South Australia Wing relocated to another part of the state and
  became unable to provide the leadership sorely needed. As an
  emergency measure, administrative leadership was provided by a
  high ranking officer based in Victoria.

- **Unreliability among the younger members**: The
  dwindling number of older adult volunteer officers meant
  that the organisation was becoming increasingly reliant on its
  younger members. Research shows that older people are more
  reliable and conscientious than youngsters and are motivated
  to complete tasks (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004), but the younger
  adult volunteers in the Air League were proving less reliable
  due to participation in higher or vocational education, part-time
  employment and a preferred lifestyle predicated by flexibility,
  multi-tasking and keeping options open. For senior volunteers this
  unreliable behaviour became a source of tension and meant that
  administrative and organisational workloads inevitably fell back
  on the older shoulders.

A problem in need of resolution

Against this background, there was an urgent need to change the
culture in South Australia to prevent the organisation from dwindling
away. Fortunately the presence of at least one successful squadron

meant the Air League had a firm position in one suburb north of Adelaide. In mid 2009 three opportunities emerged that would pave the way for a major transformation in how the organisation functioned.

Firstly, a new adult volunteer joined the Air League with over three decades of knowledge and skills in a similar youth organisation overseas. Following a short period of time in a probationary role this individual was quickly placed in command of the squadrons in South Australia. In addition to extensive experience of working with 'aviation-minded' youth organisations, this volunteer had expertise in human resource management and organisational development. The arrival of this officer set in place a change management strategy that would eventually place learning at the centre of the organisation; one where the organisation became less bound by bureaucracy and more organic in the form of a learning network where information and innovation could flow freely (Morgan, 1989). This was achieved first through the introduction of a project-style organisation and later through encouragement to become an integrated learning community.

However, the starting point of the change process was to engage adult volunteers in what Jones and May call 'techniques of managerialism' (1992: 388). In what was later referred to as 'tilling the soil' in the texts on communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000: 143) these techniques adopted a 'visioning framework' used in organisational excellence concepts (Oakland, 2004: 64) and included:

- developing a mission statement to clarify the purpose of the organisation, its goals and objectives
- developing a written plan and strategy to communicate the organisation's vision and values and take into account local environmental considerations
- putting in place a formal review process to monitor overall performance

- defining key indicators of performance and critical success factors
- targeting resources towards a strategy of growth and success
- setting in place mechanisms for communication, structured problem solving and training, and
- aligning progression and promotion with one's personal contribution to the organisation.

Secondly, in early 2010, an unexpected alliance developed with the local university's Aviation Academy, where overseas undergraduate pilots were undergoing training in commercial aviation as part of a degree. A component of the academic program involved each student working for at least 30 hours in a community-based organisation, helping the students to integrate into Australian culture. Fortunately, many of these students were visiting from Hong Kong and had previous connections with similar youth organisations overseas. After a short period of negotiation, a cohort of eight students ranging in age from 17 to 22 was encouraged to join the Air League as trainee officers—immediately increasing the number of adult volunteers with a keen interest in aviation and also helping to lower the average age profile of staff. One student said:

> As a Civil Aviation student at the University of South Australia, one of the course requirements was to gain volunteer experience through community services. Joining the Australian Air League was suggested by the program director since it is a national voluntary aviation-related youth organisation. The process of joining, visiting a local squadron and meeting with the officers awakened my memory of being an air cadet in Hong Kong for the previous five years of life.

Thirdly, a succession of formal and informal public relations activities sparked a renewed interest from the parents of cadet members, resulting in a further increase in both uniformed officers and associate members.

Using learning to build a positive community and innovative culture

The result of these strategies was highly effective but a small number of people became polarised. A vast majority of the adult volunteers supported the changes and were motivated by the renewed leadership actions, but a few individuals felt misaligned with the process, out of place (Short, 2009) and subsequently left the organisation. Wenger and Snyder (2000: 143) refer to this effect as 'loosening the weeds' before sowing the seeds of a community. The collective result of these initiatives was a 90 per cent increase in adult staff and a 60 per cent increase in new cadet members in less than twelve months. These increases led to the creation of a new officer training unit, a new squadron in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, and a range of education and training programs to equip new officers with the relevant knowledge and skills. Many existing officers chose to attend the training, thereby refreshing their skills and helping new members feel part of the emerging community. In less than twelve months the Air League redefined its position in South Australia and it is currently progressing to becoming a larger group in 2012. In addition to a large growth in membership, other measures of success have emerged such as increased fundraising, staff retention, inter-squadron cooperation on activities and the development of a new squadron. This progress involved adult participation a number of major changes, not least in the volunteers' approach to leadership, communication and seeing learning as a vital component of success. Importantly, one major success has been the emergence of a consolidated learning community. Attributed initially to the German sociologist, Tönnies, communities have since been classified as existing in three basic forms: communities of place, kinship and of mind (Hough & Paine, 1997: 194; Merz & Furman, 1997: 14):

- **Communities of place** are where people live, work and share the lives of other community members.

