SOUL
DYNAMICS

Global knowledge: three approaches to distributed communities of practice

Tom Graves
November 2002

Introduction

The so-called 'information economy' is awash with information: more is available now than perhaps in the rest of history put together. Yet, without some way to put it to use, information on its own can be worse than useless. Information only becomes knowledge when it is placed in context, and put to practical use in personal action. How to place it in context, and put it to use, becomes as important as information itself.

One of the key means to such education - in the literal sense - is to share with and learn from others. A traditional approach is the master/apprentice model - echoed in most classroom structures - linked to the guild system - likewise echoed in university structures for undergraduates. Once basic experience is fully developed, though, there are no clear 'masters' who have 'all the answers', and a different approach - one of peer-to-peer relationships - becomes necessary. This may have wide variations in roles and expertise, the key point being that much learning is necessarily collective - what Peter Sengé, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, describes as 'team learning'. [1] Again, traditionally, this is the type of model used in the higher levels of the guilds, and in higher levels of university education, in conferences and the like. But traditionally much of this specialist learning and sharing of knowledge takes place in person, face to face, one-on-one or in group discussion and practice. When this is not possible - such as when peers are geographically dispersed, on different campuses or in different companies or countries - alternate means are necessary.

With the development of the internet, and mechanism such as email and collaborative websites, such *distributed communities of practice* not only more feasible than before, but can become truly global. This paper summarises the approaches taken in three books on the topic: Etienne Wenger's *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, [2] Amy Jo Kim's *Community Building On The Web*, [3] and Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell's *Learning to Fly*. [4]

Cultivating communities of practice

In *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Wenger and his co-authors Richard McDermott and William Snyder focus on business issues, and on communities within and between commercial organisations. Early in the book they describe communities of practice as 'groups 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'. [5] They then list 'engineers, soccer moms and dads, artists, gang members, frontline managers' as examples of groups who might form communities of practice - but that is almost the last mention of any context other than business.

Although the book purports to be practical, the style and model is essentially academic. After several chapters on the social, structural and even physical aspects of in-person communities of practice, they turn the 'challenge' of distributed communities, which they define as 'any community of practice that cannot rely on face-to-face meetings and interactions as its primary vehicle for connecting members', and comment that 'in an era of globalization and worldwide communication networks, distributed communities are increasingly the norm'. [6] They then list what they consider to be the key factors of distributed communities: *distance* - connections and visibility; *size* - knowing people; *affiliation* - priorities and intellectual property; and *culture* - communication and values.

Issues around distance and size are relatively obvious, and apply to any type of distributed community. Distance makes it more difficult to know people without face-to-face connections at some stage; and increasing size of community makes it difficult to know the full range of knowledge in the community, especially in a personal way. Their 'affiliation' factor seems in part specific to business: where knowledge-sharing in sports or academic communities might be restricted by personal issues such as jealousy or competitiveness, in commercial

contexts knowledge-sharing is often seen as 'a free gift to the competition', and may be actively discouraged regardless of its functional value:

> Large global communities often have more trouble than local ones in getting senior managers with conflicting priorities to genuinely buy into the idea of sharing knowledge with other companies or business units. This is complicated by the need to develop criteria for dealing with intellectual property. [7]

Their discussion of the 'culture' factor, although still limited to the business domain, emphasises a broader range of cultural issues and needs within a distributed - and especially global - community of practice:

> People's willingness to ask questions that reveal their 'ignorance', disagree with others in public, contradict known experts, discuss their problems, follow others in the thread of conversation - all these behaviors vary greatly across cultures. … Cultural differences can easily lead to communication difficulties and misinterpretation … [s]uccessful distributed communities have to learn to address cultural differences without either minimizing them or stereotyping people. [8]

Language differences create similar barriers, even when all participants agree to use a common language: the authors warn that non-native speakers especially may have difficulty in understanding nuances and connotations, and may feel unable or unwilling to join in because they feel unable to express themselves. In other words, the authors are aware of the risks of 'othering' inherent in global communities with a dominant culture.

