

Communities of Practice for Organisational Learning

Andrew Wenn

Victoria University, Australia

INTRODUCTION

The term *community of practice* (CoP) arises out of the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) and refers to the way groups of individuals interact and engage in “the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise” (Wenger, 1998, p. 45). It is the activities of the members of these groups both individually and collectively, the construction of and practices at a local level that allows them “to meet the demands of the institution” (Wenger, 1998, p. 46) which they work for. For the CoP, learning occurs as a form of social practice.

BACKGROUND

Learning

For Wenger, learning does not occur in isolation. He proposes, in his social theory of learning, that we should understand learning as arising from social participation, and it involves four components:

1. meaning as a way of discussing our life experiences in relation to the world—learning as experience;
2. practice is a way of talking about the activities and guiding principles of what we do—learning as doing;
3. community is about the “social configurations” which organizations require of us, and, through our participation, we become recognized as competent—learning as belonging; and
4. identity is the way we talk about how learning changes us at the personal level—learning as becoming. (Wenger, 1998, p. 5)

Understanding that learning is a social process is particularly important when we wish to see how CoPs can facilitate organisational learning.

When we consider organisational learning, we must move from the individual to the “knowledge flows” that occur between individuals and the “contexts shared by individuals and groups” (Nidumolu, Subramani & Aldrich, 2001, p. 116). To be successful, an organisation must “know what it knows” (Wenger, 1998, p. 8); thus, it is necessary to understand how knowledge flows across boundaries between communities and between communities and the organisation. It is also a matter of creating, nurturing, and sustaining these flows (Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Wenn & Burgess, in press).

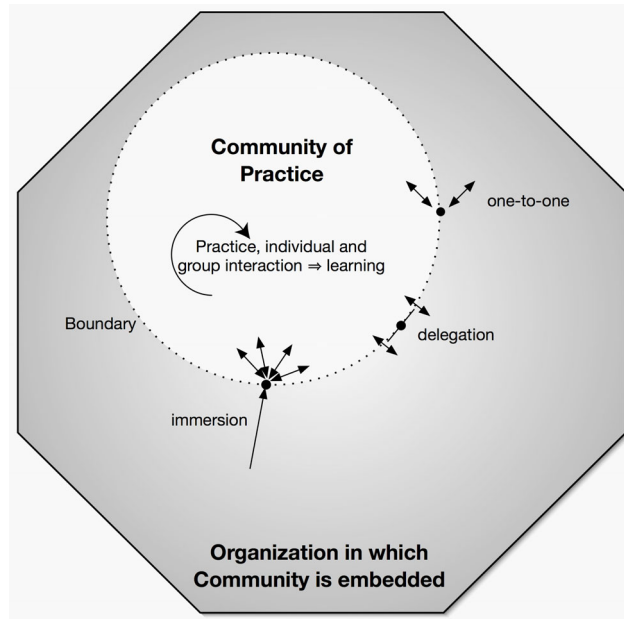
Boundaries and Boundary Encounters

Communities of practice have boundaries. These boundaries serve to separate different communities and are often only revealed when we realise what learning is required to move from one CoP to another or from the CoP to the larger organisation. What is important for our purposes is that these boundaries are not impermeable; a community cannot exist in total isolation to the rest of the world; there are entities that serve as boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that are able to move between the different communities and “coordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purpose” (Wenger, 1998, p. 106).

Examples of boundary objects are documents (such as research publications, memos, reports, e-mails, spreadsheets, forms), terms, concepts, people, and other artifacts that are capable of communicating between the community and the organisation, creating connections between them.

Wenger (1998, pp. 112-114) identifies three types of boundary encounters (Figure 1). These can be meetings, conversations, and visitations and can happen at various levels. There can be a *one-to-one* encounter where two people meet and discuss issues involving the boundary relationships of relevance to them. Another type of encounter is an *immersion*.

Figure 1. A community of practice is embedded within an organization. Organisational learning involves a two-way exchange across the boundary between the community members and the rest of the organisation.



This can take the form of a visit to a practice. “This kind of immersion provides a broader exposure to the community of practice being visited and how its members engage with one another” (Wenger, 1998, p. 112). One disadvantage of this type of encounter is that the passage of information is essentially one way. The members of the visited community ascertain very little about the community the visitor belongs to. The final type of encounter is a *delegation* where multiple participants from each community meet for a mutual exchange of knowledge. In this type of exchange, meaning is negotiated between members of each community and across the boundary. An example of this type of boundary encounter would be a manager meeting with CoP members for an exchange of ideas, concerns, or insights into the CoP’s expertise.

The links or boundary encounters that exist or need to be created between a CoP and an organisation are analogous to those that are needed or existing between different CoPs. This is true especially if the CoP under consideration is wholly embedded in the organisation.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In a recent article, Wenn and Burgess (in press) employ Wenger’s ideas of boundary encounters to advance some ideas of how the links between academic IS research and real-world practice could be encouraged and maintained. The academics were one CoP while the practitioners were another. Among these was the need to ensure that researchers, students who will eventually become practitioners, and already existing practitioners are encouraged to adopt a more reflective attitude toward their work and consider how it may benefit members of their own communities and their own learning, as well as interested and concerned members of communities external to the one they are currently in.

CONCLUSION

By their very nature, communities of practice are involved in learning and constructing knowledge as a group. Employing Wenger’s social theory of learning with its four components of learning as doing, experience, becoming, and belonging allows the individual and group nature of learning to be revealed. CoPs are by their very nature bounded entities, but this boundary is permeable, and knowledge can flow from the CoP to the organisation or CoP to CoP by several mechanisms. If an organisation is to survive and thrive, it is important that the organisation nurtures CoPs and that the CoP shares its knowledge by allowing these knowledge flows to continue.

REFERENCES

- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22-27.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. C. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nidumolu, S. R., Subramani, M., & Aldrich, A. (2001). Situated learning and the situated knowledge web: Exploring the ground beneath knowledge management. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 18(1), 115-150.

1 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/communities-practice-organizational-learning/10470

Related Content

Rethinking Virtual Teams for Streamlined Development

Andreas Larsson and Tobias Larsson (2007). *Higher Creativity for Virtual Teams: Developing Platforms for Co-Creation* (pp. 138-156).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/rethinking-virtual-teams-streamlined-development/22167

Virtual Reality and Point-Based Rendering in Architecture and Heritage

Omar A. Mures, Alberto Jaspe, Emilio J. Padrón and Juan R. Rabuñal (2018). *Virtual and Augmented Reality: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 549-565).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/virtual-reality-and-point-based-rendering-in-architecture-and-heritage/199704

Management of a Virtual Construction Management Services Company

Wafa Alsakini, Juhani Kiiras and Pekka Huovinen (2008). *Encyclopedia of Networked and Virtual Organizations* (pp. 856-866).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/management-virtual-construction-management-services/17699

Smart Classroom-Based Innovative Solution Toward Uninterrupted Education: Perspective

Sudhir K. Routray and Sasmita Mohanty (2022). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 1-14).

www.irma-international.org/article/smart-classroom-based-innovative-solution-toward-uninterrupted-education/306689

Successful Communication in Virtual Teams and the Role of the Virtual Team Leader

Jamie S. Switzer (2011). *Virtual Communities: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools and Applications* (pp. 353-366).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/successful-communication-virtual-teams-role/48679