

# Navigating Scholarly Development Through a CoP: #generational-lenses

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## Recommended Citation

Olszewski, Carol A. MA; Paoletta, Toni M. MEd; Pontikos, Keli B. MA; Selker, Matthew L. MPA; Znamenak, Kyle A. MA; and Hansman, Catherine A. PhD (2018). "Navigating Scholarly Development Through a CoP: #generational-lenses," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2018/roundtables/11>

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## Navigating Scholarly Development Through a CoP: #generational-lenses

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**Abstract:** CoPs provide opportunity for professional identity exploration. Extant research neglects how multiple identities, including generational memberships, influence development. This study explores professional identity development of scholars within a multigenerational CoP.

### Introduction

Wenger (1998) states a Community of Practice (CoP) is formed by individuals who share a mutual passion for a concern or topics. He further posits that learning emerges through interactions and shared experiences people have as they negotiate meaning through unique contexts. For PhD students, a CoP may provide space to explore and develop their professional identities and find their scholarly voices (Coffman, Putnam, Adkisson, Kriner, and Monaghan, 2016). However, little is understood about how CoP members' multiple identities, including their generational memberships, may influence their professional identity development. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to explore professional identity development of scholars within a multigenerational CoP in a public urban university. Our research questions are: How does membership in a multigenerational CoP foster professional identity development in its members? How does one's generational lens impact learning and identity development in a CoP?

### Literature Review

Several theoretical frameworks undergird our research: generational theory, social learning theory, identity development, and CoPs. *Generation* is defined as, "a series of birth cohorts who share a common location in history and common peer persona that reflects a collective identity" (Lowery, 2001, p. 7). Strauss and Howe (1991) established *Generational Theory*, explaining that each generation is shaped by a collection of social events experienced by individuals who share common birth years. These common or uncommon characteristics influence intergenerational and multigenerational learning and cooperation within a CoP.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) defines human learning as a function of both the environment and mental processes. In its simplest form, social learning theory explains how people learn by interacting with others. Hoadley and Kilner (2005) extended Wenger's work with social learning theory in CoPs by outlining four key practices related to the community's purpose: connection, conversation, exploration of context, and documentation of content.

Professional identity is the collection of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences resulting from personal and collective reflection. A CoP may also assist members with professional identity development by allowing the space for members to collectively explore and reflect (Coffman et. al, 2016).

### **Methodology**

This ongoing narrative qualitative study seeks to understand the experiences and professional identity development of members of a CoP, allowing researchers to understand how members within the CoP co-construct professional identities in interaction with social worlds. Data was collected through participants' reflective journaling in responses to a predetermined prompt. The constant comparative method was employed for further data analysis.

### **Tapestry of Findings**

The group was comprised of one Baby Boomer, three Generation Xers, and two Millennials. Three main themes emerged, each addressing both personal identity and professional identity: concerns, tribe, and support. Some CoP members mentioned concerns with their professional identity, "My CoP experience was like riding on a raft with my cohort traveling down an unexplored river." Other CoP members mentioned concerns with their personal identity and how it related to the CoP, "I was also concerned that my position as a tenured faculty member and any perceived power I might hold from this position would make working with others in the CoP difficult or awkward."

CoP members expressed feeling support throughout the CoP process regarding their personal and professional identity. Regarding feelings of support of professional identity "A non-judgmental, very encouraging space to experience and practice behaviors I choose to make my own as I transition from student to scholar." Regarding feelings of support of personal identity "I looked forward to that time of the week as a safe space to bounce ideas, as a community to ignite curiosity, and as a reprieve from the intensities of academia."

CoP members felt as if they were a tribe. One member stated, "I found 'my people', so to say and I'm better for it. I found people that enjoy thinking and talking and discussing the same things I enjoy... and they actually understand what I'm talking about!" And another stated "I strongly believe that I am the only one capable of increasing my identity as a scholar. The CoP, however, had the positive result of a sense of togetherness because we are all facing the same problems."

## Discussion

This roundtable invites adult learners interested in CoP, social learning, and generational differences to discuss how these factors may influence professional identity development of emerging scholars, highlighting the challenges emerging scholars face, and how multigenerational CoPs may be used to address their challenges. Through this discourse, college administrators, faculty members, and PhD students may gain better understandings of how CoPs may be used to foster professional identity development. This research is significant because it illuminates how adults' multiple identities, (generational, personal, and scholarly) may influence their professional identity development.

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