

NEW WAYS OF LEARNING: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE WITH **ETIENNE WENGER**

by Jader C. Souza-Silva *

Understanding that knowledge has two dimensions, explicit and tacit, formal education is considered limited because it is supported by mechanisms of transmission based on a traditional approach that transfers only the explicit part of that knowledge, and which does not represent its totality. It is only through social contexts of learning, connected to practice, that the tacit dimension of knowledge can be transmitted. It is in this context of socio-practical learning, which values knowledge in its totality, that the idea of a community of practice emerges. These communities have been identified as playing an important role in the promotion of learning, achieving prominence in the literature of organizational learning.

Professor Etienne Wenger is one of the authors who coined the concept of communities of practice (with the anthropologist Jean Lave), and is globally recognized as a leader in the field of knowledge and its application to organizations. He was featured by Training Magazine in its "A New Breed of Visionaries" series. He is the author and co-author of several articles and books on communities of practice, including *Situated Learning* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), where the term was coined, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), where he lays out a theory of learning based on the concept of communities of practice, and *Cultivating Communities of Practice: a Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), addressed to practitioners in organizations.

Etienne is also a founder of CPsquare, a cross-organization and a cross-sector of community of practice. More recently, he founded the "Learning for a Small Planet," a broad project for expanding the theory to large-scale systems. His work is influencing a growing number of organizations in the private and public sectors. Indeed, cultivating communities of practice is increasingly recognized as the most effective way for organizations to address the challenges they face concerning knowledge. Etienne helps organizations apply these ideas through consulting, public speaking, and workshops, both online and face-to-face.

Here, Etienne Wenger is interviewed by Professor Jader Souza-Silva Ph.D.¹ who defended his doctoral thesis based on how organizational culture can favor or disfavor the emergence of Communities of Practice in the organizational context.

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JADER SOUZA-SILVA - How can you describe Communities of Practice? What are the main characteristics of a community of practice? Could you give us some examples?

ETIENNE WENGER - The definition of a community of practice is very simple. It is a group of people who share a practical challenge, and in the context of interacting regularly, learn from and with each other, how to address the challenge they face. In other words they develop a shared practice. They may or may not work together on a regular basis, but they benefit from their regular interactions. Think about the impressionists in Paris. They were not painting together, but they had a lot of conversations about painting, and you can recognize this mutual influence in their respective paintings. They acted as co-practitioners to learn together. So, the main characteristic of a community of practice is the learning that practitioners do together with respect to the domain of knowledge they have in common. In the example of the Impressionists, this domain was to discover a new way of bringing color to life on the canvas, and the practice they shared was a series of techniques in using brush strokes to achieve this effect.

There are a lot of other more current examples that I could give you: a group of teachers in a small school in Italy who get together to discuss what to do about kids who misbehave and whether the theory of multiple intelligences could help understand their difficulties; lawyers at the Australian Security and Investment Commission who explore how to regulate difficult financial instruments; mining engineers at Rio Tinto who need to ensure underground safety in various mines around the world; a community of patients with myeloproliferative disorders who use the web to help each other live with their illness and keep abreast of medical developments.

In summary, a community of practice sustains enough mutual engagement in pursuing a collective enterprise to share significant learning. Communities of practice take different forms: small communities or large communities; communities within organizational contexts or not; face-to-face communities or on-line communities.

What is important is to interact and to learn together. It does not matter if it is on line, face-to-face, on the phone, or whatever. To me, what matters is the quality of the interaction and of the learning. In some cases, it is so important to have face-to-face interaction. For example, someone was telling me about a certain group of surgeons on the East Coast of the USA. They travel to operate with each other in order to learn together. In this case, the physical aspects of operating are very important. Thus, the face-to-face interaction is really important. But, in general, the exact form of interactions among members is not what matters most. What really counts is helping each other become better practitioners.

JADER SOUZA-SILVA - Why has this concept achieved so much attention in the literature on organizational learning?

ETIENNE WENGER - I think that the reason for this unexpected popularity is the way in which the term community of practice allows people to reflect on knowledge and learning as being a part of the fabric of the organization. This notion allows people to conceptualize how learning takes place in practical contexts. In other words, the concept of community of practice expands our understanding of knowledge by showing that learning is not just an individual process, but a social and interactional process as well. And, in addition to this, the notion also suggests that cultivating communities of practice can be a useful way to enhance learning in an organization.

From a traditional school perspective, knowledge has been understood as something that can be packed and transmitted as a thing in itself. This led to an "industrial" model of learning. In this model, learning just takes place in classrooms or in other formal contexts that are designed for the transmission of knowledge from producer to receiver. These formal contexts are expected to "mass produce" possessors of knowledge. But, if you adopt a different conception of learning, and assume that learning happens all the time along your path as you participate in various practices, and have to reconcile different experiences into one way of being in the world, you will

have to think of new ways to support learning. Focusing on various communities and their experience of participation becomes crucial. So, the community of practice broadens the horizon both by providing a better understanding of learning conceptually, and practically, by suggesting new ways to support it. This is why I think the concept of community of practice has received so much attention in organizational literature.

