

Chapter XV

Fostering Online Communities of Practice in Career and Technical Education

Lesley Farmer

California State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Career and vocational educators (CTE) need to find ways to foster online communities of practice (CoP) in order to optimize learning and application of knowledge to real workplaces. Not only do students engage more actively in their learning, but they gain from multiple perspectives, and can develop more complex projects with the help of others. Instruction needs to be designed to help students get to know each other, and collaborate. Technological tools can facilitate such interaction, overcoming time and space issues. Particularly as Web 2.0 tools facilitate collaboration, online CoPs can thrive. Nevertheless, equity issues of physical and intellectual access need to be considered when creating such online learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Career and technical education (CTE) should represent an efficient way to facilitate the growth of the learning community as a whole. The term “community of practice” provides a useful context for pre- and in-service professional development. The need to incorporate the features of a community of practice (CoP) in CTE becomes

increasingly apparent as this work philosophy permeates the professional workplace. Particularly as Web 2.0 tools facilitate collaboration, online CoPs can thrive. Not only do students engaged more actively in their learning, but they gain from multiple perspectives, and can develop more complex projects with the help of others. For online CoPs to succeed, CTE educators need to design instruction that helps students get to know each

other, and collaborate. Technological tools can facilitate such interaction, overcoming time and space issues. CoPs not only provide authentic training opportunities, but can also link pre-service and in-service professionals. Career and technical education (CTE) should represent an efficient way to facilitate the growth of the learning community as a whole. The term “community of practice” provides a useful context for pre- and in-service professional development.

Communities of practice constitute an effective way to optimize learning and application in the field. By working with others, students gain new perspectives and can test their own knowledge on their peers. Students can accomplish tasks together that would be too large and complex, or demand specific skills that might be unknown to an individual but familiar to another. Because they are working as a community, students may call upon each other for help – and can raise the bar for achievement as positive social norms encourage friendly academic competition.

In using a community of practice (CoP) model when designing instruction, CTE educators need to establish a learning environment that integrates collaborative learning and practice. They need to provide access and motivation, resources, learning activities, and social opportunities. The instructor assumes the role of a coach rather than a sage, providing just-in-time guidance and intervening when students are off-track or dysfunctional.

As CTE students increasingly learn at a distance using technology, the form of a community of practice changes shape to some degree. Missing face-to-face interaction, some students may feel isolated. Particularly as much telecommunications is asynchronous and text-based, learners may feel sense-deprived. Therefore, career and vocational educators need to find ways to foster online communities of practice in order to optimize learning and application of knowledge to real workplaces.

BACKGROUND

Basically, a community of practice consists of a group of people with common values and goals. In the business world, a community of practice could include a work unit, mid-level management, or even the entire enterprise. In most cases a community of practice has a social dimension that fosters interdependence, but the chief goal is organizational improvement through individual and group professional development and deployment.

In education, the term “community of learners” is more likely to be encountered. As with a community of practice, a community of learners develops interdependent relationships as they learn from each other. Carney (1999) defines a community of learners as “a place where student learners are made to feel that their prior knowledge, the knowledge that they are acquiring, and the skills that they are learning to acquire future knowledge are all tied together” (p. 53).

In both kinds of communities, the notion of sustainability, or at least ongoing engagement is expected. In a community of practice, it is more likely that a broader spectrum of experience and expertise will be represented, if for no other reason that entry-level employees may be incoming members and long-term employees may serve as mentors. However, just as a curriculum is greater than a course, so too are students in CTE programs likely to include neophytes and veteran learners. In both cases, a social norm exists that fosters and facilitates the sharing and generation of information. Indeed, “knowledge management” is a related activity whereby the individual knowledge of a group or organization is systemically collected, organized, and stored for effective retrieval and use by the whole enterprise.

It might be said that a community of learners might have more prescriptive outcomes and available resources, although a case may be made that a community of practice might have very specific goals in mind. Likewise, it might be assumed

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