The Role of Community of Practice (CoP) to Ensure Teacher Development and Sense of Professionalism: The Implication for University Teachers

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Abstract: A community of practice (CoP) is a set of people who 'share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise… by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). In the context of this paper, CoP refers to an informal as well as semi-formal aggregation of professionals who have come together to forge collaborative learning situation, which is an important step toward fostering professional effectiveness and improving learners' learning achievement. CoP has long gained importance as a model and strategy for improving teaching quality and for enhancing student learning outcomes. It provides teachers the context to learn and grow together. Studies suggest that there is a positive relationship between CoP, student achievement and teachers' professional satisfaction. CoP involves diverse and interacting professional learning practices and processes. Among the major professional learning practices and processes are collective enquiry and collaborative learning. Membership in CoP is characterized by strong professional and emotional bonds between practitioners and their leaders. This paper discusses the implication of CoP for facilitating professional development and supporting the efforts toward collective capacity building in the university context. The paper addresses institutional, attitudinal and orientational variables that prevent CoP from becoming an effective source of professional growth. Finally, it tries to address what should be done to create and sustain CoP and to enable and empower university teachers to become informed and effective practitioners

Keywords: Teacher Development; Teacher professionalism; Community of Practice

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The concept 'communities of practice' (CoP) was coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991. In their original definition, Lave & Wenger (1991) conceptualized communities of practice as:

A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its

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condition for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., legitimate peripheral participation). (p. 98)

The other concepts being interchangeably used with communities of practice are *communities of interest, communities of learning, and communities of commitment*. All of them are used to describe the kinds of informal knowledge building and sharing in workplaces. Lave and Wenger coined the concept based on their understanding of learning as a situated, social process that depends on and develops through conscious and goal-oriented interactions with others in their apprenticeship communities (Wenger, 1998).

ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Various scholars have come up with cross-functional elements of communities of practice (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).
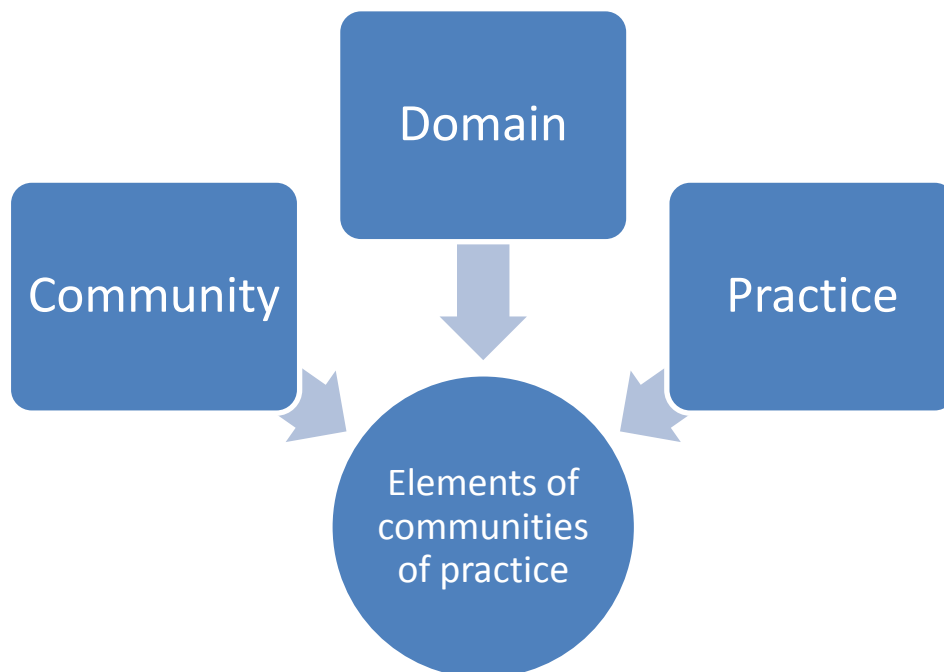

Figure 1. Elements of Community of Practice according to Wenger & Snyder

For Wenger and Snyder, the following constitute the fundamental elements of CoP.

