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Rhonda R. Newton
Pennsylvania State University

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Social Capital, Social Networks and Informal Learning

Rhonda R. Newton, The Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, USA

Abstract: Social capital theory, especially the idea of bridging capital, may provide a framework for understanding how an individual becomes known as a teacher in connected informal learning communities.

How does someone become known as a teacher within a community of practice and then the larger constellation of communities? While the K12 and higher education communities have established credentialing procedures, most informal learning communities do not. Therefore, how do participants in a local community begin to lead nonformal learning opportunities and come to be recognized as teachers? How does someone subsequently connect from their home community of practice to other related communities? The concept of social capital, especially bridging capital, may provide a conceptual framework to understand this process. The paper will explore the potential for research.

Literature

Prior research on quilting found that participants join organized groups, usually called “guilds”, in part to be in a community which shared their common interest. These quilters recognized the experience of becoming integrated into the community, of learning about the mores and practices of the group (Cerny, 1992; Cerny, Eicher and DeLong, 1993; Schofield-Tomschin & Littrell, 2001; Stalp, 2007), which then places these quilt guilds within Lave and Wenger’s definition of a community of practice.

While the original definition of community of practice – “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98) – suggests interlocking groups, Wenger implied a bounded community in exploring how participants move from the periphery to the center of a community through participation (Wenger, 1998). A community based on a hobby, such as quilting, may not be a bounded community though, even at the local level, harkening back to the original definition. Participants may be involved in many different groups, either sequentially or contemporaneously. The “community” is at the same time not just the specific guild but a broader group sharing a common interest around the country and the world, connected through media, events, and technology. Wenger (1998) described connected communities of practice as a constellation, recognizing that some of the communities could overlap. He connected communities through both brokers, that is, people who belong to multiple communities, and boundary objects, which in this case can be quilts or the related specialized tools used to make them. Social capital theory may explain how brokers connect communities of practice, which then may provide a route for individuals to become known as teachers in these informal learning communities.

The concept of social capital, while specific definitions are contested, describes the value of relationships. Putnam’s concept of bridging capital describes the value of relationships which cross between groups, enabling an individual to benefit from these connections (Alfred, 2009). Individuals may build social capital within their community, through relationships with other members. Through those members’ participation in other communities, an individual may be able to then take their recognized expertise to a new community. That is, brokers who participate in multiple communities of practice may validate a newcomer’s expertise in one community of practice because of the social capital the newcomer developed with the broker in the prior community of practice. The results of a pilot study on learning in the quilting community suggest that this is occurring, presenting the opportunity for future research examining the role of brokers through the concept of social capital, especially as it relates to the recognition of some individuals as teachers.

Results

The findings of a pilot study in the fall of 2012 on learning in the quilting community suggest that quilters participate in multiple communities of practice and that they share information about individuals who are thought of as good teachers in one community with their other communities.

All three participants participated in multiple communities simultaneously. One participates in a quilt guild and in an antique quilt study group. A second participates in a guild but also in an online community, including swapping quilt blocks with other quilters across the United States and abroad. The third participant named five different groups with which she quilts, only two of which are formally organized in a way that might fall within Wenger's COP description. Another group was a circle of friends while the final two were faith-based groups, not necessarily organized specifically for quilting. Each participant, therefore, has the opportunity to connect their groups as a broker.

One participant, who planned the programs for her guild, discussed how the group identified potential speakers. She noted that some teachers she "just knew. I knew 'em from sort of being in the quilting world." She also said "people recommend, you know, they were at a class or they were at a show and they visited with somebody, you know, it's mostly word of mouth." Both of these can then be read as situations where there were relationships. For whatever reason and through whatever means may have been involved, one individual had developed social capital with another, who was then willing to recommend the individual to another community of practice, who took the recommendation because of their own relationships, or social capital with the person making the recommendation.

How can future research then examine these relationships through the lens of social capital, to examine a developing teacher's trajectory from the home community to the broader constellation of practice? How can methodologies developed in researching social capital and networks in voluntary associations be used to explore informal communities with a more explicit learning focus?

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