

Communities of practice

This is a review /summary of literature relating to communities of practice. I have noted the books but not yet brought all the ideas together in a structured analysis. Nor checked all APA refs.

The three readings/books are:

1. Eckert, P. (2006). Communities of practice. Encyclopedia of language and linguistics. Elsevier. (pp 683-685). 2nd edition.
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B0080448542012761>
2. Roder, T & Rata-Skudder, N. (September 14-14, 2012). *Unitec developed a community approach to staff development in eLearning*. Conference paper. SEPTEMBER, 14 – 15. Heraklion, Crete-Greece
3. Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

What is a community of practice?

Eckert

For Eckert a community of practice is “a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavour”. They emerge in response to a ‘common interest or position and play an important role in forming their members’ participation in, and orientation to, the world around them”. They trace its origin to sociolinguistics where the term describes sociolinguistic practices. The term’s value is in describing social grouping in terms of practice and in placing the community of practice in the larger social order. Two conditions are crucial in ‘conventions of meaning’: “shared experience over time and a commitment to shared understanding” (p.1).

Communities commonly interpret their own place and those of others around them and develop a linguistic style. She differentiates a community of practice from a speech community saying that members of communities of practice develop their linguistic patterns and practices because of involvement in this community rather than a broader sociolinguistic communities (i.e.. neighbourhood community of practice over ethnicity, class, gender).

Lave and Wenger

Lave and Wenger (1991) in *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation* write about situated learning in relation to communities of practice. For them learning happens in social situations and they use “the tools, and presentational media that culture provides to support, extend, and reorganize mental functioning” (Pea and Seely Brown cited in Lave and Wenger, 2012, p.11).

A key idea in the book is that of legitimate, peripheral participation (LPP) which draws attention to the process by which” learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community”. Lave and Wenger say that LPP “provides a way to speak about” the ways in which newcomers and old hands talk, and about how things are done, hierarchies and identities as well as artefacts’ resources” and the ways in which practice occurs and develops. (p.29). Interaction with artefacts and technologies involves recognizing and understanding the history of the artefact and technology and thus increasing knowledge of the community’s code of meaning and practice. LPP they say “concerns the ways by which newcomers become part of a community of practice” (ibid) and are absorbed into the practice of the community. As they become mature participants the nature of the community of practice also begins to change.

Lave and Wenger's thinking arises from observations of apprenticeships which they say did not "explain everything" and was in danger of "becoming meaningless" (p.30).

The notion of situatedness they say is useful because "learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" and they characterised learning as "legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice" (1991, p.31). Situated learning is not about learning in one place but learning in situated ways and of becoming full participants in our worlds. There are, they note various perceptions on what situatedness is and consideration of these views leads the authors to note that in learning 'agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other' (p.31).

Learning is "an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" and legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) becomes a valid practice which describes an engagement in social practice that entails "learning as an integral constituent" (p.35). Situated learning relates to communities of practice where learning is seen as a social activity in which the whole person 'acts in the world'.

Because a community of practice has no centre or expert reliant on their being a closed domain of knowledge the community of practice is fluid but being peripheral indicates new comer, a person yet to learn the mores of the group. *In my thinking this relates to Bourdieu (see powercube for summary of his ideas) in his discussions of habitus and cultural capital (the role of school is to enculturate children and those who succeed belong to the same habitus as that of the school). They thus have the capital to succeed in the culture and to Foucault in his discussion of discourse where discourse is seen as knowledge and social practice forms ways of thinking and meaning as well as potential to power (Gaventa, 2003).*

The authors return in Chapter 4 to a discussion about apprenticeship models where they say that master apprentices have the duty to train people so they can participate in the community's culture. The members of the community create the 'curriculum' which is to be learned. In this sense they say the learners are peripheral participants who by engaging in practice learn the curriculum. They quote anecdotal evidence that says when knowledge is shared amongst peers and near peers the knowledge spreads quickly. Engaging in practice, they say may be a 'condition for the effectiveness of learning'. (p.93). The idea about legitimate peripheral participation becomes relevant when we view the place that the master has, not as the centre but as the participant in a community whose task is to introduce the learner/peripheral participant into that community. The master role becomes decentralised and the focus moves to the community's 'learning resources' (p.94) and the theoretical relationship with situated learning.

The learning curriculum is viewed from the perspective of the learner while a teaching curriculum is constructed for the instruction of newcomers and is influenced by the instructor's view of what needs to be learned. The learning curriculum in didactic situations is pedagogical in nature and looks towards the target practice as a subject.