Domain: the community's knowledge base and understanding of the field in which it resides

Community: the collection of people and their corresponding roles that form the community
Practice: the "work" of the community: its actions, learning activities, knowledge repositories, etc.
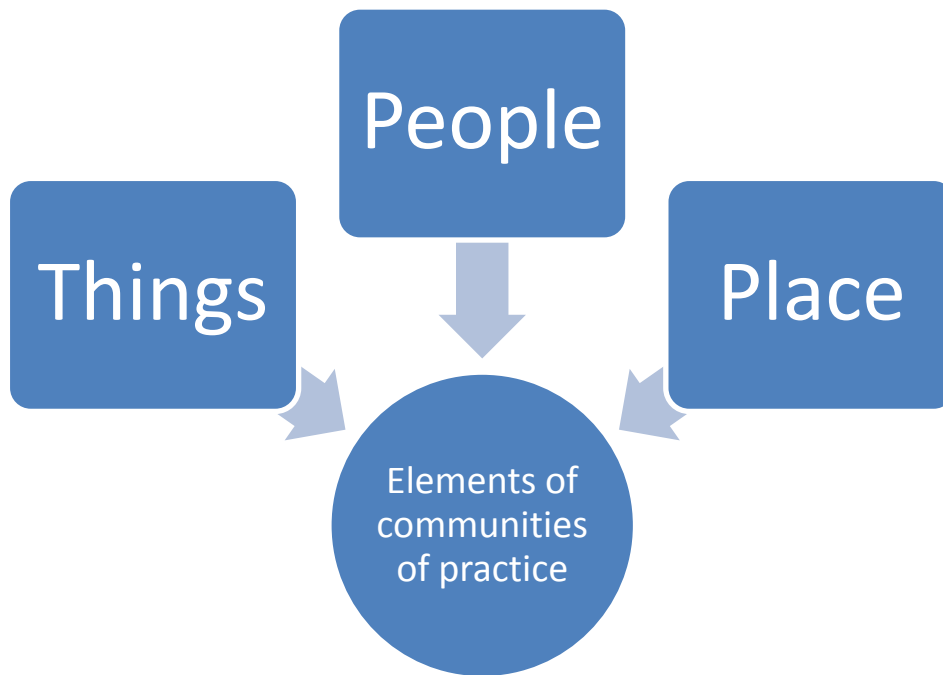
Figure 2. Elements of Community of Practice according to Lesser, Fontaine & Slusher

On their part, Lesser, Fontaine & Slusher identified the following elements:

People: those who interact on a regular basis around a common set of issues, interests, or needs

Places: gathering points, face-to-face or virtual, that provide a meeting ground for the community members

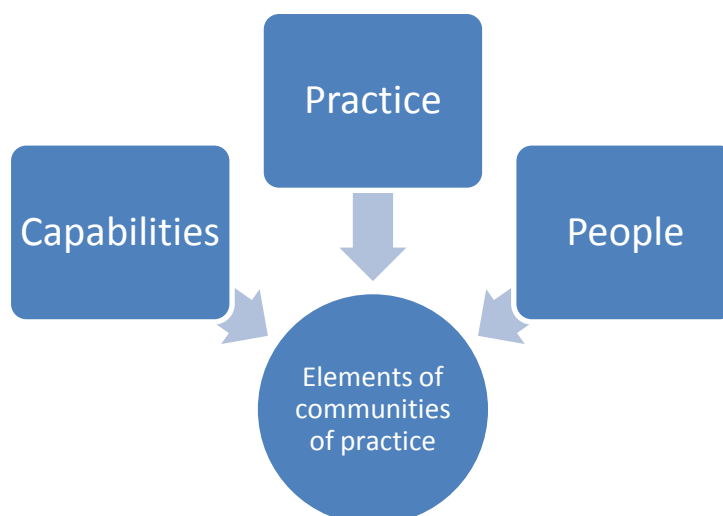*Things*: the knowledge objects generated by individuals or collectively by the community

Figure 3. Elements of Community of Practice according to Saint-Onge & Wallace

Saint-Onge & Wallace also emphasized the interactions between the following conditions to build a sustainable CoP.

Practice: the knowledge base, processes, and procedures that inform a collection of actions in the delivery of a product or service

People: the community of practitioners who join together to find ways to rebuild capability required to realize business strategies

Capabilities: the knowledge base, skills, abilities, attitudes, brands, processes, and relationships that result in the ability to undertake actions within the practice. Capabilities imply the "link" between strategy and performance.

