

Students as communities of non-practice: making the case for the use of social media in higher education(0226)

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Abstract: Educational communities frequently adopt approaches from other domains, such as the concept of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998). This concept is particularly influential for online learning environments where it has been adopted enthusiastically (Lea, 2005). This also applies to social media, where often engagement in online activities has been interpreted somewhat uncritically as a set of behaviours and tendencies exhibited by virtual communities that morph into communities of practice. There is an inherent conflict between formal and informal learning practices/spaces and a need to explore whether embedding social media within learning set-ups encourages and helps student groups to become communities of practice that support learning. The paper reports on the results of a meta-analysis of related studies which explored the links between social media and Communities of Practice.

Introduction

The concept of communities of practice (CoP) was first developed by Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger et al., 2002) to associate the idea of people organizing themselves in groups to carry out activities in professional settings and in education in a formal and informal fashion. The popularity of the concept across different disciplines including education can be attributed to the innovative aspect of the theory and its aspirational nature in how professional communities learn.

The main barrier to transferring the concept to the context of higher education (HE) has been that the formal/informal learning transition might not be supported very well by institutional learning technologies that espoused the formal rather than the informal, within well protected institutionally owned technologies. On the other hand, the proliferation of social software and the popularity of social media sites instigated interest in how to harness the success of these environments for educational purposes.

The paper explores the links between social media and CoPs by attempting to answer the question whether there is an agreement in what attributes of social media allow interpretations/claims that they support the formation/sustenance of CoPs.

Communities of Practice and social media

CoPs have members of variable expertise that can be simultaneously present, participating in a fluid peripheral to centre movement that symbolises the progression from being a novice to becoming an expert. Lave and Wenger (1991) named this 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Learning arises through legitimate peripheral participation which they characterize as an enculturation 'process by which new learners become part of a community of practice' and thereby 'acquire that particular community's subjective viewpoint and learn to speak its language'. The assumption frequently is that there is a transition from peripheral participation for the novices to acquiring full membership of the community.

The implication for an educational setup is that similar communities can be created where both staff and students can participate in multiple communities at once. There have been debates and criticisms about the value and the nature of the theory (Lea 2005; Hughes, Jewson & Unwin 2007) questioning its universal applicability and claiming that it might be a useful heuristic rather than a 'proper' educational framework:

- Formal/informal differentiation is irrelevant as informal learning is not common in HE and formal groups cannot become CoP if informal learning aspect is not embedded in learning activities.
- Students as newcomers to a community of practice do not engage in “legitimate peripheral participation” to develop their own mastery of knowledge and skills.
- Students as groups are far from being considered as communities: they encounter each other in random fashion and they do not conform to criteria about a CoP of professionals with common aspirations/aims and targets.
- CoPs cannot be created just because ICT in education can provide those opportunities that map against the framework of CoP
- Memberships ‘expire’ in these student CoPs as students move to employment.

The rise of social media and social networking has been associated with the transition from content-centred to people-centred activity. Social media sites are predominantly social and thrive on the assumption that they operate outside formal learning constraints. Institutions are generally reluctant to allow this out of bounds exchange that overrides authentication boundaries, commonly associated with an institutional VLE. Learners are sometimes equally unwilling to engage in learning interactions in spaces that they consider their own, private, a world that has attributes that are alien to formal leaning (Hatzipanagos & Warburton 2009).

Participants in internet-based social networking are immersed in fragmented digital environments, and engage in acts of computer mediated communication (Hatzipanagos 2006) through e-mail, email-conferencing and mobile texting, podcasting, personal publishing via blogs and wikis, aggregation and voice, chat, instant messaging and videoconferencing. To explore further this relationship between social media and communities of practice a meta-analysis of related studies was carried out.

Methodology

The case studies were drawn from a book on Social Software in HE, which was co-edited by the author (Hatzipanagos & Warburton 2009). An exploration of the theme of CoPs was an optional component of the call for chapters. Overall, there were 14 out of the 32 chapters of the book that discussed CoPs and how they can benefit from the proliferation of Web 2.0 tools. The cases comprised educational setups and conceptualisations of embedding social media in HE or both.

The exploration of the particular circumstances for each of these focused on answering the following questions:

- (1) Why was it claimed that a group was/became a community of practice?
- (2) What media and tools were suitable for sustaining a community of practice?

Discussion and implications for design

By exploring the behaviours, tools and workings of the ‘CoPs, it is not clear why the groupings of students and teaching practitioners have been considered to have formed CoPs. Strictly speaking, these groupings did not conform to the criteria for membership of a CoP (going back to the Lave and Wenger definition).

However, in the educational setups examined, there seemed to be an agreement about what would help a group to become a ‘CoP’. The findings reveal that the ‘Social media can create CoPs’ axiom is irrelevant but it can help make visible some of the affordances of social media tools that can help support learners. The tools and associated activities that ultimately can sustain a CoP are:

- (1) Informal and formal lines of communication.

- (2) User-configured spaces that represent the collective contributions of group members
- (3) Spaces where iterations and discussion of the common purpose (including learn how to learn activities and references to learning outcomes) can lead from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.
- (4) Opportunities to construct artefacts for personal use and for assessment purposes (as in e-portfolios).
- (5) Formal/informal assessment places with an emphasis on embedding formative rather than summative activities and feedback to enhance self- and group-monitoring processes
- (6) Linking and referencing ideas so that the development of the ideas can be traced as work-in-progress and as 'journey'.
- (7) Linking to other learner and expert groups, transversing the curriculum not just vertically but also horizontally, so that members of the group are not confined by disciplinary/progression/barriers in sharing experiences and learning from others.
- (8) Linking to professional communities that can support knowledge contribution endeavours by providing feedback, support and professional identity scaffolding.
- (9) Linking co-curricular and interdisciplinary groups

Conclusion

The concept of CoP found an enthusiastic following in the educational community that adopted sometimes uncritically the associated educational framework. The paper explored assumptions about groupings evolving into CoPs. These concern groups of students that may not strictly obey the criteria associated with CoPs membership, however they transgress the boundaries from formal to informal. They benefit from the momentum of a social network to invigorate a formal educational setup.

Active membership of communities of practice is a common theme in HE today, yet it is still an area that needs to be critically evaluated further, particularly within specific disciplinary contexts, as this disciplinary scrutiny may prove the CoP set of discourses more appropriate for certain disciplinary areas than others.

References

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