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Unexpected Learning: Development of the CoP and Its Members #generational-shift

Carol A. Olszewski MA, MT-BC
Cleveland State University, c.a.olszewski@csuohio.edu

Kyle A. Znamenak MA
Cleveland State University, k.znamenak@csuohio.edu

Keli B. Pontikos MA
Cleveland State University, keli.pontikos@gmail.com

Toni M. Paoletta MEd
t.paoletta@csuohio.edu

Catherine A. Hansman PhD
Cleveland State University, c.hansman@csuohio.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Author Information

Carol A. Olszewski MA, MT-BC; Kyle A. Znamenak MA; Keli B. Pontikos MA; Toni M. Paoletta MEd;
Catherine A. Hansman PhD; Karie A. Coffman PhD; and Matthew L. Selker MPA

Unexpected Learning: Development of the CoP and Its Members #generational-shift

Carol A. Olszewski
 Keli B. Pontikos
 Catherine A. Hansman
 Kyle A. Znamenak
 Toni M. Paoletta
 Karie A. Coffman
 Matthew L. Selker
 Cleveland State University

Abstract: Our research explores how multigenerational CoPs may provide graduate students, particularly doctoral students, find the space to explore and develop their professional identities and find their scholarly voices.

Keywords: Community of Practice, doctoral students, professional identities, scholarly voice

Introduction

A Community of Practice (CoP) is typically organized by persons who share mutual interests or concerns on some key topics (Wenger, 1999). Once the CoP forms, Hansman (2001, 2014) suggests that knowledge is developed and shared among and with members through interactions and collective experiences as members reflect upon and negotiate meaning about their learning. In the context of higher education, CoPs may provide graduate students (particularly doctoral students) the space to explore and develop their professional identities and find their scholarly voices (Coffman, Putnam, Adkisson, Kriner, & Monaghan, 2016; Olszewski, Znamenak, Paoletta, Selker, Pontikos, & Hansman, 2018). However, little is understood about the process of how these communities allow space for members to learn from and with each other and how these communities develop as a single entity. Moreover, since graduate student CoP members may span several generations, it is important to understand not only multigenerational learning but also intergenerational personal and professional development.

Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to expand on initial findings from this multigenerational CoP (Olszewski et al., 2018), to better the explore the learning and development that took place in a multigenerational CoP at a public urban university, focusing on each CoP members' processes of learning and developing professional identity, as well as the development process of the CoP itself.

Literature Review

CoPs are socially constructed learning spaces, centered on a shared interest, where interactive relationships enable the members to learn from each other and where members care about the opinions regarding each other (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). It is more than just a group of people working together on a task; rather "it refers to a social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time" (Farnsworth, et al., 2016, p. 5). Other key characteristics that make CoPs different from traditional learning groups are their organic nature and the opportunity for individuals to be self-directed while participating in a collaborative learning process (Hansman, 2001, 2014). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) identified CoPs as groups of people who share a concern or a passion and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Furthermore, according to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), over time and through sustained interaction, CoP members develop a shared repertoire of resources, including experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems and develop professional identities.

Members participating in a CoP may be resistant to disclosure and open dialog. It is important for CoP members to establish a safe learning environment, as it is essential to collaboration within a CoP. A safe learning environment encourages trust between the members. A safe, supportive and trusting environment enables open dialog among members. Open dialog within the CoP provides the most benefits to all CoP members (Cameron, 2016; Coombs, Thomas, Rush, & Martin, 2017; Dron & Anderson, 2014). Opportunities to share experience may assist in the identity transformation from student to scholar by experiences becoming internalized in the participant (Garrow & Tawse, 2009).

An earlier initial exploration of data out of this multigenerational CoP resulted in three main themes, each addressing both personal identity and professional identity: concerns, tribe, and support (Olszewski et al., 2018). These findings indicated that members were concerned and aware of how their differences affected others and that members recognized the community as one of support and safety, which further supported existing literature (e.g. Farnsworth et al., 2016). However, it was intriguing that no theme regarding generational differences emerged from that initial analysis nor did a theme regarding changes that took place as a tribe/group/entity. The lack of these themes emerging, merited further investigation, leading to our current research.

Theoretical Framework

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) defines human learning as a function of both 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 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). These common or uncommon characteristics influence learning within a CoP, as well as the development of the CoP itself.

Generational Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991) explains that each generation is shaped by a collection of social events experienced by individuals who share common birth years. Multigenerational refers to people from different generations being present within a learning group, but intergenerational refers to connections forged between the generations (Kaplan, Sanchez, & Hoffman, 2017). CoPs, as rich contexts for learning, have the potential to create spaces for inter or transgenerational communication or decision making to take place, leading to individual and group learning and development. Combining experience, perception, cognition, and behavior, experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) can be a useful lens in which to understand the learning taking place in the CoP. Through a reflection on their individual learning, each member is able to apply what they have learned to future experiences. Experiential Andragogy, proposed by O'Bannon and McFadden (2008) suggests reflection and application, or *adaptation*, as the final steps in their model for use with nontraditional adult programs. Viewing experiential learning through a situative lens (Fenwick, 2003) suggests learning by doing or in practice, which can be evident in the activities of the CoP.

Methodology

A qualitative auto-ethnographic case study framework was used to explore how the CoP

provided space for learning, how the CoP developed, and how each member developed. This exploration was a follow-up line of questioning, which developed from an initial examination of these data with regard to generational differences affecting experiences within a multigenerational CoP. For demographic information regarding the participants, please refer to Table 1.

