Communities of practice for a multi-scale learning system

Etienne Wenger, 2007

Foreword to the IDEA *Guide to communities of practice*

When I was asked to write a short foreword to this guidebook, I saw it as a chance to articulate why my involvement with the IDEA Partnership has been such an inspiration and why I find their systematic application of communities of practice to address a complex problem so promising.

The provision of a good education to students with disability nationwide is a worthy goal expressed in legislation such as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In practice, enhancing the learning of these students is an ambition that requires a lot of learning on the part of all the groups of people involved—learning to do their own work and learning to work together.

The IDEA Partnership is pioneering a thoroughly collaborative way to address such a large-scale learning challenge. Central to this approach is the convening and cultivation of communities of practice among stakeholders. This commitment to community imposes what I call a "social discipline of learning" on the whole initiative:

- What shared concerns are going to bring people together meaningfully?

- Who should be at the table to make real progress in practice?

- What should participants be doing together to increase their individual and collective learning and ability to act?

- Who has the skill, legitimacy, and leadership to convene these communities?

The discipline of domain: a portfolio of issues

The ambition of the IDEA Partnership involves a complex and dynamic portfolio of issues. These issues do not fit neatly within existing institutional frames. They cut across government agencies, research organizations, advocacy groups, school districts, and families. They cover multiple levels of scale at once, from very local practices to national policies. They can only be addressed by a correspondingly complex constellation of communities of practice. Some of the communities the Partnership is convening connect people at a given level of scale: learning together across states, across agencies, across local districts, and within districts. Some communities cut across levels of scale, bringing together national organizations, state officials, school personnel, local leaders, community-based professionals, and parents.

The discipline of community: relevant participation

Communities of practice form out of the learning needs of members. Mutual relevance is the driver of participation. This approach allows the Partnership to address important issues by bringing together all those who can contribute, regardless of affiliation or role.

From a community of practice perspective, stakeholders are not just there to represent an organization, perspective, or interest; they come as engaged practitioners, and thus as experts in their own context, whether they are professionals, politicians, activists, parents, students, or citizens. The self-governing nature of a community of practice capitalizes on this wealth of experience: it places them in a position to direct and organize the learning they need to do.

The discipline of practice: doing work together

The best way to bring out the wisdom of practitioners for collective learning is to engage them in doing some real work that builds on and enhances their own practice—something meaningful that

engages their identity as practitioners. The Partnership invites community participants to address common issues by pursuing together the work they are doing in their own contexts. This approach cultivates three essential elements of community building:

- Engagement: The discipline of making progress in practice, of doing something mutually useful, keeps the focus on learning together and develops relationships of trust even when there are conflicts

- Imagination: The multi-scale, multi-perspective community format gives participants a new vision of their own work, of its significance, and of the potential for collaboration

- Alignment: Doing their work in the context of a community focused on important issues allows practitioners to better align their respective pursuits to accomplish shared goals

The discipline of leadership: social artists

Bringing together the diversity of stakeholders involved in the IDEA Partnership takes a special kind of leadership—a mixture of insight, networking, inspiration, and humility. Some people have an amazing capability to do this work. They translate the challenge of complex problems into social spaces in which practitioners can contribute their wisdom. They have the skill to see the potential and to convene the necessary communities.

I call these people "social artists." I have met many of them over the years, and a good number in the Partnership. I have learned to appreciate the convening leadership they show in creating the conditions for people to come together in productive communities. They leave an important footprint in the world. Other artists give us pieces of music, spectacles, paintings, poetry, films. Social artists give us communities.

It is important to recognize these social artists. Their work is not necessarily obvious or visible because they give others a voice. Yet the quality of their work is such an important success factor and they often need some organizational sponsorship to achieve their full potential.

This guidebook is dedicated to these social artists. The truth is, no guidebook can replace the spirit of their artistry. But every bit of information about the experience of those who are good at this work can help. We need more of them.

Emerging principles: the outline of a model

In summary, the community-of-practice approach of the IDEA Partnership illustrates several principles of the learning systems we need to build to address complex issues:

- Convene a constellation of communities that matches the size and complexity of the challenge you are trying to address

- Bring together the people who have a stake in key issues to work in community structures that allow them to take charge of their learning together

- Involve them as expert practitioners in real works that contributes both to a joint goal and to their learning in collaboration with each other.

- Recognize and sponsor the work of the social artists who can convene these communities and weave them into a dynamic constellation.

This is the outline of a model with broad applicability. Indeed, most major problems in the world today have a similar nature: multiple issues, multiple stakeholders, multiple practices, and multiple scales.