

An Introduction to Communities of Practice

Practices of Technical Communication

A textbook chapter for Dr. Tracy Bridgeford's classes



Communities of Practice

Definition

A community of practice is a group of people who share a common interest in a particular practice and who continually negotiate that practice in order to learn more about it.

The goal is to become a learning community. The learning occurs in mutual negotiation of the meaning of the community's practice. It is joint, not because everyone agrees, but because it is communally negotiated.

The joint enterprise is what the community's all about, what it values, and what brings the people together. It is a comprehensive picture of a community's practice, which is defined in the process of pursuing it; It is not necessarily a stated goal, but created among members' relations of mutual accountability.

Trajectories of Learning

Communities of practice develop along three trajectories that support learning: Identity, practice, and meaning (see Figure 1).

Identity

In COP, identity is form of competence as defined by members in the negotiation of what constitutes competent membership in that particular COP. In other words, what does it mean to be a member of that community. How is it different from other communities? How can you tell?

Identity is continually worked out in the negotiation of a COP's practice and the meaning of its enterprise. It is worked out in practice through negotiations with other members. It is what enables members to carry themselves from experience to experience, to recognize that the meaning of an experience and why it is an experience. In this way, identity is produced as an experience of participation.

Identity, then, is a form of belonging, a way of being a member, a way of participating in the practices of a COP. Members understand how to be in the community by recognizing its boundaries; they know who they are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, and negotiable. They know who they are not by what is foreign opaque, unwieldy, and unproductive.

Meaning

The construction of meaning is a certain understanding that is given form through negotiation. Meaning is not out there somewhere waiting to be discovered; It is always a product of negotiation in social contexts. Meaning is what learning produces.

It is a productive process that gives members a way of talking about their abilities and how they experience the world and their engagement in it as meaningful. Meaning provides a framework for articulating what members know

Meaning happens over time; it is a gradual achievement that evolves from sustained engagement in pursuit of

a joint enterprise. It creates “practice,” or “knowing” as opposed to knowledge. Knowing involves knowing how as well as why something works, doesn’t work, or shouldn’t be considered.

The construction of meaning involves an interaction of two fundamental processes: reification and participation. Reification refers to how something is made into a thing, that is, how something abstract is made concrete. It is how a community creates shared understandings and projects meaning. Reification allows to form experiences. Participation is an active process of social experiences in the COP. This duality is what provides the possibility of developing an identity of participation.

Practice

The practice of a COP constitutes all that members have learned in the history of its existence; it is the community’s shared history of learning. This experience includes what is developed in order for the community to what it want do. It develops into a shared repertoire of ways of doing things in the community.

This shared repertoire includes the routines, gestures, worse, tools, ways of owing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, and concepts members use to participate in the practice. It includes what matters, what doesn’t, what to do and what not to do, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, what to talk about and

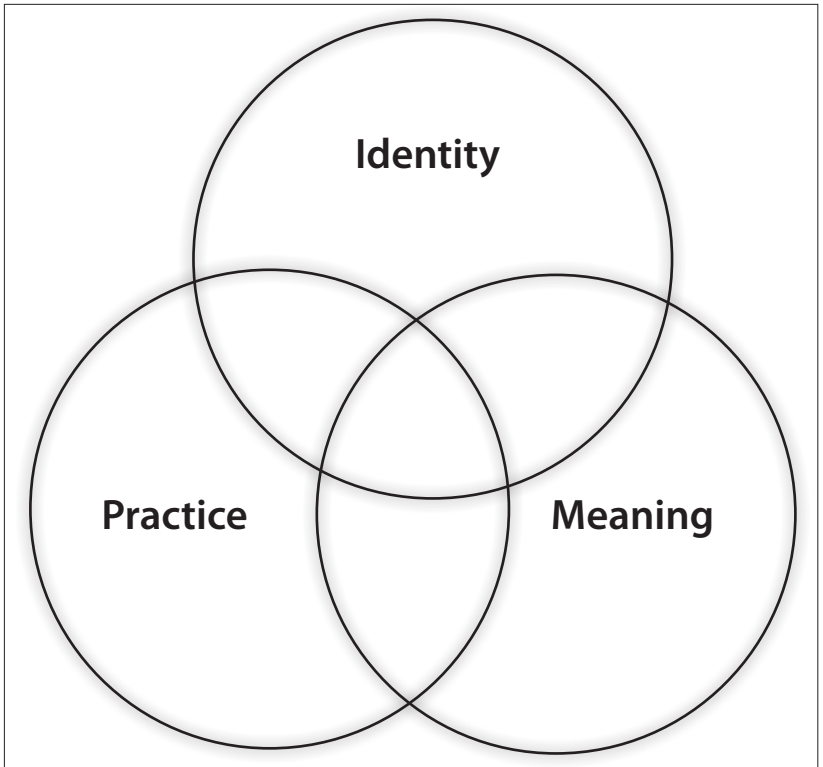


Figure 1: Trajectories of Learning in a community of practice.

what to leave unsaid, what to justify and what to take for granted, what to display and what to withhold, when actions and artifacts are good enough and when they need improvement and refinement.

