

CHAPTER 19

BIRDS OF A FEATHER?

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITIES

Mark Seaman

In recent years, two distinct theories concerning communities have emerged in regard to group efforts to improve practice: communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998a) and knowledge communities (Craig, 1992, 1995). This work compares the two theories so that educators may better understand their similarities and differences should they choose to utilize such communities in their research and/or practice.

INTRODUCTION

Seventeenth century poet John Donne (1967) wrote that “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (pp. 100–101). The notion that man, as a social creature, needs others to live and learn is certainly not new to our culture’s way of thinking. When one shares commonalities with others, communities are formed. As dynamic organizations, different communities explore

Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue
Volume 10, Numbers 1 & 2, 2008, pp. 269–279
Copyright © 2008 by Information Age Publishing
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

different commonalities and work in different ways. While no two communities are alike, some tend to take on similar characteristics in regard to their structure, operation, and goals. Quite often, the goal of a community is improvement: neighborhood development, public community service, or improvement of practice. In recent years, two distinct theories concerning communities have emerged in regard to group efforts to improve practice: communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998a) and knowledge communities (Craig, 1992, 1995). On the surface, it would certainly be easy to believe that these two theories are basically the same—two new terms describing the same age-old ideas. However, the two concepts share more differences than similarities. The purpose of this work is to explore the two theories, their common traits, and their distinct characteristics so that others may better understand the two concepts should they choose to utilize such communities in their research and/or practice. The delineation between the two models is significant to those studying communities, their role in the educational process, and their impact on professional practice.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The term “community of practice” was collaboratively coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) in an effort to provide a perspective on learning and knowing within a social context. This was done while the two were studying apprenticeship and situated learning. At that time, they defined a community of practice as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and the world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Subsequently, Wenger (n.d) has provided the following definition: “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern of a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (para. 1).

Communities of practice exist in organizations, government, education, associations, the social sector, international development, and online communities. In other words, they are everywhere. Recognition of their existence allows the members of the community to transcend the formal structures listed above and focus on improving the practice that defines the community and brought about its existence. It is this shared practice that differentiates the community of practice from other communities. A community of practice consists of members that share more than simply an interest; a community of practice shares expertise, competence, learning, activities, discussions, information, tools, stories, experiences, and a knowledge base. A community of practice not only shares knowledge; but

also it creates, organizes, revises, and passes on knowledge among the members of the community.

Wenger (1998a) describes following three dimensions of community as they relate to community of practice:

1. mutual engagement (how the community functions)—“people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another” (p. 73).
2. a joint enterprise (what the community is about)—the community’s “negotiated response to their situation ... in spite of all the forces and influences that are beyond their control” (p. 77).
3. a shared repertoire (what capability the community has produced) —“Over time, the joint pursuit of an enterprise creates resources for negotiating meaning” (p. 82).

In terms of community, these three commonalities provide the formation, the cohesion, and the goal of a community of practice.

As stated above, the concept of communities of practice had its beginnings in the study of apprenticeship and situated learning. In the time since the naming of this social phenomenon, the concept has been embraced by the corporate world as businesses become more interested in knowledge management. It has quickly become a leading theory in instructional design.

KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITIES

The conception of knowledge communities occurred as Cheryl Craig was writing her doctoral dissertation. Within a context of school reform research, Craig was looking for a term that explained her relationship with Tim, a teacher who served as a participant in her qualitative narrative inquiry. She has continued that line of research as she looks to investigate knowledge communities in the current educational climate (Craig, 1998, 2001, 2003; Craig & Olson, 2002; Olson & Craig, 2001).

Knowledge communities are bound together by what Connelly and Clandinin (1988) have termed “personal practical knowledge” which they define as “a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions for the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation” (p. 25). When teachers express their personal practical knowledge through stories, they share their narrative knowledge. This concept is closely related to both experiential learning and reflective practice: “education, in this view, is a narrative of experience that grows and strengthens a person’s capabilities to cope with life” (p. 27). People share their personal practical

knowledge as a way of reflecting, a way of knowing, and a way of bringing meaning to others' stories.

The process of sharing stories and writings with a community of writers benefits all members of the community (Gregory, 1990; Pithouse, 2005). In a quest to improve practice, members of a knowledge community share stories so that their professional growth "is *necessarily* enriched through conversation and critique within a ... community of scholars" (Samaras, Hicks, & Garvey Burger, 2004, p. 910). The structure provided by a knowledge community is designed to improve reflection by providing feedback, collaborating, and finding new solutions to problems.

The notion of knowledge communities is closely related to Fish's (1980) theory regarding interpretive communities. Such interpretive communities do not have preestablished responsibilities:

It is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. (Fish, 1980, p. 14)

Contributions from members of a knowledge community help story and re-story experiential narratives while shaping their meaning. Knowledge communities take advantage of a tacit knowledge-in-action (Schön, 1983) that is rooted in the experiences of its members and the context of their own work. Much of a community's personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) is shared through narratives among colleagues and peers, with members filling with remembrances from their own experience, possibly including alternative versions of the same events.

