

Communities of Practice: The Nuts and Bolts, Part 1

Presented by Dr. Etienne Wenger

ETIENNE: A brief, very simple definition of a community of practice is a group of practitioners who share some challenges and interact regularly, and—in the process or in the context of these interactions—learn both from and with each other—from because these teachers were learning by telling each other stories about what they were doing in their own classrooms, so they were learning from each other's practice, but they were also learning **with** each other. They were actually reframing their questions, and using each other as a sounding board for reframing that question.

And that's another remarkable aspect of that story—is that these people went beyond simply sharing tips to thinking together, "Oh how can we rethink this situation? How can we reframe our problems?" So that's actually another remarkable aspect of the story, that they were really learning **with** each other, and then, in the process of doing that, improve their ability to face whatever challenges they were facing.

Now, in this definition, when I talk about practitioners, I want to specify that I use the term "practitioner" in a very, very broad sense—as anybody who is involved in doing something practical in their life. So, it is not just the practitioner of a profession. So if you have a street gang, for instance—for whom being a practitioner means "how do you survive on the street in a city that you feel marginalized by" or something like this—that's also a form of practice. So I just wanted to say that the concept applies broadly beyond a professional context.

That first story was one in which the community of practice started very spontaneously. [In the first example,] there was kind of a catalyzing of the process out of her learning needs. I wanted to contrast this with another story, one in which the process was much more intentional and cultivated.

And the second story takes us from Italy to British Columbia. And in British Columbia, the health care system has recently instituted a new function, one that is familiar in the U.S. context, but is new in British Columbia. It's the function of a nurse practitioner. A nurse practitioner, for those of you who don't know what that is, it's a nurse who is taking some of the duties of a physician in actually seeing patients and having consultations, doing physical exams, and so on and so forth.

As this new function was being instituted in the interior health care region of British Columbia, a manager there had heard about communities of practice and thought, "Hmm, maybe these people need some kind of support in their transition." And she decided to bring in the idea of community of practice and see if they were interested. So she spoke to a number of people who had just moved into this new function, and they liked the idea.

But—British Columbia being as big as it is and this being the interior region, not the Vancouver region, the mountainous region where people are at a great distance from one another—it was felt that having a community like this would require some face-to-face meetings, but that that could not be done without some kind of sponsorship

on the part of the organization. So not only did this manager have to convince her own manager to support the idea of a community, but she actually had to talk to the supervisors of all these nurse practitioners in these different hospitals and clinics in the health care region to convince them it was a good idea that these new nurse practitioners would take a little bit of time out of their own practice to function as a community of practice.

And, actually, I met this woman in Quebec and she told me, while we were having this workshop, that the community was now actually having a meeting without her and taking over some of the “driving,” the agenda [planning] that she had been doing. So I think she was being quite successful, in that the community was now owning it’s own learning beyond her pushing the idea. So here is a contrasting idea, a contrasting story, of the community that [formed because of the] very intentional work on the part of someone—who was not even a member of that community—to get it started and put it on its way.

Moving now to the next slide and a very contrasting story again. This is the story of a community that we’re actually following. A group of us are following this community for a year. Every month we have a teleconference call with the leader of the community to see what its like to lead a community like this. And it’s called the MPD Support Community, and it’s a community of practice. In fact, it didn’t start really as a community of practice; it started more of mutual support community. It concerns a family of rare blood diseases that are not fatal but not really curable either. And one of the people afflicted by this, by one of these diseases, decided that he should start an online discussion board on this for other patients. Today this community involves about 2,300 people all around the world. It is no longer just a mutual support community. It is really a community of practice where the patients discuss their experience, their learning, the treatments and strategies that work, the research that is being pursued in different hospitals and universities. Actually not only are they’re becoming a community of practice, but they are gaining some recognition, even in the research community. Actually the leader of this community was invited recently to a research conference, as a representative of the community because the community had done some surveys and had conducted some research on itself in the context of the conversation.

