ICT enhanced communities of practice: Respecting and maintaining the duality between organisations and practices

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Abstract

Communities of practice (CoPs) are increasingly recognised as an important mechanism through which goods are created. Current conceptualisations of CoPs don’t, however, acknowledge adequately the inherent tensions between practices and the organisations within which they function. This failure leads to an inadequate understanding of ways in which organisations should interact with relevant CoPs. It is assumed in these conceptualisations that CoPs can be managed, like any other asset, in the process of creating benefit for the organisation. This paper draws on MacIntyre’s understanding of practices and institutions and on Lave & Wenger’s notion of CoPs. The paper argues that the relation between organisations and practices can best be described as a duality. The concept of duality signifies a relation characterised by both mutual dependence and inherent incompatibility. CoPs need organisations to sustain them and organisations need CoPs to create value. Their incompatibility relates to their divergent natures and goals. The best benefit for organisations is gained when attempts are not made to neutralise this duality, but to learn how to work with it. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) should be developed and employed in such a way that this duality is respected and maintained.
1. Introduction

Communities of practice (CoPs) are increasingly seen as important resources and assets in organisations to promote competitive advantage through the improvement of organisational learning and performance. They provide the means to create, share and store organisational knowledge and competence. The way McDermott (2002) advertises his services is representative of this trend:

One of the most exciting developments in business today is the emergence of communities of practice as core elements of the business. To compete with knowledge, we help you plan, start, develop & maintain communities of practice around strategically important topics.

The acknowledgement of the centrality of CoPs with their associated learning/work/identity nexus is an important phenomenon in recent theories of organisations. It represents an affirmation of the value of practices in organisations and it provides various suggestions about the utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in organisations and practices.

A critical reading of the literature on CoPs leads to the conclusion that the full value contained within CoPs is not likely to be realised because of a mis-recognition of the nature of practice around which CoPs are organised. Most of the literature sees the function of CoPs in organisations in a very simplistic way, as a mere business resource which can be managed like any other resource (i.a. Contu & Wilmott, 2000), and which can be incorporated harmoniously within the organisation. This can be seen in Wenger (1998b) who states that CoPs “self-organize, but they flourish when their learning fits with their organizational environment”. A notion of a seamless relation between organisation and practice is present in Lesser & Storck (2001:4): “We argue that the social capital resident in communities of practice leads to behavioral change – change that results in greater knowledge sharing, which in turn positively influences business performance”.

This paper, which is an overview of research in progress, will argue that CoPs cannot simply be incorporated into organisational structures and managed as functional units or teams. It will be indicated that the relation between CoPs and organisations is much more complex and should be described as a duality. If this complexity is ignored, talk about CoPs will become just another temporary trendiness in organisational theory. A consequence of this is that organisations should rather find ways to work with the duality.

This argument is based on a conceptual analysis of practice which shows its inherent value, relative autonomy, uniqueness and integrity. It will be indicated that the resistant power of practices can be attributed to two of its distinctive features: its close relation with individual identity and learning. It will further be indicated that the power of these features are enhanced by ICTs.

The argument is of a theoretical and hypothetical nature and needs to be validated through subsequent empirical investigation and theoretical refinement. Such investigation and refinement form part of the research in progress, and an outline is presented of the planned empirical investigation.
2. The idea of practice

MacIntyre (1982:175) defines practices as follows:

*By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.*

Not all kinds of practices or all features of practices are important for this essay. The focus will be on their relative autonomous and self-organising (Wenger, 1998b:2) nature, their integrity, the way goods are defined and created, their collaborative nature and the centrality of learning and identity.

The integrity of practices is based on the fact that they are the basic units through which goods and meaning are created. The goods can be understood as cultural (Bourdieu, 1984) or social (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998) capital. CoPs, for Wenger (1998b:2) "develop around things that matter for people and as a result, their practices reflect the members' own understanding of what is important". McIntyre's (1981:176) notion of goods internal to the practice means that we can "only specify them in terms of" the practice and "they can only be identified and recognised by the experience of participating in the practice in question". This notion of internal goods should be distinguished from external goods such as money, status and power which are only attached to a particular practice because of particular, contingent circumstances. Furthermore, external goods, when achieved, are the property of someone whereas the achievement of internal goods "is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice" (MacIntyre,1981:178). The notion of internal goods can be illustrated with reference to the practice of medicine. Both doctors and patients participate in the practice for the sake of the internal goods defined by the oath of Hippocrates as the promotion of health and well-being. Status and money that may be acquired by medical practitioners in the process are goods external to the practice and contingently linked to it.

Practices embody human competences and provide the means for its production and reproduction through learning. Learning is the acquisition of competence which incorporates both understanding (knowledge that) and skill (knowledge how) and represents the ability to act purposefully and successfully. Through their practices, humans are constantly involved in the process of learning to become competent in two senses. Firstly, practices themselves can be seen as learning systems in the quest for competent performance. Secondly, people have to learn to become competent practitioners through a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991:27). The outcome of the learning process within a complex environment is unpredictable and potentially innovative. It cannot be predetermined what kinds of problems will be encountered and what kinds of competences need to be developed in dealing with these problems. The competent practitioner is not only someone who has internalised the rules of the practice, but one who is able to participate in defining new rules and standards of excellence.

