

Communities of Practice: Knowledge, Learning and Identity





Social Groupings

- Examples?

- Family
- Classroom
- Work groups
- Hobby groups

- Practices, routines, rituals, artefacts, symbols, conventions, stories, histories

Wenger (1998):

- Theory of how organisations and individuals within organisations work together
- Integral part of daily life
- Organisations: “constellations of communities of practice”
- How individual identities are shaped by memberships and trajectories within CoP's

Communities of practice

A move away from traditional theories of learning (intra-individual/learning as a individual product) to **'knowing' as situated in social resources (relationships, contexts, society)**

- Scribner & Cole (1981) – Vai literacy
- Constant (1987) – the social locus of practice
- Orr (1990) Xerox repair – importance of narrative in organisational contexts
- Lave & Wenger (1991) – situated learning/participation framework (not individual mind)
- Brown & Duguid (1991) – organisational learning and communities of practice
- Wenger, 1998 – active participation and meaning negotiation



Defining Communities of Practice

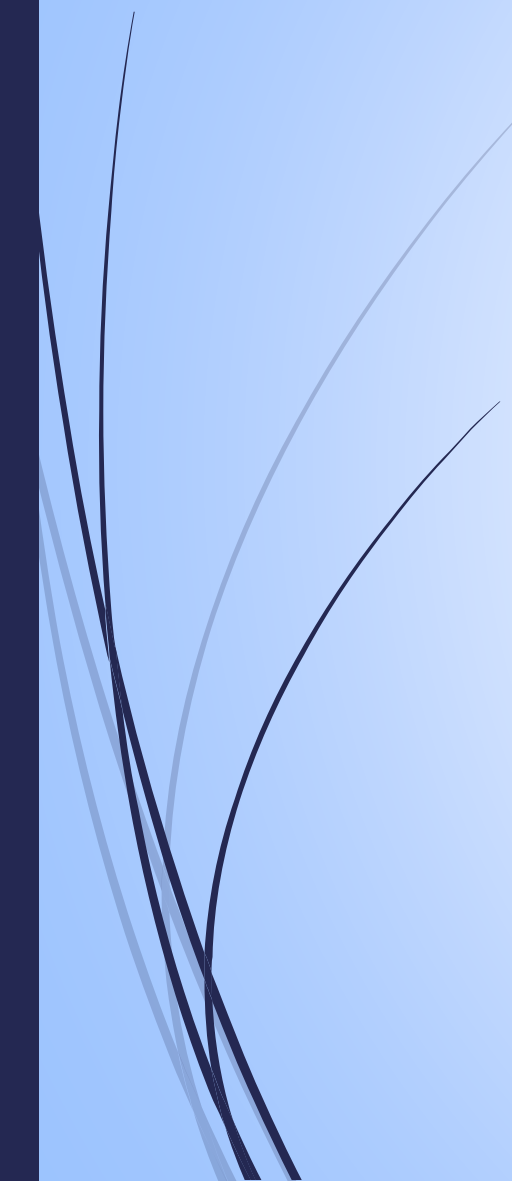
Feature-based definition (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

- A community that shares practices
- Knowledge is not passed on, but co-constructed, negotiated, reflected upon
- Example: Orr (1990) Xerox repair men
- Learning situated in the context of problem solving
- Tacit knowledge made explicit through social processes in the context of an actual problem
- Key insight: "...that knowledge, and therefore learning, were embedded in cultural practices"



Defining Communities of Practice

Process-based definition (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

- Description of the process of knowledge generation, application and reproduction
 - Reproduction of knowledge through joining and Identifying with Communities = the central and defining phenomenon within a community of practice
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Differences between concepts

Intentionality

- **'Knowledge-building community'** – intentional focus on learning and building knowledge
- **'Communities of practice'** – goal is to do jobs effectively and be comfortable within own professional identity
 - learning is incidental, instrumental aspect of that process

Source and nature of Authenticity

- **'Knowledge-building community'** – enquiry based on individual's curiosity or teacher's agenda
- **'Communities of practice'** – does not typically have a learning goal. This emerges dependent on the evolution of the community's function and role within society

