

# Boundaries in Communities

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This article suggests a way of complementing the notion of boundary objects from communities of practice to enable learning: That of extending the notion of boundary objects to account also for boundary people. There are some people whose participation in a community could provide benefits for them and the community. Although it has been suggested that in a community of practice there are different types of membership, little is mentioned about how learning could be fostered by developing *inclusive* membership. This could be a way of bringing relevant experience to the attention of a community.

## BOUNDARIES AND MEMBERSHIP

In a community of practice, there are two main elements that constitute learning: experience and competence (Wenger, 1998). A community can be seen as a recurrent encounter between people who share interests with this permanency generating their competence, participation, and own identity. The community feeds itself from the experience of its members, including newcomers.

According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), cultivation of communities of practice requires establishing first a domain of competence, something that members care about. Nurturing this requires organizing activities of a community and roles for participants. It also requires establishing ways of dealing with contingencies (i.e., conflict). The result of this will be generating knowledge, which can be explicit (i.e., documents).

Although in the theory of communities of practice, it is acknowledged that communities have boundaries that define who is in and who is not part of it, there is very little guidance on how communities can deal with the resulting exclusion of individuals. It is assumed that members share interests that lead them to become part of a community and to define

their engagement. Individual motivation is a condition for the formation of communities of practice, and the theory's main thrust is to provide guidance for the adequate development (or nurturing) of communities. An issue that remains unexplored is how to facilitate inclusion of those whose interest is (or might not be) developed to belong to a community, but who could greatly benefit from participating in it as well as benefiting the community.

## CRITIQUE ON BOUNDARIES: BRINGING PEOPLE TO A COMMUNITY

The notion of what constitutes a boundary has been explored in management science, more particularly, in the literature of critical systems thinking (Midgley, 2000; Ulrich, 1983). A boundary is a social construction by which knowledge and people to be considered relevant in a situation are defined (Churchman, 1968). This notion presents a similarity with that of a boundary object of the theory of communities of practice (mentioned elsewhere in this encyclopedia). A boundary object helps people from a community to communicate with the rest of the world and to coordinate activities (Wenger, 1998).

This concept of an object could be extended to account for people who may be excluded from participation in a community of practice. Therefore, the idea of boundary people can be put forward. Midgley (1992) suggests that in any situation, reflection on people *and* issues which become marginalized from any decision could help those deciding to foster inclusion and participation. In a community, this type of reflection could also help members define their identity by acknowledging who they are and what they do, or who they could *become*. Often, Wenger (1998) argues, defining what and who constitutes a community helps individuals to define their own identity.

Non-participation and marginality are two issues that are accounted for in the theory of communities of practice. The first refers to a non-intensive engagement (i.e., when people are new to a community). The second refers to situations where there are barriers for people to become full members of a community. This situation may be problematic for the development of a community. In this aspect, reflection on boundaries and marginalization of both objects and people could help potential participants and community members identify issues that need to be addressed to facilitate inclusion and learning.

Midgley (1992) suggests that the definition of a boundary brings value judgments about what and who is to be included and marginalized from decisions. These value judgments could be subject to debate to enable a community to debate on possibilities of including some peripheral and marginalized members and their experience as a core element of their practice. The following questions could help a community to reflect on issues of inclusion and marginalization:

- Who is to be included within this community?
- What can constitute knowledge within the community?
- What and whose value judgments are supporting the above definitions?
- What and who is to be marginalized from activities? Why?
- From the above questions, what barriers for inclusion and learning could be identified?

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article, a perspective to facilitate inclusion in a community of practice has been developed. This perspective takes the notion of a boundary object and extends it to account for the possible existence of people in the margins of boundaries whose participation in a community of practice could bring benefits for learning. In the dynamics of a community, it is inevitable some people and their knowledge could be marginalized. Reflecting on the implications of maintaining their marginality or avoiding it by including them into community's activities could be seen positively as a way of fostering learning and competency.

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## **KEY TERMS**

**Boundary:** A social construction that defines knowledge and people to be included (or benefited) from a decision.

**Marginality:** A situation resulting from the definition of a boundary over what is to be included in the mainstream of activities of a community of practice. Marginality can be defined in terms of non-participation in a community.

**Peripherality:** A form of participation in a community of practice by which individuals take less intense membership. This can be seen as a form of becoming a newcoming member of the community. This situation should not be seen as free of conflicts. Instead, it can be an opportunity for a community to develop their practice.

**Value Judgement:** An assessment that could reveal the values that support a community and its members, who or what is to be included and who or what is to be marginalized.

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