

## Communities of practice go to university

Going to university is usually a sign that you are growing up. You may still have some maturing to do, but higher education will help you do that. So, as we reflect on the trajectory of the concept of community of practice, a pair of books written by and for people who use the concept in university contexts is a good sign: the concept is growing up.

### The history of the concept

The concept of community of practice took a circuitous route to the field of education. It was initially developed as part of a research program whose purpose was to rethink learning for an education audience. The aim was to inspect and reconsider the assumptions about learning that underlie current school design. The strategy was to study learning as a phenomenon in its own right: What does learning look like when it is not the result of teaching? Decoupling learning and teaching was meant to give rise to new ways of thinking about learning. This in turn was to enable new ways of approaching the design of schools and other institutions of learning. To our surprise the concept was first taken up by organizations outside of education, in business, government, healthcare, and international development.

The concept has had a long and notably diverse career, both as part of a social learning theory and as an approach to enabling learning. In retrospect we see the theory as having gone through three phases. Each transition builds on the prior phase, but involves a figure-ground switch.

In the first phase, the concept of community of practice was derived from studies of apprenticeship in various contexts. What was common across these contexts was that learning a practice entailed becoming a member of the community that “owned” that practice. You start at the periphery and gradually move toward full membership over time. In that phase of the theory, the existence of the community and its practice is taken as given and learning is theorized as an inbound trajectory into that community.

In the second phase, the community of practice is not taken as given. It is viewed as an emergent structure resulting from a learning partnership over time. This is a figure-ground shift from the first phase in the sense that, rather than the community defining learning, it is learning that defines the community. It was in this second phase that a question started to arise about whether you could be intentional about starting or cultivating a community of practice as a way to support learning. And indeed since then, this approach has been adopted in a large number of organizations across sectors. This applied use of the concept brought to the fore a number of new questions - about active cultivation, about leadership in convening and sustaining communities of practice, and about the relationship between communities of practice and organizational hierarchies.

In the third phase, there is again a figure-ground shift. While it was always clear that communities of practice exist in a broader landscape of different practices, the community remained the primary focus for analyzing and developing social learning capability. In the third phase, the primary focus is on a broader landscape of practice. In this landscape, learning capability depends as much on what happens at the boundaries between communities of practice as it does on the learning taking place inside them. In other words, boundaries between communities are learning assets just as communities are. From such a perspective, learning trajectories cut across a number of communities of practice in the landscape. It is not only a journey into the center of one. Thus learning in a landscape involves two related but distinct processes. First it happens in communities of practice where learners define and

develop specific forms of *competence*. Second it happens in relation to the broader landscape of practice: this includes many communities and practices in which we cannot claim membership or competence, but about which we can claim some level of *knowledgeability* that informs our participation.

In the complex world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the interplay of these two forms of participation—competence and knowledgeability—becomes central to what it means to know in practice. Applying this perspective to universities, we would pose the question: how can institutions of learning rise to this challenge? How can they enable forms of participation that encompass both competence and knowledgeability in complex landscapes of practice? A danger of ignoring participation is to simply view competence as a formal degree and knowledgeability as information. But social learning theory calls for approaches that go beyond degrees and information to a focus on robust identities that can successfully navigate a complex and changing landscape.

All three phases of the theory have pedagogical implications. These are relevant to universities as well as to education more generally.

Phase I highlights the importance of participation in practice for meaningful learning. Learning is viewed, not merely as the acquisition of information and skills, but primarily as a changing ability to participate in a human practice. Social participation shapes who we become. A substantial change in competence entails a corresponding change in identity.

Phase II suggests that a university needs to consider participation in learning partnerships as a way to increase its learning capacity as an organization with a special focus on learning. Where can the institution foster useful learning partnerships? Among staff for professional development? Among students for mutual support? Among faculty for better teaching? Among researchers for innovative approaches? And with partners in the broader community?

Phase III locates the university in the broader landscape of practice in which it operates: disciplinary practices, obviously, but also funding, regulation, policy, and business, as well as all the practices where research is relevant and where students move after graduation. Learning is not the exclusive prerogative of the university; it happens all the time, in every practice, and across boundaries. How the university contributes to the learning capability of this broader social landscape is a key question for higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These questions about meaningful learning and social learning capability are central to our theorizing today. And they are well aligned with a number of trends in higher education. The scholarship of teaching and learning is an emerging field that needs to embrace and contribute to social learning theory. Universities need to rethink their approach to learning and their role in society, including alternatives to traditional university courses, MOOCs, work placements, and modular courses, among others. Inventiveness in a globalized world is now key for our students and those of us responsible for their preparation. People need to collaborate in order to explore and develop these new approaches in productive and imaginative ways. University administrators, faculty, and support staff need to accelerate their learning as new approaches to serving students and doing research require new practices. All these trends make the collection of scholarly works in these two volumes timely.

The two editors need to be commended for their work. We have known Jacquie McDonald for a number of years and have followed her work at the University of Southern Queensland, where she was a pioneer

of the use of communities of practice for learning and teaching in higher education. In 2013, Jacquie joined our fellows program, in which each participant proposes a person project to work on during the year. When she suggested editing a volume of collected papers on the use of communities of practice in higher education, we thought it was an exciting idea. Higher education is a field where the use of social learning has not been well documented and the potential for application is endless. But we were not sure about the range of existing projects. We even wondered if she would be able to find enough people willing to contribute chapters for such a book. We had no idea that the response to her call for chapters would be so high that they would produce two volumes instead of the single book she originally planned.

For us this enthusiastic response is good news. In a field with as much potential for learning innovation as higher education, it is important to document cases both to understand what is happening in the field and to trigger people's imagination about what is possible. We are impressed by the variety of areas of application reflected in the chapters: professional development for faculty, pedagogical and curriculum innovations, collaborative research and writing, community-university partnerships, student communities, doctoral cohorts, and pedagogical approaches inspired by social-learning principles. Projects are within and across institutions and disciplines, face-to-face and online, local and international. The response to the call for chapters is a clear indication of some fundamental shifts in the learning models underpinning higher education.

As communities of practice go to university, they bring social learning theory to bear on the practical and intellectual currents associated with these shifts. We believe that social learning theory stands to make a strong contribution and to mature in the process.

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