The importance of Communities of Practice (CoPs) has now been evidenced and recognized by several authors on the one hand and by practitioners on the other, whether it be in educational contexts or in companies.

Generally speaking, one could define a CoP as a network of people sharing a common practice, which makes a CoP a very particular kind of network. As quoted from Wenger (1998), who is one of the main founders of the actual concept of CoP and also one of the most recognized authors in the area, “practice is what [people develop] to do their job and have a satisfying experience at work. … The concept of practice connotes doing, but … in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. … Such a concept of practice includes both the explicit and the tacit. … It includes the language, tools documents, images, symbols, well-defined roles, specific criteria, codified procedures, regulations and contracts …, [but also] the implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognizable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions and shared world views” (p. 47). Furthermore, “practice [is the] source of coherence of a community” (Wenger, 1998, p. 49).

The “social production a meaning” within a Community of Practice is achieved through the following three basic actions:
“negotiation of meaning, participation and reification” (Wenger, 1998, p. 49):

- “Negotiation of meaning characterizes the process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful; … it includes our social relations, … often denotes reaching an agreement between people … [and] suggests an accomplishment that requires sustained attention and readjustment” (Wenger, 1998, p. 53).
- “Participation … suggests both action and connection. … [It] describes the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises” (Wenger, 1998, p. 55).
- “Reification shapes our experiences. [It] covers a wide range of processes that include making, designing, representing, naming, encoding and describing, as well as perceiving, interpreting, using, reusing, decoding and recasting” (Wenger, 1998, p. 59).

This long citation of Wenger’s (1998) book seemed necessary to me, because it could be considered the essence of what this *Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies* is. It aims to become one of the reification support of our community of practice, as researchers, teachers, trainers, IT specialists, training managers, librarians, and so forth, all of us practitioners in Wenger’s (1998) sense, of the e-learning community. It is a place for participating in this community, sharing, making tacit explicit, discussing, and negotiating the meaning.

**LEARNING IN THE “E-LEARNING COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE”**

We all agree to say that learning is a complex multidimensional process. There have been and are still several schools of thoughts attempting to describe, explain, and represent what learning is. The discussion always is animated between all these schools of thoughts, even though the constructivist + collaborative lead seems to be one of the most popular at the moment.

It is not the purpose here to discuss what differentiates all these representations but instead to try to build upon a few key elements that could be cornerstones of our CoP: actors, activities, situations, and places.

**Actors**

The number and types of actors involved in the learning process has increased significantly since the traditional picture of a master reading a book in the classroom and students writing religiously the master’s words in their exercise books. The pedagogical team is now multidisciplinary, including different species of teachers and pedagogical support people—trainers, tutors, coaches, experts in pedagogy, psychologists, librarians, pedagogical designers, staff members; experts of the content—theories, data, representations, models, methodologies; experts of the technologies used—supports, display, transmission, broadcasting, simulations, software of any kind; learning managers—responsible for programs, institutions, accreditation committees, and so forth. Even the learners are now, fortunately, considered to be actors of the learning process. More and more often, representatives of professional communities are integrated as key elements of the learning community; either via the integra-
tion of internship, conferences in the curriculum for students in their initial education, integration of students within professional communities of practice, or, better, the embedding of practice and learning in the professional activities as in Life-Long Learning.

Regarding the actants’ side (Latour 1987) (i.e., the unanimated actors involved in the process), their nature and complexity also has dramatically increased, especially with the introduction of technologically advanced objects like computers, networks, software applications, and environments.

Activities

The time is gone when listening to the professor and taking notes in the exercise book were considered the key activities of learning and knowledge delivering the key activity of teaching. Teachers (in all their variety, as mentioned previously) are now commonly considered as facilitators in the social process of knowledge building within the learning community. Activities of the learning process are as diverse as reading a book, surfing the Web, attending a videoconferenced lecture, interacting in virtual groups, dialoguing with field experts, supporting mutually between students to achieve work, creating artifacts, doing presentations in the classroom, enriching the course textbook with quality reports and findings, sharing experience at work and producing valuable models and representations of it, formalizing work experience and classroom knowledge within frameworks of competences, and even, from time to time, listening to a professor.

