Integrating Communities of Practice into Library Services

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

Since the notion of community of practice was introduced in the early 1990s, it has been popular in various organizations with the recognition that knowledge sharing is important for organizational learning. It has emerged as a strategic approach to knowledge sharing and an innovative way to foster learning. Considering that the notion of community of practice can provide an intriguing framework for library services, this study explores the implications that community of practice suggests for libraries and the roles that librarians can take to foster communities of practice.

Keywords: Community of practice; Academic library; School library; Public library; Special library

Introduction

Recently community of practice (CoP) has been recognized as one of the key approaches to gaining the competitive advantages in knowledge economy. With the growing popularity of knowledge management, many organizations have come to acknowledge the importance of communities of practice for learning and change.[1] Since the notion of community of practice was introduced in the early 1990s, it has influenced academics and practitioners in many fields such as management, administration and education. It has emerged as a potential theory of knowledge creation and a strategic approach to converting implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge.[2-3]

Community of practice is defined as a "group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."[4] It is explained as the means to foster innovation and creative problem solving. Participants of the CoPs share information and ideas, discuss common issues, produce tools and documents, and develop personal relationships. The fundamental notion of CoP is that people learn more effectively through engaging in appropriate practice.[5] It is based on the social interactive dimensions of situated learning. The idea of CoP has been around for a long time, but it has been re-conceptualized in the context of knowledge economy. It has

emerged as a strategic approach to knowledge sharing and an innovative way to foster learning. Since it suggests a way of promoting informal learning in organizations, it has been popular in various organizations with the recognition that knowledge sharing is important for organizational learning. Although CoPs are in many cases informal, they provide a mechanism to facilitate knowledge flow both within and between organizations.

The notion of CoP provides an intriguing framework for library services. It can be integrated into library services to better serve the goal of libraries as educational and cultural institutions. This study explores the implications that the CoP framework suggests for libraries and librarians, and the roles that librarians can take to foster CoPs.

Community of Practice

Dimensions of Community of Practice

Wenger broadened the traditional concept of apprenticeship to participation and identity transformation in a community of practice.[6] He identifies three dimensions of CoPs that should be constructed to associate practice with the formation of communities: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. *Mutual engagement* represents the notion that in a community of practice, people are engaged in "actions whose meanings they negotiate with one

another," thus leading to coherence of a community.[7] Wenger emphasizes that the concept of CoP does not necessarily assume peaceful togetherness or mutual support among the participants, but it accompanies tensions and conflicts. *Joint enterprise* is another dimension that defines a community of practice. It is not defined through a static agreement, but it is elicited through a collective process of negotiation by the participants. Mutual accountability imposed by the negotiation of a joint enterprise becomes a crucial part of the community of practice. *Shared repertoire* refers to a set of shared resources including stories, artifacts, tools, styles, actions, historical events, discourses or concepts produced or adopted during the lifecycle of the CoP. Wenger points out that communities of practice are "not intrinsically beneficial or harmful," but they provide the possibility of transformation through a mechanism of engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire.[8]

In the processes of identity formation and learning in a community of practice, three different modes of belonging can be considered: engagement, imagination and alignment. *Engagement* is "active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning."[9] Through engagement, participants can gain knowledge and competence that are grounded on social bases. *Imagination* represents "creating images of the world and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experience."[10] In the theory of community of practice, imagination refers to creating new images of the world and ourselves by transcending our time and space, yet imagination has limits in that it can be based on stereotypes or disconnected from reality. *Alignment* refers to "coordinating our energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises."[11] The process of alignment enables participants to form extensive enterprises through the coordination of their energies and activities. While alignment allows for tuning various localities, competencies and viewpoints, it can also expose the participants to various misconceptions, thus disempowering them. A community of practice may include all three distinct modes of belonging in various proportions, and the variety of the proportions leads to the distinct traits of the communities.

Stages of the Development of CoP

Some researchers assert that communities of practice and the knowledge they create cannot be managed in the form of control because they are dynamic, interactive and fluid.[12] However, Wenger et al. suggest that there is still a need for organizations to cultivate communities of practice actively and effectively to help them accomplish their full potential.[13] CoPs are observed to evolve through five stages of development: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship and transformation.[14] At the potential stage, a group shows the potential of becoming a CoP. Participants find that they have the interests in the same knowledge domain and recognize the need for organized interaction. The goals of this stage include identifying people who have common interests in the same knowledge domain, defining the scope of the domain and identifying potential coordinators and thought leaders. At the coalescing stage, the goals evolve into developing relationships and trust by establishing community events and spaces, promoting an awareness of the value of sharing knowledge and identifying practices to share. At this stage it is necessary to document the community's resources and elicit management support. As a community of practice grows to the maturation stage, it needs to clarify its role, manage its boundaries and organize its knowledge. At this stage, a CoP needs to begin measuring its value. In addition, it needs to establish the requirements and processes of the entry to manage the entry of new members systematically. As a community of practice moves on to the stewardship stage, it is crucial to maintain liveliness. The efforts to import new ideas and relationships and develop new leadership should be made to refresh the community.

