Chapter VIII

# Innoversity in Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about innovation in Communities of Practice and introduces the term innoversity, which describes the role of diversity in fostering innovation. The chapter sets out to discuss when and under what circumstances of innovative practice diversity should be encouraged, as opposed to similarity. The chapter furthermore explores the following questions: 1) What actually is innovation? 2) How does innovation take place in Communities of Practice—and when does it not? 3) Why is diversity in CoPs important in fostering innovative practice? and finally 4) What can be done to foster innovation within and among Communities of Practice? This chapter therefore sets out to describe innovation in Communities of Practice, and what can be done to foster such innovation.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of Practice (CoPs) emerge among people who experience a mutual engagement in a shared practice around which they share a common repertoire of knowledge (Wenger, 1998; Brown & Duguid, 1991). "What makes engagement in practice possible and productive is as much a matter of diversity as it is a matter of homogeneity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 75). But according to different fields of research such as social psychology, network theory and

Figure 1: The Similarity — Diversity Continuum
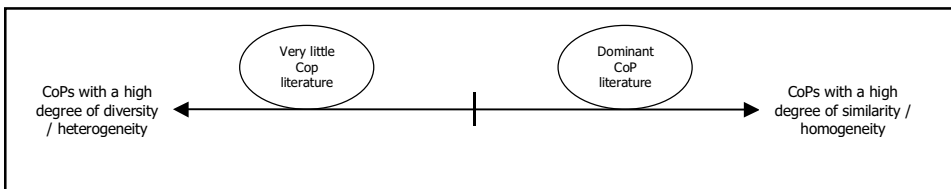
diversity theory, we have solid evidence that birds of a feather tend to flock together, which is usually described by the term *homophily* (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). The tendency towards homophily in organizations has been thoroughly documented by Byrne (1971), Kanter (1977) and Ibarra (1992). These findings illustrate why most self-emerging Communities of Practice tend to be based more on similarity than diversity. However, even though the majority of CoPs tend to be homogeneous, CoPs that emerge among highly diverse individuals deserve our attention as well. This chapter sets out to explain and illustrate why such diverse CoPs provide for an interesting new approach to working with innovation and innovative practice in organizations.

Self-emerging CoPs can be described according to their degree of diversity. Most CoP literature focuses primarily on more homogeneous CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McDermott, 1999; Wenger, McDermott &Snyder, 2002), whereas only very few theoreticians have dealt with the more diverse CoPs (Hildreth, Kimble & Wright, 2000, Justesen, 2001), as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

This distinction between similarity and diversity in CoPs becomes particularly interesting when dealing with innovation. This chapter sets out to explain why diverse CoPs are likely to be innovative, and how this perspective on innovation in CoPs, known as innoversity[1], may bring about a different approach to working with learning and innovation. The word 'innoversity' combines the words innovation and diversity, as diversity becomes crucial especially when considered in the context of CoPs (Justesen, 2001). This chapter therefore explores the dynamic relationship between diversity and innovation in CoPs and what can be done to facilitate and sustain CoPs that strengthen innovation and new thinking.

DEFINING DIVERSITY

In this section, diversity is described as an important vehicle for providing for innovation in Communities of Practice, and an explanation is given as to why this is so. Before venturing into this, however, a clarification of the term diversity is necessary. Diversity, as the term is used and applied in this chapter, refers to diversity in techne (skills and abilities) and cognition.

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