So here is a community that does not have face-to-face meetings—so it’s purely an online community—but is very important to many of its members as a connection to others who are facing the same health challenge. So I thought that I would give you these three stories to set the stage to start with. I’m going to, now, take a little break as we move to the next topic to see if there is any questions or comments at this point. If you’re on mute, just remember to un-mute yourself before you speak, otherwise you’ll be talking and nobody will hear.

MAUREEN: I will comment, this is Maureen.

ETIENNE: Yes.

MAUREEN: I really like the simplicity of the definition of a community of practice. It’s something that everybody can understand. And the examples really help,

so it's a good blend. But even just that one slide feels very helpful for sharing with other people.

ETIENNE: Very good.

FEMALE: I have a short question at the end. If you will talk about ... you talked about the community moving from a support community to a community of practice. What do you see as the major sort of elements that you would say makes the shift from a support community to a community of practice?

ETIENNE: Well, I think the shift is really when people starting to understand it. Having this disease is a practice, if you will. There are things you need to know and that sharing those things—not just sort of the emotional support but also the sharing of the knowledge. And so for instance, the leader of this community now has put RSS feeds into a number of websites. And he keeps pouring resources and URLs into this community so these people are starting to share resources. They are talking about treatments; they are talking about doctors; they are talking about diet. You know? They are really starting to talk about the practice of having such a disease.

FEMALE: Thanks, that helps.

ETIENNE: Okay, so let's move on now. The next little bit of this presentation is one that I wanted to present here—because I know that many of you are researchers or teachers and involved in pedagogy and learning—to just make clear that the concept of community of practice is actually part of a learning theory. So it is a concept that has had an amazing career, actually, way beyond anything we imagined when we first coined it. Because it has resonated with a lot of things happening in the world, and we can talk about that if you want.

But in fact, it was born—in California actually—in the context of an institute called Institute for Research on Learning. And the agenda of this institute was to re-think learning. So it was really an institute about learning theory. It was founded in 1987, well '86 actually, by the Xerox Foundation in response to the Nation at Risk Report, in 1983 by the Department of Education. So I don't know if some of you remember that report, but, anyway, the response by the Xerox Foundation was that maybe what needed to be done was not just some more research on the classroom techniques, but some fundamental re-thinking about our assumptions about learning. And so they brought together people from all sorts of disciplines. When we actually started the first year of this institute, it was just a bunch of fights between disciplines about what we need [in order] to give an account of human learning. And so computer sciences and anthropologists really did not see eye to eye as to what that was going to be.

And so the context of community of practice came up in the context of the studies of apprenticeship. An anthropologist and I, Jean Lave of UC Berkeley and I, were looking at different cases of apprenticeship. And we saw that, if you look at cases of apprenticeship—historical cases—a lot of the learning is not taking place in the relationship between the master and a student, which is often the way that you would think about apprenticeship; the relationship between a master and a student. A lot of

the actual learning is taking place in interaction among apprentices of different levels of advancement. And we needed a name for this living curriculum that we saw in these communities; and we called them community of practice.

But once we had this concept, then we started to see those things everywhere. And we started to feel that what really captured [it was] this quote that I have here on the slide by Einstein—a wonderful quote for me because it really captures what this learning theory is trying to convey—that knowing really requires a relationship between the person and human community, and that it is not a choice between the community and individuals. Sometimes people think that, “Oh, you have a collective theory of learning.” No. The individual is very important, but as I Einstein says, you know, the individual is developed in the context of specific communities where knowledge exists.

And so moving onto the next slide, let me tell you another little story that happened to me a few years ago when I was still in the institute. I was invited to a friend’s house for dinner. And he served me a glass of wine and asked me, “So, what do you think?” And being, you know, both polite because I come from Switzerland and not knowledgeable about wines at all, I just told him, “Well, it’s pretty good.” So he leans over the table and says, “Listen, Etienne, this is a really good bottle,” you know? He must have seen the kind of quizzical look on my face because he proceeded to tell me why he thought it was a good bottle.

