

# University Training on Communities of Practice

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## INTRODUCTION

The term communities of practice (CoPs) has been coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) during their quests on apprenticeship from 1988. They considered some studies carried on in very different backgrounds and kinds of culture such as those of Maya midwives in Yucatan, Vai, and Gola tailors in Liberia, U.S. Navy boatswains' drill-grounds, butchers of some American supermarkets, and among the members of Alcoholics Anonymous Association.

The common denominator of these studies that has appeared relevant to Lave and Wenger is the presence of learning mechanisms not surveyed before by others scholars and not connected with the direct interaction between apprentice and master, but with the participation to a practice shared with other actors such as other apprentices, masters and journeyfolks.

Lave and Wenger have therefore considered learning as something strictly linked to the social practice and they have observed the mechanism, defined as "legitimate peripheral participation", according to which also the apprentices are considered members of the community, that they call CoP, so they are entirely legitimated to share its resources and experiences, to take part in discussions and to have an equal interaction with senior experts.

Sprung up in an academic background, in issues connected with the study of language and social interactions, the CoPs have quickly come to business world where they are becoming successful as support strategy for training by e-learning (Brown & Duguid, 1995), knowledge management tools (Profili, 2004) and, more in general, development perspectives for studies on organizational learning (Alessandrini, 2005).

## BACKGROUND

Lave and Wenger's studies examine the social features of learning, in particular they have taken into consideration Vygotskij's (1980) works about the "zones of proximal development". This theory explains the possibility for the learner to carry out some tasks also slightly out of the learner's capacities field, using, with the learner's communicative mediation, the competences background of the learning group the learner is in.

However it needs to point out the fundamental difference between the situation of the communities of learning (CoLs), artificial environments where teacher and disciples' roles are well defined, and that of the CoP, real environments where experts and apprentices co-participate in the realization of shared practices.

More recent studies as those Engestrom's (1987)—Vygotskij's original works traced their origins during the 1930s—widen the range of concept application of proximal development zone, explaining it from a "collectivistic" or "social" viewpoint. Other authors such as Orr (1996) study in depth the individual and public identity coming out in working environments, by spreading "war stories" that are tales on particularly difficult applicative situations having been solved successfully by intuition or experience.

The exponential growth of Internet connections from the 1990s (Rosso, 2005) fosters the spread of virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993) and the transformation of CoPs studied by Lave & Wenger into communities where the face-to-face interaction is more often replaced by distance interaction with the consequent issues of the computer-mediated communication (Rivoltella, 2003).

## A TRAINING EXPERIENCE ON COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In the research work of LAOC (Laboratory of Organizational Learning and Communication), coordinated by Professor Giuditta Alessandrini from University of Roma Tre, has been experimented a specific training on CoPs during last three academic years. That was possible thanks to the starting up of a Community of Practice among people attending the distance Master GESCOM (Knowledge Management and Development in Human Resources) directed by Prof. Giuditta Alessandrini. The activity, coordinated by Prof. Giovanni Rosso, expert in Pedagogy of Work and researcher at the Regional Institute of Educational Research in Latium, has been composed of several phases according to a methodology (Wenger, Smith, & Stuckey, 2005) outlined by Etienne Wenger, one of the most important experts in this field.

The first phase mainly aimed at creating the community and giving rise to identities and sense of ownership. In fact a community is not a community of practice without the following three features (Wenger, 2001):

1. An *identity* coming from interests sharing and above all from its adherents' devotion and loyalty (*commitment*) towards community; in these conditions the community obtains a *collective expertise* and its members learn from each other.
2. An *interaction* within the community carried on by discussions, activities in common, mutual help. The interests sharing is a necessary condition but it is not enough so that a community of practice can exist: the interactive aspect is crucial and the engagement in joint activities has to be shared even if it can be discontinuous.
3. The presence of resources and *shared practices* as a result of the non-stop informal and dialectical comparison of the personal experiences at the community disposal. The development process of these resources can also be carried on unconsciously and unintentionally, but it can simply start up spontaneously thanks to the social relations among the other members of the community.

In order to stimulate people attending the course and arouse involvement and a sense of ownership to community, group tasks have been proposed, chosen every year in a different field of master's curriculum.

Amid the conventional tools for on-line social interaction (Calvani, 2005) each group had a private *forum* monitored by tutor at its disposal, to discuss the work development and organization, and a reserved area for materials exchange and sharing (*repository*). On the contrary, a discussion area in the public forum was dedicated to the impressions and opinions exchange about the progress of the activity.

The interaction by private forums has been very strong, with an average of hundred messages for each group of six to seven people in the space of about three months. The public forum area dedicated to community has collected more than 300 messages in the same period. Some groups in the first academic year have developed a strong sense of identity that at first fostered them to chose a name able to identify their group and then to organize an association among people attending the course of all master editions. This activity has also permitted in this first phase to create the community *domain*, that is the area of shared contents and organized knowledge, typical of CoPs.

On the contrary, the second phase aimed at achieving the *practice* by studying the cases suggested by tutors or discussing specific situations linked to the work experience of people attending the course and that have been proposed by the participants. In this phase people attending the course have been also stimulated to have, depending on the context and their expertise, different roles (coordinator, mediator, novice) so that they could experiment the mechanism of the "legitimate peripheral participation".

By way of an example we describe briefly a proposed case regarding the difficulties into which a hypothetical Eng. Pressi runs, supporter of an innovative management where there is much regard for workers' training and development needs, during his role of human resources manager in a conventional company, managed by its owners, where the only way to stimulate workers has always been the recourse to premium pays. Eng. Pressi has organized training interventions and meeting chances (indoor gym for employers, social trip for workers), but his initiatives have not achieved the result expected of higher personnel productivity.

The proposed incitement has opened a lively debate among people attending the course who have interact exclusively online, in forum, using the repository for sharing those materials used as a support of each theory. In this second phase, in order to make the interaction conditions closer than those of a real CoP, people at-

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