THE THEORY BEHIND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The idea of learning and growth through engagement in communities of practice has been guided by Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning.
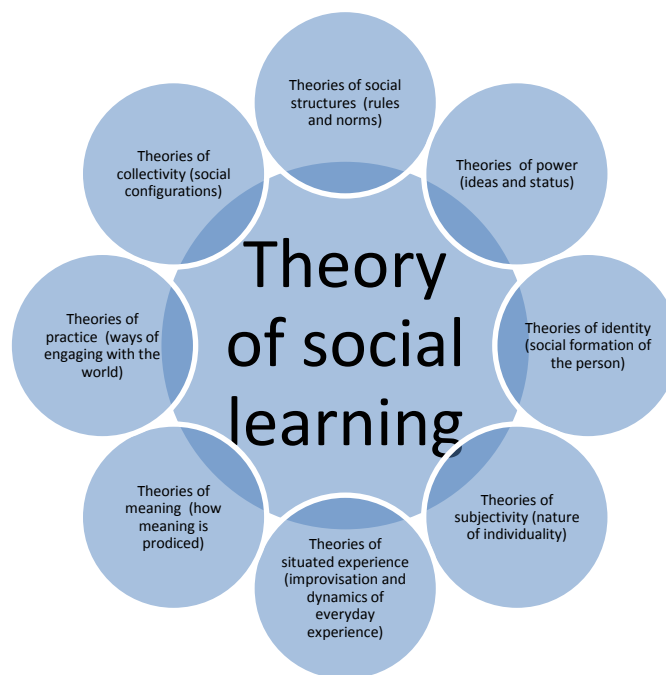

Figure 4. The conceptual underpinnings of Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning in Communities of Practice.

This theory places learning in the context of practitioners' lived experience and their meaningful participation in the world. In the words of Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 47), 'communities of practice are realized in the lived-in world of engagement in everyday activity'. In relation to this, social theory of learning posits that learning in general and professional learning in particular is a fundamentally social phenomenon. This theory emphasizes the integration between meaning, practice, community and identity.
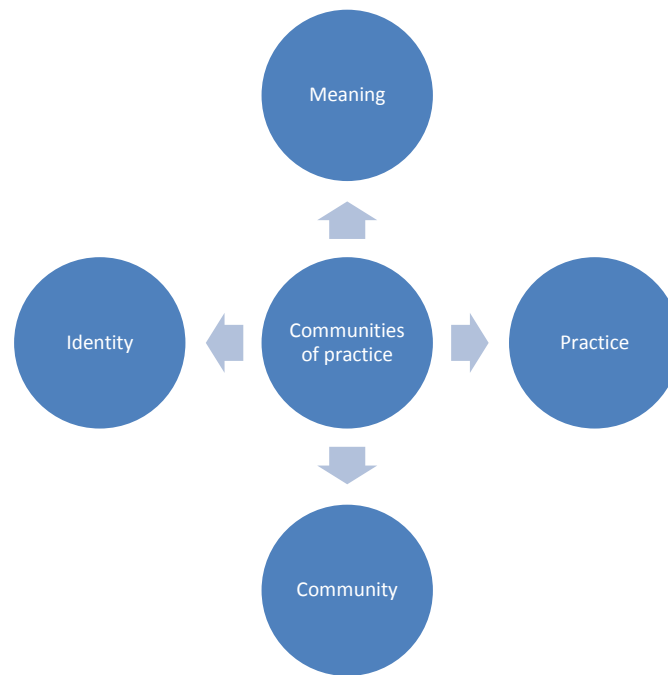
Figure 5. The integration of meaning, practice, community and identity

'*Meaning*: a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful' (in terms of learning he refers to this as 'learning as experience').

'*Practice*: a way of talking about shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action' (in terms of learning he refers to this as 'learning as doing').

'*Community*: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence' (in terms of learning he refers to this as 'learning as belonging').

'*Identity*: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities' (in terms of learning he refers to this as 'learning as becoming').