This concept of shared knowledge was articulated by John Dewey (1916) as he connected community with knowledge and education. He writes that "education consists primarily in transmission through communication. Communication is a process of sharing experience until it becomes a common possession" (p. 9). In addition illustrating the practicality of shared knowledge, the above passage also connects the terms "community" and "communication." This connection is not surprising considering that both words share the Latin root *communis* (meaning "common" or "general"). There can be no community without communication.

In the case of knowledge communities, this communication is based in the telling of stories. Building on the methodology of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990), knowledge communities share knowledge through "a process whereby data is represented as a series of stories that [are] constructed separately, then exchanged" (Craig, 1995, p. 153). These stories are subsequently reflected upon and then responses are shared.

Though primarily based in educational settings, knowledge communities can transcend disciplines in and among organizations that share beliefs that narrative knowledge can be shared in order to improve individual practice.

SIMILARITIES

While these two concepts differ greatly, they do contain some similarities. One such similarity concerns leadership roles within the communities. In both communities of practice and knowledge communities, leadership comes from inside the community. Wenger (1998b) asserts that internal leadership is diverse and has an “intrinsic legitimacy in the community” (p. 7). Leadership roles may exist formally or they can emerge informally, meaning that leadership exists even if it is not officially recognized by the members of the community. This formality and informality of roles extends not only to leadership, but to all roles within the community.

Another similarity between the two concepts is that both recognize that a community is distinct from a network. Networking is about developing relationships; communities of practice and knowledge communities are about developing and sharing knowledge. While an organizational chart of both networks and communities might look similar, the difference between the two is the purpose of the group.

Communities of practice and knowledge communities are also alike in that they share the view that external organizations may legitimize participation in the community. Wenger (1998b) puts it this way: “Organizations can support communities of practice by recognizing the work of sustaining them; by giving members the time to participate in activities; and by creating an environment in which the value communities bring is acknowledged” (p. 7). In knowledge communities, the organization is normally a school; however, knowledge communities can exist anywhere as can communities of practice. Organizations that formally recognize the communities that exist within and among the subgroups within that organization benefit from those communities and the communities benefit from the support of the organizations.

DIFFERENCES

There are more differences than similarities between the concepts of communities of practice and knowledge communities. For one, the concept of communities of practice emerged from business group practices whereas

the concept of knowledge communities emerged from the educational community. This does not mean that they are now exclusive to those disciplines. Indeed, the two concepts would work well in any organization. However, their origins lie in two distinct institutions.

Communities of practices develop informally and are emergent, knowledge communities can be created either informally or formally. While both concepts acknowledge that communities can emerge from within an organization, knowledge communities can also be formed purposefully and by the organization itself. For example, a school principal may decide to form a group from specific teachers on his campus for the purpose of sharing teacher knowledge. While this would meet the definition of a knowledge community, it would not be a community of practice.

While members of communities of practice may be either core members or peripheral members, there is no such distinction in knowledge communities. Communities of practice consist of both core members, such as members of a city council, and peripheral members, such as community leaders that attend city council meetings. In the concept of knowledge communities, all of these group members would have equal standing in regard to shared knowledge.

Communities of practice work collaboratively; knowledge communities can work collaboratively and/or cooperatively. In collaboration, all members share a common goal and all contribute to meet that goal. In a cooperative project, all members have specific tasks that individuals must complete. These complete tasks, when put together as a whole, contribute to the final product or goal. For example, when working on a school's budget, the finance committee may use a collaborative process in which all committee members have input on all aspects of the budget or they may use a cooperative process where all departments are responsible for only their own portion of the budget. One is not necessarily better than the other; just simply two different ways of approaching a problem or question.

Communities of practice are informally bound by what members do as well as what they know; knowledge communities are informally bound by what they know. In other words, communities of practice have a shared practice where knowledge communities have a shared knowledge base. An example: a community of practice about architecture would be limited to those in the practice of architecture; a knowledge community centered on architecture might also include sculptors and/or engineers. Members of communities of practice are practitioners with a shared competence or practice; members of knowledge communities are persons with shared interests or goals.