Participant	Generation	Gender	CoP Role
Catherine	Boomer	Female	Professor
Karie	Xennial	Female	Substitute Professor
Toni	Generation X	Female	3rd year doctoral student
Matt	Generation X	Male	2nd year doctoral student
Carol	Xennial	Female	2nd year doctoral student
Keli	Millennial	Female	2nd year doctoral student
Kyle	Millennial	Male	3rd year doctoral student

Data were collected through reflective journaling in response to predetermined prompts. Initially, Saldaña's (2016) codes-to-theory model was used to analyze the journal entries, to identify codes, and to develop themes. Themes are used to make assertions or create theories. For the purpose of this study, interest was in making assertions, not developing theory. As previously stated, those outcomes were previously reported (Olszewski, et al., 2018).

Following that initial coding and those outcomes, the analysis was revised, beginning with re-coding the data. Elaborative coding was utilized because its "top-down" form of coding accommodates for previously analyzed data by recognizing that the data are being coded with theoretical constructs already having been deduced from the data (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña stated, "Elaborative Coding is appropriate for qualitative studies that build on or corroborate previous research and investigation" (2016, p. 256).

All coding and analyses were conducted collectively by members of the CoP. NVivo was utilized briefly for the elaborative coding. This method was not previously used for the initial coding. Results from NVivo were utilized to spur discussion, not as the foundation for construction of categories or themes. This construction, like the analysis, was conducted collectively.

Findings

The analysis revealed three themes, which relate to the CoP members' processes of learning and developing professional identities and the congruent development of the CoP itself. These processes work hand and hand like the rotations of a gyroscope - as one process moves or develops, so does the other. These themes included: 1) safety and trust; 2) different expectations and knowledge with overlapping common interests; 3) the unique and shared experiences of the CoP members.

Safety and **trust** are primary themes regarding how the CoP created a space to enhance learning and how safety and trust were products of the shared experiences. By lessening the

reluctance of fear based humiliation and uncertain sharing reception, trust is an antecedent to psychological safety and the development of tie strength, which represents the strength of interpersonal relationships developed through member closeness, intimacy, and support. The following statements are exemplars of these themes:

It is a non-judgmental space for me to be who I am, to reflect and understand who that is, then learn from others what their meaning of our shared topic is, learn more about how they navigate our topic, scholarly identity, and borrow from them their navigation strategy and findings while contributing mine. -Matt

However, I am also excited that we are all on this PhD journey together. I do not feel like I will be alone in this journey of getting that PhD. -Kyle

Even with challenging topics that might strike a nerve or be a bit uncomfortable, it seemed to me the level of trust in the group made it a safe environment to share freely.
- Toni

Additionally, elaborative coding and analysis intimates all the members recognized all CoP members brought **different expectations and knowledge** to the CoP, but that there were **common areas of interest** (adult learning, completing the degree, and learning) that provided a foundational relationship that promoted development, both as individuals and as a group.

Although, the group was composed of individuals from different generations, these common areas of interests transcended generational differences and developed a sense of group cohesion. The following statements are representative of these findings:

The group may be composed of those with diverse levels of experience and interests, but what holds the group together is the core question or interest that brought them together in the first place. Members may also cycle in and out as the group develops. -Catherine

Diversity of thought, background, experience, and ideas will result in stronger development – both as individuals and as a group – over time. -Carol

I found a sense of community within the CoP I didn't think I would find at first, to be honest. 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, I've learned so much from them. -Toni

Furthermore, the theme **experiences** encompasses the events that took place in the CoP and between members, which contributed to both individual and group development. The following examples embody this theme:

Development is a lifelong process and interactions such as these are imperative to produce developmental change. -Keli

Together members were able to determine the shared purpose and what and how they wanted to learn. It was truly learning as group. -Catherine

This openness to shared experiences contributes to the development of relationships which is the building blocks of any CoP. -Karie

Discussion

This research points to the significance of CoPs to enhance members' learning and development and provides insight concerning how CoPs may develop over time. Many participants spoke to the importance of the sense of community that was enhanced by the safety and trust in other members in the CoP, and the importance of these qualities to their individual scholarly and professional identity development. They also highlighted the importance of having shared language to discuss the joint projects and scholarly concerns. The individual growth discussed by the CoP members seemed to undergird the development process of the CoP itself.

CoP members - students, faculty members, and program alumni - viewed CoP membership and participation as influencing their passion for intellectual growth and further enhancing their desire for and opportunities to learn. The CoP provided the space for members to collaboratively reflect on and apply meaning to their experiences (Kolb, 1984). Despite the CoP members belonging to multiple generations, the CoP seemed to function as a transgenerational community, guided by the members' mutual, as well as, diverse interests. Furthermore, learning with and from each other occurred in both "formal" meetings of the CoP as well as informal gatherings of some or all members.

Our research highlights the potential and usefulness of CoPs as vehicles for higher education institutions to support and encourage learning opportunities for students and faculty members. Furthermore, our research is significant because it illuminates how adults' multiple identities, (generational, personal, and scholarly) and their participation in CoPs, may influence their professional identity development, as well as, how CoPs themselves may develop and change over time. Future research concerning the development of CoPs over time and how individual CoP members learn and create knowledge will enrich understandings of how CoPs' contexts may enhance adult, continuing, and higher education practice.

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