



Viewpoint

The Communities of Practice Approach: A useful way of reviewing education for sustainable development regional centres of expertise?

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Abstract

This Viewpoint Paper draws on an interpretive case study research project that explored workplace and networked epistemologies of social learning enabled by the establishment of Regional Centres of Expertise (RCE) in southern Africa. The study has its origins in a concern about the potential effectiveness of RCEs in enhancing professional development through social learning towards sustainability. The case study design employed a qualitative methodology using a mixed methods approach of document analysis and in-depth interviews from selected partners of two RCEs in South Africa: RCE Makana and RCE KwaZulu-Natal. By offering deeper insights into the networking and sharing in these communities, the Viewpoint paper argues the case that these are emerging communities of practice in education for sustainable development.

Introduction

Since 2002 the Southern African Development Community Regional Environmental Education Programme (SADC-REEP) has been collaborating closely with the Ubuntu Alliance, a global alliance of 11 of the world's foremost educational and scientific/technological institutions. SADC-REEP works closely with UNESCO, the designated lead agency for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD), in exploring possible joint actions with relevant organisations. Together they have been directly involved in establishing five Regional Centres of Expertise (RCE) in southern Africa: RCE KwaZulu-Natal and RCE Makana in South Africa, RCE Swaziland, RCE Zomba in Malawi, and RCE Maputo in Mozambique. These five RCEs have become part of a networked worldwide RCE community which comprise a learning space for sustainable development by enabling social learning in the milieu of the local communities of which they are part.

The goal of this study has been to examine the usefulness of the idea of communities of practice in supporting RCEs in southern Africa. The research focuses on RCE Makana in Grahamstown and RCE KwaZulu-Natal in Howick, two RCE examples from South Africa working closely with SADC-REEP. It explores the concept of social learning and its contribution to sustainable development practices. For the space allowed in this paper I will only focus on the first question, whether RCE activities qualify as characteristics of communities of practice, and through this develop a viewpoint on whether communities of practice is a useful way of reviewing the work of RCEs.

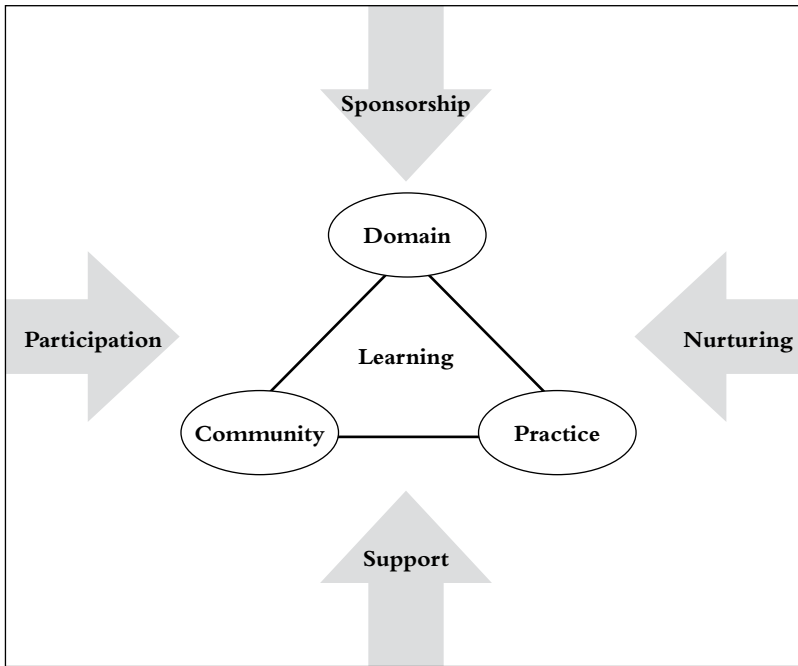
Methodology

Investigations on the two RCE cases presented here relied on qualitative evidence from multiple sources of data (Lamnek, 2005). To a large extent this research depended mainly on document analysis, 14 interviews with practitioners working in education for sustainable development (ESD) institutions networked with the two RCEs and three interviews with SADC-REEP staff. Analysis of documents established emerging patterns and initial data categories (Webb *et al.*, 2000; Marwick, 2001; Bell, 2005). Document analysis was preferred as an unobtrusive instrument which reduces the biases that may result from the intrusion of the researcher or measurement instrument (Webb *et al.*, 1966). Data from document analysis was supplemented by the 14 interviews with RCE coordinators, their partners and SADC-REEP staff (Krippendorf, 1980). This technique made use of semi-structured and unstructured interviews which provided opportunities to probe some responses further (Patton, 2002; Robinson, 2002). After negotiating with interviewees, all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed to enable more in-depth details for the purpose of data analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Bridges, 2001; Malone, 2008). Field notes and site observations complemented document analysis and interviews.