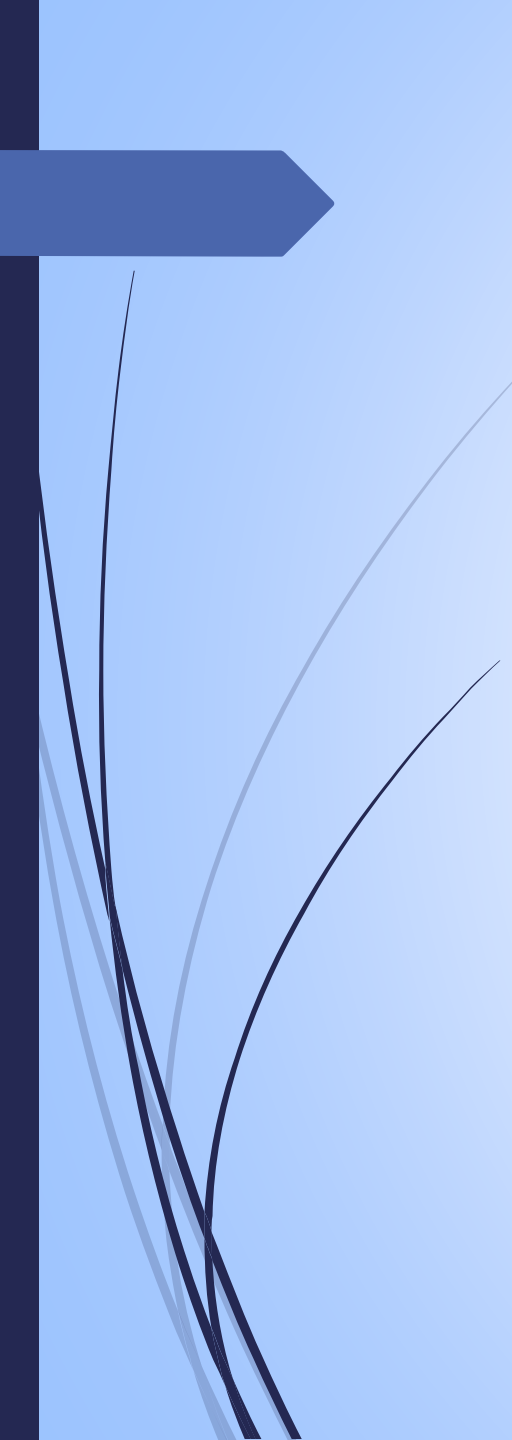


Criteria for formation of a community of practice

■ Koliba & Gajda (2009) - three criteria must be met:

1. Group comprised of members who share a common set of characteristics
e.g. similar goals, interests, expertise, roles...
2. A physical or virtual space exists for direct interaction between group members (not mediated by a third party)
e.g. formal/informal identification of physical/virtual spaces for meeting times for ongoing dialogue
This space forms the basis for a 'shared repertoire' to emerge
3. The group possesses a common domain, practice or set of practices





Understanding 'Community of Practice'

- ▶ Relational structures, mediated by and through the social construction of knowledge (Buysse et al, 2003)
- ▶ Individuals involved in a realm of relationships (Wenger 2004)
- ▶ Spaces through which 'communicative action' can take place
- ▶ Exist at intersection of intellectual and social capital: social networks serve as the foundation of knowledge creation and transfer
(Lesser & Prusak, 2000)
- ▶ CoP's valuable – contribute to development of social capital , which is a necessary condition for knowledge creation, sharing and use
(Lesser & Prusak, 2000, p.124)



CoP's: Social Learning Systems

- Competence is historically and socially defined
- Socially-defined competence is **always** in interplay with our experience
- In this interplay, learning takes place
- Novice – wants information, skills, membership
 - Novice's experience is pulled by community's competence
- Expert individuals - new experiences advances 'community's' competence
 - sharing of new knowledge alters definition of competence and deepens experience



Boundaries

- Fluid boundaries – communities of practices not always created by organizations
- Bounded – different histories, competencies, communications methods, practices etc.
- Technical languages create fluid boundaries e.g. you can learn the language of psychology

Social learning systems

- Need strong core practices and active boundary systems
- Expertise depends on a convergence between expertise and competence
- Innovative learning requires divergence



Boundaries

- Co-ordination

- Can boundary processes and objects be interpreted in a way that enables coo-ordinated action?

e.g. manufacturing an object that will incur transportation problems

- Transparency

- Do boundary processes provide access to the meanings they have in various practices?

e.g. do we understand why we have to provide certain information at a hospital ?

