Chapter 11
When Virtual Communities Click:
Transforming Teacher Practice, Transforming Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Communities of practice (CoP's)—much touted and studied as a mechanism for teacher education and professional development—may offer environments for deeper learning and transformation of their participants. This chapter examines more meaningful outcomes possible in community-centered learning—deep learning, changes in professional culture and identity, and participants "finding voice"—outcomes of value not often seen in formal educational and traditional professional development settings. Drawing on qualitative data from participants in a three-year community of writers and literacy educators, this study suggests that CoP's can be linked not only to development of knowledge and skills, but also to changes in participant beliefs, attitudes, voices, visions, and the identities of practicing educators.

INTRODUCTION

A community of practice is generally defined as the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations, with early scholarly inquiry driven by the writings of Lave (1991) and Wenger (1998). It is important to "stress that such a community of practice is not just a Website, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and, in the process, develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment; people who share your overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem to create a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Cox (2005) provides an excellent summary of these early writings and approaches.

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All well and good. Few constructivist, technology-oriented teachers in 2008 would doubt the value of interweaving the intellectual and social cultures of a class or professional development group to transform a course or study group. To modern-day readers of such theorist-and-practitioner colleagues as Barbara Ganley or Gardner Campbell, these ideas are givens. And the same group of faculty innovators eagerly infuses technology tools for community building into their digital pedagogies, even if online groups and classes sometimes struggle to find a sense of community (Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Rovai, 2002) or lack a certain group "spark" representative of the best a "community of practice" can be.

Indeed, researchers and thinkers have struggled to find models to describe, predict, and improve the activity of communities designed for human potential, a burgeoning professional literature represented in such works as: Barab, Barnett, et al. (2002); Barab, MaKinster, et al. (2003); Barah, Schatz, et al. (2004); Chee & Hedberg, 2005; and McConnell (2005). Glazer & Hannafin (2005), for example, provide a meta-analysis of the educational literature focusing on aspects of communities of practice to outline members' traits—factors such as affect, belief, or cognition—that research has suggested is related to interaction in group settings. And the qualitative research of Little (2003) most especially influenced us as researchers looking to document deeper learning and more meaningful outcomes from community-centered learning.

Domains from science, mathematics, and technology instruction (Howe & Stubbs, 2003; Graven, 2004; Horn, 2005; John & Triggs, 2004) to literacy education (Liberman & Wood, 2002) have provided fertile ground for electronic communities of practice to grow, and numerous anecdotal reports link accounts of such communities with "changing the culture" of participants' thinking and professional practice, as well as "deepening thinking" (Chapman, Ramondt, et al., 2005)--both the types of complex, high-end learning outcomes which educators covet. Communities of practice have also been linked to such ideals as allowing participants to find or shape identity (Duguid, 2005), sustain commitment among at-risk educators (Goldring & Hausman, 2001), build a "culture of inquiry" (Snow-Gerono, 2005), or increase internationalization in study and practice (Sierra & Folger, 2003).

ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES AND PROBLEMS

How are such learning communities built and sustained? Instructors of university graduate courses in education, both online and in the classroom, often go to great lengths to create learning environments which promote collaboration, support facilitation, and build community. Supported by principles of social constructivism, professors and students mediate learning in this nurturing environment where knowledge is transacted—not simply transmitted—by active, engaged learners who collaborate on problem solving contextualized in real world situations. In this environment, trust and respect are carefully built as both teachers and students emphasize the processes and products of learning.

But what happens when the course is over and teacher participants have dispersed to their individual places of work? How is the knowledge they have mediated integrated into their praxis as they recursively apply theory, reflect, and build theory? Often new knowledge—and the community that helped support it—is lost with the close of the institute, class or project. Teachers need time to apply new concepts and understanding, and they need a support system with whom they can continue to ask questions, share stories, and brainstorm. Without an ongoing support system, new instructional understanding is likely to diminish in the face of the culture of the organization or school to which the teacher returns.