

Learning Communities

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Introduction

Learning can occur in a variety of contexts through individual reflection or social negotiation of meaning. In a community, knowledge is often developed through experience and narratives based on the perceptions of individual participants and communication between them. Thus, learning in a community means to advance the knowledge and performance of the whole while supporting growth of the individual. Individuals belong to a variety of communities, such as religious affiliations, neighborhoods, work environments, classrooms, and families to name but a few. In essence, a community is a group of people who regularly share or participate in a common interest or activity. In each of these settings, learning and knowledge can take on different meaning depending on the values, beliefs, and goals of the community and its participating members.

For example, a community of engineers uses calculus to determine the strength of a material, while a community of mathematicians uses calculus to develop theorems or understand mathematical concepts. Individual words and expressions also take on different meanings according to the communities that use them. The term celebration might be described and experienced differently in a religious community than in a community of friends.

Learning in a community can be structured in different ways through informal, purposeful, or structured interactions. For example, in a corporate setting, a technician often learns how to repair a machine through a combination of training and sharing experiences with colleagues. While learning occurs in most communities, it takes on a different emphasis depending on the context and goals of the community. For example, a learning community such as a classroom values learning over performance, while a community of practice views learning through the interplay of participation and performance. Because learning environments take a variety of forms, one community's perspective can have a greater meaning than another, depending on the instructional model employed.

Learning Communities

Bielaczyc and Collins (1999) emphasize four characteristics of learning communities:

- Diversity of expertise among its members, who are valued for their contributions and are given support to develop
- A shared objective of continually advancing collective knowledge and skills
- An emphasis on learning how to learn
- Mechanisms for sharing what is learned (p. 272).

The goal of the learning community is to create an environment in which learning and deepening understanding are the primary focus. The participants' learning backgrounds vary, and each person's strengths are utilized to encourage learning among and between peers. Multiple perspectives in problem solving and analysis are encouraged to support and respect

differences in style, presentation, and ways of knowing. Curriculum and content are not necessarily fixed, nor is learning identical among students, yet experiences and findings are shared with the entire community.

Learning activities emphasize both individual and collaborative construction of knowledge, sharing knowledge and skills, and emphasizing how to learn rather than what to learn. These characteristics are present in a variety of contexts, such as class discussions, individual and group research, peer mentorship, project creation, role-playing, and collaborative problem solving.

The teacher's role in a learning community is primarily seen as that of organizer and facilitator of strategies and tasks. Learning generally takes place through student interaction, and teachers help structure the environment to allow students opportunities to communicate their understanding and reasoning. Because knowledge and background vary among students, participant responsibility to the learning community depends on the context of the task. Students may lead teams in areas of their own interest or expertise as well as take an assisting role when learning about a new topic; both roles contribute to the goals and identity of the learning community. Thus, the students' roles and responsibilities can vary between central and peripheral participation based on their degree of knowledge, interests, and experience with a particular topic. In addition, expert sources external to the immediate learning environment (such as media specialists) can initially serve as central sources to help learners transition from peripheral to central participation.

Communities of Practice

Many professional communities resemble Wenger's (1998) description of a community of practice, where participants learn through participation and sharing experiences. While learning is important, the primary distinction between a community of practice and a learning community is that members in the former learn through participation and reification, which is the process of concretizing abstract principles through the creation of a product. Thus, learning and performance are more strongly interdependent than in a learning community. Further, communities of practice are not necessarily restricted to professional communities since instructional models, such as project-based learning and goal-based scenarios, primarily emphasize constructionist-learning principles, "just in time" learning, or learning by creating something.

A community of practice has three primary characteristics:

- Joint enterprise
- Mutual engagement
- Shared repertoire

"Joint enterprise" means all community members are working towards a common goal, such as creating an instructional design product or simply learning to become a highly competent technician. Each person brings a variety of skills and experience to help establish and work towards accomplishing the overall goals of the community. Mutual engagement implies that each member's actions and ideas are equally valued and judged within the community.

Participation involves interdependence of an eclectic combination of novices and experts so that decisions are made through a representative perspective. Shared repertoire suggests that community members have similar experiences and interactions in the learning and development process. While they do not necessarily perform the same tasks, participants in the community have similar responsibilities in achieving the community's goals.

Knowledge is often considered "soft" in a community of practice. That is, there is more emphasis on troubleshooting, strategies, and problem solving, than on possessing particular knowledge and skills. Orr (1990) found that technicians often learned how to repair machines by consulting with colleagues through storytelling. Their initial training was helpful but not always sufficient to resolve complex and unusual problems. Furthermore, there may not necessarily be a single method of successfully resolving a particular problem. Hence, narratives among colleagues were found to be an effective way of learning new strategies, expanding understanding, and welcoming newcomers into the community.

Summary

- Learning in a community is often associated with the following themes:
- Knowledge is socially negotiated and constructed based on the goals of the community.
- Learning is extended primarily when interacting with others within and outside of the community.
- Each member has multiple responsibilities varying from peripheral to central participation.
- Learning experiences are similar, but not identical, among participants of the community.
- Participation and communication are essential means of learning.
- Each member makes unique contributions toward shared community goals.

A learning community philosophy is emphasized in instructional models that focus on learning, and a community of practice philosophy is stressed in instructional models that emphasize production or increased performance through participation.

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Learning Communities Home Page. Available online at <http://www.ls.sesp.nwu.edu/lc/index.html>

Citation

APA Citation: Glazer, E. (2001). Learning in communities. In M. Orey (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching, and technology*. Retrieved <insert date>, from <http://projects.coe.uga.edu/epltt/>