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## Communities of practice – real and virtual

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The word ‘community’ is a familiar one, much used by the media and policy-makers. It describes a group of people united by some common characteristic, typically their geographical location (e.g. ‘the Milton Keynes community’), some aspect of their identity (e.g. ‘the Black community’), or some common interest (e.g. ‘the Open University student community’). But how might we think of communities in people’s working lives?

An influential theory by the educational theorist Etienne Wenger talks about “communities of practice” – communities of people united by not just a common interest but a common way of working and of understanding the world. As he and his colleagues define it:

communities of practice are 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 et al. 2002, p.4)

This definition suggests that there are three basic elements of a community of practice (CoP): a clearly-identifiable group of people, some area of concern or passion as its focus, and a body of knowledge and ways of acting (Wenger refers to these as the community, the domain, and the practice). The definition implies other features of a CoP: it needs to be acknowledged as some sort of explicit community, with members who know each other somewhat and share ideas together; and the members need to be working together to develop their skills and knowledge in their chosen field – that is, they are engaged in some kind of collective learning activity.

Learning, in Wenger’s approach, is “is not something we do when we do nothing else or stop doing when we do something else” (Wenger 1998, p.8) – it happens throughout life. He jointly coined the term ‘communities of practice’ with his colleague Jean Lave in a book entitled *Situated Learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which argues that a great deal of practical learning occurs in a situated way – in the same situation that the learning is used. Their examples included such groups as midwives, tailors, naval quartermasters, butchers and non-drinking alcoholics, in each case examining the way in which the individual learned (in a form of apprenticeship) how to become an expert practitioner in the field – in other words, how to become part of a community of practice.

Communities of practice don’t need to be explicit organisations, like clubs or departments. Part of what makes them interesting is that they are fluid, coming into being as their members need them, changing their shape quickly and then ending. Wenger is keen to stress that there is nothing esoteric or modern about a CoP. They have existed throughout history and only the name is new. The medieval guilds would clearly fit the definition; so would the scientific societies of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Wenger originally intended the concept as a description of communities which had arisen spontaneously. But in the past ten years or so, the concept has become very fashionable in business circles, and many companies have consciously tried to create communities of practice.

A few modern examples of communities of practice might include:

- a group of engineers working together on similar problems;

- a group of accounting students based in different companies but sharing experiences of their studies;
- a support group for parents of young children with learning difficulties;
- a group of recently-appointed managers in a company all learning together how to do their new job.

These are very different kinds of people, but in each case they have a common interest or purpose about which they are learning together, in a very practical way.

So how do communities of practice relate to online communities, as discussed for example by Rheingold (2010) and Preece (2010)? This has been the subject of healthy debate in the literature on communities of practice. The sorts of groups that Wenger and his colleagues (including the anthropologist Jean Lave) studied were typically co-located – they worked in fairly close proximity to one another and their collective learning was largely carried out face-to-face.

However, it is clear from the previous readings that it is possible to have an online community – so is it possible to have an online CoP? Undoubtedly, many communities of practice have an online element to them (sometimes the terms ‘distributed’ or ‘virtual’ CoP are used instead, which give a slightly different emphasis but amount to the same thing). In many groups today, some element of their communication takes place online, even if they have a significant face-to-face element. An online/distributed/virtual CoP is something beyond this. Wenger et al. (2002) define a distributed CoP as:

any community of practice that cannot rely on face-to-face meetings and interactions as its primary vehicle for connecting members (p.115).

They identify many problems with distributed CoPs, including distance, size, affiliation (juggling membership in multiple communities) and cross-cultural issues. Nonetheless, Wenger and his colleagues present a series of ways to form and maintain distributed CoPs.

There are some clear examples of online communities that could be called communities of practice. Many open-source software tools, such as Linux and Firefox, have been developed almost wholly online by a large group who do not know each other face-to-face, but who share a common purpose and are engaged in collectively learning. The same is true for the online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, written together by a large group of people, few of whom meet face-to-face. As Bryant et al. (2005, p.2) argue:

observations of members’ behaviour in Wikipedia reveals that the three characteristics of CoPs identified by Wenger are strongly present on the site.

The slight distinction is that each of these communities has, at its heart, a project to create and modify an object, rather than the goal of collective learning. While learning undoubtedly occurs, it is slightly peripheral to the main purpose of the community.

Some researchers find the idea of a virtual CoP highly problematic. Kimble and Hildreth (2004), who discuss the different issues involved, conclude that “wholly virtual CoPs pose significant problems” (p.5) and note that “the most common distributed form of a so called ‘virtual’ CoP has a co-located active core”.

However, it seems clear that, as communities of practice evolve, most are becoming a blend of co-located and virtual communities.

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