Like the lifecycle of other living things, CoPs come to an end after a certain period of time and they transform in various ways. They may simply dwindle away, shift to a social club, go through the process of split or merger or become a part of formal organization. A community of practice may face challenges and difficult transitions while going through each stage of the development, so the importance of the role of community coordinators and core members

cannot be overemphasized in keeping the community lively and functioning well.

Implications of Communities of Practice for Libraries

Libraries have provided various services for a wide range of users, and library services should change continually to meet the changing needs of users and to remain relevant to a changing society. In addition to their contribution to a society by providing the traditional services of information intermediation, libraries have great potential for facilitating knowledge sharing and collaborative learning. As an effort to support knowledge activities of people in knowledge society, libraries can take more active roles in knowledge sharing and collaborative learning through communities of practice. Community of practice provides a well-theorized and practiced framework for collaborative learning in individual, organizational and social development and has been implemented in a wide range of educational and institutional settings.[15] By adopting the notion of community of practice, libraries will be able to widen their roles as cultural and educational institutions.

Implications for Academic Libraries

Communities of practice have been implemented in various academic settings. Green presented case studies of CoPs established for digital humanities research in five different universities.[16] In the projects, academic librarians collaborated with faculty members on research initiatives in digital humanities, and led text encoding training. They were extensively involved in the processes including the development of customized text encoding, training of the graduate students, and consulting on the produced XML documents. Through these collaborations, academic librarians could support emerging digital humanities scholarship and the corresponding CoPs.

Moore et al. (2004) reported how a bioinformatics CoP was cultivated through library education programs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Health Sciences Library.[17] The goal of the library's education program was to support the academic community in developing

and maintaining knowledge management competencies. In keeping with that goal, the library supported online access to all resources and services, face-to-face instruction, sponsored training, and forums. In addition, the library created a bioinformatics listserv, blog, chat reference services, and online handouts to facilitate communication of the CoP. These activities helped the academic librarians develop partnerships with research centers, departments, and faculty on campus.

Community of practice can also be adopted as a model program to implement the learning-centered approach in the academic settings. With the criticism that the traditional lecture-discussion system in classrooms does not provide an optimal environment for student learning, higher education has shifted its focus from teaching to learning. This shift has prompted the interaction between faculty, students and librarians to associate students' classroom activities with their out-of-class activities, thus enhancing their situational and experiential learning. The emphasis on out-of-class learning has led to the need for active involvement of librarians in the educational process. Students can learn from each other through collaborative activities by participating in CoPs. The CoP approach has potential to support situated learning, given its resemblance to apprenticeship. It is an effective way of learning that helps students internalize the knowledge that they obtain from classroom activities through practice.

Increasingly, many communities of practice form online, especially to serve members who are geographically dispersed. With the wide adoption of distance learning in higher education, online CoPs can serve as an ideal means for geographically dispersed groups of students to connect. For the institutions that provide distance learning programs, online CoPs can be an effective approach for remote learners to engage with one another to share their ideas, develop their skills and improve their performance. Various systems such as bulletin boards, listservs, and knowledge repositories developed as part of knowledge management systems can be used to support online CoPs.

Implications for School Libraries

The need for teachers to form communities of practice in a specific domain has been discussed in the literature.[18-19] Recognizing that communities of practice can play an important role in teacher learning, researchers have discussed the benefits of CoP in the context of teachers' professional development.[20-21] Schlager and Fusco presented the implementation of Tapped In, which was an online education community envisioned to serve the professional development needs of teachers.[22] In the online education CoP, teachers engaged in activities including course and workshop sessions, group meetings, and public discussions encompassing a wide range of topics related to K-12 education. They enumerated eight characteristics of education CoP: (1) learning processes, (2) history and culture, (3) membership identity and multiplicity, (4) community reproduction and evolution, (5) social networks, (6) leaders and contributors, (7) tools, artifacts, and places, and (8) the practice.