Research Findings

In order to address the question 'Can RCE activities qualify as characteristics of communities of practice?' it will be useful to summarise the findings of the study in terms of the prerequisites of a community of practice identified in the literature (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). This literature is organised around the key concepts of domain, community and practice. I will argue that the idea of communities of practice is enabling RCEs in providing a platform for ESD practitioners to progress from being *acquiescent partners* to *ESD connoisseurs* through ESD collegiality within the RCE community of practice. The two secretariats assume a hegemonic position because of their local and international prominence. Although RCE stakeholders share a range of interests, the domain is changing in the face of a changing world under pressure from HIV/AIDS, climate change and rising levels of poverty.

The findings of this study are interpreted according to Wenger's (2007) concept of communities of practice (as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1), a useful model for showing how RCEs are functioning as communities of practice.

Figure 1. Wenger's structural model of a community of practice

(Source: Wenger, 2007)

Domain

The domain of the two RCE communities of practice is a response to environment and sustainability concerns through ESD. This domain was also characterised by supporting sustainable living choices and health and nutrition in the community. One of the principal defining factors of community is having a shared interest, goal, or purpose, a *raison d'être* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Wenger, 2007). RCE partners come together around a shared interest in enabling ESD in institutions of learning and the community in line with the SADC-REEP's overall objective to enable environmental education practitioners to strengthen environmental education processes for equitable and sustainable environmental management choices (SADC-REEP, 2005).

That RCE practitioners had a shared purpose or goal might, at first, appear to be a given under these circumstances. There was, however, evidence of multiple goals within each community of practice. One example is Duzi Umgeni Conservation Trust (DUCT), a partner at RCE KwaZulu-Natal, whose common agenda is to promote the health of the Umgeni River. Key stakeholders include the Duzi Marathon community, representing a wealthier community of paddlers who take part in a canoe race between Pietermaritzburg and Durban, South Africa. The DUCT Coordinator, a partner of RCE KwaZulu-Natal, explained his case in this way:

DUCT also has these rich people, engineers and business people who are paddlers because DUCT was started by the people who participate in the famous Duzi marathon. The Duzi marathon paddlers started wetlands conservation because of the high counts of ecoli bacteria that was found in the river. (DUCT Coordinator, interview no. 10)

Mpopomeni community is also a DUCT stakeholder representing economically deprived people with very little resources. These two diverse communities come together with different agendas. The Duzi marathon community strive to uphold the health of the river to protect their sport, while the Mpopomeni community are concerned with a health hazard due to living close to raw sewage as a result of failing sewer drainage facilities. Mpopomeni is in the river catchment area and they are perceived to be the source of pollution finding its way into the river.

While it appeared that both RCE members shared a common set of beliefs and values, differences became apparent at implementing the Eco-Schools Programme. RCE Makana and RCE KwaZulu-Natal on one hand and Midlands Meander Education Project (MMEP) on the other do not put the same strength on the value of portfolios although they are promoting the same agenda of strengthening sustainability education in schools. The RCE Makana Eco-Schools Programme allows schools to participate even though not all of them are able to submit portfolios.

It is usually about ten schools that register per year. They register but we do struggle with attendance. Often only about four or five do submit their portfolios at the end. (Makana Eco-Schools Coordinator, interview no. 2)

This is not the case at MMEP, where if a school cannot do portfolios they cannot participate. MMEP is sponsored by the Midlands Meander Association (MMA) which represents the interests of members of the Midlands Meander, an independent organisation.

Then we started to weed out. Some people left on their own because they didn't like work. They didn't do portfolios and we said if you can't do portfolios you can't be in the programme. (MMEP Coordinator, interview no. 12)

At Makana they value the participation that takes place and assume that learning is taking place even without portfolios. At MMEP they acknowledge that learning is taking place in the absence of portfolios being produced but because they need to show sponsors tangible results they insist on evidence of participation. Although there might be multiple aspirations embodied by individual communities, they are still bound within a domain committed to sustainability education.

