

Chapter 24

Growing the eLIDA CAMEL Community of Practice Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines key design features that may be necessary to 'grow' a successful intentionally designed community of practice (CoP) in education. Prior research on communities of practice (CoPs) has emphasised their benefits for knowledge management and the relative difficulties involved in 'managing' CoPs, given that such communities are frequently conceptualised as self-organizing entities. The chapter reports on reflections from the JISC-funded (2006-08) eLIDA CAMEL project, which created a community of practice in education based on the CAMEL CoP model imported from a Uruguayan self-help farming group and adapted by JISC infoNet and ALT (2005-06). The chapter provides a case study of a successful inter-institutional CoP and recommends that certain indispensable design features may be necessary to 'grow' CoPs, including sufficiency of duration of the community, limitations in shared focus, collaborative planning, expert leadership/facilitation, an emphasis on building trust, explicating tacit knowledge and social networking in a framework fostering practitioner expertise.

INTRODUCTION

The explosive proliferation of activity within social networking sites on the internet during the first decade of the twenty-first century has, arguably, simultaneously been stimulated by and has given

further impetus to the concept of 'social learning' in education. Accelerating global interest in social networking was recorded in recent statistics on the predicted active memberships of around 230 million people participating worldwide in social network sites by the close of 2007, although such growth was expected to flatten out by 2012 (Datamonitor, 2007). A growing educational em-

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phasis on informal learning from and with peer group members both on-line and face-to-face has emerged during the past few decades, in addition to the continuing traditional foci of scholarly interest in individualised academic study and teacher-led classroom instruction. An unprecedented growth in electronic social interaction has occurred with the recent advent of social networking environments such as Facebook, Twitter, Del.icio.us, LinkedIn, MySpace, and around 200 others.

Increasing attention during this period has also been given to the way in which people interactively participate in situated learning experiences, working with others in informal communities in the workplace. Albert Bandura's influential social cognitive theory of human behaviour, and the related concepts of agency and self-efficacy (1973, 1986, 2001) have provided an authoritative psychological background of evidence to inform emerging trends towards increased recognition of the power of learning in informal social networks. Bandura transcended the environmental imperatives characteristic of behavioural learning theory to place greater emphasis on the way in which humans possess proactive agency to change their lives, learning from each other through observation, imitation and the modelling of behaviours in social situations. The concept of 'social learning' is also linked with the ideas of Vygotsky regarding learning through social development (1962, 1978) and the situated learning theories of Lave and Wenger (1991). The 'turn' towards social learning theories which had commenced in the earlier twentieth century accelerated rapidly towards the end of the century with the advent of new ideas regarding the importance of the community in which learners find themselves.

Lave and Wenger developed the idea of a community of practice (CoP) in their pioneering book on situated learning (1991). They defined a CoP as a group of practitioners who, sharing a passion for a common interest, are committed to improve knowledge and skill and to solve problems by

collaborating together to share understandings in this field (1991). Researchers Lave and Wenger outlined, in effect, a new relational concept of learning. They emphasised a socio-cultural interpretation of the way in which humans learn by engaging in shared, situated knowledge about improvements in practice through collaborative participation in like-minded communities, many of which always emerge naturally as informal, self-organizing entities in which spontaneous social learning in a particular practices takes place (1991). Communities of practice exist everywhere, therefore, and have multiple different kinds of interests that provide the focus within the community for the '*practice*' that their members share, which can be anything from a desire to learn about breeding aardvarks to a passion for playing the zurna. The 'legitimate peripheral participation' of newcomers at the edge of such communities is gradually enfolded towards the centre, as the learning of 'newbies' slowly develops through continuing socio-cultural relationships with 'old-timer' experts who pass on their accumulated expertise.

The concept of the CoP, with its three key aspects of *domain*, *community* and *practice* (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002) has increasingly gained prominence in the field of knowledge management (KM) and organisational learning (OL) theory: a worldwide growth in research on knowledge management, CoPs, organisational learning, organisational storytelling and related fields has subsequently occurred (Wilson, 2002). CoPs are distinguished from 'communities of interest' or 'information', in that they are dedicated to the development of improvements in practice within the domain of shared knowledge. The community builds a 'shared repertoire' (Wenger, 1998) of knowledge that includes collaborative understandings about informal knowledge and resources developed within the community outside of the formal hierarchies of organisations. A CoP is therefore more than a community that simply

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