A learning curriculum is situated and not considered in isolation or analysed in parts nor can it be separated from its social relationships. This makes it a learning community. It does imply "participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities". (p98). "A community of practice is a set of relations amongst persons, activity and the world over time and in relation with other tangential activities and overlapping communities of practice" (p99). "Thus participation in the cultural practice of in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e. for legitimate peripheral participation)" (p.98). They say that learning is

usually seen as an individual exercise but that peripheral participation requires the whole person engaging in a social activity... 'acting in the world'

Analysing the reproductive cycles of the communities of practice enables us to delineate the community. Physics students in school, for example, are introduced into the community of school but acquire some knowledge that helps them begin to participate in the community of physicists later in their lives. In this way we can understand the delineations of different but connected communities. Institutions have separate types of learning –i.e. practical and conceptual. Learning is about the cultural practice in which learning takes place and transparency with respect to the meaning of what is being learned. It offers a different perspective from current dichotomies. There is a difference between assisting learners to become legitimate members. The formalised learning in an institution creates a discourse of didacticism .

The authors distinguish between a learning curriculum and a teaching curriculum where a learning curriculum consists of “ situated opportunitiesfor the improvisational development of learning resources of everyday practice” (p.97).

In summary: LLP is a way of describing the ways in which newcomers are initiated into a community of practice. Learning community is a community of (learner) practice that differs from the real world community of practice via language used and approach but the communities of practice are connected (ie. Construction – students learn terminology and practices but it is learning community that links to the cop of construction workers). The learning in a cop is decentralised and focuses on introducing the newcomer to codes, technologies and language of the community. A CoP is a fluid thing that changes as newcomers become mature participants.

A community of practice in practice UNITEC

UNITEC (an Auckland based tertiary institute) staff presented at a conference in Heraklion, Crete in 2012. They discussed ways in which ‘practices that have enabled staff in eLearning roles to support their peers to increase the use of eLearning’. (Abstract, p.1). ” supported their discussion is about the way in which UNITEC developed a community of practice approach to eLearning 2010 UNITEC implemented the Living Curriculum and part of the eLearning Strategy of up-skilling staff and embedding academic literacies in learning environments as well as building institutional capability and a move from Blackboard to Moodle.

“Wenger (2006) defines communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. For a community to be defined as a Community of Practice however, Wenger, White & Smith (2009) tells us three critical elements must be present and facilitated. A **shared domain of interest** unites the members of a community of practice and creates the identity of the Community.

Community . Members have some aptitude in the domain and the community values its shared social capital. The element of community describes the nature of the interactions that define a Community of Practice. Communities of Practice provide an environment for helping, sharing, reflecting, and discussing with peers who have common interests. Finally, **practice** acknowledges the participants of the community as practitioners. Within the community, given time and ongoing interaction, members begin to develop a shared repertoire of practice. “ (p. 9.)

Members of the communities of practice were directed by management and not voluntary members. This, the authors acknowledge differs from the communities of practice model suggested by Wenger (2006, as cited in Roder and Rata –Skudder, 2012). Efforts were made to allow communities of practice autonomy in structure and objectives.

The CoP models was used because it was viewed as enabling a shift from learning as acquisition to learning as participation. The authors point out that this metaphor relates to ako principles in Māori pedagogical approaches where “ the learner and whanau cannot be separated”. (Ka Hikitia, 2008 cited in Roder and Rata-Skudder, 2012).

UNITEC offered a support for the development of the CoPs recognising that centralised and faculty based resourcing was necessary of the success of the plan and some temporary roles were created to support the process.

A key part of the process was a week-long workshop facilitated by Etienne Wenger and Beverly Trayner. This was deemed to be invaluable in setting the scene, and enabling staff to share language, objectives and processes. Moodle was the used as place to store information and share.

Mid project issues arose in relation to time and workload, digital literacy and resistance to the approach. In some area there was perceived to be a lack of support from the department or school while there was centralised support. There was also some ambiguity expressed about the roles and tension between managerial expectations and the organic nature of the process. There were also unclear perceptions of the task –to develop capability or to move to Moodle? There was general uncertainty about the CoP model as having bene a success but the authors felt that the approach had enabled a more collaborative approach to staff development and a cultural shift towards discussing pedagogy ad digital tools and also provided a place where participants questioned some management decisions.

Positive feedback was found about having a centralised place to drop into, ongoing symposiums, and general just in time help. Workshops became the most commonly used vehicle for training within faculty. The authors also felt that the cop approach enabled participants to feel part of a change process.

It appears, say the authors that “ true communities of practice a now developing in the wake of the eLearning strategy and that the emergence of these communities has been facilitated by the opportunities afforded by funded time release for staff development and community participation.” (p.17)

References

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