

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2005 Conference Proceedings (Athens, GA)

Peripheral Travelers: How American Women Backpackers Participate in Two Communities of Practice

Lesley E. Tomaszewski
Texas A&M University, USA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Tomaszewski, Lesley E. (2005). "Peripheral Travelers: How American Women Backpackers Participate in Two Communities of Practice," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/7>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Peripheral Travelers: How American Women Backpackers Participate in Two Communities of Practice

Lesley E. Tomaszewski
Texas A&M University, USA

Abstract: *This study investigated the levels of participation women have within two communities of practice and how this participation affects learning and identity using the communities of practice model.*

Caught between a rock and a hard place, we have all been there. We feel like we have to make a compromise, instead of a choice and that we are not being true to ourselves. During the summer of 2001, I interviewed women traveling through Europe alone and this idea of compromising was the least I expected. By participating in different communities of practice at differing levels, individuals can learn about how they function in different communities and actively create an identity for themselves (Wenger, 1998). But how does learning take place when the communities of practice vary greatly? The purpose of this paper is to explore how a group of women, when caught between two communities, create identity.

Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the idea that learning was undertaken “through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community” (p. 100). This ambient community they term the “community of practice.” Individuals who want to be part of a certain community interact with its core members and learn the community’s culture, ultimately becoming part of the community. A community of practice can be seen as a circle, where core members are on the inside of the circle and others are on the periphery. The core members are most likely those individuals that are the most knowledgeable of the community’s practices (Wenger, Synder, & McDermott, 2002). In contrast to the core, the periphery is the region that is neither fully inside nor fully outside, surrounding the community with a degree of permeability (Lave & Wenger, 1991). All individuals in the community of practice are considered members, whether in the core or on the periphery (Wenger, 1998).

Two primary types of participation Wenger discusses are peripherality and marginality. Peripherality refers to individuals on the periphery who are participating to some degree within the community of practice, but have not been accepted as core members (Wenger, 1998). Marginality refers to individuals, also on the periphery, whose level of participation has decreased through time (Wenger, 1998). This includes, for example, long-standing members who have not changed the way they participate within the community even though the community has changed.

If members are only allowed to participate in the periphery, and not allowed into the core, sooner or later they will become complacent, decreasing the extent to which participation occurs within the community of practice. Since the Community of Practice model holds that learning and participation are one, learning decreases with participation.

Wenger (1998) discusses the elements needed to form communities of practice. He argues that a community of practice must have three elements: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

Mutual engagement refers to individuals’ interaction with each other to create relationship among its members. Being a member involves more than being declared a member -

it is actively engaging in activities/practices with others. Joint enterprise refers to a common purpose that binds the members together, which provides the community an unifying goal. Shared repertoire refers to common practices, those things members of a community of practice do, and all the ways they go about doing things. It does not include just the work the members have in common, but the methods, tools and behavior patterns they use to accomplish their goals (Wenger, 1998).

Method

Using an ethnographic approach to collect my data, I spent five weeks backpacking Europe interviewing American women backpacking solo. To collect my data, I stayed in hostels that were known for attracting American backpackers and went to locations around the cities that were recommended to backpackers by the hostels' staff. While at these locations, I conducted interviews with thirteen American women traveling solo for longer than four weeks, collected observations, and gathered documents that were circulated throughout the hostels, such as city tours, city guides, and city maps. After returning to the United States, I continued to interview seven of the original participants for a period of one year.

I analyzed the data using a combined method approach (naturalistic inquiry and grounded theory) searching for themes in the data that address how these women interacted differently within two communities of practice and how those interactions affected their identity. Questions guiding data collection and analysis included: How do American women traveling solo describe the impact solo travel has on their identities as female travelers? What happens to those identities upon their return?

Findings

Finding 1: Creating a New Identity

The women I interviewed felt they had changed through the course of their trip and they were not the same person they had been before leaving the United States. In other words, they realized that they had taken on characteristics of the backpacker community that were not congruent with their home community. These characteristics were: increased self-confidence, not feeling American, and increased freedom.

Increased self-confidence. The women used a variety of different words to describe how they felt this experience had changed their lives. Some used "empowering", some used "confident", while others said that after this experience they felt that they could do anything. I grouped all of these types of words under self-confidence because they all referred to the same idea of feeling an increase in confidence to do things and accomplish tasks, but using different words. These women said that their experiences had given them a chance to exercise the confidence that they knew was inside them but they had been unable to exercise in their home community. "I mean my self-worth has gone up so much on this trip because just knowing my worth. Knowing that I am, I can go, I can just be alone. I don't need someone to pick me up and carry me through this trip. That I can do it on my own and be fine (Katie, July 18, 2001)."

