

Literature Review: Communities of Practice

by
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Abstract:

In this paper, the author examines the role of *communities of practice* and its importance in establishing effective educational leadership. The history of *communities of practice* is examined, the extant literature is reviewed, and recommendations for practice are presented.

About the Author

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Educational leaders have become increasingly aware of the critical role communities of practice play in their efforts to provide effective leadership. What does the concept *communities of practice* mean and why do we need to understand its impact on our teachers and schools? The notion of communities of practice was first used by researchers to describe the way meaning was negotiated and reflected upon within the practices of specific occupational groups such as architects, journalists, physicians, and performing artists (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1998) defines communities of practice as a matter of sustaining

enough mutual engagement of an enterprise together in order to share some significant learning (p. 86). Therefore, communities of practice could be referred to as a group of people with a specific relationship that results in shared histories and perspectives of learning.

Framing the Review

One of leadership's critical challenges involves envisioning communities of practice as a place where learning, adaptation, innovation, and effective change are essential and accessible elements of the culture. This literature review addresses the following community of practice themes that emerged from the literature: historical perspectives, terminology, knowledge frameworks, school culture, schools as communities, and communities of practice.

The Story and the Notion of Communities of Practice

The term *communities of practice* has its origins in the study of cultures. In the field of anthropology, the term *culture* has been used to explain the differences among the life patterns of tribes, societies, and national or ethnic groups. According to Morgan (1997), culture as a modern concept is used in the anthropological and social sciences to refer broadly to civilization and social heritage. Essentially, the concept of culture helps to understand various cultural patterns—what they are, how they came to be, and how they affect group and individual performance.

The Story of Its Origins

Anthropologists first developed the concept of culture to explain life pattern differences of human behaviors across human groups. Then, later on social scientists applied their understanding of the concept of culture to the various processes involved with predicting and describing patterns of group behavior and thought within groups. In essence, a group's culture is

its pattern of *shared or taken-for-granted* basic assumptions that are manifested through observable artifacts and their share or espoused values, norms, and rules of behavior (Schein, 1992). In order to understand a group's culture, it is important to get at its shared basic assumptions and understandings about the learning processes of the community of practice as they occur in classrooms and schools.

The existence of communities of practice, sometimes referred to as *learning communities*, emerges from a common desire among its members to improve existing practices through providing opportunities for collaborative reflection and inquiry through dialogue and discourse. Ultimately, communities of practice develop common tools, language, images, roles, assumptions, understandings, meanings, and shared perceptions (Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Marshall & Hatcher, 1996; Rogoff, 1994; Stamps, 1997; Westheimer & Kahne, 1993). In his seminal research on communities of practice, Wenger (1998) describes communities of practice as presenting a theory of learning that starts with the assumption that engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are.

Terminology

As human beings and members of cultures and communities, we are engaged in interactions and relationships with each other and the world as we adjust our actions and relations with each other accordingly. In other words, we are engaged in the process of learning as a culture and as a community. As a result, the collective learning results in practices that reflect the results of our actions and relations. Therefore, the literature refers to these kinds of collective learning communities as *communities of practice*.

First, in addressing the meaning of the term culture, although various definitions in the literature address the relationship between culture and communities, the widely accepted and recognized definition of *culture* is attributed to Schein (1992):

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 12)

A more informal definition by Bower (1996) is *the way we do things around here*. Others define culture as a web of significance in which we are all suspended (Geertz, 1973) and the shared beliefs and values that closely knit a community together (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

Culture is both a product and a process, according to Bolman and Deal (1997). As a product, it embodies the accumulated wisdom of those who were members before we came; as a process, it is continually renewed and recreated as new members are taught the old ways. Furthermore, they indicate that every culture develops distinctive symbolic forms—myths, fairy tales, stories, rituals, and ceremonies—many of which are unconscious or taken for granted. Those who understand symbolic forms and activities encourage their use in helping to shape an effective organizational or community culture.

Secondly, the concept of communities of practice includes two terms, practice and communities. The concept of practice refers to action, not just action in and of itself. It is action in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do. In this sense, practice is always social practice. Wenger (1998) explains that it includes the explicit (what is said and what is left unsaid) and the tacit (what is represented and what is assumed) social elements of practice (p. 47). Therefore, the concept of practice includes the social and negotiated elements of both the explicit and tacit issues in communities of practice. The concept of community refers to the idea of the source of coherence of a community. Wenger (1998) uses

the following dimensions in explaining this relationship between community and practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire of ways of doing things.

Furthermore, Wenger (1998) defines the combined term “communities of practice” as sustaining enough mutual engagement in pursuing an enterprise together to share some significant learning. These communities can be thought of as shared histories of learning (e.g., persona/collective experience, set of artifacts) that come together in a combination of participation and reification that intertwines over time by continually converging and diverging.