- **Communities of kinship** are bound by relationships, such as families, extended families and groups of friends.
- **Communities of mind** emerge from people coming together with common goals, shared values and shared conceptions of being and doing.

Not surprisingly, all the above types of community are relevant to how the Air League has developed and overlap in the way members gain meaning, identity and a sense of belonging from the organisation. However, a community is also associated with fellowship (Webster, 1989) and adult volunteers in an organisation such as the Air League can be involved in multiple communities of fellowship; existing not only in the organisation itself, but also in the wider community, which may intersect or be completely separate. One form of community can take a leading influence over the others, but this can change over time, or according to personal circumstances and levels of motivation among those involved. How people interact with each other and build goodwill into the group is the essence of social capital (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001; Adler & Kwon, 2002). A key question for this study is the extent to which the behaviours exhibited in the Air League during 2009–2010 not only reflected the characteristics of these three learning communities and built social capital, but also extended to incorporate the elements of a community of practice.

Communities of practice

According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder communities of practice (COPs) are 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (2002: 4). People within a COP may not work together on a regular basis and their collective passion can be drawn from almost any discipline; the key driver is the commonly shared values of group members and their commitment to learning as a group. Other characteristics of a COP include the voluntary nature of membership and absence of formal

structure or process. Group members can join a COP for a limited amount of time, be passive or active participants, be internal or external members of the host organisation and choose to contribute at a level appropriate to their knowledge and experience (Mitchell & Young, 2002). What binds the group together is a shared interest in the topic, eagerness to learn and desire to improve. It is easy to understand from these definitions how the Air League could provide a rich environment for a COP, provided the environment was cultivated for a COP to grow and develop. Communities of practice can be as variable as the environment in which they can thrive. However, cultivating an environment for a community of practice that serves a specific purpose requires organisational support and a clear purpose. If the environment were considered toxic, people would soon become reluctant to participate for fear of retribution. Examples of toxicity might include, but not be limited to, lack of management support, domination of the agenda for political gain, members unable to find a voice in the group, an expectation of high performance and disinterest in innovation. Wenger et al. (2002) suggest there are seven principles on which an organisation can be evaluated to ascertain if it has become 'alive' to the potential of becoming a COP. These are considered below with examples drawn from Air League.

Design for evolution

The main role of the design elements is to encourage the evolution of an add-value community (Wenger et al. 2002). Due to the dynamic nature of a community, to design for evolution is to provide guidance rather than crafting the community from ground zero. The foundation of a community is built on personal networks that are already in existence. Therefore, the community design elements should act as catalysts to help the community develop as opposed to imposing a structure like most traditional organisation design. It often requires fewer elements at the beginning compared to an organisation design. Although the Air League is hierarchical and structured, there are

three ways in which the organisation can be considered to be designed for evolution.

Firstly, as the Air League is a voluntary organisation, members come from all walks of life with different cultural backgrounds, life experiences and expert knowledge, which adds value to the whole organisation. Bringing in new perspectives and ideas veers the group in the same direction towards a common goal by discussing and implementing the best practice as agreed by the members of the group. Most of these new members come from backgrounds somehow related to the aviation industry, which gives a broad spectrum to other members involved and also encourages learning through communication and sparks new interests. A few examples would be having members involved in the Royal Australian Air Force, the UK Air Training Corps, Hong Kong Air Cadet Corps, the Defence Science and Technology Organisation and the Scouts of South Australia.

Secondly, because the Australian Air League has been established in South Australia for many years, networks and connections with the local communities have been built over time. Events and activities such as citizenship ceremonies, Anzac Day parades and fundraising barbeques improve the relationship with local councils, Returned Service League clubs and the community. The full extent of this involvement led the South Australia Wing to obtain usage of a state museum as a meeting place for one of its squadrons. Furthermore, a growing external relationship with the University of South Australia opened doors for the SA Wing to take part in a major promotional opportunity in the form of a national educational exhibition in Adelaide. The Air League exhibited over two days, increasing public awareness of the organisation and also attracting several new members. Thirdly, aviation is central to the Air League's mission and the arrival of a new officer and private pilots who were also a members of a local flying club provided a gateway for members of the

South Australia Wing to participate in air activities such as gliding and introductory flights.

