Letting Go and Letting the Angels Grow: Using Etienne Wenger’s Community of Practice Theory to Facilitate Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a small-scale qualitative research study conducted within a community of English Language teachers, and explores how teacher development workshops can be used to foster or cultivate Communities of Practice. The study was situated in a Language Centre within the domain of UK Higher Education where there was an institutional drive to better integrate the use of new technologies with traditional approaches to pedagogy. Data was collected through focus group sessions with a team of English Language teachers before, during and after a series of teacher development workshops on the use of technology in the English for Academic Purposes classroom. These focus group sessions were then followed up with individual interviews, drawing on a framework of stimulated recall. The data was then analysed through an established discourse analysis framework in the early stages, followed by a more inductive approach of thematic analysis in the later stages; triangulated by classroom observations of all participants. The purpose of the paper is to understand the functioning of a Community of Practice in terms of its contribution to teacher development. The core argument within this paper is that Communities of Practice theory can contribute much to the fields of EAP (English for Academic Purposes), and teacher development in both theoretical and practical terms. It advocates a loosening of the reins on the part of organisations so that teachers are allowed to develop at their own pace and in a manner that is self-directed and tailored to their individual needs. It draws on Vygotskian-based theories of teacher cognition which suggest that in order for development to occur in a teacher education programme, participants need some form of prompting to move from within their “zone of proximal development” (Manning & Payne, 1993, p. 361). This prompting or scaffolding, as described in Vygotsky’s own work (1934), generally takes place through a combination of support from more experienced practitioners in the first instance and then “situated engagement and negotiation” with peers and practitioners within a teaching community (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998, pp. 715-733).

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Educational Technology, Focus Group Research, Teacher Development, Teacher Experience With Technology, Teachers’ Voices, Vygotsky

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INTRODUCTION

The title of the paper comes from a quote within an American film telling the story of a military veteran coming to terms with his life after involvement in the Vietnam war, after which he suffers a series of flashbacks affecting his perception of reality. This film, entitled Jacob’s Ladder, takes as one of its central analogies a quote and an idea that the only way to be free of your fears is to let go and set them free to become a positive force in your life. The original quotation and idea, which featured a metaphor of ‘demons’ changing to ‘angels’ according to Greeley (1991), comes from the thirteenth century Christian theologian Meister Johannes Eckhart. In the film, Jacob, the central character, only makes sense of his life when he has finally released the demons from his system.

Similarly, in developing a Community of Practice, the trainer or educator must let go of the reins and allow the creation to evolve in its own way, in its own direction, and at its own pace so that it can achieve a life of its own. In order to do this we must harness all forms of energy that technology awakens, and accept, then deal with both the positive and negative affordances that it brings to traditional education. Teachers, as in most professions, cannot learn in isolation even if the classroom can seem an isolated place (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998, p. 716) where those in control of it feel they are “supposed to know it all” (ibid).

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Though Samaras & Gismondi (1998, p. 716) argue that many teachers find themselves in a “lone ranger” role, Etienne Wenger (1998, p.6) has stated that we all belong to communities of practice in both our personal and professional lives. Although the dichotomy of roles could be seen as contemporarily blurred, particularly in light of the demands of today’s society and our 24/7 accessibility, communities of practice are an integral part of life both in the workplace and outside. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) describe communities of practice as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.” These overlapping communities of practice are described in more detail in Schlager & Fusco (2003, p. 208) as part of their broader Activity Theory Framework (pp, 208-211) which “focuses on the activities in which individuals and groups engage” (ibid, p. 208). This form of engagement, which becomes the glue holding together a community of practice, comes about because “activities take place in the context of, and are influenced by, a surrounding community” (ibid).

Wenger (1998, pp. 125-126) emphasises this theme of engagement by defining a community of practice as “a group that coheres through ‘mutual engagement’ on an ‘indigenous’ (or appropriated) enterprise and creating a common repertoire.” Guldberg and Mackness (2009, p. 3) state that “at this time, the negotiation of individual identity in communities of practice was central to Wenger’s thinking about communities of practice.” This sense of the importance of individual identity within a community of practice is further echoed in the work of Darling-Hammond & Richardson (2009) in the context of teacher professional development. Yet, when ideas about communities of practice first emerged, the emphasis appeared to have been centred on the group rather than the individual.

In the earlier stages of his work, Wenger (2000) sought to define communities of practice in quite straightforward terms as being “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise”. Essentially, in the words of Rogers (2000, p. 385), the core feature of a Community of Practice is that the actual “practice serves to bring coherence in a community.” This sense of practice being at the heart of a community is nothing new as admitted in Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002, p. 40) in which the authors outline how communities of practice have existed since ancient times up to the present day, using the artisans of Ancient Greece and
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