Kymes and Ray reported the development of CoPs comprising K-12 public school teachers, librarians, and some seeking a degree to work as a school librarian.[23] The CoPs held professional conferences, workshops, and group discussions which allowed the members to network with other professionals and strengthen their practice. Participating in the CoPs enabled the members to avoid isolation and develop deeper professional relationships. Through the participation in the CoPs, they were able to apply their educational skills to school libraries and establish their identities as school librarians.

Communities of practice have implications for school libraries in that school libraries provide information resources and services to support the curriculum and students' development. The services provided by school libraries are essential in students' learning process, especially for the development of their literacy. In addition, school librarians can facilitate the students' creative and productive activities by adopting the notion of community of practice, which can serve as a systematic approach to enhance student learning by facilitating out-of-class activities. A community of practice, whether it forms online or offline, serves as a venue for the stu-

dents to talk, learn and create meaning. Thus the adoption of the CoP approach can enhance students' learning in many aspects. It facilitates collaborative activities in small groups, thus better supporting the unique learning style of each student. The students' learning can be enhanced by discussing ideas with other students and applying the knowledge obtained in classrooms to practice. They can maintain interests in the subjects they learned in classrooms through practice and become familiar with utilizing various information resources to resolve problems they have.

In schools, communities of practice may form in connection with particular courses or other topics of interest. They can help students to share knowledge and develop creative ideas through the shared knowledge. School librarians can provide the support to sustain meaningful activities of the CoPs and integrate information provision into their creative and productive activities. To foster communities of practice, librarians need to identify and meet students' information needs, keep up-to-date in information provision and support managing the repositories of the outputs created from the CoP activities. They can also make efforts to foster students' information literacy skills that can enhance students' learning and provide necessary support throughout the students' research process. Information technology can be integrated into the CoP activities as necessary. Various applications that support the online activities of the CoPs can be utilized to supplement offline activities.

Implications for Public Libraries

CoPs comprising users of public libraries have not been extensively reported in the literature. However, the implementation experience of the CoP of public library professionals established by the team of Penang Public Library Corporation (PPLC) and Knowledge Connections Inc. shows to what extent a CoP contributes to knowledge sharing and informal learning among library professionals.[24] The observation of the communications among the librarians revealed that know-hows obtained from doing tasks were shared in the form of frameworks, ideas, stories, lessons learned, and documents, indicating that shared practice was present in

the CoP. The online and face-to-face environment of the CoP was evaluated to provide a venue for interaction and knowledge sharing situated in the context of the librarians' practice.

The role of public libraries as cultural and educational institutions to foster culture and learning in their communities makes them the ideal places for cultivating CoPs. Public libraries may serve their community as social places where people can gather and pursue specific topics of their interests. Considering the resources that public libraries have, they are well suited for the role of facilitators of knowledge sharing among community residents. They can provide the CoP participants with places to meet, to discuss or work on specific agendas. By supporting various cultural and educational activities for individuals and groups through CoPs, public libraries can continue to engage actively with people and remain at the center of the community.

Implications for Special Libraries

With the wide adoption of knowledge management in the context of business practices, some special libraries have already taken on the role of facilitating the development and successful implementation of CoPs in their organizations. Special libraries have traditionally conducted such activities as collecting, assessing, organizing and disseminating information to their users. The prevalence of knowledge management and CoPs in the business sector provides special libraries with the opportunities to expand their professional services in managing the knowledge environment and to contribute to their organizations by enabling them to gain the competitive advantage in the field.

Margulies emphasizes the engagement of the Information Resource Center (IRC) and special librarians as a critical success factor for CoPs.[25] The engagement of special librarians encompasses managing content, facilitating knowledge dissemination, and making connections among subject matter experts and the communities of practice. She argues that special librarians can play a critical role in CoP performance and value by enabling CoPs to identify expertise, create knowledge, transfer competency, and achieve

competitive advantage through their engagements.

The case of the Exempla Saint Joseph Hospital (ESJH) Library presents how hospital librarians engaged in multidisciplinary teams to improve patient care and benefited from their active participation in the CoPs.[26] The ESJH librarians participated in team development activities of the microsystems, which were multidisciplinary communities of practice. They supported the patient education activities of the team and provided health literacy tools for the staff. They also implemented blogs, news feeds, and content management systems to improve communication among the members and archive useful information. Through the process of participation in the CoPs, the ESJH librarians contributed to concrete benefits of the communities, and simultaneously benefited from their active participation in the CoPs.

Many organizations have increasingly adopted the notion of learning organization and emphasized the importance of learning opportunities for their employees. Special librarians can play crucial roles as facilitators of learning forums such as CoPs, where members teach and learn from each other.[27] Participation in CoPs helps employees in various organizations obtain new knowledge and skills and apply them in productive ways. To support the communities of practice, librarians in special libraries can identify and provide the resources that meet the communities' information needs, systematize the mechanism of organizing the knowledge base created by community participants and set the conditions that can attract them to actively participate in knowledge activities thus keeping the CoPs lively.

