

The Virtual Community of Practice as an appropriate model for learning in Collectivist Cultures

CS7035 Pedagogy for Technology Enhanced Learning

11/19/2009

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ABSTRACT

Learning is no longer confined to the classroom. The pervasiveness of technology has spurred the development of virtual communities of practice (CoPs); communities that foster learning through practice, or *situated learning*, without the aid or constraint of formal learning conventions. People from collectivist cultures are adept at situated learning because they value community and collaboration, information in context, and they do not depend on explicit content to direct their learning. However, an assessment of the appropriateness of technologies and tools for use in virtual CoPs that serve learners and groups of learners from collectivist cultures could allow for a far richer learning experience for all.

Introduction

The central concept of Community of Practice (CoP) is that of *Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (LPP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991): newcomers to a community engage in simple or 'peripheral' community tasks and activities that gradually take on more meaning as they are exposed to the community's experts and artefacts. Over time, group members move from the outer layer or periphery, to the core of the community where they will take on a central role. Through LPP knowledge is transferred through *situated learning* - learning that is deemed central to, and inseparable from, practice. CoPs were initially considered to be predominantly co-located (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The spread of technology and globalisation has in part resulted in the emergence and development of *virtual-only* CoPs. There are many examples of these in corporate and educational settings (Rogers, 2000; Thomas, 2005; Wenjing, 2005) though according to Murillo (2008) none describe themselves as such with the aid of a model. The concept of CoPs has expanded, from the original apprenticeship model (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to

include many other variations (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). However, in this paper we will only concern ourselves with virtual CoPs as they support learning through practice.

Situated learning places the learner at the centre of the instructional experience and makes no distinction between practice and learning (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Lave 1988; Shor 1987). Some cultures, particularly those identified as collectivist in nature, are adept at learning in-situ (Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Wentling, & Stuedemann, 2006; Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002; Gallimore & Au, 1979; Hall, 1989) and in this paper we will consider the appropriateness of virtual CoPs as learning models for these cultures.

Limitations to the proposition

Access to technology must be noted as a major obstacle to the participation of large sections of society in some collectivist cultures. Research on *virtual only* communities of practice in collectivist cultures is therefore limited and research on learner behaviour and knowledge sharing preferences among collectivist cultures has to be reinterpreted in the context of virtual environments. The constructs of individuation and collectivism are widely applied to patterns of behaviour across cultures. In this paper the construct of collectivism is viewed through the lens of learning, communication and information sharing, but could also be interpreted through a number of different lenses.

Situated Learning and Virtual CoPs

The three major components of situated learning – *context*, *community* and *content* (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Shor, 1987) will be described in the context of virtual CoPs:

Context in situated learning means that learning takes place through the activities of daily life, with and through other people and artefacts. Virtual CoPs facilitate the sharing of real and particularly tacit experience, by enabling people with common interests and objectives to engage in discussion, debate, and reflection independent of formal learning practices (Murillo, 2008; Rogers, 2000; Thomas, 2005).

Community is central to the concept of situated learning. Virtual CoPs, through the provision of a number of a-synchronous and synchronous tools, enable the formation of community that is not physically constrained but exists within a common space of shared interest. It should be noted here that whether virtual CoPs are designed, as is the case in many organisations and educational settings (Allen, Kligyte, Bogle, & Pursey, 2008; Baek & Barab, 2005; Krumsvik, 2005) or emergent as Murillo (2008) found, the creation of the *space* and the appropriation of tools and artefacts in that space will not guarantee the formation of a community of practice without the establishment of a commonly accepted domain (Johnson & Thomas, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, et al., 2002). Le Baron et. al (2000) observed that culture can be a barrier to learning in virtual CoPs even within a common domain due to the sometimes conflicting cultures of the participants. Much of the research indicates that knowledge is transferred more fluidly between people of the same culture in communities of practice (Ardichvili, et al., 2006; Bhagat, et al., 2002).

Content in the form of documentation, processes and tools is seen as supplementary to situated learning. In fact, over-emphasis on content can contribute to the failure of a community of practice (Wenger, et al., 2002). Oliver et. al (2009) makes an important distinction between the impact of text-based content and interactive material in online environments. This distinction will become more significant when discussing collectivist cultures and situated learning in the following section.

Situated Learning and Collectivist Cultures

The constructs of individualism and collectivism have been prominent since the early 80s (Bhagat, et al., 2002). There is no single categorical definition of a collectivist culture, but we offer the following description which covers the main characteristics:

Collectivist cultures tend to regard cooperation and group harmony as more important than individual goals. They behave in ways that foster group cohesion and regard information in context as more significant than de-contextualised information.

Context is fundamental to communication and learning in collectivist cultures (Bhagat, et al., 2002). Ardichvili et. al (2006) discovered that individuals from collectivist cultures in online communities of practice would often disregard written information that was not delivered in a context that was relevant to them. Hall's (1989) theory of low and high context cultures also supports this claim.

Community goals or group goals are prized over individual ones in collectivist cultures (Bhagat, et al., 2002) and individuals from collectivist cultures are enthusiastic about sharing information with others in virtual CoPs (Ardichvili, et al., 2006). Despite this penchant for collaboration modesty can act as a deterrent to participating 'actively' in online discussion forums (Ardichvili, et al., 2006). However, this may also be attributable to the choice of content or technology.

Content is understood best in context in collectivist cultures. Tacit knowledge is particularly well transmitted in collectivist cultures where meaning is sought for each piece of information (Bhagat, et al., 2002). However, many assumptions are made about content which ignore cultural preferences for knowledge sharing and communication (McLoughlin, 1999).

Collectivist cultures will likely prefer high impact rich media such a second life, video, teleconferencing, images and music that are culturally contextual. Over-use of documentation, explicit information (de-contextualised) and text-based discussion can inhibit participants from collectivist cultures from fully engaging in virtual CoPs.

Conclusion

Virtual Communities of Practice are potentially ideal learning environments within collectivist cultures due to the value those cultures place on collaboration, group harmony and contextual learning. However, this potential can go largely untapped when technology is perceived as neutral. Damarin (1998) argues that technology is 'culturally biased' and McLoughlin (1999) echoes this view to some degree, by noting that 'current' models of instructional design are specific to the culture in which they are developed.

Given the existence of such bias Ardichvili et. al's (2006) recommendation that a 'cultural needs assessment' be conducted before developing any online community initiatives, is pertinent. Undertaking this degree of analysis may also counter the belief that 'if we build, they will come' (Baek & Barab, 2005).

Most of the literature on virtual CoPs is situated in the context of North American and Western European cultures. When online cross-cultural knowledge sharing is examined it is usually situated in North American and Western European multi-national-corporations and educational institutions. Given the great challenges that developing countries face in terms of access to education and access to new knowledge and innovation, we recommend that further research into the appropriateness of virtual CoPs as models for learning in collectivist cultures in developing countries be explored. A starting point for this research could be the comparison of data from cultural learning needs assessments from communities of learners (such as teachers) in individualistic developed countries and collectivist developing countries. An analysis of such data might indicate common as well as opposing cultural learning needs that will directly influence the medium of communication and choice of technology adopted in virtual communities of practice in collectivist developing countries.

Joseph Stiglitz, former Chief Economist of the World Bank cautioned that tacit knowledge *for development* cannot be 'downloaded' and that best practices cannot be codified as data and simply transferred from one context to another (Johnson & Thomas, 2007). The virtual CoP could provide an appropriate medium through which tacit knowledge is shared and re-contextualised within collectivist cultures in developing countries.

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