

Encouraging Research through Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the role communities of practice (CoPs) can play in encouraging individual and organizational research capacity and capability. Through three case study CoPs with members from UK universities, we highlight this potential contribution. We argue that processes of social learning underpin the CoPs and use reflexive learning as the methodology to explore individual experiences. We focus particularly on the identity construction for new researchers and identity transformation for experienced researchers enabled by participation in the CoPs. Emerging knowledge domains that bind together individual members are also discussed.

While this account focuses on CoPs and the development of competencies and identities of researchers, we believe the process and benefits of collaboration discussed have application to other organizational contexts for the development of core competencies and organizational learning.

BACKGROUND: THE UK HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

The pre-1992 UK universities have emerged grounded in research cultures, but in the ex-polytechnics, the move of focus from teaching to research is a relatively recent phenomenon.

As a result, the UK new universities may have achieved excellence in teaching, but performance in terms of research has been slower to develop. However, the necessity for developing research profiles within these new universities is increasingly placed on

the strategic agenda, and there is an increasing expectation for academics to be research active.

Oliver (1997) argues that research is more a process than a product. From this perspective, research is an endless activity, and systematic inquiry becomes a way of life, encouraging us to become different people. Traditionally, research has been perceived as an individual, isolated endeavor with the “ivory tower” images of academic contexts (Bryans & Mavin, 2004). However, with the pace of change and the development of new knowledge, there are benefits to interdisciplinary collaboration. The task for new universities is to foster and develop research cultures which encourage collaboration between experienced and new researchers in order to leverage research capacity and capability.

CoPs

One way to foster this type of collaboration is through CoPs. Par (2002) argues CoPs are “communities that learn. Participants meet to learn from each other and share and benefit from each other’s expertise.” Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) argue that people who come together in CoPs do so within and across the boundaries of teams, departments, and organizations to create, share, deepen, and apply knowledge to their problems and passions about a topic. Far from being a new idea, CoPs are, in fact, our first knowledge-based social structure (Wenger et al., 2002).

Fox (2000) asserts that learning theory has developed from its roots in mainly psychological traditions through organizational learning to social construc-

tionist influences resulting in an emphasis on social learning theory. He views Lave and Wenger's (1991) account of situated learning as a specific version of social learning theory, arguing that its principle element is the notion of the CoP in which members learn by participating in shared activity. We view social learning on two levels: first, that we learn with and from others in all our social relationships and, second, that the social context mediates and structures the sense making and meanings we experience and generate as we perform and interact within this context.

Wenger et al. (2002) claim that CoPs form naturally when people come together around common interests but argue that organizations need to become more proactive and systematic about developing and integrating them into their strategy. However, this may raise issues of alignment where individual and organization needs may not coincide. They observe that, in the development of a CoP, there are five stages: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation, but these are not fixed linear points.

Taking a fluid approach, Brown and Duguid (1991) argue that communities are significantly emergent, "that is to say that their shape and membership emerges in the process of activity, as opposed to being created to carry out a task" (p. 49). They comment that much of the literature refers to the design or creation of new groups, but their interest is with the detection and support of emergent or existing communities.

IDENTITY

Participating in new activities and social groupings encourages us to become different people, impacting on our identities. The concept of individualized identity is problematic and has a long history of discussion in social studies. Identities are individualized through the narration of one's own story (Gherardi, 1996, p. 188), constructed within a repertoire accessible in a situated time and space (Meyer, 1986 and Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994 as cited in Gherardi, 1996, p. 188) and part of a discourse of historically related sets of thoughts, expressions, and practices (Foucault, 1984). From this perspective, identity is a subjective concept which changes over time and in different situations (Mavin, 2001).

Occupations and, more particularly, professions have been increasingly important sources of identity for individuals. Not only has academic work provided the conditions for strong identities but also the building of individual identities that are nevertheless embedded in defined communities (Henkel, 2000, p. 13). Taylor (1989) as cited in Henkel (2000) emphasized the importance of a "defining community" in the formation of identity which provides the language through which we understand ourselves and interpret our world: "Your identity is essentially tied up with what you are committed to, what you overwhelmingly value and what you strive for" (p. 145). This embedded nature of identity is fluid and influenced by the institution's changing values and agendas.

CoP is a theory about learning as socialization, where increasing participation in CoP is the key to both how learning happens and identity formation (Fox, 2000, p. 859). "Participation is both a kind of action and a kind of belonging. Such participation shapes not only what we do but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4), and building an individual identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities (Wenger, 1998, p. 145).

In terms of experienced and less experienced members of CoPs, Wenger (1998) notes that membership translates into an identity as a form of competence. From CoP theory, we know that masters of a practice show novices what to do: they act like obligatory points of passage enabling the novice to work/learn and move toward the center of the CoP gaining in legitimacy as they do (Fox, 2000, p. 861).

METHODOLOGY

We approached the research from a subjective stance, acknowledging that meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world, where meaning is not discovered, but socially constructed (Crotty, 1998). We developed a reflexive approach to three case studies whereby, as authors of this paper, we are both the researchers and the researched, as participants in the case study CoPs. We acknowledge individual's experience as a basis for research and the accountability of researchers to research participants and to a wider research community. We have taken a reflexive perspective on the

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