Reifying, Participating and Learning:
Analysis of Uses of Reification Tools by a Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents observations and analysis of an activity of reification of professional practices within a community of practice. A case is examined of a distance community of tutors using a semantic Wiki for formalising their practices and a tool for storing and classifying documents. On the basis of the instrumental genesis theory, the author highlights the process of appropriation of the tools by the community of practice. This community participated in the development and conception of uses for the tools through a research and development project based on participatory design. This appropriation process, even if it did not occur to the expected extent, did nonetheless allow the community’s members to develop their representations regarding the reification of their practices and, gradually, to elaborate broader uses of the tools.

Keywords: Community of Practice, Folksonomy, Instrumental Genesis, Ontology, Participatory Design, Semantic Annotation, Teachers Learning, Tutor, Wiki

THE REIFICATION OF PRACTICES WITHIN A COP

The notion of community of practice (CoP) has been widely used and annotated since Étienne Wenger’s book “Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity” (Wenger, 1998). A CoP is a group of professionals who share the same interest in a specific professional domain. They meet regularly, either face-to-face or at a distance. They share daily practices, gather useful resources and develop new ways to consider or understand their profession. Through their activities they formalise their tacit knowledge, discuss and debate various issues and develop professionally. According to Wenger (1998), learning in CoP occurs through the active participation of members and socialization in meaningful activities. More precisely, Wenger refers to the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in order to highlight four processes central to the learning process of professionals who participate in CoPs:

* The active participation of members, their involvement as professionals with

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skills and knowledge to share and as individuals;
- The reification of knowledge and practice that often remain tacit for experienced professionals;
- The negotiation of meaning that is in interaction with the two first processes and aims to produce a common definition of what the practices are and how they are implemented by CoP members in their daily professional activity;
- The development of identity processes as a consequence of the three previous processes and related to how the “borders” of the community are defined, as well as its members’ practice and the collective and individual professional identity of the members.

Observing reification, we see it is a process which is considered to be an important vehicle for learning and professional development (Wenger, 1998). “I will use the concept of reification very generally to refer to the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into “thingness”. […] I would claim that the process of reification so construed is central to every practice. Any community of practice produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form” (Wenger, 1998, pp. 58-59).

Taking personal notes, writing an account of a meeting, developing instructions for use for colleagues, etc, are forms of reification which make concrete knowledge or practices that often remain tacit or individual. Once this knowledge is “objectified”, made concrete and formal, it can be discussed, modified or evaluated. Through reification (and the active involvement of members in discussions), a CoP can negotiate the meaning of its professional practice and hence develop it. This process allows professional practice to continue while paving the way for discussions and the negotiation of meaning. In some way, the shared objects constitute the realization of an experienced world in which the social process of understanding each other “allows negotiating common definitions of the situation” (Habermas, 1987, p. 153). The interaction between reification, participation and negotiation of meaning is important for avoiding “crystallisation” of knowledge and practice. If the meaning of a reified object is not discussed and debated, it may become useless or be elevated to a dogma. That is why Wenger (1998, p. 65) does not consider reified objects as culminations but rather as “boundary objects”: “If reification prevails – if everything is reified, but with little opportunity for shared experience and interactive negotiation – then there may not be enough overlap in participation to recover a coordinated, relevant, or generative meaning”. The reified objects are not created for themselves but in order to support CoP members throughout their search for meaning in their professional practice.

In addition, it is probably futile to seek to reify everything in a CoP: practices, knowledge, procedures, activities, rules, etc. (Wenger, 1998). Only some aspects of professional practice can be made explicit through reification however participation makes it possible to give these aspects a particular meaning by preserving their specific context, which often remains more tacit.

Other models centred on knowledge management tackle the reification process from a different point of view but always insist on the significance of socialization of professional communities’ members not only in order to formalise tacit knowledge but also (and mainly) to transfer and improve individual knowledge (CEFRIO, 2005; Gourlay, 2006; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), socialization is the transfer of tacit knowledge between two or more people. In a CoP, reification as a process is hence inseparable from the participation and social commitment of members. All of these processes interact and lead to the creation of a ‘social space’ that defines the location in which sharing and interaction occur. The more this space is managed in a positive and strong way, the more it is able to become a place of
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