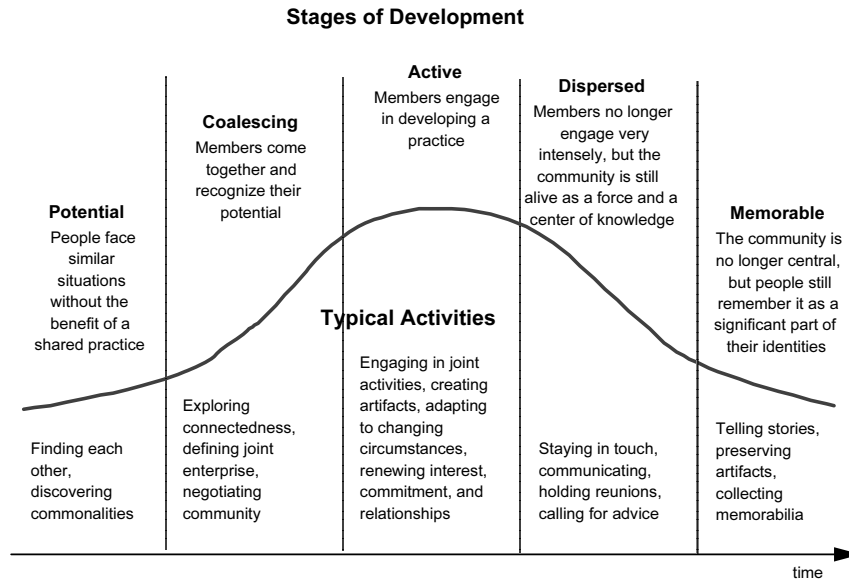
Members of knowledge communities assume that all knowledge is constructed narratively; communities of practice do not necessarily make that assumption. That does not mean that communities of practice do not assume that some knowledge is constructed narratively—the concept simply allows for other way of constructing knowledge and building a knowledge base around which practice can be improved. In research terms, communities of practice can produce quantitative and/or qualitative data; knowledge communities are strictly in the qualitative realm. Communities of practice promote active, conceptual thought; knowledge communities promote reflective thought expressed through narrative.

When studying and analyzing communities, the primary unit of analysis concerning communities of practice is the community itself. Conversely, the primary unit of analysis in knowledge communities is the individual. Therefore, the main goal of communities of practice is to improve practice or collectively redefine practice where the primary purpose of knowledge communities is to improve the individual member's practice. For communities of practice, the knowledge they construct as collective unit can in turn impact the definition of the practice and/or modification of the practice. A member of a knowledge community is more concerned with improving individual practice in hopes that sharing the knowledge that led to that improvement will lead to others' improvement.

Members of a community of practice believe that learning is a social process; members of a knowledge community believe that learning is both a social and personal process. While both concepts take into account that it is life itself that is the main learning event, members of a knowledge community take a more personal, reflective turn on life events when constructing knowledge. This is not to say that members of a community of practice are not reflective, they simply are more concerned with acting on their thoughts as they relate to their practice.

Finally, a community of practice follows specific stages of development and knowledge communities can exist indefinitely, sometimes lying dormant. Wenger (1998b) states that there is a life-cycle for communities of practice: potential, coalescing, active, dispersed, and memorable (see Figure 19.1). While not all communities of practice follow these stages, most do. However, knowledge communities do not follow any pattern or cycle. In fact, the relationship may be dormant if there is no current exchange of knowledge. This implies that the relationship can be resumed when members of the community have new knowledge to share or are in need of new knowledge.

The similarities and differences outlined in this work are summarized in Table 19.1.



Source: Wenger (1998b, p. 3).

Figure 19.1. Stages of development for communities of practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As seen in Table 19.1, there are more differences than similarities between communities of practice and knowledge communities. In any community, a program is secondary to the personnel. It does not matter if a group of people is considered to be a community of practice or a knowledge community; the most important resource is people sharing a common desire to improve.

Both concepts are certainly useful and worthy of use, research, and analysis. Communities are ideally formed for the purpose of improvement. Members of any community may also be members of other communities sharing different stories and purposes and will most likely join other communities at some point. Membership in a knowledge community completely depends on context. Interestingly, members of the community may or may not know each other or their contributions or even be aware of how many people are in this community. This anonymity actually strengthens the community by allowing members to speak freely without concerning themselves with others' opinions.

Table 19.1. Summary of the Similarities and Differences Between Communities of Practice and Knowledge Communities

<i>Communities of Practice</i>	<i>Knowledge Communities</i>
distinct from a network	distinct from a network
organizations may legitimize participation	organizations may legitimize participation
roles within the community may be formal or informal	roles within the community may be formal or informal
leadership comes from inside the community	leadership comes from inside the community
informal, emergent	can be either formally or informally created
Collaborative	collaborative and/or cooperative
informally bound by what members do and what they know	informally bound by what they know
exists to improve practice or collectively redefine practice	exists to improve individual practice
community believes that learning is a social process	community believes that learning is both a social and personal process
primarily based on business practices, but adaptable to other settings	primarily based in educational settings
individuals may be either core members or peripheral members	no distinction between core and peripheral members
members do not necessarily assume knowledge is constructed narratively	members assume that knowledge is constructed narratively
primary unit of analysis is the community	primary unit of analysis is the individual
members are practitioners with a shared competence or practice	members are persons with shared interests or goals
active, conceptual	reflective, textual
community follows specific stages of development	community may lie dormant

In terms of practice, knowledge communities may be better suited to a school setting in which the goal is to improve individual teacher practice. The philosophy of the school faculty in this situation would need to be one which believes the individual classroom teacher is the strongest influence on a students' learning. In this case, goals of the school are better served by effective teachers that work together to improve practice.