Throughout the past twelve months, conferences and meetings have been held to set clear goals and align the officers' mindsets so that they are all working towards a common objective rather than working against each other. In order to work collaboratively in an effective and efficient fashion, different strategies in different areas of expertise were set to achieve a common goal which allowed and encouraged the formation of smaller groups of expert officers from all units within the bigger establishment of the wing. In doing so, some of the members also filled a key role as facilitators for the smaller groups, which was needed to add value to the bigger group. Despite the hierarchical structure that was in place within the organisation, all members were encouraged to speak up and express their views, which created a culture of trust and openness.

Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives

The second principle claims that the perspectives of the core members of a community are invaluable to the understanding of community issues, while new members or members who are not involved in or part of the community often shed new light on topics on which existing members may have become blinded by shared perceptions. In the SA Wing in 2009 there were a number of core members running separate units who formed the pillars of the organisation and these members had been involved for almost ten years serving the Australian Air League and its predecessors. Each of the core members carried forward the solid experience of how to run the organisation, but also understood the restraints that prohibited change or progression.

Near the end of 2009 and the start of 2010 a number of new volunteers from outside the South Australian circle joined as officers and were able to bring their own experiences from serving

in similar organisations to the Air League. They all worked on different levels within the organisation and instigated change by sparking off new ideas within the parameters that the constituted policy would allow. These included how the wing would be run as a team, as opposed to being individual units, in order to create a more organised environment and structure in which the leaders of the wing could work. Additionally, the creation of a new wing council drew all the key people within the wing into one single meeting to discuss strategies and rectify problems; as a result, SA Wing could run more efficiently and effectively. Training programs that were not known to the SA Wing before were adopted to enhance the quality of education for the young members, such as the introduction of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and the two Australian Air League Diplomas. Operational methods and techniques borrowed from other groups interstate also provided reference points on how the wing could be run.

Moreover, placing a younger trainee pilot from Hong Kong in one of the estranged squadrons as the education officer resulted in an overall improvement in the performance of the squadron and a shift of mindset from self-governing to increasing involvement in the greater wing community. Setting education plans and programs tailored to the squadron while aligning it with the Air League Diploma requirements provided a time frame and a goal for the members to look forward to. There was also a sense of achievement for those who took part and followed the schedule that was laid out. The new instruction timetable also provided the squadron with more structure to the parade nights as every member knew what was in place and what to expect, which slowly formed a routine in their mindset so as to enhance the efficiency of the operation and the effectiveness of the programs. In the process of aligning the training programs with the Air League syllabus, the squadron transformed from a self-centred unit to a more open unit by participating in more South Australia Wing activities and functions such as visits and flying days. It also

saw the need to establish better connections with local community groups which created an understanding of mutual support between the squadron and the other groups such as local pipe and drum bands and Returned Service League clubs.

Invite different levels of participation

As memberships in communities of practice are voluntary, participation involved many factors. Time, interest, commitment, motivation, ability and skill levels were normally taken into consideration when making the decision to participate in a community of practice. The community also had to be inviting in a wide range of ways in order to attract a diverse range of members. Members of the community participated on different levels at different times on different topics. There were also non-members who had an interest in the community. Community members drifted to different levels of participation from time to time. For example, in the Air League formal membership is segmented into three levels, namely officers, branch members and cadets. However, informally broader participation included parents, school teachers, local authorities, community groups and the business community.

Developing public and private community spaces

In keeping with the ideas of Wenger et al. (2002), we found the Air League to be a special place where members gathered, as formal or informal networks, to further the interests of the organisation. A range of public events, such as parades, sports activities and air shows, allowed parents, friends and the uniformed members to mix and build collegial relationships. Invariably, the main topic of conversation was directed towards the shared interest (the Air League), but these adults also exchanged knowledge, insights and experience on a wider range of topics. In an organisation where the safety and care of cadet members is paramount, it was important for parents to know their kids were in safe hands; so private and informal community networks helped to build trust and confidence. Away from

the public setting, the same people kept in touch in smaller groups or networks to continue their work. It was not uncommon to see adults dropping in on other squadrons to collect documents, talk about plans for a forthcoming event or simply meet to bounce ideas around over a drink. These informal and private community-based activities acted as a kind of adhesive to hold the other events together and often provided the right environment for sparking off innovative ideas or creating new strategies. However, downsides to this community-generated energy emerged in the form of frustrating clashes with policy constraints and chaotic planning as new ideas were implemented without full consideration of previous arrangements.