JADER SOUZA-SILVA - How does learning take place in the context of a community of practice? What are the main differences compared to other traditional organizational learning mechanisms?

ETIENNE WENGER - Members of a community of practice do not learn from just one person who possesses knowledge, like a teacher, but actually by acting as colleagues or "co-practitioners." So, they engage in activities together that allow them to learn in a very practical way. They learn a lot from each other's stories or from a colleague's inquiry. For example, someone comes up with a question on a specific situation and he or she asks the others: "What would you do?" And, somebody responds: "In this situation I would act in this way...". Then, another member can say: "I think this answer is interesting, but I would try something different". So, in such a case, the learning takes place when all the members of a community of practice try to solve the practical problems that one of the members has. This is just one example of how a community of practice acts as a place of learning. Some communities have different techniques or mechanisms for learning. For instance, they develop a framework to benchmark each other's performance, they document a process for a recurring problem, they invite an external expert to address an urgent topic, or they develop a shared response to a new policy. In each case, what is really significant is that the process of learning is in the hands of the practitioners.

JADER SOUZA-SILVA - Why have communities of practice been understood as being the ideal social structures to promote learning? Why are they more effective than databases?

ETIENNE WENGER - The first thing I should say is that those two things are not incompatible. I am not saying that databases are useless. As a technique, they are very useful. On the contrary, I am saying that communities of practice and databases are complementary approaches to knowledge. Knowledge has to be alive. A community of practice is alive and keeps its knowledge alive. At the same time, a database serves as a memory for the community and sharpens debates as people have to decide what goes into the database, and, therefore, what knowledge matters to the community. But, a database without a community can easily die. So, the two go together. Of course, the work of a community of practice is not limited to a database. People discuss issues and share experiences. From this perspective, communities of practice are places of learning that can address both the explicit and the tacit aspects of knowledge. But, the main reason that communities of practice have come to be regarded as ideal social structures to promote learning is that they place the process in the hands of practitioners who use their circumstances, their challenges, and their experiences as material for peer-to-peer learning. They decide what is useful knowledge, what needs to be discussed, what needs to be documented. They help each other with the issues they face. And, sometimes they call upon expertise from outside the community, but, because it addresses a knowledge necessity they have. And, because people learn together and develop relationships, communities of practice also incorporate the social and emotional aspects of learning, which are quite important.

JADER SOUZA-SILVA - What are the benefits and disadvantages of communities of practice?

ETIENNE WENGER - Well, I have just outlined some of the main benefits of a community of practice as a vehicle for learning together. It uses the practical problems of practitioners and, therefore, provides both the short-term benefit of addressing the

problem at hand, and in so doing, the long-term benefit of increasing the knowledge and capability of the whole community. For members, this provides an ideal setting for professional development as well as getting immediate help. And, for organizations, communities of practice engage practitioners in the development of strategic capabilities as well as improve immediate performance. Still it is important not to romanticize communities of practice. They require attention and nurturing. They take time and resources. And like any group, they can fall into the traps of becoming closed, internally focused, and stuck in their ways. For this reason, it is essential for the members of a community of practice to interact with people from other communities so that they can continue learning.

JADER SOUZA-SILVA - How do communities of practice emerge in the organizational context? What are the main barriers of that process?

ETIENNE WENGER - In some cases, the emergence of a community of practice in organizational spaces is a spontaneous process, as in the case of the teachers I told you about previously. People form a community of practice because they have a strong desire or passion for developing themselves in a specific domain of knowledge, intimately connected to their practice. In some other cases, the development of a community of practice requires careful seeding, nurturing, and encouragement, especially if the community brings together people who would not normally talk to each other, for instance, at the boundaries between disciplines or functions. But, most communities involve a combination of bottom-up and top-down processes. The main barrier I have seen in organizations is time. Everybody seems to work under pressure and complain about not having enough time to devote themselves to community activities. This is why it is important for an organization to support the formation of communities of practice explicitly, so that the time required is seen as justified. Another barrier for the emergence of communities of practice in organizational contexts is the understanding of the process of learning. For many people the notion of learning immediately conjures up images of classrooms, training sessions, teachers, homework, and so on. Some people associate learning to some specific points in our lives. They associate learning as resulting from a teaching process. And, finally, another barrier is a focus on technology as the solution to an organization's knowledge challenge. Technology can help, but knowledge is fundamentally a property of human systems that involve both individuals and communities. So, we have to adopt a different perspective. As more people in organizations see learning from a different point of view, for instance, as being part of our daily life, including professional experiences, the more initiatives for creating communities of practice in organizational contexts will appear.

JADER SOUZA-SILVA - How can the culture of a company foster or discourage the emergence of communities of practice?

ETIENNE WENGER - The culture of an organization is a very important factor because, as I said, it is difficult to have thriving communities of practice when the contributions of these communities to the organization are not recognized or valued. Note that communities of practice are not just "soft" structures. They are not company picnics or other feel-good activities. They have a human aspect, but they are also a strategic investment in capabilities that improve performance. They bridge between personal engagement and professional identity on the one hand, and organizational strategy and performance on the other. But, to realize this bridge productively, an organization has to value learning and reflection, and focus on knowledge as a strategic asset.