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Practice Makes Perfect? A Retrospective Look at a Community of Practice

Ramirose Ilene Attebury

University of Idaho, rattebur@uidaho.edu

Robert Perret

University of Idaho, rperret@uidaho.edu

Jeremy Kenyon

University of Idaho, jkenyon@uidaho.edu

Deborah Green

Fort Hays State University, deborah.white0411@gmail.com

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Practice Makes Perfect?

A Retrospective Look at a Community of Practice

Abstract

Communities of practice have been touted in the organizational literature as an effective form of professional development in the workplace. When the University of Idaho Library faculty created one in the fall of 2008, they hoped the group would enhance new librarians' understanding of publication requirements and research methods. Although the community seemed healthy during its first year, problems arose in subsequent years that led to its decline. Seeking to understand the nature of this decline, the authors conducted a survey and initiated a focus group discussion of former members. Analysis of data led the authors to identify three themes related to the group's struggles: an overly formal structure, a gap between expected and realized benefits, and ambiguity of purpose. Evaluation of these themes in light of literature related to learning theories and organizational learning offers further insights as to why the group faltered after a seemingly successful start. The authors conclude by offering possible next steps for revitalizing the community of practice by altering its format to better match the constructivist learning principles that seem to characterize successful communities of practice.

Keywords

Communities of Practice; Constructivism; Cognitivism; Organizational Learning; Learning Theories

Introduction

The University of Idaho (UI) Library formally established a Community of Practice (CoP) in the Fall of 2008. The creation of the group stemmed from the desire of five new faculty librarians for assistance as they navigated the waters of academic publishing. Originally envisioned as a form of mentoring in which published librarians would share advice with their new colleagues, the group appeared to have found a strategy for reducing the anxiety associated with a new tenure-track position. The success led some members of the group to write positively about their experiences following the group's first year of existence (Attebury & Henrich, 2010). The resulting article contained a section about the challenges of sustaining a CoP, yet nothing led the authors to believe the UI Library CoP was in danger of faltering in the face of these challenges. By the end of the second year, however, the group's activity had begun to diminish. Meeting attendance dwindled, and the initial enthusiasm that had marked the group's beginnings was noticeably absent.

The short time that elapsed between the group's initial creation and its decline prompted introspection among the faculty. What had seemed like not only a good idea, but also a success was abruptly not, and several members of the group began to wonder why. Was a lack of time to blame? Did participants no longer need the group? Was something wrong with the way the group was organized? By asking former CoP participants for their opinions, and then surveying the literature on communities of practice the authors uncovered some interesting ideas about the nature of CoPs and learning in general. This feedback from participants led the authors to identify three thematic categories of perceived problems. First, participants cited the group's overall structure, complete with by-laws and officer positions, as too formal. Next, participants

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noted a discrepancy between the benefits they expected versus the reality of what they actually gained from participation. Finally, although the goal of the group originally seemed straightforward, it became apparent from participant feedback that ambiguity about the group's true purpose caused confusion among members.

In addition to the three thematic categories which emerged from participant feedback, the literature review undertaken by the authors highlights a major theoretical issue which may help explain some of the problems that the CoP faced. In the adult education literature, communities of practice generally belong to a school of thought known as constructivism (Leonard, 2009). Constructivist learning occurs in groups when members can learn from and with each other, constructing knowledge in a personal and meaningful way. This perspective contrasts with the school of thought known as cognitivism, which suggests that learning occurs when knowledge is transmitted from those who know something to those who don't.

Based on the feedback gained from CoP participants and ideas developed through the review of the literature, the authors propose that the original CoP at the UI Library was created by members operating from a cognitivist perspective. That is, original CoP members assumed that experienced members of the library who knew how to publish could somehow transmit this knowledge to newer members. While this assumption is unsurprising given the cognitivist perspectives present in the United States educational system, the challenges that befell the UI Library CoP suggest that beginning a community of practice under cognitivist, rather than constructivist, assumptions may cause challenges for the group down the road.

