THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a common topic, a passion for a professional or personal activity. Universities may be regarded as professional communities in which joint activities are carried out, with well-defined structures. Using networks at university level increases joint assembly of ideas held by each individual, while the exchange of ideas and practices inevitably may lead to the system enrichment, producing effectively loops of innovation and development.*

Key words: *Communities of practice, principles. University*

1. Introduction

Communities of practice are originated in antiquity, mostly being orientated around family. Living together and having meals together, family ensures the transfer of experience and professional tricks from father to son in the process of taking over responsibilities and of perpetuating the job on which the family was specialized. Everyone was helping each other for the good of the whole family and community to which they belonged.

In a modern context, implementation of communities of practice was applied in Chrysler Company. Thus, until 1988, Chrysler Corporation was traditionally organized with directives from the top of the management structure. Being threatened by the Japanese companiesø competition and being on the verge of bankruptcy, the company had to develop something innovative to stay on the market. The solution was a formal community of practice composed of engineers from all divisions of the company in order to speed up the process of developing a new car model. The result was spectacular: from 5 years as the process of creating a new model last, they managed to release to the market a new model in just 2½ years. Communities of practice formed by Chrysler benefited from the already established relations between the same field engineers who met informally and discussed on what the other such teams were doing, what were the difficulties they were facing and how they overcame them. To avoid common experiences and similar ideas, the communities decided to create Engineering Book of Knowledge or EBoK: a database that would contain all relevant data, best practices, learned lessons and information about suppliers. This was the solution found by the company in order to withstand the automotive market.

IBM, Xerox, British Telecom and The World Bank are just a few of the organizations who understood the role that

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communities may have and they acted for their development.

A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a common topic, a passion for a professional or personal activity. Community consolidates its knowledge in a particular field through continuous interaction of its members. Examples of communities of practice in the online environment ó virtual worlds: Second Life, Entropia Universe; ó providing information: Blogs, Google Docs, forums, Wikis; ó networks: YouTube, Linkedin, Facebook.

The community is based on cohesion derived from the joint construction of a daily culture, consisting of behavioral norms, routines, rules and a common goal. Community activity involves artifacts and ideas which support group work and individual understanding. (Riel & Polin, 2004).

Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder (2002) in "Cultivating Comunities of Practice" present communities of practice as "groups of people with common interests who meet regularly or not, in formal or informal manner, and discuss on the field which unites them, share experiences, tips and information and, in some cases, study in detail and thoroughly this information for future reference". The community of practice purpose is, therefore, to make explicit the informal transfer of knowledge by providing a formal structure to enable the acquisition of new knowledge through shared experiences within the group (Bozu & Imbernon, 2009). In this way, the group itself and the individual professional identity can be improved effectively.

Woodrow Wilson said: "Not only do I use the whole mind that I have, but also the one I can borrow." The communities of practice are based on the same principle, which is to borrow knowledge from others

in order to solve your own problems, but also to lend your knowledge to others for development and rapid evolution purpose.

2. Principles for communities of practice development

Wenger, E. shows the seven basic principles for communities of practice nurturing, principles that can help us to be more flexible and to understand their needs.

2.1. Design as progressive structure

Communities of practice must be designed as natural progressive structures, usually on relationships structures already existing. The mission of the coordinators and key members of the community is to think new ways of capturing the interest of members, to attract new members with new ideas and new areas of interest in order to build new relationships within the community. The new members may have related interests also in other areas so they can determinate the community of practice to evolve towards other areas of interest too.

2.2. Openness to dialogue between interior and exterior

Dialogue is the solution for an efficient community of practice, this because only through dialogue it can form a clear picture of problems. However, there may be difficulties in encouraging dialogue within the community because people do not know how open they should be, they are afraid of dialogue and of how this could affect their inner balance.

2.3. Invitation to the different levels of participation

Within the community of practice can be identified three main levels of participation and a secondary group outside the community. The first is the *Central* group; it ensures the community functioning, being involved in discussions, identifying community problems, solving its problems

and it comprises 10-15% of the community members. From here the leaders are chosen. The next group is the one called *Active*; it comprises 15-20% of the members; they occasionally participate in debates and forums. Then, there is the group called *Peripheral* which rarely participates in events and sits on the sidelines observing the interactions of the first two groups. Finally, there are the *Outsiders* that gravitates around them; they are outside the community; they are not members, but they are interested in community life. Community members can move from one group to another, sometimes staying active for a period and then they may lose interest or, alternatively, they may get involved in more heated debate and move to a higher level of interest.

2.4. Development of both inside and outside space of the community

For effective functioning of a community, it is necessary to create a space for public interaction, venue, debate sessions, meetings, where as many community members as possible can come, but also private spaces where its members can meet face to face. Communities focusing on geographical point of view are very important because they cannot operate dispersed. It must not insist too much on the public events on the expense of private events in which members express their problems and where they are being placed in relation with useful resources located both inside and outside the community.

2.5. Focus on value

It is essential to attract more and more valuable members, experienced in the field, who give weight to the community and provide innovative contribution. The value results mostly from the activities and daily interactions of community members. Small achievements from the beginning give confidence to community members

and provides moral comfort to achieve major breakthroughs. Communities thrive through innovation, through the contribution value brought to the community, groups of individuals and teams that are part of them.

2.6. Combining the familiarity with interest

Giving participants a familiar environment, an environment that makes them feel comfortable and invites them to take part in discussions and other activities, to seek advice and share opinions is the key to a successful community. It can combine both familiarity and interest for the new which make the members to connect fully in community life.