Knowledge Frameworks

The knowledge frameworks for communities of practice include the theory base and conceptual ideas about its three critical elements: culture, school culture, and communities. Even though there maybe discrepancies between these elements, our communities of practice are those places where we develop, negotiate, and share through what we say and do, what we aspire to and settle for, and what we know and can manifest (Wenger, 1998, p. 48). In essence, the relationship between theory and what actually occurs in communities of practice is always complex and interactive.

Culture

The theoretical concept of culture is important because it shapes the different ways we recognize and react to events (Bolman & Deal, 1999). Cultural patterns are enduring, impacting our performance through the ways people think, behave, feel, and relate. The energy and spirit of the organization, as well as its performance, are expressed in the culture as it flows through the organization in the forms of myths, rituals, customs, symbols, beliefs, and heroes that hold the organization together in dynamic and complex webs of connections. This is especially true

in our schools where educators are shaping how people experience that culture and its meaning in their lives through community.

School Culture

The idea of schools having culture is not a new concept. Waller (1932) referred to schools as having a culture that is definitely their own where there are complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, irrational sanctions, and a moral code based upon them. The school members are taken as a collective culture with their rituals, climate, values, and behavior bound together into a coherent whole (Schein, 1992). Schools cultures are complex, dynamic webs that may be perceived as collectively shared, but these cultures may also be perceived as perpetually mediated and negotiated by the individual members and the subcultures.

School culture affects every part of the community (Deal & Peterson, 1999) from what the faculty and staff talk about, to the type of instruction that is valued, to the way professional development is viewed, as well as the importance of learning for all students. Therefore, the functions of the impact of school culture are (a) fostering school effectiveness and productivity; (b) improving collegial and collaborative activity that develops better communication and problem-solving practices; (c) succeeding with change and improvement efforts; (d) building commitment; (e) amplifying the energy, motivation, and vitality of school staff, students, and community; and (f) increasing the focus of daily behavior and attention on what is important and valued.

These views of school culture fail to account for the various subgroupings within the whole. An organization or community can be viewed as differentiated by these subgroupings—identified by function (student, teacher, staff, administrator), race, gender, ethnicity, and

immigrant status (Bates, 1987; Frost, Moore, Louis, Lundberg, & Martin, 1991; Martin, 1992). There are shared networks of overlapping and nested subgroupings within the organization (Meyerson & Martin, 1987) who are subject to change depending on the problems, issues, and players who choose to be involved. Therefore, school culture includes those subcultures that might reify or oppose the dominant culture, due to their influence on what occurs in the school as a community.

Schools as Community

Growing evidence in the literature addresses our understanding of how organizations in schools can be understood as a community and as a cultural phenomenon. For instance, in recent years Sergiovanni (1992, 1994) has challenged scholars in the field of education to rethink their theoretical base by arguing against the metaphor of choice [being] organizations. He believes that educational scholars have primarily drawn from the organizational development framework in shaping their beliefs about schools (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Collins & Porras, 1997; Morgan, 1997). Organizational researchers tend to emphasize the economic orientation regarding management concerns—quality, productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness. In contrast, Sergiovanni theorizes that the connection to people is about purposes and the connections among people in schools are not based on contracts but on commitments.

Therefore, Sergiovanni (1994) recommends the metaphor of *school as community* in suggesting that schools be thought of as:

Collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bound to a set of shared ideas and ideals...members [that are] part of a tightly knit web of meaningful relationships, [sharing] a common place and [who] over time come to share common sentiments and traditions that are sustaining. (p. 218)

He maintains that life in a school as community differs from that of school as organization as follows: in communities we create our social lives with others who have intentions similar to

ours, whereas in organizations relationships are constructed for us by others and become codified into a system of hierarchies, roles, and role expectations (p. 4).

He further indicates that the term school as community will create new understandings about how people come together, how a sense of belonging is valued, and how the role of leadership might be viewed differently. First, the notion of community suggests that school members are connected in special ways with shared values and ideas. Second, school as community compensates for a loss of a sense of belonging. Third, changing from school as organization to school as community affects how we understand leadership in schools. Fourth, this new metaphor provides a useful perspective for understanding recent school reforms. Finally, school as community affirms the emphasis placed on an ethic of caring (Beck, 1992; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Palmer, 1998; Noddings, 1992). Sergiovani emphasizes that the complex nature of school as a social organization and the various organizational development theories have not adequately described school organizations in that schools as communities connect people to purposes and commitments. In essence, schools as communities are socially organized around relationships and the felt interdependencies that nurture them.

Communities of Practice

St. Clair (1998) describes community as a form of relationships between people rather than a collection of things. Since many communities are created around common interests and bonds, the viewpoint of relationship as the interaction among community through discourse is critical to our understanding of community. Central to the idea of schools as communities is the notion that teaching and learning are social activities where people learn from doing, developing a shared sense of what has to happen to get things done, as well as evolving a common way of

thinking and talking about their practice. Therefore, as a *community of practice* they come to share a sort of mutual identity—a single understanding of who they are and what their relationship is to the larger school as community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In essence, the core principles of communities of practice are simple: learning is socially occurring in communities, and learning happens as close to practice as possible.