However, there are schools where the foci of the school may be the school climate or culture, discipline management, or higher scores on standardized tests. These schools may be better served with the communities of

practice model because of that concept's focus on the improvement of the community as a whole. In today's culture of accountability, many schools feel they must adopt a business approach to education in which the students' test scores are the product. For this situation, a community of practice model would work well for improving the community as whole.

As with any educational practice, there is no "one size fits all" approach to building and utilizing community. Leadership in each school will need to give some thoughtful consideration to which approach to use. Regardless of preference, the fact remains that both concepts have their merits and their place. As long as there is knowledge to be shared, both will continue to thrive, whether or not they are named as communities of practice or knowledge communities.

REFERENCES

- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1990). Narrative experience and the study of curriculum. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 20(3), 241–253.
- Connelly, F. M. & Clandinin, D. J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Craig, C. (1992). *Coming to know in the professional knowledge context: Beginning teachers' experiences*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta: Edmonton.
- Craig, C. J. (1995). Knowledge communities: A way of making sense of how beginning teachers come to know. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 25(2), 151–75.
- Craig, C. J. (1998). The influence of context on one teacher's interpretive knowledge of team teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 15(4), 397–411.
- Craig, C. J. (2001). The relationships between and among teachers' narrative knowledge, communities of knowing, and school reform: a case of "The Monkey's Paw." *Curriculum Inquiry*, 31(3), 303–330.
- Craig, C. J. (2003). School portfolio development: a teacher knowledge approach. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 54(2), 122–134.
- Craig, C. J., & Olson, M. R. (2002). The development of teachers' narrative authority in knowledge communities: a narrative approach to teacher learning. In N. Lyons & V. LaBoskey (Eds.), *Narrative inquiry in practice: Advancing the knowledge of teaching*. (pp. 115–129). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Donne, J. (1967). Devotions upon emergent occasions. In H. Gardner & T. Healt (Eds.), *John Donne: Selected prose* (pp. 100–101). London: Oxford University Press.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class?: The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gregory, C. (1990). *Childmade: Awakening children to creative writing*. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press.

- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Olson, M., & Craig, C. J. (2001). Opportunities and challenges in the development of teachers' knowledge: the development of narrative authority through knowledge communities. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 17*(6), 667–684.
- Pithouse, K. (2005). Self-study through narrative interpretation: Probing lived experiences of educational privilege. In C. Mitchell, S. Weber, & O'Reilly-Scalon (Eds.), *Just who do we think we are? Methodologies for autobiography and self-study in teaching*. (pp. 206–217). New York: RoutledgeFarmer.
- Samaras, A. P., Hicks, M. A., & Garvey Berger, J. (2004). Self-study through personal history. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 905–942). Boston: Kluwer Academic.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Wenger, E. (1998a). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998b). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system [Electronic version]. *Systems Thinker, 9*(5). Retrieved April 17, 2006, from http://www.ewenger.com/pub/pub_systems_thinker_wrd.doc
- Wenger, E. (n.d.). *Communities of practice: A brief introduction*. Retrieved April 24, 2006, from <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm>

Brian D. Schultz is an assistant professor of education at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. His research focuses on students and teachers theorizing together, developing integrated curricula based on students' priority concerns, and curriculum as social action. He is particularly interested in encouraging preservice and practicing teachers to create democratic and progressive educational ideals in historically marginalized neighborhoods. Prior to his role at Northeastern Illinois, Brian taught fifth grade in Chicago's Cabrini Green. change to: He has a new book, *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom* (2008).

Mark Seaman is an assistant professor in the Department of Secondary Education and Educational Leadership at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas.

Yonghee Suh is an assistant professor of Indiana University-Northwest. Her research interest includes social studies/history teaching, teacher knowledge and a comparative study.

Dr. Pamela B. Thompson is an assistant professor of education at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. She has been in the field of education for 17 years, teaching at the elementary, middle school and collegiate levels. Dr. Thompson has designed and implemented art curricula for both a Montessori elementary school and a middle school program. She has also served as an administrative director of a teacher education program and a human rights education program.

Benjamin H. Welsh is visiting professor at Alfred University where he teaches foundation courses in the Division of Education. The Barnes' research methods are his next research project.

Kai-Ju Yang is curriculum studies doctoral student at Indiana University Bloomington. Her research interests focus on tracking and mathematics education.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.