They state baldly that 'true globalization requires community'. [9] By this they also mean community in the wider, more personal sense: 'Even though information technology has made deeper interdependence between operating units possible, it is communities of practice that create the relationships required for global integration'. [10] They discuss a wide of range of mechanisms for information exchange - telephone, videoconferencing, email, physical mail, video, broadcast and interactive websites - and the sociodynamics of communities and their coordination and maintenance; but the underlying theme is always business, business, business.

Community building on the web

In *Community Building On The Web*, Amy Jo Kim takes almost the opposite perspective. In the midst of a very wide range of community types, businesses are hardly mentioned at all. Although her focus is on social communities - she lists sites for new mothers, African-Americans, auction traders and, especially, online gamers as her key examples - much of her information is directly applicable to constructing distributed communities of practice.

The emphasis of the book is on the social aspects of constructing and maintaining distributed communities, summarising her professional work with the consultancy Naima, which lists Adobe, the BBC, iVillage, Oracle and Yahoo amongst their clients. [11] The approach is hands-on, but from a social perspective rather than a technical one: there is very little code-level, implementation-layer detail. Although the descriptions, and most of the examples, are somewhat US-centric, the basic assumption, from a critical perspective, seems to be an inclusive one - that online communities should exist for everyone, and that such communities should at most be 'guided' through appropriate technical and human structures rather than 'managed' or controlled. As Clay Shirky comments, audiences are built, but communities grow: 'the community will want to build - help it, or at least let it'. [12] The aim of the book, in effect, is to show, in practical terms, how to provide some of that help.

Kim suggests nine principles which denote the 'social scaffolding' for intentional groups such as communities of practice:

- define and articulate your *purpose*;
- build flexible, extensible gathering *places*;
- create meaningful and evolving member *profiles*;
- design for a range of *roles*;
- develop a strong *leadership* program;
- encourage appropriate *etiquette*;
- promote cyclic *events*;
- integrate the *rituals* of community life;
- facilitate member-run *sub-groups*. [13]

This last principle makes the community recursive, and able to scale to any size, with sub-groups nesting within and splitting off from other groups, whilst still operating within the same technical and social framework.

Kim also suggests an online parallel of Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs': [14]

Need	Offline	Online
physiological	Food, clothing, shelter, health	System access; the ability to maintain one's identity, and participate in a Web-community
security and safety	Protection from crimes and war; the sense of living in a fair and just society	Protection from hacking and personal attacks; the sense of having a 'level playing field'
social	The ability to give and receive love; the feeling of belonging to a group	Belonging to the community as a whole, and to sub-groups within the community
self-esteem	Self-respect; the ability to earn the respect of others, and contribute to society	The ability to contribute to the community, and be recognised for those contributions
self-actualisation	The ability to develop skills and fulfill one's potential	The ability to take on a community role that develops skills and opens up new opportunities

Overall, Kim provides detailed advice on the social aspects of design and construction for online communities. What's missing, from the perspective of communities of practice, is how exactly to manage processes for information exchange - a need which is satisfied by the third book, Collison and Parcell's *Learning to Fly*.

Learning to fly

As with Wenger's *Communities of Practice*, the oddly-titled *Learning to Fly* returns us strictly to the world of business - in this case, detailed hands-on examples of actual knowledge-management processes used within British Petroleum. The focus throughout is on practice - an emphasis on 'what works, and what doesn't' within their own chosen context, with little recourse to theory, and few references to applications outside of that context. Yet despite the business context, most of the examples and techniques described in the book would be directly applicable to any community of practice - including futures education.

Their basic model is that any community of practice requires three key elements: a common, reliable technology infrastructure to facilitate sharing; connecting the people who know, and the behaviours to ask, listen and share (difficult to achieve in what they described as a 'macho' engineering culture!); and some processes to simplify sharing, validation and

distillation of knowledge. [15] Each community of practice has different needs, and a different mix of technology, people and process - for example, a small local group has far simpler technology requirements than a globally distributed community - but the basic principles remain much the same.