Focus on value

One of the key developments in August 2009 was the re-establishment of a new wing structure. Prior to this time, the three squadrons had reported separately and directly to the Air League headquarters in Victoria. As a result of this action, the requirements for local commanders to deal with Victoria was effectively removed and replaced with an intermediate layer of management. For the people on the ground, the value of this new layer of management was not immediately apparent and some feared the structure would add a new layer of complexity to an already bureaucratic system. Moreover, within this new wing structure, three new officers were appointed into key positions with no first-hand knowledge or experience of recent events in South Australia—so the potential risk of rejection among the existing personnel was high.

The risk of rejection was offset by a number of actions designed to promote the value of the new structure. To begin, a meeting of all adult members was convened to discuss issues and allow members to ask questions, thereby enabling people to gauge the knowledge and experience of the new staff. Later, the new staff consulted widely, helped out at the local level and took a lead role in organising a major activity that was previously considered an organisational

headache. Finally, the new officers arranged much larger events and demonstrated leadership by taking on strategic issues at the federal level. These activities all added value by encouraging the emerging community to develop confidence in the new officers and realise the community was growing.

Combine familiarity with excitement

One important characteristic of an Air League squadron is the local meeting hall where members can feel at home and have a sense of ownership of the environment. The meeting hall is a special place where members enact their nominated roles, free from other commitments such as home, work or school. Some units hire or own their meeting hall while others use local facilities in schools or community centres made available through goodwill.

Throughout 2010, the squadron meeting halls became vital hubs, in which new activities emerged such as informal activity days, drop-in evenings for games and sports, and special project meetings. Where access was readily available, the organisation moved from being a once-per-week event to a perpetual arrangement of meetings, discussion forums and activities. When the meeting halls could not be opened, the members simply moved elsewhere and found another place to conduct their activities—so the meeting places become less important for a while.

Creating a rhythm for a community

The use of traditions, rituals and routines in a team setting is a tried and tested process for building harmony and purpose, and passing on the culture (Martens, 2004). When people became involved in a vibrant community of practice a rhythm soon developed that generated a steady flow of information and ideas that promoted not only a sense of belonging, but feelings of inclusion and involvement among the members.

In the Air League, this rhythm was created by a blend of formal and informal traditions and new routines introduced by the emerging community. For example, weekly parades, staff development training days, briefing communications and organised cadet training activities were complemented with joint fundraising efforts, regular email information sharing, coaching sessions between more experienced adult staff and new members, plus special activities where people could recall enjoyable times spent in each other's company. Wenger et al. (2002) referred to these social events as milestones that punctuate the regular rhythm of the community.

## Transition to the commercial aviation environment

So how can some of these insights on socially constructed learning and COPs obtained from the Air League be transferred to the world of civil aviation and what learning points can be usefully applied to pilots working in an aircrew environment? As the aviation industry is constantly evolving, new management systems have been developed over the past few years with a main focus on safety. Most came to the realisation that the development of a safety culture and community was of the utmost importance for a system to work.

One such system can be found in a simple model developed by a group of civil aviation students studying the implementation of effective safety management systems for a well-established international air race in 2011. Using a simple acronym, WINGS, shown in Table 1, the students identified five characteristics of a safety culture. Most organisations in the aviation industry are planting the seeds of a just and safety culture which encourages people to make their concerns known and to report accidents and incidents willingly in an honest and truthful manner so that the others working within the same environment will be able to learn from the events and avoid similar occurrences by using more advanced technology or developing better procedures.

In a community of practice, participants share the same interest or focus, and volunteer their effort to add value on the issue concerned. A good example of COP in the aviation industry would be the Aviation Confidential Reporting Scheme (REPCON) or the Aviation Self-Reporting Scheme (ASRS). A REPCON report may be made by anyone who observes or becomes aware of a reportable safety concern. By implementing such schemes, the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) has created an environment where people's concerns about aviation safety can be freely expressed, thereby cultivating the results of the schemes which generate new tools for enhancing safety through a network where people willingly share their concerns with integrity.

As a community of practice cannot be built, the safety and just culture that most organisations in the aviation industry are instilling into their employees may be the means of creating the environment for communities of practice to flourish. The willingness of management to allow such a growth is crucial as it may save costs, reduce accident rates and most importantly save lives.