And what followed was this sort of amazing symphony of tastes, you know? So, he started to tell me that it was strawberry here, and there was chocolate there, and there was a strong entrance and long lingering; and it was this amazing perspective on a glass of wine that simply did not exist to me. And the one that really floored me is when he kind of puts his nose in the glass and goes into this kind of trance state and then tells me, “Hmm, and this one is a really good purple in the nose.” Now, I could imagine that a wine would taste like strawberry even though I couldn’t taste it. But the purple in the nose, really, that was beyond my imagination. And I remember that evening kind of thinking, “Yeah, this is what we are trying to capture with this learning theory”—is that every human community creates a kind of universe, and, unless you have access to the participation in this community, you can hear the sentences like “purple in the nose,” but you simply have no idea what it really means. Because what that means implies that you have drunk a lot of wine in the company of people who understand the language, and that slowly the language has come to mean something to you.

And to me that was a good story to illustrate how knowledge is part of communities even though it is actually experienced individually. So, my friend was experiencing this glass of wine by himself, and yet the way that he was talking about the glass of wine reflected the practice of his community and the knowledge of wine that his community has developed. And, I guess, it was the main difference between his glass of wine and my glass of wine, that his [glass] reflected the knowledge of the community and mine didn’t. And I can tell you this story without feeling too amorous because, in fact, my identity is not involved in the community. Still today I decided that I was not going to become a wine taster, even though, I think I’m sure that if I had told him, “Oh, can I come to one of your meetings?”—he belongs to a club and they have regular

meetings—“Could I come to one of those?,” he would have welcomed me. But I decided, no, that’s not what I’m going to do with my life; I’ll stick with beer for now, you know? So, for me I didn’t see my trajectory as really connected to that community, so I don’t feel accountable to the knowledge of that community. To me it’s just a curiosity, it’s like, “Wow, that was neat to see that”—to see him; it was very poetical and beautiful, but it was not me.

So mostly what I learned that evening was, “Oh no, that’s not me.” I’m not one of those people. And I still, today, cannot tell you really what “purple in the nose” really means. Even though I’ve used this story a lot, so I know two things that I didn’t discover that evening. I know that even white wine can have “purple in the nose”—at least that evening it was red wine, so it had this purple color—but even white wine can have purple in the nose. And I have also learned that the nose that he is talking about is not the nose on your face; it’s actually the nose of the wine. Apparently the wine itself has a nose, so it’s even more mysterious today than it was at the time.

So if we move, now, to the next slide as a summary of the various elements of this learning theory, the first one is—we start at the bottom—is really the emphasis on meaning. Meaning is an experience in living in the world. So it is not enough to teach or learn the expression “purple in the nose.” What is important is: What does it really mean in practice? What is the experience of the word that corresponds to the expression? So, it’s a theory that really puts a lot of emphasis on the experience of meaningfulness. It’s a theory that says the tool that we use to make meaning in the world, [as it] belongs to specific practices.

So this expression, “purple in the nose,” you could view it as a tool of meaning making. It’s almost like the expression itself constructs instruction. Okay, you put your nose in there, and you imagine purple—or something like this—and you’ll have a certain experience. So really, you could say that an expression like “purple in the nose” is a community tool for building shared meaning. But, it is also important, another part of this theory, to see these practices—these human practices—as part of actual human communities that don’t float in one another. They are part of specific communities where the social relationships also have a lot of impact on what is and what is not learned. What is and is not. So, you know, if you want to bring a new idea into that community—if all of a sudden you want to say, “Hmm, this wine has excellent electricity in the temples,” or something like this—depending on who you are in that community, your ability to change the practice of the community and have the community learn something will be very different. If I said that, or if someone who is writing newsletters and is a famous wine taster said that, it would have very, very different impact. So human practices are really part of social community where the quality of relationships really matters as to the learning capability that is embodied in those communities.