Community

The community in Figure 1 is represented by individuals and institutions which are committed to sustainability education and supporting communities in health and nutrition. This community extends further to include other RCEs in southern Africa and the global RCE

community under the banner of the United Nations University. RCE membership is however not a binding association as it gives room for open entry and open exit.

While open entry and open exit enables flexibility in participation, this model was not adopted by MMEP as those who could not produce portfolios were not allowed the privilege of participation. This translates to discrimination by default and shows a tendency of exclusivity by the community of practice which works as a screening strategy because it is highly unlikely that MMEP would take all interested schools even if they produced portfolios. Attendance by schools at Makana Eco-Schools programmes showed little evidence of homogenous commitment to the group because the RCE always struggles with attendance. An electricity supply company withdrew their participation from RCE KwaZulu-Natal after completing their training resource on energy. This company could have benefited more by staying and others could also benefit from their contribution. The company obviously did not see any need to maintain their commitment. This is contrary to the Director of Education's comments that a partnership was a two-way process, involving contributing to and drawing from. If a partnership remains a one-way process it is not a true partnership as participation is not balanced and the relationship becomes hegemonic. It is clear that RCE membership is not a binding association, but shared social learning activities can still be selected to depict a common practice.

Practice

A number of social learning activities can be singled out to profile the practice of RCE communities; these include mentoring, professional collaboration, sharing stories, community collaboration and sustainable agricultural practices. RCEs are in the process of developing a set of practices that help to shape their identity and provide the cohesiveness that sustain them over time (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). They are developing a set of formal and informal norms and responsibilities for expected behaviour. According to Westheimer (1998) and McCotter (2001), responsibility and authority for the community is shared rather than invested in one person. These authors argue that power and organisational structure is flattened rather than hierarchical. In the Makana and KwaZulu-Natal RECs there was however no evidence of the flattened structure as there appears to be an overload on the part of the secretariat. The hegemonic relationship is elaborated in the following quotations:

Rhodes University is viewed as the RCE by its partners:

... they [RCE partners] almost like associate us with the RCE, Rhodes Environmental Education and Sustainability Unit. We see ourselves as providing a secretariat for an open membership. (RCE Makana Coordinator, interview no. 1).

Here the RCE Coordinator is reflexively reviewing the situation as he is from Rhodes University, and is therefore critical of his own situation. MMEP also confirmed an acquiescent relationship with WESSA:

We gain from WESSA opportunities like being invited to workshops because of location. I think we can use WESSA as sort of way to include us. It gives us weight in environmental circles. We can get references from other people but WESSA in environment are the ones that are valued. (MMEP Coordinator, interview no. 12)

Since the early 1990s, SADC-REEP, Rhodes University and WESSA have acquired a great deal of knowledge and competency to act as critical experts in ESD practice, an essential element to be leaders in ESD, an asset I have called ESD connoisseur capacity. The common characteristics strengthening internal capabilities of RCEs as communities of practice are identified in Figure 1 and expanded in Table 1, which shows participation, sponsorship and nurturing, and support.

