Chapter 16

Students as Communities of Non-Practice: Making the Case for the Use of Social Media in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The concept of communities of practice has been particularly influential in education, particularly in online learning, where it has been adopted enthusiastically. This also applies to social media, where often engagement in online activities is interpreted somewhat uncritically as a set of behaviours and tendencies exhibited by virtual communities of practice. The notion is that social media can facilitate formal and informal learning because they are not content-centred but people-centred, open, and participative. On the other hand if embedding social media within learning set-ups sustains communities of practice that support learning, it is important to explore how and when this happens. The chapter explores the correspondence between the key constituent components of the CoP framework and the attributes of social media that allow claims about formation/sustenance of CoPs.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of communities of practice (CoP) was first developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) to associate the idea of people organizing themselves in groups to carry out activities in professional settings and in education in a formal or informal fashion. Later on, Wenger adapted the theory to address a need for learning in professional communities (1998a; 1998b), where the focus and context of these re-interpretations was on professional learning and how people in organisations learn. The popularity of the concept across different disciplines can be attributed to its innovative aspect and its aspirational nature in how communities learn. There have been debates about the value of the construct and criticisms (Lea 2005; Hughes, Jewson & Unwin 2007), questioning its universal applicability and claiming that the construct might be a useful heuristic.
Students as Communities of Non-Practice (as an experience-based technique that can help students learn) rather than a ‘proper’ educational framework. However, the CoP theory has ignited the imagination of educators on how educational communities can be formed and sustained. It has also given rise to debates and multiple applications, where the framework was reinterpreted in the context of various disciplines with some very successful applications, for instance in the domain of knowledge management.

Re-interpretations in the context of higher education (HE) were more problematic as the framework is not directly transferable to tertiary education. The main barrier has been that the transition from formal to informal learning which is prominent in the CoP framework might not be supported very well in traditional HE institutions. This is more acute in cases where CoPs were supported by learning technologies that espoused the formal rather than the informal, within well-protected virtual learning environment (VLE) boundaries and other institutionally owned proprietary technologies.

On the other hand, the proliferation of social software and the popularity of social media sites, such as Facebook, Ning and Elgg, to name but a few, instigated interest in how to harness the success of these environments for educational purposes. Such aspirations seemed to fit very well within the parameters of the CoP framework to support student learning.

The chapter explores critically the CoP framework and its usefulness as a heuristic for supporting learning in HE and creates a correspondence between the key constituent components of the CoP framework and the attributes of social media that allow interpretations/claims about formation/sustenance of CoPs.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK OR A USEFUL HEURISTIC?

The term CoP has been used to describe groups of people who share concerns, problems, and passions about a topic, and who choose through membership to the community to deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis (Wenger et al., 2002).

CoPs have members of variable expertise that can be simultaneously present, participating in a fluid peripheral to centre movement that symbolises the progression from being a novice to becoming an expert. The assumption is that there is a transition from peripheral participation for the novices to acquire full membership of the community. Lave and Wenger (1991) named this ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, which they characterize as an enculturation process. Learning occurs through the legitimate peripheral participation, by which new learners become part of a community of practice by ‘travelling’ between boundaries and thereby acquire that particular community’s subjective viewpoint and learn to speak its language (Brown and Duguid, 1991: 48). There seem to be three main conditions for the formation of a CoP, i.e.: a shared repertoire, mutual endeavour and expert-novice interaction.

The theory drew extensively from the situated cognition debate (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989). The idea of ‘situated learning’ where situations…co-produce knowledge through activity, given that learning and cognition are fundamentally situated (ibid.) also becomes the mode of engagement with the CoP. Interactions in the community are characterised by engaging with authentic tasks and communication (Johnson, 2001: 45).

In addition, the implication was that similar communities could be created in post-compulsory education. The assumptions for these CoPs were:
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