Chapter 19
The Critical and Historical View in Communities of Practice (CoP) for the Development in Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter describes the training course for school managers for the use of information and communication technology (ICT) that was developed at Sao Paulo Pontifical Catholic University, (PUC-SP), Brazil. This was a blended course, using face-to-face and online activities, providing school managers with the experience of using ICT to share experiences, and to learn about effective ways of using ICT for school management. Even though the school managers had no previous experience with technology they succeed in changing their working reality and understanding the use of ICT to interact, exchange documents and organize their ideas. This experience has produced two other important results. One is the interaction that enables the formation of collaborative networks and partnership among school managers. Social and cultural practices were considered for analysis concerning the subjects that contributed to the creation of the ICT culture in the school. The authors have considered this network and the building of this community as the seed of a community of practice (CoP), as proposed by Wenger (1998a). Second, it was possible to see a close relationship between Wenger’s theory and Freire’s (2003) educational approach, which showed that social transformations are constructed on the basis of participants’ will and in the presence of leadership in a historic moment.

INTRODUCTION

The development of virtual communities as part of the learning process starts to gain momentum after the publication of the studies conducted by Etienne Wenger (1998a) on communities of practice (CoP). The creation of these communities has been facilitated by the dissemination of information and communication technologies (ICT) and, in particu-
lar, by the increased number of online courses offered. These technologies have enabled learners to interact, exchange ideas and experiences and reflect on the contribution that each individual brings to the community and, as a result, provide the possibility of reconsidering their experience and build new knowledge.

As noted by Wenger, besides the way how groups of people and learning are formed, the communities of practice (CoP) are defined according to three dimensions: the institutional, the functional and the dialogic. The first dimension relates to how the institution is understood by professionals and how they continuously renegotiate their daily practices so that they can solve problems, make decisions and generate information related to the institution to be later conveyed to those working in the institution. The second one addresses how the pedagogical and administrative practices related to their social aspects are shared (Wenger, 1998a; Wenger, 1998b). The third is related to how the shared repertoire of routines, responsibilities, vocabulary, styles and technological resources is set up (Wenger, 1998a).

These three dimensions of the communities of practice greatly resonate with the work developed by Paulo Freire in relation to the school as an institution. Freire points out that learning is a social phenomenon and that it is connected to experience, history, and daily practice, as a creative act intended to gain a critical understanding of the social practice and as a contributor to the learning process, both collective and that used for the purposes of action (Freire, 1981).

Thus, this work attempts to use the ideas of communities of practice (CoP) developed by Wenger in an educational context, related to the training of school managers via an online course. Although this course relies on Freire’s educational principles as its theoretical basis, it seeks to create conditions so that those managers may engage in activities that can be regarded as the seeds of a community of practice (CoP). With that, in addition to showing how the course supports the development of this community, the chapter also aims to establish the connections between Wenger’s and Freire’s views.

This chapter presents an overview of the relationship between Wenger’s ideas on the communities of practice and how these ideas relate to Freire’s educational tenets. The chapter also describes the manager training delivered and its results, in addition to how a community came to be formed although this outcome had not been previously foreseen.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WENGER’S AND FREIRE’S IDEAS

The work of Wenger (1998a) shows that the construction of an active and successful community depends on a person or a core group that assumes the responsibility for the development of the community. As self-organizable systems, the communities of practice (CoP) bring about collective learning and the professional qualification of its members, according to the interests of the institution and the will of the participants.

On the other hand, one of the aspects that differentiate the communities of practice (CoP) is how the connection is made because interest and geography for their own sake are not enough to gather people together. The important thing is working with shared practices and that such practices are accepted willingly. In this regard, Freire’s work can greatly contribute because it shows that social transformations come about based on the will of the participants and on the presence of leadership in a proper critical and historical moment (Freire, 2003). This willingness can be that of helping yourself and helping the institution solve its problems, a historic opportunity and a social meaning which justifies the time spent and the intimacy with the events, or the contradictions found in the context (Freire, 2003).

Moreover, as noted Freire, learning is subject to political and social purposes (Freire, 2003). The