As educators, we thus face a difficult question of evaluation and assessment. If learning activities are so rich, diverse, and deeply interactive, how can we evaluate the amount of learning that every participant in the learning process has acquired? If learning is so embedded in social practices, how can we evaluate the performance of our programs and courses? We probably will have to take into account competence management models that will enable us, our students, and their possible employers to better share common views.

Situations

Situations of learning include both the context and the scenario of the learning activities. The context is increasingly diverse and changing. From university classrooms to company offices, from initial training to vocational training, from continuing education to lifelong learning, from paper stuff to the World Wide Web, from local education to the global learning field, the environment within which we learn is reflecting the increasing complexity of the surrounding world. If we want to offer to learners the most valuable learning situations, we now have to think about building learning scenarios that take all the richness and diversity of the environment into account. Learners will experience the real business or the professional world, will discuss and negotiate the meaning of the information available, produce presentations of professional quality, solve real-life problems, make thoughtful dissertations, cross-assess their work, confront practitioners, create artefacts and models, and reflect upon their individual and collective learning processes.

Places

When complexity increases, we have an increasing need for landmarks. The world is becoming a small village, and at the same time, we are looking more and more for our
In regard to our teaching activities (though teaching could seem like being out of fashion at the moment), we are less and less able to design, implement, deliver, tutor, and assess our class by ourselves. We have to work in multidisciplinary teams, coordinate experts, professionals, and technical experts to help us with information technology and pedagogical experts to support us in the design of our pedagogical scenarios. We need to acquire multi-dimensional competences, not forgetting our ability to be an expert in our content field by proving our capacities in doing research and writing papers.

We have to cope with the complexification of teaching situations. If we want to stay competitive, like any good professional in the world, we have to learn and learn quickly. Coming back to Wenger (1998), we might be willing to consider his social theory of learning (see Figure 1).

Belonging to a CoP helps us to enhance the quality of our practice and to perform better in our professional environment by sharing experiences, building knowledge, and creating new meaning in our professional life.

This journal definitely is intended to be one of the places for reification within our CoP, a place to share practices, while building and enriching our identity as e-learning experts and developing our sense of belonging.

CASE STUDIES AS KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PARTICIPATION/REIFICATION DUALITY

One of the most usual ways in which we use pedagogical situations so our students can experience the flavor of real life is
to use case studies. Case studies enable learners to confront real situations, deal with real information, ask themselves real questions, and solve real problems. Then they find out that one never knows everything about a situation, that there is a lot of missing information, that people do not act as they should, that there might be unpredictable events, that no choice is the best one, that there are conflicting interests, and that the solutions are never given; one has to build them within fuzzy contexts, with bounded rationality, and with limited knowledge. Case studies enable them to take part—to participate—actively in the situation. They can engage in the world as individuals and within groups and experience the difficulties, the rewards, and the learning.

Naturally, case studies are not sufficient. It would take an infinite number of case studies to experience all the possible situations and an infinite amount of time to solve all the possible problems. Furthermore, we know that experience is only part of the job. Formalizing, modeling, representing, and abstracting also are key activities in the process of building and sharing knowledge. To quote Wenger (1998) again, “theory is neither useless nor ideal. Practice is not immune to theory, but neither is it a mere realization of theory or an incomplete approximation of it” (p. 48).

We need theories, frameworks, methodologies, and longitudinal studies. But we also need case studies—good case studies—of the kind that will help us to recognize ourselves within our community of practice, build new knowledge, enrich our learning situations and activities, build identity as e-learning actors, and help ourselves to be entrepreneurs in e-learning. We need case studies that reify the world as it is perceived, represented, experienced, and lived in our CoP.

This issue presents three different learning situations that, hopefully, will play their roles as good case studies.

- The first one intends to develop and illustrate a framework linking students performance and satisfaction to the learning environment and course delivery.
- The second one introduces the novel notion of conversational learning com-
munity in the design and implementation of Web-based courses.

• The third one is relating experience and lessons learned when working with entrepreneurs and trying to meet their needs through complex Web-based technologies and distance collaboration.

The article from the industry is presenting the market opportunities for open source software in the e-learning field. It is written by a researcher at IBM Belgium who has been involved in several European projects in e-learning. It is also a testimony of the multiple engagements of large companies like IBM (it is true not only for them, naturally) in the various threads of innovation, including the pedagogical ones.

REFERENCES


Further Reading


ENDNOTE

1 E-learning has to be taken here in its broader sense of learning activities, processes, and environments using information technology.

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