Literature Review

In undertaking a literature review for information about declines in other CoPs, the authors encountered work from the field of adult education that led them to consider perspectives

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and theories related to learning in general. Some of these theories suggest why the UI Library CoP was not successful. Specifically, the literature review led the authors to consider the dialectic of constructivism and cognitivism. In a reference work on learning theories, David C. Leonard identifies four major schools of thought commonly espoused by scholars of the subject: humanism, behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. Of these, the last two have considerable implications for thinking about communities of practice. Cognitivism suggests that there exists some definitive piece of information or way of doing something that teachers understand. It is the goal of students to acquire that piece of information or understand the right way of doing something (Leonard, 2009). This contrasts with the learner-centric school of thought known as constructivism, which suggests that students themselves construct knowledge by making meaning from their experiences. Moreover, social constructivists espouse the idea that groups can create subjective meaning together in collaborative groups (Leonard, 2009).

Leonard, drawing on the work of Jean Lave, describes a CoP as a “social, interactive group of seasoned practitioners who provide cognitive coaching and apprentice learning to novices who are in the process of learning a particular skilled craft or trade” (Leonard, 2009, p. 32). On the surface this sounds very much like what the founders of the Idaho CoP sought to create. However, scholars also very firmly place CoPs within the constructivist learning school of thought (Leonard, 2009; Kerno, 2008). That is, rather than entities in which those seasoned practitioners have the right answers and seek to impart them to novices, CoPs are interactive, collaborative groups in which seasoned practitioners form a committed core whose members learn from and with each other while mentoring new members and drawing them into that core.

Adult education researcher Enrique Murillo (2012) has identified two interpretations of communities of practice in the organizational and business literature: organizational studies

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interpretations and knowledge management interpretations. The former are those that are organic, emergent, and informal and the latter, those that are seen as strategic resources to deliberately develop knowledge among employees. The Idaho CoP can be described as the latter type, one which was strategically and deliberately created, complete with formal by-laws and meeting structures prior to implementation. Although the authors argue that it was this deliberate and formal nature of the group that led to its limited life, at the time the group undertook the endeavor, some literature seemed to support this model. The use of groups to mentor new hires has received positive attention in the literature, and CoPs have been mentioned specifically as one useful type of group (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Lesser & Storck, 2001). There is also evidence that creating CoPs for fostering research efforts can be successful under the right circumstances (Janson & Howard, 2004). Additionally, librarian Robin E. Millar (2011) touts the use of CoPs as a means of enhancing the professional knowledge of reference librarians at her institution, and library educator Char Booth (2011) discusses their uses in instructional development. Given, then, that CoPs have had some success in both research and library settings, it was understandable that librarians at the University of Idaho attempted to make use of the model.

Thus, in September of 2008, following a recommendation from the library's dean, a group of ten new and experienced librarians met to discuss the creation and layout of a community of practice. A written agreement codified the group's intended goals and direction. The original document detailing the group's creation answered four key questions, which emerged from the organizational planning meeting. "What is our goal?" "Who will do what?" and "What will meetings look like?" These questions related to three structural elements identified as necessary by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) for the formation of a CoP:

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domain, community, and practice. The fourth question, “How will we determine success?” attempted to acknowledge the challenges that CoP members often overlook regarding the maintenance of the group (Wenger, 1998).

According to McDermott (2004), communities of practice must have clear goals in order to succeed; that is, they must have a specified domain over which members attempt to gain mastery. The Idaho CoP seemed to meet this requirement; minutes from the first meeting state the goal specifically: “to create a professional community within the library where group members have the opportunity to exchange ideas, create relationships that further collaboration, present recent research ideas (towards promotion and tenure or otherwise), and seek feedback and advice from the group” (personal communication, September 12, 2008).

Pemberton, Mavin, and Stalker (2007) suggest that other necessary components of a successful CoP are an understanding of who is in the community, how it functions, and who is responsible for internal leadership. The Idaho CoP laid out the framework for fulfilling these requirements as well. Each meeting was to have a designated facilitator who was to receive any agenda items from members in advance. The position of facilitator was to rotate among members. Because the CoP envisioned a member presenting something about his or her research at each meeting, it was decided that presenters would become facilitators the following month, allowing everyone to share in the responsibility. Further, the CoP elected a secretary to take notes at meetings, and a listserv administrator to ensure adequate communication among members.

The third structural component of a community of practice is the practice itself, or what activities should be undertaken (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002). The CoP planned to meet twice a month for an hour. The first thirty minutes was to be reserved for a presenter who

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could discuss his or her research. Any stage of research was acceptable to group members for discussion: brainstorming ideas, soliciting recommendations for research designs, discussing data analysis, asking for feedback on drafts, or even doing trial runs of conference presentations. The second half hour was to be dedicated to discussion of items of professional interest. In order to ensure that the group remained useful to members a mid-year survey would be distributed. Survey questions would address the usefulness of meetings and whether individual goals were being met because of participation in the group. The option of offering suggestions was also to be a feature of the survey.