And the fourth element I wanted to bring in is this question of identity. That not only is knowledge part of human communities, but then our relationship of identity, with respect to these communities, creates relationships of accountability or non-accountability to the knowledge of these communities. And therefore, our expression of ourselves become almost like a filter for what meaning we seek and what meaning we let go. So to conclude this short little window into this learning theory, learning—a

social discipline of thinking about learning—would place learning at the middle of these four elements that, if you will, constitute the social fabric of learning. So again, a quick little pause to see if there are some reactions, questions, comments. That was a very brief overview of the learning theory. I thought I would give you that because the concept community of practice does not live by itself.

FEMALE: I wanted to make a comment if I could.

ETIENNE: Yes, go ahead.

FEMALE: About how you're pointing out the importance of your bringing up the linguistic part of the identity—

ETIENNE: Yes.

FEMALE: —how important do you think the physical experience is to the, you know, the whole communities of practice (especially when we're looking at special ed versus general ed; but a lot of times they're differentiated not only for their inability to keep up linguistically, but also a difference of appearance and also the appearance of certain teachers to other teachers and how their "kingdom" is based on how they look not necessarily about what they say)?

ETIENNE: Yes, well, I guess what the theory would say here ... because often you know, people ask me, "So, if practices create a universe, is this sort of a 'reluctant' theory that says each community sort of developed whatever it wants and it's just a matter of practice or a matter of interpretation?" And [how you can think about it is] people are born in a certain body. There is a vessel that they use to enter and interact with communities. So, you know, a realistic theory would say, "Okay, your body will determine how you are looked at." And so a theory like this would say, "Well, yes, practices are not developed in a vacuum, they are developed in a context where people live in institutions and with a certain body," and so the context that this—the whole context—for practices that these practices have to deal with.

At the same time, I think it is important to see that the context—whether it's an institutional context, the cultural context, or the physical context like the body—the context is under interpretation. So the experience of having a different kind of body is not deterministically caused by that body, but mediated by the practice of the community. That doesn't solve the problem. Because practices can be extremely cruel. All of us who have had kids and all have worked on a playground can know how cruel the practices of kids can be with respect to things like learning disabilities or physical disabilities. At the same time it's important to remember that those are practices and practices are not set in concrete. Practices are frameworks of interpretations. And these frameworks of interpretation, I mean, that the extent of meaning is not deterministically caused by the physical world or the institutional world. They are mediated by that practice. Am I making sense?

FEMALE: You are. Yes, definitely.

ETIENNE: And so if we have to deal with institutions like this, it's really incumbent on us to understand exactly what is the practice and why is this practice developing. And what are interventions that can be brought into a community that would change those practices. Now that's not easy to do, and, you know, often it needs some insiders. As in the wine thing, you know, for me, it would not be easy as an outsider to change the way a community describes a certain wine. But it is not completely fixed either. Any other comment or question before we move on?

So a big surprise to me has been how the simple idea of a community of practice. As you said or as someone said earlier, you know, the definition is so simple it is almost like duh. And yet when you think about the learning theory that can be built on it, it's a fairly subtle learning theory in terms of how knowledge lives in the world. With a lot of implications about what it would mean to create context in which people can learn. But also what has surprised me is how the concept has been adopted in all sorts of different sectors as a way to start re-thinking the institutions of learning. And when you go ask people who belong to communities of practice, what that means to them—now moving to the next slide called “Practitioners Need a Community” here are a list of some of the answers that you get—people will tell you, “Well, hmm, I get help to solve a problem,” in the same way these teachers were getting help addressing issues with her misbehaving kids. Hearing each other's stories so practitioners really value the stories of practice that come from someone else doing something related in a different context. A story, unlike maybe a principle or a best practice, is something that opens your imagination, opens new possibilities, but leaves you with the responsibility to apply it to your own context. So story sharing is a very important activity in communities of practice.

