Learning Communities and Communities of Practice

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A learning community can be generally defined as a group of people who share a common learning context who organize themselves into a cohesive group to achieve common and individual learning and community objectives. Each of us is a member of multiple learning communities: some of mine include the MHPE, educators in the undergraduate curriculum at Michigan, a research team focused on the learning environment, and a collaboration with colleagues at a school in India. Each of these learning communities meets the above definition in various ways. It is useful to understand the differences in the dynamics of learning communities to interact more effectively within these communities and contribute to their development.

Social psychologists McMillan and Chavis[1] define four key factors that create a "sense of community:" membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connections. Note that these focus on the interpersonal dimensions of a community, which in turn emphasizes that these communities live and die on the quality of member participation.

An important theoretical framework for understanding learning communities comes from Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger[2], who studied the nature of apprenticeship as a method of learning. From their observations, they generated a theory of "Communities of Practice" which are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion fro something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." [3] Communities of practice have three key characteristics:.

"1. The domain: A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. (You could belong to the same network as someone and never know it.) The domain is not necessarily something recognized as "expertise" outside the community. A youth gang may have developed all sorts of ways of dealing with their domain: surviving on the street and maintaining some kind of identity they can live with. They value their collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may value or even recognize their expertise.

2. The community: In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other; they care about their standing with each other. A website in itself is not a community of practice. Having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together. The claims processors in a large insurance company or students in American high schools may have much in common, yet unless they interact and learn together, they do not form a community of practice. But members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis. The Impressionists, for instance, used to meet in cafes and studios to discuss

[1] www.drdavidmcmillan.com/category/community/

[2] Lave J, Wenger E. Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991.

[3] Wenger E, Trayner-Wenger B. Communities of practice: a brief introduction [Internet]. [cited 2015 Dec 4]. p. 1–8. Available from: http://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/07-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf

the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they often painted alone.

3. The practice: A community of practice is not merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. A good conversation with a stranger on an airplane may give you all sorts of interesting insights, but it does not in itself make for a community of practice. The development of a shared practice may be more or less self-conscious. The "windshield wipers" engineers at an auto manufacturer make a concerted effort to collect and document the tricks and lessons they have learned into a knowledge base. By contrast, nurses who meet regularly for lunch in a hospital cafeteria may not realize that their lunch discussions are one of their main sources of knowledge about how to care for patients. Still, in the course of all these conversations, they have developed a set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice. "

Within communities, we often observe varying levels of participation.

- Observers / Lurkers: people who monitor the community but seldom contribute to the community
- Active Contributors: people who monitor the community and consistently respond to other members of the community
- Creators / Facilitators: people who convene the community, facilitate the development of community purpose and norms, and moderate the community

A widely cited term that relates to participation in a community of practice is "legitimate peripheral participation." This originally described the status of an apprentice as she began her training and joined the community of practice, but only as a peripheral member, not yet a member of the main body, much less the leadership core. Her participation, though peripheral, was legitimate because it was part of her education and development as a future member of the community. *Legitimate peripheral participation* is used in many educational contexts to describe the experience and environment of learners who are entering a profession – much of their learning is about the community of practice, not just the content knowledge or skills of the discipline.

Participation in a community of practice can take many forms, depending on the community and the individual's position within the community. The table below describes many ways that Communities of Practice develop and contribute to their members (and vice versa)

Activity Category	Example
Problem Solving	Giving ideas and constructive feedback on a scholarly work of another member of the community
Satisfying Requests for Information	Referring resources (e.g. books, articles) to other members of the community in response of a request for information
Providing Experience	Giving guidance to another member of the community on an EPA which the person him/herself has completed
Re-Using Assets	Sharing professional resources with others in the community
Coordination and Synergy	Participating in group peer mentoring meetings (in-person and on-line)
Discussing Developments	Participating in online and in person discussions about trends in education
Documenting Projects	Contributing to the improvement of the MHPE curriculum and program
Visits	Participating in on-campus events and networking with the learning community
Mapping Knowledge	Managing and documenting the membership of the learning community

Understanding learning communities and Communities of Practice as a theory can help analyze and reflect on the challenges confronting a community, how you as an individual can contribute to or benefit from the community, and compare communities to understand how history, purpose, and participants influence the character of a community. Relevant dimensions to consider include:

1. Community membership and purpose. Who is in this community and why does this community exist? What are the values of this community? What is its history?
2. Community roles and norms. Who is responsible for what? How do people interact? How formal is the community?
3. Learning through the community. How do the norms of the community contribute to individual and community knowledge and perspective? How does one contribute one's knowledge, perspective, and skill to the community? How does one ask for help from the community? How do people in the community connect?
4. Building community cohesion. What are the opportunities to increase the trust and connection within the community? How does one build trust and emotional connection? How does the community increase group efficacy over time?
5. Analyzing community challenges and opportunities. What problems does the community face? Do its activities reflect its values and priorities? What conflicts exist within the community? What alliances? Is there too much or too little or the wrong kind of structure/governance?