


The Development of a Doctoral Program CoP and Its Members

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to explore how a multigenerational community of practice (CoP) at a public urban university may provide doctoral students the space and the support needed to explore and develop their professional identities and find their scholarly voices. The second aim of this study was to examine how the entity of the CoP itself evolved over time. Social learning theory and generational theory provided the framework to interpret the data. Through analysis of collective autoethnographic journals, three primary themes emerged: 1) psychological safety and trust; 2) diverse expectations became shared interests; and 3) the unique and shared experiences of the CoP members.

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography, Communities of Practice, Community of Practice, Intergenerational Learning, Multigenerational Learning, Transgenerational Learning

INTRODUCTION

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group typically organized by persons who share mutual interests or concerns on some key topics (Wenger, 1999). Once the CoP forms, Hansman (2001, 2014) suggests that knowledge is developed and shared among and with members through interactions and collective experiences as members reflect upon and negotiate meaning about their learning. In the context of higher education, communities of practice (CoPs) may provide graduate students, particularly doctoral students, the space to explore and develop their professional identities and find their scholarly voices (Coffman, Putnam, Adkisson, Kriner, & Monaghan, 2016; Olszewski, Znamenak, Paoletta, Selker, Pontikos, & Hansman, 2018). However, little is understood about the process of how these communities allow space for members to learn from and with each other, and further, how these communities develop as a single entity (Smith, Hayes, & Shea, 2017). Moreover, since graduate student CoP members

DOI: 10.4018/IJAET.2020040101

may span several generations, it is important to understand not only multigenerational learning but also intergenerational personal and professional development (Boysen, Daste, & Northern, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to expand on the initial findings of a pilot study of a multigenerational CoP at a public urban university (Olszewski et al., 2018) to better explore the learning and development that took place, focusing on each CoP members' processes of learning and developing professional identity, as well as the evolution of the CoP itself.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Foundational to CoPs is situated learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) described situated learning as a process whereby individuals participate, to varying degrees, in a group where shared practices, what they describe as legitimate peripheral participation, are central to their learning and development. Social interaction forms the basis of a common bond that helps to establish a group identity and a sense of shared value to the learning that occurs within the group (Gauthier, 2016). Communities of practice are typically "formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour...[and they] share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1).

CoPs are socially constructed learning spaces, centered on a shared interest, where interactive relationships enable the members to learn from each other and where members care about the opinions regarding each other (Farnsworth, Kleanthous, & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). Within a community of practice, people also develop, negotiate, and share personal ways of understanding the world; they experience a form of social learning (Gauthier, 2016). CoPs are more than just a group of people working together on a task; rather "it refers to a social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time" (Farnsworth et al., 2016, p. 5). Other key characteristics that make CoPs different from traditional learning groups are their organic nature and the opportunity for individuals to be self-directed while participating in a collaborative learning process (Hansman, 2001, 2014). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) highlighted that groups of people in a CoP share a concern or a passion and learn how to do it better through regular interaction.

Hoadley and Kilner (2005) extended Wenger's work by outlining four key practices related to the community's purpose: connection, conversation, exploration of context, and documentation of content. Professional identity is the collection of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences resulting from personal and collective reflection (Ibarra, 1999). P. A CoP may also assist members with professional identity development by allowing the space for members to collectively explore and reflect (Coffman et. al, 2016). These common or uncommon characteristics influence learning within a CoP, as well as the development of the CoP itself.

Generational Complexities

A generation is defined as, "a series of birth cohorts who share a common location in history and common peer persona that reflects a collective identity" (Lowery, 2001, p. 7). The generational groups' birth years are defined, although somewhat fluid. However, for the first time in history, our society has five generations of adults living, working, and learning together (Darby & Morrell, 2019). Figure 1 displays generational birth years and characteristics.

The CoP is not immune to the changes that come with this multi-generational society and the many issues that arise from the diversity of ages and learning styles. The values and belief systems of each generation represented can be wide-ranging, with unique motivating factors. Even with the uniqueness of each individual, there are certain behaviors which can be attributed to generational groups as a whole.

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