Challenges with the CoP did not appear all at once, and at times during the first two years members seemed to enjoy and benefit from meetings, but in hindsight a few signs of weakness appeared early. The meeting schedule immediately changed from bi-weekly to monthly, with members citing lack of time as the cause. During the first academic year, a meeting was held each month from October 2008 to April 2009. No meetings were held over the summer, and the following Fall a loss of momentum was evident. Later, when group members began to question the benefits of the CoP, dissatisfaction with the time commitment was a prominent theme.

The second year of the UI Library's CoP saw a dramatic drop in the number of meetings that took place. Although the group gathered in September 2009 for a productive discussion, the minutes of which indicate a number of ideas for making the CoP more relevant, only one other meeting was held that year. An email discussion during the summer about reinvigorating the group spurred two meetings during the fall 2010 semester. However, these meetings were not well attended. By the third year, the group ceased meeting and was effectively defunct.

Participant Feedback

In order to gather feedback from fellow Community of Practice participants, the authors employed a two-tiered approach. First, they created a ten-question survey using Constant Contact, an online survey tool. Invitations to complete the survey were sent to all UI Library faculty via an internal listserv. The complete survey is included in Appendix. In general, the survey was designed to gauge the level of participation of the respondents, their expectations of the CoP, and their level of satisfaction. The authors favored open-ended questions after careful deliberation, deciding that open-ended feedback was more valuable than easily quantifiable results. Of ten potential participants, eight responses were received. All responses, including those of the authors, were collected anonymously.

The second method of gaining participant perspectives was to put together a small focus group. As Krueger and Casey (2000) note, focus groups allow participants to influence the interview by responding to the ideas and comments of others. This interplay of ideas was exactly what the authors hoped to encourage. Focus group participants were told up front that the authors hoped to share their findings by writing an article for the wider library community. Because of the possibility of aggregated ideas being shared outside of the group in the form of an article, the authors also applied for and received IRB approval prior to conducting the survey and focus group. All participants were assured that participation in both was voluntary and that no names would be used should results be put into writing. Eight members of the library faculty, plus three of the authors, attended the focus group. Overall, the authors felt that the size was small enough to ensure everyone had a chance to comment but large enough that conversation flowed continuously.

Thematic Categories

Three themes emerged from the survey results and focus group discussion: 1) group structure, 2) expected benefits of participation, and 3) group purpose. In all, there was relative uniformity in response both from the survey and the focus group, highlighting several consistent obstacles to the success of the Idaho CoP. Participants also made suggestions as to how future iterations of the group could be improved. These suggestions provide useful information about the types of flaws participants perceived in the original version of the CoP.

Group Structure

The most common remarks about the group's structure were of two types. On one hand, the CoP was deemed to be too formal. Simultaneously, participants saw too little management of that structure by leaders. The first of these flaws likely stemmed from the nature of the group's creation. The CoP was seen by the group's members as an arbitrary, top-down construction, one which many respondents stated was fundamentally flawed. Even among the respondents who remarked on the advantages of formality, there was a sense that it began too rigidly. As one respondent noted, "It seems like many of us said that mentoring is something we want to do. Then we were given this model. None of us knew what it was or what it meant." Another simply said, "The 'officialness' was frustrating."

In terms of structure, the committee-like format apparently hindered the group's development. With a chair, secretary, bylaws, and meeting agendas, the group was seen as just another meeting to attend and a committee on which to serve. Bylaws were especially singled out as preventing buy-in from the group. The decision to write up formal bylaws originally stemmed from a desire to adhere exactly to the knowledge management interpretation of a CoP. Unfortunately, the by-laws appear to have been too constricting, to the point of preventing

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organic growth. That the group became just another responsibility was acknowledged during the focus group by statements about a lack of interest in participating as leaders and supporting the leaders. One respondent noted, “It stayed among the same people all three years. It was a chore, a burden, but no one else wanted to do it.”

Criticisms about the formality of the group coincided with criticisms about a lack of strong leadership and direction. One respondent suggested that the group devolved into an “anything goes” mentality over the three year period, which undercut the group’s mission. It was felt this could have been prevented by stronger or more effective leadership. Another respondent reacted to the “lethargy, poor planning, and poor responses to presented work.” Although complaints of too much formality combined with criticism of a lack of leadership might seem like mutually exclusive problems, the two may be related. The formality seems to have irritated participants, which led to a lack of willing leaders, which in turn contributed to a lack of direction and purpose.