Learning in this context is understood through the analysis of participation that is situated within the activities of the community of practice. This effectively shifts the unit of analysis from one of knowledge construction (what is being learned) to an ontological emphasis on identity as relational (who we are). Therefore, this perspective of learning is an ontological transformation, not an epistemological effect (Hodges, 1996). What emerges as essential is the quality of a person's participation within the community of practice and less about the content of the knowledge.

The quality of legitimate participation evokes a sense of belonging, an identification process that occurs as a member of a community of practice. The form that the legitimacy of participation takes is a defining characteristic of the ways of belonging, and is therefore not only a crucial condition for learning, but an effective element of its content (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Belonging is about engaging as a member of a vast and complex set of relationships that are transformed, rearranged, produced, and reproduced through the community of practice. Whereas membership is not just about belonging to a community, it is an ongoing process of shifting locations and transitional participation that increases possibilities of fulfillment over time through identifying with the community of practice. The desire for ongoing membership and belonging further shapes and is shaped by the quality of participation in the community of practice.

The *culture* of communities of practice involves participation as a way of learning through absorbing and being absorbed in the process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For example, an apprentice or new teacher gradually acquires a general idea of what constitutes the practice of a community in a school. This may include who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, work, and generally conduct themselves; how people who are not apart of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners. In addition, there are models and products such as master teachers, finished products, and those more advanced who are in the process of becoming full practitioners. Various viewpoints for understanding the practice evolve through participants changing involvement in assigned activities, changing relations to ongoing community practices, and changing social relationships in the community. Therefore, the cultural where learning is taking place includes issues of access and transparency of the cultural artifacts in that environment.

The elements of control, selection, and the need for access are inherent in communities of practice. These elements act as tools of mediation between the community's practices, the processes of identification with the community's practices, and the way of organizing activities that makes their meaning visible. In addition, Wenger (1998) identifies the elements of negotiating meaning that include engagement in action, interpersonal relations, and shared repertoire of knowledge. First, mutual engagement means the participation and reification that is seamlessly interwoven in participant's practice. Second, interpersonal relations element refers to joint enterprises that create relationships of mutual accountability without ever being reified, discussed, or stated. Third, the shared repertoire or histories of engagement are those resources for negotiating meaning without constant need to compare notes. Wenger concludes that the key

to real transformational affecting people's lives is the influence of forces understood a mediated by communities in which their meaning and identity is negotiated in practice.

To become a full member of a community of practice, newcomers must have access to a wide range of ongoing activities, old-timers, and other members of the community as well as information, resources, and opportunities for participation. Becoming a full participant includes engaging with the artifacts of everyday practice, as well as participating in the social relations, production processes, and other activities. Knowledge within the community of practice and ways of perceiving and manipulating objects characteristic to that specific community are encoded in artifacts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In terms of the epistemological role of artifacts within the context of the social organization of knowledge, the notion about the transparency of the inner workings of an artifact involves the process of access to the culture of the organization as well as to all forms of access to the practice. The term *transparency* refers to the way in which using artifacts and understanding their significance interact to become one learning process.

In summary, communities of practice have histories and developmental cycles. They reproduce themselves by transforming newcomers into old-timers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This transforming process involves newcomers becoming integral to the community of practice through accessing the following: *knowing* what is inherent in the growth and transformation process; meaning that is located in the relationships among practitioners, their practice, the artifacts of that practice; and the social organization and political economy of communities of practice.

Conclusions

The nature of efficient communities of practice involves providing practitioners with the following opportunities: (a) managing their own action research and problem solving through effective planning, organizing, monitoring, and revising their practice; (b) working collaboratively and access the distributed expertise to allow diversity, creativity, and flexibility in their community; (c) identifying their own issues and relevant resources; (d) accessing technology to build their own knowledge base and frameworks; and (e) making artifacts visible for the sustainability of the culture.

Given these elements of the nature of communities of practice, it is essential for the community to declare its outcomes and norms in order for it to succeed. This needs to be done collaboratively so all practitioners, newcomers to old-timers, have the opportunity to participate in the process of constructing, negotiating, implementing, and revising expectations. Also, clear and ongoing communications among the practitioners is critical. In addition, distributed expertise empowers everyone in the community to understand the purpose and value of their particular expertise as well as the expertise of others. Overall, the design and development of efficient communities of practice requires the combined wisdom and inclusion of all participants.

The role of leadership in communities of practice is to facilitate, broker, and link the practitioners to each other within the community and to others outside of the community. A critical leadership task is to make possible the building, maintaining, and preserving the community's culture and to insure the inclusion of all practitioners. In addition, a major concern involves figuring out how to keep the community growing as it deepens its knowledge and practice while connecting to the larger organization. At a time when school systems are involved

in reinventing themselves to serve a highly technological and multicultural world, communities of practice are becoming an important and valuable force for change in education.

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