[Then there's] keeping up with change. You have communities in very technical fields, for instance in the Silicon Valley in California here, where the field is changing so fast, that, you know, you need a community to even follow. You can't follow it all by yourself. So I have seen communities of practice that distribute the work. I've seen a community where they have a meeting the beginning of every year. They look at all the conferences in their field, and they say who wants to go to this one, who wants to go to that one, who wants to go to that one? And they send one or two members to each of those conferences with the charge of bringing back the philosophies that they have discovered. So keeping up with change is an important aspect of living in a community that is very relevant to today's world, where any field is becoming almost impossible for any individual to follow.

As a practitioner it's so easy to become so engrossed in the local practice that you find, like, “I need to talk to others who do something somewhat different. I need to, to open my perspective.” So connecting with others in different context, but in a way that's relevant to what you're doing, is really the way to avoid local blindness. And you know these teachers were using their community as a forum for reflection—and, in the process of reflection, trying to improve their practice together. Some communities really have an intention to push the boundary of their fields.

So, I was working with a group, a community of practice—I'm going to tell the story soon about that. They were mental health practitioners trying to think about the

relationship between mental health in the community and learning disability in the school. And what the community did was to list ten key issues that they felt the field needed to address, and they created little working groups to go work on this ten issues with the agenda of coming back to the community after awhile and reporting on what they had found. So for them it was a way of really pushing the boundary of their own field. That's what the community was about. And in some context, community becomes a way to rethink the value of their knowledge. I'm going to tell you a story about the World Bank later. There, there was a community that had developed an ability to build communities, to build communities of practice, and they started to see that that capability could be used not only internally within the bank but could also be used externally as a way to do the work of the bank with client countries. So I'm just listing here a few of the main topics that you hear about when you talk with members of a community of practice and what it means to them.

So this idea had been broadly adopted. Here is the next slide now, formal and informal opportunity is actually a slide from the mode that we are still doing at the mining company in Australia. And this mining company has had informal communities on the Internet for a few years. Recently the technical services have decided to reorganize. And in the process of the formal reorganization they started to focus on domain that where actually the domains of existing communities of practice. So you could imagine the kind of topics would be in the mining company and one of the more successful communities there is underground safety.

So here is a community of practitioners, engineers, mining engineers around the world, who debate issues of underground safety, a very strategic issue for a mining company. But these engineers have developed their own community. Leaders have emerged sort of naturally out of the process of building the community, and here comes this big redesign, and the question is: Can this informal process of these, you know, naturally occurring communities and the formal top down process of redesigning a service meet in a way that is going to be useful? And actually in December in Perth, Australia, we had a meeting with the members of the design team and the leaders of some of the informal communities to talk about this issue. And to me, I found it a very interesting meeting, because to me it reflected one of the main challenges for organizations in the 21st century, which is how can the informal processes, by which people construct meaning and identity around their work, co-exist with the formal processes, by which organizations set of context for performing what they are expected to perform? And the 20th century has been very much sort of a history of the formal organization. That organized and reorganized and reorganized. It's almost like we put all of our faith in the formal. But what many organizations are discovering now is that there are limits to the ability to meaningfully formalized things, and you have to rely on less formal processes, like communities and networks, to take care of a lot of the work of the organization.

So, there was one; it was a business application of the idea of communities of practice. Here is another one about, moving onto the next slide, learning simple transition. I'll tell you this story very briefly. It was in July 2004. I was invited to a conference in Pennsylvania, and that conference was entitled the Pennsylvania Transition Communities of Practice Conference. That was an interesting mouthful. But