Group Purpose

Related to the expectations and outcomes, respondents acknowledged a lack of a collectively defined purpose for the group. There was confusion on two levels. First, was the CoP intended to function as a support group for the scholarship required of faculty librarians, or was it an orientation tool for newly hired librarians into the work and purpose of university faculty? The responses given indicate that participants felt that both purposes were set forth, and quickly became irreconcilable. As one respondent suggested, “Maybe [the new hires] just needed to review the Faculty/Staff Handbook. After one or two sessions, it was getting repetitive.” This comment reflects the fact that new hires had little research to “present” at the first several meetings, so conversations tended to lean toward advice from more experienced

faculty. However, there was only so much advice to give. Reviewing literature related to virtual Communities of Practice, Bourhis and Dubé (2010) claim that a willingness to share knowledge is one of the most important factors in a CoPs success. Without a body of knowledge to share in the first place, the University of Idaho CoP struggled to find its purpose.

Some senior faculty members joined the group to help their colleagues, and it was considered a good opportunity for publication and discussion for all involved. But soon a sense of confusion about what type of help was expected or possible set in. One librarian lamented “you can’t help if you don’t know anything about their topic.” One respondent commented, “as a public services librarian, I found it difficult to provide useful feedback on some of the more technical papers...one paper was completely outside the library science field.” The division between public and technical services generated some of the dissatisfaction with the process. The library as a whole has more public service librarians than technical services librarians, and those belonging to the latter group indicated that they did not feel the group gave very helpful research advice. While everyone seemed understanding about the difficulties associated with providing feedback on unfamiliar topics, it nevertheless created a major hindrance for a group originally designed to help with research. In fact it is difficult not to conclude that the inherent differences among the librarians involved, between senior and junior faculty, between public and technical services, played a major role in exacerbating the ambiguity of purpose. These divisions, never fully confronted, appear to have been fatal to the group’s success.

Expected Benefits from Participation

Reasons given by respondents for participation in the Idaho CoP varied. Participation for new faculty was felt to be implicitly required, regardless of interest. For others, there was a genuine set of reward expectations. Most members felt its original purpose was explicitly to

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support the publication requirements of promotion and tenure. This vision of the CoP involved “a place to share ideas and generate new research” or to provide “research guidance and feedback...and a place to find collaborators for papers.” While this conceptualization of the CoP may sound valid from a constructivist standpoint in that members hoped to learn from each other, the underlying idea that some members knew what to do in terms of research and publications and others needed to learn this speaks to the cognitivist perspective that members brought to the group.

Unfortunately, after a year of participation, few felt that the hopes of learning how to do research were realized. Participants, perhaps aware that the original expectations for the group were not succeeding as well as they hoped, began to search for new meaning in the group. Many suggested that their perceptions about the group as a research forum gave way to seeing it as a place for theoretical and intellectual discussions about librarianship. Although this second approach gained support among members, the formal structure of the group hindered change and led to a crisis of identity. The knowledge management interpretation under which the group had begun held members to the belief that the group had been specifically created so that members could learn about research and publication. Even the awareness that theoretical and intellectual ideas related to librarianship might eventually lead some members to research interests seems to have been stymied by the group’s narrowly perceived mandate.

One member suggested that “we are always busy and forced to be practical. I thought this would be a way to engage with bigger issues.” Another hoped the group would be “a place where we have the intellectual conversations about our work”. The evolving needs and expectations of librarians who were gaining more experience and beginning to fulfill their promotion and tenure requirements began to clash with the original expectations for the CoP.

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Eventually participation was affected by this tension. Members tried to keep the original format of meetings the same, with one person responsible for presenting his or her research while also leaving time for informal discussions. This led to oddly dichotomous responses such as: “We were cramming too much into the same group”, and “[we] were meeting for the sake of meeting,” and “once you stopped going, you stopped caring about going.” Some felt the Idaho CoP had too ambitious an agenda, yet others felt the opposite. It appears that by trying to be both a research support group while hesitantly transitioning to a professional development discussion group, the CoP pleased no one. Once benefits were no longer felt by the members, they stopped attending.