Not feeling American. While traveling abroad the women altered how they saw themselves as Americans, as shown by the reluctance of these American women to associate with other Americans. "The opportunities of meeting other travelers, I mean besides Americans, but a lot of other European countries is higher staying at a hostel. It is the opportunity to meet

other people that are traveling from other countries, which is the fun part. The best part actually (Wandering Girl, July 21, 2001).”

While back in their home community, they felt that they were not as American as they had been and that they no longer fit in to the American way of life, i.e., their home community of practice. “I do feel different than the average female American who has never traveled. But a lot of the times, when I tell them what I do are just amazed. But you know we, men and women, have the same characteristics inside, we are still people. I can take care of myself, and I think that a lot of the women were surprised that I was by myself and I wasn't freaking out (Naomi, July 1, 2002).”

Increased freedom. While traveling abroad the women emphasized how freeing it was to travel without a companion. One reason the women traveled solo was that they wanted to be free of what people from their home communities thought of them by traveling alone in Europe for a period longer than four weeks.

All of the women I met who were traveling alone abroad for the first time stated that they had gained a sense of personal freedom that they had not anticipated prior to their trip. During their travel they were all willing to meet up with other travelers and go places, but they were free to leave when they wanted and did not feel confined by this type of traveling. “It’s easier to travel alone. I’ve done a couple of travels, like last spring when I went to Ireland, a girlfriend flew into Shannon and I hung out with her for 2 weeks when I was in Ireland and I was so glad to get rid of her. I’m more of a budget-oriented and yeah I could probably stay in a five-star hotel, but why? I mean I’m just going to sleep there. It’s no different than sleeping here (Wandering Girl, July, 21, 2001).”

Each of the characteristics summarized feelings that participants experienced during the course of their trip. As the women participated with other backpackers developing these characteristics, they were altering their level of participation in the community. They were moving from the periphery towards the core of the backpacker community.

Finding 2: Coping with Multiple Identities

The women I interviewed felt they had different identities associated with the two different communities. One was associated with the home community and the other was associated with the backpacker community.

According to Wenger (1998), becoming a member of a community of practice is voluntary and individuals are not born into a certain community, but for the purpose of this study, family and friends were considered the home community of practice, while backpackers, staying in hostels and traveling with a backpack throughout Europe, were considered the backpacker community. Each community had its own shared language, ways of dressing, and behaviors towards its members.

Interacting with the backpacker community of practice made these women feel differently about themselves. They knew that if they wanted to they could move towards the core of the community and become members, while in the home community this was never an option because they were not part of the male hierarchy. After traveling, they were not accepted by their families, which forced them to re-evaluate the shared repertoire of their home community. “Coming back I had nothing. And I didn’t really talk to anyone about what I did because it was more for me. But, it seemed like my family really didn’t care about it or just thought I was. They started teasing me, ‘Oh, you’re French, you’re this snob now.’ And I didn’t think I was at all and I was like ‘You guys need to lighten up.’ But they would start teasing me

about every little thing, like if I said ‘I don’t like that kind of music, or I don’t like that food that way’, they were ‘Oh, you’re just a French snob’ (Anais, November 12, 2002).”

In the backpacker community, these women did not know how to participate in this new community of practice, so they were on the periphery. But while being in the periphery, non-participation gave them a chance to learn about the community through observation. Once learning how to participate in the community, they began to participate in the periphery. This participation level was why all of the women felt that interacting with the backpacking community had changed their identity.

After traveling for at least one month in this community, coming home was a bit of a shock. They were no longer able to participate to the same degree they could while in the backpacker community of practice.

Discussion

This study has implications for adult education theory as it clearly reinforces the idea that there is an interrelatedness between participation, learning, and identity within a community of practice. The findings from my study show how the individuals suggest that participation in one community of practice can have a tremendous influence on participation within another community of practice. While participating in the backpacker community, the women were able to participate in a way they had not been able to in their home community. They were also introduced to different characteristics, which were not in their home community. These practices, which I present as characteristics (increased self-esteem, not feeling American, and increased freedom), helped the women to create a new identity. But, when returning home and participating with home community members, they did not feel accepted by their home community.

The community of practice model highlights the learning taking place within each community. It also allows us to view members in the context of multiple communities and see how their identity is affected through participation in these various communities. So that when caught between a rock and a hard place, the compromise perhaps can become a choice.

References

- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., Synder, W., & McDermott, R. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.