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Communities of Practice in Graduate Education: The Learner's Perspective

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is the use of Communities of Practice as a tool to help learners acquire lifelong learning skills. The purpose of this research was to assess the effectiveness of this learning strategy to better understand how educators can help students to become lifelong learners.

Introduction

The 21st century is the era of cradle to grave learning. Engagement in lifelong learning is essential for economic survival. To prepare students to engage in successful careers, many higher education classrooms at both the graduate and undergraduate levels are using group projects, small group discussions, and team-building exercises. Educators recognize the value and enhanced learning that occurs with the use of these types of techniques and projects. In addition, organizations value the skills of employees who are able to work effectively as part of a project or team. A learning strategy that advances beyond these concepts of group projects, discussion, and teambuilding is “Communities of Practice (CofP).” Communities of Practice provide learning forums where learning needs can be met as soon as they arise.

Literature Review

The basis of this strategy is the formation of communities that are involved in creating knowledge for the community members, as well as stewarding knowledge for others beyond the individual community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Lave & Wenger (1991) introduced the concept of Communities of Practice as learning that occurs in real-life, real-time contexts. Organizations striving to be learning organizations are developing and applying this concept (Marsick, Bitterman, & Van der Veen, 2000).

Within the arena of higher education, “the term ‘learning community’ describes a learning event with fixed time limits and existing for a more or less specific purpose (Pedler, 1994). The design involves bringing together a group of people as peers to meet personal learning needs, primarily through a sharing of resources and skills offered by those present” (Rigg & Trehan, 1999, p. 271, citing Pedler, 1984). Learning in higher education has been moving towards a focus on collaborative learning, which has become a dominant paradigm both in the literature on on-line learning and in group work with students in face-to-face situations. “The focus then is on learning as a social activity, an activity in which the autonomous student learner is seen to take responsibility for his/her own learning” (Lea, 2005, p. 182).

There are many forms of collaborative learning in use in the educational arena. It may be a group or team project where the purpose is to complete a pre-determined assignment. The educator establishes the parameters; learners divide the work, and then assemble the parts into a finished project. A second form might be a team-building exercise. Here the purpose is not to complete a project but to build a spirit of trust and cooperation among the team members. An example of this would be Ropes Courses. “Ropes Challenge Courses are often used in conjunction with other forms of training or education, such as in physical education, in orientation programs, and for staff development” (<http://www.wilderdom.com/ropes/>

[RopesWhatIs.html](#) , ¶6). Collaborative inquiry is a third form. A definition from the field of adult education states, “Collaborative inquiry is a systematic process consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question of importance to them” (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000, p. 6). These types of inquiries could occur in a number of settings from an educationally structured setting to one organized by the learners, perhaps for professional development.

In contrast, a community of practice provides resources and facilitation of learning by using the time, expertise, and knowledge of a collection of individuals in a real-life, real-time context. A further definition of Communities of Practice is a “group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). By their nature Communities of Practice are generally self-forming and self-governing. They can occur in any area of an individual’s life. For instance, they are discussed in the context of organizations (Wenger et al., 2002) or formal educational settings (Wenger, 1998). A broad sweep of the literature about Communities of Practice ranges from the principles to create and maintain communities within organizations (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), the interrelatedness of learning, meaning, and identity as a result of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), and how discourse and language shapes Communities of Practice (Barton & Tusting, 2005).

Wenger (1998) proposes in his social theory of learning that learning, the creation of shared meaning, and identity formation occur as a result of engaging in Communities of Practice. Here learning is situated in the context in which it will be used. This is an important component of this type of social learning. Its value lies in moving learning beyond the individual and out into the world of practice. Chalmers and Keown (2006) argue that lifelong learning includes more than technical skills training. They suggest along with Bell and Gilbert (1996) that lifelong learning involves personal and social development while exploring underlying beliefs and concepts that may affect how a civil society administers justice, especially in the economic sector.

Problem Statement

The focus of this research was the use of Communities of Practice in a formal educational context as a tool for helping learners acquire lifelong learning skills. The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of this learning strategy at the graduate level in order to better understand how educators can help students to become lifelong learners. The following questions guided this study:

1. What was the learners’ experience of Communities of Practice in a graduate level class?
2. How is this experience different from or similar to other types of collaborative learning?

It is important in this era of lifelong learning to prepare students to engage in learning outside of the formal classroom setting in the context of their professional lives. This can be a prelude to the economic sector where, “Communities of Practice create value by connecting the personal development and professional identity of employees to the strategy of the organization” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 17). This study contributes to the knowledge base by examining the learner's experience of this learning strategy as both an activity and learning opportunity. Another significant impact of this study is the illumination of ways to enhance the practicality and the usefulness of Communities of Practice for the learner and the transferability of the knowledge gained to the learner’s life. Finally, it will provide an assessment of whether this

experience has the potential to affect the way learners engage in learning in the professional arena.

Methodology

Qualitative methods of collection and analysis were used in this case study of a graduate class in a Master's class in an Adult Learning and Development program. With the approval of the Institutional Review Board, students were given the option of anonymously submitting copies of their final paper for this research project. These papers were used as raw data for this study. 17 out of 25 students chose to submit their paper for this project. The final paper directed the students to assess and reflect on their experience in a Community of Practice during the semester. The constant comparative method of analysis was used to categorize and answer the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

This was the second time that I taught a class using this learning strategy of Communities of Practice as an assignment. The course was titled Adult Education for a Changing Society." The purpose of this course was to provide an "overview of the field of adult education; study of the philosophies of adult education; discussion of historical development, future alternatives, and contemporary issues and trends as they affect adult education in diverse settings." In this course, the individual Community needed to relate the learning plan to the provision of adult education. The primary purpose of the Communities of Practice assignment was to provide an opportunity for learners to "a) experience the process and b) have an opportunity to explore a topic in depth as both an individual learner and as a member of a community. The final reflection papers used in the research required the learners to address their experience of their individual Communities of Practice.