As with Wenger and Kim, the authors emphasise the need to be inclusive, to avoid 'othering' people as individuals, or subsuming their identities *as* individuals within the organisation. For example, in describing a 'Yellow Pages'-like intranet directory they created, called Connect, whose purpose was that each page should act as 'an advertisement for a conversation with the owner' (the respective person), they emphasise the need to keep the vision and purpose clear, keep the information separate and distinct from the company-oriented HR information, and, above all, ensure that 'ownership' rested with the individuals - not the company. [16]

Collison and Parcell also draw a useful distinction between different types of community within the shared-learning context:

- *community of interest* - people sharing a common interest 'often peripheral to work', such as in sports clubs, hobby groups or just ordinary social connections;
- *community of practice* (enabling network) - focused on the development and sharing of knowledge, 'the guardians of competence in that practice', continuing indefinitely into the future;
- *community of commitment* (delivery network) - focused on applying knowledge to a specific short-term mission or 'clear business goal' [17]

In addition to similar recommendations about community roles as described in Wenger's and Kim's books, they suggest that successful communities of practice shared characteristics such as:

- 'are empowered, are proactive, add value, and save time' - the latter two items indicating the business emphasis of the book;
- meet physically, where practicable, to develop rapport - even, or especially, if the community is distributed and primarily communicates online;
- have clear enabling mechanisms to sustain interactions, such as intranet community pages, electronic discussion forums and shared tools;
- are clear whether they are developing shared capability and competency (enabling network) or focused on measurable 'deliverables' (delivery network) - because the needs and requirements are different;
- have a clear simple governing policy, such as a performance contract (delivery network) or terms of reference (enabling network);
- have an elected coordinator who manages the network's processes and its 'rhythm of interactions';
- have a sponsor or other 'ambassador' who connects the community to the outside world - in this case the business, and its needs, resources and support. [18]

The great strength of this book is in its detailed practical advice, on communities, on techniques, on ways to engage people in the processes of sharing knowledge. These are summarised well in a set of 'resource' checklists at the back of the book - which, in keeping with their theme of openness in practice, they invite readers to copy, or to download from their website. [19]

Conclusion

On its own, each of the three books provides only part of the information needing to construct and maintain distributed communities of practice. Wenger provides solid grounding in theory; Kim provides social structures, and recommendations on implementing those

structures within websites and online chat-rooms; Collison and Parcell provide practical techniques and, perhaps most useful of all, a lightheartedness and wry wit. Together, the three books provide almost all the advice necessary for distributed communities of practice: the only other information needed would be on the technical details of implementation, such as for collaborative websites ('Wikis') or templates for personal-page intranets. There is much that the worldwide futures-education community could gain from this, especially when put into practice on a global, open scale.

---

[1] Peter Sengé et al, *The Dance Of Change: the challenges of sustaining momentum in learning organizations*, Nicholas Brealey Publications, 1999, 32.

[2] Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: a guide to managing knowledge*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002; particularly Chapter 6, 'The Challenge of Distributed Communities', 113-37.

[3] Amy Jo Kim, *Community Building On The Web: secret strategies for successful online communities*, Peachpit Press, 2000.

[4] Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell, *Learning to Fly: practical lessons from one of the world's leading knowledge companies*, Capstone, 2001; particularly Chapter 10, 'Networking and Communities of Practice', 123-39.

[5] Wenger et al, Communities of Practice, 4.

[6] Wenger et al, Communities of Practice, 115-6.

[7] Wenger et al, Communities of Practice, 117.

[8] Wenger et al, Communities of Practice, 118-9.

[9] Wenger et al, Communities of Practice, 135.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Naima , 'Welcome to Naima - social architecture for networked communities', http://www.naima.com/ , viewed 8 November 2002.

[12] Clay Shirky, 'Broadcast, Institutions, Community Values', http://shirky.com/writings/broadcast_and_community.html , viewed 7 November 2002.

[13] Kim, Community Building, xiii-xiv.

[14] Kim, Community Building, 9.

[15] Collison and Parcell, Learning to Fly, 18.

[16] Collison and Parcell, Learning to Fly, 105.

[17] Collison and Parcell, Learning to Fly, 127.

[18] Collison and Parcell, Learning to Fly, 139.

[19] Collison and Parcell, Learning to Fly, 206-11; also available from http://www.learning-to-fly.org .