Discussion

By analyzing the feedback gained from the survey and focus group in light of literature related to CoPs and learning, it is possible to make some suggestions as to what happened to Idaho’s CoP. It is unsurprising that negative comments expressed during the focus groups centered on the group’s overly formal structure. Although Murillo noted the prevalence of CoPs that were deliberate created, PhD students Janson and Howard (2004), in describing their CoP, say, “By definition, CoPs self-form and self-direct as our group did, as opposed to other groups, which have external regulation and governing mechanisms. Managers’ attempts to create and control teams and workgroups in organizations have met with only mixed success” (p. 174). The fact that the University of Idaho CoP founders tried to formally and deliberately create a CoP with rules and regulations runs contrary to observations by some organizational scholars that successful CoPs are organic in nature, developing circumstantially as likeminded practitioners begin to share ideas with and learn from each other.

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In addition, the fact that the group did not develop organically seems to have contributed to some of the tensions described as members expressed confusion about the group's purpose. Hustad and Munkvold (2006) state, "The emergent, self-organizing characteristic of CoPs based upon voluntary membership and participation is in contrast to using formal controls to support knowledge exchange, such as contractual obligation, organizational hierarchies, or mandated rules. Instead CoPs promote knowledge flows along lines of practice through informal social networks on a continuous basis" (p. 60). It seems somewhat unlikely that in a casual, informal setting technical services librarians would have sought out new public services librarians to discuss potential research ideas and vice versa. That this is what was expected to happen as the group was originally designed defies research that indicates true communities of practice are composed of "likeminded practitioners" who have the ability to give each other useful feedback and advice.

Although several respondents mentioned a lack of strong leadership as one of the problems resulting in the group's demise, constructivism deemphasizes hierarchical learning, so it seems unlikely that stronger leadership would have resulted in a better community of practice. The formal structure prevented the group from evolving naturally into something capable of providing a meaningful learning experience to members. Looking to a leader for a solution suggests the prevalence of cognitivism in educational experiences. Ultimately, the idea that there could exist a person or group of people with knowledge of "the" answer about how to do research is perhaps questionable in and of itself, and it is even more unlikely that a community of practice would be the venue in which to transmit such knowledge.

Conclusion

In spite of the appearance of failure, there has proven to be a genuine interest in continuing the process of group learning, albeit with significant change, at the University of Idaho Library. The faculty involved agree that the nature of the group has to be different from what was originally attempted. Proposed changes for the group include loosening the structure and eliminating formal agendas, thereby creating an open session for discussion. In order to loosen up the structure one person suggested that having a “sign-up sheet [and] giv[ing] everyone a few days’ notice; [then] whoever shows up, like at the coffee shop, we have a discussion. Super-informal, but might also be the only way, too.” Changing the venue as suggested above was echoed by several participants of the focus group. It is possible that meeting in the conference room, a site which often serves as a place of knowledge transmission rather than knowledge creation, hindered perceptions about the ability to freely exchange ideas. Others hoped that informal sessions would be a place for “discussion of different methodologies . . . [and] what actual librarians are actually doing.” Participants also wanted to change the scheduling of meetings. For future meetings one person suggested to meet “every two weeks” with different times and days so everyone has an opportunity to participate. Another wanted to maintain the once a month because everyone is busy. Regardless of meeting times, the group seemed to feel it was important for participants to come as they could or as they pleased, with no feelings of obligation or duty.

Perhaps more important than details such as when and where to meet is the emergence of a shared agreement on future iterations of the group. The responses from the participants make it clear that by examining the weaknesses of the CoP, the group participants came away with some good, if previously undefined, ideas of what had gone wrong. Moreover, they had suggestions

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for change. The nature of this examination, enabled by a focus group environment, forced a learning experience in which the expressions of future iterations could be suggested. The act of investigating the group's decline has also remedied what one focus group participant described as a lack of understanding about what a CoP model really meant. It is clear to the authors from reading the literature that a successful CoP is not always a by-product of traditional, cognitivist-based educational practices in which knowledge transmission occurs from those who know to those who don't. Similarly, successful CoPs need not be of deliberate creation. Rather, by definition a community of practice is organization born out of constructivist learning principles, one where members can grow together and learn together. Instead of having a specific goal that all members produce and share their own research in turn, a successful and popular library-oriented CoP might very well be conceived of more as a discussion group of whatever trends or issues may be prevalent at any given time, convened as individuals or groups see fit. Such discussions would be beneficial to all participants, and likely the entire profession, whether they spur research or lead to non-research outcomes.

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