On the Definition and Impact of Virtual Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the Internet has made several Communities of Practice to go online and has brought into life numerous Virtual Communities of Practice. The purpose of this article is: to define and categorize Virtual Communities of Practice; to examine their social impact in general and specifically in knowledge and technology management; also, to examine the contribution of Communities of Practice to informal learning and to relate them to Connectivism and collaborative learning. Several case studies are presented to clarify the presentation. It is expected that Virtual Communities of Practice will play an important role in both learning theory and practice as well as knowledge management during the years to come.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Connectivism, Knowledge Management, Social Capital, Social Learning, Technology Management, Virtual Community of Practice

INTRODUCTION

Since the invention of the WWW, the Internet started changing everyday life in the Western World. The Web and ICT (information and communication technology) have given rise to new and flexible means of communication and interaction, which have affected traditional Communities of Practice (CoPs) in at least two ways: a) by transforming traditional CoPs into hybrid CoPs; b) by enabling the creation of new, purely virtual CoPs (VCoPs).

It has been stated that CoPs and consequently VCoPs are in fact learning communities. Thus, two of their most important applications are in knowledge management and informal learning.

VCoPs are based on Communities of Practice as well as Virtual Communities, and have inherited from both. Therefore, the purpose of this article is:

- To introduce Communities of Practice and Virtual Communities;
- To study the creation of Virtual CoPs and the transformation of CoPs to VCoPs;
- To define VCoPs, categorize them and present case studies;
- To discuss about the social capital of CoPs and VCoPs;
- To tackle the social impact of VCoPs;
- To examine some recent trends in knowledge and technology management, related to VCoPs;
- To study the contribution of VCoPs to informal learning;

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• To display the relationship between VCoPs and Connectivism.

The methodology is as follows: initially there is a literature review. Next we proceed to a definition of VCoPs and some important criteria for categorizing VCoPs, through case studies and discussion. Next we examine the application of VCoPs to knowledge and technology management through a case study. Next we examine the relationship between VCoPs and Connectivism. Finally we present some conclusions and issues for further research.

DEFINING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (COPS)

Towards a Definition

The word ‘community’ has a lot of meanings. The most relevant to our study, are: 1. A group of people living in the same locality and under the same administration or management. 2. A group of people having common interests. 3. A group of people having similarity or common identity. 4. Sharing, participation, and fellowship (source: the American Heritage Dictionary).

There are many definitions for Communities of Practice (abbreviated henceforth as CoPs). The term was introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991, who used it in relation to ‘situated learning’, as part of an attempt to “rethink learning” at the Institute for Research on Learning (Wikipedia: Community of practice, 2006; Pemberton-Billing et al., 2006). In 1998, Wenger extended the concept to other contexts, including organizational settings. According to Etienne Wenger, Communities of Practice are groups of individuals who share a common practice, experiencing and continuously creating their shared identity through engaging in and contributing to the activities of their communities, as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2006). Face-to-face frequent interaction is essential for making a community of practice.

Examples of Communities of Practice include: a group of programmers working on the next version of a Linux distribution, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of high school teachers discussing ways to cope with unruly students during breaks, etc.

Hildreth, Kimble & Wright quote the following definition from Manville & Foote (1996): CoPs are “a group of professionals informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge” (in Hildreth et al., 2000, p.29). CoPs have therefore been closely related to “the process of social learning, occurring when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem, collaborate over an extended period and share ideas in order to find solutions and build innovations” (Wikipedia: Community of practice, 2006).

According to Davenport (2001), CoPs are flexible groups of professionals which unite unofficially in order to serve their common practice and interests, interact through mutually dependent tasks, driven by a common goal. Their members share a common professional experience, therefore speaking ‘the same language’. People with similar practices and sources develop like identities. Thus, these teams have a feeling of community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These practices allow people to form social networks through which the knowledge is diffused, cultivated and easily assimilated. Acquisition of knowledge comes as a result of apprenticeship; as new members join the team, interact and associate with the old members, they gain practical knowledge. Communities of practice are in fact a special form of social networks.

It has been supported (Ackerlauer & Heiss, 2006; Lesser & Prusak, 1999) that communities of practice are valuable to organizations because they contribute to the development of social capital, which in turn is a necessary condition for knowledge creation, sharing and use (Andreatos, 2007a). A neat definition of social capital, given by Nahapiet & Ghoshal...
Relevant Intra-Actions in Networked Environments
www.igi-global.com/chapter/relevant-intra-actions-networked-environments/29167?camid=4v1a