the idea of the conference was that the Department of Education in Pennsylvania had adopted the notion of community of practice as a way to start thinking about the issue of transition for kids with learning disabilities from school to work. And I know that many of you are in that field, so you know more about this than I do, but apparently it's a very difficult issue. It is also one that does not easily fall into any department or agency. So the idea of community of practice was to create a horizontal set of connections among people interested in those issues across education, vocational rehabilitation, labor, social services, and so on and so forth. So the idea was, instead of creating a department of transition, to create a network, a community of people who care about this topic. And not only were they doing that at the level of the department, this is an initiative that was actually driven by the Department of Education, but not only were they doing this at the level of the department and interdepartmental relationships, but also at the level of local councils—they were called transition councils—that existed in different counties in Pennsylvania. And the idea of the conference was to bring them all together in a state college, in a small town in the middle of Pennsylvania, so that people who were in the government, but also people who were on the ground, could talk about these issues together.

And another thing, another interesting thing, to say about this conference is that there were representatives from different states who had heard about this conference and come to see what Pennsylvania was doing, to see if there's, you know, any applicability in their own state. So actually there was a representative from California; Ohio was there; I think Louisiana, oh no, it was Alabama. Well anyway, there were six different states who had come to visit and actually one of my work there was to work with the representative of the different states to say, "Okay, how can we both attend the conference, but also learn together what relevance it has for our own states?" And actually these people are still, today, meeting regularly on the phone once a month to continue that learning. And the reason I'm telling you this story—this is actually part of big project called the IDEA Partnership—the one way to express the ultimate goal of this project would be to create a multi-scale learning system where you have learning techniques of a very small scale, in counties and in school districts, but also at the state level and also at the interstate level, creating communities of practice at different levels of scale to try to form a whole learning system. I'm going to stop here. We can talk more about this project to some of you who are interested.

And the last story that I wanted to tell to finish today's story telling part is the World Bank. So the World Bank is an organization that has, for a number of years, adopted communities of practice as a way to connect the practitioners in different countries around issues such as transportation, the early childhood/women's issues, services to slums, and so on and so forth—but also the developmental challenges that the bank is addressing. And a group, some groups in the bank, are now thinking that this approach that was used internally to connect bank specialists across countries could also be used to do the work of the bank, and a few years ago a group developed communities of practice among main offices in Central America, in the capital cities. And they formed communities of practice across countries around issues like e-government, eco-tourism, and so on and so forth. And actually, at the end of June, I'm going to go to Slovenia where they are developing a community of practice among treasurers in the Soviet satellite, former Soviet satellite, trying to create a process by

which they can learn from each other how to do public finances. So what is interesting there is that the development work has shifted from being a vertical process where the North is telling the South what to do, to becoming a more horizontal process by which different countries help each other and then the experts from the bank bring in the voice of research, if you will, but its one voice in a collective process of perfecting on the practice of managing a city or managing the public finances in a country.

So, this was what I was hoping to do today, is to give you a number of stories to trigger your imagination, and then next week what I'm hoping to do is to talk about the more practical aspect of community development. And I'm going to proffer a number of models for looking at communities and the work of cultivating them. So, I think we have a few minutes for comments and questions. And then we'll continue this next week. Yes?

LINDA: Okay, since there are no further questions, what we'll do is if something comes up when you're thinking of it over the course of the week and reflecting on what you've heard today, if you can email it to Marin or to Linda Blong at CalSTAT, we will make sure that those get to Etienne so that he can know about them as he approaches next week. And I would really like to thank you, Etienne, for this foundational introduction to communities of practice. I know that a lot of people are thinking about the concepts and this will give us a lot of food for thought about how to apply it in our work here. So thank you very much. If there is no further comments, I'll thank Etienne and we'll plan on meeting again in one week at 4:00 again.

ETIENNE: Okay and what I would say is that coming to the next session try to think about a community of practice in your work or in your hobbies that you know about, that you care about, because it would be good to have a specific case in your own mind to apply the models that I'm going to propose.

LINDA: That's a great idea. Okay, we all have our assignments.

ETIENNE: Very good.

LINDA: Thank you very much Etienne.

ETIENNE: Okay my pleasure.

GROUP: Thank you. Bye.