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AS AN ENGINE OF PRACTICE

Meaningful professional practice and growth is the result of active process of participation, negotiation through continual interaction and the creation of artefacts that show the existence of participation and involvement in professional practice. In relation to this, Wenger (1998), sees learning 'as the engine of practice and practice is the history of that learning.'

Mutual engagement usually results also in the creation of shared histories and identity stemming from a shared repertoire of practice. This in turn becomes a source of coherence

and unity for the community through which identity is created (and transformed) for both individuals and the community.

The role of CoP for Teachers' professional development
1. CoP helps professionals develop shared meaning:
2. CoP helps establish a common ground for ongoing mutual engagement
3. CoP promotes active participation and critical reflection on practices and the theories that underlie them.
4. CoP facilitates conditions for open engagement with differences as well as common grounds
5. CoP creates context for richer learning and for fostering intersecting relationships

Conditions for CoP

It is however important to create conditions under which professionals take the responsibility for their own growth and transformation. Teachers thrive in a context that supports collaborative leaning and promotes the culture of critical inquiry. Professional growth is possible only in a context where practitioners can make conscious and reflective accounts of their experiences and challenges and engage in collaborative inquiry (Blackmore, 2010).

There should also be sense of mutual trust/obligation (mutually acknowledged obligations), shared identity (identification with a well defined domain), close relationships, and belonging. Learning requires an atmosphere of openness that promotes willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002). The relationship should allow free communication and the development of a mutual understanding of their roles and expectations (Keppell, 2007).

In this regard, members of a community of practice should establish strong learning partnerships. Wenger (2010) considers a community of practice as a learning partnership and as a place where practitioners explore a social discipline of learning.
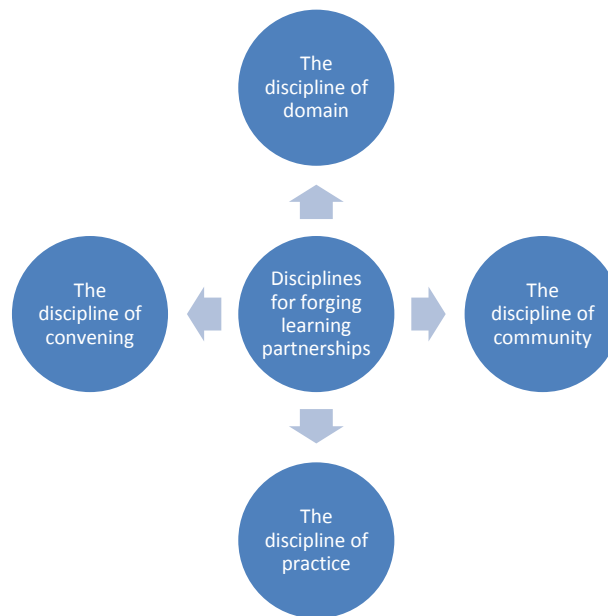
Figure 3. Conditions for Community of Practice

The discipline of domain: What is our partnership about? Why should we care? Are we likely to be useful to each other? What is our learning agenda? What specific set of issues does it entail?

• *The discipline of community*: Who should be at the table so the partnership can make progress? What effects will their participation have on the trust and dynamics of the group? How do we manage the boundaries of the community?

• *The discipline of practice*: How can the practice become the curriculum? How can it be made visible? What should participants do together to learn and benefit from the partnership?

• *The discipline of convening*: Who will take leadership in holding a social learning space for this partnership? How can we make sure that the partnership sustains a productive inquiry? Who are the external stakeholders and what are their roles? What resources are available to support the process?

CONCLUSIONS

The paper tried to indicate the importance of community of practice (CoP) and the fact that it is characterized by strong professional and emotional bonds between practitioners and their leaders. The paper stressed that CoP involves mutually interacting and goal-oriented professional learning practices and processes. Among these are professionals' engagement in collective enquiry and collaborative learning. The paper also discussed the implication of CoP for facilitating meaningful and potentially transformative professional practices. If properly planned and run, CoP can foster the effort to build university instructors professional competence and sense of professionalism. Towards the end, the paper outlined institutional, attitudinal and orientational variables that prevent CoP from becoming an effective source of

professional growth and what should be done to create and sustain CoP and to enable and empower university teachers to become informed and effective practitioners.

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