Chapter 4
Communities of Practice from a Phenomenological Stance: Lessons Learned for IS Design

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contributes to the debate about the concept of community of practice considering the latter as a means for understanding the behavior of the people using in their practice artifacts and sharing spaces. The experience they share makes them a community and, when the space they share is a workspace, a community of practice. The unusual way through which one reaches a community of practice, and its being, first, a community, and second, a community of practice, makes it very important to understand what characterizes communities.

Community (Gemeinschaft in German) has emerged as a relevant concept for understanding the social dimension of human life, at the end of nineteenth century, when in a famous book by Ferdinand Toennies (1925), it was opposed to society (Gesellschaft in German). The debate that accompanied and followed Toennies’ book at the beginning of the twentieth century opposed the irrationality of communities (where no utility value justifies membership) to the rational principle sustaining societies (that are ruled in order to balance costs and benefits of all members). More recently, the concept of community has been again at the center of philosophical debate after its deconstruction by Jean Luc Nancy: it is, therefore, interesting to situate the concept of community of practice within it. What emerges from this analysis offers to designers of ICT-based applications, such as information systems, knowledge management systems, etc., some new hints on the nature of those systems.

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INTRODUCTION

Probably because of its special position among scientific disciplines, between natural and human sciences, informatics has paid a particular attention to philosophy and to its discourse; it has also raised the attention of philosophy, beyond its specialized branch, philosophy of science. This mutual interest has been alive and controversial, generating, on the one hand, sharp discussions with inflamed tones, and on the other, attention and curiosity.

The history of the relationship between informatics and philosophy, that began with the origin of computer science, in the forties, in the multi-disciplinary environment of the Macy conferences on Cybernetics (Heims, 1980, 1991, 1993), is today rich with contributions and merits a specific attention, going beyond the scope of this chapter. I recall it because, when I began to pay attention to philosophy, as a computer scientist committed to design systems empowering human beings in facing the complexity of their (professional) lives, I discovered that other scholars were looking for inspiration and concepts in the European philosophy of the twentieth century. In particular, I was influenced by Understanding Computer and Cognition by Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores (1986), whose work in Computer Science was close to the one of my group and with whom I initiated a scientific friendship. Quickly my attention was focusing on the issue of design: what are the things we build when we design computer based applications, and how can we shape them in such a way that they are capable to give answers to human needs and desires? This work, bringing me to contribute to the birth of interaction design as a new discipline, led to several texts, including: Aperto, Molteplice, Continuo (1998), a book in Italian whose subtitle is (my translation) ‘Artifacts at the End of the Twentieth Century’; ‘The Phenomenological Stance of the Designer’ (2009), my contribution to the book Revisiting Digital Bauhaus (Binder, Loewgren, Marlborg, 2008); and my coauthorship of Design Things (Telier, 2011), the book where I am one of the authors collected under the pseudonym of A. Telier.

In these texts, the focus is on design, from both the point of view of how we do design and what is its outcome. I adopted a ‘phenomenological stance’ showing how such a viewpoint allows one to go beyond the traditional idea of design as a practice, to capture its complex social nature. In all those texts, the social dimension of design is preeminent, but the social context of design is not discussed directly. This chapter wants to open, for me, this field of study, looking at the concept of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Makoto Su, et al., 2011) as the means for understanding the behavior of the people using artifacts and sharing spaces. With reference to my interest on design, they are those who may be interested in what designers are doing. Design, as the practice through which something new is brought to existence, has several stakeholders, beyond its customers: the people whose space will be modified by the designed thing, the people whose potential for action will be affected by it, the people whose future may be changed by it, etc., and all these people have different interests and viewpoints with respect to the designed things. As a consequence, designers must be able to find a way through them, so that what they design is acceptable and sustainable by all of them. Even if it appears counter-intuitive, it is not a matter of negotiation, since the stakeholders of a design process share a space and the experience of living there together. The experience they share makes them a community and, when the space they share is a workspace, a community of practice. It is somehow unusual looking at communities of practice from the viewpoint of design, but, as a community, a community of practice shares a space that is impacted and transformed by the deployment of the outcome of a design process. The unusual way through which we reach a community of practice, and its being, first, a community, and