Implications of CoPs for Librarians

As a milieu for professional socialization, communities of practice help the members exchange ideas with colleagues and build professional identity.[28] They can form in professional associations that are distributed regionally, nationally or internationally.[29] CoPs consisting of librarians from different organizations are beneficial to the participating librarians by enabling them to share their expertise. They can provide a venue

for the librarians to share tacit knowledge as well as codified knowledge. Communities of practice can be especially effective in the context of digital reference. They help to quickly identify the experts in particular topics, thus enabling them to provide more rapid and precise answers to user inquiries. Online CoPs can be utilized to connect the digital reference librarians dispersed throughout a wide range of areas. Other benefits of CoPs consisting of librarians include that they can foster a sense of connectedness among librarians and provide an informal form of apprenticeship for new members. Successfully implemented, they can elicit new ideas and solutions thus leading to innovation in the profession.

Recognizing the increased focus on interdisciplinarity and collaboration in academia, the librarians at the University of Idaho identified a mentoring model of a CoP and established a community comprising new library faculty members and more experienced faculty members.[30] The CoP focused on goals such as collaboration, publication, research, and fostering relationships between faculty members. The CoP held scheduled meetings centering on presentations and discussions of research ideas and opportunities for collaboration. The CoP listserv was utilized for online communication. The relaxed atmosphere of the CoP served to foster a feeling of collaboration and support among members. The evaluation of the CoP implementation conducted at the end of the first academic year indicated that the majority of the participants agreed that the CoP was beneficial to their professional development. However, the CoP's activity was reported to begin diminishing by the end of the second year, revealing the challenges of sustaining the CoP.[31]

Libraries implementing the CoP framework as part of their services face challenges as well as opportunities in cultivating the CoPs and demonstrating the value of them. Gannon-Leary and Fontainha identified lack of members' engagement and difficulty in trust building as barriers of CoP.[32] As challenges of virtual CoPs, they identified lack of the opportunity for face-to-face interaction and socializing. In addition, legal implications such as data protection and

intellectual property were also identified as barriers of CoPs.

Despite of the challenges, communities of practice have also been reported to be successfully implemented across many professional environments.[33] Active involvement of librarians is essential in the successful implementation of CoPs, which requires the ability to organize knowledge resources collected and created by the participants and disseminate them effectively. Fostering communities of practice requires considerable efforts. Librarians can contribute to the successful performance of CoPs in the following ways:

- Provide access to the existing body of knowledge that is relevant to the knowledge domain that the community of practice focuses on.
- Validate the authenticity of the knowledge resources.
- Add value to the knowledge resources by providing them with context.
- Capture, organize and disseminate knowledge resources created by the community members in the form of both documents and narratives.
- Develop the optimal taxonomies of the knowledge domain to organize knowledge created and collected by the community members, thus enabling effective knowledge flow throughout the organization.
- Provide efficient tools for searching and browsing knowledge repositories.
- Facilitate the contribution of knowledge resources from the members of the community of practice.
- Ensure that knowledge resources added by the community members are continually updated.
- Support situated learning among the participants of communities of practice.
- Teach them information literacy skills.
- Provide engaging social spaces for the gatherings and activities of communities of practice. The spaces can be provided both online and offline.

In order to play a supportive role in the success of communities of practice, librarians are also

expected to actively participate as community members. Thus they need to develop expertise both in library and information science and in the knowledge domain that the community of practice focuses on.

Conclusion

Despite the benefits of CoPs reported extensively in the literature,[34-36] there are also critiques of the approach.[37] People may not be willing to share their knowledge with others for fear of being deprived of their competitive advantages, thus discouraging the collaborative efforts among the members. Also, communities of practice may not be successful when they are not open to new ideas and discussions. Although communities of practice have limitations, they have demonstrated that they create value in diverse aspects. The tangible values they create include the production of tools and documents, improvement of skills and cost reduction. They also create less tangible values including interpersonal trust or passion for innovation.[38] The CoP approach can be a successful mechanism, especially in organizations and groups with a high degree of autonomy. It provides an effective means of enriching the creativity of people by helping them share both tacit and explicit knowledge. The notion of community of practice is still in the evolving stage of development. Business organizations and academic institutions will be able to leverage the full potential of CoPs as they enhance their understandings of the development of CoPs and make efforts to cultivate them.

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