Figure 1: The 'swiss cheese' model (Reason, 1998)
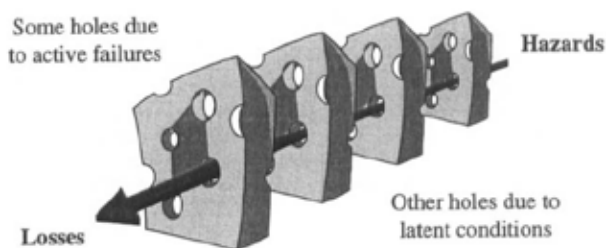
In the aviation environment, errors provide critical lessons to be learnt by others in a similar situation. The Reason model (Reason, 1998), shown in Figure 1, illustrates how accidents occur when gaps in defence mechanisms (represented by the cheese slices) become

aligned. Alignment of the holes can be created by active failure such as human error and/or a range of latent conditions. By learning from the mistakes made by others, the industry is able to develop more effective measures to prevent mishaps. We know from Wenger et al. (2002) that different levels of participation are important to the growth of a community of practice as concerns can be viewed from different perspectives and angles in order to create a balance between prevention and production, which keeps the organisation operating in a safe but profitable manner.

Table 1:   Comparison chart of aviation security in relation to communities of practice

	Aviation industry safety culture principles	Alignment with communities of practice
W	Willingness: Willingness of employees to report accidents and incidents. Willingness of management to promote and adopt a safe and just culture.	Participation in a community of practice is voluntary and relies heavily on each person making a meaningful contribution to the learning (Van Winkelen, 2003).
I	Integrity: Levels of honesty in reporting. Upholding a degree of self-discipline towards safety such as accurate reporting, withholding of evidence, trust and transparency.	Members of a community of practice are bound together, and foster a sense of common trust and common purpose among each other (Wenger & Snyder, 2000: 139).
N	Enhancement: How to improve the current system continuously and make the environment safer.	Communities of practice focus on adding value in a continuous cycle of learning and improving productivity (Mitchell & Young, 2002).
G	Generative: Coming up with new ideas and technologies to tackle issues that may arise from safety concerns.	Communities of practice provide the practitioner with access to new knowledge and come up with innovative new ideas and technologies to tackle issues that are of common concern (Mitchell & Young, 2002).
S	Sharing: Collegial and collaborative communication processes among stakeholders build a safety culture and raise awareness of emerging hazards, risks and possible solutions.	Having a shared vision ensures that all members of the community can share in, and respond to, future opportunities (Armstrong, 2003).

Projecting forward

As commanders of aircrafts, pilots are in charge of not only flying the aircraft but also the lives of everyone on board. Therefore, pilots must maintain a certain level of interpersonal relationship with both crew members and passengers to ensure the safe operation of a flight. Externally, pilots also need to connect with other aircraft and traffic controllers in order to gain crucial information for the sake of safe flight. Amidst these networks, socially constructed learning occurs throughout pilot training as students often discuss their flying amongst themselves informally during their free time outside formal briefing sessions. From such conversations, individuals learn about what actions were taken and what could be done better. This habit carries through to their career as flying is almost their sole interest and passion. Although this type of social learning may not be a community that is cultivated by an organisation, it is considered a broad, worldwide community of professionals. Flight crew travel all around the world and work with a variety of people and potentially a different crew every time they take to the skies.

Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed how the value of learning is shaped by organisational culture and how the implementation of modern management practices can be used to focus effort and bring about a systemised process of change. Though much learning can exist in traditional or classical organisational structures, such as the Air League, the implementation of modern management practices was found to assist in aligning diverse groups of people with the characteristics of a unified learning organisation and in doing so paved the way for socially constructed learning communities, such as communities of practice, to develop. Central to this transformation was the role of a new leadership team, who enabled fresh communities to emerge in an unpredictable and sometimes unstructured way. Mitchell, Wood and Young found that the

importance of situated learning was defined by learning that 'occurred in certain forms of social co-partnering' (2001: 4). As the Air League volunteers built a new culture of learning, they enjoyed being part of an organisation that was full of support, information sharing and participation at all levels. This level of motivation contributed significantly to improvements in performance and growth during 2009–2010.

Moreover, we have compared practices found in the Air League against seven principles defined by Wenger et al. (2002), and concluded that much evidence can be found to support these principles of socially constructed learning. In regard to the significance of building social capital, we also reflected on how we, as participants in the organisation, might benefit from our involvement. For one author, the personal learning journey was a new experience and he discovered that the concept of a socially constructed learning group was relevant to his professional development and learning opportunities in the wider aviation industry. Importantly, we found that volunteers who work in community organisations readily assimilate and commute their new learning to many aspects of their lives and this is an essential facet of building social capital.

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