2.7. Create a community rhythm

To ensure continuity and maintain an active community, it is necessary to impose a certain rhythm in its activity, rhythm which is achieved through sessions, meetings, informal activities, tasks, deadlines. It is very difficult to create a rhythm of community because each community member has a specific rhythm imposed by other communities to which he belongs (family, job, friends, and sports). If it's too fast, people feel overwhelmed and leave the community. The community rhythm is the best indicator of community of practice's life because this rhythm moves people and keeps their keen interest for the community.

3. Communities of practice in the University education system

Improving educational systems can be achieved through networks consisting of universities and professionals from education field. These networks can be formed by professionals from the same university, from different universities, from educational and social services in the

same locality or different localities, in collaboration with educational, professional administrations and different communities.

In Era of knowledge, the ability to recognize patterns, to share ideas with communities of interest and the opportunity to grow personally through a set of relationships is how an individual integrates and develops (Poley, 2002). Continuous changes at organizational and didactic level produced within educational system reveals the need to promote the exchange of knowledge between professionals, the ultimate goal being the one of improving the efficiency of the educational process of students.

Internal collaboration at the university level carried out regularly in departments, research centers or faculties is already a routine activity. However, these types of collaboration and networking are limited processes and circumscribed at teachers individual level, with poor participation of other agents, such as students or other external institutions.

In this respect, promoting activities and community projects, promoting courses conducted by involving various agents may lead to increasing knowledge and sharing responsibility and participation of multidisciplinary teams of teachers, students, representatives of other institutions or community, and also of schools in the case of education sciences.

There are enough examples of collaboration within the educational system, so collaboration between schools and universities in the implementation of projects is commonplace; creation of university consortia bringing together universities around common mission is already accomplished.

We can consider universities as professional communities in which joint activities are developed, with well-defined structures. Universities isolation can be overcome by strengthening collaboration processes that not only provides a powerful framework for professional exchanges, but also mutual support to overcome the problems that arise in teaching and learning processes. Using networks at universities level increases joint assembly of ideas held by each individual, and the exchange of ideas or practices may inevitably lead to system enrichment, producing effectively loops of innovation and development.

We can consider networks as types of organizational structures based on interaction without having a central point or predetermined sequences, but allowing non-sequential development of functions in an organization (Mintzberg & Van der Hieden, 2006), such as discovery, preservation, transformation and distribution (in our case, of knowledge).

As shown, communities of practice are made up of people who are part of a collective learning process, in a shared field of human activity. A community is a group of people, at work or leisure, whose identity is defined in large part by developing roles and relationships and who share group work. Therefore, we can talk about communities referring to universities, courses, educational activities, from a specific territory or a virtual space, understood as a group of people who are organized to build and to participate together in a joint educational project and who learn through cooperation and collaboration, but also individually.

An important role in organizing communities of practice has the legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1991) and this requires transferring knowledge and skills across groups using various forms of guidance, implicit learning and active participation in the community. Legitimate peripheral participation is the way to achieve the relations between new and old members and also the relationships

between activities, identities and communities of knowledge and practice. As the development continues, community members are moving from peripheral participation to full participation.

Creation and development of communities of practice in Knowledge Management can be achieved in several ways (Steve Denning):

- Promoting already existing informal communities of practice: identifying them in different types of organizations reveals that these communities operate within an institutional framework;

- Maintaining active and promoting communities of practice by requiring their members to give response to issues that concern them and by requesting them to treat topics that interest all participants;

- Forming the communities of practice is left to institutional leaders: this process usually ends in failure, except in situations where the formal leaders are also informal leaders recognized by the community;

- Creating pure virtual communities of practice: creating this type of communities of practice involves a very high level of interest that is not common in formal organizations.

The functioning of any community of practice depends on the following facilitators (Cummings and van Zee, 2005; Gannon-Leary and Fontainha, 2007; Kimble and Hildreth, 2005; Milton, 2005):

- Institutional changes that facilitate the development;

- Promoting necessary technical innovations and tools facilitating to foster modern and flexible contexts;

- Open participation and horizontal structures of functioning;

- Teamwork;

- A properly coordinator;

- Participation of experts of recognized prestige;

- An initial meeting to establish common goals and directions for action;

- Appropriate degree of autonomy for characteristics and functions;

- Task orientation and clear deadlines;

- Shared interest, desire and motivation;

- Good use of technology;

- Alignment with organizational strategy.

The community of practice is not a scientific community; it does not deal with science but with the practice derived from knowledge and with the management of this knowledge creation process. This process is achieved in a collaborative form and through a continuous process of establishing strategies of participation, leadership, identity and use or mobilization of knowledge.

Integrating the community of practice within organizations involves the consideration of four challenges identified by McDermott (2001):

1. **Management**: the community should focus on important aspects of the organization and its members; identifying a member as the leader of the community and supporting him by the organization; ensuring that people have the time and inclination to participate; the reliance of the community of practice on the values of the organization.

2. **Community**: involving key leaders; developing personal relationships between members; developing a core of passionate people and very dedicated to the community of practice, creation of joint bodies and systems in order to develop efficient exchanges of knowledge.

3. **Technology**: facilitating access to community contributions.

4. **Human resources**: generating a real dialogue about important and current techniques among all members of the community of practice.

Although the communities of practice donøt have a hierarchical structure, does not mean that all members have the same position. There are differences of power that may conditionate the internal

dynamics of the community of practice. The community of practice helps interaction and knowledge sharing, but bad management can lead to a flawed implementation of innovative processes.

4.Conclusions

Communities of practice are formed by people who are part of a collective learning process in a common field of activity. Promoting activities and community projects, promoting courses conducted by involving various agents may lead to increasing knowledge and sharing responsibility and participation of multidisciplinary teams of teachers, students, representatives of other institutions or community, and also of schools in the case of education sciences.

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The community of practice helps interaction and knowledge sharing, but an incorrect implementation can lead to failure.

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