

# Chapter 17

## The Roles of Peripheral Participants and Brokers: Within and Beyond Communities of Practices

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### ABSTRACT

*The objective of our chapter is to gain a better understanding of learning trajectories connecting external and internal communities of practices. To do so we studied four internal communities of practice by actors belonging to a same external community. We realized semi-directive interviews in these communities supplemented by direct observation of meetings. Our results give a new perspective on participation to communities of practice. We describe how young members act as boundary spanners between the communities and the practice in their organization while more senior members act as unique facilitators with a balance between boundary spanning and buffering. We describe in detail the personal characteristics of these senior members.*

### INTRODUCTION

The image of a self-interested strategist gatekeeper is hard to reconcile with that of the community of practice, an open knowledge exchange space that can exist only as a 'neutral place' where members are supposed to be driven by passion rather than individualism. If we add to that the ambition of articulating internal and external knowledge ex-

change spaces, we must underline the difficulties that are to be expected.

Nonetheless, the empirical evidence we collected in our four case studies explores situations where the gatekeeper plays the role of boundary spanner between an internal and an external community of practice, thus creating especially rich learning trajectories that cut across internal and external boundaries of the organizations studied. Hence, these are case studies where boundary spanners, instead of using their privileged power

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situation to play with the creation or disappearance of practices in order to serve their own purposes, help members of the organization to craft and experiment their own practices while feeding the process from what they learnt in external communities of practice.

The objective of our chapter is to gain a better understanding of learning trajectories connecting external and external communities of practices. This involves understanding the conditions under which communities of practice brokers acts as boundary spanner rather than as gatekeeper and also to gain insight into the role played by other members of the communities of practice. In turn we will contribute to a better understanding of participation and answer to the call of Handley *et al* (2006:642) to better understand “what happens within and beyond” communities of practice.

### **Background: Learning Trajectories Within and Between Communities of Practice**

Communities of practice can be defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002:p4). This consensual definition clearly illustrates that their capacity to enhance learning is one of the key features of communities of practice. It is also an explanation of the success of the concept. Still, we argue here that many aspects of the learning trajectories within and between communities of practice still need to be revealed. This is especially the case of cross boundary learning trajectories. Despite the fact that organizations have been presented as constellations of practices (Wenger, 1998), we know very little about the connections between communities of practices (Handley *et al*, 2006) both within and between organizations. We will explore in this chapter three main aspects of communities of practice connected with the question of cross

organizational learning trajectories: that of learning trajectories per se, that of the role played by peripheral participation and by key connecting actors within these trajectories.

### **Learning Trajectories**

The founding work by Wenger (1998) stresses the importance of constellations of practices but gives us little in the way of exploring the learning trajectories at play between communities of practices. Even if it underlines the importance of such constellation, the work is focussed on identity building mechanisms within the community. If we want to better understand how an organization can be considered as a learning constellation of communities of practice, we need to work on learning trajectories that cut across communities but also across organizations.

What limits our vision so far is also the dominant representation of such trajectories. In the early work by Wenger (1998) and Orr (1996), the population studied are composed of professional with little management role: claim processors for Wenger and Xerox technicians for Orr. In these two case studies, the dominant learning logic is that of the relationship between old-timers and newcomers. The learning trajectory is embedded in the negotiation of meaning and identity building process and results from the generational encounters between the two categories. It thus tends to insist on the master-apprentice inspired learning interaction (Wenger, 1998: p101) which limits the application of the concept to other organizational situations. Identity is definitely as a central question to understand communities of practice but it is not sufficient to understand learning.

We also think that in order to broaden our view, the perspective on learning has to be extended beyond the actual interaction that takes place within a community. This is coherent with the idea that participation is social even when it happens beyond the actual interactions of the members of the community members (Wenger, 1998). In the

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