- Negotiability

- Do boundary process provide a one-way or two-way connection? Allows links between co-ordination and transparency

e.g. welfare teams – may be co-ordinated, but not understand each others' perspectives

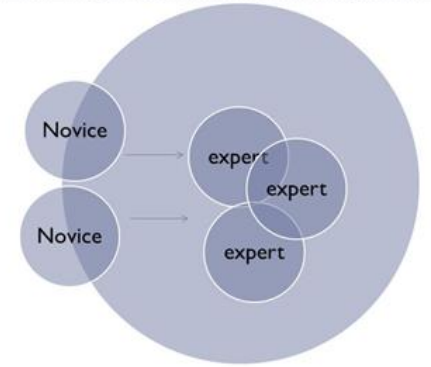
Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Lave & Wenger (1991)

► CoP's – groups in which a constant process of **legitimate peripheral participation** takes place:

- Learners enter a community of practice as a novice
- Gradually take up the group's practices
- Over time, take up more of the identity of group membership
- Become a more central member, taking up more of the central practices
- Does not rely on language/discourse – can take any form

Legitimate peripheral participation





Concept of 'communities of practice '

- Broadened since early consideration
- e.g. Moved from descriptive to prescriptive (e.g. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002)

Originally...

- Constant (1980s) – descriptor of a type of knowledge (social)
- Lave and Wenger (1991) – explanatory theory of naturally occurring processes underlying all knowledge and learning



CoP: altered concept

➤ Altered in two ways...

1. Move from conceptualising CoP as naturally occurring phenomenon to one that can be explicitly created and fostered e.g. teacher, community organiser
2. Move from anthropological and social aspects of CoP's towards a physical manifestation via external representations and explicit rules - i.e technology platforms – specific ways of fostering and supporting CoP

(e.g. Hoadley & Kilner, 2005)



Using the concept of Communities of Practice

- A means to describe and analyze the relationships between groups
 - Social Psychology and Gender Studies: identity
 - Anthropology: apprenticeship relations
- Exploration of professional and organizational behaviour, organizational change and professional development
 - e.g. political science, public administration, business management



Modes of Belonging

- Engagement:

- doing things together and learning from responses of others shapes our experience of who we are

- Imagination:

- Constructing an image of ourselves, our communities and the world allows us to reflect on our situation and consider other possibilities. 'Imagination' because we cannot interact with everyone, so imagines what could be possible

- Alignment:

- Mutual process of co-ordinating perspectives, interpretations and actions to realize goals

Identity and Belonging



Identity and Belonging

(Wenger, 2000)



- Knowing, learning and sharing knowledge are part of belonging (Eckert, 1989)
- Identification with particular communities
- We define ourselves by
 - What is familiar/foreign (discourses, practices, places, people...)
 - What we need to know/what we can ignore (assessment deadlines and requirements)
 - What we are not/what we are (learner/teacher)



Identity and Belonging (Wenger, 2000)

1. Connectedness

- An identity is not an abstract idea or a label (ethnic category, personality trait)
- It is a lived experience of belonging (or not)
- Strong identity – deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection and mutual commitment

2. Expansiveness

- A healthy identity will include multiple memberships and cross multiple boundaries
- Openness to new experiences and possibilities

3. Effectiveness

- Identity is a vehicle for participating in the social world, but can also lead to non-participation
- A healthy identity is socially empowering – not marginalising

Identity Dimensions

(Wenger, 2000)

	Connectedness	Expansiveness	Effectiveness
Engagement	Is there a community to engage with? How far back do you go? What kinds of interactions do you have? What do you do together? Do you trust and are you trusted?	Is there enough variety of contexts and identity-forming experiences? e.g. Internet access, foreign holidays	Do you have enough opportunities to develop socially-recognised competencies by participating in well-established practices? Are your communities ready to embrace your competencies into their practices?
Imagination	Do you have good conversations? Do you talk about your deepest aspirations? Do you listen well?	Can you see yourself as a member of large communities e.g. a global citizen.	Do you understand the big picture well enough to act effectively?
Alignment	Do you keep your commitments to your communities? Do you uphold their principles? Do you give and receive feedback?	Do you follow guidelines that align your actions with broader purposes, such as saving energy or recycling for the sake of the planet?	Do you know the regimes of accountability by which your ideas, actions and requests will be judged? Can you convince others of the potential of a new idea?



Identity

(Wenger, 2000)

1. Home base:

- Identity needs a place where a person can experience knowing as a form of social competence
 - The work you do in your projects, assignments, tasks do not have a social 'home' unless they can belong to a community of practice

2. Trajectories:

- Identity extends in time brings past and future in the present (your history and aspirations)
 - E.g. apprenticeship – novice-journeyman-expert. Sense of trajectory

3. Multi-membership

- Identity extends in space, across boundaries. Not unitary nor fragmented, but an intersection of many relationships
 - The experience of being a person – both one and multiple

All require communities of practice