The practice of a COP is inherently ambiguous in order to allow space for the interpretation of meaning, which

is continually worked out in the act of participation. The practice is what draws us to a particular community and want to participate.

Mutual Engagement

To participate in a COP, members mutually engage in practice, which becomes the social fabric of the community, developing the rules for the negotiation of meaning. To mutually engage, members participate in three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment.

Engagement

Engagement involves doing things together, talking, producing artifacts, which shape member's experience of who they are. They learn what they can do and how the community responds to their actions.

Imagination

Imagination allows members to see who they are, to construct an image of themselves and the community that enables them to orient themselves, reflect on their situation, and explore possibilities. Imagination is not the work of fantasy, but of creative and critical thinking, allowing members to imagine possibilities.

Alignment

Alignment helps members to recognize and set boundaries for their experiences, to align themselves with other members' experiences, and to articulate their and others' role in those

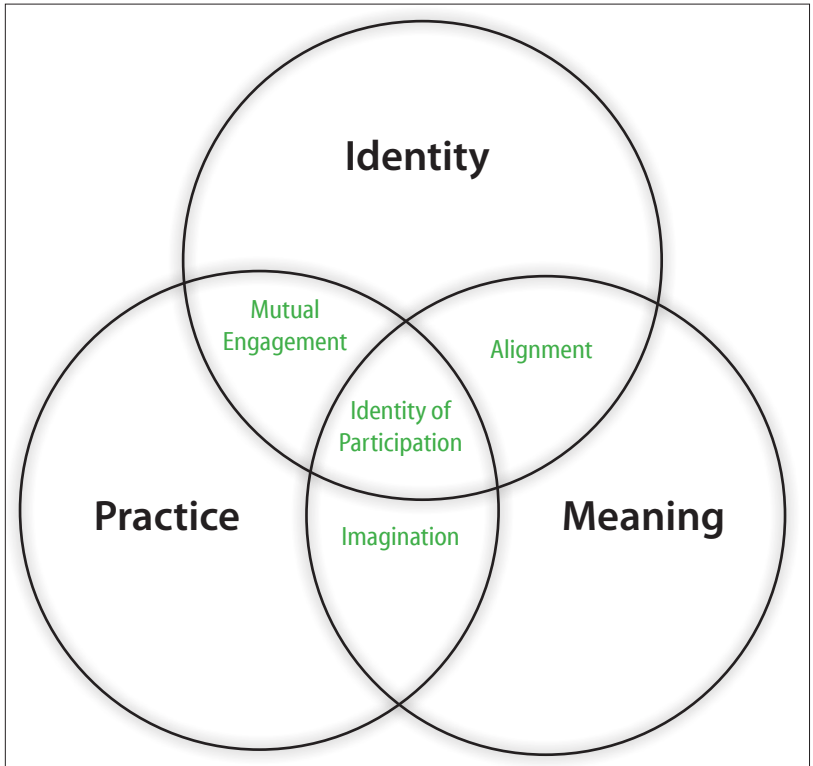


Figure 2: Interactions of identity, practice, and meaning in a community of practice.

experiences. Alignment is not a one-way process, but a dynamic coordination of members' experiences.

Mutual engagement, then, is how members connect to each other along modes of belonging. It involves members' abilities to connect to what meaningful, and it grows out of the practice. Engagement is the management of a community's boundaries, aligning relations interests, skills, and knowledge. It is a

commitment to competence—a complementary relationship of their own and other's contributions. Engagement, imagination, and alignment empower members to develop an identity of participation and display competence.

Identity of Participation

An identity of participation is a member's recognition, knowledge, understanding, and articulation of competence. This is, it allows members to see experiences of meaning, know how that experiences came to be, figure out why that experiences is meaningful, and articulate its relevance to the COP's enterprise.

An identity of participation is competent membership that enables members to take responsibility for their actions, constructions of meaning. With a fully developed identity of participation, members can make proposals of meaning as well as accept proposals from others, which is how members are accountable to each other.

Membership Characteristics

Membership in a community of practice constitutes shared characteristics that enable learning to occur and members to negotiate meaning and develop an identity of participation.

Shared Domain

Members are informally connected by a shared body of knowledge. This characteristic includes shared ways of working, expectations for belonging, and rules for

negotiating meaning characteristic of a particular community. Members share a body of knowledge that defines their problems and solutions in ways that reflect their membership in a particular community.

Common Practices and Language

This characteristic refers to the ways people naturally work and play together. In essence, communities of practice are groups of people who share similar goals and interests and how to talk about their practices. In pursuit of these goals and interests, they employ common practices, work with the same tools and express themselves using a common language. Through such common activity, they come to hold similar beliefs and value systems.

Common Sense of Purpose

This characteristic refers to how members work together in the execution of their practice; that is, their real work. Members are held together by a their commitment to a joint enterprise—a common purpose. There are many communities of practice within a single company, and most people belong to more than one of them.

Commitment to Life-long Learning

This characteristic refers to how members emphasize the learning they have done together and their familiarity with the shared histories of learning characteristic of a particular group. They collaborate directly, use one another as sounding boards, and teach each other. More than a community of learners, a community of practice is also a community that learns.

Commitment to Each Other

Members share and benefit from each other's expertise. They are colleagues committed to jointly developing better practices.

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