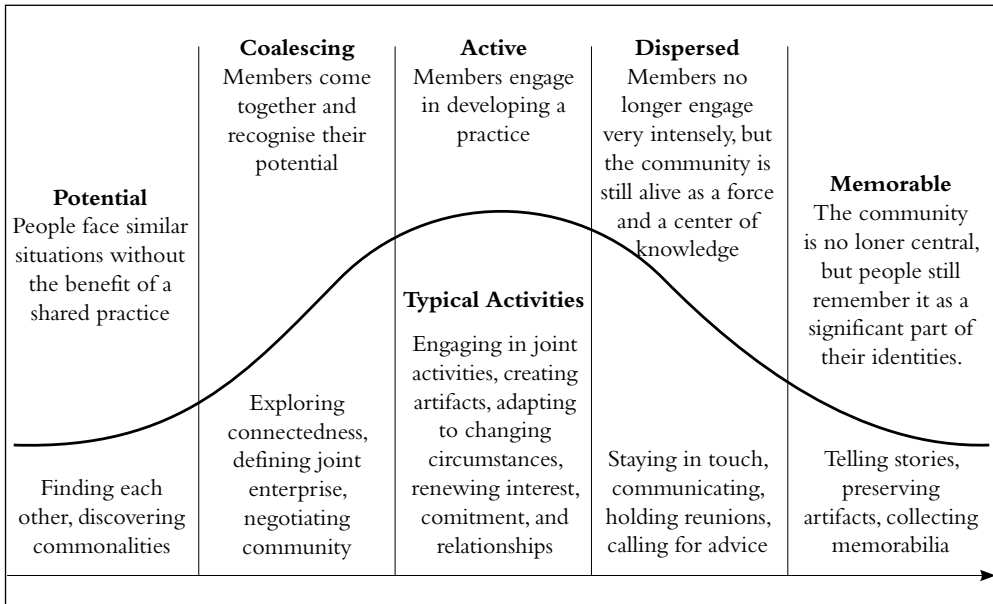
Table 1. RCE characteristics strengthening internal capabilities

Support Structure – RCE Secretariat <i>Connoisseur capacity</i>		<p style="text-align: center;">Nurturing and conceptual support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SADC-REEP connecting to international community • University research community • University links to international community
RCE Makana Rhodes University Department of Education	RCE KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative RCE home and Interaction hub • Networking support and venue for meetings 		
Participation		Sponsorship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System of working groups • Stakeholders meet quarterly • Open management structure 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SADC-REEP seed funding • No additional funding • Use of existing funding

The two RCEs are indeed emerging communities of practice and it is possible to allot their position according Wenger’s model of development of a community of practice.

Community of practice stages of development

Figure 2 shows stages of development a community of practice will go through as it moves from conception through maturity and beyond. When a community of practice is emerging in the organisation, the focus is on promoting learning, networking and collaboration (Wenger, 1998).

Figure 2. Stages of development

(Source: Wenger, 1998)

The SADC-REEP ESD community can be conceptualised within the active stage of this model, where members are engaged in developing practices consistent with SADC-REEP's overall objective of empowering environmental education practitioners in southern Africa. Members are engaged in common activities (course development and participation in regional courses), creating artefacts (Environmental Association of Southern Africa bulleting, newflashes), adapting to changing circumstances, renewing interest, commitment and relationships. The two RCEs, on the other hand, are situated between the potential and coalescing stages. Although some partners are still finding their way into the community there are a number of partners who have come together, recognised their potential and are exploring their connectedness. It is however important to note that partners operating in the coalescing stage have previously done so without the RCE. What the RCE has done is to make it official and enable partners to come together for official sharing, especially during quarterly meetings.

Conclusion

Since the early 1990s, SADC-REEP, Rhodes University and WESSA have acquired a great deal of knowledge and competency to act as critical experts in ESD practice, an essential component to leadership in an ESD community of practice. I have called this asset 'ESD connoisseur capacity'. RCE partners operating on the periphery still struggle with confidence and competence in participating as equals. Their willingness to accept an unequal position without objection or resistance creates an acquiescent relationship with the RCE secretariat.

It is therefore essential to encourage these partners to participate in other ways. The manner in which ESD practitioners are interacting with one another and the extent to which they approach their work is demonstrated by support for one another through ESD collegiality.

An example of how connectedness has defined joint enterprise can be illustrated through training programmes – such as the attachment programme, a SADC-REEP/WESSA partnership, and the International Certificate Course in Environmental Education, a SADC-REEP/Rhodes University partnership – which provide training opportunities to a number of ESD practitioners. This ‘connoisseur capacity’ has become a resource upon which RCEs in southern Africa are built. Rhodes University and WESSA have worked and supported ESD in southern Africa through SADC-REEP. As much as this has been positive in many ways like linking partners with international networks, the partnership between SADC-REEP, Rhodes University and WESSA has sometimes been perceived as hegemonic (Lupele, 2007), which needs to remain open to reflexive engagement, as shown by the Rhodes University RCE Coordinator in his reflexive commentary on the membership of the RCE. In conclusion, this short viewpoint paper has shown that Communities of Practice literature can provide useful tools for reviewing the formation and functioning of regional centres of expertise in ESD.

Notes on the Contributor

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