The quest for identity and meaning is the driving force behind practices. At a basic level practices are driven by the quest for the meaning of humanity (Wenger,1998a:149) and at a personal level by the quest for self-identity. Wenger (ibid.,153) also indicates how people identify with their practices and develop a sense of self when becoming competent practitioners. The “project of identity” (Castells, 1997:8) happens through choice and
participation. The individual chooses which practices to identify with and becomes a competent practitioner through participation in the practice. The centrality of the quest for identity makes the choice of and participation within practices a highly valued enterprise where both the stakes and the risks are high.

3. The duality of Practices and Organisations

Although practices are self-regulating, they are not self-sustaining. Practices do not operate on their own, but are found in organisations and institutions. The mutual dependence between organisations and practices is reflected in the following quote from MacIntyre (1981:181) with reference to institutions:

“They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor can they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions.”

An organisation such as a hospital comprises various practices such as management, nursing, heart surgery, radiology, etc. These practices always need the sustaining structures of organisations and institutions which provide them with the necessary infrastructure and resources. Organisations, on the other hand, are dependent on the creation of goods within practices which are used by the organisation to produce external goods such as the accumulation of capital. The mutual dependency between practices and organisations, or symbiosis, is illustrated in the following quote from Brown (1998:5):

“If an organizational core overlooks or curtails the enacting in its midst by ignoring or disrupting its communities-of-practice, it threatens its own survival in two ways. It will not only threaten to destroy the very working and learning practices by which it, knowingly or unknowingly, survives. It will also cut itself off from a major source of potential innovation that inevitably arises in the course of that working and learning.”

This symbiosis is not a relation of harmony, but one characterised by tension because of basic differences between the two such as the different kinds of goods, different purposes and the different ways in which they function.

Whereas practices are associated with free creativity in the pursuit of internal goods, organisations control and manage resources (material and human) in order to obtain external goods. Practices cross the boundaries of organisations (Wenger, 1988b:4), draw on longer traditions and usually survive organisations. Organisations need to use the energy generated by practices, but the attempt to regulate them for organisational purposes destroys them as illustrated in the quote from Brown (supra).

The inherent tension between practices and organisations can be illustrated with reference to learning, identity and power. Organisations have the desire to regulate learning in order to maximise its performance. This regulation threatens to destroy the learning process which is by nature driven by curiosity and creative innovation (Garrick & Rhodes, 1998:176) and resists any form of regulation. Organisations wish to frame identity in terms of loyalty to itself and without regard of a coherent identity outside the confines of the organisation (Lesser & Storck, 2001:8). In contrast, the project of identity within the late-modernity context is by nature open-ended and any attempt to frame it would be experienced as a form of oppression.
The tenuous position of practices within this tension is described by MacIntyre (1981:181) who states that

_The ideals and the creativity of the practices are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution ...the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution._

The way organisations use power to distribute resources can lead to various forms of domination and oppression. Within the nexus of learning, practices and identity oppressive power denies opportunities to learn, to choose and to participate fully in practices and frustrates the project of identity.

4. The ICT context of Practice and organisation

Practices and organisations do not operate in a vacuum, but take specific forms depending on the context which frames them. This context is currently shaped by ICTs, that have a pervasive influence on practices and organisations and the ways they interrelate. We live, according to Poster (1990) within a "mode of information" where information has replaced material or labour as the basic means of cultural and material production and reproduction. Since ICTs are the means through which information and knowledge are accessed and created, their design and use become of critical importance to organisations and practices.

Through the employment of ICTs, practices have been less affected by the boundaries of time and space. The notion of virtual communities of practice indicates how practices are established and maintained through ICTs. A closer connectivity exists across time and space and an increased flow of information and knowledge occurs. The possibilities to interact create further opportunities for learning and the collaborative construction of knowledge.

The importance attached to ICTs by organisations is reflected in large financial and human investment in design and development of information systems. Although the tangible value of ICTs is difficult to establish, it has become a necessary means to maintain a competitive advantage through increased productivity and efficiency.

The tensions in the relation between practices and organisations is enhanced through ICTs. Because of the possibility to work across boundaries of time and space, practices find the means to operate more independently of particular organisational boundaries. Enhanced opportunities exist for collaborative work and learning. Organisations, on the other hand, find in ICT the means to extend their control over and surveillance of practices.

5. Conclusion and further research

The study so far indicated that the conflictual relation between practices and organisations should not be resolved, but accepted as a duality. The implication is that organisations and practices should learn how to live with and manage the duality as a way to maintain the relative autonomy of both and the mutual dependency.

Living with and maintaining the duality is even more important within the context of ICTs which enable practices to operate optimally and organisations to exert total control. It is important for organisations to refrain from controlling practices because it may destroy their integrity and relative autonomy. Instead of exercising total control, organisations should
enable the operation of practices by providing them with ICT resources through which they can flourish. They do not flourish when “their learning fits with the organisational environment” (Wenger, 1998b), but when organisations provide them with the space to pursue their own goods.

The deployment of ICTs is in the hands of organisations which should recognise their own limitations when attempting to respect the boundary between themselves and practices. These ICTs should enhance the relative autonomy of practices in order to maximise their ability to create goods through learning and identity-formation. The learning organisation should be seen as a place where practices are enabled to flourish through the employment of collaborative ICTs, in order to pursue their internal goods.

In order to pursue this research further, the following two questions are pertinent:

How should various ICTs be employed to enhance to activities of CoPs within and across organisational boundaries? This includes an investigation of ICTs such as e-mail, groupware, intranet and internet as mechanism to enable the functionality of practices.

How can ICTs be designed and used in order to protect practices from intrusive forms of organisational surveillance and to promote their relative autonomy? This includes an investigation of mechanisms employed by organisations to limit their intrusive gaze of practices.

References


