Communities of Practice

General

The term "*community of practice*" was coined in 1991 by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave during their study of cognitive apprenticeship learning model.[1] Communities of practice are

- "***groups of people*** *who share a* ***concern or a passion for something they do and learn*** *how to do it better as they interact regularly.*"[2]

A community of practice can for example be

- "*a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope.*"[3]

Members of a community of practice don't need to be aware of its existence[4].

What are communities of practice?

A community of practice is defined by three elements:

- **Domain** - Members of the community of practice share interest for a certain domain.
- **Community** - Members of the community of practice take part in activities, discussions and learn from each other.
- **Practice** - Members of the community of practice practice the knowledge they share among themselves.

Size, formality and meeting frequency of a community of practice can vary. New members may join a community of practice and existing members can leave it.

Some other important characteristics of a community of practice are[5]:

- **Enterprise** - how active is the community in its quest for knowledge?
- **Mutuality** - how deep is the sense of community among its members?
- **Repertoire** - how self-aware is the community about its own levels and ways of practice?

Learning in a community of practice typically occurs through dialogue and discourse, sharing of ideas and knowledge, collaborative search for solutions to problems. Social learning through interaction with others is here expected to occur.[6] By interacting with experts new members of a community of practice increase their expertise and move from the periphery of a community towards its center. This process is called the *legitimate peripheral participation*[7].

What is the practical meaning of communities of practice?

The concept of communities of practice has practical applications in business, organizational design, government, civic life and education.[8)]

Transformation to communities of practice in schools could however be more demanding since education is their primary goal. The transformation can be observed in three dimensions: internally to organize learners into communities of practice around their school subjects, external to connect them with other communities outside school and over lifetime by organizing communities of practice lasting after the schooling period.

Criticisms

Keywords and most important names

- **Communities of practice**, **community**, **social learning**, **legitimate peripheral participation**
- Etienne Wenger, Jean Lave

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Read more

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