

Building a Dynamic Model of Community Knowledge Sharing

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INTRODUCTION

Many case studies have been undertaken about how informal, sponsored, and supported communities of practice operate within private and public sector organizations. To date, however, no examination has been made of how informal communities of practice operate within the third sector, the sector of community, and voluntary organizations. The third sector has a long history of using community space, in various forms, either physical or notional, to engage individuals in discourse and informal learning. The rise of the network society has added value to this process by allowing active individuals to personalize networks through the use of technologies which enhance communication. The third sector is now demonstrating that individuals and groups are seeking to create open access knowledge-sharing spaces which attempt to combine face-to-face networks with computer-mediated communications to support informal learning between community development practitioners.

This article examines the role of Sunderland Community Development Network in the creation of informal communities of practice. It pays particular attention to three key areas:

1. **Community space:** How core, active, peripheral, and transactional community spaces within third sector partnerships create an ebb and flow of informal communities of practice.
2. **Personalized networking:** How issue-based activity, inside and outside communities, can lead to the rapid appearance and disappearance of informal communities of practice.
3. **Knowledge-sharing space:** How core members of a third sector organization can create a dynamic model of roles within informal communities of practice capable of impacting upon

processes of governance beyond the organization.

BACKGROUND: SUNDERLAND AND THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

Sunderland is a new city in the North East of England with a population of 300,000. Toward the end of the last century, it suffered adversely from the post-industrialization process. Both shipbuilding (ships had been built on the River Wear for over 1,500 years) and coal mining (Monkwearmouth Colliery was one of the largest deep mines in Europe) went into terminal decline. The dawn of the new millennium, however, has witnessed an economic, social, and cultural renaissance in the city. Sunderland's Nissan car plant is now the largest in the UK with 12,000 employees. Sunderland University has a new riverside campus adjacent to a thriving marina and an emerging shellfish industry. Sunderland Football Club has a new arena (built on the former site of Monkwearmouth Colliery), boldly titled "The Stadium of Light", and there is an award-winning museum and winter gardens in the heart of the city center.

Sunderland Community Development Network (SCDN) forms the neighborhood-based component of the city's renaissance and is open to community groups, community networks, voluntary sector organizations, volunteers and residents who are, or want to be, active in their communities.

The aims of SCDN are to link together neighborhood renewal (Social Exclusion Unit 2000) areas of the city in communities of practice; maximize the power of communities to shape the future of the city; provide a decision-making and discussion forum for communities; provide effective, meaningful, and coordinated representation at all levels of the city council's Local Strategic Partnership (LSP); and

provide a structure of accountability for community representation and the communication of information. The concept of partnership working in this manner was first suggested in a document produced by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (2001). In summary, SCDN aims to capture, store, and transfer the wide range of knowledge contained within Sunderland's community-based organizations and make this knowledge accessible to other sectors.

THE EMERGENCE OF SCDN

SCDN has been emerging as a meta-network since September 2001 under the innovatory leadership of VOICES. VOICES was originally established as Sunderland Voluntary Sector Partnership (VSP) in 1994, and since September 1994, has played an active role on the City of Sunderland Partnership (CoSP). Three community development workers were appointed in May 1998 to develop networks in areas where there was no existing infrastructure and to build the community and voluntary sector in the city. In 2000, the VSP gained charitable company status in the name of Sunderland Voluntary and Community Sector Partnership. The official launch of the new company was held in October 2000 to coincide with the signing of the local compact between the CoSP and the voluntary and community sector. The name VOICES was adopted to reflect the role of the VSP in ensuring local people's needs, views, and opinions are integral to the decision-making processes of policy makers at local, regional, and national levels.

The core group of VOICES has many years of experience of community development activity, stretching back to the 1970s, long before the introduction of the Internet and other network technologies. Some members of the core group have taken readily to e-mail and other network technologies while others struggle with it. All, however, are very skilled face-to-face networkers and demonstrate a high level of trust in the communities they support.

The meta-network provides a range of knowledge-sharing platforms through which dialogue can flow, both formally and informally. These platforms include formal strategy meetings, informal lunches, events and residential conferences, and seminars as well as sharing documents and discussion via e-mail and the Internet. Key informants constantly refer to

the informal dialogue, which takes place before, after, and around meetings. The informal sharing of knowledge is seen to lie at the hub of the collective learning and knowledge-sharing process, which takes place within the meta-network. Access to knowledge is sought in a seamless way by combining face-to-face informality with document sharing and the use of e-mail, firmly grounded in the needs of communities. Knowledge is also accessed via the mobile telephone and text messaging which adds value to the use of other technologies. A high level of trust is placed upon individuals with key skills and competencies within the network, as containers and carriers of knowledge on community development.

SCDN has been debating, for more than 2 years, the importance of legitimizing peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1997) within the network and the LSP. Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newbies, veterans, activities, identities (Wenger, 1998), communities of knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1991), and practice. It is concerned with the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). As a result of this debate, a model has been devised which aims to provide a means of legitimizing peripheral participation within it.

In this model, members of the network are divided into a tripartite framework of community development responsibilities within each of the 12 themed and 6 area-based neighborhood renewal groups of the LSP, as follows:

1. **Capacity-builder:** With previous partnership-working experience, well-developed informal and formal meeting skills and knowledge of decision-making structures.
2. **Mentor:** With experience of representation or other partnership working.
3. **Learner:** With experience of meetings at a neighborhood level but no previous representation experience.

Clearly, individuals tend to exhibit all of these roles to a greater or lesser degree. In terms of the meta-network, however, these three roles form a dynamic learning framework for the community participants within the 18 working groups of the LSP. It is clear that this tripartite framework creates a dynamic

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