There were several limitations to this study. It consists of first phase data and preliminary findings based on one type of data. As other data sources, notably interviews, are collected in further research stages, it is anticipated additional insights and themes will emerge as I analyze and triangulate other data sources. In addition, since data was collected as part of a graded assignment, it is important to recognize that the agenda of the instructor and the learning environment potentially influenced the students' reflections.

Findings

The findings are based on the reflections of 17 participants. The criteria for including a theme were based on the fact that at least half of the participants individually talked about a particular theme in their reflection papers. For the purposes of this research, that translates into a least 10 participants or more. Although only 17 out of 25 of the class members participated in the research, I would like to provide a picture of the class as a whole. These demographics are based on instructor observations. To begin, all of the participants are part of a master in adult learning program at an urban campus. 22 members were female and three were male. The female population split along equal lines in terms of race – 50% African Americans and 50 % Caucasian. Of the males, two were African American and one was white. The age ranges were from 24-60, with the majority of the class in their thirties and forties. Because the data was collected on an anonymous basis, I have chosen to present that data as a compilation of many voices in the form of a composite participant to illustrate each theme.

At first glance, it might appear that CofP, group work and/or teambuilding assignments produce similar learning among adults. However, as I will explain in the discussion section, there are some significant differences. Based on this study, three overarching themes emerged from

the data: CofP foster self-direction in knowledge creation, it deeply engages and builds on the experiences of the learners and it fosters profound networking among learners.

Self-Direction and Knowledge Creation

Most participants were surprised at the amount of self-directed learning that is required for a community of practice. They were further surprised that once they got past the initial anxiety of this new form of learning that they actually enjoyed it and felt that they learned more than they would have learned in another setting.

The participants in the study noted that “the difference between the CofP and group work is that there are a lot more opportunities for people to learn from one another....The cycle of learning is that information is collected from individuals and returned to the whole community where it is used to generate more ideas....It is an ongoing transfer of knowledge which creates an efficient way for members to keep up with new trends in different areas of the field....The information gathering is fluid and open-ended and provided knowledge that I would not have gained otherwise.” Finally, CofP, a participant shared, “created more opportunities [than group work] for educating and learning....We were able to generate more knowledge as a community than as an individual, in terms of both diversity and breadth.”

Engaging Experience

Some participants developed “a new confidence that prior experience and knowledge was an asset to the community....Everyone came in with some level of knowledge...so prior knowledge was beneficial to the community.” The community was viewed as a “wealth of new information. Every person had different experiences and each contributed in some way or another.” Because the CofP engaged the learners at the level of their experience, it was learning that was “more pertinent to real life circumstances.” This diversity of experience created a “potential pool of practical knowledge that extended through the community and beyond.”

“The community allowed a member to bring everything they have to the table rather than limiting them to a specific area....With CofP there is no leader; everyone is responsible and everyone’s opinions count.” The CofP was important as a space “to share life experiences, information, and research especially the opportunity to include life experiences.”

Networking

In terms of networking among learners, the participants felt that the CofP was “beneficial not only for class purposes but also for further career exploration....a great networking opportunity...it helped to underscore and strengthen the value of networking – not just in the present but in the future as well....because the intentions of the CofP are different, [it created] synergy between willing participants....Also because there is no real end point, the community and learning can extend beyond the limits of the classroom....It fosters the opportunity for learners to cultivate relationships....I experienced more interactions and dialog than is usually found in my previous group work experience...I found it to be an enormously valuable tool because it provided an opportunity to really get to know your classmates...The community bonded from the beginning...One of the best benefits of CofP is the relationships that developed among the group allowing us to gain the perspective of others.”

This is not to say, that there were no power dynamics and problems. As I have addressed in another forum, (Monaghan, 2007), there were multiple dynamics that played out and created additional problems. These dynamics were usually the result of positionality (Johnson-Bailey &

Cervero, 1998) and revealed that even a learning strategy designed to be non-hierarchical and democratic invokes power dynamics as a significant part of the experience.

Discussion

Three major conclusions were drawn from this study. Communities of Practice are important learning tools because they allow learners to contribute their experiences and knowledge in significant ways to co-create knowledge. Second, Communities of Practice align with learners needs to be self-directed. Even those learners who initially lacked confidence in their ability to be self-directed experienced an increase in their capacity for self-direction. Finally, the relational or networking aspect of Communities of Practice is stronger than in other types of collaborative learning, providing the learner with professional associations that can be useful for lifelong learning well past the end of the semester.

An important question to ask is what the Communities of Practice model means for professional development and lifelong learning for graduate students. It provides learners with the opportunity to learn how to create and utilize Communities of Practice in both their professional and personal lives. It has the potential to teach learners ways to link a social justice focus to the strong economic utilitarian focus that is prevalent in our capitalistic society. Finally, as Brookfield (1994) points out there are potentially harmful results when learners engage in critical thinking. A Community of Practice can help learners navigate through the downside of critically questioning the underlying beliefs and concepts of professional practices. In summary, Communities of Practice in a higher education setting provide an opportunity for learners to explore a process of creating and sustaining Communities of Practice in both their career and personal lives. This type of classroom activity provides a forum for self-directed learning on a community level and helps learners to establish networks that are important for future life success.

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