

Chapter 2

Communities of Practice: An Ecosystem–Based Philosophy of Harmony in Education

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ABSTRACT

Despite continued efforts of educational professionals to develop a quality, meaningful classroom experience for teachers and students, relevant to employability, there still exists in the USA a skills gap. This gap has created a lack of a competitive advantage in the national and global marketplace as well as a low return on investment. There is a growing consensus that highly developed education systems are unlikely to be capable of the kind of change which is urgently needed. Community-building in education is not just about creating or defining a new work for teachers to do collaboratively. It is about changing a school's professional culture. Establishing communities of practice (CoP) involves the whole educational experience. Engaging with learning has become a central focus for educators, administrators, business, and community leaders. This chapter attempts to bridge the gap between the either-ors by presenting a learning ecosystem and three case studies highlighting successful CoPs.

INTRODUCTION

A creative explosion of school formats will utilize diverse strategies and structures for organizing learning experiences to increase district adaptability and responsiveness (Saveri, 2013).

John Dewey, in his book, *Experiences and Education*, speaks about the either-or philosophy of education. “Mankind is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. ” (p. 17) Dewey goes on to say in his treatise, *Traditional vs. Progressive Education*, “The main purpose is to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life” (Dewey, 1938, p.18). Dewey rejects an ‘either subject-matter or learner’ thinking that recognizes no transitional possibilities in between. Emphasizing the importance of both subject-matter and learner, and maintaining that educators need to direct student learning by integrating appropriate content into the learner’s total experience (Tan, 2015).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7853-6.ch002

Beyond Either-or Thinking

An example of this either-or conflict is the current tug of war which exists between state and national accountability standards which mandate immediate change, and on the other side, is the educators' who want to build stronger teacher-student learning relationships in the classroom, which take a lengthier time to produce noticeable result. Inviting individuals to develop relationships and share their abilities to create and use knowledge at the school-wide level is easier to facilitate than in a classroom, where a greater focus is often placed on the individual's ability to meet prescribed learning outcomes (Kane, 2016). However, over the past few decades there have been many improvements in curriculum, effective teaching and learning strategies and assessment procedures. What is now needed in most schools is an alignment of these practices (Cooper & Boyd, 1995).

Community Building in Education

Community building in education is not just about creating or defining a new work for teachers to do collaboratively. It is about changing a school's professional culture (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006). It is also about changing the culture of the classroom.

The children in my class contribute to classroom rules and participate in discussions with teachers about fair consequences. Early in the year, we create a classroom manifesto that distills the community's belief system. The statements in the manifesto are always in the affirmative—for example, "We use kind voices with one another," "We keep bodies and feelings safe," and "It's okay to make mistakes." Teachers guide the class and model empathy as the children collectively discuss breaches in the manifesto and encourage their peers to cooperate. The manifesto is meaningful to children because it is in their language and it is framed in the lens through which they see the world. (Kane, 2016)

By definition, a community is a group of people who work with one another building a sense of trust, care, and support (Hittie, 2000). Part of a teacher's profession is to provide opportunities and structures by which students can support one another. To accomplish this goal of creating a sense of share community, teachers will provide explicit instruction and guidance so that students learn how to feel members of a common interest. Community building is something which requires active participation by all members to create. Through cultivating relationships, we learn how to create communities within our classrooms. "In our room, we call these dispositions and realizing them starts by elevating us all to the *status of learner* (Brown Wessling, 2012)." There's no doubt that the membership, the trust, the sense of self that comes from being part of a classroom community keeps kids in school and keeps them engaged (Jalongo, M. R., 1994; Cooper & Henderson, 1995; Senge, 1995; Hittie, 2000; Brown Wessling, 2012; Eng & McLean, 2014). Teachers all over the world are building a literature of practices promoting community building in the classroom (Hittie).

Effective community building is also an essential element for cultivating what are essentially 'communities of practice'. Establishing communities of practice involves the whole educational experience, requiring us to explore common goals and to investigate creating shared values, beliefs, and attitudes about learning. Unlike traditional notions of community, a community of practice is regenerative and can create structures to help institutions fully realize their potential when traditional or inadequate structures exist (Nair & Thomas, 2018).

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