

Chapter 17

Cooperative Learning through Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

A community made up of a group of individuals becomes a “community of practice” when a mutual engagement is established between its members. The mutual engagement unites the participants in the carrying out of a common task (Wenger, 1998). The main aim of a community of practice is to find the solution to a problem by sharing experiences (Midoro, 2002). This paper examines the definition, characteristics, management and effectiveness of communities of practice. They are understood as being communities of self-managed learning where professional development is not based on a pre-set training course but on sharing experiences, identifying best practices and helping each other face the daily problems encountered in one’s profession (Trentin, 2000). Such communities are useful in particular working environments as an opportunity to improve digital competences. In communities of practice, it is possible to encourage ways of co-building knowledge through teaching methods such as cooperative learning. Until now cooperative learning has been limited to traditional training contexts, but it can be realised via Web technologies.

INTERACTION, AN ESSENTIAL PREMISE TO STARTING UP A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A virtual community is generally understood to be a place, a space on the Web that helps the real community to exist and survive. The difference between a real community and a virtual one is

the way in which the members interact: the participants in a Web community communicate with each other with the aid of a computer (*Computer Mediated Communication*). To be part of a virtual community it is necessary to become an active member by participating in the life and growth of its members and of the space of the community, by establishing meaningful relationships with the participants and trying to be an integral part of the group. If we consider the educational implica-

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tions of virtual communities, at least three types of groups can be identified:

1. Discussion groups or spontaneous communities;
2. Learning communities;
3. Communities of practice.

In spontaneous communities the participants are united by one or more topics which are connected to their personal interests and they do not always have specific aims. The members often do not use well settled computer platforms to interact, they mostly use simple interpersonal communication tools such as forums and above all mailing lists. Within these communities there are great differences regarding the participants' level of commitment and participation.

Learning communities and communities of practice, on the other hand, have specific aims. Learning communities are more focused on developing knowledge and skills in a teaching course, communities of practice deal with solving common problems or sharing experiences and cases that are useful in particular working environments or serve as a refresher opportunity for the professional development of adults at work. All the components of these communities should be helped in giving their contribution to the community: their participation should therefore be equal.

The starting up and the development of different ways of interaction and of intense social relationships, that can give life to communities (of special interests, of learning and of practice), can be traced back to the key concept of *social interaction*, which on Internet is usually defined as *communicative interaction* (Rivoltella, 2003). To explore the possibilities of developing this new sense of community, brought about by the Web, means to study the communicative exchanges among the members of the different communities. In the case of a community of practice, the activities can be carried out on line using specific computer platforms. The setting-up of these platforms must take

into consideration the different types of exchanges of knowledge that can occur on them. Generally speaking, a computer platform should provide a public section, to be accessed by anonymous users, which gives them a general description of the community of practice's activities. There should also be a private section, where access is reserved only to authorized people so that they can actively participate in the community. *Peer tutoring* and *reciprocal teaching* are fostered within these contexts because the interaction and exchanges between the participants become mechanisms which can encourage and stimulate learning through interaction and sharing tools. All the means that allow both synchronous and asynchronous communication on the Web are interacting and sharing tools: email, chat-rooms and "teaching forums." They are virtual spaces where each participant makes his own contribution available to the whole group, thus creating the necessary conditions to "share" knowledge (Pascale, 2002). Within these areas the contributions are organised in a discussion *thread* sequence, the contents are more visible, there is more freedom as to when to use them, it is possible to trace back the communication, different points of view can be collected and the group can directly experience the ability to build knowledge. As regards this latter issue, the role of the *tutor*, who supports the distance-education teacher, is fundamental. His job is to help the users with the communication tools (technological function), to manage the exchanges and group dynamics (moderation function) and to encourage and support the participation (relational function) (Pascale, 2005).

A community of practice is a self-directed and self-organised group in which the mechanisms of sharing tacit knowledge and of enriching one's personal and professional identity are possible only if the participation is spontaneous and voluntary. There are various differences in on-line platforms compared to traditional communities of practice:

- They guarantee continuity in the communication between the members when it is

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